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CRACK NOVELET OF YANK SKYFIGHTERS

By **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

10

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JULY, 1943

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WHEN A FIGHTING YANK GETS SILVER WINGS.....by Lieut. Jay D. Blaufox 38

His job was to knock Japs out of the sky, it didn't matter whether he was a pilot or a gunner or a bombardier!

MAKE EVERY BOMB COUNT.....by Allan K. Echols 54

So his Lockheed's guns and gear and armor plate were shot away, so the hell with them—he'd still take on fourteen Jap Zeros!

COCKPIT COWBOY.....by David Brandt 72

Precision gun-sighting was okay for combat pilots that liked it, but Aerial Gunner Dane Richards was a cockpit cowboy who did his lead-throwing from the hip!

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A fair air fight? Five murderous Zeros against one battle-weary Airacobra? ... Hell, yes!

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Now Lieutenant Jinx Greybar would get his chance to try out Wing's new fighter tactics—solo ambush!

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WINGS OF HATE.....by Wayne Shipley 93

—With a pair of sleek-nosed torpedoes in the belly of his Blue Devil and hate in his heart for the Nazis!

SKY TERROR.....by Everett Meiklejohn 95

A new American sky terror is taking its place in the fighting fronts—the Curtiss Hell Diver.

FLYING WORKHORSE.....by Morse Chandler 97

All-out airwar means more than dropping bombs and knocking enemy fighters out of the sky!

ROBERT O. ERISMAN—EDITOR



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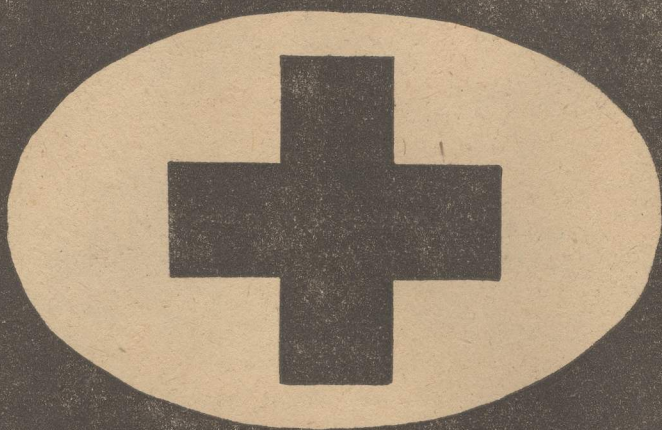
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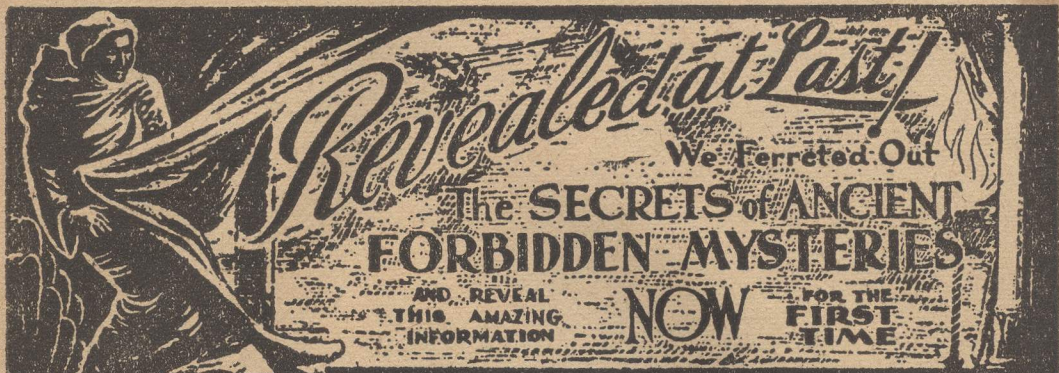
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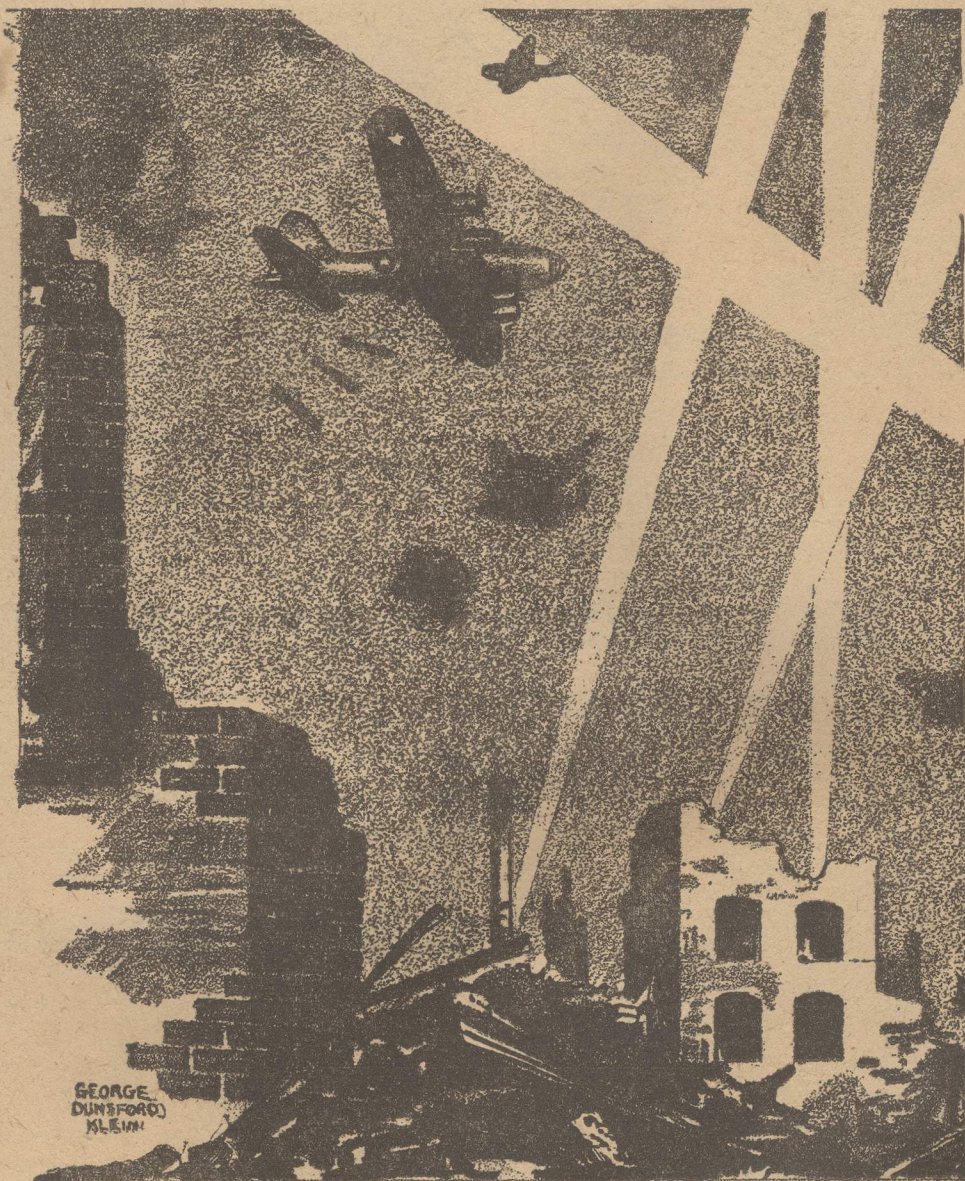
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BLOCKBUSTERS



CHAPTER I

LOST—ONE P-40

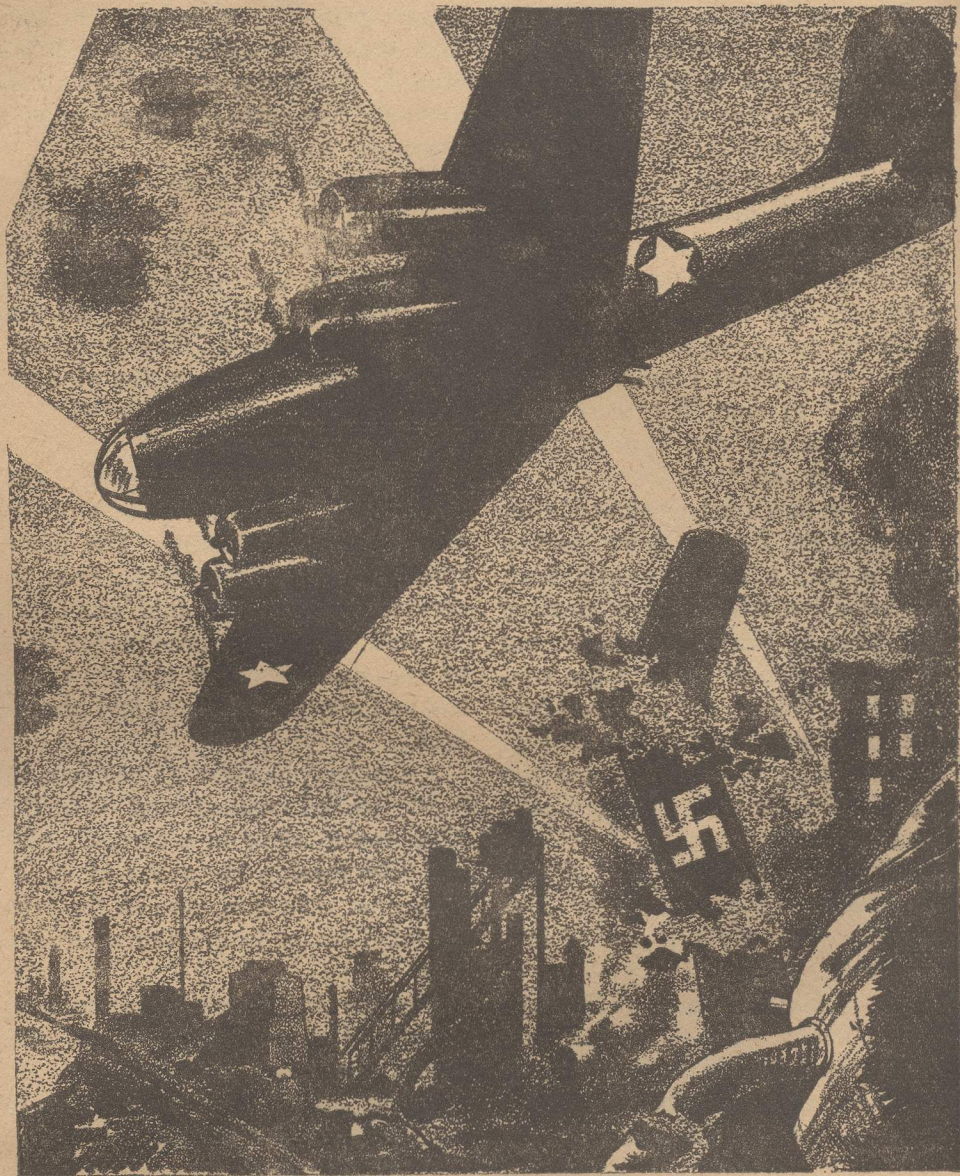
THE dogfight over the English Channel had broken up into separate scraps that spread from the coast of Britain to the coast of France.

Bob Allen, in the Curtiss P-40, had his eyes, his plane and his guns all trained on a Messerschmitt that was streaking for dear life back toward home. Allen had fired all but about one second's ammunition, peppered the Me. several times too, but never hard enough to down it.

Bob Allen was, ordinarily, a rather

THEY'RE COMING, BERLIN—THE WORLD'S BIGGEST BOMBERS

FOR BERLIN! by NORMAN A. DANIELS



Flight Lieutenant Bob Allen in a Curtiss P-40, with his eyes and his plane and his guns trained on a Messerschmitt, meant another Heinie shot down in flames, another air victory for the Allies.

good looking youngster with an amiable disposition, but here in the sky, in full battle, he looked more like a flying fiend. His eyes were narrowed behind the goggles, his lips drawn back in a

nasty scowl. He wanted only one thing—to knock down that damned Heinie. Nothing else mattered—which was, perhaps, the reason why he didn't watch his fuel gauge any too well.

WITH THE WORLD'S BIGGEST BOMBS!—SMASH NOVELET!

When it suddenly occurred to him that P-40's won't operate on air, he did look and gasped. There wasn't even enough to get back to his base in Ireland. With a savage oath he broke off the pursuit, shook his fist at the departing Kraut and did his best to eke enough power from his tiny supply of fuel to get home.

Six miles from the coast his motor conked out. He sighed deeply, tightened his inflatable jacket and went into a glide. He couldn't extend the glide all the way to land, but there were motorboat patrols and one of them might pick him up.

He was in luck for ten minutes after he watched the P-40 go down, he was hauled aboard a British rescue boat. Hours later, Bob Allen changed clothing at his base in Northern Ireland and then braced himself to face the consequences. Major Keane, Squadron Commander, wasn't noted for leniency.

Allen came to attention, saluted and made a brief report. Major Keane settled back in his chair.

"Lieutenant Allen," he said slowly, "you exhibited rank foolishness. I've heard about the way you pitched into those Huns. That's all very well, but a combat section is a unit. You're supposed to follow orders. Instead, you shot off like a lunatic, failed to down your enemy craft and instead, lost a valuable P-40 in the Channel."

"Yes sir," Allen said. "I—wanted to down that Nazi so bad I forgot everything else."

Major Keane waved a hand. "All right, Lieutenant. We can forgive impetuosity once. Mind you—if this happens again, you're in for trouble. That's all. You'll have a new ship assigned."

"Thank you, sir," Allen saluted.

"Oh, Lieutenant—just a moment. Confidentially, you'll have another chance very soon. Stand by for action."

Outside the Major's quarters, Allen's

fists clenched and unclenched and that deadly grim look came over his face. The Major was right, of course, but even so, if a Kraut got in Allen's way, he'd send him down if it meant another chase over to France.

He wandered into the dispersal hut and sat down. There were about fifty young American pilots in the hut. Ordinarily, while waiting for action, they'd be chattering and skylarking all over the place. Instead, they were very quiet. Something was in the wind and they hoped it would be the wings of their planes very soon.

North Ireland, at this coastal point, was a bleak, dismal spot. The airdrome was expertly concealed. The planes spread out and camouflaged. From the curving country road that ran beside the field, no sign of those planes could be seen and even from the air, a man had to know the region to find his way home.

A slender youngster walked into the room, looked around and saw Bob Allen seated alone in a corner. Allen was idly turning the pages of an old magazine. His eyes were on the print, his mind ten or twelve thousand miles away.

The newcomer waved to several other pilots and then dropped into a chair beside Allen.

"Hello, Nolley." Allen looked up for a second and then dropped his eyes to the magazine again.

Nolley Scott hedged his chair a bit closer. "Okay, grumble-puss, I've got some news. All over Ireland—at every Yank air base—heavy bombers are being loaded up. Fighters are geared for action. We're going to pull the curtain raiser pretty soon, kid. Maybe tonight."

Allen merely grunted. Nolley Scott sighed deeply, threw his flying helmet on the table with a crash and made a hopeless gesture with his hands.

"Bob—you and I trained together at

Kelly Field. We got our wings together. You used to be one of the swellest, rip-snorting pals a guy ever had. Then, a day or so before we embarked for Ireland, you calmed down and turned into a hermit. Come clean . . . what's up? You're not scared because we are going into action?"

"No," Bob said sharply, "I'm not scared. I don't remember fear when I'm up there. That's how my kid brother must have flown too."

"Must have?" Nolley gasped. "Bob—you speak of him as though he were dead!"

"He is," Allen replied softly. "It had to come out sometime or other. The day before we embarked, my Dad got a wire. The kid shot down an Me., someplace in Libya. He had to bail out and half a dozen other damned Nazi lice swooped down and machine-gunned him when he was dangling from his chute. Never gave the kid a chance, did you hear me? Not a chance."

NOLLEY whistled. "Gosh, Bob, I'm sorry. It does explain a few things though. Especially about the way you act in the sky. Why—you go absolutely berserk when you sight a Kraut plane. You threw the whole doggone formation for a loss last time."

Allen closed the magazine slowly. "So the brass hats tell me, but that doesn't make a particle of difference. Every time I see those Krauts I also see my brother dangling from his chute and being peppered by rats. When I think of that, all I want to do is knock down a Kraut. Nothing else matters. I get so doggone mad, I almost go crazy."

"Look, Bob," Nolley said. "I can realize just how you feel, but getting the Heinies has to be done coolly, with the use of every tactic you've ever been taught. They're smart devils. When you just cut loose, they snag the oppor-

tunity to get you instead. A man has to use his head up there when the steel starts flying."

"My brain freezes," Allen said. "Like an amateur's grip on the stick during his first flight. All I want to do is kill and get it over with fast. I . . ."

There was a sharp click in the amplifier. An authoritative voice came over, putting every pilot on the alert.

"Blue Section come to readiness. Come to readiness!"

"That's us," Nolley yelled and raced across the room where his gear was piled. He slipped on an inflatable jacket, fur-lined suit and heavy boots. Allen did the same, but with a colder deliberation than Nolley or lanky Lieutenant Lowery displayed.

The next order came. "Blue Section. Scramble!"

It was the command to action. Nolley led the run to where their three P-39's were poised at the apron. Allen's ground crew helped him swing into his chute, gave him a boost up and he settled down in the seat of his new plane. The Allison engine ticked smoothly.

They'd get their orders in the air from radio control. Perhaps it would be to examine a suspicious craft on the North Sea, or to intercept an enemy patrol of bombers. There was even a chance for some real action with a sky full of Heinkels and Messerschmitts.

A green light flashed. Lowery roared down the runway. Allen set his propeller at full fine, revved her and streaked down the runway too. Nolley was almost beside him and all three planes took off simultaneously, keeping their tight formation.

Allen heard Lowery, who was C.O., radio control that they were in the air. The answer came promptly.

"Hello, Blue Section. Vector 112. Get a move on."

Allen set his compass for 112. Still

in tight formation, the three planes pointed north, racing for the sea. There was trouble developing out there. Operations would tell them very soon.

The radio hummed. "Operations calling Blue Section. Are you receiving me?"

"Receiving you and standing by for orders," Lowery called back.

"Hello, Blue Leader," Operations came back. "Angels one, zero. Bandits."

That meant there were enemy craft at ten thousand feet somewhere in the immediate vicinity. Lowery nosed up. Allen and Nolley followed and they shot into the clouds. Allen turned on his oxygen. They'd start flying all over the sky once those bandits were sighted. He'd need all his energy and vigor and the air was apt to get a bit thin.

Straight up to fourteen thousand, they streaked like meteors in reverse. They levelled off. Allen peered down. Far below, he could see the North Sea and then one tiny wave of that ocean seemed to have acquired a straight, even movement. Allen knew what it was. A Dornier Flying Boat, camouflaged to blend with the water.

Lowery saw it too and the radio crackled. "Blue Leader calling Number Two. Come in, Number Two."

Allen threw the switch. "Number Two, sir."

"Take rear position. Watch out for more bandits. Number Three . . . let's go downstairs."

Lowery and Nolley went into a dive. Allen couldn't follow quite yet. He was required to allow distance to accumulate so that if he saw enemy fighters, he could stop them before they'd attack. This, he figured, was a put-up job, part of his punishment.

ALLEN tilted his nose down anyway and as he slipped into the dive, he turned the safety catch on the firing

button, snapped on his gunsight and set it for the width of a Dornier. If Lowery and Nolley missed, it would be his turn.

The gunsight glowed. Allen squinted through it. If he could only get one of those planes squarely in the sights. Once the enemy wing spread filled the entire sight, he would be within range and ready to rap out a few thousand slugs from the six machine guns, or a few hundred shells from the nose cannon.

Lowery was diving straight at the tail of the Dornier. The Huns didn't open fire yet. They were waiting until Lowery was well within range. The P-39 started to throw steel. Lowery was aiming at the rear blister from which a terrific defense fire could be set up.

Lowery's tracers showed he overshot his mark a bit, but there was no stopping now. He went into a roll and shot past the Dornier. Nolley was next. He streaked down, guns flashing flame and death. Allen saw the flexible glass blister smashed to bits. He gave a yell because Nolley had cleaned out the rat's nest in the tail. Now it was Allen's job to get the pilot.

Nolley zoomed on by the Dornier, successfully running the gauntlet of steel hurled from the side guns. Allen set his jaws tightly, looked over his instruments in a flash and was sure everything was perfect. Almost at the same instant, Allen saw a convoy plowing through the ocean, miles ahead. The Dornier was trying to reach it, unload her bombs and make a stab at getting home.

Allen came roaring down. With the tail gun silent, it should be easy. He was outside the range of the side guns. The Dornier grew bigger and bigger. She almost filled his gunsights and he placed a finger gently on the firing button.

Suddenly the tail began to eject lances of flame. The tail gunner's body had been pulled away and someone else manned the guns. Allen felt his heart give a violent leap and then he squeezed the button. The range was short and his tracers went plowing straight into the already battered blister.

He rushed on, bullets whipping the Dornier from above. He saw the pilot's compartment start to smoke. The bomber dropped its nose in a steep dive. More and more smoke poured from the forward end.

Allen let out a yell of joy. It died in his throat as he nosed upwards again. Lowery and Nolley were maneuvering away from the six fast Heinkel 113 fighters.

Suddenly, Allen knew this surprise attack was his fault. He'd been too busy watching the destruction of the Dornier. He'd forgotten to protect Nolley and Lowery. But this was no time to go soft. Allen zoomed up at a terrific speed. He quickly changed his gun sights to accommodate the much smaller enemy craft. The safety ring on his firing button was still off.

Two of the Heinkels were on Nolley's tail. Lowery chased another and was, in turn, pursued by a fourth. Two more were diving on Allen. Whatever he'd done by carelessness had to be made up now. That was the only way to win back Lowery's respect.

Allen selected one of those Heinkels and held a straight course toward it. The distance between the two planes grew less and less until Allen could see the face of the Nazi pilot, all teeth, like the face of a devil.

The Heinkel was shooting. Allen felt bullets rip through the left wing. The Nazi shifted direction just a trifle and the stream of bullets came closer.

Then Allen pressed the button. One tenth of a second later he hopped over

the top of the Heinkel, didn't even look back and went catapulting toward the other Hun.

This one seemed to have too great a respect for Allen's flying. He banked and veered off. Allen craned his head, saw the Heinkel he'd first attacked, plunging down to the sea. Somewhere, miles to the left, was a red glow. That would be the Dornier.

Allen rose to eighteen thousand, levelled off and looked around. Lowery had chased one of his enemies off and was now engaged in a savage dogfight with the other. Nolley didn't seem to be quite so lucky. He was diving crazily with a pair of Heinkels on his tail, their guns jetting death.

Allen nosed down and streaked toward Nolley. The pilot of the rear Heinkel must have seen him coming in the rear view mirror because he suddenly came out of his dive to attack. Allen raced toward him, still in a dive. His guns hammered. The nose cannon hurled shells at the Heinkel and one of them ripped through the tail assembly. The Heinkel veered off and started limping for home.

ALLEN turned his attentions back to Nolley and groaned. Nolley Scott was heading for an ocean grave. His plane gave out flame and smoke. The Heinkel stayed right behind him, waiting for a chance to put in the killing finish.

Silhouetted against the sea, Nolley's plane was vividly clear. Allen saw him push back the cowling, turn the plane over on its back and fall out. Silk blossomed and he floated down.

Now Allen's heart really stood still. Would that Heinkel circle him like a buzzard and do the same as those other Nazi rats had done to his brother? Allen tried to squeeze a few more miles out of the P-39. He had to reach that Heinkel fast.

But the Nazi seemed satisfied. Perhaps his ammunition was low, or he figured downing one enemy was enough. Certainly, he possessed no desire to tangle with Allen for he roared off toward home.

Allen turned back to look for Nolley, somewhere in the water and held up by his jacket. Then Allen grunted because he saw another one of those huge Dorniers circling to land on the sea. He dived toward it, changing his gun sights for a fresh target.

The Dornier paid no attention to him and then Allen saw what they were trying to do. Land—and pick up Nolley. Allen closed the safety ring on his firing button, banked and roared away. Shooting down that Dornier would be the same as murdering Nolley. It was tough to be taken prisoner, but much better than drowning.

At ten thousand, he levelled off, glanced at his fuel supply and decided it was time to go home. Lowery was coming toward him from a cloud bank. There were no Heinkel's on his tail. The battle had ended.

CHAPTER II

PRISONER OF WAR

ALLEN followed Lowery back to their base. He saw how busy the field was, especially near any of the big bombers. There was something ready to blow off and very soon too. He wondered why Lowery hadn't contacted him by radio. Perhaps the C.O. was hurt. He'd certainly seen enough action.

Wind screamed through the holes in Allen's wings, but the landing was smooth. His ground crew hurried over, grinning delightedly. They saw the gun flaps had been shot away indicating that Allen had gotten in a few licks.

They saw the bullet holes and waited breathlessly until Allen came out of the plane and told them briefly what happened.

Lowery was walking toward the headquarters hut. Allen caught up with him.

"Not a bad show, sir. Tough on Nolley though."

"Yes," Lowery answered. "Isn't it, thought? Come along with me, Allen. I want you to listen to my report."

They came to attention before the Flight Major's desk. Lowery gave Allen a queer glance.

"We downed the Dornier, sir. Allen has the credit for that bag. Then we were attacked by six Heinkels that came upon us suddenly."

"Just how did they surprise you?" Major Keane asked sharply.

Allen gulped. "Sir—it was my fault. I was supposed to keep an eye peeled, but when Nolley . . . Lieutenant Scott, sir . . . missed the Dornier, I came down to attack. I—forgot all about protecting our tail, sir."

Lowery was at the boiling point. He suddenly whirled on Allen.

"That's only half of it. Tell the whole truth. I'm not criticising your flying, mind. You were damned good, but your brain. Allen, thinks of nothing but killing Nazis. You forget your own comrades."

"I beg pardon, sir," Allen started.

"You heard me," Lowery said. "Nolley told me all about it while we were running for our planes. How much you hate Nazis. How you just want to get up there and go mad with rage. Yes, your brother was killed by some louse of a German. I don't blame you for being sore, but it wasn't just your own life up there, Allen. It was mine and Scott's."

"Yes sir." Allen looked straight ahead. "I accept the blame, sir."

"Well, that's really elegant," Lowery

thundered. "There's another thing. You thought I didn't see you, Allen. Scott was shot down. He landed in the sea. Another Dornier went down after him. Why didn't you attack it?"

Allen turned swiftly and slow anger started to burn in his eyes.

"You know why I didn't shoot it down, sir. Scott was my friend. That Dornier was saving his life. It would have been just the same as if I put a burst into Scott to shoot down the Dornier. One minute I'm put over the coals because I only want to smash Nazis. The next I'm accused of being soft."

"Now just a moment, gentlemen." Major Keane arose. "I'll take over from here. Lieutenant Allen, did you have fuel and ammunition enough to attack that Dornier?"

"Yes sir, but I . . ."

"Silence! Didn't it occur to you that one of our convoys was only a short distance away? They could have picked up Lieutenant Scott. Do you know what happened after the Dornier picked him up? They bombed the convoy, sunk one ship and crippled two others. You saved the life of your friend at the expense of many others."

"Yes sir," Allen said softly. "I'm sorry, sir. I was only thinking of my friend. At least he is safe. I'll take whatever punishment you want to hand out."

"There will be punishment all right," Major Keane said tartly. "So you think your friend is quite safe and snug, eh? You fool, Allen. That Dornier was on a scouting trip. It was trying to find out what we're up to here. They didn't find out because we have been most careful, but they've got Lieutenant Scott and they'll try to make him talk. Now get out of here while I see what's to be done."

Lowery and Allen saluted, turned and walked out. Allen stopped.

"Lowery," he said, "I don't blame you much. I never figured things this way. I thought the idea was to kill as many Nazis as possible and damn everything else. Then, when they murdered my brother, that was exactly the way I wanted it."

ALLEN didn't turn in. Instead, he sat down and wrote a long letter to Nolley's people telling them he was safe. He posted this and was on his way to mess when he was called to Major Keane's office again.

Keane looked none too pleased. "Apparently Lieutenant Scott didn't talk, otherwise the Huns would have sent over bombers and thrown every fighting ship on hand into the sky. That is to Lieutenant Scott's credit, not yours. I have decided on your punishment, Allen."

"Yes, sir."

"Breathe this to a soul and I'll have your head, so help me. Tonight the United States makes its first all-out air offensive attack on Germany. We're going to Berlin, Lieutenant. Eight hundred bombers. It's all our party. The British aren't taking any part in it."

Allen's eyes lighted up. "That's what the boys have been waiting for, sir."

"Including you, I hope. Allen, I know about your brother and it's quite proper that you should develop considerable hatred for the Germans. But not to the point of forgetting that coolness in action is more essential than mere bravado. You did well this afternoon only to muff the whole thing at the end. Therefore, you do not accompany us on our raid."

Allen's face fell. "But, sir, let me explain a bit . . ."

"You are out," Major Keane interrupted. "If you were not such a capable flier, I'd ground you."

"You might as well," Allen groaned. "Leaving me behind to sit and wait."

"Ah—but that isn't it at all. We're going to have another raid—over France. A diversional raid. The British are carrying out a big attack on still another Nazi city. While the Hun command tries to fight these raids off, our main forces will be winging toward Berlin. You won't. You will accompany four of our bombers which are going to raid the French Coast. That's all, Lieutenant."

Lowery was waiting outside. "Allen, I know what he told you. It's tough, but you deserve it."

"Yeah," Allen said glumly, "I know."

"But you don't. You hate the enemy to a point where it paralyzes your brain."

They started walking towards the barracks. Allen said, "You may be right, but your brother wasn't murdered like mine."

