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BATTLE BIRDS



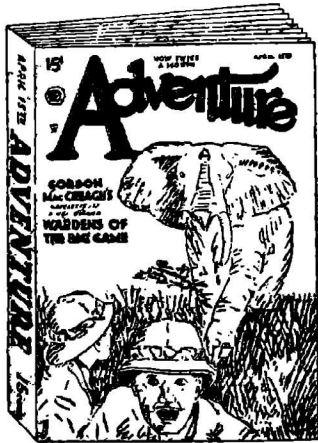
THE BLUE CYCLONE
NOVEL OF THE NEXT WAR
by
ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN



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Vol. 8

Contents for May-June, 1935

No. 2

SMASHING STORIES OF THE NEXT WORLD WAR

by Robert Sidney Bowen

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Black Invaders establish secret base in the Rocky Mountains! . . . American H. Q. heard this news in surprise—and dread. Despite our vigilance, the enemy had penetrated our Border, were hidden in our very midst. What was their plan? How would they strike? The nation's safety depended on learning these answers in time—and Dusty Ayres and his buddies took the job, pitting their wings against the war's newest death weapon—the Blue Cyclone!

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Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second class matter June 15, 1934 at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted 1935 by Popular Publications. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. \$1.50. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

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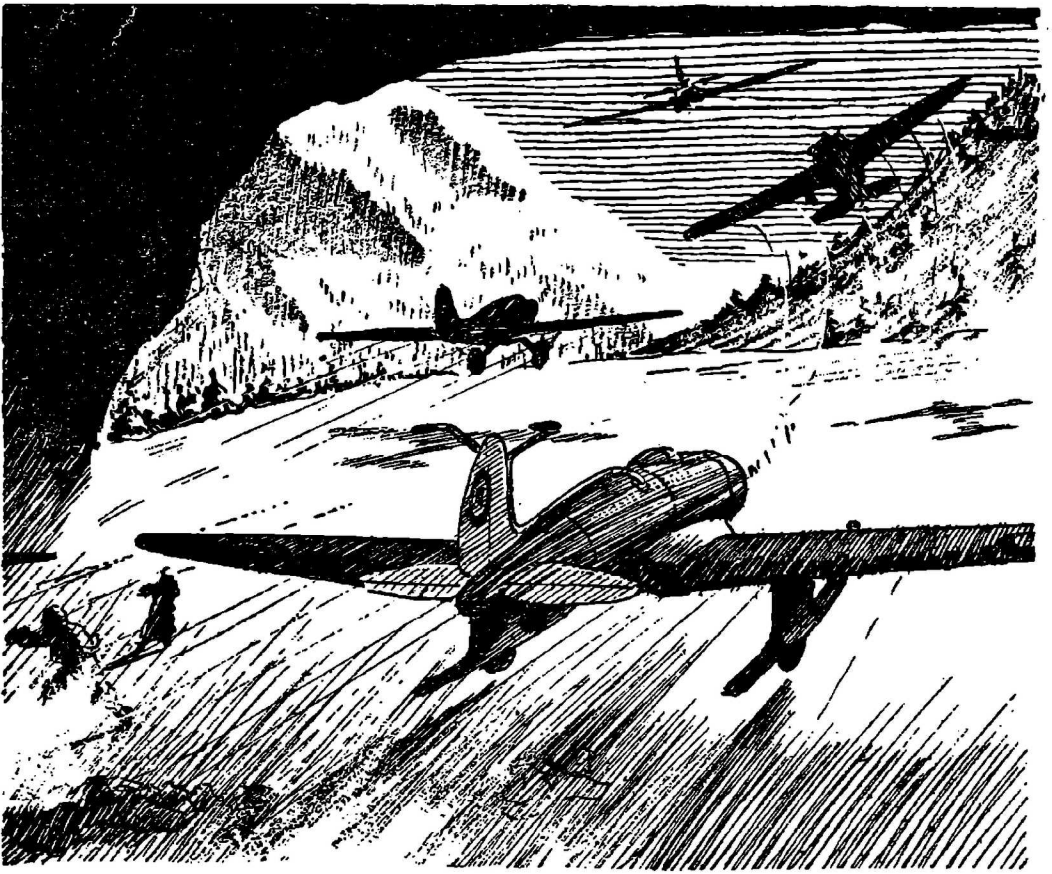
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The BLUE CYCLONE

by ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN





AN AMAZING NOVEL OF THE NEXT GREAT WAR

Black Invaders in the Rocky Mountains! H. Q. heard this news grimly. But only one Yank knew just where the Blacks were secretly based . . . knew that when they struck a cyclone of blue death would be released upon America. And he was a prisoner, condemned to die!

CHAPTER ONE

Black Bait

SHIVERING, Curly Brooks tugged the collar of the civilian overcoat tighter about his neck and stared gloomily up the wind-swept, ice-caked street. A fine flurry of snow slithered down, and in the dim light of the street lamps it was like an eerie, mystic shroud descending from heaven.

He shivered again, half turned and glared at Dusty Ayres, also garbed in civilian clothes, pressing back against the building wall to keep clear of the cutting wind.

"Somebody's nuts!" Curly growled. "And I'm damn near frozen stiff!"

Dusty shrugged, banged his gloved hands together.

"Don't boast, sweetheart! I know you're nuts!"

Curly snorted, moved over to him.

"Listen, guy, I've had about enough. Maybe Jack Horner isn't coming."

"Maybe he isn't," Dusty replied. "But I'm still going to wait. I'm curious."

Brooks sighed and slumped against the wall in a gesture of hopeless resignation.

"But what's it all about, Dusty?" he groaned. "We've been waiting over an hour. It's damn near nine!"

"Don't know," was the informing reply. "He simply said for us to meet him here, in civvies."

"But for what?" persisted Brooks. "What else did he say? He must have given you some reason! This isn't April Fools' Day!"

Dusty half rolled, shoulder against the wall, to face his pal.

"Listen, little boy!" he bit off. "I've told you everything I know. This afternoon I got a phone call from Jack—from Northeastern Area H.Q. He said for us to meet him here at this corner tonight; to come in civvies, armed, and I said that we would. I started to ask questions, but he cut me off and hung up. Something's in the wind! So I'm going to stick here and find out. You can shove back to the field if you want to!"

Curly gritted his teeth, fished for a cigarette and stuck it between his lips. He glared at Dusty's outstretched hand.

"For that last crack you can smoke one of your own!" he growled. "Of course I'll stick. Someone has to nurse-maid you two! But it all listens screwy to me, that's all. Why the hell couldn't we meet him some place where it's warm? The old think-box can't work so good when I'm cold!"

"Which is the same as in warm weather!" Dusty grunted. "And speaking of warm weather, I'll be damn glad when it comes around. With the Blacks snowed in, nothing has happened for weeks!"

Curly made no comment and both of them lapsed into brooding silence. Each mulled over Dusty's final remark. It was quite true. Winter had settled down with savage earnestness and practically created a mutual cessation of hostilities.

For the last four or five weeks there hadn't been more than a dozen aerial bombing raids by either side. And as for ground troop movements—well, that phase of warfare had come to an absolute

standstill. Perhaps winter was not entirely accountable for the last. The Black forces in Canada were not as strong as they had been during the Fall, and it was believed on good authority that Fire-Eyes, supreme commander of the Invaders, and his staff, had gone across the Atlantic to his European stronghold.

Were it any other period of the year, the time would be perfect for a gigantic American offensive all along the Canadian front. But the coming of Winter with its snow, sleet and glare ice, made such a thing a mighty doubtful possibility.

Even the air arm of the Yank forces was held up. Bombing strategic points in good weather was one thing, but bombing them in a blinding snow storm whirling down from the Polar regions was entirely different. It wasn't simply a question of being unable to see their objective—instruments took care of that. It was principally a case of ineffectual results.

The bombing raids didn't tie up mobile troop movements, because no troops were moving. Nor could they pave the way for an American drive. For although the bombs smashed great holes in the ground, even isolated large sectors of Black Invader-occupied territory, they did not remove the miles and miles of chin-deep snow and ice.

Therefore both sides had more or less dug in, and were making plans and preparations for great things when Spring rolled around.

At least, so it seemed. On the other hand, a feeling of tenseness and mystery pervaded the American forces—the aerial branch in particular. Inactivity added to the suspicion that strange chaos was slowly brewing in the hidden background.

In an effort to ferret out the truth, Air Force G.H.Q. had issued standing orders that constant aerial vigilance be

maintained. And it had been maintained—but with absolutely no result.

Flying with High Speed Group 7, Dusty had made countless flights, many of them deep into Black territory. But only on two occasions had they met with opposition, and both times had been but a hit-and-miss scrap with a couple of units of Black Darts.

THE answer to it all? Simply the daily increasing feeling that Fire-Eyes intended to strike at some other section of the nation. The history of his conquest of Europe showed that time was the fundamental basis of all his successes.

When weather, or anything else, prevented an onslaught against any given point, he did not waste time waiting for a more favorable opportunity—he simply smashed at some other and more vulnerable point. It was natural that he was planning to do that same thing right now—and the unanswered question in the minds of G.H.Q., and all others who gave it thought, was where and when.

"Extree! Extree! Read all about it! Blacks to sue for peace! Blacks to sue for peace! Extree!"

The shrill cry of a newsboy slipping and sliding along the icy sidewalk jerked Dusty away from his thoughts. He squinted at the lad through the drifting snow, snorted aloud.

"Sue for peace, hell!" he grated. "Editors will print anything for bigger circulation!"

"Yeah!" echoed Curly, rapping bunched fists against each other. "But right now I'd sure love to believe it!"

Faces shielded against the biting wind, they watched the newsboy make a sale to a couple of pedestrians who were interested enough to fish around in the cold for pennies. Presently, the lad cut diagonally across the street and ran up to them.

"Paper, mister? Help me out, will ya? Only got a couple more, and I'm cold."

And as Dusty started to shake his head, "Aw, please, mister! Geez, I need the dough! Me mother—"

"Okay, sonny," Dusty cut him off. "Here's a quarter—keep the paper."

"Nothing doing!" replied the kid, pocketing the coin. "Just take a look at that first page!"

Shoving the paper in Dusty's hand, he yelled, "Thanks, mister!" and went scuttling on down the street shouting his wares.

"Enough profit, and glad to get rid of it, I guess," grunted Dusty, smoothing out the paper.

He stared at the front page. In bold type it contained the headline ~~the~~ newsboy had been shrilling. But it wasn't like headline that caught and held Dusty's eyes. Pinned to the vertical fold was an envelope—a sealed envelope, with no writing on the outside.

"What the hell?" grunted Curly.

Dusty didn't answer. He jerked the pin free, ripped open the envelope, and pulled out the single sheet of paper inside. Together they read the pencil-scrawled message.

Will pass you in about ten minutes. Take no notice, but watch whoever is trailing me. Follow, and be ready for anything. But do not shoot to kill!

Jack

"Well, I'll be damned!" came from Curly. "More riddles! What do you sup—"

"I don't suppose!" Dusty cut him off, and made as though he were reading the paper. "Got your gun in your pocket ready?"

"Sure!" Curly nodded. "But God knows if I can pull the trigger, what with all ten fingers frozen! So Jack's being trailed, eh? Wonder why he doesn't want

us to shoot to kill—in case we have to shoot?”

“Maybe it’ll be his mother!” Dusty snapped.

“All right, funny boy!” Curly grated harshly. “Don’t tell me another one—my sides are aching!”

Once again they settled into brooding silence. But this time they did not give themselves up to idle thought. On the contrary, they each wracked their brain for some reason that could explain the mysteriousness of Jack Horner, known to a select few as Agent 10, of the U.S. Department of War Intelligence. And at the same time they kept darting sharp glances up and down the street for a first glimpse of their mutual friend.

FIVE minutes dragged by, and only two elderly ladies, bodies bent against the wind, went past. Seven minutes, and a group of street urchins went chattering by. Ten minutes and two army officers marched past, neither of whom was Jack Horner in facial appearance, or build for that matter.

Two more minutes and a cop sauntered toward them, stick under his arm, and slapping his obviously numbed hands together. As he drew near, something about his bearing made Dusty stiffen slightly. In the dim glow of the street light, the cop’s face was typically Irish—the face of a man too old for military service. Yet, there was something about his carriage—the way he walked—that clicked in Dusty’s brain.

As though not even seeing them, the cop came abreast and continued on. But it was at that instant that the words came clearly to them both—whispered words, shot out the corner of the cop’s mouth.

“Okay, fellows! Eyes open!”

It was all Dusty could do not to start forward. He sensed Curly starting at his

side, swayed toward him and opened the newspaper.

“Hold it, kid!” he hissed. “Don’t spoil it now!”

“Don’t worry!” came the cryptic reply. “Here, hold the paper down so we can see down the street. Say, isn’t that somebody hugging the wall?”

Eyes narrowed, Dusty peered in the direction whence the cop had come. He wasn’t sure for a second—and then, suddenly, he saw a shadowy figure close to the wall, about two blocks away. A moment later, as the figure passed within the glow of a street light, he saw the fatigue cap and O.D. great-coat of a U.S. infantry private. He scowled, snapped his eyes around to the back of Agent 10, in cop’s uniform, a block to the other side.

“Must be him!” came Curly’s voice in his ear. “Can’t see anyone but that buck private—and he’s sure hugging the building. Wait—he’s spotted us, I think! He’s moving more out to the curb—walking faster!”

“Yeah!” Dusty grunted. “When he gets within earshot, play up to anything I say.”

That took about half a minute. As a matter of fact, the soldier was within twenty yards of the pair when Dusty suddenly folded his paper angrily.

“The hell with those dames, Joe!” he snarled. “We been here an hour. They gave us the run-around!”

“Don’t be like that!” Curly clipped back. “I know Bess—I’m telling you she’ll show up!”

The soldier was directly opposite them now.

“Sez you!” Dusty grated. “When we’re a couple of icicles! I ain’t waiting half the night for no dame! Come on—let’s go ’round to where she works. They both work there, don’t they?”

As Dusty spoke he pressed against

Curly in a silent signal to wait a moment or two before moving.

"Yeah, they work there, sure!" said Brooks in a loud complaining voice. "But we can't see them until they get out.

"Well I ain't going to wait here another minute!" cried Dusty. "And that's flat! Come on—we're gonna breeze around to her place!"

He started to saunter along behind the soldier, who was now a good half block ahead of them. Over two blocks ahead of the soldier, and almost out of sight in the slithering snow, was Agent 10.

"What a guy, what a guy!" shouted Curly, catching up with Dusty. "All right, we'll go there. Now keep that damn trap of yours shut!"

Then in a soft whisper,

"Okay? Shall we close in?"

"No," Dusty murmured back. "Hold it this way. We'll wait for him to do something. Nuts! Like you said—this sure is screwy!"

For six blocks the strange procession continued up the street. Every moment Dusty expected the soldier to turn and glance back. But the man didn't. Hands jammed in the pockets of his great-coat he continued on at an even pace, neither gaining nor losing ground on the dim figure of Agent 10 up ahead.

At the end of the seventh block, Jack Horner turned sharp right and disappeared. Instantly, the soldier quickened his pace; almost broke into a run, but not quite. Behind him Dusty and Curly put on an equal amount of speed.

For fleeting seconds they lost him as he turned the corner. But, when they turned it, they spotted him again, still the same distance ahead. Jack Horner was considerably closer now, however. To be exact, just one block ahead of the soldier. And he was leading the way down an unlighted street, flanked on both sides by deserted apartment buildings.

For perhaps half a minute everything remained the same. And then, suddenly, the soldier broke into a loping run. His right hand jerked free of his pocket, and although Dusty wasn't sure, he thought that it was clutching something.

However, he didn't stop to figure it out. Jerking his own gun out, he started racing swiftly along the icy sidewalk. Curly Brooks stuck right at his shoulder.

The soldier was within twenty yards of Agent 10, who had not turned, when Dusty saw the man's right hand shoot out, saw the blurred outline of the gas gun clutched in his hand.

"Hold it, you!" he roared.

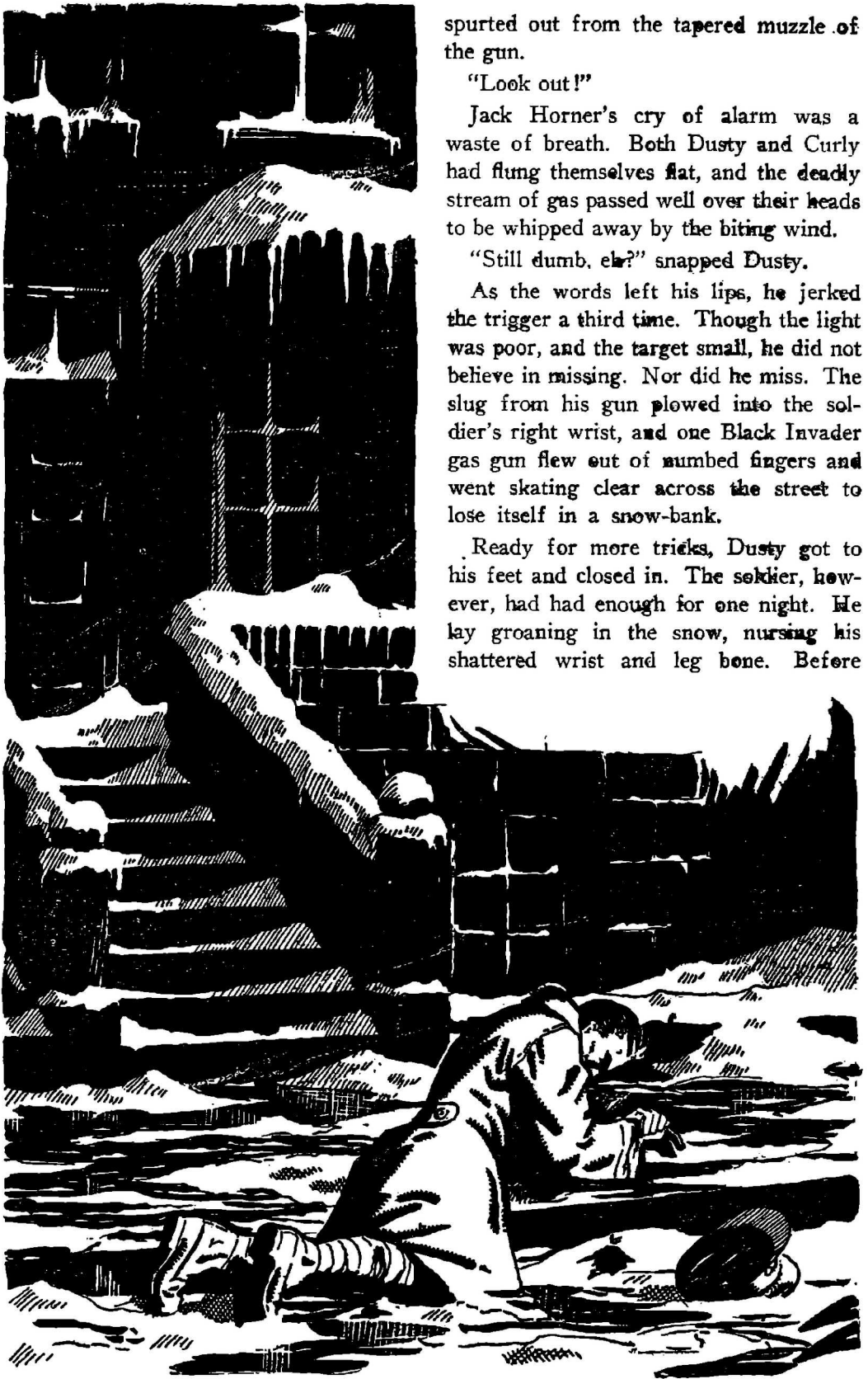
The sudden and unexpected shout caused the soldier to snap his head around and glance back. At the same instant Dusty's gun crashed out sound. The bullet from it smacked into the pavement at the soldier's feet, ricocheted off and went whining away into the snowy night.

The soldier, still running, darted to one side, drew a bead on Agent 10 with his gas gun. The Intelligence man had dropped flat at Dusty's shout, and now the soldier was almost on top of him.

Dusty was not running when he jerked the trigger again. He was sliding flat-footed over the icy sidewalk. So was Curly Brooks. As a matter of fact, their shots came so close together that they practically blended into one single sound.

A wild cry of pain greeted the echo. The soldier's left leg buckled under him. He tried desperately to regain his balance, but a bullet-shattered leg bone and the icy sidewalk were too much for him. He went sprawling headlong, slid the width of the sidewalk and bumped down over the curb into the snow-filled gutter.

But all the time he clung onto his gas gun, and as he came to a stop he twisted over and swung it around. There was a *pop* and a thin stream of purple smoke



sputtered out from the tapered muzzle of the gun.

"Look out!"

Jack Horner's cry of alarm was a waste of breath. Both Dusty and Curly had flung themselves flat, and the deadly stream of gas passed well over their heads to be whipped away by the biting wind.

"Still dumb, eh?" snapped Dusty.

As the words left his lips, he jerked the trigger a third time. Though the light was poor, and the target small, he did not believe in missing. Nor did he miss. The slug from his gun plowed into the soldier's right wrist, and one Black Invader gas gun flew out of numbed fingers and went skating clear across the street to lose itself in a snow-bank.

Ready for more tricks, Dusty got to his feet and closed in. The soldier, however, had had enough for one night. He lay groaning in the snow, nursing his shattered wrist and leg bone. Before

Dusty could bend down to inspect the amount of damage, Agent 10 came sliding up, knelt beside the man, and in practically a continuance of the same motion straightened up again.

"Thank God, you didn't kill him!" he breathed heavily.

"You didn't want him that way, did you?" Dusty replied, pocketing his gun. "But what's it all about? And what do we do now?"

"Tell you the first, later," the Intelligence man clipped out. "Right now we take him into the house here. Your shots were probably heard, and there'll be others here in another minute. Certainly timed it perfect—right in front of the house!"

All of which meant little or nothing to either Dusty or Curly. It was Brooks who asked the obvious question.



...DUSTY GOT TO HIS FEET AND CLOSED IN.

"What the devil are you raving about?"

Jack Horner hooked his hands under the wounded soldier's armpits.

"Later, I said!" he grunted. "Catch hold—make it snappy! I want to get him out of here!"

Shrugging, the two pilots bent over and took hold of the groaning man. And then with Jack Horner leading the way, they carried him back across the sidewalk and up the front steps of a dark and desolate looking building.

CHAPTER TWO

The Melting Death

ONE of a bunch of keys that Agent 10 pulled from his pocket opened the heavy front door and admitted them into a pitch-dark hallway. It was only pitch-dark for a second, however. The Intelligence man pocketed the bunch of keys and took out a small flashlight. Its thin beam revealed another door at the end of the hallway. Through this they went, and down a steep flight of stairs to the basement.

At each step the soldier groaned, and whined unintelligible sounds, to which none of the other three paid the slightest attention.

At the bottom of the stairs, young Horner turned left down another hallway toward a third door. They were within a half dozen steps of it, when it swung open and the figure of a middle-aged medical officer was silhouetted against the lighted room behind.

"You're late, lieutenant!" he said, stepping back to make way for them. "I was getting worried!"

Agent 10 made some casual remark that Dusty didn't hear. As a matter of fact, he was too occupied with the appearance of the room into which they had entered. It was like one of several he had seen

since his first association with Jack Horner and Intelligence department work.

In other words, the room was fitted out with every communications instrument known to man. Long and short wave radio transmitters and receivers, Cook-ray focusing and recording plates, ground phones, teletype machines, and a dozen other creations of communication science.

Following Jack Horner's lead, Dusty and Curly helped carry the wounded soldier across the room and deposit him in a chair. The instant he let go, the Intelligence man nodded at the medico.

"Nothing much, doc!" he grunted. "Just ease the pain a bit, so that he can concentrate on talking."

And then, twisting back to the soldier,

"You are going to talk, you know, Morgan—or whatever the hell your real name is!"

The hiss of an enraged cobra could be no more venomous than the tone of the soldier's voice as he replied through pain-whitened lips.

"You will pay dearly for this, I promise you!"

Agent 10 said nothing, and stepped back to let the medico go to work with the contents of a little brown bag he took from the nearby table. Dusty walked over and faced Horner.

"And now can we play?" he asked. "Or is it still a very deep and dark secret?"

"Check!" Curly echoed. "What's the dope, Jack?"

The Intelligence man didn't answer for the moment. He raised both hands to his face, pulled off strips of make-up clay, pulled wads from his mouth that had given his face its rounded fullness. Presently his face was back to its normal appearance.

"I'm not sure," he said slowly, "that even I know what it's all about. That's

why he's here—I'm going to try and find out."

Dusty stared at him, narrowed one eye critically.

"Are we going to play questions and answers?" he grunted. "Or will you tell us what you do know?"

The other sighed, and Dusty could not help but notice the look of utter dejection that fitted across his friend's face.

"There is little to tell," young Horner suddenly got out in a low voice. "A certain trust was placed in me, and—well, I failed. I'm—I'm trying to redeem myself. But I needed the help of you two!"

"That goes without saying," said Curly quietly. "What else?"

The Intelligence man seemed to struggle for words. It was as though the full significance of some terrible catastrophe had suddenly descended upon him. His shoulders slumped forward, and a dull, almost listless, look seeped into his ordinarily steel-gray eyes.

Impulsively, Dusty reached out, gripped his arm and squeezed hard.

"We've licked lots of tough things before, kid!" he said in a steady voice. "Just give us the facts, so that we all can do a little figuring! What do you say, huh?"

A thin grin twisted Jack Horner's lips.

"Thanks," he said. "Shouldn't be slipping like this—"

He checked himself, and moved over to the far corner of the room, and lowered his voice to little more than a whisper as Curly and Dusty joined him again.

"The Bureau of Chemical Warfare has been working on a secret process known as Metal-Meltic. It's composed of two secret gasses that when mixed create a heat that will melt anything from platinum wire to tempered steel."

"Like those chemical bombs that Ekar used awhile back?" put in Curly.

"Something like them," Agent 10 replied. "Only about ten times more effec-

tive. However, I believe the bureau developed the stuff for shell use—long-range use. Alone, neither of the gasses is potent. But when mixed—and they can be mixed by a timing device—the stuff will destroy everything it comes in contact with. A single shell of it will cover a quarter mile area."

"And it's good-by to every rifle, machine gun, and all other pieces of ordnance, eh?" grunted Dusty.

"Right!" nodded Agent 10. "And, incidentally, a lot of things that are not made of metal. God, by Spring the Black forces up north wouldn't have a gun worth firing, let alone other equipment. But—but now it's gone!"

The last was little more than a moan.

"You mean?" began Dusty. "You mean—"

"That because of me, it's gone. Final tests were to be made a week ago. Made at—well, the place doesn't matter. Major Crandall, chief of the chemical department, was to conduct them. He believed that he was being watched by Black agents. We had him shadowed for a couple of days, but discovered nothing. As an added precaution I was delegated to take the available supply—a single cylinder of each gas—and the formula, to the testing place."

"Good God, the formula, too?" broke in Curly.

"It was necessary for checking during the tests," the other replied. "You see, Major Crandall didn't consider it letter-perfect, as yet. He intended to make further experiments during the tests."

"Anyway, five nights ago, in utmost secrecy, I left Washington by car for the testing place—not more than twenty miles south of here, as a matter of fact."

"Everything was under cover in the back of the car. And on the rear seat rode two armed guards—two of my own men. Nothing happened until we were

JACK HORNER



just outside Hartford, Connecticut. It was close to three A.M., as I remember. And that was the last thing I remember."

The Intelligence man stopped short, made a hopeless gesture with his hands.

"What happened?" Dusty encouraged when the man didn't go on talking.

"I don't know," came the bitter reply. "At least I don't know all the particulars. Everything suddenly became a blank and I passed out cold. When I woke up, it was almost noon. The car was on its side in a ditch, every window, including the windshield, splintered to bits. We'd slammed into a tree.

"I was half in and half out of the car. And my head felt as though it had been split in two. It took me a few minutes to get up onto my feet. Then I saw my two men. They were crumpled up in back—dead!"

THE Intelligence man stopped short, flicked his eyes across the room to where Morgan was submitting to medical

treatment. For a split second young Horner's eyes blazed with a look of savage hate. Then he got control of himself, blinked and looked at Dusty.

"You can guess the rest," he said quietly. "My two men had been gassed. They were in back, of course, and helpless. In some way I must have plowed through one of the windows—that saved me. I found the release spring of a small gas cartridge on the rear floor of the car. Poor devils, they didn't even know what it was they were guarding!"

"But the stuff—the two cylinders, and other things?" broke in Curly.

"It was gone, naturally!" came the bitter answer. "Including the formula I carried in the sole of my

boot. Everything gone—and not a single clue!"

"Except?" murmured Dusty.

He half nodded toward the man in the uniform of a U.S. infantry private.

"Except him!" Agent 10 replied tight-lipped. "But it took me a couple of days to remember—remember that he was the only possible man who could have known that I was leaving Washington by car with that stuff."

"How'd he know?"

The Intelligence man gestured.

"Simple! For a couple of months he's been in charge of our transport division. Fell down on a small job, and the general transferred him to the transport division for punishment. Hell, the same old story—another Black agent practically sleeping with us. God knows how much information he's passed on before this."

"Well, why haven't you nailed him sooner?" frowned Curly.

"For several reasons. One of them, because I wanted to make sure. Not muff it again, and have the real rat get away. And another, because I wanted to make the

Blacks start worrying, and thus be able to bait my trap better."

"All of which is as clear as mud," said Dusty. "What the hell would the Blacks have to worry about—assuming, of course, they got the stuff? Which, of course, they did."

"Here's what I mean," Agent 10 replied, speaking rapidly. "According to Crandall, the formula was not entirely complete. He had left out one thing—something to do with generating temperatures, so he said.

"However, he says that expert chemists can, in time, figure that out for themselves, if they have the formula. As for having the two gasses, that doesn't matter. They can not be analyzed, absolutely. It's just a question of discovering the true generating temperatures from the formula. Learning of that—I mean the part left out—gave me what I wanted. The chance to bait my trap."

"Yeah?" queried Curly as the man paused.

"Yeah!" grimly. "So I let it be known—known so that Morgan would be sure to hear—that a new formula had been drawn up—one that included the missing part—and that I was going to communicate it by code to Crandall, at a secret laboratory, tonight.

"To make the thing seem all the more real, Crandall has been in hiding ever since I reported my failure to him. You see—well, I lost the thing—it was

all my fault, and, my father, the general, has dumped the job of getting it back into my lap."

Dusty said nothing as Agent 10 stopped talking for a moment. But he knew what was behind the man's words. It was not only a question of duty to country, but one of personal honor as well. General Horner was chief of the department, and his own son the ace operator. But in their work, relationship meant nothing. It was up to Jack Horner to make good. If he didn't—

The Intelligence man was talking again.

"I let Morgan trail me tonight—just long enough to make sure that you two were set. I knew that I could count on you to get him without having to kill him. I didn't dare try it alone—he might have smelled something in the wind."

"You took a hell of a long chance!" grunted Curly Brooks.

"Not so long! Didn't I say that I knew I could count on you two? Anyway, it worked just as I planned it. When he realized that I was coming to this signal station, he started to close in on me. Once

I was inside, it would have been too late. And now, by God, he's going to talk—tell me where that stuff was taken, after it was taken from me!"

As the Intelligence man started across the room, Dusty grabbed his arm, pulled him back.

"Wait a minute, kid," he said. "What the hell does it matter whether he talks

GENERAL HORNER



or not? Crandall knows the formula, doesn't he? What he did once, he can do again."

"No," Jack disagreed. "It's now a race—between our chemical bureau and the Blacks to see who can find the missing generating temperatures first. We've got to see that the Blacks don't win!"

"But Crandall knows!"

"Crandall is dead! He was killed early this morning—shot by some Black rat who smoked him out!"

ROOTED in his tracks, Dusty dully watched Agent 10 turn and go over to the medico working on Morgan. Then he shook himself out of his trance and quickly joined his Intelligence pal. Curly tagged along at his heels.

"All right, Morgan!" young Horner began in a deadly voice as the medico stepped back from the wounded man. "You know what I want, and I'm giving you a break. The rest of the war in one of our military prisons if you talk, a firing squad if you don't!"

Morgan's lips slid back in a leering grin.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Lieutenant Horner!" he spat out. "But I do know that you'll pay for what's happened tonight!"

The Intelligence man whipped out his hand, grabbed the other's shoulder so tightly that the man groaned aloud.

"Where was the stuff taken? I know damn well that it's still in the country. A snow-flake couldn't have gone through without our knowing it. Speak up rat! Even you don't want to die!"

The other seemed to half smile, though the features of his face were screwed up in a grimace of pain.

"Threats will do you no good, dog!" he suddenly hissed out. "Kill me, then—kill me! It will get you nothing!"

Beneath the berserk anger that flushed

Agent 10's face, Dusty could see his pal's hopes fading out like a candle flame in a gale of wind. The hope that the man would talk had been a crazy one in the first place. It wouldn't be the first time that a Black agent died with sealed lips. The thing had thrown young Horner off his usual stride. Too much planning, and too few results. Now if only—

"Listen, Jack," he said suddenly. "This bum probably doesn't know anything anyway. And we're wasting time. If I'm going to fly the rest of that stuff for testing, to P Fourteen tonight, I've got to be on my way. We'll just hand this guy over to a firing squad and forget him! That'll be just one less of them for us to worry about!"

Agent 10's eyes widened.

"Huh? You fly to P Fourteen? Why—"

"Pipe down!" Dusty cut him off hastily. "I didn't mean to—wait a minute! Is there some other place where we can talk?"

Jack Horner, eyes still wide and brows furrowed in a puzzled frown, jerked a thumb toward a second door leading off from the room.

"There's a bunk-room in there," he said.

"Then we'll go in there," said Dusty. "You too, doc!"