Allen shrugged and returned to his quarters. Everywhere pilots were busy with their gear. None knew what was up, but they could guess. Heavy bombers, loaded to capacity with T.N.T., didn't mean a pleasure jaunt.

Lowery came in after mess, "I just saw Major Keane," he told Allen. "A secret short wave radio somewhere in France reported that Nolley is in the hands of the Gestapo at Teins, a small town about three miles from your target tonight. If you run into any trouble, see that he, at least, will be proud of you."

CHAPTER III

SMOLDERING HATE

FOUR medium bombers and four escorting Brewster F2A-2's took off shortly after dark. The Brewsters were fitted with spare fuel tanks to increase their range. They could fly twenty-five hundred miles if necessary.

Keep right up with the bombers.

Before he took off, Allen saw the looks of envy from other pilots who were on the alert, but figured they were left out of it. The real envy was in Allen's heart. They were going to have the fun tonight—over Berlin. The first mass Yankee raid and it would be a honey. And while this happened, Allen would be helping to pound some insignificant spot in France, for the sole purpose of drawing as many Nazi planes away as possible. Major Keane knew what punishment was.

Allen still possessed that concentrated hatred in his heart for the Nazis. Bombing Berlin would have been a great party. They deserved it over and over again. He'd have loved nothing better than to drop a stick of bombs in the middle of Wilhelmstrasse.

The squadron rose to twenty thousand feet and Allen used oxygen. The stubby Brewster held formation easily. This was like a flight over peaceful country.

They roared out above the Channel and Allen knew the blacked out coast of France was just ahead. He figured if they met any opposition, it would be from Me's, so he adjusted his gun sights for their wing spread.

There would be no radio advices on this trip. They'd come over the target, the bombers would swing down and the Brewsters were supposed to keep the sky clear of enemy interceptors. Their objective was to do as much damage as possible; make it seem like a bigger attack than it was and then get away.

They came over the target about an hour and a half before the main attack on Berlin was due to begin. From all over this area the Nazis would send up interceptors to search for the small raiding group while the larger one slipped past the defenses and headed deep inland.

Suddenly a searchlight beam

streaked upwards and then another and another until the sky was a living mass of those searching fingers. Some of the bombers were caught in the glow. They tried to escape, but that was impossible. Allen had never seen so many searchlights in his life.

Then there were other lights. Crimson jets of flame and the crash of ack-ack. A veritable tower of steel went hurtling upwards. The Brewster rocked a little, but the stubby plane could take this stuff nicely. The bombers were not so fortunate.

One of them seemed to stop dead in midair and then burst into flame. It had been squarely hit by ack-ack. Allen cursed softly and his mind went berserk again. There were Krauts down below and he had machine guns. He dipped his nose into a dive and went streaking toward the ground. He soared straight through the barrage. He could see the batteries now, in the glare of the searchlights. His guns spat. Some of those batteries ceased firing.

But there were too many. Allen held a low course, out of range of the ack-ack, and decided to get away from here. He hurtled across a flying field. Me-109's were racing across the ground. There must have been a hundred of them. Allen knew that no such concentration of fire or interceptor planes had been expected. Something had gone wrong here.

He opened up with all guns, strafing the field. Two planes, in the act of taking off, banked over and burst into flame. Others were in the air and Allen started roaring toward the stars. He was comparatively safe now because the ack-ack was bound to stop or they'd shoot down their own ships.

He had a good start on the Me's and reached his formation quickly enough.

One of the Martin mediums laid a row of eggs that blossomed out di-

rectly over the target. Another manoeuvred for better aiming, taking a test run across the target first. Allen decided to protect that ship. He roared directly above it, eyes alert for signs of those Me's,

Then he saw two of them, both coming at the bomber from underneath. Their guns flamed. Allen went into a dive and prayed the gunners on those Martins wouldn't mistake him for a Nazi.

He swooped toward one of the Me's and the Nazi pilot veered sharply to get away, but Allen was on his tail, flying with savage determination.

HIS guns pounded. The Me tried to roll out of the way and turned into the spray of Allen's guns. It exploded in midair. Allen power-dived, yelled loudly to avoid a blackout and then came out of it to rise again. He looked for the Martin which had overshot its target.

The plane was held in the beam of a searchlight and seemed to be in trouble. An Me darted around the craft, picking at it like a hornet. The guns on the Martin still blazed and held that Nazi off, but it wouldn't be for long. Allen suddenly realized, as he streaked after the bomber and the Me, that they'd passed out of range of the ack-ack and searchlights and were flying over blacked out farmland.

He got on the Me's tail and flung a burst at it. The Me went into a power dive with Allen right on his tail. The fast little Brewster ripped through the sky and the Me grew larger and larger in the sights of Allen's guns. He waited until the enemy craft more than filled the sights and then he started shooting.

Tracers peppered the Me's tail. Allen nosed up a hair and the stream of slugs practically sliced the Me from the tail to the nose. With a whoop, Allen banked and looked around.

There was a huge black shadow just to his right and fingers closed around the firing button again. But it was the Martin—in serious trouble. She was on her way down.

Almost at the same instant the Brewster's engine did a loop. Oil shot out and columns of black smoke. Allen groaned, turned his nose to the ground and followed the bomber. Apparently, the pilot knew just where he was going because he maneuvered along a certain course. Perhaps his maps showed a field suitable for an emergency landing.

There were no Me's in the sky, no military action on the ground below. Allen cut his engine and went into a long glide. The Martin was already down and he came in from the far side of what seemed to be a big pasture. His wheels made contact, the plane stopped and Allen jumped out. He seized an extinguisher and turned it on the engine. The flames, which were mounting, died down.

Someone moved behind him and he swung around, reaching for his gun.

"*Non, Monsieur.* I am French—your friend," a voice said in English.

Allen walked forward. Two men in peasant garb stood quietly waiting, their arms slightly raised to show they were unarmed.

"The bomber?" Allen asked. "Where is it?"

"This way," one of the Frenchmen said. "You are American, yes? We have waited many months to see your faces in France, *Monsieur*. Now that day has come, we shall not have to wait long until we are free."

Allen smiled slightly and the grin died away when he saw the Martin. The big plane didn't seem to be damaged very much, but one member of the crew was hauling out his crewmates.

"Lieutenant Allen," he cried. "Boy, you saved our skins that time. Or—I mean—mine. The pilot is dead, the

co-pilot made a landing and died with his hand on the stick. The rear gunner got it and the navigator is very badly hurt."

"Put them all back inside," Allen ordered. "I'm going to fly this Martin back."

"But no, *Monsieur*," one Frenchman protested. "It is impossible. The Boches expect a big raid here tonight and the area is patrolled closely. It would be suicide."

"How do you know they expected trouble?" Allen asked.

"We have means of finding out things. They brought an American to Gestapo Headquarters at Teins. Perhaps he talked—told them to expect this raid."

"Hey—wait a minute," Allen cried. "Are we near Teins?"

"Two miles east of it, *Monsieur*. It is best to wait. There is a small forest at the edge of this field. I think we could bring the plane into it and camouflage it. Your smaller ship can be hidden, too."

ALLEN made a snap decision. "Okay—you and your friends take care of it. The bombardier who isn't injured can stay and supervise the job. Say—what's your name, friend?"

"Louis—the last name does not matter. Can you not see how delighted we are to help? For months the Boche dogs have overrun this land. My father has been a prisoner in Germany ever since the armistice. My mother died because she should not secure proper medical attention or enough food. My brother was shot because he did not remove his cap when a Boche officer passed by. My sister—nothing has been heard of her for months."

"You mean the Nazis did that?" Allen asked.

"That and much more. Two days ago they shot thirty men from the vil-

lage. Why? Because one of their Gestapo chiefs was executed in another country. I say executed because it is not murder to kill a man such as he. So the Boches are killing men all over Europe to avenge his death."

"And what have you done in revenge?" Allen barked.

"We are waiting," Louis said softly. "Just waiting."

"Yeah—that's great. Listen, if I were in your shoes, I'd kill every Kraut I came upon. I'd blast their barracks, knife their officers. Instead of that, you sit here and wait. Not me—and don't say I haven't suffered. My brother was killed by those rats."

"You are very impetuous, *mon ami*. I lost a father, mother, brother and sister. Other relatives, too, but . . . I force myself to remain cool. A man fights better when he knows what he is doing, *non?* Only a fool strikes out blindly."

Allen's wits raced madly. He thought he'd suffered and had a right to go half mad. But this man—who had lost everyone he loved—maintained more damage could be done by coolness.

"We have accomplished much," Louis went on. "The Boche are found in the rivers, drowned. Their food is spoiled by gasoline stolen from their tanks. Bombs go off now and then, but all is done with a purpose in mind. We do not rashly murder them, though they deserve it."

"But how can you just stand by—after all those killers have done to you—and your country? That's not the way I work."

"And yet," the Frenchman said, "it is our way because it is the best way. At first some of us went crazy. They were shot and accomplished nothing. We learned from them. Use stealth and trickery. Then some day we shall all rise up and vent our hatred in a way we should like to do now."

Allen frowned. This was practically the same thing Lowery and Major Keane asserted was correct—only in a different way. Coolness, stealth . . . perhaps they were right—all of them. Then Allen's mind came back to his present problem.

"Louis," he said. "This American they brought to Teins today is a friend of mine. In a way, I'm responsible for his capture so I'm going to try and get him away. I need clothes . . ."

"You shall have mine." The peasant promptly began to peel off his clothing. "Also, I can furnish you with a few grenades. We have kept them buried, but they are not far away."

He called one of the others over and gave him instructions. The man sped away and returned in a few moments with four large grenades. Allen stuffed them into a small sack and slung it over his shoulder.

The Martin had already been rolled into the woods and the peasants were hastily placing camouflage over it. The Brewster had disappeared completely. Allen called over the bombardier.

"I hope to be back in an hour or two. Meantime, you work on the plane and have her ready for a quick takeoff. How's the navigator?"

"Sitting up and swearing, sir. That's a good sign. Good luck, sir."

Allen nodded, gestured to one of the Frenchmen assigned as a guide and they struck out across the field. Half an hour later the guide pointed to a small grey building and in halting English explained that it was the town jail. Prisoners were locked up there only temporarily while the Gestapo worked on them. Then they were either led before a firing squad or taken to some camp.

Allen knew his bearings, sent the guide back and boldly walked into the narrow little Main Street. There were Nazi patrols all about and soldiers by

the score. None paid much attention to him. He had the proper shuffle, the old worn clothing and he'd spread dirt on his hands and face lavishly.

CHAPTER III

ESCAPE FROM HELL

ALLEN walked past the tiny jail and was grateful for the blackout. Evidently the Nazis did not require the French to remain indoors at night, believing they'd cowed them completely.

Allen made sure he was not observed and turned into a passageway between two buildings. He reached the rear and made his way toward the windows of the jail. They were heavily barred and dim light shone through them. He approached the first one, seized the bars and pulled himself up to look inside.

The cell was probably the filthiest place Allen had ever seen. It was empty and he didn't wonder. Any human being would have died in there within a month. The bed was a pile of foul smelling straw. Papers and debris were strewn on the floor.

He went to the next window and hauled himself up. There he saw that the pile of straw was occupied—by Nolley Scott. There was no question as to his identity even though he lay on his face and had one arm up as if to protect his head.

"Nolley!" Allen hissed. "Hey, Nolley!"

Scott moved a bit, but that was all. Allen hissed again.

"Nolley—it's me—Bob. For the love of Mike, stop sleeping, will you? I can't shout."

Nolley Scott raised his head then and Allen's stomach did a loop. There wasn't much left to call a face. Just puffed red and blue flesh. One eye was

entirely closed and there were vacant spaces in his mouth where healthy, firm teeth had been. Dried blood formed a trail from the corner of his mouth.

Then Nolley dropped flat again. He seemed unable to move. Allen let himself down slowly and stood there in the darkness cursing Nazis for five minutes. At the same time his brain fashioned a plan and a grim determination. Although his first thought was to invade the Gestapo headquarters, wreck it and everyone in it, he forced himself to remain cool now. If the downtrodden French could keep calm, so could he.

There were voices inside Nolley's cell. Allen listened. One man spoke English with a thick accent. Nolley groaned in response to what sounded like a cruel kick.

The German said, "You lie—pig. Only four bombers came over. It is not the big raid. Where is it? Speak . . . or you will have more treatment."

Nolley just groaned. The German kicked him a few more times to make sure his condition was such that he wouldn't even feel further torture.

"Bah," he grumbled. "The dog is a weakling. He is to be allowed to rest for one hour. Then, if he does not talk, we shall shoot him."

The cell door slammed shut. Allen raised himself once more. Nolley lay on his back, puffed, raw face looking up at the ceiling. One hand kept clenching and unclenching.

Allen let himself down and cursed some more. He wiped sweat off his face and sat down in the darkness to think. There had to be some way of getting Nolley out of this and paying back with interest what those Huns had done to him. But whatever he did must be calmly premeditated. Allen saw the whole thing clearly now.

They questioned Nolley, tortured him unmercifully. He'd let them keep

on and then spilled the news of a raid over this particular area. The Huns knew some big raid was brewing and they'd apparently believed him. That accounted for the big concentration of ack-ack and fighter planes here.

Allen grinned a bit. By now, the eight hundred heavy bombers were roaring toward Berlin while the Nazis scoured the skies over this region. Nolley had succeeded in drawing many of the Nazi planes and ground crews away from the route to Berlin.

Allen rose slowly. He drew his service automatic, stuffed it into the small sack with the grenades, and went to the window of the empty cell. Hoisting himself up, he hung by one hand, inserted the sack and let it fall. The cell was shadowy enough and so littered with debris that the sack would hardly be noticed.

Then Allen took a last look at Nolley and found him in the same position. By the looks of him he needed prompt care if the Huns would be cheated out of using their firing squads. Allen noticed one additional item that made his blood boil.

Nolley's left hand was crushed. The fingers looked like something that hangs in a butcher shop.

Allen glanced at his clothes, felt certain he could pass as a French peasant and as he edged carefully away from the tiny jail, he practiced the French language in whispers.

He reached the street once more and shuffled down it in the direction of the jail house. There was a sign outside it indicating that this also served as Gestapo Headquarters.

ALLEN passed by a graveyard and made out the shape of long rows of graves. There was a stone wall that looked like the backdrop of a shooting gallery except that the stones were stained a dark brown. Allen's rage

mounted higher than ever.

There was a sentry on duty outside the jail. An hour before, Allen would have shot him down and rushed the building in a blind frenzy of hate. Instead, he stumbled toward him and accidentally brushed against the man. With a roar of rage, the Hun brought his rifle to ready and called out a command to halt. Allen stopped, turned slowly and looked at the stolid-faced Hun.

The next moment he wondered if he'd bitten off more than he could chew. The sentry was bringing the bayoneted rifle forward in a thrust. Allen leaped aside, took a step forward and grabbed the gun by the barrel. He deflected its aim, tore it from the sentry's grasp and flung it to the ground. Then he stepped up to the retreating Hun and plastered him across the mouth. He followed this up with a solid punch to the nose and the German sat down in a very undignified manner. Allen felt a little better after that.

Then the sentry's slow moving brain began to work and he yelled for help. Allen saw men come rushing from the Gestapo Headquarters. He turned and started running. He deliberately tripped himself and sprawled in the dirt. Rough hands yanked him to his feet. The sentry swaggered up and used his fists for a moment or two and then Allen was dragged into the building.

A Gestapo minor officer explained to a medal bedecked mountain of flesh who was squeezed in a swivel chair behind the desk just what had happened. The more important officer growled a command and Allen breathed easier as they led him toward the rear of the building and the two cells contained there.

He was flung into one of them. For more than ten minutes he didn't move. Then he crawled toward the window, fumbled around and found his sack. He removed the gun, pushed the safety

to off and laid his grenades in a row.

This done, he crawled to the door. "Nolley," he whispered hoarsely. "Hey, Nolley, you got company."

A groan answered him and Allen bit his lip. He'd hoped that Nolley would be coming out of it by now. There was a scraping sound in the next cell. Feet stumbled across the floor. Suddenly, Nolley began to yell. It was the sound of a man driven mad by torture. It dinned into Allen's ears until his blood ran cold.

Someone came pounding down the narrow passageway from the front of the building to the cell room. The door opened and two Gestapo men walked in. Both held short clubs and growled curses at Nolley. One of them reached for his keys, started to open the door and at the same time raise his club to silence this racket.

That Gestapo man suddenly went hurtling back. With a roar, he reached for his gun. Allen thrust his own automatic through the bars.

"Drop it," he warned in a low voice.

The Hun didn't understand him, but he comprehended the language of the gun and let his pistol fall to the floor. The second man raised both hands high.

Nolley came out of his cell, swollen face twisted in something that resembled a smile. He picked up the gun, disarmed the second man and then took their clubs away. He opened Allen's cell door.

"Pal," he said. "I heard you out there, but I thought my mind had snapped. Then I saw them drag you in and, brother, that gave me more strength than a dozen transfusions. Here, take this gun."

Nolley herded both Gestapo men into the cell, spat into his right hand and took a firm grip on the club. He stepped inside and Allen waited very patiently. When Nolley came out, he flung the club aside and both of them

walked to the main door.

Nolley was weak, but plenty game. His left hand was useless so he contented himself with holding only one of those German Lugers. The second gun was stuffed into his belt.

"What's the dope on getting out of here?" he asked. "And Bob, tell me what time it is. Have they headed for . . . tonight's target yet?"

"They ought to be there about now," Allen whispered. "Pretty smart of you to make them think we were headed this way."

NOLLEY snorted. "They gave me punishment I didn't think a man could take and still live. I had to take it so they'd believe they broke me and I was telling the truth. Bob—I understand German a little. I heard them talking. There is one big reason why they were so ready to believe me. They have set up a big fuel supply base here. Expect to refuel subs and planes and tanks here if we invade."

"Yeah?" Allen's eyes grew larger. "That's good news. They're getting the jitters already, eh?"

"Plenty. They took some of it out on me. Made almost every soldier in these parts watch the little act while the Gestapo commander told them no Yank could take it—that we were all soft and he was proving it by me."

"The scum," Allen said between his teeth.

"A mild word," Nolley grunted, "but how come you held back? Didn't start blasting everything with a swastika on it? Don't bother to answer. I can see you learned a lesson somehow. Maybe you were right in the first place anyhow. If we can't get away, destroy as many of them as possible. You can't even realize what they're capable of. Bob—when I told them the raid was expected here, I hoped it would take place. I hoped a Yank bomb would

land smack on the jail and kill me. That's how I felt until you came along."

"I know," Allen said. "It gives me a yen to kill as many of the rats as possible before they get us, but—that just isn't the way it's done. We can accomplish more damage by keeping our heads. A poor French peasant taught me that. Let's get along."

Allen unlocked the door gently and both of them stole up the passageway. There was a small office halfway up it and a German lieutenant was in there, doing desk work. Allen crept up behind him, raised his gun and skull crunched.

They kept on going and reached the end of the passage. A door, with a small glass window, blocked their way. Allen saw that the door swung inwards. He peered through the glass window and grinned tightly.

The main office was large enough to accommodate about thirty men and it was full. A new patrol was apparently going out. Most of the men were officers and the Gestapo leader was talking to them. Allen couldn't hear what he said and didn't care.

He took out a grenade, removed the greasy cap which the Frenchman had loaned him and wrapped the grenade into it. He pulled the door open slightly. The men were lined up facing the Gestapo officer's desk and their backs were turned toward the rear of the room. Allen signalled Nolley to get started for the office halfway down the corridor. He'd already opened its window wide and made certain it wasn't barred.

Nolley hurried away, disappeared in the room and Allen gently pulled the pin with one hand and sent the padded grenade rolling between the legs of the Huns with the other.

He went loping down the corridor now, slowed up to turn into the office and was thrown flat on his face when

that grenade exploded. There were screams and pandemonium. He got back on his feet, dived headlong out of the window and with Nolley at his side, they ran toward the rear of the place and cut across small yards which had once been neatly kept by the prosperous villagers.

It didn't take long for Nazi efficiency to work. Patrols were thrown out and one of these was coming toward Nolley and Allen. Allen took out another grenade and they both sidestepped toward the protection of a barn. As the patrol came by, Allen drew the pin, counted slowly and let fly. That squad was blasted to oblivion.

But the explosion brought all the Nazis to the scene in a run and they began to spread out. Nolley shot one man who spotted them and this made the trail even easier to follow.

"We've got to find a narrow dirt road leading due west," Allen said. "Two miles down it, is a Martin bomber that I think can still fly. Are you able to make it, Nolley?"

"Me? Say, I never had so much fun in my life. But pal, we got two grenades left and I hate to see 'em go to waste. When they took me here, we passed by a tavern. They drove the French out and are still working on a pretty good cellar full of brandy. Now it seems a shame good brandy should go down the throats of swine."

"Yeah," Allen grinned. "You really said something that time. Let's go!"

Ten minutes later flames roared up from the tavern and the two Americans were sprinting madly across a field.

CHAPTER IV

THE PARADE HOME

THEY reached the level farmland where Allen had landed. It seemed to be deserted. Allen groaned and tried to remember where

the Martin was concealed. In the distance he could hear the roar of motorcycles and armored cars. The Huns were spreading out to cover the whole countryside. Nothing short of capturing these two Yanks would wipe out the stain against Nazi efficiency and every German soldier knew it. They were almost as desperate as the two fugitives.

Allen heard Nolley groan and stopped. He turned swiftly, one hand going toward his gun. It froze. Four men were facing him. Nolley had his good arm in the air.

Then Allen heard a welcome voice and the four men lowered their guns. It was Louis, who had helped to accomplish all this and Louis had a grin as big as the ditch a Junkers makes when it crashes.

"*Bien*," he said softly. "It is very good, what you have done, *mon ami*. We know what happened."

"Listen," Allen said. "We've got to get out of here and fast. The Huns are coming at us from all directions and I don't want any of you men caught trying to help us."

"We shall not be caught," Louis vowed. "The plane—she is ready. Come—in five minutes we can have it on the field."

"Nolley," Allen said. "You go with the rest of 'em and help get the plane out of those woods. Louis—walk with me. I've got something to tell you."

"*Oui, monsieur*," Louis grinned. "For you I would do anything. The Gestapo has been cleaned out. Your bomb killed most of them."

"Your bomb, you mean. Listen, Louis—there's a big fuel dump around here. The Martin has a full load of bombs. The boys never got a chance to drop one, but . . . if that fuel dump can be attacked without a lot of Frenchmen getting killed, I want to blow it up."

Louis took a firm grip on Allen's arm. "We Frenchmen are not afraid to die. Some of us would rather be dead than continue to work for the Boche. They kill us gradually anyway. We would die smiling if American bombs were coming down."

"Maybe," Allen answered, "but can you clear the area around the fuel dump and do it without the Nazis finding out so they can't pull any of their retribution stuff on you?"

"But yes, we could do that. There is much excitement all over France tonight. How do I know? Ah, *Monsieur*, we have an underground too. Word passes swiftly. There have been two huge raids on Germany proper tonight. Their interceptors are roaring off to the East and the North. Many of the fields are stripped of planes."

"Good. As soon as the Martin is ready to go, have your men hurry to the vicinity of the fuel dump and get every Frenchman out of there. You won't have very long."

The Martin was being wheeled out as they reached the end of the field. Nolley still looked like something out of a book of horrors, but he was able to help. The Bombardier helped to set the plane right. Allen climbed inside and came out again in a moment. He handed Louis a peculiar looking gun.

"A Very pistol," he explained. "When you get everybody out of harm's way, fire a rocket and I'll answer it with bombs. Got that?"

"*Oui, oui, monsieur*. We go now. To you—the best of good fortune. Come back soon. Come back with many guns and planes and men. You will find help waiting here for you. More help than you ever dreamed of. Frenchmen sing their babies to sleep with songs about the day when Americans will come with milk and food."

The Frenchmen rushed away. Sounds of pursuit were drawing nearer, but the

Martin was all ready. The bombardier crawled into his greenhouse. The wounded navigator was at post. Three covered bodies lay on the floor of the plane.

Nolley headed aft. "I can man the tail guns with one hand, Bob. Now let's give 'em hell."

Motors roared into life. Allen strapped on the throat mike, glanced at the slightly unfamiliar dashboard and quickly examined the score of dials. On the left were levers to control mixture, prop pitch and the throttle. He turned the engines on full blast, set the props and the big plane rumbled across the field.

As it took off, a dozen headlights flashed across the farm land. Guns began to fire—ineffectual stuff. Then, as the Martin rose into the air, Allen felt it throb. That was Nolley pumping steel from the tail guns. The headlights winked out all of a sudden.

ALLEN nosed for the heavens at full throttle. Reports would be flashed about the escape of this bomber. Louis had indicated that many planes had been sent elsewhere, but some would be left. Me.'s were not to be fooled with.

Through the intercoms, Nolley began giving directions to the navigator and very soon Allen had a neat little map showing where the fuel dump was located. He rose to twenty thousand, using oxygen generously. He began to orbit, dangerous stuff over enemy territory, but he had to keep performing these slow circles to wait for Louis' signal.

The navigator had left his little desk and was manning side guns and keeping eyes peeled for Me.'s or Heinkels. Nolley was in the tail, almost praying some would come along. The bombardier kept practicing with his sights.

Then an orange colored star unfolded

below them. Louis' signal.

"Action stations," Allen said calmly. "We're going downstairs and give those rats a headache."

He sent the Martin down at fast speed until the meters indicated he was set for bombing. He levelled off, got his bearings and headed for the fuel dump. It was odd how easy all this was when he remained calm.

Ack-ack was beginning to throw up muck. Searchlights stabbed the sky questing for him. So far no Me.'s had taken off and for that Allen was grateful.

The bombardier spoke crisply. "Give me a trial run, sir. I don't want to miss this one."

Allen roared above the target and was able to see the many huge tanks directly below. They were carefully camouflaged, but the Nazis' own searchlights were reflecting on low clouds and bringing the whole area into relief.

"Ready, sir," the bombardier said tonelessly.

Allen gave him winddrift and air speed. He swept above the target and felt the plane lift as one stick of bombs went plummeting down. Allen heard the blasts, felt the concussion, but had to come about to see the damage. It was bad.

Gasoline and oil was blazing cheerfully, giving him plenty of light. He went over the target again and again, while sticks of bombs fell. When the racks were empty and the bombardier reluctantly informed him of this, Allen checked a course hastily and headed home.

Nolley came forward. "The bombardier is taking over the tail guns," he grinned crookedly. "Boy, that was something."

"Thanks to you alone," Allen said. "You cleared the way for our big attack. It's happened. Louis heard of

two big raids. The Huns fell for your trick and when they heard of the raids, they dispatched every available plane to head off the returning bombers. Wait. . . .”

Allen switched on his radio. “Allen of Blue Section calling operations. Come in, operations.”

He got his answer in a moment and Allen went on. “Contact main squadrons. Tell them bandits flying East and North. South areas practically unguarded. Easy to get through.”

“Thanks, Blue Section. Understand south areas clear. Thanks again.”

They were heading out over the Channel when Nolley raised his good hand and pointed.

There, in the distance and illuminated by a good moon, were more planes than Allen had ever seen in the sky at one time. Heavy and medium bombers. Layers of protective fighter craft. Allen headed their way and began to blink signals.

He flew above them until they'd passed and then he joined the parade.

“Looks nice, eh?” Nolley said. “Worth going through what they did to me to see this.”

“The parade home,” Allen said

softly. “There will be others, headed in the opposite direction. We're getting our wind, Nolley. When the boys find out what happened to you—what really goes on over there, they'll be nearly crazy to attack again. I'll be anyhow.”

“But not wildly,” Nolley said. “You'll never be that way again. I can tell.”

Allen nodded. “I still want to knock off as many Huns as possible, but I've learned it's best done by remaining cool. By thinking of the rest of your flight and carrying out your own particular job. Plunging madly into a fight never draws the greatest dividends. It's when you take time out to plan and plot. To figure a way that will cause the most damage. Then you really do something. Personal tragedies or hates don't count. Take it from that French peasant I met. This war isn't that of any single individual. It calls for team work. They got a sample of what Yanks can do tonight, Nolley. There'll be more. Wait until we really hit our stride.”

“You bet,” Nolley said fervently. “And it won't be long, brother. Not long now.”



THE BLACK ACE

By
JAMES O. GOODWIN

*Five Zeros slashing murderously at one battle-weary Airacobra—
but yellow rats in the Zeros and a fighting Yank in the Cobra!*



CHILL fingers of icy fear needled deep into Red Ballew's being as he became conscious of the five Mitsubishi's blasting down through the hell-racked sky.

He kicked his twisting Cobra through a curtain of Jap slugs—eased the stick forward. The pilot in the

Zero that was riding his fin thought he was going into a dive and was drawn into a close follow-up. Then Red pulled back with his right hand and slid the throttle up the gate with his left. The Airacobra went up and over with the smooth grace of a well-trained diver.

The Zero whiffed into being for just a second in Red's tube sight. A huge, freckled fist squeezed the pistol-butt trigger on the thirty-seven. The Zero jumped apart with the suddenness of a clay pigeon before the muzzle of a scatter gun.

Fear still clung to Red Ballew—he swore at his helplessness. Five Zeros slashing murderously at one battle weary Airacobra.

Blood drained from Red's face as he rocked his cobra into a slanting bank and set the whirring spinner toward the distant battle.

FIVE yellow, murder-bent rats after one lone Yank. On the fuselage of the outnumbered flier's plane was pictured a black ace of clubs. Crouched in the cockpit was a mere youngster—Ronnie Stephens was Red Ballew's flying battle pardner. One of the widely known pair whose names had grown to be a by-word in the Pacific. Allied pilots spoke in proud tones of the "Two Black Aces." But the little yellow fliers from the land of the rising sun told of the two in frightened whispers.