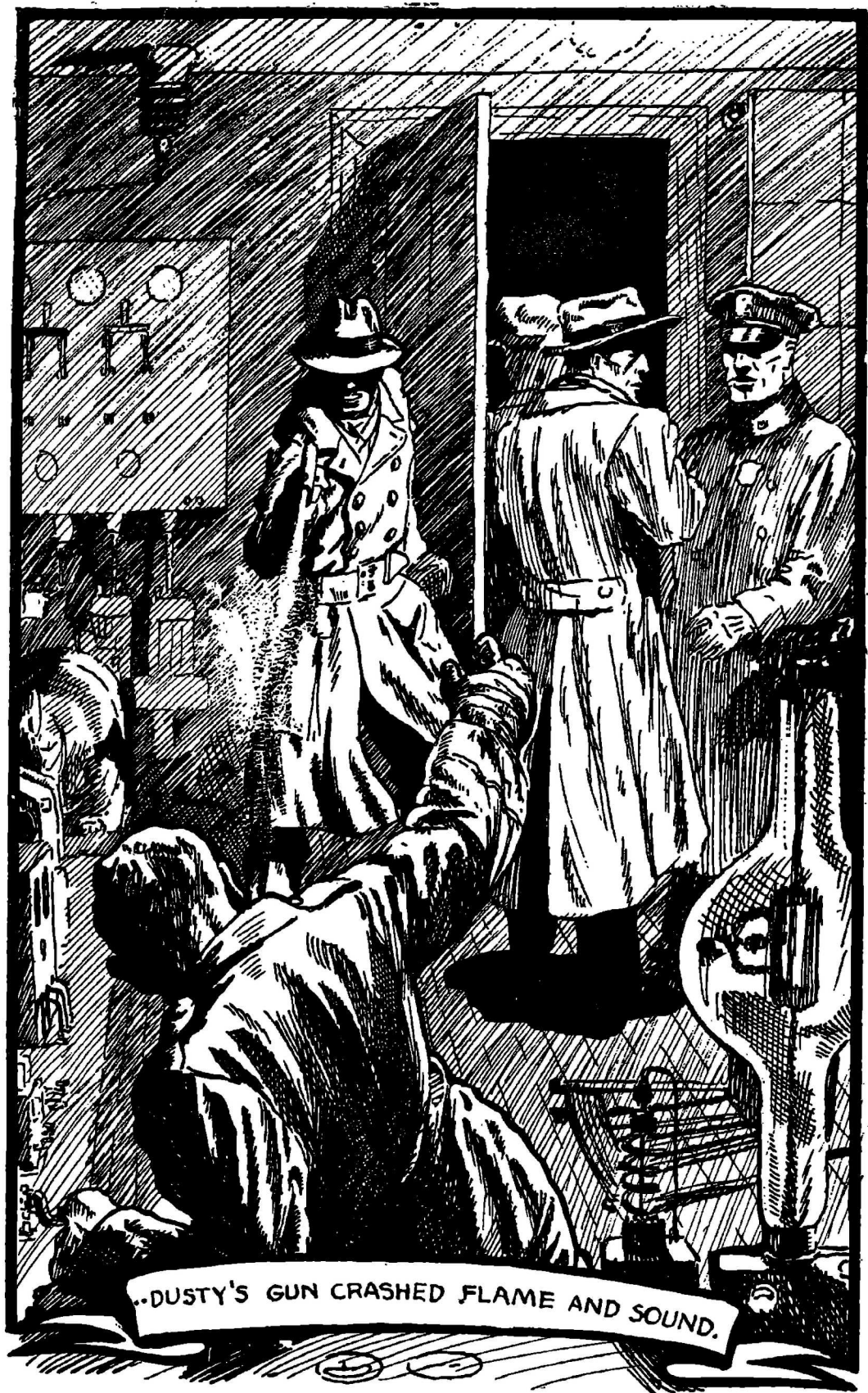
As he spoke, the pilot walked over to the door through which they had first entered, twisted the key in the lock, and dropped the key in his pocket. Then he motioned Agent 10, Curly Brooks and the medico toward the other door.

"The tramp will be here when we want him," he said. "Come on, make it snappy. I want to outline something to the three of you, before I leave."

"Listen—"

"Listen, nothing!" Dusty snapped off Agent 10's outburst. "Into the bunk-room, will you?"

The Intelligence man hesitated a split



second, then with a muttered curse, led the way into the bunk-room, snapping on the light as he entered. As soon as they were all in, and the door had been shut, he whirled on Dusty.

"Now, for God's—"

Dusty clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shut up!" he breathed fiercely. "All of you, shut up! Let's play it my way for a couple of moments. I've a hunch we'll learn a lot more than by just sailing into him. Hell, you can't make that type talk unless they don't realize it!"

Agent 10 gritted his teeth but said nothing. Like Curly and the medico, he stood looking at Dusty in befuddled anger. The ace pilot, however, ignored them, slid softly up to the door, pressed his ear against it.

For five solid minutes he didn't move, even when Curly impatiently plucked him on the sleeve. Finally, though, he straightened up, flashed them a grin.

"Okay," he grunted. "I think he's taken in hook, line and sinker."

"Damn you, Ayres!" grated young Horner. "What the hell's this all about?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," Dusty grunted, and jerked open the door.

MORGAN, or whatever his true name might be, was slumped down in the chair. He didn't even look up as Dusty and the others re-entered the room. Giving him but a sidelong glance, Dusty continued on past him to the rear wall covered with communication instruments. He stopped and stared at them a moment, then turned back and grinned at the others.

"The old hunches are still working for me!" he said. "And the latest has worked perfect!"

Agent 10 cursed, reached him in two bounding steps.

"Out with it!" he shouted. "Out with it!"

For an answer Dusty pointed his finger

at the outgoing message recorder of the high-speed wireless unit. Agent 10 took a good look and gasped aloud.

"Hell! A message was sent out on this four minutes ago!"

"Right!" Dusty grunted, moving over in front of the fake infantryman. "I heard our boy friend, here, trying to muffle the key. I saw you looking at the set, rat, and it gave me ideas!"

The Black looked at him with scornful eyes.

"Clever! But you only fooled yourself. You forget that the recorder does not record the nature of the message being sent!"

Dusty laughed at the words.

"One for you, sweetheart!" he snapped. "But I knew what the message would be, you see. And your rat friends waiting for me at P Fourteen will be in for a nice little surprise!"

The soldier started violently, tried to cover it up by shifting his position on the chair.

Jack Horner, most of his scowl gone, came over to Dusty.

"We all seem to be acting riddles, tonight," he said. "What's the right answer?"

Dusty shrugged.

"Simple enough. Saw this rat eyeing the wireless unit when I spoke about flying some stuff to P Fourteen. 'Stuff' meant either the real formula or some more Metal-Meltic, to him. So when I gave him the chance to get at the set, he took it and sent out the news."

"But we don't know where he sent it!" Curly Brooks blurted out.

"Right!" echoed Jack Horner:

Dusty gave them both a look of annoyance.

"Who cares?" he grated. "Don't you get the point? There'll be company waiting for me at P Fourteen—that old deserted airdrome just north of Oil City,

Pennsylvania, in case you don't know it. Can you get a couple of cylinders, Jack? Like the ones the stuff is carried in? Get them right away?"

"Sure! But—"

"Swell! Now listen, I'm going to drop the stuff by flare chute. Have some of your trusted men covering the place but don't let them run out and pick it up. Wait for the Black agents, who are bound to be there, to get it. Then tail them to wherever they go.

"If the real stuff is still in the country, they'll lead you to wherever it is.

"As an extra precaution, Curly and Biff Bolton will tail me in the air—and we'll take up the chase, in case they use a hidden plane. If it does work that way, be sure that Intelligence H.Q. is tuned in on my wave-length all the time. But do not under any circumstances try to talk with me, unless I talk first. Got it?"

Jack Horner nodded.

"God, it may work out that way, at that!" he breathed.

"Sure it will!" Dusty came right back. "Now let's get going."

As he talked he turned his back on the Black agent, and started herding the others toward the door.

"Wait—look out! He's—"

Dusty whirled, right hand streaking for his holstered service automatic. The fake soldier had thrown himself from his chair, twisted in mid-air, and was now clawing with his good hand for the wireless key. He had reached it, and clicked out perhaps two letters, when Dusty's gun spat flame. Not a sound came from the man's lips. His body was slammed up against the instrument-covered wall by force of the bullet that caught him square between the shoulder blades. Then he slowly fell over on his right side and slumped down onto the floor, stone dead.

Dusty holstered his gun without giving

the dead Black spy a second look.

"Now, I know my guesses were right!" he said under his breath. "I was hoping the rat would make a break for the key. Come on—now we go to work!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Blue Cyclone

"ALL right, you two. Tag me as far behind as you can without losing my tail running light, see? And keep your eyes peeled for any plane that may take off. O.K.?"

Dusty toed out his cigarette on the snow-crueted tarmac, and gave Curly and Biff Bolton a keen look. They both nodded, but it was Curly who spoke.

"That'll be easy enough," he said, "tailing your running lights. But suppose the hidden plane they may use isn't near the field? I mean—they'll use the plane later, when they get to it by car."

"That's taken care of," Dusty nodded. "Jack has a portable radio-sending set. Once I drop the empty cylinders, I'm to circle around—every circle bigger and bigger, but keeping in his sending area. If they do what you say, Jack will let me know at once. You'll know too. Then it will be up to us to pick up the ship and stick with it. Any more questions? Time to go."

"Not that it's important," rumbled Biff Bolton, "but how come you're taking the Flash instead of your X-Diesel?"

Dusty looked at the Silver Flash IV setting with prop idling over on the tarmac in front of the end hangar. He shrugged, smiled faintly.

"For no particular reason," he murmured. "Nothing, except that it happens to be just a year ago today that I set that world's speed record in the first Flash. Just figure I'll use her—sort of an anniversary flight, you know."

Jumping quickly to the side to miss Dusty's booted foot coming up, Curly saluted with the usual raspberry and ran over to his own plant. Biff Bolton hung back, just long enough to give Dusty an odd look.

"Know just how you feel, skipper," he mumbled. "Planes are just like human beings to me, too. Curly—I just guess he never will take things like that seriously."

"I hope not," Dusty laughed. "Two old sentimental gray-beards like you and I are enough for one unit. See you aloft, pronto."

As Dusty walked over and climbed into the Flash IV a warm look seeped into his eyes and for a moment he hesitated in releasing the wheel brakes, and opening the throttle, to enjoy that inexpressible something that surges through a pilot who, after a long absence, once more returns to fly an old familiar plane. The feeling, if words can express it, is akin to a reunion of tried and true pals.

A moment or two later, though, thoughts of the job to be done took charge of him, and with face grim he taxied out onto the field, slued the ship around on its ski-wheel landing gear and went streaking up into the air. The fine flurry of snow had long since spent itself, and a stiff wind had whipped the low-hanging clouds elsewhere, leaving in their place a limitless canopy of winking stars.

Holding the nose up toward them, Dusty snapped on the single tail running light, sealed the cockpit hood, and set his radio dial for transmitting and receiving on his own personal wave-length. That accomplished, he ruddered around until he was on a crow's course for P Fourteen, then snapped off the dash light.

Tearing upward and forward through the dark air seemed to steady his thoughts regarding the job ahead. Not only did it steady them, but also filled him with

a certain unflinching confidence that it would be a cinch.

Poor old Jack! The thing had certainly smacked him square between the eyes. He was taking it as a great gob of muck splashed against a perfect record sheet. Hell, he must get the stuff back, and snap Jack out of his dizzy way of taking things.

The sudden blinking of the red signal light on the radio panel put an end to Dusty's ruminations. For a split second he wondered why no words crackled out of the ear-phones. Then he realized that the signals were not on his wave-length. They were on a band close enough to his to make the red light blink. Impulsively, he reached out his free hand and gingerly turned the dial knob. The result meant very little, however. True, he got sound. But it was a fuzzy sound.

"Not static-jamming!" he grunted aloud. "So what the hell?"

Concentrating on the dial knob and volume rheostat, he fiddled with both for a couple of minutes. But to no avail. He succeeded only in making the fuzzy sound louder in tone. Yet, he could tell that some voice was broadcasting. Several times the ear-phones crackled out distinct individual syllables. Not enough, though, to convey any meaning to him.

AND then like a smack between the eyes the truth came to him. The station broadcasting had a failing generator. It could only raise enough power to make separated signals clear. Between the clear signals the power would fail and the signals become just fuzzy sound—something like the drone of a bee on a hot summer's day.

Snapping on the dash light, he squinted at the station direction finder. The needle on the dial was quivering back and forth. It was as though the instrument were human and reluctant to make up its

mind. Accurate recording was impossible. He could only make several guesses as to what the true reading might be, and then strike an average. That average, however, jerked him up straight in the seat with a startled grunt. It placed the sending station somewhere in the P Fourteen area—the very spot for which he was headed!

"I must be wrong!" he muttered aloud. "For one thing, there isn't any known station located there. And Jack and his men couldn't possibly have reached there, yet. Why, it—"

The sudden thought came to him like a bolt of lightning.

"Unless the Blacks are there with a portable set of their own!" he exclaimed. "A portable set that's going haywire on them!"

For a moment or two he mulled it over, reached a grim decision and twisted the wave-length dial back to his own reading.

"Calling Jocko, calling Jocko!" he droned into the transmitter tube. "What big eyes you have, grandma! All the better to see with, my dear. Yes, grandma, we must always look before we leap. Yes, my dear, now turn on the radio and let's see what we can hear."

Slapping the transmitter tube back on its hook, he stared flint-eyed out into the dark night, and waited—hoping against hope. Hoping that Jack Horner had picked up his crazy message and realized that it was a warning for him to watch his step, and that strange signals were streaking through the night skies.

For ten minutes or more, he sat as man of stone expecting to hear some answering signal from Jack, far down there on the ground. But none came through, and a worried scowl lined his forehead. Why didn't young Horner send him some sort of an answering signal? He must have received his message. Hadn't they arranged to keep all sets on the same wave-length?"

The red signal light blinked at last! But the voice that crackled out of the ear-phones was like a bombshell from out of nowhere.

"Change your course to due north, Captain Ayres!"

Struck dumb for the moment, Dusty could only gape wide-eyed in the darkness. Suddenly the voice spoke again.

"I'm on your wave-length, Captain Ayres! Change your course to due north!"

"Who the hell are you?"

Dusty blurted out the words almost before he realized that he had spoken them. The unknown voice had been quite clear and moderate in tone. As a matter of fact it was like the voice of a cultured American. Then it spoke for the third time.

"I have no time for questions, Captain Ayres! I am simply giving you orders. Change your course to due north—and keep it until ordered otherwise!"

The Yank pilot cursed softly, unconsciously balled his free fist. It wasn't a Black Invader voice, that was certain—no harshness or grating tone to it. So what American was trying to tell him where to head in?

"Whoever you are!" he thundered into the transmitter tube, "get the hell on your way! I've got other things to do!"

"Quite true," came back the instant reply. "You are on your way to drop something quite valuable, at a certain destination. But you are not going to do it, captain. You're going to do what I tell you to do!"

As the words came to him, Dusty immediately changed his original opinion. The unknown speaker couldn't possibly be a Yank. All those who knew of his mission would never communicate with him—until he gave the signal. True, he'd given that signal to Agent 10. But this was not Jack Horner's voice. As far as he

knew, he had never heard it before in his life.

Leaning forward, and snapping off the dash light, he squinted up into the night skies. He had already taken a flash glance at the station direction finder and found that the mysterious broadcaster was located within a quarter of a mile of his own position. Perhaps more, perhaps less. That didn't matter. He knew that the broadcaster was close to him. And what's more—in the air!

But as he peered at the canopy of stars, he could see no tell-tale shadow streaking across their twinkling brilliance. Even when he slipped around in a dime turn and studied the heavens in back of him, he still saw nothing.

"There's a ship close to me!" he grunted aloud. "I know damn well there is!"

The mysterious voice speaking again made him realize that his radio set was still open.

"Of course there is, captain! I am very close to you! And telling you for the last time—change your course to due north!"

Dusty was on the point of telling the unknown just what he could do, and to where he could go. But he suddenly changed his mind, and grabbed up the transmitter tube.

"Hey, string bean!" he barked. "Mama goes where papa goes!"

Those words off his tongue he banked the Flash around toward the north and flew steadily forward.

"Counting on you, Curly," he whispered to himself. "He's spotted me because of my running light. You follow it too, and maybe between the three of us we'll—"

"Captain Ayres!" the unknown voice cut in. "Your quaint remark was undoubtedly a signal to others. If you value your life and their's, I would most sincerely suggest that you tell them to go elsewhere."

THE last jolted Dusty into the firm belief that the mysterious broadcaster had guessed the true meaning of his signal to Curly. In fact, there was no doubt that he had. For a moment or two he glared hard at the radio panel, trying desperately to decide on his next move. If the unknown was a Black—and hell, he must be—why didn't he attack him? The answer to that was one of two things—either the bum was too yellow to take chances or he believed that the Flash carried cylinders of Metal-Meltic, or the complete formula.

Dusty suddenly smashed his free fist against the side of the cockpit.

"That's it!" he breathed fiercely. "The tramp wants this stuff. And he doesn't dare crack me down—or try to—for fear it will destroy itself. Yeah, it must be that."

A plan of action leaping into his brain, he grabbed up the transmitter tube.

"Bean pole!" he snapped. "Amscray with the boy friend. Them's orders! Never mind the check-back! Git!"

Snapping off the set, he gave the Flash its head, and sat staring straight out into the darkness. Tingling ripples of suppressed excitement raced up and down his spine. The whole thing was working out far better this way. Instead of trying to trail the Black to the secret hiding place—if there was one—he was letting the Black escort him there.

True, everything wasn't entirely clear. Who was this unknown who gave him orders? What kind of a ship was he flying? And just where was he, right now? There was no answer for either of the three questions. However, they would undoubtedly be answered later.

The important item was, that to all appearances, the Blacks had not as yet figured out the missing generating temperatures. Else, why come after him?

Good! In fact, swell! Things were working out for a perfect chance to breeze right into the enemy's camp. So long as they continued to believe that he had Metal-Meltic with him, his skin was as safe as could be. Once they found out the truth—hell, plenty of time to figure on that later.

The blinking of the red signal light cut in on his jumbled thoughts. He flipped up the contact switch and spun the wavelength dial knob, half guessing the voice he would hear. His half guess was correct. The unknown Black spoke in the ear-phones.

"Throttle your engine and go into a glide, captain. Keep your glide toward the north. We'll land in a few moments!"

The words were like a dash of icy water over Dusty's hopes. Land in a few moments? A quick glance at the roller map brought a groan to his lips. His position was just a few miles south of Rochester, New York. A glide would take him down onto the old 207th Infantry camp, just this side of the city. No chance of there being any hiding place of the Blacks in that section of ground. The answer? Simple! Yeah, simple as hell!

The unknown, riding herd on him, was going to force him to land, relieve him of his "precious" cargo, and then carry on by himself. Carry on, after jerking a gun trigger a couple of times, perhaps!

"Wrong again, Dusty!" he grated softly. "The tramp isn't as dumb as you thought he was."

Eyes agate, lips pressed together in a thin line, he reached out and pulled back on the throttle and sent the Flash coasting down toward the ground.

For three minutes he held the plane in the glide, all the while half turned in the seat and peering hard up toward the stars. Then suddenly, his lips curled back in a tight grin.

"For the fleeting part of a second he saw the blurred shadow sliding down, about three thousand feet above him. Just a blurred shadow that was gone almost instantly.

But it gained him the advantage that he desired. And in one sweeping motion of his free hand, he snapped off the dash light, and the tail running light, and banged the throttle wide open. A split second later he hauled the stick back into his stomach, and sent the Flash arcing up in the first half of a gigantic loop.

Almost instantly, the unknown voice spoke in the ear-phones.

"You are a fool, captain! You force me to kill you!"

Upside-down, head thrown back, Dusty stared down at the streaking silhouette of a barrel-fuselaged monoplane pursuit. In the darkness, it was impossible to spot details. But he didn't bother about that. He didn't have too. His surprise maneuver had reversed everything. Now he was top man. And his thumbs were itching to jab home the electric trigger trips.

"Thanks for the tip!" he snapped into the transmitter tube. "But now its your time to dance."

"You fool, I repeat! You are forcing me to kill you! And for the present, I have no such desire. Land as I ordered you to."

"Listen, big shot!" Dusty countered, "maybe this will put a bit of common sense into your thick skull!"

As he spoke, he jabbed home the right gun trigger trip, and set a hissing shower of hot steel slithering down through the left wing of the plane below.

"Next time, it will be a hell of a sight closer!" he thundered. "Now—"

"Very well, fool, if you insist!"

THE words crackling out of the ear-phones were immediately followed by



a weird sky phenomenon that chilled Dusty to the marrow of his bones.

As though by magic a hazy, wavy ribbon of blue fire cut a path through the inky air. Grotesquely it curved up toward him, changing inky darkness into a shimmering conglomeration of blue shades. For split seconds every muscle in his body seemed paralyzed. Even his brain refused to function. Like a man of stone he sat gaping at the weird scene in the night sky.

And then, suddenly, he was conscious of his voice bellowing out in wild alarm; conscious that he was whipping the Flash around on wing-tip and striving desperately to zoom up away from the wavy ribbon of blue fire that was reaching out for him in the night.

And also, he became conscious of the cool voice of the unknown pilot speaking in the ear-phones—speaking as though he were making casual mention of some unimportant incident.

"Rather an interesting sight, eh, captain? But you have only yourself to blame, you know. I gave you your chance—but you force me to extreme measures. Goodby, Captain Ayres. I am truly sorry that it should turn out this way. I had wished to meet you face to face, in person. Goodby, Captain Ayres!"

Words—words that seemed to come from a million miles away and beat against Dusty's brain with triphammer effect. Everything was spinning around in a blue haze. A terrific heat was seemingly searing every square inch of his body.

He felt as though he were literally on fire. Automatically, he hurled and tossed his plane around in a berserk effort to get clear of the sea of blue fire that seemed to curve up at the edges and engulf him.

One instant he was tearing around on wing-tip. The next he was zooming full out toward the stars. And the next he was thundering down toward the ground.

Suddenly something seemed to let go in his head with a terrific explosion. It was the radio tubes blowing out in the terrific heat. But he didn't know it. As a matter of fact, he had suddenly gone numb to everything. Movement of the stick and rudder pedals was instinctive. Flying instinct was keeping him in the air. That and nothing else.

A blue shimmering haze, weaving a cockeyed crazy pattern in the sky. A blue, shimmering haze that seemed to actually give off a sort of roaring hissing sound, A blue cyclone engulfing the Flash, the stars, everything, in its swirling vortex. And he was going down; slipping, sliding, spinning down into a roaring and crackling blue hell. For one infinitesimal period of time his brain was released from its paralytic spell long enough to grasp that fact.

Spinning, whirling down toward earth! Helpless to move a single muscle, he was caught fast in the whirling maelstrom of blue hell! Down—down—down—

CHAPTER FOUR

Vanished Buzzard

EYES red-rimmed, face gaunt and haggard, Curly Brooks paced up and down the length of the mess lounge, puffing furiously on a cigarette. Slouched in a nearby chair, chin cupped in his big hands, sat Biff Bolton. In another chair sat Major Drake, C. O. of High Speed Group No. Seven. Save for Curly's feet thumping against the floor, there wasn't a single sound. The very air of the room seemed charged with electrified silence.

Presently, Curly broke it as he cursed savagely and hurled his half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace.

"If I only knew where he was!" he intoned. "Only knew that he was alive! Good God, I'm going mad doing nothing!"

For emphasis he smashed one clenched fist against the palm of the other hand.

"I'll go mad, I tell you!" he repeated in a wild tone. "Stark, raving mad! Dusty—the swellest man God ever made! Gone—gone, God knows where!"

He shrugged helplessly and resumed his restless pacing.

"Sit down, son," said Major Drake quietly. "You're just wearing yourself out. Sit down and tell me the whole thing again. Maybe you forgot something."

Curly smiled wryly, dropped into a chair.

"Didn't forget anything," he mumbled. "There wasn't anything to forget. Just before we would have reached the P Fourteen area, someone cut in on Dusty's wave-length—started ordering him north, like I said. He also knew what Dusty was up to. Dusty gave me the tip to tag along, but this rat, whoever he is, got wise. So Dusty told us two to beat it."

"But didn't you spot this ship—this other ship?" Major Drake asked.

Curly looked at Biff, and they both shook their heads.

"No," Brooks said. "At least, not up to that time. We could see Dusty, of course—he had on his tail running light. but later—"

He stopped, looked at Bolton again.

"What was your impression, Biff?"

"Don't know how to put it," mumbled the big pilot, scowling heavily. "I saw the skipper's tail light go out—heard this other guy calling him a fool and so forth. And then—well, it was sort of like a smoke screen on fire. Only it was blue flames instead of red. Wavy like—sort of transparent, too. Of course we were pretty far behind, but I spotted the skipper's ship. He was trying like hell to get away from the stuff. Hadn't touched him yet. And—"

"And it was then that I saw the other crate!" cut in Curly. "Saw it in the re-

flection of the blue stuff. It was a radial Diesel pursuit monoplane. A big job, though. An all-red ship, I think. It—"

"And the blue stuff was coming back off the top of the rudder post!" added Biff. "Just like a sky-writing ship, if you know what I mean."

Major Drake nodded.

"Guess I get the idea," he said. "And then—then, what happened?"

Curly gritted his teeth, bunched his fists.

"We lost sight of Dusty. The stuff got between him and us. I think he went down in a spin. I'm not sure, though. He was still a couple of miles away. About the same time we lost the other crate, too. It stopped spitting out the blue fire, and just seemed to fade into the night.

"When we reached the place the blue stuff had faded out. We circled, and tried to get Dusty on the radio—but didn't get a thing."

"We even went down and dropped flares on the snow!" spoke up Biff. "Hunted for him in case he crashed. But—"

The big pilot's sad gesture finished the sentence. For a couple of moments silence settled over the room again. Presently, Major Drake made a snapping sound with his lips.

"He'll show up!" he said with a conviction none of them felt. "We'll be hearing from him soon. He was always a fool for luck, you know. I have a feeling that it won't fail him, this time."

Curly said nothing. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was close to noon. A little under twelve hours since he'd last seen his closest pal. He twisted his wrist so that Major Drake could see the watch.

"Twelve hours, and no word! He said desperately. "If he was okay, we would have heard by now. Dammit, I can't stand this waiting. I'm going looking for him."

"You're going to park right here!" Major Drake barked. And then in a softer tone. "Be sensible Brooks! You haven't the faintest idea where to start looking."

"Maybe he crashed near Rochester! I could look there, and see if—"

"That area is now being gone over with a fine-tooth comb," the C. O. cut in patiently. "If he's crashed, he'll be found. And you forget the message that came through from Lieutenant Horner a couple of hours ago. He's on his way here now and he distinctly requested that you two wait for him. Perhaps he'll have news."

At that moment the roar of twin engines came to their ears. Rushing over to the nearest window they stared up into the slate-colored winter sky. A twin-engined cabin ship was streaking down toward the field. No sooner had it landed than the cabin door opened and Jack Horner jumped down onto the ground. Breaking into a run he came over to the mess, in through the door. Curly grabbed him.

"Jack! You've heard from him?"

The Intelligence man frowned, shook his head.

"Not a word," he said sadly. "Not a word since you contacted me this morning and said that he was missing. Damn, if I could only have gotten through to him last night. If that blasted set of mine hadn't gone screwy!"

"Then that was you?" cried Biff Bolton. "That was your set making that fuzzy sound?"

"Yes! We reached the place ahead of time. Found that the Two-seventy-eight motorized gun outfit was there. Dusty didn't know when he selected that place. I tried to tell him by radio. Naturally, the Two-seventy-eight being there knocked Dusty's original plan into a cocked hat, at least from the ground angle. I wanted to

tell him that so that he'd concentrate on the air end entirely. But I couldn't get through—couldn't even hear a message that he tried to send me."

Agent 10 stopped talking, stared thoughtfully at the floor. Curly stood it as long as he could.

"But—but what's the plan?" he asked sharply. "Why did you want us to wait here for you? Good God, maybe by now Dusty's—"

"Steady, Brooks!" the C. O. slipped out. "Give Lieutenant Horner a chance to talk. You have an angle on the thing, Lieutenant?"

Maybe and maybe not," was the non-committal reply. "If what you say about that blue stuff is true—the Black who flew that ship is the Black who got those two cylinders of Metal-Meltic from me!"

The announcement was like a bombshell going off in the room. Curly peered hard at the man.

"You mean—"

"I mean that Metal-Meltic is wavy blue in appearance," the Intelligence man broke in. "I mean that the Blacks are using the stuff for air work—what they have of it."

"God!" choked out Major Drake. "Then if Ayres was caught by it—"

"There'd be nothing left of him, or his ship," Agent 10 said in a hushed voice. "If it caught him Dusty's—Dusty's gone!"

Curly sank into a chair with a bitter groan of dejected misery. But he was up on his feet again almost instantly.

"No!" he said fiercely. "It didn't work out that way! It just couldn't! It isn't in the cards for Dusty to go—like that! I feel it—feel it, here!"

As he spoke the last he thumped his right clenched fist against his chest. Then suddenly he gave Agent 10 a queer look.

"There's something else on your mind!" he said almost harshly. "Let's have it."

The Intelligence man pursed his lips, sucked in air with a whistling sound.

"No matter what's happened to Dusty," he said slowly, "he'd want us to carry on with the job of getting the stuff back. Or at least preventing the Blacks from using it. It may sound crazy, but I think that the formula and the stolen Metal-Meltic are in the country."

"What, lieutenant?" Major Drake shot at him. "What makes you think that it hasn't been flown into Black territory?"

"Because, sir," replied young Horner, "if it had been taken out, I'd know about it."

"Meaning what?" grunted Curly as the other paused.

"Anything so important as that would create quite a stir back of the Black lines. Our agents there would be bound to hear about it, and would communicate with us at once.

"But for the last week, their reports have contained no news of any interest, simply plain reports of increasing inactivity in Black territory. And another reason that makes me believe it's still within our borders is a report that came through to me early this morning. It is an unconfirmed report that there are Blacks in the Rocky Mountains!"

"The Rocky Mountains?" boomed Major Drake. "Where—where in them?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "But the report—from a trusted agent incidentally—states of the sighting of Black Invader planes over the western part of Montana, near the Butte, Helena and Virginia City areas. As you know, you could hide half a hundred army corps in the region, and nobody would be the wiser."

"Granted," nodded the C. O. "But planes sighted over the mountain regions don't necessarily mean that there are Blacks in the mountains!"

"Of course not, sir," replied Agent 10,

BIFF BOLTON



a trifle tartly. "I am quite aware of that.

"But try and look at it this way. What's the idea of Blacks patrolling those mountainous regions? To bomb them? For what gain? None, absolutely! As regard inflicting damage on us, they might just as well bomb the middle of the Atlantic.

"True the cities of Butte, Helena and Virginia City offer something in the way of objectives. But if my reports are correct, none of the planes sighted came anywhere near the cities.

"And it so happens that no enemy planes have been sighted, or spotted by ground detectors, either coming or going over the Canadian line. Further, none has been spotted, or heard, crossing any of the borders of Montana!"

Major Drake seemed unimpressed. His next words proved it beyond doubt.

"The last," he said, "is perhaps because they crossed at high altitude. And as for

the first—I repeat, planes in the air do not necessarily mean troops on the ground.”

“Troops, no,” Agent 10 reasoned patiently. “But let us say that Blacks are establishing a H. Q. base for Intelligence activities within our borders. That is possible, also practical, you must admit.”

“I do,” grudgingly. “But I’m still unconvinced that both the formula and the stolen supply of Metal-Meltic have not been taken out of the country. Hell, on the face of it, it follows that they’d get it to their own laboratories as fast as they could. But that brings a question to mind. I understand that Crandall, the inventor of the stuff, was killed. Did he—make out a new and complete formula before he died?”

Jack Horner sighed, stared gloomily at the opposite wall.

“Not that we know of,” he said. “At least he did not turn it over to the Bureau of Chemical Warfare. He was to have done that yesterday. Frankly, the thing was such a close secret with him that he made no record at all of the correct generating temperatures. While he was in hiding he planned to work them out, and then give them to the bureau.”

“So,” grunted the C. O., “its up to the bureau to figure them out without his assistance? In other words, the bureau and the Blacks are more or less starting from scratch? They have an equal opportunity to profit from American genius, eh?”

“Unless we can do something about it, yes!” nodded Agent 10 heavily.

“To hell with that!” Curly Brooks blurted out. “That can wait! My first job is to find Dusty!”

“Check!” rumbled Biff Bolton. “And I’m gonna do it, even if I have to slug every Black rat still alive!”

Jack Horner gave them both a bitter look.

“Don’t you suppose I feel the same

way?” he grated. “If it hadn’t been for my blunder, my damn foolishness, he’d be with us now! If you think—”

Curly leaned forward, took hold of his arm.

“Steady, Jack!” he said quietly. “We’ll be smacking each other in a moment—and for nothing. We’re all in the same boat. We want to learn the truth about Dusty. Find out if he’s—we want to find him.”

“Sorry,” the Intelligence man grinned. “Guess I spoke out of turn. Yes, yes, of course we all want to find out about Dusty. No news of his plane? It hasn’t been found, yet?”

Curly shook his head.

“Not yet. But, if that stuff got him, we might never find what—was left!”

Brooks suddenly spun toward the C. O.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he got out rapidly, “but I’ve stuck here long enough. I’ve got to join in the hunt. I’ve got to do something! Even if its only flying over where we last saw him. I’m not going to stick around here any longer!”

THE C. O. said nothing. Simply looked at Curly, and at Biff waiting at Curly’s shoulder. Then he started to speak, but only succeeded in opening his mouth when the radio signal buzzer on the desk cut him off short. He whirled toward the small set, and flipped up the switch.

“Drake on Seven-two-four!” he barked. “Go ahead!”

The tiny built-in speaker crackled and hummed a bit, and then gave forth words.

“Niagara Base H. G. calling! The plane described as belonging to Captain Ayres has been found.”

“Found? Found?” echoed the C. O. in a loud voice. “When? Where was it found? How is the pilot? How is Captain Ayers?”

“Please do not interrupt until the mes-

sage is completed!" crackled the voice in the speaker unit. "The plane, known as the Silver Flash, was found ten minutes ago in a field just north of Batavia.

"It is undamaged save for some scorch marks on the right lower wing. The pilot was not found. A search is being made for him now, in the event he left the plane by parachute. But according to the radioed report from the searching party that found the plane, it is not believed that Captain Ayres left the plane by parachute."