The white hand on the air-speed indicator of the red-head's cloud-slicing Cobra trembled around the four hundred mile mark. Groaning speech came into his tightened throat—husked out through the mike. "Stay with 'em Kid—stay with 'em. I'm comin'."

Ronnie Stephens flashed a white-toothed smile even as the explosive missiles from the gyrating Zeros ripped his plane into a patchwork of cruelly torn metal.

He turned a round, boyish face toward the too distant speck that was rocketing down to tear the slant-eyed hellions from his tail. The seep of blood from a shrapnel gash at his hair line met the gamely lifted lips. He raised his hand in a salutary gesture.

"No use, Big Red," he whispered

into his mike. "The last card's been dealt. It looks like Uncle Sam is gonna have to split a pair and draw to a lone Ace. This kite's losin' altitude faster than Isaac Newton's apple."

Red Ballew groaned at his inability to help as he saw the distant plane settle earthward. "No!" he pleaded. "It can't be so. We've licked this many before. We can do it again. Eh, Kid?"

Young Ronnie Stephens took two of the tricky rat-cages with him as he went down. The remaining three spiraled into a fighting front to face the plane swooping down upon them.

Had those three Jap pilots known the pangs of agony that were ripping at the heart of the big red-headed flier, they would have fled full speed before the relentless fury of his avenging guns.

The big Yank flew the plane like a wild man—chopped them out of the air one at a time. He sliced the plane through the wildly mad design stabbing at the smoke trails the falling Japs had left as though he wasn't yet satisfied with the odds he'd claimed for his reckless young pal. When the last of the smoke had dissipated into nothingness, his body slumped forward in the cockpit. Heavy sobs tore from his throat.

"I couldn't help it, Kid," he cried. "I—I just couldn't get here in time."

ALMOST as though in answer to Red's grief stricken apologies, a faint voice leaked in through the head set phones clamped to his ears.

"Help," the weak voice pleaded. "I'm down in a field at the base of the ridge. If you'll land and pick me up, we can still get away."

The big muscled body of the red-head puffed to cockpit-filling attention. A burning light flared in his eyes. He flicked the transmitter switch. "I'm

comin' down, Kid," he said eagerly. "If there's one chance in a million, I'll take it."

Red was clawing his way up over the tattered wing of the smashed plane on the ground when the Japs appeared. They popped into being from the bushes, from the shallow ditch, from every conceivable hiding place. He could never recall having seen so many loathsome countenances at one time. It reminded him of the monkey island in Swope Park at Kansas City.

He stood braced on the side of the plane and shot at the faces as long as his ammunition lasted. Each time he triggered a face would blot out and another would bob up to take its place.

When the hammer clicked ominously on an empty cylinder, he threw the gun at the closet set of teeth. Huge muscles rippled beneath his freckled skin. "Come on you rats," he bellowed. "One at a time or the whole pack."

The Japs chose to come at him by the pack. The third successive wave managed to push the fighting red-head to the ground. The fourth and fifth waves captured the flailing arms, and the only weapon left to the swearing Yank was his lashing tongue. "Aren't you the proud ones though, you bloody heathens?" he shouted to the milling throng. "You've shot down a silky haired kid because your lousy planes out-numbered him five to one, and now with the aid of the whole Japanese infantry, you've captured me."

Red didn't expect an answer to his mouthings. He was merely working off his spleen in the only manner left.

He did receive an answer, in very precise English!

The speaker was a smallish Jap with a pronounced slant to his evil eyes. He wore the uniform of a pilot and there was a brilliant purple dragon emblazoned on the front of his leather jacket. "If the crazed American flier

would be so kind as to stop his raving for just a moment, he would recognize the untruth of his words," the Jap pilot said. "Did it not strike you as unusual that no shots were fired at you? My honorable men have not so much as blackened your eye."

Red Ballew blinked his eyes and wrinkled his facial muscles. It was true. His face was unmarked, and no bullets had crashed about him. He struggled to an upright position, swinging as least five Japs off their feet as he arose. The talkative Nip was standing before him, pointing a small automatic at his midriff. The rest of the slant-eyed soldiers released Red's arms and stepped respectfully back.

A SINISTER smile broke the coldness of the gun-holder's face. "So sorry that I found it necessary to resort to a ruse to get you to earth," he intoned, "but at the time I found myself too busy to come up in my plane and shoot you from the sky as my men shot your friend."

Red weighed the chances of living out a bull rush on the gun—decided against it. "Where's Ronnie's body?" he asked. "He's an officer you know—rates a decent burial."

The trimly uniformed Jap inclined his head, "Your impetuous young friend is far from dead. We have had him taken to Sanderra Village." The shave-topped head swung to and fro. "The American youth swears with the viperish tongue of the aged. He has committed the unpardonable sin of blaspheming the Emperor."

A broad grin crawled across the big Yank's freckled face. His red hair seemed to throw off a wave of warmth. "Good boy," he chuckled. "Guts enough to be a Missourian."

The Jap bowed from the waist, but the pistol never wavered. "I trust you will forgive my impersonating your

friend on the radio, but you see I, like all of the men who fly for the Emperor, am aware of the identity of the Two Black Aces. When I saw the large Ace of Clubs, on the fuselage of the wrecked plane, I knew that you would be up above flying the Ace of Spades plane."

Red Ballew swore luridly. "I might have known the Kid wouldn't have called me into anything that held personal danger for me."

Two days after the plane crash, Red Ballew puffed at a roll-your-own cigarette and stared hopelessly out through the slats that covered the tiny window of a grass-thatched hut.

His gaze drifted past the poker-faced Jap sentry, through the dusty village street and over to the Bay of Maokola. He watched a small native outrigger bounce on the ripply waves. He was about to turn and walk back into the semi-darkness of the interior when his gaze froze in astonishment. He staggered a few steps backward and made a little gurgling sound.

Ronnie Stephens came up from a straw-topped bunk like a shot. "What is it Red? Something hurt you?"

A sickly white color bleached out the freckles on the big red-head's face. "My God!" he whispered. "I can't believe it. Tell me. I was only seeing things." He pointed a shaky finger. "There," he said, "by the edge of the bay. Snugged up to the bank as far as you can see."

Ronnie stared silently for a long time. When he turned to face Red his face was pasty. "Ships," he said. "Jap cruisers and destroyers. An entire fleet of them."

Standing in the hut, looking out, Red understood why they had never spotted the ships on any of the reconnaissance flights. The craft were all drawn in close to shore. Each ship was covered

with a heavy green netting into which was woven a collection of mosses and banyan leaves. The nets were made fast to tall trees on land and drawn out over the ships where they were secured to submerged rafts.

Ronnie turned pleading eyes to the older flier. "Isn't there something we can do Red? Some way in which we can send a message?"

THREE weeks went by. Three weeks of agony during which time the two Yanks saw more Jap ships sneak into the harbor and slide into hiding to await the signal for an all out invasion of the mainland.

Ronnie was staring out through the slatted window when he saw the Japs heading for the hut.

"Company's comin' Red," he said. "The slick little Jap that wears the purple dragon on his chest and half of the Emperor's army." His face tightened. "Do you suppose this is the wash-up?"

Red shrugged. "The Japs never were noted for their extreme kindness. It could be."

"What I can't figure out," Ronnie said, "is why they've been pampering us like they have. First off they didn't kill either of us when they had the opportunity. They didn't even take our valuables. You've still got the gold watch and pencil set the Missouri University gave you for your football playing. They stick us in here and feed us like kings, even bring hot water for bathing and shaving." Ronnie shook his head. "It doesn't stack up with what we have seen before when the Japs took prisoners."

The trim waisted little Jap pilot entered first and the others followed at a respectful distance. The Jap introduced himself. "I am Major Higura Kamira. You of course have heard of me?"

Red Ballew scratched at a rusty lock of hair and shook his head. "Any particular reason why we should have?"

The Jap attempted to conceal his obvious displeasure. "Don't jest with me," he said testily. "All Americans must have heard of the prowess of Major Kamira of the Purple Dragon. I am the leading Ace in the mighty air force of the Emperor. Even as wide as is the fame of the Two Black Aces, I am sure that my ability supersedes anything you two may have accomplished."

The big red-head chuckled. "Must be American censors won't let us read about it!"

The Jap's head bobbed vigorously. "That is exactly the trouble. Your pig-headed government is keeping our successes smothered beneath false claims of Allied victories. I daresay the masses of Americans back in the United States are still suffering under the delusion that the Allies are winning the war instead of rapidly losing it."

RED laughed in the Jap's face. "I suppose the Emperor has told you guys that Uncle Sam took an awful beating at Coral Sea and Midway. He probably forgot to mention the number of flat-tops we've sent down along with their planes." The red hair shook from side to side. "No soap mister. I'm from Missouri."

The Jap's head tilted sidewise. "Soap?" he parroted, "Missouri?"

Red nodded. "No soap—no sale. Us natives of Missouri are as stubborn as the mules we raise there. We just don't believe *anything* until we see it with our own eyes. That's why they call Missouri the *Show Me State*."

The Jap Major frowned back his disapproval and motioned for one of the men who had been standing in the background. The man came forward. He was carrying a Graflex Camera.

The Major let a cool smile wash over the outside of his face. "With your aid, we are going to enlighten a few of the misguided ones who are being held in ignorance. By now of course, you men know that we treat our prisoners with the utmost respect. Have you not been well fed and cared for?"

Red Ballew blew a smoke ring that bristled with suspicion. "Give out feller," he grunted. "You're fishin' for something."

The wearer of the purple dragon flushed slightly. "There is something," he said evasively. "Something you should be only too glad to do. If you two will pose please for some pictures, showing that you are well and unharmed. You link arms with me so, to show that you harbor no ill feelings for the man whose superior flying shot you down?"

Ronnie Stephens snorted. "Who shot who down?" he gasped. "Why you slimy little—"

Red Ballew's freckled hand restrained Ronnie—stopped the flow of heated words. "Go on little feller," he nodded toward the Jap. "We're listenin'."

The Jap bowed from the waist. "In return for our kindness to you, we expect please that you record your voice on phonograph records to be played over the short wave station at Tokyo. You will advise the American soldiers to lay down their arms and accept the Emperor as their ruler. Tell them their life under his rule will be far better than living under the money mad Roosevelt's thumb. You will warn them of the superiority of our aircraft. And above all you will tell them of the kindness with which we treat our prisoners."

Red Ballew was looking over the Jap flier's shoulder, toward the edge of a little clearing. His eyes took in a long freshly filled trench. At short-spaced

intervals along the trench, crude crosses of sticks were poked into the dirt.

There had been a small band of unresisting natives in Sanderra Village. Some of the more peaceful ones had stayed in the village when the Japs took over. A few resentful ones had escaped to the security of American held islands. The trench and crosses verified the tales of the refugees—of having seen those who remained behind being mowed down like grass. And simply because the Japs wanted their dwellings and what food supplies they had on hand.

Red Ballew's fists balled into sem-blances of gnarly tree trunks. And suddenly he wasn't able to just go on standing there any longer—

RED'S muscle-driven fist crashed heavily into the prominent teeth of the Jap with a sickening thud. As the Major's body somersaulted backward, teeth flew in all directions.

Ronnie Stephens dived with flailing arms into the midst of the close packed Japs. The very compactness of the Nips prevented them using their guns. Seven of the yellow men were prostrate on the grass before the two berserk Yanks were controlled.

Red Ballew snorted and glared from blue-gray eyes beneath a wicked gash caused by a slashing Jap pistol barrel. His great arms were pinioned by a dozen of the little yellow men. His uniform hung in tatters from his bulging muscles.

Ronnie Stephens, unable to free his own arms, was trying desperately to sink his teeth into his nearest captor.

The Major was helped to his feet. There was a bloody gap in the front of his face where the teeth had been. He spat a reddish froth and glared insanely.

"American fools," he raved, "you will be shot in the public streets to-morrow

morning. But first I will have the pleasure of striping your bodies with the lash of an ox whip."

Red Ballew's oak-like legs spread wide and his great body was as unyielding as a granite cliff as the biting lash whistled viciously through the air. The lead-tipped thong bit deep, brought spurts of blood to change the broad back to an expanse of angry gore.

Ronnie Stephens stood straight on his slender legs and took his lashing until the blessed blackness of unconsciousness carried away the unbearable pain.

The Japanese flier was as full of insane hate as a deadly scorpion. He continued to beat the fallen youth with a wild fury.

When the insanely mad Jap had spent his fury and was preparing to order the two beaten fliers thrown back into the darkened hut, an orderly came up and saluted. He made a terse report to the Major.

A gleam beaded out from the slitted eyes of the Jap pilot. "Good!" he leered. "Very good indeed." He turned to face the two Americans. He scooped their tattered shirts from the dirt and threw them into Red's face. "Clothe yourself," he ordered. "And revive your young friend. I have still more fun in store for you."

On the camouflaged little airfield of the island, two twin-motored Mitsubishi type 97 heavy bombers were being bombed up preparatory to making a raid on the mainland.

THE Major halted the two Yanks at the edge of the field. "Some calling cards for your friends," he said coldly. "These bombs are to be dropped on your own air field. The seventy-seventh fighter squadron." Evil cunning crackled from the button-hole eyes. "You two will enjoy loading a

few bombs so that they may be dropped on your friends won't you?"

Ronnie Stephens made a weak lunge at the grinning Jap. "If you think we are going to load your stinkin' planes with eggs for your men to drop on our field, you're even more insane than you look."

Red had been preparing to join Ronnie in a last desperate battle. Suddenly he stopped and stared at the carts of bombs. "Wait Kid," he said, "maybe we'd better do it after all. We want to live until to-morrow don't we? And if we don't do it, the Japs will."

Ronnie staggered back. Disgust filled his eyes. "It isn't you sayin' that, Red," he grimaced. "It can't be. My pal Red Ballew, one of the Black Aces, would never consent to a thing like that. Why hell, Red—"

A half-frown crossed Red's face. He looked at the sneering Jap flier standing close by. "You better do as I say kid. You can't stand any more lashings."

Ronnie's head dropped hopelessly. "O.K.," he said flatly, "we bomb up the lousy crates. But I got no stomach for it."

The Jap bombs were of the medium heavy type. The bomb cart had flat metal wheels with no bearings. Red took the back end close to the bombs and pushed. Ronnie pulled at the end of the slender tongue. The Nipponese guards seated themselves at the side of the field with ready rifles across their knees. Kamira fondled the purple dragon on his jacket front. He was well pleased with himself.

Red was bent low over the back of the cart. He held his voice down so that his words only reached the ears of the Yank on the front end. "Take it easy kid," he said. "Stop in mid-field and let me roll a smoke."

Ronnie stopped wordlessly, his head bent low. Red fumbled with the

makin's—spilled his cigarette papers and had to search among the bombs on the cart to retrieve them.

They took so long about delivering the bombs that Kamira came out and herded them on at gun point.

Ronnie groaned helplessly as they lifted the last bomb into place in its bay. Red was silent as he swung the tail of the bomb up and secured it.

Kamira's face was a leering mask as he supervised the closing of the bay doors.

"Just so that you get no ideas about jamming them," he sneered.

Red Ballew watched the 97's rumble into the sky and line out toward the distant field of the Seventy-Seventh Fighter Squadron. His eyes held a strange quizzical look. "I wonder," he muttered, "if those Nips are good enough on the drop to lay those eggs anywhere close to our field?"

IT WAS some hours past midnight when Ronnie stirred restlessly on his hard bunk.

The big Red-headed flier was sitting on the edge of his bed staring into the darkness.

Ronnie put out a hand and rested it on Red's knee. "Sorry I beefed about bombing up the Jap planes," he said with a little catch in his throat. "It's just that—Well hell Red! It's bad enough to be held prisoner here with the secret of the Jap armada bottled up inside of us and no way of getting word to our friends. When that stinkin' dragon-chested egotist asked us to bomb up the planes I just felt like takin' a slug from his gun and callin' it quits."

Ronnie swung his legs down from the bunk and sat up. "What difference would a few hours make anyway? How much more time before we go for the one way walk in the city street?"

Red made a scooping motion toward

the pocket where the gold watch presented him by the college usually reposed. His hand came away empty. "You'll have to reckon time by the stars," he said bitterly. "My watch is gone."

Ronnie nodded his understanding. "Tough losing something you value so highly. They take your pencil too?"

Red nodded soberly. "Yeh, the pencil went with the watch. Wouldn't do to break the set."

Ronnie studied the dirt floor and pondered. "You gonna let those rats march you down the street so the rest of them can gloat when they rub us out?"

Red got silently to his feet. His voice held a slight burr. "I've been thinkin' Kid," he said slowly. "There's only one man guarding us and he can only shoot one guy at a time. This is what we're gonna try. You stand beside the door with a bowl or something in your hand. I'll call the Jap in and mix with him. You bash him over the head and take to the bushes."

Ronnie cleared his throat. "That's all there is to it," he said. "I dash off into the night—and leave your dead body layin' in the floor you big ox."

Red shrugged. "It's better than letting them get both of us."

Ronnie picked up a gourd shaped bowl of baked earthenware. He balanced it on his hand. "I used to be able to shoot a flat lateral pass the full width of the field," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe if we got in a huddle we could work something out."

THE Jap sentry answered Red's summons with a suspicious rifle held at ready. The big flier's body bulked large in the small door—prevented the Jap from seeing into the room.

Red parleyed the sentry around into the proper position. Then he gave the signal. "What kind of a dump is this

anyway?" he growled. "Can't you even bring a guy some drinkin' water?"

As the word *water* left his lips his body dropped floorward as though his legs had suddenly dematerialized.

Ronnie Stephens, standing across the little room, snapped his arm forward with machine-like precision. The hurtling bowl shot past within inches of Red's dropping head—smashed with a stomach-turning thud full into the surprised Jap's face. His body smacked into the dirt like a loosely tied sack of barley.

Dawn was just streaking the sky when the two Aces, crawling side by side, worked their way up near the Airacobra with the Ace of Spades painted on its fuselage. The Cobra had been wheeled onto the line with several Jap Zeros.

Red fished in his pocket—came out with his tobacco sack. He spun it into the air. "If the bull comes up," he whispered, "you take the Cobra and I wrestle with one of the Zeros."

The sack came down with the picture of the bull facing downward.

Red's balled fist took care of the lone guard who had been watching the planes. When the guard was trussed and gagged, the two men moving like shadows made a quick check on the planes. They met for a moment for a silent handshake then slipped into the cockpits.

Red settled himself comfortably in the office of the Cobra and waited for the few minutes necessary to let Ronnie accustom himself to the mechanisms of the Zero.

The first rays from a tropical sun were washing out the ground-haze when the two planes blasted into fast moving life.

Pilots came running from the ready room across the field.

Looking back over his shoulder, as

the Allison behind him sent its full 1,150 horse power surging through the ten foot extension shaft beneath him to spin the three bladed prop into a mad circle of invisibility, Red could see that the leading pilot dashing across the field wore a leather jacket with a gaudy purple dragon emblazoned across its front.

The lash marks on his back burned into new life. His tight smile was cold and humorless. "Little man," he gritted, "you're gonna have a busy day."

Five thousand feet above the little flying field the two planes clashed in a duel to the death.

Flying with the picture of Ronnie Stephens prostrated beneath the blood-spilling lash of the maniacal Jap's whip, Red Ballew was a feelingless, smooth-working machine, a master cog directing the smoothly responding Cobra on its mission.

HIS gloved hand went to the "shell loader" handle of the thirty seven millimeter hub cannon—pulled back. The motion was repeated on the "shell charger." The cannon was loaded, cocked and ready for battle.

Ronnie Stephen's voice cracked in through the phones.

"—bunch of lousy Jap trash," he was saying. "If I could only be sure that the radio is working. Ronnie Stephens to Red Ballew. Can you hear me Red?"

Red looked down to where a cloud-riding Zero was cutting over to block the upward climb of Kamira's pals so that the two-plane duel could continue uninterrupted. He tried to make his voice sound harsh in the mike. "Look Kid," he ordered. "This is my beef. You got to get word out about the ships in the bay. You point the nose of your plane toward the mainland and fly until you see an allied ship or flying

boat, then hit the silk. If you don't bail out they'll shoot your tail feathers off. Remember you've got a nice round rising sun painted on the undersurface of your wings."

Ronnie's laugh slapped back through the ether. "Still want to play hero huh? I'm gonna get word through all right, but *over the radio* and while I'm talkin' I'm gonna be doin' a little fightin'."

Suddenly a broad grin sliced across the freckled countenance of the Red-Head. "Oh yeah?" he chuckled. "If you do any fightin' in the next few minutes it'll be fightin' the air tryin' to keep from bein' ventilated by Yankee bullets. Look off to your left. Those streaks of greased lightnin' you see shootin' in aren't so many honey bees. Unless I miss my guess it's the boys from the Seventy Seventh and if you'll look high enough up you'll see a hundred or so tiny black specks." The Red-Head's laugh boomed out over the air. "Flyin' Fortresses Kid, and every one of 'em equipped with a bomb sight that never misses."

As though guided by an unspoken code of battle the pilots of the Seventy Seventh stayed clear of the twisting battle between the opposing aces.

Jap ack-ack blossomed into existence about Red—gave him the feeling of flying through a cotton patch looking at the fleecy bolls ready for picking.

Kamira went into a twisting roll—bored up wildly under the Airacobra and lashed a deadly burst from his twenty millimeter wing guns.

Red dropped off on a wing as the slugs ripped past within inches of his cockpit. He shot the ink to the Allison and swung wide for a running burst. Experience had taught him that the lighter, more maneuverable Zeros were wicked in-fighters. He had developed a technique of his own. He held the stick steady, flying in line a

little above the Zero. He wanted Kamira to think he was going to by-pass him from above. At the last minute, he shot the stick forward and braced his neck against the sudden shock.

THE Cobra went down like a falling star. Red thumbed out all of the fire-power at his command. Two fifty caliber guns blazed beside the coughing cannon in the nose. Four thirties chattered from the wings. Steel drummed about the pride of Nippon's air force.

There was a grim smile on the freckled face. "I told you I was from Missouri," he gritted. "If you're so damn much better'n I am, you got to *show me.*"

When the Cobra had whipped past in its battering run, Kamira's face was more green than yellow. There was a jagged row of holes zig-zagging across his left wing and a fresh gust of wind told of an angry bullet that had pierced the plex-o-glass covering on his cockpit. Only the propaganda praise that had been dished out at Tokyo spurred him on. "American dog," he muttered. "No one outflies Kamira of the Purple Dragon. Prepare to die."

Screaming steel from Kamira's guns ripped into the Cobra. Jerked a curse from the lips of the red-headed Missourian. "Got to whip this monkey," he gritted through tight clenched teeth. "Can't let any slant-eyed baboon put a whip to my back and live to brag about it."

Back in the Bay of Maokola, a twisting hell of Nipponese planking and steel mingled with leaping blazes as the "Forts" began dumping their eggs into the green netting. The *secret* invasion fleet was a chaos of sinking hulls.

Ronnie Stephens was desperately gassing the purloined Zero through the air in front of a swooping Airacobra

that was intent on knocking his wings off. A big Consolidated P.B.V.-5 sat down off shore and prepared to pick up any pilots that chuted to the water.

The Yank pursuing the Zero shook his head in disgust as he saw its pilot slide back the hatch covering and hit the silk. He turned away in search of another Jap. American pilots were not trained to machine gun a man swinging in the air beneath a parachute.

High up over the island, the purple-dragoned Jap's Zero twisted into a tight bank and came spitting blue hell toward Red's plane. Red giggered the left rudder and slid out of the line of fire. The Zero skittered by within feet of his wing tip.

Red let the Jap sail past, then he kicked the nose of the Cobra over and sent a heavy burst slashing about the frightened Nipponese flier.

The very fear of the Jap pilot caused him to maneuver the Zero into position for a lucky burst. He clawed wildly at the stick and kicked the rudder heedlessly. Then, because of his fluke flying, he had Red's plane in his sights.

A million candle-power light burst into flame in Red's head as a cupro-steel slug furrowed a bloody gash an inch above his left ear.

The hate drive bullet knocked him momentarily into stunned helplessness. His hands and feet slid from the controls. The Cobra danced drunkenly through the sky, skewing off at a crazy angle that jerked it from the danger zone.

RED came out of it like a fighter. He shook the blood from his eyes and clamped his teeth against the pain. His lips peeled back determinedly. The controls leaped into life beneath his vengeful fingers. "Now you've done

it!" he gritted. "You got me mad mister, and it ain't good to get a Mis-sourian mad."

On board the American flying boat, Ronnie Stephens wrung salt water from his garments and squinted aloft toward the two madly twisting specks high in the heavens. He was talking to the co-pilot who had pulled him from the water. "What I can't understand," he said, "is how you guys got word of the Jap ships that were hiding in Maokola Bay? What gave you the tip-off?"

The co-pilot looked his surprise. "You mean you don't know about the message we received?"

Ronnie took his turn at being surprised. "Message?" he repeated.

The co-pilot laughed. "I'll say it was a message. And a plenty clever one if you ask me. A couple of Jap bombers came over our field yesterday and dropped their eggs. None of them landed even close, but one particular bomb was a dud—failed to explode. After so long a time some of the boys got up nerve enough to investigate." The co-pilot laughed quietly. "It was one of the type Japan copied from us. You know the kind—contact bomb fired by a detonator pin in the nose—with a center section of the pin turned cross ways to prevent an accidental explosion. The whirl of the released

bomb swings the center part of the detonator pin into line and makes the bomb effective. The center section of this particular bomb hadn't lined up—and for a mighty good reason. Some one had jammed a gold pencil in behind the pin so that it couldn't work. We examined the bomb closer and what do you think we found?"

Ronnie shook his head impatiently. "Go on," he urged, "what'cha find?"

"A watch. A gold watch with a football engraved on the back, tied on the inside of the tail-fin rudder. It was smashed all to pieces, but the note written on the cigarette paper was still in the back case." The co-pilot shrugged. "That's about all," he said. "We loaded up the big ones with eggs and followed the instructions written on the message in the watch."

Ronnie Stephen's eyes were suspiciously damp as he looked far up and saw a hornet-like Airacobra with a black Ace of Spades on its fuselage slash in and deal the death stroke to the Zero piloted by the whip-wielding Jap ace. As the Zero rocketed water-ward streaming smoke and flame, the Yank-flown Cobra shook its wings and hawked off to join the Fighting Seventh.

"So that's why that big egg was so willing to load the bombs on the Jap planes yesterday," Ronnie grinned.

KEEP IT TO YOURSELF!

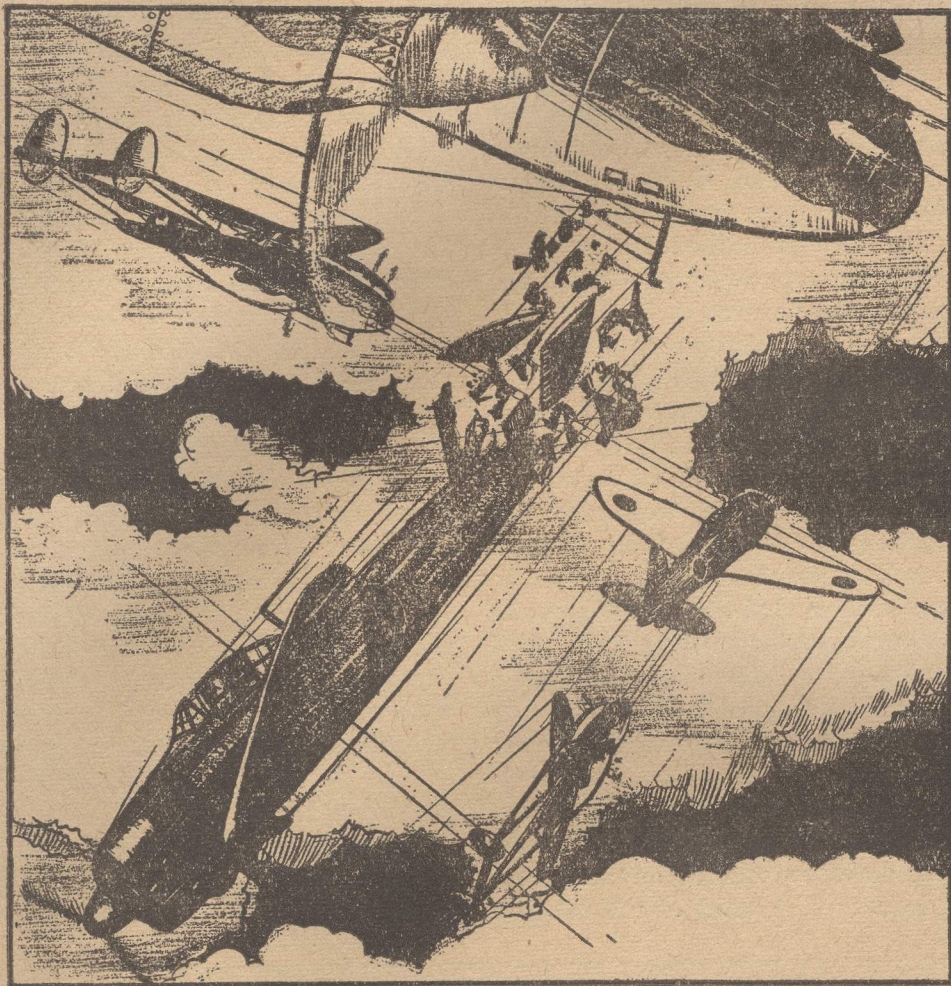
THE ENEMY IS ALWAYS LISTENING . . .
HE WANTS TO KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW

WE ARE OUT FOR **VICTORY**

WHEN A FIGHTING YANK GETS SILVER WINGS

By
LIEUT. JAY D. BLAUFOX

Manning the guns in the Fortress' blister or working through the bombsights, Shorty's job was to knock Japs out of the sky!