"Why?" Major Drake thundered into the transmitter tube. "What do you mean by that? Why not?"

The speaker unit gave forth sounds that were very much akin to cursing. Then came the words.

"There are no bullet holes in any part of the plane. And it seems to be in perfect mechanical order. The glass of the alcohol compass is broken and there are blood stains on the metal rim and on the cockpit floorboards. It indicates that the pilot was thrown forward when landing, and struck his head on the compass."

"But he can't be far away!" the C. O. shot back. "And he must have left a trail in the snow! What about tracks?"

"There are tracks," came the reply. "But they are tracks of another plane landing, and taking off. Also footprints going from the plane tracks over to the captain's plane and back again. They are almost obliterated though—as if something had been dragged over them!"

"Such as Captain Ayre's body?" barked Major Drake.

"Perhaps. What do you wish us to do? Shall we move the plane?"

Curly leaped forward and practically snatched the transmitter tube from out of the C. O.'s hand.

"Leave everything as it is!" he roared. "Don't let anyone touch a damn thing!

We're on our way up there now. Don't let anyone touch a damn thing, understand?"

"I understand," replied the voice in the earphones stiffly. "Signing off!"

Curly didn't hear the last. He had thrust the transmitter tube back into Major Drake's hand and was bounding toward the door.

"Biff!" he bellowed over his shoulder. "Shake it up! This is a start for us, anyway!"

"A start for all of us!" roared Major Drake, grabbing Jack Horner's arm and pulling him along. "We'll all go in your cabin job!"

CHAPTER FIVE

One-Man Patrol

"I KNEW he couldn't go out that way! I just knew it! It wasn't in the cards! He's still alive!"

Curly roared out the words with forced joy, as he pulled the twin engined cabin job off the crusted snow and poked its nose toward the western Massachusetts skies.

"A miracle, if there ever was one!" echoed Major Drake, in back with Biff Bolton and Jack Horner. "But, good God, why didn't they find him when they found the plane. Hitting the compass knocked him out—but he couldn't have gone far away."

"Unless, maybe he was kidnaped, huh?" Biff put in.

The C. O. shrugged, sat scowling at the back of Curly's neck.

"From that angle, it doesn't make sense," he said dubiously. "To all intents a very definite effort was made to kill him. By a miracle he escaped, got down on the ground, and cracked his skull. Let us say that the other pilot followed him down to get the stuff he was

believed to be carrying. All right! Why take Ayres along, too?"

"If the Black Hawk, or Ekar, were alive, I could answer that one," Curly grunted back over his shoulder. "But say Jack—would you swear that stuff we saw was Metal-Meltic?"

No answer from the Intelligence man caused Curly to turn around in the seat and look straight at him. Young Horner was slumped down in his seat, gazing through half closed eyes out the side cabin window. He seemed totally oblivious to all that was going on inside the cabin.

"Hey Jack!" Brooks shouted. "Still think that stuff was Metal-Meltic? Maybe—"

The Intelligence man kept his eyes fixed on the air outside and slowly shook his head.

"I don't know what to think, yet!" he muttered. "If Dusty didn't go through the stuff, it could still have been Metal-Meltic. But if he did go through it, and only got a scorched wing, it's a cinch it wasn't Metal-Meltic. I'm thinking more about the kidnap angle than of how he escaped.

"And what are you thinking about it?" Major Drake shot at him. "Got any ideas?"

With tantalizing effect, young Horner shook his head again.

"Nothing worth mentioning at the moment."

The others grunted, and heavy silence settled over the group. Up forward in the pilot's seat, Curly held the ship on a crow course for Batavia, New York. He hadn't bothered about altitude; speed being the essential thing. And now, with automatic movements he kept the craft on even keel, skimming across the peaks of the Berkshire Mountains and west over the New York State line.

A little under an hour later he had sighted the field where the Silver Flash had been found, and was coasting down toward the group of figures on the north side. As a matter of fact, though, even in the middle of summer that spot of ground could not exactly be termed a field.

It was more a part of a timber slope, that had been cleared for reasons known only to the owner of the property. Several tree stumps stuck up above the drift snow. And in places there were the snow-covered humps of boulders that, like icebergs, concealed seven tenths of their size. But field or no field, the Silver Flash was there. And as Curly caught sight of the glistening craft a choking lump rose up in his throat.

Cursing, by way of giving relief to his inner feelings, he banked around to the long side of the slope and set the twin-engined craft down in a perfect exhibition of piloting. By the time he had the cabin door open and was leaping out, several of the group had detached themselves from the others and were running over.

An infantry colonel was leading them. But Curly gave him only a flash glance and went plowing through the snow over to Dusty's plane. He did not even know that Biff was at his heels until the big pilot bumped into him as he skidded to a stop beside the cockpit.

"Gee, Curly, what are we gonna do? We got to do something!"

Curly didn't bother to answer. He had climbed up on the fuselage step and was staring narrow eyed at the interior of the cockpit. Last night Dusty had been sitting there on that seat—had his hands on that spade-grip stick—his feet on those rudder pedals. And now, he was gone. Gone—leaving behind only stains of his blood where he had smashed his head

MAJOR DRAKE



against the glass dial of the alcohol compass.

SLOWLY Brooks stepped down, turned and gazed at dragging marks in the snow that led down the slope for some thirty yards to a set of ski-wheel landing gear tracks. With his eye he followed them across the snow to a point where they stopped—the point of take-off of the mysterious plane. From there he raised his eyes toward the slaty, snow-cloud-laden heavens and heaved a long, bitter sigh.

"Say, kid, I've been thinking."

The rumble of Biff Bolton's voice at his ear shook Curly out of his trance.

"Yeah? Thinking about what? We've all been thinking—and nothing else!"

Bill put out a protesting hand.

"Now, that's no way, Curly!" he chided. "Get hold of yourself, lad. Listen about what Jack Horner was saying—about that Rocky Mountain idea. There may be something to it at that, you know."

He seemed to stop for lack of words. Curly frowned at him.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "I haven't forgotten, myself, what Jack said. But, dammit, who nabbed Dusty?"

He gave it up with a savage grunt of self-disgust. Then suddenly he whirled and leaped up on the fuselage step again. He was back in the snow in almost a continuance of the same movement.

"Those fake cylinders of Metal-Meltic!" he yelled at Biff, grabbing his arm. "They're down there on the cockpit floor—down there with the flare chute. The bum, whoever he is, passed them up."

"Then that settles it!"

The voice of Jack Horner roared out behind Curly and Biff. They turned as the Intelligence man came running up, face flushed with excitement.

"Yes, that's the answer!" he went on before either Biff or Curly could say anything. "Don't you see? He found out that they were ~~fake~~—realized that the whole thing was a trap. So, instead of killing Dusty, he did the obvious thing!"

"Obvious what?" the other two cut in in the same breath.

"Kidnaped Dusty!" young Horner bellowed. "Took him along as hostage. "Get it—we send back our prisoner if you send us the real formula! Not as crude as that, of course. But something along that line. Or, maybe they think Dusty knows more about the thing than he does. One thing's certain, though—they don't know that we haven't the complete formula either! That'll give us some time, at least!"

"Time?" snapped Curly. "We don't need time! What we need is an inkling of where they've taken Dusty, so that we

can go there and get him. Listen, this Rocky Mountain angle—just what do you think about that, Jack? Have you any real proof? I mean, anything to work on?”

The Intelligence man didn't answer directly. He half turned and looked across the slope to where the infantry colonel and a few others were engaged in conversation with Major Drake. When he turned back, there was an annoyed expression on his lean face.

“I have only the report of our own agents,” he snapped out bluntly. “And I put a lot of stock in their reports. Regardless of what Major Drake said, there is something screwy going on in the southwestern Montana area.

“Hell, when the war broke out, we didn't know that the Blacks had holed up in the Hudson Bay area, did we? No, but they had just the same. Well, what the hell would stop them from pulling the same stunt on a smaller plan in some out-of-the-way place in the Rockies? Because of this damn snow, both sides are more or less marking time.”

“But what good would it do to park troops there?” Biff butted in. “The Rockies ain't those Canadian plateaus, Jack.”

The Intelligence man snorted wrathfully.

“For God's sake!” he yelled, “have I got to tell you airmen that ground troops aren't everything in this war? How—”

“An air base!” Curly roared. “A secret air base for gas and germ bombing!”

“Now you're showing what sense you've got!” Horner snapped. “Sure, a secret air base. Or maybe it's something like they had down there at Chihuahua, Mexico. There's no telling just what it might be. I'm simply saying that—”

“That,” Curly broke in again, “our best bet in finding Dusty is that southwest

Montana area of the Rockies. And, by God, that's where I'm going. I'm going to smoke out the works from one end to the other—until I find Dusty!”

“Wait a minute, Curly,” spoke up Jack Horner. “That's a lot of territory out there. One plane and one pilot wouldn't be able to do much.”

“Hell, I'm going along, too!” boomed Biff.

“Two planes wouldn't do much!” the Intelligence man went on evenly. “As I was about to say, I suggest that we organize a general search. Ten or fifteen air units, contacting ground parties.”

Curly stopped him with a vigorous shake of his head.

“It would take too long to get organized,” he said. “I've got a better plan, a plan that may work just as I hope it will. I'm going to make the search in this ship—Dusty's Flash!”

He paused to let the underlying meaning sink in. Young Horner simply grimaced, and Biff Bolton blinked.

“What do you expect that to get you?” the Intelligence man asked. “Just because you're flying his ship isn't going to help you find out where he is any quicker!”

“No?” Brooks bit off. “You're missing the point! If he is somewhere down in that region, and he sees the Flash, he'll know we've got an idea where he is, and are trying to get to him. Maybe he'll be able to signal me in some way.

“Secondly, if the ones who grabbed him are down there, too, they'll figure it the same way—figure that we're wise to their presence in that region. That will put the next move up to them. They'll either come out in the open and make a break for it, or else they'll try to hole up even tighter.

“Either way, it will be to our benefit. We'll be able to get a darn good line on

them, one way or the other. Hell, using Dusty's plane is the one perfect thing about the whole plan. You know, get the other guy worried and he's bound to make a wrong step. Your way, Jack, might take us weeks, and get us nowhere. Yup! I'm going to take the Flash and go to work."

"I still think that the two of us could do it better," Biff stuck in doggedly.

But Curly shook his head.

"Your turn will come later, kid," he said. "At the start it's a one-man job. You fly Jack and the major back to the field. There's just a chance, you know, that Dusty will get through to us direct at the field. That is, if he's still—dammit, I know he is! He's got to be alive. "Watch it! Here comes the major. I haven't got time to argue with him. Don't think he'd like the idea any better than you two do. But shut up! For once, I'm going to play something my way!"

He had hardly finished when the C. O. reached them.

"Can't say that coming up here helped any, Brooks!" he snapped at Curly. "We learned everything there was to learn, over the radio. But maybe you've got another bright idea?"

Curly looked crestfallen.

"Nothing much, sir," he said with a shrug. "But if it's okay with you, I'll fly his ship back. I kind of think that he'd like to have me do that. Like they said, it's in good shape."

The C. O. gave him a keen look, also included Jack Horner and Biff Bolton.

"Is that what you've been wrangling about?" he shot out. "Heard you from way over there!"

"No, sir," Curly answered truthfully, at the same time climbing up on the fuselage step. "We were arguing about the whole thing in general—wondering if he might possibly get in touch with us direct, at the field."

"Then you feel sure he's still alive?"

"I feel surer than ever that he's still alive, sir," Curly came right back. "Look, sir, they must have got wise to the whole thing. So they took Dusty, instead of this!"

As he spoke the last, Brooks reached down into the cockpit with both hands, heaved up the empty tanks and the flare parachute, and dumped them down into the snow.

"Okay, stand clear!" he called out right afterward. "I'm going to start her up!"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw an expression of puzzled suspicion spread over Major Drake's face. Instantly he slid down into the cockpit, kept his head bent and thumped down on the electric starter.

"Come on, Silver Flash!" he whispered fiercely. Let's get going and away—before the major changes his mind!"

Twice, Curly desperately booted the electric starter, and twice the engine didn't give forth a single murmur. The third time it caught, however, and roared into life. But it was at that exact moment that Curly sensed someone climbing up on the fuselage step. He raised his head and stared into Major Drake's narrowed eyes, and his heart went sliding down into his boots.

He gulped, tried to look innocent.

"Yes sir?" weakly.

"There never was a pilot that I couldn't read like a book, Brooks!" came the startling words. "But I'm not fool enough to try to stop any crazy plan that's in your mind, at the moment. Only—only, for God's sake watch your step, son. Losing one of you is too much as it is! Luck!"

With that, the C. O. jumped down from the step and walked quickly off to the side.

CHAPTER SIX

The Scarlet Ace

THREE minutes later, Curly eased open the throttle of the Flash, taxied a few feet to shake the clinging snow from the ski-wheel landing gear, and then with a quick wave to those watching he rammed the throttle wide open. Like something human, and overjoyed to be in motion again, the Silver Flash virtually leaped forward across the glistening whiteness.

The twenty-eight hundred horses cowed into the nose thundered out a mighty song of power, and after a run of but a few short yards the plane responded instantly to Curly's touch and went streaking off the slope and up toward the lead-gray clouds.

Holding the ship on its maximum climbing angle, Curly took time out to slam the cockpit cowl shut and seal it with the locking lugs. Then he carefully checked the instruments for temporary faults. But finding them in perfect working order, he slumped back comfortably in the seat and kept one eye on the air above, and the other on the altimeter dial and drift indicator.

At thirty-two thousand feet, exactly, he found what he wanted—a stiff thirty-mile-an-hour wind on his tail from the last. There he leveled off, swung in robot control and let the mechanical pilot do the work for him.

"Now, let's see," he mused aloud, glancing at his wrist watch. "With a stop at St. Paul for fuel—just in case—I should hit the mountains between two and three. That'll give me a couple of hours light. Damn—wish I'd started this thing sooner!"

Thoughts of the last irked him. And, as though he could do better himself, he swung off robot control and took charge.

Hunching forward over the stick he silently cursed the plane on to greater speed.

For over an hour he flew due west between two great cloud layers that stretched to the four horizons. Through the top layer filtered a bit of the sun's light, with the result that he seemed to be thundering along an endless corridor of shimmering gold.

The weird beauty of it had no effect upon him, however. Other and far more important things occupied the attention of his mind. Each passing minute was but another minute of worry about the fate of his closest pal. Like the unrolling of a motion-picture reel, every incident of their years together flashed vividly across his brain. So vivid, that each incident seemed to have happened only yesterday. And, eventually, he reached the final picture—a picture of the very plane in which he now sat, hurtling earthward through night skies tinged with flaming blue!

Hardly realizing it, he smashed his free fist against the side of the cockpit, groaned aloud. And it was at that moment that the red signal light on the radio panel blinked furiously.

One glance, and he knew that some station was signaling on the S. O. S. Emergency wave-length reading. Realization and action were one for him. He whipped out his hand, snapped up the switch, and spun the dial.

The ear-phones crackled out sound instantly.

"Calling all planes North Central Areas! Calling all planes in North Central Areas! Corbin of Unit Twenty. Strange all-red enemy monoplane pursuit above me—flying due west toward Dakota border. Unable to reach it. Suggest that you try and—wait, wait—it's coming down—"

The voice trailed off into throbbing si-

lence that lasted perhaps a full minute. Then the ear-phones gave off a shrill, piercing scream. It was like the scream of a half crazed man who has met with some horrible catastrophe. Just one ten-second scream, and then clicking sound in the ear-phones, signifying that the set at the other end had either been snapped off, or had gone dead by accident.

For a couple of moments Curly sat perfectly stiff, staring at the radio panel, and half expecting to hear more sounds from the ear-phones. Presently he did hear more sounds. But they were simply the broadcasts of a dozen different stations trying to check-back on the broadcaster who had said he was Corbin of Unit Twenty.

A quick glance at the station direction finder told Curly that he was a good eight hundred to a thousand miles from the point of the original broadcast. Too far away, anyway, for him to be of any help—if help was now needed.

Nevertheless, he changed his course slightly and went thundering toward that spot. And as he tore through the air, part of the wild message repeated itself over and over again inside his head—all red monoplane pursuit—all red monoplane pursuit flying due west toward Dakota border!

"Which one?" he shouted aloud to himself. "North Dakota, or South Dakota?" Then, still aloud, "Nuts! What difference does it make? It looks like Jack was right! Looks like I'm right, too."

Oblivious to the cackling of a dozen different radio operators in the ear-phones, he went thundering tail-up down the cloud lanes. Minutes dragged by, became an hour, then an hour and a half. The radio cackling had long since died away, but he was not even conscious that it was gone. As a matter of fact, he was not conscious of anything save his calcu-

lated position every other three or four minutes.

Finally, he stuck the nose down and went careening through the lower cloud layers into clear air. With a grunt of grim satisfaction he noted from the terrain below that he had smacked his objective right on the nose.

He was right over the intersection of Montana and North and South Dakota. In other words, in the same section of sky whence had come the wild call for help—assuming, of course, that the Flash's station direction finder had functioned properly.

BUT if he expected to see anything startling—anything such as an all-red Black Invader pursuit monoplane floating around in lazy circles—he was doomed to instant disappointment. There wasn't the single sign of a plane in the air below the clouds. And five minutes later, when he had climbed up through four layers to sunlight-filled clear air, he found the same thing to be true up above.

Impulsively he shot out his free hand to spin the wave-length dial and contact a local station for information. But before his fingers touched the knob, he changed his mind and let his hand drop back into his lap.

"No sense to that," he grunted aloud. "Probably don't know any more than I do. Besides, it's the red crate you want. Get going!"

A glance at the fuel gauge showed that although he had passed up a landing at St. Paul, he still had enough in the tanks for five to six more hours of flying. To go back to St. Paul, or to any other field for that matter, would be more or less of a waste of precious daylight.

His mind made up, he swung the Flash around and went thundering west over the Montana line. In his original excitement he had thought only of reaching the

Rockies. But now, as he neared the section of which Jack Horner had spoken, he realized the seemingly utter futility of the task he had set for himself.

He smashed his fist down on one knee.

"Unless they see the Flash, and tip their hand!" he breathed fiercely, "I'm sunk! No, like hell I am! I'll find Dusty no matter where he is!"

Repeating the last over and over again, to bolster up his failing spirits, he urged the plane on to greater speed, and kept his eyes glued on the distant horizon. For a full hour he kept well above the clouds. And then, finally, when a careful check of his instruments placed him within gliding distance of the northern end of the Big Belt mountain range, he eased back the throttle and went coasting down through the clouds.

The instant he came out he checked his position, found that once again he had hit it right on the nose, and then concentrated on a minute study of the terrain below.

The first look brought a bitter laugh to his lips. A minute study? Hell, he could spend a week in a minute study of only one square mile! And there were a good five hundred miles to be searched.

Save for three or four cities, stuck here and there among the towering snow-covered peaks, the terrain in general was an over-awing expanse of rugged, impenetrable wilderness reaching to the four horizons. A gigantic panorama of Nature untouched and unconquered by man since the very beginning of time.

As he gazed down hopelessly at the scene the words of Jack Horner filtered through his brain—"You could hide half a hundred army corps in that area, and nobody would be the wiser!"

Hell, yes! And then some. And with the additional protection of the great blanket of snow, the region was practically a world all by itself—a world that

could only be entered by air, and left by the same way.

"But there could be a hundred hidden dromes down there!"

The words burst unconsciously from his lips, as he banked south, opened the throttle and went roaming over the interwoven network of jagged, glistening peaks.

"Yeah!" he echoed his own words. "And you're just making a sap of yourself, Brooks! Jack was right—one plane can't do this job. It needs a hundred, two hundred—and a lot more!"

With a bitter groan he reached out for the wave-length knob to call his home field and tell young Horner to start organizing a concentrated air and ground search at once. But, as though it had almost been planned by unseen powers, his fingers had hardly touched the knob when the red signal light blinked.

As his eyes flew to the incoming station recorder, he jerked up straight in the seat. Some station was signaling for contact on the wave-length of the Silver Flash's set—the personal wave-length of Dusty Ayres.

For a second he could not force his fingers to snap on the contact switch and twist the dial. He gulped out a curse, broke the weird spell that gripped him, made contact and grabbed up the transmitter tube.

"Contact made!" he shouted. "Go ahead!"

There was a moment of silence, and then a voice crackled in the ear-phones—a voice that made Curly's heart do wild loops in his chest. It was the voice of Dusty Ayres!

"Ayres calling! Who is flying my ship?"

Curly nearly cut his lips as he jammed the transmitter tube against them in his wild excitement.

"Dusty! Dusty! This is Curly—Curly

Brooks! Where are you, kid? I've been looking for you! Are you all right? Where are you, Dusty?"

"I'm okay!" came back the answer. "Everything's fine! So, it's you, eh? Good boy! Listen, does anyone else know where you are?"

"Huh?" echoed Brooks. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do any of the others know your present position? Are you by yourself? Or are there other ships around—American ships?"

"No, I'm alone," Curly told him. "And nobody knows my exact present position—not unless they are listening in on us now. And only Jack and Biff know my general location. But where are you, Dusty? Your signals are coming from the ground. For God's sake, where are you?"

"Don't talk so much!" the ear-phones snapped back. "Listen, I've got to hurry. Now do just as I tell you. Keep on this wave length, and fly as I order. Right?"

"Right! Where do I fly? Which way?"

"Keep going as you are now," said the ear-phones. "But throttle and come closer to earth. I can only just see you in the glasses. Some down a bit."

Curly glanced ahead, saw the peaks of the Gallatin Range.

"Straight ahead toward the—"

"Shut up!" the ear-phones barked savagely. "Don't let your position go out over the air. Come down lower!"

OBEDIENTLY, Curly eased back the throttle and sent the Flash sliding down toward the treacherous terrain below him. Lower and lower he went, expecting to hear Dusty's voice again in the next second. Finally, when he was but a few hundred feet above a group of peaks that formed the rim of a half-mile-wide crater formation, he was about to

speaking himself, when Dusty's voice came to him again.

"Bank right and fly toward the other side of what you see below you!"

"Right it is!" he called, and moved the controls.

The maneuver resulted in a due west course across the top of the crater. But as he glanced ahead, he saw that the peaks on the west side towered a good three to four thousand feet above the others.

To fly between them—if that was what he had to do—would be one tricky job. Air current would toss him about like a cork in a heavy gale. True, the terrific speed of the Flash would help plenty. But even then, it would call for everything he had.

The thought caused him to unconsciously nose up the ship toward the top of the peaks. But instantly Dusty's voice barked at him.

"Don't climb, you dope! Keep on coming down!"

Curly corrected his error as the voice continued.

"Now, look—straight ahead. See that tallest peak?"

"Right!"

"See the third to the right of it?"

Curly looked to the left, saw the peak mentioned.

"Okay!" he grunted.

"Good!" grunted the voice in the ear-phones. "Now between it and the next there is a shelf about halfway down. Land at the wide end, toward those trees. Can you do it?"

It took Curly a couple of minutes to find the shelf-like platform of rock halfway down the mountain side. But for Dusty's instructions, he would never have spotted it in a thousand years.

It was about three thousand feet below the summer snow line. And now, with its timbered fringes covered with



A SLEDGE HAMMER SMASHED AGAINST
CURLY'S CHEST.

snow, it appeared as a part of the slope, rather than being a shelf that jutted out between the mountains.

But as he peered at it hard, he knew that he could sit the Flash down on it without a great deal of trouble. The surrounding mountains served as a sort of channel for the wind, forcing it along parallel with the shelf.

"Can do easy!" he said into the transmitter tube.

"Then go ahead!" came the reply. "Land, cut your engine. Then get out and wait. No—move over close to those trees. Okay! I'll be waiting."

Heart beating wildly at the thought of an immediate reunion with his pal, Curly slapped the Flash around and down toward the mountain shelf.

A bit of a cross-wind caught him and drove him off his course for a moment. But easing open the throttle a bit and applying rudder instantly, counteracted the cross-wind effect. And like the bullet from a gun he went streaking straight down toward the shelf.

As he neared it, flattened out a bit for the landing, he noticed that the snow on the shelf had been packed down. Instead of it being in drifting heaps, it had been smoothed out level and packed. Realization jerked his eyes open wide, and he searched the plateau formation for—he didn't know just what.

In the back of his brain he dully realized that considerable time had been spent on packing the snow—and that without question it was used as some sort of an airdrome. Yet, in the time allowed, he saw not the slightest sign of any planes.

On the south side the mountain towered up toward the clouds—a massive slab of snow covered rock, dotted here and there by a few trees. Two hundred feet out from the mountainside the shelf tilted off at a four-degree angle until it met the

flanking mountain. In a way, the shelf was more of a long narrow tray of rock between the flanking mountain sides.

At least, that was the impression he got as he sent the Flash streaking in. The job of landing right side up prohibited any second impressions. Hands and feet working in perfect coordination, he slid the plane down the last hundred feet, flattened out and settled. With a swishing, crunching sound the ski-wheels hit the packed snow. The Flash bounced twice, and would have gone swerving crazily off on right wing—toward the edge of the shelf—had not Curly jerked it in time. Slamming on opposite rudder, and "gunning" the engine, he pulled the craft back on its course and went sliding and bouncing across the snow to a full stop.

The instant movement ceased, he snapped off the engine, unlocked the seal sealing lugs, pushed back the cockpit cowl and leaped out. A blast of icy air swirled around him, cut through the heavy flying togs he wore. It was like jumping from an overheated room into a tub full of cracked ice.

But he noticed the difference in temperature just long enough to curse. Then he started running toward the snow-laden trees at the far end.

At every step he expected to see the familiar figure of Dusty come dashing out to meet him. But no familiar figure appeared. And finally, when he reached the edge of the trees and skidded to a halt, he was still all alone on the wintery shelf. In fact, for all the companionship he had at that moment, he might just as well be a hundred miles from the government meteorological station at the North Pole.

Frowning, he cast his eyes about for a moment, then cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Hey! Hey, Dusty! Where—"

He sensed, rather than saw the movement behind him. He spun around, a grin on his face.

"Gosh! You had me worried for a—"

The grin on his face froze. Under the trees, not twenty yards from him stood three figures—three figures in the uniform of Black Invaders. And in the clenched right hand of each figure was a gun.

For a split second Curly blinked stupidly. Then the bellow of an enraged bull gushed from his throat.

"Damn you!"

His right hand streaked down for his holstered gun, and in the same movement he flung his body to one side. But he never touched his gun. There was a spurt of flame, and the sharp crack of sound. A sledgehammer smashed against Curly's chest. His body was knocked clear of the snow, and he had the weird crazy split second impression that he was shooting out into space—shooting out like the projectile of a naval gun!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Zytoff

"I WOULDN'T try to move, Captain Ayres! In the first place, you see, it's quite impossible. Just sit still, and you'll be far more comfortable!"

From out of a whirlpool of darkness came the words; beating against Dusty's throbbing brain like so many white hot triphammers. Gradually light pierced the darkness, and in a befuddled, abstract sort of way, he realized that he was staring at the instrument board of an airplane. An instrument board covered with countless gadgets just barely visible in the faint glow of a small cowl lamp.

He closed his eyes tight, gritted his teeth against a horrible pain on the top of his head, then opened his eyes again. The

instrument board was still in front of him, and just above it, the forward end of reinforced glass cowling that sloped back over his head.

"The instruments interest you, captain? Or haven't you recovered yet from that rather nasty crack on the head?"

A voice to his left—cool, calm, dripping with self-assurance, yet not blatantly so. He started to turn his head, but stopped as the top of it seemed to rip off. He tried again, steeled himself against the pain, and succeeded.

A man swathed in fur-lined flying clothes sat beside him. He was smiling pleasantly, and there was what might be taken for an amused twinkle in his deep-sunk, jet-black eyes.

As a matter of fact, the stranger's entire expression was one of contented amusement. Pain forgotten for the moment, Dusty swept him with his eyes from helmeted head to heavy-soled boots resting on rudder pedals. During that moment he realized that he was in the double cockpit of a plane, and that the plane was tearing along through night-darkened skies.

"Say! What the hell? Where am I?"

Dusty's words echoing back to him were the only indication that he had spoken them. His brain, as far as grasping what the situation in which he found himself was all about, was a total blank.

He saw the stranger lean forward and glance at the instruments a moment, then turn flashing teeth upon him.

"Just rest awhile, captain," the man said. "Just rest, and try to collect yourself. You're still very dizzy!"

A queer quirk of the brain caused Dusty to take the last as a dirty crack. He tried to sit up straight. But it was then that he got his third surprise in a row. Both wrists were lashed securely to the metal bars of the seat. His ankles, also, were lashed and tied back so that

they were out of the way of the nearest rudder pedal. The shock cleared his head a bit, and he cursed aloud.

"Who the hell are you!" he grated. "And what's this all about? The last thing I remember, I was—"

Like the flood waters of a bursting dam, memory came racing back to him. The Silver Flash! He was flying toward P Fourteen! Some one ordered him to fly north. He'd tried to get out from under. There'd been a swirling blue cyclone in the night sky. A sizzling, terrific heat! He hadn't been able to get clear of it! He'd gone spinning down, and he'd—yeah, he must have crashed.

He cut short on his thoughts, scowled into the grinning face at his side.

"So you're the little boy scout who is responsible, eh?" he gulped.

Broad shoulders shrugged, and more white teeth flashed as the stranger widened his grin.

"Not entirely, captain," the man said. "I'd say that your lucky star is mostly responsible. Just why you are still alive is something that I'll never be able to answer correctly. An overwhelming amount of luck, and perfect flying, I guess. My compliments on the latter, by the way. You are even better than they told me you were."

"They?" echoed Dusty in a flat voice.

"Those who have met you, and lived," came the reply. "I suppose that makes me one of them now. But I must say that tonight's little venture wasn't exactly difficult. Shall we call it, say—child's play?"

As the man talked Dusty studied his face. Tried to fathom the brain working behind the twinkling eyes. That the man was a Black, or at least connected with the Invaders, was a self-evident truth.

Yet his mannerisms, his tone of speech, the very atmosphere he created, set him

as far apart from a Black as chalk is from cheese. No bragging, no blustering and snarling, or anything approaching it. The man spoke just as anyone might speak during a casual conversation with a friend.

In spite of the weirdness of the situation, Dusty grinned and shrugged his bewilderment.

"I'll hand it to you for coolness, buzzard," he said. "And no argument about it. Just for the hell of it, though, would you mind answering my question? What in hell is this all about? Up to now, I'm supposed to have crashed. Don't tell me that this is what we meet in the life after!"

The other threw back his head and laughed loudly.

"And I hand it to you for being cool, captain," he chuckled. "I'm almost sorry that I tied you up. From reports of your former deeds, I thought it best to apply the safety first theory. But seriously, you didn't exactly crash. As I said, by some miracle—and a lot of fine flying—you escaped my attempt to kill you. Incidentally, you may recall my telling you over the radio that I was reluctant to kill you?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"No thanks needed, my friend. I really did not want to kill you. But—well, it seemed necessary. I later discovered my mistake. It would seem that both of us were trying to pull off a little *coup de grâce* tonight. And to a measure, we were both very neatly fooled.

"You did not expect what happened, and I did not expect to find that you did not carry that which I wanted. But, as I was saying, or about to say, you dropped a landing flare and succeeded in making a rather decent landing. And—"

"I dropped a landing flare? I don't remember that!"

"But you did—a small one. I landed

close to you and when I reached your plane I found you quite unconscious. In some way you'd been thrown forward. You cracked your head on the compass. Very convenient for me, if you'll pardon the expression?"

"Skip it," Dusty grunted. "And then? How come I'm still able to take nourishment? There are plenty of your breed who would have pulled a trigger. In other words, why didn't you? Why the kidnap act? It is a kidnap act, isn't it? Sort of taking home the bacon to old man Fire-Eyes, eh? Betcha get a swell medal for this."

THE Black didn't answer directly. Ignoring Dusty he concentrated on checking the plane's position, and compass course. But when he looked at Dusty again there was a slight glint of disappointment in place of the twinkle in his eye.

"Conceit does not become you, captain," he said quietly. "In fact, it's entirely out of place in your make-up. A medal? No! You are far more valuable to me than any medal. Yes, far more valuable. Frankly, there was a reason for your little trick tonight—a trick that came very close to working, by the way. I intend to find out that reason. Find out several things."

Dusty looked dumb.

"Trick?" he echoed. "What trick?"

The smile came back to the other's face. It was almost a paternal type of smile.

"Those empty gas cylinders, and the flare chute," the Black said. "You were out for a bit of bomb-dropping practice, perhaps?"

The Yank grinned.

"How'd you guess? Got it the first time. By the way, you didn't bring them along did you?"

Dusty twisted around as much as he

could, looked back and stiffened. The rear wall of the semi-cabin cockpit was about a foot in back of him. It was blank save for near the top where there was a set of valve handles, some lengths of pipe running from them up through the top of the cabin, and a couple of pressure dials. At least, he took the dialed instruments to be pressure recorders.

"No," he heard the Black answer his question. "I did not bring them along. What use would they be to me? Yet I can't complain, I guess. I've brought you along instead. And I feel that you can tell me considerably more than those gas tanks could tell me—even though they had been full of your precious Metal-Meltic!"

Dusty snapped back front, fixed his eyes on the man.

"You know everything, don't you?" he grunted.

"No, not everything. For instance, the whereabouts of the real formula. Perhaps you can tell me where Major Crandall put it before—he died so suddenly?"

Though the man's knowledge of the drama of Metal-Meltic made Dusty's heart thump wildly against his ribs, he kept his face expressionless. At the same time, however, he became instantly on the alert.

"So you don't know that, eh?" he said in a meaning tone. "Well, that's certainly one on us, I must say! Huh! And all the time we've been thinking that you birds had tapped that second batch and that Morgan had told you about the new formula. Hell, you might as well put me down on the ground. Then we all can start the act over again."

Dusty spoke the crazy thoughts just as they came to him. But as he looked into the other's face he realized that they were bearing fruit. For one thing, a lot of the man's self assurance went out of his being.

His eyes narrowed in half suspicion and half puzzlement and they bored searchingly into Dusty's. In other words, the Black was swinging at three wild curves, and not realizing that they were bad ones.