THE giant Flying Fortress sat down on the northwest-northeast runway on Henderson Field on Guadalcanal and settled its props to zero revolutions in front of the hangars on the Lunga side.

Little black holes dotted it from the leading edges of the huge wings and ran down the fuselage toward the stinger tail. The lines of holes were irregular, running in all directions of the

compass.

Mechanics surged around the ship but the crew still remained inside. As the Technical Sergeant opened the heavy fuselage door Skipper Lawton's voice tore through the opening and smote the ears of the men on the ground. They instinctively withdrew to a safe distance to wait. The Technical Sergeant glanced up at the white painted name just under the pilot's

window and smiled. "Louse Buster" it read. He shook his head thoughtfully. He wondered if that name referred to the Japs or the skipper of the ship, whom he could hear tearing into one of his gunners for bad shooting.

"What did you train on," the Skipper was shouting, "a peashooter?" He was blasting at Shorty Stewart, a pint-sized little gunner whose office was in the stinger tail of the Louse Buster.

Shorty was tiny; but he looked like a pigmy in the presence of the tall, six-foot skipper. He tried to find voice to reply but the words mixed with his larynx and garbled like a transcontinental radio telephone conversation. Sounds emanated from his tensed throat, but the sounds were horribly scrambled. Finally he managed to explain: "But Skipper, if I'd opened up my guns on the guy, my strays would have peppered the Fortress on the other side of him.

"Your job is to get Japs," roared Lawton. "If that's asking too much," he added sarcastically, "I'll have you transferred to the Sanitary Squads."

"I think Shorty's done a swell job of getting Japs," defended Chips Maginis, another gunner on the Louse Buster. In fact, his specific job was to man the guns in the blister just behind the pilot's compartment of the B-17E to keep the diving Nips from clipping Lawton in the back of the neck.

"Who asked you?" shouted the enraged Lawton, turning on Chips.

"No one," replied Chips quietly, "but I didn't think you were being fair to the kid." Chips was as tall as the Skipper, as heavy, and as powerful. The man held no terrors for him. He didn't like Lawton. Neither did anyone else, for that matter. The man had an unreasonable temper. He didn't like any of his crew; didn't like any of anybody else's crew. In fact, just didn't like anybody.

He was distasteful, hateful, uncooperative except in the air where his life was at stake. He demanded the almost impossible and was never ready to reciprocate a favor or a service. He would pick on the slightest error of his crew and magnify it to heart-rending proportions well beyond the scope of its importance. He seemed to delight in making his men miserable, though his pleasure was never evidenced.

Rumor had it that his wife back in San Francisco had run off with a local Four-F whose thriving business on government contracts, and genial temper, made him most desirable. And knowing Lawton, who could blame her?

The men didn't know whether this experience had soured Lawton on people, for he hated women because of men, and hated men because of a woman. But they did know that if he had been intolerable to her, he was intensely impossible now.

FOR some unknown reason he seemed to dislike Chips more than anyone else. Perhaps it was because Chips was like him in build, though better looking. The gunner's blue eyes always seemed to penetrate to the Skipper's heart and make him most uncomfortable. And for this reason he always rode the gunner more than he did anyone else. As for Chips, he disliked no one—sometimes not even Lawton. He was just sorry for him. Lawton knew this and hated his gunner all the more for what he called his "patronizing" attitude. But Chips was never patronizing. He was human. When he saw Lawton riding a man almost half his size, and especially one who had done such a magnificent job of keeping the Louse Buster's tail clear of Zeros, he couldn't help siding with the kid.

Lawton fumed at being told he was not being fair.

"Who the hell gave you the authority

of judge and jury as to whether I was being fair or not?" he stormed. "You just keep the Japs off my neck. That's your job. Do that well and that'll be all that's required of you."

"I think I do a good job of keeping the Zeros away from your controls," said Gunner-Sergeant Chips Maginnis.

"That's just your opinion," retorted Lawton.

"In fact the whole crew on this ship do a damn good job of helping you get her home with very few holes in her every time you take her out," ventured Chips. "If you ask me," added the gunner, growing a little more daring, "this crew's a little too damn good for you."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm not competent to handle this ship and men intelligently?" demanded Lawton, his eyes blazing, his temper at white heat.

"If you pick on a little guy like Shorty who's doing a grand job and tear into him for no good reason," replied Chips, whose own temper was beginning to show the irritation he was feeling, "then I'm inclined to think somebody higher up has made a mistake about you."

That was more than Lawton could stomach. The Sergeant had not said anything that could be construed definitely as an open insult, but the inference was there. Lawton saw that Chips was getting angry. He knew, too, that the man was from Texas. He made up his mind to break the man; to provoke him into an act that would result in his being broken. He timed it perfectly.

"You're a cotton-mouthed liar," he cried.

There was a resounding crack that echoed through the fuselage of the big bomber as bone met bone. Lawton's head snapped back with the impact of Chip's fist; his body went hurtling out through the open hatch and he lay stunned a moment in the sand of Gua-

dalcanal. The crew poured out of the Fortress after Chips, who jumped onto Lawton, who had risen from the sand. They started mixing it until the crowd gathered around them and separated them.

His mouth bloody, his helmet and goggles knocked off his head, his right eye swelling from contact with Chip's heavy fists, he shook off the men who were holding him when the C.O. thundered up in a sidecar.

"What's going on here?" asked the Commanding Officer.

Instead of keeping his mouth shut, Lawton demanded Chips' arrest for insubordination and striking a superior officer. That act added to his already gross unpopularity.

It was three days later when Chips Maginnis emerged from the court martial. They had taken his stripes away—but not his job. Good gunners were scarce on Guadalcanal. He asked for a transfer to another bomber crew.

"Why?" asked the Commandant.

"I'd rather not fly with Captain Lawton, sir, if you don't mind," replied Chips.

"Maginnis," began the Commandant, "I don't believe in holding a man down to a job he doesn't like. I'm sorry the court martial had to find you guilty of assault and insubordination in spite of the fact Lawton called you a liar and provoked the attack. Your procedure should have been to demand an apology through the regular channels. You lost your temper, indicating that your dislike for the man was not of recent birth; that you must have been, unconsciously, if you will, harboring the displeasure for some time. Acts like yours are never impulsive in men who are not prone to impulse. And your record among the men shows that you are usually even tempered." He paused to examine Chips' frigid face before he continued: "It would seem to me

that you have a problem to solve. You and Lawton. I want my men to get along."

"Pardon my interrupting, sir," injected Chips, "but that man gets along with no one. He seems to hate everyone and everything he comes in contact with. He had no justification for tearing into Shorty Stewart. I couldn't help defending the kid."

"Sorry, Maginnis," said the Commandant. "You got yourself into this scrape. Now I want you to get those three stripes back again because I like you. So get yourself straightened out with Lawton." He half smiled confidently as he added: "I not only think you can do that for yourself; but you might possibly straighten him out. He's a fine pilot and we need pilots like him. Sorry he isn't as good a man as he is a pilot; but I think underneath he is and it's up to us to bring it out. I think you can do it. I want you to stay with him."

THAT was the best Chips could do with the Commandant. It was an embarrassingly peculiar situation and the old man had no official right to place him in it. He didn't want to remake Lawton. What did he care about the man? He was just plain no good and that was enough for Chips. To hell with him.

The Louse Buster would be on Milk Patrol the following morning, according to orders. He'd see Lawton then. But when he got to his tent, Lawton was waiting for him. To add to his already completely ratty attitude, he said:

"I understand you wanted a transfer from my command," he began. "I could have had you kicked out of the Army, but I interceded for you with C.O. provided he let you stay with me."

Chips eyed Lawton suspiciously.

"You don't ask me why I insisted that you stay with me," he continued.

"I have nothing to say to you, Captain Lawton," replied Chips. "And anything I have to say will be strictly on official business."

Lawton's nose was in a sling. When he grinned his usual nasty grin, its unpleasantness was amplified by the plaster which kept his septum from folding back to the bony structure.

"This sling I've got on my nose, Maginnis, is one of the reasons," Lawton told him. "I want you near me where I can keep my eye on you."

"I know you like riding people, Lawton," replied Chips, "for no obvious reason. We have broncos where I come from. And some of them are bad to ride."

"I'll remember that, Bronc," grinned Lawton. "In the meantime don't forget; it's the Milk Patrol in the morning."

He turned his back on Chips and strode quickly away. The gunner didn't believe Lawton. But he did know that the man would try to ride him harder now than he had ever ridden anybody in his crew before. He would have to look out for him. He thought him a rat; and if there had been a category lower than a rat's he would have placed Lawton in it.

At dawn the next day, the crew was standing beside the Louse Buster waiting for the skipper. The Wright Cyclones were rolling over in gentle, perfect cadence. A dank moisture hung over the atmosphere; a misty jungle humidity that had rolled in from the swamps to the south. Once in the air, although it would affect the temporary visibility—or lack of it—the mist would be left behind.

Lawton in sheeplined leather coveralls stopped in front of the group beside the Fortress' fuselage. He eyed them up and down for a moment with an unconcealed look of disgust. They had given him no cause for the expression.

It was his customary salutation on dawn patrols and the men were getting used to it. There was a boy who cried wolf once too often and nobody paid any attention to him. And so it was getting to be with Lawton. Except with Chips Maginnis. He returned the look. Lawton's grin was half with pain when he realized he was getting a rise out of Maginnis. The pain was caused by the grin's wrinkling his plastered nose. He said nothing, however, other than to give them additional instructions. They had had their briefing and knew what their job was and where they were going to execute it.

"We're going to Buka, as you already know," he began. "And I'm going to get a good job out of this trip or you'll all get a taste of what Maginnis got."

The men stirred perceptibly. Especially Chips. His face reddened. But he remained quietly behind the others.

"We're attacking the Japanese naval base in the Buka Passage at the tip of Bougainville Island on the run out; and on the way back, we leave a few eggs at the Kieta Base for breakfast." He turned to the bombardier. "And you, Smith, see that you remember to save a few for the return trip."

LAWTON observed a small khaki pouch hanging from a canvas strap from one of the gunner's shoulders: "You, Marsh, what have you got in that bag?"

Joe Marsh, one of the waist gunners, a medium sized, stocky chap with a pair of arms developed at professional baseball, replied: "Some hand grenades, sir. I picked them up at the dump in case we needed them."

"No kidding," grinned Lawton cynically. "You're not going to try that strong right arm of yours to pitch the Japs out of the sky, are you?"

"I'm still a pretty good pitcher, sir," replied Marsh. His gray eyes became

steely—his face tense. Lawton was even getting into his hair. And he had plenty to get into. His dark, frowzy mane was long and thick. Someone kidded him about having either Indian or Chinese blood in him.

Lawton dropped the smirk from his face like a man shedding his coat. "That's what you think," he said. "Don't use those grenades in the air even if your guns run dry. Remember." He turned to the others. "I expect all you guys—especially the gunners—" he looked coldly at Shorty Stewart, the stinger tail gunner, and at Maginnis, his top blister man—"to waste no ammunition but get your targets. When we get back this time I want a mellow report—or there'll be one you'll all be sorry for." He nodded them into the craft. "Get aboard."

Without a word the men climbed into the Fortress. They were serious, and sore. There was no justification for this treatment of them. They always did as good a job as they knew how. When Lawton had taken his place at the controls and Gabby Frale, the copilot, had taken his seat beside him in the compartment, Marsh turned to Maginnis, who was passing him through the waist of the ship for his own swivel chair in the top blister and whispered: "I'll give you one of these grenades if you promise to slip it down the back of Lawton's neck."

"I'd take you up if I wasn't sitting so close to him myself," replied Maginnis.

Six huge Fortresses roared off Henderson Field and headed out toward the sea. They slipped through the mist as it flowed around and past them like great waves of thin white smoke. At the tail of the formation rode the Louse Buster.

The formation rose to twenty thousand feet before it headed due west to avoid being seen from the Jap bases

on the New Georgia group. Once well out to sea they turned northeast and picked up the course for Buka. In addition to the naval base there, the Nips had a large airfield which housed their Zeros.

Lawton tested the intercom and the alertness of the men in the Louse Buster to see if they were at their battle stations. All were ready and accounted for. Even here, with death so possibly close, the man could not seem to submerge his wide streak of meanness and his tart, terse remarks over the intercom left his men with bitterness in their hearts and a hope that they might be attacked and relieved of him permanently.

Lawton called the navigator over the intercom: "Sears, check our position and report it."

Limpsey Sears, wounded in the foot in another action and refusing to be invalidated home, stayed on to finish his job, replied, "Very good, sir." He examined his maps; checked his time of departure from Henderson with his time of flight duration; made his computation and reported to Lawton that they were only a hundred miles off Buka.

THE sun was still well over the horizon and the islands lay dim and barely outlined in the distance. Tiny spots that were not clouds were visible high above them. The formation of Fortresses had dropped to about twelve thousand for better ground visibility. Although a thin haze hung over the sea and the islands, they could be made out. Here and there on the airfield a tiny flicker of light glowed a moment then went out. Lawton cried over the intercom: "Attention, you birds. Watch out for those Zeros above us. You, Maginnis, don't fail to get your targets or else . . . you, too, Stewart. Marsh, forget those hand grenades and try pitching with your guns—and oh, yes," he added

sarcastically, "strike your men out with those. That's what they're for. Bombardier! Get ready for bombs away."

This was no time to hate Lawton, the men thought. This was time to hate Japs—and what they stood for. They'd hate Lawton later. In every battle station on the ship men got their guns ready for action. Maginnis tried his revolving turret; Shorty Stewart in the tail tried his gun's universal joints. So did Marsh and his sidekick, Swifty Yale, try theirs. They did not want to warm their guns just yet.

Out over Buka Passage rode the Fortresses. As the big ships crossed the naval and air bases, one thousand pounders were released from the bomb bays and went crashing to the decks of the ships below and smashing through the Japanese planes still on the ground. Hundreds of small incendiaries followed the big bombs down and nested comfortably and burned brightly as the orange flames ate into the hearts of the installations below.

The black specks, the men in the Louse Buster had seen, were Zeros and they blackened the sky above the Fortresses, lighting it only with blistering fire from their wing and cowl guns.

Men in the Fortresses warmed their guns by spraying the diving yellow rats with ammunition made in the U. S. A. One by one the Zeros came and were conquered; but they left a trail of 30 calibre bullet holes in the giant fuselages of the Fortresses one could see through for miles.

The raid was over in twenty minutes. And the field below lay a mass of ruins. Ships at the Buka docks were burning like a new fire that had just been stoked. The smoke rose up to mingle with the slipstream of the Fortress' props. But the Zeros kept coming.

One by one they dived on the Louse Buster. One Zero sent its bullets crashing over Chips Maginnis' head as they

ripped through the Perspex turret cowl, tearing dangerously past his neck too and finishing up by splintering the instrument panel in front of the Skipper. The Zero roared past and tore up into a climbing turn, taking a load of Chips Maginnis' hot steel with it deep in its sleek, black body.

The headphones clapped to Maginnis' ears rattled with the raging voice and the cussing epithets that Skipper Lawton hurled at his top gunner through the intercom for not protecting him with his own neck.

Chips held his peace. But he watched the result of his fire and saw the Zero heel over; start to smoke like a hot dog that had been left on the grill too long and dive for flaming Buka Passage below unsteadily. He grinned as he guessed what a chump Lawton must feel. He knew the man had seen the same thing.

The Zeros kept pounding at the huge bombers and drilling them for mechanics later to fill with oversized rivets. But the fire power from the Fortresses was too much even for the Japs' best fighters and they were soon keeping out of Fortress' gun range. This left the sky to the Yanks and they turned their attention and noses toward Kieta to the south.

But they were expected here and a barrage of anti-aircraft rose up to meet them that drove the Fortresses to twenty-five thousand feet and the men to slip their oxygen masks over their noses.

MORE Zeros climbed for the attack and seemed to pick out the Louse Buster to center their blistering fire upon. Two of them dived directly on the tail, their guns blazing. Shorty Stewart's guns were silent until the Zeros dropped into range. Then his stingers opened up with a continuous, withering fire that forced the diving

Japs to swerve to both sides of the Fortress.

Chips Maginnis, watching the show from his grandstand seat on the roof of the ship, kept his eyes on the trail of fire from Shorty's guns to see which one of the Japs he would follow down.

It was an old Jap custom to dive by two, split up, and divert the enemy's fire to one, while the other came in for the kill from behind. Typically Japanese. And Chips watched for the trick and they worked it. But he took up the bird who swung about on his wing to come in for the kill on Stewart and while the man offered the bottom of his fuselage to Chips. Chips accepted the invitation and poured everything his guns held from the nose to the differential of the Zero almost cutting the devil in two.

The man's guns did not speak. The nose continued over and down in a half Immelmann and that was the last seen of it. But a third Jap dropped down from nowhere and plastered the Louse Buster amidships just missing Maginnis, but laying a seam of holes along the top of the ship from the middle right down through the huge fin to the transparent turret of the stinger tail. And Shorty's guns did not reply as the man rode over and past.

Chips got a chill. Shorty! If his guns didn't answer he must be hit. He called the little tail gunner on the intercom. But Shorty did not reply. Chips called Lawton.

"I think Shorty Stewart's been hit, Skipper," he cried.

But all the reply he got was: "To hell with him. I'm having trouble of my own."

A word lay on Chip Maginnis's tongue that would have made even a truck driver's hair curl if he heard it. So that's how little Lawton thought of the safety of his crew. He swung around in his chair and glanced down

into the pilot's office. Gabby Frale was fighting the controls; Lawton was applying a bandage to his head that was leaking blood all over his coveralls. He had been hit. Probably by the same man who had hit Shorty.

Chips turned back and faced the fin. The Zeros had broken up and were going down. The bombing of Kieta had not taken more than a few minutes and the formation, split up now, was forming again. Not one of the big bombers had gone unscathed. But it took more than Jap ack-ack or Zero bulleting to knock one down.

But the Louse Buster had been mortally hit. Gabby Frale was having the devil's own time keeping the ship in the air. The Automatic Pilot was smashed when the instrument panel was hit in the raid on Buka. And Gabby was battling to keep the nose up for it was trying desperately to lie down like a tired thing who felt it had done all it could and now wanted to die in peace.

Two of its engines had been silenced. The propellers had been feathered to cut down the drag on the rest of the engines. One of the ailerons fluttered dangerously—the right aileron to be exact. And although Chips could not see it from where he sat, one of the wheels on the landing gear hung half out of the ship and stuck there. Even if the ship got home, it was due for a crash landing anyway.

The two remaining Cyclones roared on bravely and dragged the giant bomber tailing after the others. The formation flew on past Shortland Island and again Jap ack-ack sent a spray aloft to help send the Fortresses on their way. No Zeros came up to attack them. But one of the ack-ack shells finished off the Louse Buster's damaged aileron and another put a third engine out of commission forcing Gabby Frale to cut the switch on it to keep it from bursting into flames. Now on only

one engine, with its right wing clipped, the Louse Buster, Chips could see, had a swell chance of landing in the Pacific. As for making Henderson Field, he thought, perish the thought.

THE big ship was losing height steadily. While the other five in the formation gained altitude, the Louse Buster was dropping for the water below. Looking back, Chips noticed the perspiration leaking down Gabby's cheeks from under his helmet. Keeping a Fortress in the air on only one engine was more than one man's job. But Gabby was doing it.

By the time the Louse Buster reached the coast line of Vella la Vella in the New Georgia group, it hung about four thousand feet over the jungle interior. About fifteen miles inland, the last of the Cyclones became a whispering wind and then died out completely leaving the huge ship motorless; powerless.

A glance back at Gabby to see what he was going to do showed Chips an unconscious Lawton. The man had passed out from loss of blood; and Gabby was not able to do anything for him because of the crippled ship.

The Louse Buster lost height rapidly and Gabby headed the ship for a clearing among the palm trees and the Eucalyptus. It just cleared the edge of the tallest palm and skimmed in for a belly landing for the landing gear electric controls had been crippled and the gear stuck.

As the huge forty-seven thousand pound hulk plopped down in what turned out to be a swamp, the half-lowered landing wheel ripped off the fuselage; the plane ground looped, and the tail section smashed against a heavy palm and crumpled. The wings of the ship were ripped back as the momentum drove the big bomber out of the mud and mire and through a section of palms and eucalyptus with such a thunderous

noise that the air about them soon filled with scared parrots and other jungle birds.

Inside, the men who had not tied themselves down were thrown about like dice in a cup. When the ship finally settled to a stop,—or what there was left of it—Chips uncovered his face and looked about him.

Gabby Frale was lying over his control wheel out from the sudden contact with the ground; Lawton was lying over him out from the loss of blood.

Chips stepped down out of the blister and into the compartment. He let Gabby wait and started giving First Aid to Lawton in an effort to stanch the still though now slowly trickling life stream. He drew the man down and laid him on the floor of the ship, after stopping the flow. Then he took care of Gabby. He came to almost immediately but there was a great bump in the middle of his forehead where it had struck the control wheel.

Chips went through the hatch to the waist where Limpy Sears, the navigator, had got mixed up with Joe Marsh and his bag of hand grenades to which he clung desperately lest they go off and blow him and Swifty Yale, the other gunner, through the ribs and skin of the fuselage. Marsh was rubbing his head; Swifty caressing his right shoulder which had come into unpleasant contact with the cartridge case on the fifty caliber waist gun.

Limpy Sears lay under his navigation table dazed, while Sparks Logan, the radio operator, was nursing a broken arm.

Chips Maginnis had had two years of premedical and knew something about the job of patching up a man. He was an expert at First Aid and took Sparks Logan in hand. He had the man fixed up from splints and materials in the First Aid Cabinet hanging loosely from the waist compartment

wall. With a moderate injection of morphine to make the pain tolerable, he made Sparks Logan comfortable.

In the meantime, Gabby Frale threw open the door and stepped outside. The frightened birds had calmed by now. The atmosphere had returned to the noises that only the jungle knew. Gabby's side arm was in his hand. There were Japs in the territory and he didn't know how close; or whether they had seen the Louse Buster go down and were hunting for it and the crew.

The radio was smashed up in the crash; the antenna ripped off its stanchions. And even if it could be worked, any attempt to get a message through would most certainly be intercepted by the enemy.

SMITH, the bombardier did not come out. Neither did Shorty Stewart. Chips ran toward the bombing compartment to see what had happened to the bombardier. He found the man lying in a pool of blood, but conscious. He could move nothing but his right hand, and in it rested his Colt 45. When he saw Chips, he smiled weakly.

"Hi yah, Mister Sergeant," he said.

"Smitty!" cried Chips. "You're hit."

"Not too bad," replied the stricken bombardier. "I'll probably survive long enough to pump all the blood through the leak in my side,—then—the Happy Hunting Grounds."

"Better let me help you," replied Chips. He bent down to see what he could do to save the bombardier when the other halted him.

"Wait," he said raising the gun threateningly.

Chips halted. He understood the other's act, however.

"I get it, Smitty," he said. "It's okay. I'll put the cover over the bomb sight without even looking if you want me too."

Smitty smiled weakly: "Sorry, Chips," he said apologetically. "But I guess you understand."

"I do," Chips Maginnis assured him. "Your oath to protect it. Do you want me to cover it?"

"Please," requested the wounded man.

Chips Maginnis, without looking at the bomb sight, retrieved its cover, and feeling for the instrument, slipped the cover over it. Then he attended to the man's wound. It was a bad wound. Part of his right side was blown away. The clothing stuck to the wound where the blood had clotted and Chips found it difficult to remove the clothing without causing the bombardier undue pain. The pain became so intense, and the loss of blood so great, that the boy lost consciousness. Ten minutes later, while Chips was still working on him, Bombardier Smith passed to that vale where all hero bomber airmen go when they die. Chips had fought desperately to save the man—and had lost. Gabby Frale stepped into the compartment to see what had happened to the bombardier. And Chips told him sadly. Then quietly, Gabby Frale turned to Chips and still addressing him as Sergeant as did all the others in the crew when Lawton wasn't listening, he said:

"Sergeant, I hate to add another bit of bad news to yours, but Shorty Stewart is gone to."

Chips thought a moment before he spoke: "Then I was right. That monkey did get Shorty." Then he looked up at Gabby Frale with a satisfied smile: "Well, it's good to know I got the monkey who got Shorty."

A voice behind them startled them out of their reverie. A man was calling a name; a woman's name. They turned and saw that Lawton had regained consciousness. And in his delirium was calling for his estranged

wife. Chips ran to his side. The man's face was flushed—and he was running a fever.

"This guy's in a bad shape," he said.

"Who cares?" asked Gabby Frale. The man rarely said much; but when he did speak, a little spoke volumes.

"He cares," replied Chips. "He seems to care a lot too. He's calling his wife."

"He must have loved that dame," ventured Frale. "And you wonder that a bird like that could have any love in him." He looked down at Chips beside the raving Lawton. "I wonder you don't want the bum to die after what he did to you."

"This is no time for revenge," replied Chips. "Especially when we are all practically in the same boat, Lieutenant."

"Okay," said Gabby resigned to Chips' altruistic attitude. "Let's get him outside. We've got to head for the coast and try to make home in the dinghies before the Japs pick us up. They must have a couple of raiding parties out looking for us by now."

"What'll we do with Smitty and Shorty?" asked Chips.

"Bury them here," replied Gabby Frale. "The ship's got to go up in smoke. There's the bomb sight, you know."

"I was just thinking of that," said Chips.

LAWTON was removed from the ship as were the bodies of the tail gunner and bombardier. After Lawton was laid on an improvised stretcher, and quieted down to mumbling the name of his wife from hysterical shrieks, the rest of the crew went through the process of burying their dead.

As the last of the earth was thrown over them, and quiet Gabby Frale had read from the small, khaki covered bible his mother had given him, he said:

"Like England, no matter where an Englishman dies, there lies a bit of England itself; so here, on Vella La Vella, is a part of the great country we Americans love; the United States of America."

There was a slight pause as the Parrots screamed through the jungle; and the men moved restlessly as he spoke. There were no tears. They hoped none would be shed for them either if they, too, should find an early resting place.

But there was still a job to be done. And they had to get back to base to help do it. With Lawton down, this placed Gabby Frale in command and he ordered the two dinghies to be removed from the ship, as many of the machine guns in case they were attacked and would need to defend themselves, and whatever other ammunition and supplies would help them get to Guadalcanal and Henderson Field. When everything was ready, they got well away from what was left of the Louse Buster and the ship was fired.

The men silently watched the flames lick at the compartment where the Norden Bomb Sight was concealed. They watched the intense heat of the flames melt the metal skin on the fuselage, but did not stop to see the Buster completely consumed. Besides, they wanted to be clear of the ship when the tanks blew, as they knew they would.

It was a motley crew which headed for the east coast of the island under the guidance of Limpy Sears and his miniature set of navigating instruments which he had thrown together from small parts in his spare time back at the base. Two of the men, Chips and Gabby, carried Lawton between them on an improvised stretcher. And thus they trudged—or rather slogged—through the swampy dampness. With each step their feet sank in the soft, wet mud; and with each drawing out

of their feet there was a hard, sucking sound that resembled the noise a small boy makes when he greedily sucks on a lollypop. One could almost sense the same feeling—if mud had feeling—in the reluctance to release the heavy, sheep-lined boots the men were wearing.

They slogged for hours in the dim, dank jungle, through the heat and the mud; sweeping aside the giant leaves of massive ferns, and tall wild grass, keeping an eye open for poisonous reptiles which infested the place. They stopped long enough to rest, to share the emergency rations between them, and to give the wounded Lawton momentary relief from the bouncing up and down he was getting on the stretcher made up of birch poles and palm fronds.

Gabby Frale's head bump was giving him trouble. It had swollen to the size of a small lemon and the pad he had put over it—or rather the pad Chips had placed on it to compress it—did not seem to be having much effect. His head was splitting; and the bumping of the stretcher with the wounded Lawton on it wasn't doing him any good.

Sparks Logan was doing as well as might be expected with his arm in a sling. The others who were unhurt by the crash were each carrying a Browning machine gun stripped from the ship. Joe Marsh still had the bag of hand grenades slung from his swarthy neck besides lugging a box of ammunition for the Brownings.

Limpy Sears, in addition to his small compass and sextant, carried another box of ammunition. On any other occasion, his limp and the box on his shoulder might have seemed a little humorous; but there was nothing funny about the picture now. It was grim; serious; deadly.

"How far have we walked?" called

Chips to Limpy across the little space that separated them.

"We've been travelling for six hours," Limpy replied. And looking at a small, nickel-plated pedometer he took from his pocket—Limpy carried everything, it seemed—he added, examining its face: "and we've come only seven and a half miles."

"Holy cats," gasped Gabby Frale, "Is that all? It seems as though I've walked thirty miles."

"It's the mud and swamp that's keeping us back," explained Chips. "Looks as though we're going to spend the night in the jungle. We can't travel at night without showing a light, Lieutenant . . ."

"And we can't do that," interrupted Gabby. "I still think they've sent a searching party out for us. The surprise to me is that they haven't caught up with us yet."

"They obviously haven't located us," said Chips.

"If they had Limpy with them with his little compass and little sextant and miniature maps and pedometer," chucked in Marsh good-naturedly, "they'd have found us long before this."

THE tired men smiled wanly. It was the first smile they had indulged in since they left the wreck of the Flying Fortress.

"Guess we'd better stop here for a rest," suggested Gabby. The sun was dropping as the late afternoon bore on and the men were hot, perspiring, and weary. Especially Chips and Gabby.