"So Morgan knew about the new formula?" he put the question softly, as though to himself. "Then why didn't he say—"

"Because I didn't give him the chance," Dusty cut in. "So now we're right back where we started—or are we?"

The Black pressed his lips together in a gesture of heavy thought, grunted through his nose.

"Perhaps," he said. "We shall see, presently."

Dusty grinned. He couldn't possibly feel any worse, so he was beginning to feel better. At least mentally, for the moment.

"Here's hoping, in case not," Dusty grinned. "But in the meantime, do you happen to have a flask? A good shot would help this dome of mine a lot."

He spoke just for the sake of saying something, but to his amazement the Black reached into a cabin wall pocket and drew forth a flask. Snapping off the cap he turned and held it to Dusty's lips.

It was fine old brandy, and as it slipped down his throat Dusty began to feel one hundred per cent better. A nod of his head signaled the Black to take the flask away. Dusty coughed on the last couple of drops, got his breath back and bilged his cheeks.

"Thanks!" he breathed. "That did help!"

Then twisting toward the Black:

"Surprise number umpty-seven!" he exclaimed with a puzzled frown. "I would have bet the roll against your doing what you did just now. Say, who are you anyway? Not the little fairy who res-

cued the princess from the old duffer with the tobacco-stained beard?"

A twisted smile came to the other's lips.

"You find me different from the Hawk, or Ekar, eh?" he murmured.

Dusty nodded vigorously.

"Very much so! In fact, you strike me as a chap who has made a hell of a dumb mistake!"

"I've what?"

"Made a hell of a dumb mistake and don't know it!" Dusty repeated. "You enlisted on the wrong side. You should be an American!"

"So? Perhaps you are forgetting, captain, that I tried very hard to kill you tonight."

Dusty shrugged.

"Call it a part of your contract," he grunted. "Anyway I'm skipping it, for the present. Now for the big surprise—who are you? As we say down Dixie way—yuh have the advantage of me, suh!"

"I doubt that my name would mean anything to you, Captain Ayres," was the quiet reply. "As you mimic, I have the advantage of you, in several ways. But all that is a result of training and experience. A name means very little to me. As a matter of fact, I've used several different names during my life. Some years ago, when I took a post-graduate course at Harvard, I was known as Davenport—R. J. Davenport."

"Ah!" nodded Dusty. "I knew there was something familiar about your accent. Harvard, eh? Well, I refuse to hold that against you. But to bring everything up to date—what's the name now? I might want to introduce you to—some of my friends, you know."

THE Black chuckled, squinted at his instruments again. Dusty took a squint, too. He noted that the plane was

flying a few degrees north of true west, and at a high altitude. Then the Black gave him his attention again.

"Your last remark is doubtful," he said. "However, I shall probably meet Lieutenant Brooks and Lieutenant Horner eventually."

The last surprised Dusty, and he showed it. Impulsively he leaned toward the Black, his face strained.

"My ship!" he snapped. "It was the only one that went down?"

"Then I was correct, eh? There were other planes near you! Yes, captain, your ship was the only one that went down."

Dusty slumped back against the seat, stared narrow-eyed at the instrument board and tried to think. The result was not very exhilarating. Underneath all the chit-chat he had been carrying on with this strange Black was a deeper meaning. Something was in the wind.

He couldn't put his finger on it, right at the moment. But he knew that all this palaver was but a preliminary act for something really important. The Black expected him to talk; spill what he knew, or what the Black thought he knew. Hell no, the man wasn't that dumb! Okay—then, so what? Why was he—

The Black broke in on his jumble of thoughts.

"And now that we've passed the time very pleasantly, captain," he said. "I must ask you to hold still while I blindfold your eyes. Yes, we will be landing soon."

The man had released his hold on the stick and was folding a handkerchief kitty-corner. In the few seconds allowed, Dusty snapped his eyes toward the instrument board. Though the instruments were graduated in Black Invader units of measure, he had seen enough similar ones before to be able to read them more or less accurately. He noted that the plane

was flying a course considerably south of the U. S.-Canadian line, and that they were over the Rocky Mountain areas.

The Black must have guessed the reason for the puzzled look that came over Dusty's face, for he shrugged indifferently.

"Don't worry, captain," he said. "I know exactly where we are."

Dusty forced a grin to his lips, fired what he believed to be a jolting shot.

"And so do our ground detectors downstairs!"

The Black blinked for a second, then broke into a hearty laugh.

"Yes, yes, captain, you're absolutely correct. But I don't believe that those manning the ground detectors will get overly curious."

"No?"

"No. I'm not exactly that stupid. You see, I had this craft fitted with an engine of American design! In daylight my plans depend upon speed. At night they depend upon your countrymen believing that an American plane is flying over them. And now, hold still please."

With deft fingers the man covered Dusty's eyes with the folded handkerchief and tied it securely in back.

"Sorry that you cannot watch me land, captain," came the words to Dusty's ears. "But you'll just have to put your trust in my flying ability."

The Yank grunted.

"I might," he said, "if I knew who you were."

He heard the Black chuckle softly. Then—

"Still curious, eh?"

"Yeah! Still curious. But if you think I might use it against you, why—"

"Oh, it really doesn't matter one way or the other," the Black broke in on him. "My name's Zyttoff."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Show-down

ZYTOFF! Like a streak of blue lightning, Dusty's memory raced back over the weeks to that day when he and Agent 10 and Curly Brooks had helped wipe out the Black Troposphere Flying Submarine base at Bersimis on the St. Lawrence.

It had been on that day, the very day that Ekar, the Avenger, had died, that he had first heard of the name, Zytuff. Jack Horner had told him—told him of a mysterious Black Invader leader who had risen to a position of highest favor with Fire-Eyes. That man was known as Zytuff.

It was he who was to have complete command of the Tropo-Submarine armada. At the time he was supposed to be still in Europe—waiting there for final word from Fire-Eyes to begin his crushing attack against the U. S. Naval and coast defense forces.

The destruction of the Bersimis base had obviously postponed any such attack. Undoubtedly it was because the U. S. had captured the last remaining Troposphere F-S, and had immediately begun construction of a similar type of war craft for its own use. Yes, with the element of mystery and surprise gone, the Blacks had postponed their action.

But! Zytuff had come to the United States. Zytuff, the mysterious, was here in the country! Perhaps he had been here for some time. But even more important, perhaps, right now he was coasting a plane for a landing on American ground and one Yank pilot was coasting down with him!

"You have heard of me, captain?"

The question snapped Dusty away

from his depressing reminiscences.

"Nope, can't say that I have," he lied.

"I didn't think so," was the quiet comment. "But I believe that now that you have, you and all of your countrymen will be a long time forgetting it!"

With that somewhat ominous statement the Black stopped talking. Dusty didn't say anything more either, just sat perfectly still and pictured in his mind the plane rushing down through night skies toward the ground.

Once he heard Zytuff snap something in his native lingo. It could have been some annoyed remark made out loud, or it could have been the man contacting somebody over the radio. A second later, when Dusty thought he heard the click of the switch, he felt positive that Zytuff had used the radio.

Presently, he felt the plane come out of its dive; knew that it had leveled off and that they were banking to the right. Then he heard the hiss of a compressed air chute flare being released. He felt the plane bank a bit to the right, straighten out, and settle lightly with hardly a jar.

Z Y T O F F



Instinctively, he nodded his head in appreciation of what he knew was a damn good landing—no matter where the landing had been made.

"Thank you, captain," came Zytov's pleasant voice to his ears. "And now, I must give you a warning. I am going to release your hands and feet, but not the blindfold. Make no attempt to remove it, and do just as you are instructed. You understand?"

"You're the doctor," Dusty grunted. Then added, "For the moment."

"For a considerably longer time than that!" was the somewhat sharp comment. "Very well, hold still."

The sudden release of pressure about Dusty's wrists and ankles told him that they had been freed of their bonds. A second later strong fingers gripped his arm, pulled him up on his feet.

A blast of icy wind smacked against his face, sent violent shivers all the way down to his toes. He heard several voices speaking in Black Invader. More hands gripped him and he was lifted into the air. When his feet touched something solid again, he knew that it was hard-pack snow.

Both arms held tightly, he was led forward. Something slapped against his face, stung his cheek and dropped coldness down under the collar of his flying suit. It might have been a snow-laden branch. He didn't stop to figure it out.

Though his eyes were blindfolded, he knew that he had been ushered into some sort of a lighted room. The cold wind wasn't tugging at him now. He felt quite comfortable. Those holding him, however, did not stop. They continued to lead him forward; now right, now left, and now down a short flight of stairs.

From the sound he knew that they were wooden stairs. The floor over which they had led him, had been wooden, too.

Those deductions placed him in some sort of a house. A house with several rooms. He was sure of that, because at intervals had heard doors open on either side; heard voices located a short distance away.

Eventually, his escort pulled him to a stop and pushed him down into a chair. Then the handkerchief was whisked away from his eyes. The sudden change made him blink, and for a moment his surroundings were all a mixed-up jumble of golden shades.

Presently, though, his eyes became adjusted to the light from a ceiling lamp, and he found himself seated in a fairly large room—sitting at a table covered with food. There were no windows in the room, that is, no windows with glass. At the top of the far wall there was an opening. No light was coming through it, however, so he judged it to be some sort of a ventilator.

The walls, it was a square room, were made of rough pine board, supported every few feet by solid six-by-six uprights. The ceiling, too, was beamed. There was a single door to his left.

Stationed at the door, was a tough-looking character in the uniform of a Black Invader. Across the table from him, smiling his infectious smile, was Zytov. The man gestured toward the food.

"I guess we're both pretty hungry, captain, eh? Shall we eat first and talk later?"

Unconsciously Dusty was sliding his hand toward his holstered automatic. He himself, only realized the movement when he found that his gun had been taken away. At that moment, Zytov, too, saw and understood the movement.

"Naturally, I couldn't let you keep it, captain," he said in a soft, chiding voice. "You should be satisfied that I've left your hands free to eat with."

"Thanks," Dusty grunted, and let his eyes glide over toward the door.

Zytoff's next remark almost proved him a perfect mind reader in Dusty's opinion.

"Yes, he's armed, and an excellent shot, captain. So is the other soldier on the other side of that door. And, myself, too, if you'll permit me to say so. Look—see that knot in that board over there—to your right?"

Dusty snapped his eyes around, saw the knot, frowned back at Zytoff.

"Watch, captain, if you will."

THE Black was leaning both elbows on the edge of the table. Suddenly he became a whirlwind of motion. No, rather he became a human bolt of lightning. Down went his right hand, up it came in almost the same split second.

There was a gun in his grip and it crashed out sound. Impulsively Dusty glanced toward the knot. There was a neat hole the fraction of an inch from the dead center. He turned back toward Zytoff and grinned.

"Not bad," he said. "I guess I'll eat!"

"My compliments on your sane decision," murmured Zytoff. "I'm sure you'll find a Black Invader repast quite as delicious as your own American food."

The man spoke the truth. That, Dusty was forced to admit to himself after the first mouthful of food. True, he was as hungry as a starved wolf. But regardless of that, he could think of few places where he'd ever tasted anything better.

By the time he was halfway finished, he had forgotten the dull ache in his head; almost forgotten the seriousness of his predicament. In short, he was fast becoming a new man again.

However, as they both finished the meal, Zytoff brought him right smack back to the situation at hand.

"And now, captain, I suppose you are wondering more than ever just why I've

brought you here? But first—a cigarette?"

The Black pushed a box across the table. Dusty took one and lighted up.

"I guess so," he nodded, spewing smoke ceilingward. "But where's here?"

The other waved his hand airily.

"Sorry, but that's my little secret," he said. "But to get to other things. You're here for two reasons. One, so that I may get to know you real well. Your record has always fascinated me, you know. And second, to try and discover just how much your friends know."

Dusty puffed placidly on his cigarette a moment. Then said,

"As to the first, lots of folks don't consider me a nice fellow to know. I scare small children. Make them run home screaming to their mothers and have horrible nightmares. And for the second reason, well, ask me any questions about the Yank forces. I'll be tickled to death to tell you. Tell you what—I'll even draw a map of some of our most important fortifications. Got a pencil and some paper?"

Zytoff smiled and nodded his head patiently.

"I was hoping that you'd volunteer all that information," he said lightly. "I knew I could count on you. You're so obliging. As a matter of fact, the outer defenses of New York harbor have always intrigued me."

"Oh, those?" scoffed Dusty. "That will be simple. I designed and planned them myself, you know. Why, one day I was saying to the President—and a few big shots of the war department—gentlemen, here is what we should do regarding New York harbor. First, we'll have to—"

"Splendid!" Zytoff clapped his hands and stood up. "At last I'm going to find out! But never mind the details, captain. Tell you what—get it all pictured in your mind, and be ready to tell me when I get

back. Sorry, but I've got something else to do just now. You'll excuse me?"

"Sure," Dusty grinned. "Mind if I walk about the place? First time I've been here, you know."

The Black showed all of his teeth in a loud laugh.

"If we both survive the war," he said, "which we probably won't, I shall insist that we team up in vaudeville, or perhaps television. Sorry, you'll have to remain here, captain. I've got to prepare for your friends arriving—if they do arrive."

That brought Dusty up straight.

"What?"

Zytoff, at the door, gestured.

"Why, captain!" he said in a mimicked voice of surprise, "how could I find out how much your friends know unless I asked them? Ta-ta, see you soon. But, oh yes, a tip. The guard here is a far better shot even than I am. A point to remember, captain!"

With a smile and a short nod, Zytoff jerked open the door, stepped through, and closed it quickly behind him. Not knowing just what to think at the moment, Dusty lighted another cigarette and sank slowly down into his chair. Then, chin braced on one fist, he sat scowling darkly at the opposite wall.

For several minutes, the cigarette burned unnoticed between his fingers. Then it burned him and he smudged it out with a muttered curse. In a way, though, the burn was of some help. It jarred him out of a foggy trance, and thoughts began coming to him in a somewhat logical sequence.

To begin with, Curly and Biff were undoubtedly safe.

They had not come close enough for the Metal-Meltic to catch them. Metal-Meltic? Yeah, that's the stuff Zytoff must have used—though he didn't say so in so many words. The Yanks think up something for ground use, and the Blacks swipe it and use it in the air! Hell—what a war!

But to get back to himself. Let's see, why was he here and where was he? The last, he didn't know exactly. Some place near the Rockies, he guessed. And why had Zytoff allowed him to live? Nuts! What did the guy mean—"to try and discover how much your friends know"? What friends? Curly and Jack?

"By God, does he think they'll follow me here?"

As he shouted the words aloud he stood up straight. The guard at the door, instantly swung up his gun and trained it on Dusty's chest.

"You will take care, American!"

The words came from the Black's throat as though he had trouble in dragging them out. Dusty gave him but a snap side glance, slumped back in the chair, brain racing madly at top speed.

Curly and Jack follow him here? Here? Where? Was some ship tagging their tail—tagging the tail of Zytoff's crate? No. It couldn't be that. Curly and Biff would have sprung something before now. Now? What time was it, anyway?

He glanced at his wrist watch, noticed for the first



time that the crystal guard had been crushed inward, cracking the crystal and jamming the hands on the dial. It had happened at sixteen minutes of two. He turned his head toward the guard.

"Hey, you! What's the time?"

A wide, stained-tooth grin and a shrug was his only answer. Dusty let it pass, fell to brooding at the opposite wall again. If only he knew what the hell it was all about, then he might think up some line of action.

Damn Zytoff, anyway! The bum was playing him for a fare-thee-well. A darn queer type to be a Black Invader, though. Certainly acted like a white man. At least, as white as a member of the enemy could be.

That crack about Morgan got him, though. He hadn't expected that. But had it made any lasting effect on him? Guess not. Since that first mention, the Black hadn't spoken of Metal-Meltic or the formula again. Either he wasn't interested or else he was one damn clever egg playing a damn clever game.

AS THE minutes dragged on, and further concentrated thought resulted in getting him exactly nowhere, he heaved up out of his chair, and with hands jammed in his pockets started ambling about the room. His getting up put the guard instantly on the alert.

The man's gun hand became rigid, only the muzzle of the gun moving as Dusty changed position. Out the corner of his eye, the Yank noticed the seemingly awkward way the Black handled the gun. When he moved it to the right his forefinger seemed hardly to be touching the trigger.

That apparent fact, plus curiosity and wild imagination seething up in Dusty, resulted in a grim, yet insane decision. Puckering his lips he whistled softly to himself, continued strolling around and

around the room, eyes bent on the floor. But on each circuit he drew a few inches nearer to the Black.

"You try tricks—I shoot, American!"

The dragged out words smote Dusty's ears as he was making what he had decided would be the last circuit. Once more around and he would try his luck. Like hell he would, now!

He stopped, looked blankly at the guard.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"You try tricks and I shoot!" growled the man. "I hear lots about you. You will not fool me, no!"

Dusty laughed, kicked at an imaginary stone on the floor, and casually swung back toward the guard.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" he exclaimed. "I saw your boss shoot, didn't I? Well, he says that you're even better. Tricks? Yeah, I look like I got a bag full of them don't I!"

The guard's thick lips twitched back in what could have been a grimace or a smile. But he took neither his eyes nor the muzzle of his gun off Dusty for one single split second.

"That is good then!" he rumbled. "You had better not try those tricks!"