Lawton, his fever subsided, had not spoken a word during the whole trip. He had taken his twelve Sulpha tablets long since to save him from infection. Chips had done a good job of bandaging. When they placed him on the ground and made him comfortable, he turned to Chips, and in his own peculiar

manner said quietly as the other men drew off to lie down on dry spots:

"I guess I'm supposed to owe you my life," he said.

Chips detected a touch of what seemed like sarcasm. He looked down at Lawton's face. The man's expression seemed to belie the tone of his voice. The lines on his tense, drawn features seemed to have softened. The recent fever had broken; the danger of malaria was averted. Those sulpha tablets certainly performed miracles.

"You owe me nothing, Skipper," replied Chips quietly. "I'd do as much for a wounded dog."

Lawton's face reddened. His brown eyes flashed weakly a moment, and the angry light disappeared as quickly as it had come. Something had happened to the man under the fever. Weak as he was, Chips knew the man's temper. That he did not explode even slightly was a marked change in the Skipper's temperament. Chips wondered if the fever had released something in the man's brain: something that eased a pressure that had been there for years and suddenly given him relief. He wondered if the woman whose name he had cried out in his delirium had anything to do with it. If she had, he guessed he'd never know about it from Lawton. In any case, The Skipper, though his tongue from force of habit had not lost much of its bitterness, his brain—or mind—call it what you will—may have.

"Lucky for me you're kind to dumb animals, Maginnis," replied Lawton. "I know I'm supposed to be grateful."

"I told you Captain, you owe me nothing," reminded Chips. "Suppose we let it stand to discharge of duty."

Lawton said nothing. But there was a peculiar expression in his eyes that Chips did not fail to get. It was almost a kindly one. Not like Lawton, Chips

thought. The man was dangerous, sick or well. He didn't trust him.

They rested for almost half an hour and then resumed their trek for two hours more. When they finally stopped it was dusk. They found a small hill that lifted them out of the swamp of Vella La Vella and made rough camp for the night. Swiftly Yale and Mike Strong were carrying the dinghies and they hung them high to keep them from being attacked by insects and reptiles.

The men's throats were parched. They had not found water fit to drink and the water they did find could not be drunk without boiling it first. To do this meant building a fire the smoke of which might bring the Japanese searching parties down about their ears. The risk was too great; so they went desperately thirsty.

Darkness fell about them and the jungle night sounds enveloped them from all sides. Giant frogs croaked ominously to an obligato of shrill cricket calls. Hoot owls jeered at them from the Eucaplytus trees. The smell of the dank slime rose to offend their nostrils mingling with the perfume of wild jungle flowers and the odor of the green foliage. Attacked by thousands of flies during the heat of the day, now that night had fallen about them, mosquitos in the millions buzzed about their ears to annoy and attempt to devour them.

"If we get out of this alive," ventured Joe Marsh in the process of flattening an offender against his round cheek, "it won't be because the mosquitoes didn't try to stop us."

THE boys spent a restless night; sleeping fitfully when they finally did doze off, or slapping their faces and necks periodically to rid them of the midnight marauders.

When dawn finally arrived and

slithered through the heavy humid mist that hung over the jungle, every man's face was pockmarked with mosquito bites. Two or three were reminded of their period of passing through puberty and the resultant attacks of acne. Under any other circumstances their appearance might have been funny.

"You guys look as if you had the chicken pox," laughed Chips Maginnis as he roused them to their feet.

"What makes you think your face resembles Hedy Lamarr's?" asked Gabby Frale. "If I didn't know what was wrong with you I'd think you had any one of a dozen nasty diseases."

After a hurried breakfast consisting of next to nothing, they gathered their materials together and started off in the direction indicated by Limpy. While they ate he orientated the map of the region to get the position of the men; got the direction in which they were to travel toward the coast and started the little safari off.

They had not walked more than fifty feet when a shot rang out and echoed through the jungle. The noise was followed by the frightened screams of wild birds and animals. Chips and Gabby quickly set Lawton on the ground and themselves fell flat on their faces as did the others.

"They've caught up with us," cried Gabby. "I told you they would sooner or later."

"I hoped we could reach the coast before they did," replied Chips Maginnis grabbing one of the Brownings dropped by Strong.

They scoured the trees about them but could see no one.

Chips called to Limpy Sears and Sparks Logan to get Lawton out of the way through the thick jungle foliage and hide him. Lawton insisted on staying with them, but Chips urged him to do what he was told; to get out of the

range of fire in the impending fight. It would be safer. Lawton let them take him out, but they were seen and a blast of Jap shells followed after them. The blast of flames in the distant foliage showed the American where the monkeys were hiding.

Gabby had the men who could handle the guns, Joe Marsh, Swiftly Yale, Chips Maginnis and himself spread out and converge their fire on the spot they had seen the burst of Japanese shells pour from. They opened a withering blast, at the same time spraying the area for twenty to thirty yards around the spot.

Squeals of burning pain rose above the noise of the chattering guns. The Japs poured out into the open and returned the fire. A line of tracers from the American and Jap formations crossed each other but the Yanks were better marksmen.

Chips picked off the snipers he could see in the trees and one by one knocked them into the mud. He had the advantage for the brush completely concealed not only his position, but the reflection of his fire. Gabby Frale was not as fortunate. A Jap bullet cut him across the shoulder. It ripped his tunic away and left a streak of searing, burning pain that made him swear as no man was ever heard to swear before. The Sphinx had come to life and become as mad as hell chatterbox. He let valor and anger overcome the better part of discretion and jumping to his feet ordered the others out in a charge and to maintain fire as long as the ammunition in the guns lasted.

THEY mowed everything down in the path of their hellish blast. Then Joe Marsh remembered his hand grenades which bore him down at the neck. He pulled the pin from one and pitched it to the spot from where he had seen the

major part of the Jap fire come. He shouted to Gabby and the others to drop to their faces. A second or two later, a terrific explosion rang through the jungle; then, deadly silence. The grenade had done the trick.

Cautiously they rose, peered out. All was quiet. Gabby whispered to save their ammunition. Slowly they moved forward. No one stirred to halt them. They soon came upon what was left of the Jap searching party. Eight of them had fallen where the Browning had laid them down. Parts of the others the hand grenade had finished off were strewn on the trees and the brush.

"I guess that's that," muttered Gabby wincing as a streak of pain tore through his shoulder. "They got me in the shoulder, Chips. Just another little first aid job for you."

"Better take your Sulpha tablets then, Lieutenant," suggested Chips. "Let's get back to the others and I'll tape you up."

When they returned to where they had left Lawton, the man actually grinned when he saw they were all there.

"Did you clean those monkeys up?" he asked hopefully.

"To a man, Skipper," replied Gabby.

"Joe Marsh's hand grenade nailed the coffin down, sir," Chips informed the Skipper.

"Good work," he muttered. The men were nearly dumbfounded. They had never heard the skipper say things like that before. Must be the heat. Or the wound in his side had driven him insane. It wasn't natural for him to say nice things.

They didn't say anything, however. Just nodded encouragingly at the prostrate man.

"I don't know if there are any more of them anywhere near here," said Gabby. "But if those guys are missed

too long someone will be out looking for them. Let's get out of here."

It was late in the afternoon before what was left of the Louse Buster's crew reached the coastline of Vella La Vella. Seven half naked men, with bandages on various parts of their scrub-torn persons, could have shouted for joy when they beheld the Pacific. In less than fifteen minutes the two dinghies were bouncing on the ocean with Lawton, Maginnis and Strong in one; Gabby Frale, Joe Marsh, Limpy Sears and Sparks Logan in the other. The ammunition and guns were divided between the two dinghies. Lawton was made as comfortable as the room would permit. And thus they floated south, pushing out into the Pacific to get away from any observation posts the enemy might have hidden along the shore.

By nightfall the men breathed easier. Although it was not completely dark, they knew they could not be seen from the distant shores. Gradually the shores of the islands blended into the sea and fell over the horizon. From then on, Limpy Sears took charge of the job of navigating the two dinghies whose painters were tied together.

The currents also aided them for they were moving south. This eased up on the boys who were well enough to do the paddling. They had paddled an hour in the twilight when darkness fell upon them. But it was not too dark to see a black towerlike form rise up out of the sea. The tower took shape and increased in length until its decks were awash and upon the surface. The hatch cover on the conning tower was thrown open as Gabby Frale threw the beam of his flashlight upon it. Men—little men—climbed out of the tower to the deck of the submarine. A sharp, shrill cry in Japanese echoed across the water to the dinghies. The men in them didn't understand the command, but

they sensed what it meant. A searchlight was turned full upon them. In the darkness a deck gun coughed a cough of flame just as two machine guns in the forward dinghy sent a blast of tracer flame in the direction of the submarine. The sub missed, but the commander of the Japs fell back into the water with Browning lead weighing down his dirty heart, and with two of his men. In spite of the withering fire, the sub's deck gun spoke again. This time it had found its range. Its three inch shell tore through the dinghy in which Strong, Lawton and Chips were sitting. The rubber boat gave a deep sigh, and gave up its airy soul and sank to the bottom of the Pacific leaving the wounded Skipper, Chips Maginnis and the gunner floundering in the water.

WHEN the Japs saw what they had done they roared with laughter. Gabby ordered his dinghy to the rescue of the others. Firing ceased on both sides. The Japs held their fire to see how the rescue would be effected. Under the beam of their powerful searchlight they seemed to enjoy the frantic efforts to save the three men in the water.

Chips watched Lawton disappear out of sight. He dived for him and caught hold of him though his stab for the man was a blind one. In the glare of the sub's searchlight, Lawton was helped aboard the other dinghy while Limpy Logan lowered himself into the sea to make room for the Skipper. It seemed the Japs waited to see them all get into one dinghy before they let loose again. More of them had come out of the sub's innards to watch the fun. When the dinghy seemed full, the Jap gunners started to load. But Chips Maginnis already had a Browning in his hand and was pouring a stream for the Jap searchlight. He blew it out

with the first blast and threw the gunner's aim so far off that the flash from the gun seemed headed skyward. The shell finished off far behind the dinghy.

Then Marsh got busy. In his best bush-league pitching, he tossed one hand grenade after the other in the direction of the sub's gaping hatch. He said it was just swell placing; but the others insisted it was Irish luck. But both grenades found a berth inside the sub and blew its seams wide open, bringing the laugh to the side of the Yanks.

Gabby threw on his light to the cheers of the men in the overloaded dinghy and they saw the black hulk swallowed up by the sea, sucking what was left of the crew down with it. They paddled furiously away from the spot lest they too be drawn into the whirlpool the sinking sub created. A few minutes later, the surface of the Pacific was like glass—and the dinghy and its crew floated lazily and alone on its wide surface.

"Maginnis," the C.O. began. "I don't like to say I told you so, but I knew when I insisted that you stay with Lawton that you'd do the very thing you've done." He shrugged his shoulders as he said: "Oh, I didn't think it would happen the way it did. But perhaps that was the way it should have. The man's brand new. He's lost something that was making a madman of him."

"I'm glad I helped, sir," replied Chips Maginnis back on Henderson Field with the Commanding Officer.

"Lawton credits you with saving his life twice," continued the Colonel. "He recommends you be reinstated to rank, with a recommendation for a decoration." Then with a twinkle in his eye as he smiled up at the blushing Chips, he added: "Maginnis, how would you think a gold bar would look on your shoulders?"

Chips Maginnis had to sit down. His knees were no longer interested in keeping him standing.

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MAKE EVERY BOMB COUNT!

By **ALLAN K. ECHOLS**

Maybe fourteen Jap Zeros could handle this lone Yank in a Lockheed Lightning—now that the Lightning's guns and gear and armor plate were shot away!



CHAPTER I

LAME DUCK

GOGGLED slant eyes watched her from the cockpits of fourteen Jap Zeroes as she soared in wide lazy sweeps high over Burma's green carpet of jungle. She looked like three silver bullets welded to the cutting edge of a silver cake knife blade.

A Lockheed Lightning, she was ordinarily the world's fastest fighting airplane, with well over four hundred miles an hour pouring from her two supercharged Allison's at the rate of a hundred horsepower for each of her twenty-four cylinders.

She had left the factory bristling with fifty-caliber machine guns and 37 mm shell-firing cannon, plus all the heavy electrical equipment and gear

which it took to operate these guns, a weighty load itself, with all its motors, cams, gears, cartridge feeding devices and cases. She had come to Burma by way of the Bay of Bengal, a mighty fighting machine.

But now as the hungry Japs encircled high above her, her glories were gone. Not one gun muzzle protruded from her wings nor her cowlings slots, and inside her, even the machinery which would have operated the guns was gone.

She could not fire one bullet in self defense.

And as she sailed in the evening sun, one motor coughed and died in its nacelle, and its silver prop idled in the wind. The other motor tried to pick up the load, staggered under it, and lay down and died, too.

Fourteen Japs grinned hungrily as they saw the American pilot nose the ship down to pick up speed, then level off—and saw that portside motor still idling. They licked their chops, clicked their gun loading levers, and waited for word from their squadron leader. They weren't yet close enough to insure success if they pounced on this American. They would have to get closer, for a Lightning can dive at a speed, even with one motor, which would whip the wings off a Zero. Their leader decided to take up some of the gap between them before he gave the word.

The Lightning dropped a wing, limped like a crippled bird with a pack of hawks hovering above her. She seemed ready to give up the ghost at every frantic move the pilot made to get her motors to pick up their load. But the pilot worked without reward.

Lieutenant Eddie McAlpine, in his cockpit between the two recalcitrant engines, lit a cigarette, then looked back over his shoulder at the Japs who, in perfect formations of Vees, were getting closer to him at every turn of their

props. He took off the peak cap, whose design had come to the Air Corps from saltwater fishermen, and stuffed it under his parachute pack. Eddie's face was young, lean and freckled, and almost verged on the comic, due in part to the humor wrinkles around his shrewd, green eyes. He lifted the spring hoop connecting his earphones and placed it over his upright bronze hair, snuggling the rubber cups over his ears as he plugged in the other end of the connecting wires.

"Hey, are any of you glamour boys upstairs?" he asked into his mouth-piece.

There was no answer.

"Hey, you—"

He looked around again, saw the Jap leader trying out a burst from his guns. Still short, but getting closer.

Eddie jabbed his two engine throttles, nosed over into a quick dive, and one of the engines caught. The other caught on, and Eddie leveled off. The engines coughed, as though the mixture were too lean, or too rich in his carburetors, but there was enough power to pull him to safety for another moment.

It was cold up here, and the air almost thin enough for oxygen, but Eddie didn't want the added bother of the bit in his mouth. He let the ship settle some in a long shallow glide, and this gained him a little more lead on the men who were already tasting his death.

Then the engines coughed—and fell to idling again!

Eddie glanced at his compass, then over the side, looking for landmarks. The river off to his left was widening, straightening out somewhat, as though it were nearing the seacoast. A bright red temple with that peculiar Burmese serrated pagoda top stood on the left bank of the muddy stream at the foot of a sharp series of hills below him.

All the rest was jungle—a thick, unbroken expanse of green carpeting showing bright patches of light and pools of shade in its uneven spread.

“Say, are you matinee idols taking the afternoon off?” Eddie again said into his transmitter. “Or don’t you work after five o’clock?”

Again the radio silence was complete.

EDDIE cursed and looked back over his shoulder. The Japs whom he had outdistanced for a moment were gaining again. And again, hopeful for the kill this time, the Jap leader was testing his guns. The tracers left silver penciled lines which almost reached Eddie’s twin tail surfaces before they arced gracefully downward and melted into nothingness. In another moment those bullets would be stinging his tail.

A quick glance at his compass showed him on a due westward course. His altimeter showed sixteen thousand, and its needle was slowly crawling backward as the ship flew on without power.

A stream of tracers passed within three feet of his transparent hatch, and Eddie twisted his chin around over his shoulder and shoved the controls forward all in one synchronized movement.

He saw the Japs breaking formation as they came in, alternate Vees breaking to the left and right to surround him, and the Vees in turn breaking into single lines, like parentheses around him, which would meet before him and form a circle of entrapment. It was fine teamwork those Japs had.

In response to his instinctive control movement, the Lightning fell over on her nose and picked up speed by her own weight. The throttles came open again under his hand, the motors coughed and coughed again—and again they miraculously came to life.

Eddie leveled her off as the tach-needle climbed, and still again he had a reprieve from the hail of steel from those fourteen hornets trying to surround him. When those Allison’s ran smoothly he was safe from them, when his motors took time off—he was on the verge of being cold meat for the New Order in Asia.

Eddie looked back, saw he was holding his own, and pressed his radio button again.

“Tell me, little dream boys, aren’t any of you at home? I’m bringing company for dinner, and it isn’t polite to run and hide when guests come.”

This time he got an answer. It was a long series of Bronx cheers, mixed with some very impolite laughter and insults. “What’s the matter with the Crown Prince?” one of the voices asked. “Is he lonesome up here without papa and no guard of honor to look after him?”

“I’ll see you on the ground,” Eddie answered sharply. “Wait there behind the hangar, or wherever you’re hiding.”

“Okay, Prince, just bring your guests along. We’ll entertain them. We see ’em, and we’re fixing up a party now. You think Lena can make it home, with you at the stick?”

Again the motors coughed and died as Eddie looked back. The ship slowed down and again began losing altitude. The Japs crept up on him again, eating up the gap they had lost.

“All right, boys, now is the time for you gigolos to show your stuff. I’ve got fourteen guests for you this time. Put on your zoot suits and teach them to jitterbug.”

“Nuts to you, Copperhead. Bring ’em on a little further, then pull up your chair and learn something about flying, but keep out of our way. You might get stepped on,” came the answer, followed by a peculiar sound in

his ears which Eddie McAlpine had heard to many times from the same source. It was no longer amusing.

McAlpine was flying into the sun and he could not see the whole sky ahead of him, but the voices were coming in stronger now. He looked at the fuel tank indicators—and at his auxiliary tank indicators on the instrument board.

All tanks showed practically empty.

He looked over his shoulder, saw the Japs again gaining on him, strung out like a flight of wild ducks ready to circle for a landing.

Then he looked overhead—and grinned. High over him, approaching from out of the sun, were nine more Lightnings, their triple fuselages and double tails glittering in the late evening sky. Three triads in a Vee formation, a full five thousand feet above the Japs, and still in the sun from them.

McAlpine's ears caught another voice in his phones. "All right, sonny, you can run for home now. We'll take care of them."

AND they did! He heard Buddy Moffat giving his orders, assigning his fighters, and then, "All right. Get 'em, boys. We'll make Burma safe for Eddie McAlpine and his Brownie."

Eddie bit his lips and shoved on forward. He looked back over his shoulder, saw the American boys dive a mile down on the unsuspecting Japs with throttles wide open and their guns pouring out deadly hails of lead. He took time to circle once, to see the outcome of the first onslaught. And he saw nine Jap Zero fighters either exploding in midair or making a comet streak of smoke toward the jungle floor without ever knowing what had hit them.

Eddie nosed his own ship down and cut his gas, leaving the pursuit boys to

fight his attackers, while he made for the safety of the airfield.

This was one of the things that burned Eddie McAlpine to a crisp—and made his life unendurable. Eddie was the reconnaissance photographer of the Two-ninety-ninth pursuit group, of which his father, Brigadier General Russell (Rusty) McAlpine, was commander. His Brownie was a set of the finest automatic photographic equipment which science could build.

Eddie's Lightning had been stripped of the weight of all its armament, of everything not absolutely necessary for takeoff, flying and landing, in order to make room for his automatic camera gear—and for the sake of the additional speed this lightening of his load would effect. His job was to get the pictures and get home with them. His job was not to stop and fight, but to turn tail and run for home with his precious photographs.

To this assignment, Eddie had added one of his own invention. And this had come about because of his father's position. General McAlpine had brought his boys through India and established them here north of Akyab on a hidden field carved out for them by the British. The boys were young and green, and itching for a fight. They had never had the chance to face Jap lead, and they were eager to taste it. Eddie McAlpine had not come with them.

Eddie had carefully kept clear of his father's outfit, and ended in China, where he was minding his business and doing all right on his own hook—until McAlpine's photographer didn't duck quick enough, and old Rusty needed a new one. Eddie was the closest good man—and he ended in his father's flight—much to his disgust and to the cynical looks of the green young boys itching for anything to entertain them in

the monotony of the Burmese jungle.

On his first day with this outfit, Eddie got a cough in his port motor at twenty thousand feet over a Jap base—caught a dusting of Zero lead—and got a bright idea.

His motor picked up after he dived the ship, and he quickly got out of reach of the Jap stingers. And then the bright idea was born. The boys were always complaining about not getting a shot at the Japs. So—Eddie brought them some Japs.

He killed his motors again, goosed them on and off, and put on a show like a wounded duck, and the Japs followed him, hoping that every time his engine coughed it would be the last. But somehow, his engine always picked up just in time for him to get out of reach again.

And this kept up until he brought the Jap pursuit squadron home with him, and let his dad's green boys entertain them. They did alright for themselves—and so Eddie unofficially added the job of "decoy" to his photographic duties. He had brought the boys a total of a hundred and thirty-eight Japs in a few weeks, and the boys had stuck more than a hundred Rising Sun decalcomanias on their cockpit cowlings—

And still razzed the pants off him, because he was his father's son, and had the fastest ship in the jungle with which it was his task to run away from every fight which threatened him. It blossomed into quite a feud, with a veneer of polite sarcasm just to keep it interesting.

Eddie rolled along the camouflaged runway and pulled his ship up under a canvas hangar, and crawled out. As he stood on the ground stretching his legs and pulling the cotton out of his ears, he looked upward and saw the last of the Japs spinning downward and

trailing a corkscrew of black smoke behind him.

AN ORDERLY saluted. "The General's compliments, sir, and he would like to see you at the dispersal office!"

Eddie braced himself as he walked through the trees.

Brigadier General Rusty McAlpine fitted his name. He was rusty and sharp-edged and brittle. His shoulders were erect and his frame lean and athletic. His mouth was tight and his eyes piercing, as Eddie stepped into the tent and saluted him. The old man sat behind a desk spread with panoramic pictures. He looked up.

"Lieutenant," he said stiffly. "The purpose of the Allied Armies securing a beachhead and a foothold in Burma is, as you must know, to establish our own control here as protection for the landing operations of substantial forces whose later task it will be to retake Burma, reopen the Burma Road, and ultimately open supply lines for our final attack on Japan proper. You understand that, do you not, sir?"

Eddie recognized the warning signs in the old man's formal stiffness, and he stood erect and at attention as he answered. "Yes, sir. I do."

"And you understand also, do you not, Lieutenant, the purpose of our squadron is to effect control of the air in this theater?"

"I do."

"And that before we can do that, we must locate the half dozen or more hidden Japanese airfields back of Akyab?"

"Yes."

"Sir?"

"Yes, *sir!*"

"And that it is your task not only to photograph this terrain, but to bring in those pictures?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that we have only one plane equipped to do the work?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then will you tell me why in the living hell you think your personal pleasure at playing lame duck with those Japanese with the only photographic plane we have is more important than the whole Allied Asiatic campaign?"

Eddie said angrily, "Now listen, Dad—"

"Sir!"

Eddie wilted. "All right, sir. We're here to clear those Japs out. I found out that I could decoy a bunch of them up here for the boys to destroy every time they got sight of me. Every one they knock down—"

"And what if they knock you down?"

"I'll take my chances on them—"

General McAlpine stood up behind his desk and roared, "It does not matter what you think your *personal* chances are. That photographic equipment and the *photographer* cannot be risked in any such business. That is the important thing! Hereafter, you will do your photographic work as ordered and return directly to your base, observing every precaution of safety. Do you understand, sir?"

"Yes, sir. But do you know that the boys are saying that I'm afraid to get within range—"

"Sir, I am not interested in what the boys are saying. You have had your orders. That is all."

CHAPTER II

WAR IS IMPERSONAL!

EDDIE clamped his jaws, saluted and turned on his heel and marched out of his father's tent

in a military manner. When he reached the flight commander's tent, the technical men already had the first prints of his pictures ready, and Colonel Raines was examining them. Raines was short, fat, slightly bald, and sweating profusely.

"Any signs of those Jap landing fields?" Eddie asked.

The colonel looked at him bleakly and shook his head. "There's nothing that shows on these," he said. "But, of course, they naturally would be well camouflaged."

Eddie studied the panoramic pictures which had been laid out on a pine table, one beside the other, each fitting into its place to make a large picture of the terrain over which he had flown. He examined the pictures carefully.

"There's one thing certain," the Colonel said. "Those Jap ships don't sleep in trees at night like a bunch of birds. They've got fields—"

Eddie looked at him squarely. "The impression seems to have got around, sir, that I'm spending more time looking for Japs to play tag with than in looking for their landing fields. It's true that I have been bringing home any of them I happen to run into, but that has been purely incidental."

"Sit down, McAlpine," Colonel Raines invited, shoving a humidor of cigarettes across his desk. "I wonder if you'd mind if I said something personal to you, just as a friend."

"It would be a novelty to have *anybody* say something to me as a friend around this dump," Eddie answered dryly. "I should be glad to hear it."

The colonel took a long, thoughtful moment lighting his cigarette, then, as though to get a bad job finished quickly, spoke rapidly. "Look here, young man, I feel somewhat as though I had a right to say this, because your father and I have been pretty close together ever

since our days at the Academy. I've known you ever since you were a baby. Right now you've got a chip on your shoulder, and you need some advice.

"Now, here's something I believe you don't see. It was neither your father's desire nor yours that you be assigned to his outfit. It simply happened in the routine transfer of men, but I'll admit that it makes it tough for him as well."

"What do you mean?" Eddie responded flatly. "I've never asked any favors."

"No, of course not. You understand the difference between the flying branch and any other branch of the service. The fighter pilot is under such a personal strain that his morale is in much greater balance than in the case where men work in groups as units rather than individually. You know what flying takes out of your nervous system. This might sound like a long way around, but it is important. Pursuit pilots are touchy boys, and these boys do not have a long background of discipline like an Academy-trained officer. They're lonewolves, temperamental, and always on edge, because they know that any take-off may be the last one. They have to feel that their commanding officers are behind them—and are doing the best they can for them—*impartially!*"

Eddie bridled at the word. "Do you think my father is doing me any favors?" he snapped.

"On the contrary. Look at your position. Your work demands that everything be done for the safety of the pictures you bring in, and consequently, for your safety. Understand this point. It isn't you, it is the pictures which the General has to protect. The success of the whole Asiatic campaign depends on our getting established here, and with our limited facilities, on the work you do. Thus, your father is in the difficult position of having to use his fighters to

protect his own son, not because you're his son, but because of the pictures. The boys would understand his protecting any other photographer—but his son—well, you can see how difficult his position is."

Eddie got to his feet. "Well, he's certainly not making it any easier for either one of us. It seems to me as though he were trying to make me prove what the boys hint at—that I don't want any part of a fight."

"I think you're mistaken about what the boys think. They are ragging you—just because that is their way—to see if you can take it. And your father, well, he's probably trying to teach you a little military discipline. It was a great blow to him when you wouldn't follow him into the regular Army. I'd think it over, if I were you."

"I've been doing too much thinking," Eddie answered. "Anyway, what's on the fire for tomorrow?"

COLONEL RAINES opened up a large sheet of white drawing paper, on which there was a rough topographical sketch done in pencil.

"Scout Reconnaissance brought this job in," he said, taking a pencil out of his pocket. "One of the boys ran into ten large Jap Mitsubishi's apparently transporting troops and supplies. They were on a course of 157 Degrees when he saw them at this point, where he made this part of the sketch from memory. This is the river here. Now, another of the boys caught sight of a flight of nine more of those big babies flying a course of 169 Degrees when he saw them at this other point. He went up pretty close to them and while they had a fighter escort, it did not try to bother him, but kept on its way. Now, those two courses will intersect at this point." The colonel indicated a spot where two straight lines representing

the courses of the two flights of planes intersected.

"These old British panoramic maps show this spot to be all mountain peaks and impassable jungle. But those transports weren't converging there over a lot of mountain peaks without reason. We've got to find out what's brewing up there. So, you're elected to photograph that entire area between these four points. And if you see any critical evidence of any kind, duck down and get a closeup of it, will you?"

"Right," Eddie answered. "Have you got a copy of this map for me?"

"It will be ready. And, by the way, you'll have an escort of three fighters with you. Moffat will—"

"Moffat—"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing. Sorry, sir."

"Moffat will cover you, and be under your orders. That's the job for tomorrow. Personally, I wouldn't be surprised if there isn't something brewing up there in those mountains. That seems to be the opinion of your father—"

"Of the *General*, sir?"

"Cut it out, Eddie. Your old man's all right. Thirty years in a uniform sometimes makes a man a little stiff."

"It makes him a *big* stiff, if you ask me, sir." Eddie returned, and left the tent.

AS EDDIE walked down the trail toward the mess tent, a form suddenly halted him in the half-darkness. Eddie recognized Moffat, and stopped in his tracks.

Moffat wore a Zelan jacket over his broad shoulders, a pair of khaki shorts and sneakers. Apparently he was just returning from the woods pool in which they all bathed.

"I say, McAlpine," Moffat said, "I see I'm on the board to go along with

you and protect you at dawn."

"So I heard," Eddie answered with reserve. "But who's going along to protect you?"

Moffat brought a small forked stick out of his pocket and handed it to McAlpine. It was about seven inches overall, Y-shaped, and from each prong there was tied a six-inch strip of rubber from an inner tube, the two pieces being joined by a patch of leather the size of a cigarette paper. He handed it to Eddie, who examined it.

"This looks like a bean flip that kids play with," Eddie said wonderingly. "Where'd you get it?"

"We made it for you, McAlpine. We thought you might get cornered some day—"

Eddie McAlpine's knotted fist shot out and caught the big flyer in the jaw with a crack which could be heard half a mile through the jungle. Moffat crashed back into the liana vines, clawed his way out and up to his feet, where he crouched with his own fists doubled.

Eddie said coldly, "Come on, if you can take it, unless you're too much of a *gentleman* to have any defense against a common or garden variety of fist."

"What do you mean, me a gentleman?" Moffat answered. "I played pro-football two years for the Brooklyn Dodgers."

"That's fine," Eddie answered. "Then I won't feel guilty of slapping a baby out of his diapers when I give you something to take back to your play-mates."

"As I live and breathe," exclaimed Moffat. "I do believe Sonny Boy wants to fight. Will wonders never cease!"

"Shut up and defend yourself—if you've got it in you," Eddie snapped.

And he followed his words by wading in on his toes, fists doubled and one hand feinting in the pursuit pilot's face

like the tongue of a rattlesnake. Moffat sucked in his breath and came in like a backfield man hitting the line.

In the dark jungle trail there was no other sound except the crunching thuds of fists on flesh, and the deep, sharp breathing of the two opponents as they fought toe to toe. In the half light, only their forms were visible to each other, and, unable to see each other's movements quickly enough, each man took more punishment than he would have in good light.

It was significant that although both men had been trained in commando tactics, and could kill or cripple with their bare hands, neither availed himself of those disabling tricks, but stood and slugged it out in the good old American style.

Eddie McAlpine tripped on an exposed root in the dark path, and Moffat stepped back until he was up on his feet again. Then as McAlpine waded in once more he caught Moffat a solid blow on the point of the jaw and knocked him backward into a briar bush. He stood and waited until Moffat crawled out and picked the briars out of the seat of his shorts.

Then they settled down to a long, gruelling slugfest, with the only sounds the grunts knocked out of them by solid blows, and the shuffling of their feet in the soft jungle earth.

"Gentlemen!"

The sharp edge of that imperative voice froze both of them in their tracks. Old Rusty McAlpine emerged from the twilight of the path and stood glaring at the two of them. He did not need an explanation, and he did not ask for one.

Neither of the fighters knew how long he had been watching them, or whether he had just come up. The silence, as they waited for him to continue, was embarrassing, and terribly uncomfort-

able, and the Old Man intentionally left it that way for a long moment.

Finally he spoke again. "You will both report to your quarters, and not leave them except on duty, and you will return to your quarters and stay there between assignments. If this happens again, you will be placed under guard."

He turned and walked back in the direction from which he had come.

AT DAWN Eddie McAlpine took off the jungle-hidden landing field, and three other ships, which had the same outward appearance as his own, followed him. But this time there was no ragging between the ships over their radios. Eddie gave his directions and then flew silently, even grimly, on his mission. The feud which had developed through words had at last reached the stage where silence was more expressive than anything that could be said.

He followed his predetermined course high over the vast green carpet of the coastal jungle, continually climbing as the terrain became more broken, and then abruptly shot skyward in a series of serrated mountains. Far below him were tiny gray and green checkerboards where once rice had been grown, and where now the Japs were desperately trying to make the natives again grow rice—when they could catch them. The natives had tasted the New Order in Asia, and they did not like its flavor.

He passed over the mountains into the section marked G-2 on his improvised chart, and looked back over his shoulder to see the triad of Lightnings above and to the rear of him. He opened his transmitter, and spoke.

"You men stay at this point while I make my first run. I'll pick you up exactly ten miles north of here before making the second run."

"Yes, sir." The formality of Moffat's answer was more than irritating, it was enraging. Eddie snapped off his transmitter and saw to the buttons of his automatic gear which operated his cameras.

The cameras acted on cams synchronized with the motors so that they automatically photographed sections of the terrain under him, which separate pictures could be pieced together to make one larger picture of the whole area under observation. Eddie started his cameras going, set his course across the mountain peaks and valleys and kept flying in a straight line, while he added his own personal observation of the ground under him to his job.

He worked at fifteen thousand feet, just under the altitude at which he would need oxygen. But as he flew eastward the mountain peaks became higher, and he had to climb. Placing the bit of the oxygen tube in his mouth, he needed an occasional inhale of the gas to keep his head clear.

He passed over a ridge of peaks jutting up above the snow-line at eighteen thousand feet, dropped down toward a valley between this ridge and another one twenty miles distant. The farther ridge represented the eastern extremity of the sector he was photographing.

Between the ridge he had just skirted and the far ridge he saw a flat depression which was the bed of a dry lake reaching almost the whole distance across, and what he judged to be forty or fifty miles in length.

And this broad, hidden flat nestling between two mountain ridges was one vast series of Japanese bases, teeming with activity and dotted with encampments, dumps, flying fields and row after row of tents and habitations.

As the British and Americans were preparing to establish a foothold in Burma, so the Japs were secretly as-

sembling a vast armada of air-borne troops and planes to drive them back into the sea.

Eddie looked down from ten thousand feet above this arena and whistled through his teeth. The old man—pardon—the General had been right in his hunch! Not so dumb, the old man.

He traversed the valley with his cameras clicking, and had almost reached the eastern range when suddenly out of the sun the Japs dived!

He had not seen them between himself and the sun, but when they came down upon him he knew they were there, for the first burst of their fire sewed seams of bullet holes through his left wing and engine nacelle, and the second burst, with explosive cannon shell opened up a jagged hole in his other wing big enough to throw a dog through.

They were there—nine of them! And they had no intention of letting this lone American look at their hide-away and go away to report its whereabouts.

Which was just what Eddie had in mind at this moment. Without guns, he had no recourse but to flight—and flight he did! He dropped a wing straight down, spun on it and headed back toward Moffat's squadron.

BACK of him and above, the Japs peeled out of their Vees and spread out in preparation for cutting off any attempt on his part to escape to right or left. Eddie had no such intention; he was headed for the barn!

Suddenly his port motor coughed, started missing, and finally continued revolving only on account of the prop turning it in the wind. Eddie's quick eyes examined his instrument board, then checked on his enemies. He jiggled the throttle, cut it down, sped it up—and still the motor coughed oc-

asionally and refused to take up its part of the load.

Eddie plugged in his radio, pressed the button and called out, "Stand by to take some Japs off my tail, Moffat. There are nine of them."

"Yes, sir," came the noncommittal answer and then silence. But the formality of that answer was getting under Eddie's skin like a thorn. He cursed and tried again to bring the motor to life.

Glancing up, he saw that the Japs now made a U shaped group behind and on both sides of him, and that it was a mere matter of seconds until they would dive on him.

"Moffat," Eddie again said. "In case I don't reach you, and in case you get back to the base, please report that my left motor conked. The Japs found it with their guns. Report that there is a wide valley at G-2 on the map I was using, and that there is a strong enemy concentration of men and gear. The valley has a flat floor and will make a perfect secret flying field—"

"Yes, sir. And shall I tell papa—I beg pardon—tell the General that the motor got going again as soon as you had turned the Japs over to us to take care of—"

Eddie saw a yellow comet hurtling down upon him, preceded by the silver streams of day tracers, felt a series of jolts, and saw a new jagged hole ripped in his port wing.

"Damn it to hell, Moffat, I tell you, I've only got one engine. You've got to take these birds off my tail or I don't get home."

"And you *do* want to get home, don't you?"

"Damn you, Moffat, I'll come out of this just for the purpose of taking the hide off you. We're in the sun from you, but be with you in a minute. Now cut out this clowning and get ready for

business. There are nine of them for you to handle. Do anything you have to in order to let me get clear with these pictures."

"I thought you liked to play tag with the boys, so long as there was somebody around to get you out of the messes you got into."

"Damn it to hell, Moffat, you've got to listen. This base I've found is already strong enough to prevent our establishing a beachhead at Akyab. If it isn't broken up *now*, we'll be licked before we're even started. I've got to get those pictures in for the bomber command."

"Then I respectfully suggest, sir, that you break silence and notify our base."

"And have the Japs get its location? There's enough of them to wipe out our whole gang before breakfast. Mister, we can't even *go* home, as long as there's a man of them in the air to tail us."

Now the Japs were swarming on Mc-Alpine like hornets, coming from all directions at once, with guns clattering and motors screaming. They were above him, below him, and on all sides and even in front of him. He was like a man who had accidentally disturbed a beehive—and had no protection against their stings.

If he were to have any protection at all he had only one course open to him—to fly straight ahead until he reached his squadron of three fighters. He tried to climb his ship, but one motor did not give him enough power to do much good at it. He did not dare try to dive it now, because every foot of altitude he lost would be gone for keeps. It would be hard if not impossible to regain it.

So he flew straight ahead toward his squadron.

Machinegun bullets sewed seams of holes in his wings, clattered off the armor of his seat, stitched straight lines

across the transparent cockpit hatch. He did not swerve from his course.

A few of the Japs were equipped with shell guns, and these shells went through his wings and exploded, tearing off great sheets of metal, which whipped away in the wind like newspapers in a cyclone, leaving his wing ribs bare and gaunt. Something jolted his tail, and his controls became sluggish in their response. He flew straight ahead.

ONE Jap came up from under, looped far ahead but squarely in his path, and came at him head on. They had no intention of letting him get out of this hidden valley with his information.

They had fought him as though afraid of his guns, but now this man was going to find out why he didn't return their fire. He meant business.

The Jap aimed his ship squarely toward Eddie's limping Lightning, and they closed up the distance between them like two railroad engines running head-on on the same track. Eddie McAlpine did not swerve from his course by one hair's breadth.

He knew the fatalistic legend of Jap flyers, without parachutes, whose orders were to do the job or not come back. The Japs kept roaring straight toward Eddie's propellers. Eddie switched on his forward camera—and took great pains not to let his line of flight deviate so much as an inch.

He ducked his head below the armored cowling as the bullets began tearing into his cockpit from dead ahead—and went on.

Now the Jap was within seconds of crashing head-on into him. The length of time it takes to take one breath was sufficient time for the impact.

It was the Jap who weakened. He nosed down suddenly and passed under Eddie so closely that the torque of his

slipstream twisted Eddie's ship up onto one wing before he could right it.

Another Jap roared in from the side with flaming lead spouting, and tore off half his aileron before he could even start to flatten out. With that much airfoil missing, the ship responded sluggishly. Eddie fought the controls desperately, trying to level off and resume his course.

He got one glimpse of three double-barreled Lightnings with American stars on them as his own squadron swooped into the free-for-all. He heard Moffat's taunt.

"So they finally caught up with you, did they, Mister? All right, get for home, and let some men take care of them."

At the moment he had no time to answer. His cockpit was full of Japanese steel, whining like mad hornets around his head.

Something hit his temple with the impact of a blackjack, and the paralyzing effect of it left him with his jaws sagging open.

His oxygen bit fell out of his mouth, and he was too stunned to know it. But some inner urge, stronger than even his conscious actions, prompted him to press his radio button and mutter into the transmitter:

"All pursuit pilots are descended from a long line of yapping coyotes."

Then his ship was going down in a flat spin, which slowly tightened as one wing rose higher and the other drooped lower.

Following the trail of an ever-narrowing corkscrew, the ship focused its nose on the inner side of the mountain which enclosed the hidden valley, and spun for the earth at five hundred miles an hour.

Eddie McAlpine did not know it, for he was unconscious. The oxygen bit slithered at his feet like a red snake.

CHAPTER III

JUNGLE HELL

PLUNGING downward into heavier air, Eddie regained his senses just enough to realize that the earth was rushing up to meet him at express-train speed. By second nature, he hauled back on the stick with such strength as he had.

It seemed useless, for the ship did not immediately respond. In a split second he would be buried six feet in jungle earth. There was no choice but to keep pulling back on the controls.

Slowly the nose of the ship edged out of the dive. Eddie braced himself for the crash—and kept pulling. He took both feet off the rubber pedals and put them up on the instrument panel to give him more leverage, then reared up in his seat and pushed with his legs while he pulled with his two hands.

The triple-bodied Lightning roared down in an arc tree-top high, sliced the tips off a long swath of jungle trees and turned her nose upward, leaving a trail downward and again upward like the shape of a giant hairpin.

So tremendous had been his diving speed that the momentum and his one motor carried him almost straight up in a seven-thousand feet climb before his head was again clear and he had a chance to try to get the ship under control.

But in that split second interval, Eddie McAlpine had seen something! He looked quickly at his camera switch and knew that he had also photographed it. And it was a thing which was worth all he had gone through to discover it.

He leveled off a moment and scanned the sky above him, where his three wingmates slowly but with infinite pa-

tience and care were systematically blasting the remainder of the nine Japs into the laps of their ancestors.

One of the Japs saw him again climbing, and dived for him.

Eddie knew now more than ever that he could not linger here. He realized now for the first time how much depended on his own safe return to his base. His father had been right. There was an interest bigger than his own to be considered, and he could see that clearly now.

He dived again, almost following the trail of his unconscious dive, down toward the upward-leaping jungle along the mountainside. Guided by a stream bed he had caught sight of, he plunged downward with the Jap on his tail until the Jap had to pull out to keep his wings from ripping off.

Eddie did not pull out, but leveled off at a few hundred feet and headed his roaring machine straight toward the mountainside. Above him, the Jap saw him disappear into the green carpet—and credited himself with the kill.

But Eddie did not crash into the trees. He headed for that peculiar thing he had seen in his first waking moments as he pulled out of his first dive. It was a narrow pass through the mountains, an outlet from the hidden valley to the plains below, which led down to the sea.

Eddie flew through this pass just skimming the treetops. On either side of him the narrow passage was walled with precipitous cliffs from which great boulders hung precariously, ready to topple and go rolling down into the pass at the slightest excuse.

Along the floor of the pass ran a snaky, twisting roadway, along which motor trucks crawled in and out like ants!

Eddie's limping Lightning weaved a crooked and drunken trail over them

until he left the two walls of the pass behind him and came out over the open rice paddies and headed for home.

EDDIE McALPINE dropped into his own field and turned his ship over to the ground crew while the photographic crew jumped at his order and went to work on developing the pictures. Eddie hit the path through the teakwood trees toward the operations office in a khaki tent under a mangrove clump.

"I'd like to see the General," he said to the sentry who saluted.

"There's not a soul around, sir," the sentry answered.

"Where is everybody?"

The sentry was thoughtful a moment, then answered, "I wouldn't know this officially, sir, but I accidentally happened to hear that the General and the operations officer were suddenly called to a conference along with the commander of the bomber group."

"Where?" Eddie asked impatiently.

"I think it was at that XAB field down south of Akyab. There was word that a flight of heavy bombers was taking up headquarters there—"

"So there's nobody around here in authority?"

"No, sir. The only officers around are the fighter squadron and the light bomber squadron on standby, and they're all playing poker over at the officers' mess."

"Thanks," Eddie answered shortly. "But this can't wait. Get me an orderly, please."

He went into his father's office, looked around and saw a typewriter on a pine table. He picked up a sheet of paper and two carbons and flimsies and sat down and wrote an order. Under it, he signed, "McAlpine."

He spiked the original, then came out of the office just as the orderly came up.

"Give one of these to the squadron leader of the fighter squadron, and the other to the bombers. I'll be along in a minute and tell them the yarn. And also—get me a pursuit ship."

He went to the photographic laboratory and found the first of the pictures coming out of the dryer. He grabbed up a bunch of these, compared them with the sketch map he had in his pocket, then headed for the officers' mess.

Flyers were crawling into their leather flying suits and filling the air with questions and speculations. Eddie went in, stepped up onto the makeshift rostrum with the blackboard behind it, and called for attention.

"Here it is in a nutshell," he announced. "We've bumped into a secret concentration of Japs large enough to break up any serious attempt on our part to establish a beachhead here. You all know how important that is, so you know how important it is that we quickly break up any stunt of theirs which will interfere with us.

"Now this place is in a high valley surrounded by mountains. There is one narrow pass by which trucks can get in and out, while the rest of their stuff goes in by air. They are growing in strength every hour—and that's got to be stopped. Now here's the plan.

"That pass is as narrow as though it had been cut by a knife, and its sides are steep and full of boulders. A good rattling by a few demolition bombs will start those boulders rolling down, and perhaps a few landslides, which will entirely close the only land exit from the valley. One flight of bombers will fly about a thousand yards ahead of the rest of the squadron, and at as low an altitude as is safe from our own bombs. Its job is to close that exit.

"The rest of the bombers will go on in and demolish all installations. I'll

assign as many individual targets as we have clear pictures of."

One of the bomber leaders spoke up. "How about their anti-aircraft and their fighter protection?"

"There's no ack-ack, so far as I know, and I've just flown over it. But there are fighters, and a lot of them. So—here's where our fighters come in. They go ahead of and above us, covering the three bombers who destroy the pass, and who go on as though they were going to be the only bombers attacking the installations.

"This will bring their fighters up. Now—you fighters will make a point of drawing the Japs off to the North. You will have to play lame duck with them a bit. The point is, that you are to keep the Zeroes engaged while our bombers take their own good time in picking out their targets and working on them from low altitude. Is that understood?"

"But where is this Japanese Shangri La?" somebody shouted.

"That," Eddie McAlpine answered, "is where I come in. I'm leading you to it. Anybody doesn't want to follow me can stay at home. Let's go."

THREE bombers rendezvoused at five thousand feet over the field with a lone Lockheed Lightning. Twenty-one more Lightnings climbed another five thousand and fell into formation a mile above the bombers. Then the Lightning set out on a straight course, with fighters above him and bombers behind him.

It mattered little to Eddie McAlpine that what he had done was ethically if not technically the crime of forging the name of a commanding officer to an order. It mattered only that he was going to try to destroy that enemy installment before it grew too strong.

Headed by Eddie's lone Lightning,

the three light bombers roared away, while above and behind them came the triads of fighters, and still further behind and lower than the fighters, the remainder of the bombers leveled off into formation. The whole group set off toward the distant mountains.

As they approached the barrier ridge separating the valley from the sea, a lone bomber came out of nowhere, hovered around with curiosity for a long time, and then climbed to a point over the whole formation—as though going along just to see what would happen! It did not belong in the formation.

Eddie spoke into his transmitter. "Number One Bomber wing. Follow me through the pass in single column. Drop your bombs at the points where the sidewalls of the canyon are steepest. Each bomber save at least one bomb for bombing of the installations later—but make 'em count."

Then he called the fighters above him. "You cover the first bomber wing until you have drawn all the enemy fighters up to you—then lead them off to the North. Got it?"

"Right-o, Copperhead!" came the enthusiastic reply.

Eddie caught the new tone in the voice but made no comment.

He called the rest of the bombers. "You linger here on this side of the mountains out of sight. The leader take altitude enough to see when the fighters have got the Japs out of the way—then go in low—and clean 'em up. Make every bomb count. Let's go, men."

Eddie set his Lightning toward the pass, followed by the three bombers, while the fighters cleared the mountains above them. The sides of the gorge rose up on either side of the four planes, a long, twisting and narrow lane, with the walls of the canyon almost reaching out to grab the bombers'

wings.

So near the floor of the gorge were they flying that they could see the faces of the Japanese truck drivers winding their way through the twisting lane. Eddie wriggled his wings in a signal.

The number one man dropped a bomb. The explosion as it hit the cliff-side echoed and rocked the mountains. A volcano of rock and rubble lifted almost up to the wings of the ships, then dropped back into the knife-edged cut, filling it ten feet high. Stones as big as houses loosened and rolled down into the cut, ripping and tearing others in their path and adding them to the landslide.

Another bomb repeated the process further down the cut, and again the mountains labored and gave forth rubble and stone to fill the cut; and still again the bombs rained into the narrow pass, and the sides of mountains slid down and filled the gap, covering moving trucks and men as though they had been ants. That pass would never be used again in this generation for human transit.

Suddenly the mountain pass was behind them, and Eddie and his three bombers came out into the open where the ground dropped a quick five thousand feet below them—and they were headed for the Jap installations. High above them, in perfect formation, roared the fighters.

But the Japs had heard them, and they were already preparing to meet them. Like tiny insects taking off far ahead, they were rising in triads and climbing like falcons to protect their secret base.

"Boys, we won't have to beg them to come up and fight," Eddie shouted into his phone. "Head for that runway and gas dump on the left first. I think it's their assembly and repair depot."

Unconcerned at the sight of more

than fifty Japs now climbing to a point before and above them, the three bombers made straight flight toward the tiny dots of camouflaged tenting which marked the main installation in the valley. Eddie McAlpine flew squarely ahead of them with his peak cap twisted down over one of his green eyes, his jaws working on a piece of chewing gum.

"Bombers, take over," he shouted, as they approached the target. "I'll do what I can to cover you. But streak for home the minute you've laid your eggs. Your job will be done. Give it to 'em, boys."

THE bombers gave it to 'em! Eddie climbed over them and out of their way as they separated and selected their individual targets for their run over them. Eddie kept his chin over his left and right shoulders, watching the fighters above.

Then the fighters found the American fighters, and the whole steaming air over the hidden jungle became thick with milling ships. Here and there a black streak of smoke showed the path of a ship which was falling to fight no more. Debris of steel and duralumin and motor parts and human bodies rained down on the jungle, and nobody had time to watch it.

Eddie's three bombers laid their eggs and then—did *not* streak for home! They stayed to join the party which had not yet started!

Now the general dogfight overhead was veering toward the northward as the Americans gradually maneuvered it so. It was like a dust storm, milling and turning on its own axis, but at the same time traveling in a straight line of flight. The Japs were falling for it. They outnumbered the Americans three to one, and a lot of those American ships seemed to be having motor trou-

ble; they seemed like lame ducks until the Japs got closer, then the Americans' motors would come to life again, and somehow they were again fighting even—but further north than before.

It was not long before the hundred-ship dogfight passed over the northern rim of the mountains, like a swarm of milling locusts, and disappeared over the mountaintops.

All except one small group of six Japs! Their leader must have smelled a mouse, for he suddenly turned and left the melee and came back with his squad—straight toward Eddie and his bombers.

"All right, you lugs," Eddie shouted. "You've been waiting to see me get it for a long time. Here it is—win or lose."

Even the bombers who tried to keep out of the way except when they could get in a lick, could not tell in their individual reports just what happened there over the Jap base. All they knew was that Eddie McAlpine seemed suddenly surrounded by six Jap Zero ships and that the whole morning air was streaked with tracer lead, and was filled with falling pieces of ships—and they were all Japs.

It lasted less than ten minutes, but when it was over, Eddie McAlpine had a ship with holes in its wings that one of his cameras could have passed through. The upper half of one of his rudders was gone, and the other rudder was entirely a mass of junk.

There were half a hundred dotted lines running across his ship in as many directions to mark the paths of spurts of machinegun bullets, and one of his landing wheels hung out of its retraction cell and wobbled like a pendulum in the slipstream. There was not much left of Eddie McAlpine's ship—

—and not a great deal more left of Lieutenant McAlpine!

But now a new bunch of bombers came floating in—the boys Eddie had held back until the fighters had been decoyed away.

Those bombers came according to plan, and what they did to that Jap field was conversational meat for many a day. It was a holiday! They flew low and slow, as the old French General demanded on his first hop, and they picked their targets with care. If they weren't dead on at the first run, they waited and made another run. They sought out targets camouflaged with green boughs and took a particular delight in blowing the most carefully concealed, and most important ones into kindling wood.

They went down treetop high to silence the anti-aircraft guns with their own machineguns, just to save their bombs for bigger stuff. Gradually the smoke from the fires in the valley rose higher and higher, half a mile, a mile. . . . One column of black fog grew and united with another and made one larger column, which in turn engulfed others, until at last the whole valley looked as though it were the twenty-mile square mouth of a giant volcano.

It was getting too black to fly, even at fifteen thousand feet.

"All right boys, let's call it a day," Eddie shouted. "That's all—except the fireworks."

"What do you mean, fireworks?" Somebody shouted back through the phones.

"Nothing. Except, that order you got signed McAlpine, was not signed by the General. That was a bright little idea of mine. You boys will get a real laugh at me when we get back to the base. I want you all to come to my court martial party."

EDDIE McALPINE woke up in a hospital bed under a tree. The

last thing he could remember was that his ship tripped the light fantastic into a tree when he tried to land it on two wheels, without knowing that one of his wheels was shot away. He did not know that had been two days ago.

There was another man covered with bandages lying on the next bed to him. It was Moffat.

Eddie looked at the bandaged flyer. "What happened to you? I thought you were in the clear before I left the valley the first time."

"I was, but when I came back to the base and found everybody gone, I had an idea there was a party, so I went and joined it."

"You didn't get orders to make a second trip."

"The hell I didn't. From the Old Man himself."

"The Old Man?"

"Sure. He was here, just back from somewhere, stamping and spitting fire. I told him what I thought was happening, so he had me fly him there. Didn't you see us upstairs, in a grandstand seat?"

Eddie groaned. "Boy, I'm going to catch hell."

"No, you won't," Moffat said. "We fixed that all up. Nobody knows where the order came from, so the Old Man has decided that it was a trick the Japs used to get us into the air, and that just because you planned things as you did, their trick backfired."

"Who told him that yarn?"

"I think everybody kind of added to the impression, without exactly saying so—and finally the Old Man got wise."

"Then he believes it?"

"No, I wouldn't say he believes it, but he's putting on a good act making out as though he believes it. Which will cover the whole thing—so long as you don't shoot off your head and tell him the truth. He may be a human being after all."

Eddie tried to sit up in bed and look at Moffat. "Say," he asked. "How come a bunch of pursuit pilots would do a thing like that for me?"

Moffat grinned. "Well maybe it's because you're just another one of us—but still a bum, of course. The Old Man brought back a new photographer with him, and you're being transferred to our gang. As though we didn't have enough troubles already."

Eddie groaned. "And to think I didn't know when I was well off. Well, you have to associate with all kinds of people in a war. Gimme a cigarette, will you?"

It was just then that the Old Man showed up, bringing a carton of cigarettes under his arm. He stood looking down at the bandaged Eddie for a long moment, then said:

"How are you, son?"

Eddie looked back at him for a moment, noted the signs of human worry on his seamed face.

Then Eddie grinned. "All right—dad."

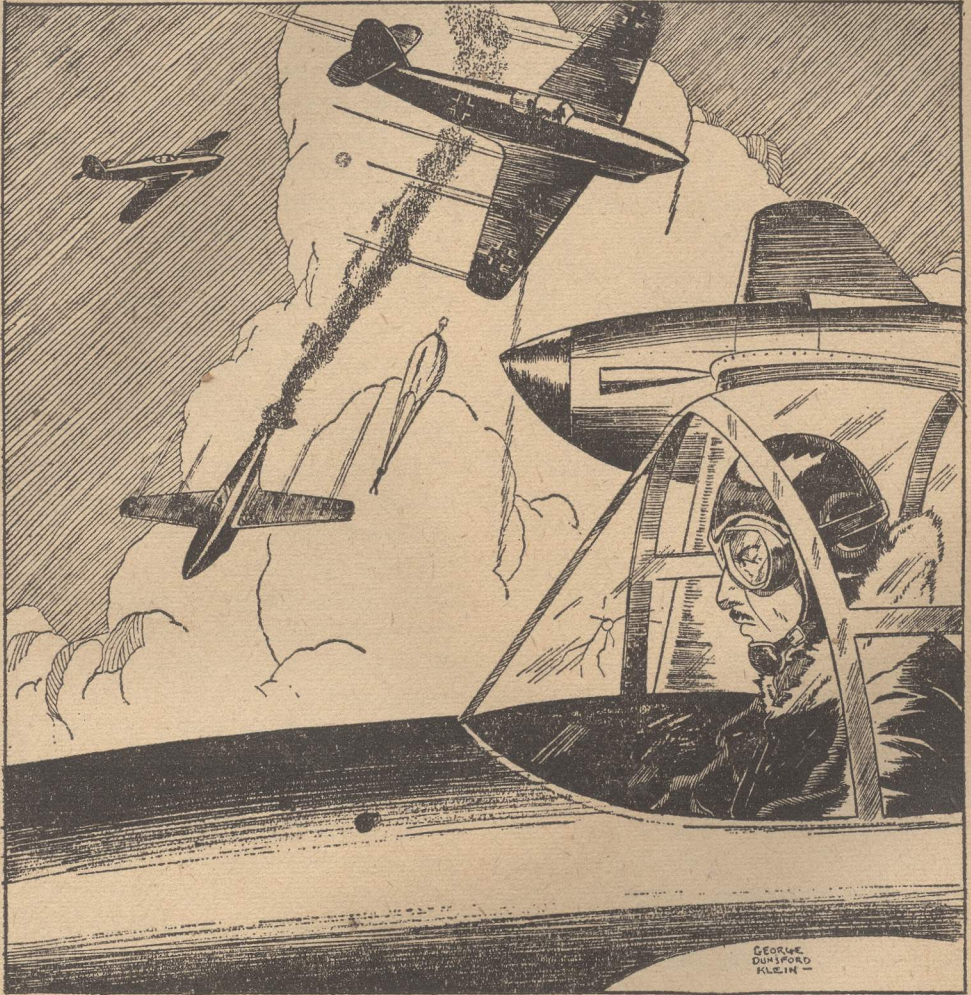
SAFETY FIRST—AND LAST—TOO!

A wounded worker on the production front holds back the soldier on the battle front—When your day begins take all precautions against accidents on the job—and when your day ends—be careful in your home—traveling—or driving!

COCKPIT COWBOY

By DAVID BRANDT

When a cockpit cowboy forgets his aerial gunnery and starts throwing lead from the hip!



THIS was the kind of a tight spot for a guy with plenty of imagination!

This was when the hero should shake off the clutching fingers of leaden death and emerge victorious to prowl enemy vanquished skies once more!

According to the bluntly realistic standards of Aerial Gunner Dane Richards, however, trying feverishly to clear a cartridge jam in his swivel-mounted

Browning, this was one hell of a spot for any guy to be in—with or without imagination.

At five thousand ceiling above Tunisia's Ousseltia Valley, twin Messerschmitt 109F's came hurtling out of the soup to knock off the crippled Blue Devil light bomber.

Dane worked with ten oversized thumbs to clear the defective cartridge before another burst from the deadly

Madsens turned his maiden combat flight into a chaplain's dirge.

The port motor of the Blue Devil was having a hacking case of the screaming meemies. Jim Randall at the controls of the ship was trying to hold course and at the same time fight off the sickening nausea of a bullet hole in his right shoulder. Hunk O'Grady, the five foot five—Mister Five by Five, the Ranger Squadron had dubbed him—bombar-dier was sprawled in the bomb bay, knocked cold by that first furious burst of machine gunning that had raised merry hell inside the Blue Devil.

The Messerschmitts came sweeping in for the kill about the same time Dane yanked the defective cartridge loose. Their guns warmed up at a hundred yards. Lead spanged nastily all around the rear turret. The Blue Devil sheered off seconds later, just a breath of time before a burst had Dane's coffin plaque all stitched out.

He was untouched, except for a gouge that had ripped through the left shoulder of his jacket. But he was too scared to notice it. The Devil leveled, following a two hundred foot drop, with the Messerschmitts in hot pursuit.

Dane's tongue was too frozen to yell into his mouthpiece to find out what was the matter with the ship. But he could feel the lifeless dead weight of its movement.

By those same realistic standards, he was far from being the dashing hero of the thousand and one thrillers he had batted out for Eric Manson's magazine chain back home. He knew from the first moment the Blue Devil had run into this pair of twin death baiters north of Kairouan that banging out exciting stories of glorious sky battle in the secure denizens of a Chicago hideaway was one heck of a difference from the real thing.

With those Messerschmitts bat-wing-ing in for the Big Kayo, Dane promptly

forgot all the golden rules of aerial gunnery. He simply grabbed for the butt of the Browning and disregarding the advantages of ringsight aiming, let go with his best Western shooting-from-the-hip style.

The heroes of his brief fling at cowboy yarns had always gotten their man like that.

The Messerschmitts, holding deep respect for the deadly accuracy of Yank gunners, had figured the possibilities of return fire based on the cold mathematics of precision sighting, gauging of distance, and a dozen other little vital things strictly according to the code of military combat practices.

Dane's chattering Browning went hog wild.

At a little over a hundred yards, coming in to rake the Blue Devil from a forty-five degree angle, one of the Messerschmitts caught a stream of tracer stuff point blank! It was insane, unorthodox shooting, and a matter of pure luck.

It was ten thousand to one odds on the books—and Dane collected a jackpot!

The Messerschmitt showed black smoke pouring from its motor for an instant, then exploded with a blinding sheet of flame.

The surviving swastika draped coffin peeled off in a hurry without firing another shot, seconds later.

It whipped up for altitude and fled towards its hidden lair beyond Medjez-El-Bab.

Dane, mouth agape in stunned surprise, stared after the amazing fantasy he had just miraged. His brain refused to register the truth of what his eyes had just witnessed.

He, Dane Richards, fiction writer par excellence, had actually performed an incredible feat of shooting down an enemy plane and driving another into flight! He tried hard to let it sink in.

THE Sky Phantom, hero of his last great novel—*Treachery Inside The Crooked Cross*—just before he had proudly enlisted in the Air Corps ten months ago, had not done half as well in his first test of combat.

Dane had just barely skimmed through his course in aerial gunnery—but in this great moment of his he actually placed himself beside the Daniel Boones and Davy Crocketts and other warriors of history.

He was too wrapped up in the exciting possibilities of this fantastic adventure of his to heed the drone of five Curtiss Warhawks coming in fast from the west to chase after the fleeing Messerschmitt.

They swept across the Valley a quarter of a mile from the Blue Devil.

It would have never dawned on Dane that the sharp eyed enemy flyer had taken a runout powder because he had spotted the numerically superior Allied formation sweeping in to cut off possible retreat.

Randall's thick voice pounded in Dane's earphones.

"Hang on, fella, we're going downstairs. Motor trouble." And added, "Okay out there?" The veteran flyer did not mention his bum shoulder.

Dane discovered his own voice. "Set 'er down, lieutenant," he chirped happily, blissfully innocent of the havoc inside.

At that moment, he didn't care if they dropped in on Bizerte. He was ready to tackle anything twice his size.

The nose of the Blue Devil pointed for the Valley. Dane's stomach turned flip-flops from the swift dive. He hung onto the turret braces for dear life.

And he began remembering again how this part of combat flying always drove him into a state of panic. He had stuck through all these months of training, even when he had been scared pea green most of the time, because of one

thing—his vanity. And a subordinate second reason—Eric Manson.

When Dane had announced his decision to enlist in the air corps without waiting for final draft—deferred these long months because of a 3A rating based on an invalid sister—Manson had been delighted.

"Think of the prestige it will give your stories," the publisher had urged over a weak moment of hesitancy following the impulsive decision. "Why, man, our readers will be fighting to get each issue of *Blazing Air Sagas* when they find out that Dane Richards is actually writing his stuff from real experiences."

Dane had positively glowed. The five foot six of his one hundred forty-two pound slim hipped figure stretched imaginatively to the proportions of a lusty two-fisted sky hellion—like the Sky Phantom.

He had one burning ambition—to become the kingpin adventure writer of all time!!

Now with the Blue Devil plunging towards the Valley, Dane wished he hadn't been so impulsive.

He would have been terrified if he had known the battle Jim Randall was putting up to keep from passing out of the picture. Randall was hanging onto his senses—and the controls—by sheer guts. He had lost plenty of blood from that hunk of lead lodged in his shoulder.

The valley grew larger.

It was a nasty spot for any ship to land.

There had been too much of a scrap to decide which side, in this battle for Tunisia, would hang onto it. Right now, it was a sort of prowling No-Man's Land.

Dane didn't know that, either.

He had come down from the States two days ago. A Flying Fort had dropped him and half a dozen other

gunnery replacements at Heliopolis Airport at Cairo from where he had been flown to Castel Benito Airfield, ten miles south of Tripoli to move into the battle zone with his new squadron.

Dane shut his eyes tightly. The wind whipped into his face through half a dozen smashed openings in the turret. Then, miraculously, he felt a terrific jarring as the Blue Devil struck a rolling carpet of earth. He opened his eyes again.

They were safe in the Valley with the swimming blur of landscape slowing up.

Dane took a deep breath as the Blue Devil shuddered to a braked stop. He leaned weakly against the swivel for a moment, then, rousing himself, pushed back the sliding hump of the turret and climbed to the ground. It felt spongy and earthquake-conscious beneath his feet. He stumbled, pushed out a hand against the bulging fuselage to steady himself—and discovered a criss-crossing weave of bullet holes sieved from the cabin almost to the rear turret.

THERE didn't seem to be any movement inside the plane. Dane started to grow uneasy. Something was wrong.

He climbed the wing, yanked open the cabin door.

A gasp trickled from his thin lips.

Randall was slumped over the controls.

Mister Five by Five hadn't come up from the bomb bay, either.

Dane had devoted many gruesome paragraphs in his Sky Phantom series to depicting death scenes like this.

He was sure Randall was dead. The pilot was still sprawled motionless across the controls. Nazi lead had made a shambles of the panel board of instruments.

The terrific buildup Dane had visualized of his triumphant return to his squadron base started to fade.

His knowledge of local geography was nil plus minus. He had a disabled bomber, one and possibly two dead men on his hands, and an excellent chance of becoming listed among those "missing in action!" The radio was wrecked. He could tell that in two seconds of inspection. It must have conked out after Randall's last message to the turret.

Dane was no superman.

The Sky Phantom had never been in a spot like this. And if he had been, Dane's figment of imagination would have probably set him to work repairing the ship and flying it back to safety himself.

A low groan almost brought a scream from Dane's lips. Coming up from the bomb bay the left side of his face smeared with blood, was Mister Five by Five. The little Irishman was dragging himself.

Dane brushed past Randall and matching his own strength with that of the bombardier's, managed to drag him up into the cabin.

"Gotta get outa here," the little bombardier mumbled. "D — dangerous. Enemy . . . patrols."

Then he flopped forward on his face again.

Dane fought his quickening panic again.

Something had to be done—and fast.

It was!

Three rifle shots cracked out across the valley! It was followed by a burst of machine gunning. Dane could feel hot lead ripping into the bomber. He ducked and crawled towards the cabin door, lifted himself cautiously and dared a quick glance.

His heart sank at the sight he saw.

Three enemy scout cars were racing towards the grounded bomber!

Where in the hell was the vaunted Allied numerical superiority on land and in the air? Newspaper reports

had used astronomical figures—yet three enemy scout cars were converging on the helpless bomber without a single Allied gun or tank or plane to stop them.

Dane groaned.

At that moment he could have cheerfully throttled fat Eric Manson, his brain child the Sky Phantom, and everyone and everything that had brought him here.

The machine gunning and rifle fire was fairly accurate for a five hundred yard range. Well did Dane know the tough problem of scoring hits on a target from a moving vehicle. That had been part of his own training. He had done very poorly, himself.

That very thought gave him impulse to attempt the mad, terror-inspired defensive action he put into operation. In a wild scramble he was out of the cabin, tumbling to the ground and dashing towards his turret with lead playing hop-skip all around him. He banged one knee and twisted his right ankle clawing to get back into the turret before some of that Nazi lead found a home.

The turret had been designed to stand plenty of punishment. Once inside, Dane unscrambled a maze of miscellaneous arms and legs, and discovered he had ten thumbs again as he tried to slam a new drum of ammunition into place.

The Nazis were using .30 calibre stuff. It slapped the turret without penetrating. Dane got back some of his confidence. He felt fairly safe now unless stray lead whistled in through some of the cracks in his armor protection which the Messerschmitts had caused.

He let the scout cars get within a hundred and fifty yards. They had seen the bomber come down, and with no return fire from the ship had been certain that its crew were all dead, or seriously wounded.

Dane put his best foot forward in utilizing nine months of expensive training. Sighting very carefully on the lead scout car coming head on for the bomber, he squeezed the trigger of his weapon. The Browning snarled with all the fury of a hepcat going all-out. It was the finest music Dane had ever heard.

HE HAD aimed for a burst that would smash lead into the engine of the enemy vehicle, putting it out of action. It was a nice target at that distance. Tracer stuff had a habit of playing havoc with things like that.

The scout car made fireworks that put on a better show than the best Fourth of July celebration Dane had ever staged. Those newly developed .50 calibre armor piercing bullets gave the Austrian paper hanger more scrap to yelp about.

The other two scout cars split away from frontal attack and geared into high to swing around for a flanking jab.

From the attacking vehicle on his left, Dane, who had swung his gun around to polish up on a little more target practice, saw a flying object soar into the air and come winging towards the bomber. It dropped short by twenty yards.

Almost immediately a terrific concussion jarred him. Shrapnel splattered the bomber.

Dane got it!

Mortar fire!

The Nazis were using a new stunt—mobile mortar guns to blast fixed positions in hit and run tactics!

Dane fired blindly at the vehicle, circling closer for the kill. His luck was running out—and he knew it!

Just one direct hit—and goodbye Manson and the next issue of Blazing Air Sagas.

Another tin fish kicked up a geyser

of dirt fifteen yards from the port wing. It was close enough to shatter the window of the cabin and pepper the inside with shrapnel served piping hot.

Randall, who wasn't quite the corpse Dane had imagined, had regained consciousness for several minutes during the first attack by the enemy—and had promptly gone off to sleep again. In doing so, he had fallen away from the controls, slumping forward onto the floor.

That unconscious action had saved his life.

Dane was already seeing headlines before his eyes proclaiming the valiant death of America's foremost adventure writer when unexpected aid came from upstairs over the Valley.

The flight of Warhawks, returning from luckless pursuit of the Messerschmitt spotted the helpless bomber grounded in the open slot of landscape below. They also spotted the enemy scout cars in full attack.

The Nazi ground vultures lost all appetite for their own private war about the same time.

Swift greyhounds chasing a pair of trapped rabbits showed little mercy in this war of extermination. Another minute corner of the pantry of Schickelgruber was given a thorough delousing.

Upstairs, a grim-faced flight commander contacted a not-too-distant Allied air base by radio.

In less than half an hour, one of the new Douglas trouble-ships came winging into the valley. With it came an escorting formation of Lightnings to patrol the skies. The Douglas landed with its crew of first line mechanics and a flight surgeon.

They found Dane slumped over his still hot barreled gun.

He hadn't been touched by enemy fire.

The truth of the matter was—Dane

Richards, creator of that daredevil superman of aerial combat, the Sky Phantom, had played sissy and fainted!

The miracle that went to make up the hundreds of thousands of tiny cogs within the great machinery of the air corps performed and completed one of its toughest jobs in less than an hour.

While the flight surgeon gave swift treatment to Dane, Randall, and Mister Five by Five, the bomber underwent a speedy repair job.

Nor was the miracle unattended by the spectacular—exactly eighteen minutes after the crippled bomber took off with its guardian escort, all hell broke loose in Ousseltia Valley!

THE prowling No-Man's Land which had ironically enough permitted the brief armistice of hostilities became a cauldron of fierce battle as ten divisions of mixed British, French, and American troops poured through behind a rolling barrage of heavy artillery set on commanding heights with powerful tank units paving the advance. Nazi units stationed in the far heights guarding the northern entrance to Kairouan from the valley opened up simultaneously, pouring everything they had into the defense of holding against superior odds.

And—

Where bluish-white skies had dozed under a drooping sun, the batwinged forces of Hitlerism poured every available ounce of air power to smash down this all-out assault to smother the last remaining coastal footholds on the continent of North Africa. A dozen different types of American and British planes came out of the west and from the south to meet the challenge.

It was a battle that would rock the international presses!

This was it!

The showdown for Hitler's last stand in Africa was on!

And while the casualties on both sides

ran into the thousands, a fantastically minded writer of adventure fiction flew to the safety of a Yank Airbase suffering from a slight case of blood pressure, a splitting headache, and a twisted ankle.

A rear lines leg man for AP, stationed temporarily at the Ranger Squadron base twiddling his thumbs until the first reports of the battle reached him, smelled a story when the crippled Blue Devil landed. A blitz buggy carrying stretchers tore up to the ship, and half a dozen medical corpsmen were on hand to remove the wounded men from inside.

The Warhawk's escort landed only long enough to refuel and replenish ammunition drums and take off again.

The AP man simply followed his nose—into the best human interest story of the Tunisian campaign.

Army censorship released it.

Eric Manson—and fifty million other Americans—read the front page account of Dane Richards and his fellow crew members over rationed breakfast coffee, on crowded streetcars, and during wartime lunch hours.

They listened to glorified accounts by news commentators—ripe for just a story like this.

Eric Manson got deliriously reckless with his limited supply of paper and ordered a special issue of *Blazing Air Sagas* to hit the newsstands within five days, featuring three of the Sky Phantom yarns resting in moth balls for over a year since their first appearance in print.

It was only natural that the backwash of all this publicity should reach the Ranger Squadron base in a sheltered spot west of Kasserine and to the south of Kairouan which had already been pounded into submission by the relentless Allied drive to the sea.

Major Yancey Rogers, six foot fighting Texan in command of the base, sent

for Dane the day after the yarn hit American newsprint.

Dane, still unaware of the fuss that had been stirred up, hobbled to headquarters tent, using a makeshift cane to favor his weakened ankle.

He noticed that air base personnel, busy at their jobs of servicing grounded planes, stopped to stare at him as he hobbled past them on his way from the hospital tent.

Dane felt uncomfortably uneasy. He hadn't been stationed with this outfit long enough to know anyone. Something was brewing. He wondered if he was going to catch hell for something that had happened during that wild adventure.

He had been in the army long enough to expect the worst when summoned before the C.O. Back at Harlingen Gunnery School in Texas he had caught a week of K.P. for borrowing an office typewriter to bang out a story for Manson when he was supposed to have been on special detail. He had paid a fellow gunner five bucks to take his place. And had slipped a pencil pushing corporal a ten spot for three hours' use of the typewriter.

That had been the Saturday afternoon the C.O. was supposed to have been on forty eight hour leave and had walked into the administrative building instead to catch up on some work.

A guard barred Dane's entrance to the headquarters tent.

DANE set his cap at the proper military angle, gave a quick hitch to his belt, and smoothed out a wrinkle in his only clean pair of khaki o.d.'s that had managed to reach the base with him. Then straightening up the best he could, leaning heavily on his cane support, he said, "The Major sent for me, bud."

"Name and rank, soldier," the guard snapped back. He had corporal's

stripes.

Dane sighed. "Dane Richards, private first class."

He raised a thin eyebrow when the corporal broke into a big grin then and deliberately winked at him.

The corporal entered the tent, reappeared a moment later.

"Major Rogers will see you at once," he said, adding in a half whisper, "Brother, you hit the jackpot. Nice going."

Dane started to say, "What the hell . . ." His voice trailed off.

His legs were shaking a little as he stepped inside the tent, stood there in uncertainty for an instant, then brought up his right hand in stiff salute to the bronze faced officer seated behind a portable desk facing him.

"Private Richards reporting, sir," he said, and snapped his arm swiftly to his side as the salute was returned.

Major Rogers grinned in friendly fashion.

"Relax, Richards," he ordered, and motioned to a canvas folding stool.

Dane was afraid he would wake up any minute.

He sat down and waited nervously for the next move.

Rogers leaned back in his own camp chair and reaching for a heavy briar from the desk, began tamping tobacco in the squat bowl.

"You did a magnificent job, Richards," he said, pausing between puffs as he lighted up. "We've had official confirmation of the Messerschmitt you shot down over Ousseltia Valley. And you have certainly upheld the traditions of the air corps in standing off three enemy vehicles from your grounded ship until help arrived. For that little job," Rogers continued, "you will be recommended by me for citation and promotion to the rank of sergeant-gunner."

Dane's head started to buzz madly.

"Well, sir . . . I . . . I . . . don't know what to say . . . I . . ." he floundered around for words that stuck in his throat.

Rogers laughed.

"Well spoken—sergeant."

Dane foolishly enough remembered the words the Sky Phantom had spoken under similar circumstances and to his amazement found himself using them as well.

"I had a job to do, sir. I tried to do it the best way I knew how."

Rogers removed the briar from his mouth. "A release was passed by the censors on the story of your little bombing jaunt, Richards," he said. "It kicked up quite a stir back home, I should imagine, judging from reports we have received out here."

Dane gulped. "Really, sir," he protested, "I had no idea . . ."

"Neither did I," Rogers interrupted. "I had no idea we had a celebrated writer with us. In fact, before I left the States, I used to read quite a bit of your stuff. Wasn't bad, either."

Dane started to swell. He forgot for the moment that he was in the presence of his commanding officer, and things had to be strictly military.

"Gosh, Major, thanks," he blurted. "I wish Manson could hear that. He's my publisher, you know. A swell guy."

Rogers glanced at his wrist watch abruptly. "It's been pleasant talking with you, Richards. But we've both got a job to do."

Dane got to his feet.

"Captain Young informs me you'll be fit for duty again in a few days," Rogers said. "In the meantime, rest and confine your activities to the base. And if there is anything you want—short of leave—we might be able to arrange it."

Dane positively glowed with happiness. Why, the Major and he were practically palsy-walsy.

"I would like one thing, Major," he said hurriedly as if afraid that the dream would explode into a nightmare of reality and k.p.

The Major grinned. "No blondes or chilled beer," he warned.

Dane instinctively ran a tongue over his lips in most unmilitary fashion at mention of chilled beer. It seemed like years since he had tasted any.

"With the Major's permission, I'd like to borrow a typewriter," he said—and held his breath.

It was like asking for a rare jewel or that blonde the Major had mentioned.

ROGERS frowned a moment then sighed. "Afraid you've got me over a barrel, Richards—but I think we can squeeze out the outfit machine for a few hours this afternoon."

Dane bubbled over with thanks. In two hours he could knock off plenty of wordage on the new Sky Phantom saga Manson would be screaming for in the next mail to reach him—war or no war.

Dane was walking on air when he left the tent. In his excitement, he had even forgotten to salute on the way out.

And he discovered in the next hour or two that his personal star was rising. Everywhere he went, he received the polite respect of the entire outfit. Even the ground officers and few stranded flyers waiting for their planes had an encouraging word or two for him.

Dane carried it off with the best traditions of the Sky Phantom, his modesty flaunting bravely over the richness of the bright colors of hero-worship he had donned.

He stopped off at the hospital tent.

Mister Five by Five was awake noisily slurping up a bowl of soup.

"Hi, Richards," the little bombardier greeted. "First chance I've been awake long enough to thank you for saving our skin when the Krauts started peppering us with mortars out in the valley."

"Save it," Dane wisecracked, "I might want to borrow a buck sometime."

From the bed alongside Mister Five by Five, Randall stirred.

"Nice job, fella," he commented. "I'd like to have you with me again when we go upstairs on another sightseeing jaunt."

"I'll be ready, sir," Dane said.

And wondered why his heart started knocking all at once.

The thrust through Ousseltia Valley and Kairouan to the vital port of Sousse gained terrific momentum throughout the next seventy-two hours. Large scale air and tank battles were being fought without letup. The Nazis were drawing on precious reserves of equipment from the Tunis and Bizerte sectors to stem the breakthrough.

At the Ranger base, Dane had spent three happy days pounding out piecemeal his latest thriller for Blazing Air Sagas. Another afternoon, and his first draft would be completed. The problem of getting the final copy through army censors and back to Manson was the least of his worries. He figured he had a solid enough in with Rogers now to smooth that over.

The war upset the final terrific black-out of Tunis by the Sky Phantom—and Dane.

Dane got orders to report for active duty again.

Randall was still in quarters and would be for another ten days. But Mister Five by Five was up and chirping about, eager for another go at the Nazis.

Dane got a sickish feeling in the pit of his stomach when he reported to "operations" for orders.

He had tried to kid himself along that from here in, the war was going to be a pushover. But that brief taste of sky murder had blunted his enthusiasm for box seat view of leaden hurricane. It

had also jarred his nerve.

He was scared now. And the odious smear of yellow was not far behind, although he had been fighting himself against the plain truth of it.

Only one thing kept his legs from buckling and calling it quits—his vanity.

He had built himself into a halo that belonged to heroes only. Manson and Blazing Air Sagas would be depended on to keep it alive back home. Out here the guys of the outfit, the ground worms especially, had fashioned him into a two fisted hard hitting gunner.

Death would be preferable—if they ever sucked the real secret from Dane's heart. He had led himself into a neat trap! He was stuck with the role of Sergeant Dane Richards, sky hero supreme!

Rogers had a brief word with the bombing crews of six Blue Devils of formation A.

"We have our orders from Headquarters, gentlemen," he began. "Just before dawn we attack a rail spur ten miles northwest of Sousse. This will be our primary target. The enemy has been getting reinforcements and supplies through from up the coast despite repeated attacks to knock out the line." The Texan paused for a moment. "They will not push through any more, gentlemen. You are to attack at low level."

HE WENT on to outline secondary targets and other preliminaries necessary for the combat flight.

Dane got sicker and sicker as he listened to the deep voice go on and on. The enemy had powerful ack-ack all along that rail line to keep it open. And five previous Allied smashes had thus far been unable to close the line once and for all.

Rogers caught Dane's eye following the brief meeting.

"Good luck, Richards," he said. "We'll be expecting good work from you."

Dane gulped. "I'll do my best, sir."

He wondered if they stuck a man in front of a firing squad for getting sick without warning.

His supper raised hell with a jittery stomach. He spent the entire evening cleaning his Browning and checking the ammo drums personally. It kept him from thinking too much.

His sleep doubled back to zero during the long hours of darkness. He kept seeing Messerschmitts diving and zooming and smashing right at him, their guns bent on finishing one job—exterminating future sorties of the Sky Phantom.

All in all, Dane spent a dandy night.

He was dressed and waiting for the executioner's knife to fall an hour before flight.

An orderly was moving through the darkness arousing the pilots. Dane hunched miserably in the darkness of his own quarters and wondered how the men who flew the dynamite crates felt before a flight that might well be their last.

A squat shadow popped inside the pup tent Dane was using alone, making him squirm back a few inches, from surprise.

"Hi, Richards. Awake yet?" a cheerful voice inquired.

It was Mister Five by Five.

Dane lied. "Woke up about ten minutes ago. That blasted cook rattling pots and pans pounded into my ear."

Mister Five by Five chuckled. "We get pancakes and sausage today. Special occasion, I guess." He chuckled again. "The condemned ate a hearty breakfast."

Dane shuddered.

Mister Five by Five couldn't see the action. He rattled on, "Guess I'm in luck, Richards. You're riding the tur-

ret in my crate. Always feel a hell of a lot better with a good guy back there."

"You flatter me pal," Dane burst out uncontrollably, and covered up quickly by adding, "Wish I had a cold bottle of beer before going up.. Settles my stomach."

"Make it a case—on first leave," the bombardier said promptly. "I'll join you with pleasure."

Dane screwed up his face. Right now the prospect of guzzling a case of beer with Mister Five by Five did terrible things to his already jittery stomach.

A tall, lean limbed Vermonter, Lieutenant Ebenezer Green, was pilot of Dane's ship. He already dangled two bits of twisted metal from his tunic.

They had been wrested from the devil's own stew pot during dangerous, almost suicidal, missions from Tripoli to Bizerte.

Dane had been with the outfit just long enough to discover why Ebenezer Green was so popular with the fellow officers of the squadron—and the bad news epidemic of a miscellaneous collection of aerial gunners, superstitious to the last round of ammo in their drums.

He was a flying lunatic—combat nuts, unpredictable, and without nerves.

He had also lost more back seat machine gun artists than the rest of the squadron put together.

Somebody, Dane decided, had handed *him* the short straw. His enthusiasm to keep a rendezvous with a tangle of shiny steel rails, frigid to begin with, began to strangle from subzero arctic frost.

Dane got a case of indigestion five minutes after he gulped down three swallows of scrambled eggs and half a cup of thick black coffee.

Ebenezer Green found him groaning

a little as he worked to set up his Browning in the rear turret of the Blue Devil.

"Don't let it get you, Richards," the Vermonter advised.

"It's my stomach, sir," Dane replied.

The combat lunatic clucked his tongue sympathetically.

"Sure. Sure," he said. "Know just how you feel. Nothing to be ashamed of, either."

Dane rarely got mad. But this was one of those times. He wanted to shriek out that it wasn't what the lieutenant was thinking. Then on second thought, he figured maybe it had something to do with *that* after all. Instead he forced himself to say in a steady voice:

"Just a touch of indigestion from G.I. coffee, I guess, sir. Always get it in the morning."

Green was apparently satisfied. "My insides are so doggone tough, guess I kinda forget the other fellow gets a touch of early morning jitters now and then," he said. "Anyway, I'm sure glad to have you with us, Richards. In fact, when I heard you were ready for active duty again, I asked the Major to let you come along as my gunner."

Dane almost choked. "For that," he bit off, "I offer the lieutenant my deepest appreciation."

The flyer thought he caught an unmistakable brand of sarcasm in the remark, but he wasn't sure. And he was really tickled to death to get Dane. Topnotch aerial gunners were worth their weight in gold.

NIGHT still strangled the sky when six heavily loaded Blue Devil bombers took off for an egg laying party above Sousse. At ten thousand ceiling, Dane almost froze to death on the way over.

In a few hours—if he were still alive—he would be cursing the heat. Storm clouds and nasty weather hadn't hit

Tunisia in three weeks now.

The formation of bombers picked up an escort of Warhawks thirty miles west of Kairouan. There were an even dozen—marking the importance of this deadly mission.

Nazi sky prowlers, outnumbered three to one in this battle for Tunisia's east coastal harbors, were grounded at camouflaged bases within the Nazi triangle, hoarding their power against the expected renewal of daylight assaults on land positions.

Fires from the still burning destruction of Kairouan were visible faintly even at the height the Yank bombers were flying. The formation wheeled and directed a more easterly course towards their objective.

Dane huddled over his gun and tried to relax. Every nerve in his body was tingling.

Green's voice, slow and drawling, suddenly crackled in Dane's earphones.

"I say, Richards. Everything okay back there?"

"Everything fine, sir," Dane forced from his half frozen lips.

"Hi, Richards," Mister Five by Five's voice sang into the phones. "Cold as hell down here. How about a little heat?"

"Remind me to pick up a footwarmer at the next trolley stop," Dane snapped back.

He could hear the little bombardier chuckling before the phones went dead.

Green was getting orders from Captain Spence Carter in the lead bomber.

The Blue Devil suddenly sheered off and went peeling into a dive.

Dane sucked in his breath.

Over the target so soon? He waited for the crash of Nazi ack-ack. He had never gone through it before. This would be a new realistic experience for the Sky Phantom to joke about. Not Dane! He was scared skinny.

The Blue Devil was slicing off plenty

of altitude. Then abruptly it came up nose level again, the twin roar of the Allison muffled into the blend of terrific speed. This baby had been built for speed, even with the load of five hundred pound easter eggs tucked into its belly.

Dane had no idea where he was.

He found out soon enough!

Seconds after the Vermonter's warning, "Approaching target," made a dirgeful sound in Dane's ears, the whole black earth below seemed to erupt steel splinters of man created lightning.

Nazi ack-ack poured a havoc of shell fire through every inch of skyway from which the low flying Blue Devils were releasing tons of bombs.

The danger from strong ground batteries had not been exaggerated. The enemy were determined to keep the rail lines open at any cost.

Dane's ship was plastered with several near misses as the ack-ack exploded above and to the port wing of the bomber. But these low level tactics were making the chances of direct hit lessened.

It was still far too close for Dane who crouched, terrified, in his turret waiting for the end of the world to come. Nothing right now could fit into a pattern of words sane enough to make sense to him.

The bomber suddenly peeled off and went screaming towards the very center of those blazing ack-ack guns. As a breathtaking swoop drove the remains of breakfast from Dane's stomach, he felt the ship lurch in its upward lunge. Then heavy concussions beat in his ears from almost directly beneath him.

THIS wasn't much like that first jaunt with Randall. They had remained at proper altitude, Mister Five by Five had dumped his load, and that

had been that.

Dane suddenly remembered—this was Ebenezer Green he was riding to hell with. Ebenezer the lunatic. . . . Ebenezer the unpredictable. . . . Ebenezer, the guy who lost more back seat gunners than the rest of the squadron put together.

And that wasn't all.

Mister Five by Five had dumped his pay load. Dane could tell that much by the way the lieutenant was flying hell out of the bomber.

And the ack-ack let up suddenly.

It wasn't much relief for Dane. Green's cool voice broke into his ear-phones.

"Get ready for action, Richards. Flock of Kraut coming up to join the party."

Dane pushed himself erect by sheer will power. Fumbling fingers played around the butt of the Browning for a second. Then one good luck at the lightening sky was all the convincing Dane needed.

A swarm of Messerschmitts were pouring off the starboard wing, smashing recklessly with courage borne of desperation in to the cover escort of Warhawks.

The sky became Satan's playground!

A Messerschmitt, diving at one of the Curtiss fighters, locked wings with another zooming up to meet it. The wreckage of the two planes shot earthward, flaming fiercely.

The bomber twisted on its back all at once and went down in a streaking dive.

The madman from Vermont had good reason, although Dane almost knocked himself out, banging against his gun.

Two Messerschmitts in a squeeze play just missed annihilating a quarter of a million dollar investment by Uncle Sam's taxpayers. They roared down after the Blue Devil.

A machine gun in the belly of the bomber opened up at them.

Mister Five by Five was tossing his trigger finger into the scrap, even while the bomber was flying *upside down*. The lieutenant hadn't bothered to wing over even though they had completed one loop already.

Dane spent the most hectic three minutes in his entire twenty-five years. Then, miraculously, the bomber maneuvered over, right side up again.

A Warhawk blasting away with its guns drove the Messerschmitts off for a breathing spell.

Green's voice, a miracle of calm, peppered Dane again.

"Are you still around, Richards? Here come our pals again."

Dane had no time to answer. He instinctively ducked his head as a spray of lead riddled a gash inches away from the turret. The shadow of a Nazi fighter vultured over the bomber. Another attacked from broadside at a distance of less than a hundred yards.

The enemy were enjoying a brief holiday of air superiority and were making the most of it.

Still Dane hadn't made a move to use his gun. His fingers were paralytic from terror.

In the area below, huge fires were burning brightly, sending smoke signals of distress to Tunis and Bizerte.

Then without warning, the Blue Devil shuddered, its starboard motor conked out completely. The nose of the bomber dipped.

Then Green's still perfectly calm voice gave Dane orders. "We're going downstairs. Hang on."

The Vermonter deliberately cut his port motor to equalize the pressure of the long dive. The altimeter showed less than three thousand ceiling. There was no time to even think of bailing out. Not while there was still a chance

of saving the ship.

To Dane, his face a sickly greenish hue, it looked like another repetition of his first jaunt with Randall. It also looked like his last . . . this time. They were going to drop in for tea—caught between the advancing Allied land forces and the tight ring of Nazi defenses.

The Sky Phantom had never brushed closer to the lips of hell than this.

The dawn was breaking light enough for Dane to get a fast look at what they were plunging into.

An open flatlands lay before them. Too open, in fact. It was a neat place for enemy artillery to pick off anything within range of their guns.

Down . . . down went the Blue Devil, with the Vermonter nursing every bit of speed he could.

THEY brushed within daisy-picking distance of three startled enemy tanks, shot over a fourth, turned on its side, wrecked by a strafing fighter plane, and hit the ground at a hundred and ninety miles an hour.

The bomber bumped, almost turned turtle as the balloon wheels straddled a shell crater.

Dane mumbled a stiff lipped prayer. It looked as if they were going to plow straight in the range of hills ahead. But the lieutenant was breaking cautiously now, the controls steady in his grip.

The bomber rolled to a stop less than fifteen feet from a demolished enemy supply truck directly in their path.

Dane had no time to congratulate himself on this miraculous deliverance from certain suicide. The scream of a shell sounded in his ears, followed by a geyser-making explosion that gouged the earth twenty-five yards to the left of the stalled ship.

From the frying pan into the bubbling grease of hell! They had settled

down under the very noses of a Nazi artillery position on the hill just ahead.

Another shell burst an equal distance away, directly in front of the ship.

Dane needed no orders to tell him what to do next. He literally threw himself from the turret, hitting the ground and rolling over unhurt with all the skill of a tumbling artist. He had played around with stuff like that three nights a week in a Chicago gym—just to keep in shape.

He had plenty of company.

Lieutenant Green and Mister Five by Five had figured out the same thing.

They dropped from the plane into the tall grasses surrounding it and the base of the hill from which the Nazi field piece was doing its morning constitutional.

Thirty seconds later, the hidden gun spoke its piece—with a hit on the starboard side that literally sheered off the entire tail assembly.

Another shell made a direct hit. The gasoline tanks exploded with a terrific roar, scattering wreckage for a distance of thirty yards.

Dane, some eighty or ninety feet from the demolished bomber, ate more dirt than he had ever swallowed in his entire life. A splinter of flying lead knifed a four-inch gash in his right thigh. It wasn't deep, but the feeling of running blood put panic into him.

Wounded in action! He'd bleed to death! A thousand and one horrible thoughts burst through his mind as he hugged close to the ground, not daring to move.

Then something flopped down beside him. He jerked up his head.

It was Mister Five by Five, apparently unhurt, and grinning.

"Hi, Richards," he whispered. "One sweet helluva pinch to be in, eh?"

Dane groaned quietly.

Once those devils on the hill spotted the three-man crew, it would simply be

a case of shooting gallery ducks bobbing and ducking until lead smacked them down—once and for all time.

A rift in the grasses parted without warning — and the Vermont flyer peered through, his face a greasy black. One arm was dangling.

“Hurt bad, Lootenant?” Mister Five by Five whispered.

Ebenezer Green shook his head. “Shrapnel. Think I’ll survive, though.”

Dane felt a little better with the appearance of the officer-pilot. It relieved him of the pressure of acting on his own—in a place where the first move might prove the last.

There was no time to question ranking authority, however. A drone of a motor sounded overhead. Then all at once, a long, big wing spanned bomber came out of the greyish dawn from two thousand.

Dane’s hopes lifted for a second. It might have been one of the Ranger Squadron dropping in for an eleventh hour rescue.

Mister Five by Five nudged him. “Heinkel,” he whispered. “One of those new dynamite jobs.” He grabbed excitedly for Dane’s arm.

The enemy ship was in trouble. The stuttering hack in its motors was reason enough. And the Heinkel was going to make a forced landing!

It had probably run into Allied fighters in their surprise dawn smash at Sousse.

MOTORS still spitting and snarling, it circled gracefully and then dipped for a landing. It touched wheels and rolled within a hundred yards of the smoke-charred wreckage of the Blue Devil. The motors cut off. Then two figures got out of the cabin and another dropped to the ground from the rear gun turret.

The three Yank airmen watched eagerly. That gun on the hill was silent.

But two figures emerged into the open and made their way below. They passed within fifteen yards of the hidden Yanks.

In a few minutes the bomber crew was busy with the starboard motor of the Heinkel.

The Vermonter wriggled closer to Mister Five by Five and Dane. He wet his lips for a moment, then whispered, “How about it, men?”

Dane’s heart started pounding furiously. He needed no blueprint to figure out that question. This lunatic of a flyer actually had the crust to suggest hijacking the enemy plane—at five to three odds.

Dane was all for putting in a strong nay. But the lieutenant pulled a .45 Colt automatic from the pocket of his jacket and motioned for his crew to get going. He was grinning.

Dane and Mister Five by Five were without weapons. But anyone could see Ebenezer Green was going through with this—bum shoulder or not.

The Sky Phantom would have been in his glory in a spot like this. He was six foot plus.

Dane was only the little guy who had created him—on paper.

It was a case of string along or wait for the early sun to whitewash his presence here. That Nazi artillery post had figured them for dead after those two havoc-smashing shells.

That was the longest hundred yards Dane had ever crawled.

The Heinkel’s twin engines burst into a roar suddenly with the Yanks less than ten yards from their prey. In a matter of seconds, the enemy crew would be taking off again, the minor motor ailment completely fixed.

The Yank flyer, a little ahead of his men, paused, propped himself on one elbow, and raising his automatic, took quick aim at the nearest Nazi.

The blast of that .45 had hardly died

away, when it spat again three times in rapid fire.

It was neat shooting—with a miss at thirty feet almost impossible.

The trio of Nazi crewmen were dead Injuns. In the face of that terrible close range ambush, the two Nazi artillerymen fled in panic towards the hill-top gun.

Ebenezer Green, whose ancestors had fought with Ethan Allen leaped to his feet.

“Let’s roll, men!” he cried, his thin hawkish face flushed with excitement.

Mister Five by Five was already clambering into the Heinkel. His voice was ringing out lustily with a fighting Irish tune.

Dane hobbled towards the rear turret of the enemy bomber as fast as his weakened ankle would permit. Now that the moment of salvation was at hand, fresh confidence pumped madly through his veins.

The Sky Phantom was coming through again! Oh, Manson, if you could see the Phantom’s daddy now!

The fact that Lieutenant Green had a shrapnel smashed shoulder failed to bother Dane now. He was willing to lay his chips on the line. His lucky streak was riding high. The Vermonter would get them through.

The motors roared with renewed power, seconds after Dane had tumbled into the turret. The wheels of the Heinkel started into motion.

Ebenezer Green had once proclaimed to one and all that he could fly anything with wings.

The Heinkel was gathering speed across the flatlands.

THEN from the artillery post on the hill shot and shell blasted. Two more followed in quick succession, ripping into the earth fifty yards behind the ship. A moving target was a little too tough for an emplacement weapon

of heavy calibre to smack down.

Green had the ship in the air now. Dane relaxed slightly. In a little while they would be circling their home air base with fresh tales of hair raising adventures to report.

Dane made a serious miscalculation. At five hundred feet, the Vermont pilot circled and deliberately headed back for the hilltop artillery post.

Mister Five by Five had discovered a rackful of untouched enemy bombs.

The morning sun was just making its appearance. It was a beautiful start of another day.

Mister Five by Five had the time of his life. He had always wanted to operate one of these enemy gadgets.

His eyes spotted the enemy gun a minute later while the Yank daredevil at the controls followed his instructions and came over it again.

Mister Five by Five scored a miss before he got the hang of operating the Naz bombsight. Green banked, came back again for a second try.

This time Mister Five by Five scored a bulls eye!

Neither he nor his pilot wanted to go home yet.

They had a full fuel tank and immunity from Nazi patrols until the deception was discovered. The only danger could stem from Allied marauders.

It was the sort of chance both bombardier and pilot delighted in. Dane was too sick with anxiety to enjoy this wild escapade. There was no telling what Green was up to next.

The Heinkel banked and pointed its blunt nose eastward.

Dane gulped.

They were heading back for Soussel! A flight of Messerschmitts passed over them at three thousand.

Ebenezer Green waggled his wings in greeting.

In fifteen minutes they were cruising over the wreckage created by the early

dawn raid of the Blue Devils. Major Rogers' boys had done a neat job.

There would be no rail traffic through to Sousse for quite some time.

Enemy labor battalions clearing away the wreckage along the vital spur were not too curious about the low flying Heinkel. They had more important worries.

The Vermonter brazenly followed the course of the tracks eight hundred feet below.

Twenty miles north of the Yank visitation, Ebenezer Green hit the jackpot. A line of stalled freight cars lay waiting for the rails to be cleared.

Mister Five by Five saw that inviting target below about the same time.

No instructions were needed.

He took his sweet time. And at the precise instant that the Vermonter came winging over the center of the cars, the bombardier threw everything he had at the target except the bombsight.

A terrific explosion that made kindling wood of the cars rocked the Heinkel and threatened to rip it apart. Green fought the controls with his one good arm and poured on the soup to get more altitude. Below, an ammunition train spread death for a quarter of a mile. Shells exploding in the tail cars whined and screamed off into space. A chunk of 88-mm tore through the starboard wing of the Heinkel.

It was a fitting climax to a long six hours of flight and hell.

At five thousand, the Heinkel pointed for the west and home.

Forty miles from the Ranger Air Base, Dane's lucky streak snapped.

Five Curtiss Warhawks, going out for patrol, ran into a powerful formation of Me. 109's, fifteen strong.

The Heinkel poked its nose into the fight at a thousand ceiling vantage. Below, ships of both sides were tumbling all over the sky with guns flaming and spitting.

Dane's first inkling of what this lunatic flyer was about came when the Heinkel dipped without warning and went diving right into the mess of spinning fighters.

The entrance of a Nazi bomber into the dogfight came as a complete shock to both sides!

THE Nazi horde got a rude double-cross when Ebenezer Green's wing guns blew a Messerschmitt out of his way. Then the Vermonter had to hang onto the controls with one good hand for dear life. He had bitten off a sizable chunk of trouble.

Two of the enemy fighters immediately disengaged combat with the Warhawks to take care of their double-crossing "comrade." Dane got a taste of rear turret action. Lead riddled his right arm in that first burst.

The feel of blood running down his arm did something to him. His mind suddenly twisted with hate for these sky murderers. Tension numbed the shock of pain. He was shrieking and cursing like a madman—one desire burning hotly through him. Revenge! Try to kill him, would they! Riddle him with their stinking lead, eh!

He forgot Manson and the Sky Phantom and that citation. He forgot that he was a little guy with a yellow streak. He forgot about the hundreds of words he had used to describe that certain something that snapped when a guy got fighting mad.

All he knew was that he wanted to kill! Smash these yellow babies before they smashed him.

Bracing himself against the heavy Nazi machine gun, he went to town. A Messerschmitt, diving for the tail of the Heinkel, got in his sights. He squeezed the trigger and screamed defiance as the snarl of lead ripped along an enemy wing and bit into a red hot motor that went dead from the blasting

impact. He swung the gun around and used up the rest of the drum emptying it at the belly of a Me. zooming up, with a Warhawk on its tail.

He cursed when the gun went dry.

But there was no use trying to fight an empty sky now. The Messerschmitts, with six of their wolf pack dropped in flames, went streaking for the coast with four Warhawks giving them the last of their ammunition before turning back.

Dane never knew that Mister Five by Five, with forty-one flying hours, brought the Heinkel down for a crash landing.

The Vermont firecracker had been unable to digest the full chunk of trouble he had bitten off. That shrapnel in his shoulder had been worse than he had figured.

The Heinkel pancaked three miles from the Ranger base. Mister Five by Five never did find out how to work the retractable landing gear.

A Yank trouble crew dug the three man terror-crew from the wreckage seconds before it burst into flames.

Of the three, Dane was the only one

who was still semi-conscious.

He was wacky with pain and kept muttering over and over again, "Great story, Manson! Phantom . . . does . . . it . . . again!"

One of the rescue crew shooting Dane to the base hospital on a stretcher across a blitz buggy muttered, "Who in the hell is the Phantom this guy is wacking about?"

Such ignorance would have hurt Dane's pride deeply.

But Manson took care of that about a month later while Dane was recovering in the big hospital at Tripoli.

With an assist by Major Rogers, a load of magazines came through on a Flying Fort.

Morale stuff! Great for the boys!

And greater stuff for a little guy with big ideas.

The cover spread almost burst his heart with pride: *Blazing Saga of the Sky Phantom in Action*—by Dane Richards, *America's Ace War Adventure Writer!*

It was, the way Dane figured it, a good beginning—one he figured he'd better see through—to the end.

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JAMMED-GUN JINX

By JERRY DRAKE

Now Lieutenant Jinx Greybar would get his chance to try out Wing's new fighter tactics—solo ambush!

L T. JINX GREYBAR, lurking in the clouds south of Munda Air Base, waited patiently for the signal from Operations Shack at Henderson Field that four Jap bombers last sighted fleeing from a reception of piping hot flak were coming home to roost.

Jinx hoped his luck would change for the better this time. Two strikes against him already, and Manson was about to nail his hide to the trophy display at C. O. headquarters.

His guns had jammed over Rekata Bay for the first strike—at a time when they meant the difference between life and death of his fellow flyers. The second time—in his green inexperience—he had chased a Zero alone, had run into a twin trap of two more, and had been forced to crash land.

It was tough medicine for a guy to take—especially when he had been born on Friday the 13th!

The PT boat down below somewhere had spotted the formation, relayed the information to operations, and now—Jinx had his chance to try out Manson's new fighter tactics—hit and run!

Jinx dropped his Thunderbolt from twenty thousand ceiling—spotted the Jap bombers quarter of a mile below to the starboard wing limping for home. Ack-ack had had a good morning.

Jinx dove at his target, fingers tense to squeeze the trigger control of his deadly Brownings.

He got a fat bomber squarely in his sights and opened up. Murderous fire power from eight wing guns blasted the cabin into a bloody tomb. Even before it started to sheer off in a death spin, he was raking the other two Nakajimas with cold, calculating fire.

The enemy bombers took the challenge and swept the Thunderbolt

with a raking cross fire from their tail guns. Jinx looped and came back for more. He got the tail assembly of a second Nakajima.

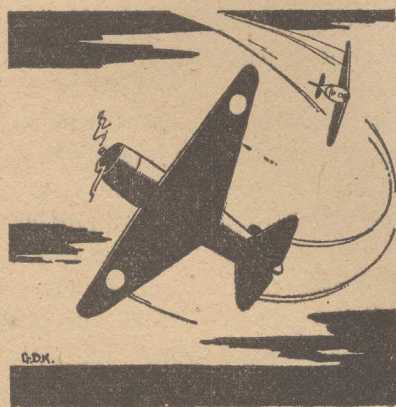
Then he had that Jap's shredded tail in his sights and burst into it again.

He was swearing as he went limping home with a half dead engine.

He expected anything from a dirty look to a court-martial, but as he crawled from the cockpit he was amazed to be met by a glowing-faced Major Manson and a cheering ground crew.

"That bomber you hit, Lieutenant, crash-landed right here on Guadalcanal, and in it was the Nip Air-Marshal Ishikawa, himself, who was flying to New Guinea to take command of all Jap air forces in the South Pacific. We got him before he could commit hara-kari!"

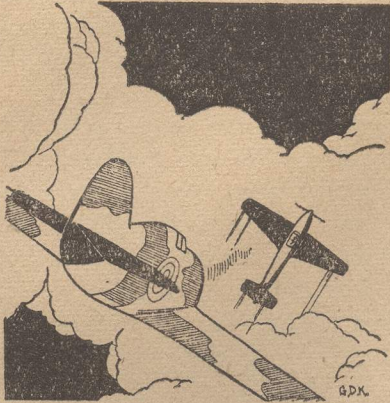
Who said Friday the 13th was a jinx!



CRASH-LAND IT, COWARD!

By **ROGER HOYT**

This was any man's sky, with victory going to the airfighter who threw lead the fastest!



OLD CAUTIOUS, the gang had labelled Luther Trench. Ever since he had crash-landed his British-loaned Spitfire south of the Valley of Ousseltia, with a chunk of Nazi flak in the engine.

An American armored patrol had hauled him out of the wreckage and brought him back safely to his base, with enemy lead chasing them all the way.

Luther got two busted ribs and a gnawing fear out of the experience.

Now—two months later—in a new Spitfire over the blazing inferno of the Mareth fortifications, Luther sat upstairs at eighteen thousand nervously fighting against indecision to join seven Lightnings and half a dozen more Spits giving the Nazi hordes below a thorough spring cleaning before the final assault by Montgomery's desert hel-

Luther had welcomed the assignment

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to play watchdog against high-flying enemy patrols. They would be along soon now. This was any man's sky—and to the victor—a little more borrowed time.

Luther suddenly stiffened.

In a cloud rift two thousand feet below him, a flight of fourteen Messerschmitts were coming in for an ambush stab from a Tunis base.

Luther got that sick gnawing fear again. He was alive because he had been cautious, taking no chances against superior odds.

That fear drove Luther into action. Fear against his own conscience.

The Spit went into a steep, screaming dive . . . with dead center accuracy right into the enemy wolf pack! The first four fighters had peeled off when Luther struck, Vickers flaming a desperate challenge against the weight of their number.

Lead screamed and bit all around him as the unexpected assault scattered the Messerschmitts and spoiled their ambush. Luther got one in his sights, ripped his guns into her vitals. He was after another when three Messerschmitts trapped him.

A salvage crew counted six hundred and forty holes in the Spit hours later—when Luther managed to crash-land safely beyond the Mareth Line.

He had a shattered right arm, but he was grinning when a British patrol got him out of the battered Spit.

Fresh reserves of Allied fighters had swooped down on the enemy formation minutes after Luther's solo attack.

Luther still had that gnawing fear when an ambulance truck carried him to the rear.

It was the sort of fear that would grind into that label of Old Cautious—the same kind of fear that would keep driving him until he finished the job of paving the way for an ultimate Peace.

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Vigilant sky patrols had spotted the powerful Nazi surface menace in the vicinity of the Lofotens. Now Sklaars was getting his chance to pay back the slave-makers for a charred fire-swept home in Beitstaden and a father and younger brother — whereabouts unknown!



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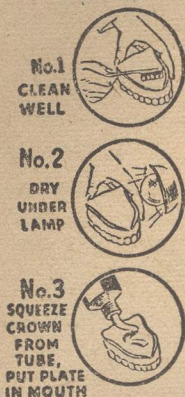
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They were at the mouth of the Vestfjord, marauding at ten thousand. The absence of enemy fighter squadrons was an ominous prelude to the storm.

The same instant Van Goot's urgent signal crackled in Sklaars' earphones.

"Ready for action, you chaps! Target below two miles starboard side."

Sklaars needed no second invitation. The Fock-Wulfes struck at the powerful bomber-torpedo armada with flaming guns. Sklaars' turret gunner—a new addition to these carriers of tin fish—got one just before the Blue Devil went into a breath-taking dive.

Sklaars' blue eyes had sight only for the huge grey shape of a Nazi cruiser—taken from the graveyard of Toulon—knifing the waters as if to outrun the deadly torpedo terrors of the sky.

The cruiser was opening up with every gun at its command. The Blue Devil had one wing slashed to ribbons. Sklaars was bleeding from a shrapnel gash along the right side of his head.

But nothing could stop him now.

The Blue Devil, hurtling at the doomed cruiser from a hundred foot ceiling above the water, came in broadside. With a snarl Sklaars released the first torpedo. Then the second.

He didn't have time to see the results. The Blue Devil fought the controls as he zoomed for ceiling.

Twin explosions rocked him violently seconds later. He didn't remember much after that.

His tail gunner was dead. He crashed into the Vestfjord.

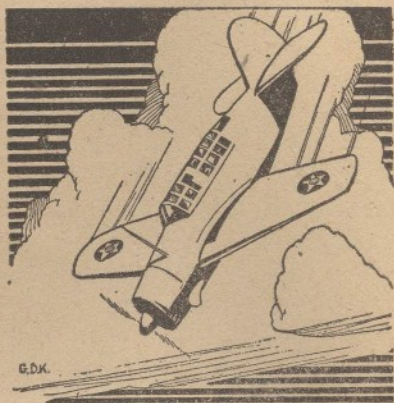
The Blue Devil stayed afloat for half an hour. Long enough for a Norwegian fishing boat, running the Nazi gauntlet, to fish him from the wreckage, half dead.

The men in that boat—they brought Sklaars home . . . to nurse that spark of life into a blazing fire that would soon scorch the enemy from his beloved land.

SKY TERROR

By **EVERETT
MEIKLEJOHN**

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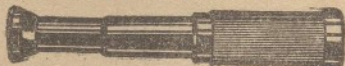
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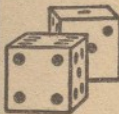
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deadliest weapon for vertical bombardment. Its speed, armament and other technical details are a military secret.

If you've been wondering how this ship got its nickname, here is an interesting fact—a small North American bird known as the Dabchick, but more generally as the Helldiver, gave the Curtiss its famous tag.

The Hell Diver's present perfection was developed from the best features of thirteen distinctive types of Curtiss five bombers built within the past fifteen years. The first granddaddy of them all was the XF8C-2, built in 1928. Curtiss turned out a two place biplane powered by a 450 h.p. Pratt & Whitney engine, and mounted three guns—one in the rear cockpit and two in the wings. It carried twin 100 pound bombs. It had some success in early 1929 after washing out in first tests but was scrapped in favor of a single place dive bomber in 1932 carrying two 116 pound bombs and later by 500 pounders.

Ironically enough, most military men in 1936 failed to recognize the tactical importance of dive bombing, and stressed the necessity of fighters.

Curtiss obliged with the F11C series to primarily meet fighter specifications. Successful experiments with this plane, however, showed its excellence more as a dive bomber than a fighter. Designers plotted the upper wing to provide a greater angle of vision between the leading edge and rim of the cowling—vital in affording perfect vision for expert dive bombing. Other features, including a streamlining of the landing gear to increase speed, were incorporated for use in the present standard dive bomber. This was the beginning of many changes that has turned out the Hell Diver of today as the deadliest dive bomber attacking surface craft.

Twenty years for perfection is a long time—especially when it takes a matter of seconds—for destruction!

FLYING WORKHORSE

By
MORSE CHANDLER

All-out air-war means more than knocking enemy fighters out of the sky!

THE newspapers are pretty busy these days carrying stories about the increasing menace of larger and more ravenous packs of Nazi undersea raiders and the damage they are inflicting on Allied shipping.

The newspapers don't mention too often about Adolf's own fast dwindling supply of merchantman tonnage—or the job that is being done by the less glorious side of the RAF to discourage further Nazi shipments.

The RAF is doing a thorough and excellent job of minelaying in enemy waters with a fleet of 60,000-pound Lancasters, mentioned quite often in communiqués telling of fresh bombing raids over Germany and her satellite neighbors. These winged workhorses carry on with monotonous regularity day after day.

The Lancaster can easily make five trips to Kiel Canal with an 8-ton load—where it would take a surface layer only three-fourths of the distance for one trip in the same amount of time.

Hydraulic bomb lifts hoist the huge mines into horizontal position inside the belly of the Lanc. Then the load is flown to the area designated for spring sowing and planted in specific spots, either by laying them along the surface or dropping them by parachute.

Allied crews get plenty of action from the enemy, by ground and air—but the Lancaster is a husky baby and a tough one for any Nazi to knock out of action.



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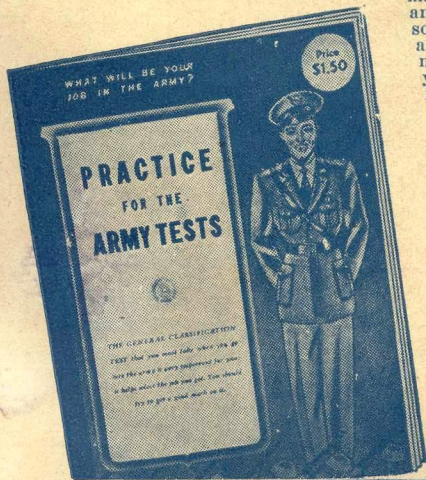
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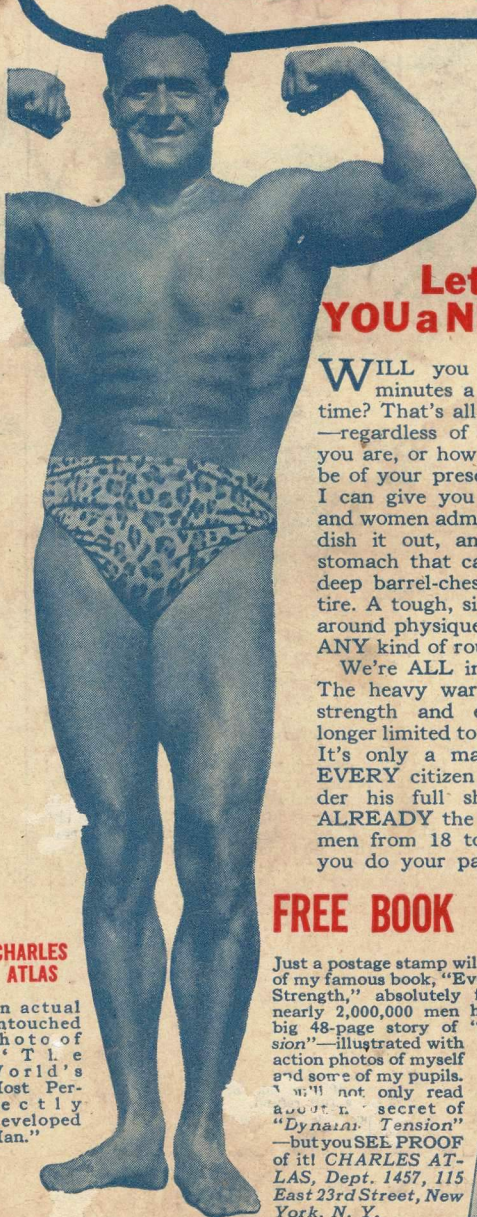
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BUT JUST LOOK AT THAT

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IMPOLITE or not—a girl just can't help staring at a man who's got a HE-MAN build! What about you? Does your physique KEEP 'em staring—or do you suspect that girls may be snickering behind your back? If you're built like a blacksmith around the chest and arms—if you've got a spring in your step and a sparkle in your eye that just radiates physical health and strength—then watch the panic among the girls! Which man would YOU rather be — HE-MAN or WEAKLING? Charles Atlas puts it UP TO YOU!

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