"Not today," said Dusty. Then with a grin, "But I'll tell you something. I bet I could grab that gun away from you with my bare hands, before you could kill me. And what do you think of that?"

As Dusty spoke he moved casually toward the guard's right. The Black immediately followed him around with the muzzle of the gun—and made no comment.

Dusty moved his hands in his pockets.

"With these two hands, right here in my pockets," he grinned. "Grab your gun away, and you wouldn't kill me. Know why? Well, I'll tell you. Because it's my hunch that the big boss would wring your pretty neck if you killed me. Your

orders are not to shoot to kill, are they?"

The guard shrugged, muttered.

"You play no tricks on me, American!"

"Just what I thought," nodded Dusty, shifting his weight to his left foot. "Oh, you'd shoot, but not to kill. That's why I could get my hands out, and grab that gun before you'd dare pull the trigger? Want to see me do it?"

The guard's eyes narrowed and his lips went back.

"You will try no—"

"Save it!" Dusty cut in. "Don't worry, I'm not going to!"

He gave the Black a scornful look, puckered his lips to whistle, and started to turn away. It was at that instant he saw the guard relax a bit, take his eyes from his hands buried in his pockets. And it was during that very instant that Dusty whipped into action with the speed of a striking cobra.

Hands still jammed in his pockets, he swung his right foot across his left leg and up. No human eye could have followed that movement, and the Black guard was no exception. Perhaps he sensed it, however, for a wild light leaped into his jet-black eyes. Too late, though, his brain grasped the full significance of what was taking place.

Before he could even begin to crook his trigger finger, the toe of Dusty's boot crashed into his wrist. There was a sharp crack of bones breaking, and the gun went flying across the room.

In what was practically a continuation of the whole general movement, Dusty's clenched right fist whipped out of his pocket, and arced upward with every ounce of his one hundred and eighty-five pounds behind it.

A cry, rising up from the guard's throat, died before it was even given life. Like a tree trunk that has been sawed in two the Black fell over sidewise, stiff and rigid, and totally unconscious. Flinging

out his other hand, the Yank caught him, eased him down and pulled him away from the door.

"Next time you'll remember that people have feet as well as hands!" he muttered at the still figure. "Figured that the hand angle would hold your attention."

Turning swiftly away, he crossed the room, picked up the guard's gun, and then tiptoed back to the door. Ear pressed against it, he listened intently for a moment. There was no sound on the other side. He scowled, reached for the knob, but changed his mind and jerked his hand away.

A moment or two longer, he hesitated. Then with an inward curse, he grasped the door knob again, slowly applied pressure, and began to twist, the fraction of an inch at a time. Bit by bit, bit by bit, until the knob would not turn any more.

Gun clenched in his left hand, he eased the door open, eased it open so slowly that in a crazy, excitement-inspired sort of way his brain told him that the door wasn't moving at all!

PERHAPS it was seconds, perhaps hours; at any rate, to his tingling nerves it seemed an eternity before there was a crack big enough for him to peer through. And when he did, he saw the broad shoulders of another Black guard, not two feet away, standing back to him.

Dusty grinned. Just what the doctor ordered! Damned if it wasn't going to be round two for the poor people!

Silently he eased the door open another inch or two; just enough to slip his gun hand through. His eyes were riveted on the point in the small of the Black's back, where he would jam the muzzle of the gun.

That would be better than trying to clout the bum. He might miss, or because of his unbalanced position, might not hit hard enough. Plenty of time to

smack him later. Ramming the gun muzzle into the man's back would be plenty for the moment.

Tight-lipped, body tensed, Dusty moved the gun forward—and stopped it a couple of inches from the man's back. The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs, at the end of the twenty foot corridor, smacked against his ear-drums. The Black stiffened to attention. Over his shoulder, Dusty caught the flash glance of shiny black-booted feet, then coarse, baggy-knee breeches and then a skin-tight tunic with a pair of gold wings—and then the lower part of a face.

Zytoff was coming back!

For one infinitesimal iota of time, Dusty crouched paralyzed. His gun was still a couple of inches from the Black guard. He could cower the man, perhaps, use him as a shield against Zytoff, and trust to luck from then on. No, it wasn't worth the risk. Better let Zytoff come inside—then get him!

Ducking down so that the Black guard hid him completely from the approaching Zytoff, Dusty pulled his gun hand back, twisted sidewise and pushed the door shut.

With as much speed as he dared, he turned the knob back and allowed the latch to catch. Then stepping to the side, he flattened himself against the wall, switched his gun to his right hand, and waited breathlessly.

The seconds slipped by. He thought he heard the sound of voices beyond the door, but he wasn't sure. Hell, maybe he was wrong. Maybe Zytoff was coming to the room. Had he seen another door leading off the corridor outside? He couldn't remember. He'd concentrated on the guard's back. And then the approach of Zytoff had grabbed his attention.

Maybe there was a door. Maybe Zytoff had gone through it. If so, swell! He'd try the outside guard again. And—

The sharp rapping of knuckles against the other side of the door stopped his wandering thoughts. He held his breath, didn't move a single muscle. Then came a voice—the clear, pleasant voice of Zytoff, with just an echo of patient chiding in it.

“Captain Ayres! Why be so foolish? Open the door, and toss that gun out. It is not going to help you in the slightest! I know you've taken it away from the guard, you see?”

The man's words banged and slammed around inside Dusty's head. One split second he was boiling with rage, and the next he felt like a five-year-old who has been caught with his hand in the jam jar. Zytoff knew? What the hell—and how the hell? He gripped the gun tighter, made not a sound. There was a pause of a moment or so, and then Zytoff's voice came through the door again.

“Be sensible, captain! Don't you realize that you're trapped? Just toss the gun out here, and it will save us a lot of trouble. Be sane, captain. You are completely helpless!”

Dusty's jaws squared, and his eyes became hard.

“Yeah?” he barked through the door. “Why not appoint yourself a committee of one, and come in and get it? I'll even let you get the door open. Maybe let you have first shot.”

A low chuckle came back to tighten his nerves all the more.

“A contest of that sort can wait until another time, captain! I'm asking you for the last time—will you toss your gun outside and surrender like a sensible person? The sensible person I've always understood you to be?”

As though the other were in the room with him, Dusty shook his head doggedly.

“I like this gun!” he grated. “And I'm keeping it!”

Silence for a moment. Silence, heavy and sombre. Then, from beyond the door.

"Very well, captain—if you wish it that way!"

"I do! And that's flat! You can have this damn gun when you come and get it!"

Whether his action was insane or not, Dusty didn't even give it a thought. He was trapped between four walls. Zytloff could wait him out, even try to starve him into submission. Maybe and maybe not. He had a gun in his hand, and there were death slugs in that gun. Let there be a show-down! Damn right, a show-down. And the sooner it came, the—

An eerie weakness rippled through his body. His eyes began to water, his chest to burn—and there was a strange giddiness in his head. He found himself straining every ounce of his strength to hold the gun up. Sweat broke out of his forehead, and a great invisible weight dragged down on his shoulders.

Damn! What the devil was the matter with him? He was down on one knee. He couldn't get up. He was being pushed down, pushed down flat on the floor. There didn't seem to be any air in the room.

His lungs were sucking in fire. Hell—keep the gun up—keep the gun up! The spell will pass. Just a relapse, maybe, from that crack on the head. Damn you, you can't pass out now. Passing out like a baby? Can't take it, by God! A little smack on the head is getting you down!

Then through blurred eyes he saw the filmy, milk-white wisps seeping into the room through the ventilator opening, or whatever the hell it was. Gas! The bums were gassing him! Snuffing him out like a damn rat in a trap!

"Damn you! Damn the whole blasted lot of you!"

From out of a swirling, ringing fog he heard his own hoarse voice. Then there

was a crash of sound, another, and another. He saw flame spurting from the muzzle of the gun in his right hand, saw that it was pointed up toward the opening in the wall.

Yet he couldn't feel it between his fingers, couldn't even feel that he was pulling the trigger. He was, however. The crash of sound, and the flame spurting from the muzzle proved it.

A defiant laugh echoed back to him. It came from his own lips. He was laughing. Damn right! He'd show the bums! He'd lay every slug right through that opening, and pick off the tramp beyond. Gas him, would they? He'd show 'em! No—no—put a couple through the door! It wasn't very thick. Maybe Zytloff was still out there waiting!

Sure! A couple through the door. Might get the big stiff. Serve him right. Get the big stiff—just—for—luck!

His hand wouldn't move! The gun had ceased firing. He wasn't even pulling the trigger. He— and then with a thunderous roar of sound the walls of the room caved in and the ceiling crashed down on top of him!

CHAPTER NINE

Eagle Trap

PITCH-BLACK darkness slowly fading away; tiny shreds of faint light piercing through it, becoming brighter and brighter. The shreds of light merged together, and became a solid glow that drove the darkness farther and farther away.

Through dazed and blinking eyes, Dusty dully became conscious of the fact that he was staring at pine boards fitted together and braced by heavy beams.

Steeling himself against the spinning merry-go-round in his head, he forced himself up to a sitting position, pressed

the tips of his fingers hard against his temples and concentrated on focusing his eyes on his blurred surroundings.

Gradually the filmy mist cleared from his eyes, and he found himself in an entirely different room. It was much smaller than the other. It contained a cot on which he sat, a couple of chairs, and a knocked-together table. On the table was a glass and a bottle. There was a brandy label on the bottle, and more important, dark amber liquid in the bottle.

He stared at it a moment while strength flowed back into his veins, then pushed himself up and lunged across the few feet of floor space to the table. Snapping off the bottle cap he sniffed the contents. It was real brandy—smelled every bit as mellow as some he had had from a flask, Zytov's flask.

Tipping the bottle he splashed some into the glass, took a sip. It tasted the same, too. And in one gulp he downed a man-sized shot, lurched back to the cot and sat down. Head buried in his hands he waited for the tingling warmth to spread to all parts of his body.

It not only did that, but banished the few remaining cobwebs in his brain. When he eventually raised his head and surveyed the room again, the objects in it were no longer blurred, nor did they make any attempt to dance around before his gaze.

"If my dome didn't still ache!" he grunted aloud, "I'd say that this whole damn business was one grand, cockeyed nightmare!"

The sound of his own voice brought a queer sense of comfort to him. It seemed to make his heart pump the blood faster through his veins, filled him with a renewed sense of vigor—and curiosity. It was the last that forced him to his feet again, and started him on a tour of inspection.

The tour was short, very short indeed.

As a matter of fact, right straight over to the door that he suddenly noticed on the opposite side of the room. As he reached it he paused, and like once before, pressed his ear against the wood, listening intently. But as before, he could not hear the slightest sound on the other side.

Straightening up, he chewed his lip in scowling silence a moment, then shrugged and boldly grasped the knob and twisted. He half expected to find that the door was locked, or at least hear movement on the other side—the quick shifting of feet, the growl of a Black guard on the alert. But to his amazement the door swung inward at his tug, and he found himself gaping into another room, little different from the one in which he woke up.

He swept it with puzzled eyes, stiffened, and let out a sharp cry. On the cot to his left was the figure of a man half bundled up in flying clothes. The flying clothes were of the U. S. Air Force type. The man's head was half buried in the fur collar, hiding his face.

In two wild leaps, Dusty reached the side of the cot. He reached down and pushed back the fur collar to look at the face.

"Curly! My God, Curly!"

His booming shout echoed and re-echoed about the room as he stood gazing down into the pale still features of his pal. For a moment he couldn't believe his eyes. He cursed, roughly brushed the back of his hand across them, and looked again. The unconscious figure was still that of Curly Brooks.

Spinning, Dusty tore back into the other room, snatched up the brandy bottle and glass, and came racing back. Pausing long enough to pour some into the glass, he then sat on the edge of the cot, hoisted Curly's head and shoulders with his left hand, and forced some of the brandy between the pale twisted lips.

Just a few drops. A wait of a few seconds, then another few drops.

BY THAT time the first few drops had trickled down Brooks' throat. His body twitched, and he coughed violently. Dusty held his nose, forcing him to swallow it all. Weakly, Curly's hands came up, tried to push himself away from Dusty's grasp. Then, presently, the lean pilot's eyes fluttered open. Blank orbs stared up at Dusty. They cleared a bit, and the faint light of recognition seeped into them.

Dusty heaved a long thankful sigh, grinned.

"Yup!" he nodded. "It's yours truly."

Curly blinked a few more times, but didn't speak. With Dusty's help he worked himself up to a sitting position, rubbed his hand across the left side of his head, and groaned. Dusty saw the goose-egg and the blood-matted hair on the top of it.

"Take your hand down, kid," he said. "Here, let me look at it."

"Just a bump," Curly mumbled thickly, still rubbing. "Got clouted by a Black and—"

Brooks dropped his hand, turned toward Dusty.

"Say, what's the big idea?" he yelled with surprising energy. "How come you sent a Black receiving party to meet me? You damn fool, I followed your instructions, and damn near got killed!"

"Hey, hold it!" Dusty cut in. "What are you raving about? I didn't give you any instructions? I—o-o-oh, you mean about you and Biff tailing me? But, where's—"

"Biff and me tailing you, hell!" Curly snarled. "I mean about you contacting me on the radio—telling me to land on that damn ledge. Well, I did, and three Blacks jumped me. Hell, one of their slugs just grazed my chest! It glanced

off the buckle of my Sam Browne and knocked me kicking! Then they came down on me like three ton of bricks. The lights went out! And here I am. Now, what—"

"Hold it some more!" Dusty barked, and held out the brand glass. "Here, take another swallow. You're still out of your nut!"

Curly took a swallow, coughed over it and glared at his best friend.

"Out of my nut, am I?" he yelled, the blood rushing back to his cheeks. "Say! What is this, anyway?"

"Somebody's crazy," said Dusty. "And I feel all right. What do you mean, I gave you radio instructions to land on a ledge? What ledge—where?"

A puzzled look drove the anger from Curly's eyes. He stared hard at Dusty, started to speak a couple of times, but couldn't seem to find words. Dusty watched him anxiously, his eyes traveling unconsciously to the goose egg on Curly's head.

"You didn't get me on the radio?" Brooks finally questioned in a vacant tone. "Didn't tell me to land on that ledge—that snow-packed ledge between the third and fourth peak?"

"Of course I didn't, kid!" Dusty said in quick reply. "You've been having bad dreams. But how the hell did you get here?"

"Yeah, bad dreams!" murmured Curley thickly. Then, "Huh? Bad dreams, my eye! How'd I get here? On a tip from Jack. Came in your ship. You saw me, in the glasses. You contacted me. You told me where to land. You told me to wait. Then, wham-o—those tramps jumped me. That's how I got here! Now, how about telling me a few of the answers? Or haven't I been initiated enough yet?"

Dusty laid a hand on his arm.

"Pull up, kid, pull up!" he soothed. "Something's screwy—very screwy!"



**DUSTY
AYRES**

"I'll say!" Brooks growled. "Next time why not add Fire-Eyes to your welcoming committee?"

"For God's sake, pipe down!" Dusty snapped. "You're talking in circles. Hell, man, I didn't do any of the things you say I did. I've been a prisoner ever since I went down. I was shanghaied—shanghaied by none other than Zyttoff."

Dusty went on to tell in rapid sentences of his experience.

"And when I came out of it, and came into this room, I find you," he finished up.

Curly muttered a groan, went back to rubbing his head.

"It doesn't make sense!" he grunted. "I've heard your voice enough to be able to recognize it. It was you all right—but maybe it wasn't. Nuts and more nuts!"

Dusty scowled at the floor a few moments, then took hold of Curly's hand and pulled it away from his head.

"Listen, Curly," he began, "we've got to try and match things together—make something out of it all. Let's hear your story from the time I was attacked."

Brooks took time out to have another swallow of brandy. Then, clearing his throat, he told his story from beginning to end.

"At least it all checks with Jack's hunch," he grunted at the end. "While we've been sitting by the fire knitting, the Blacks have entrenched themselves—right in our own back yard, by God! Zyttoff? You're sure it's Zyttoff?"

Dusty shrugged.

"He said he was! And there's no reason to disbelieve him. But you say that Crandall died without leaving the real formula? Damn! The hell with that, now, though. A side issue, for the present. The point is the jam we're both in now. You shouldn't have come alone, Curly. Jack was right—should have organized a regular searching party."

"And it would probably have searched until hell froze over before it found this place!" Brooks bit off. "Our big question is where do we go from here?"

"We go no place, Curly, old kid!"

The two of them sat up straight. Curly gaped wide-eyed at Dusty.

"Your—your voice!" he choked out. "But but you didn't say anything. You didn't even open your mouth!"

Dusty hardly heard him. Speak? He knew damn well that he hadn't spoken. But he, too, had heard a voice say "We go no place, Curly, old kid!" A voice that was such a dead-ringer for his own, that for split seconds he wondered if he really was mistaken—if he really had spoken.

AND then from in back of him, he heard a soft chuckle. Whirling, he saw Zyttoff standing in the open doorway between the two rooms. The Black had a mile-wide grin on his good looking face, and his eyes were fairly dancing with merriment. In his right hand, however, was a very business-like looking Invader gas pistol.

Still grinning, Zyttoff advanced a step or two into the room.

"Vanity prevents me from keeping it a secret any longer," he said. "Yes, the art of imitating human voices has been one of my very few accomplishments, since childhood. It was I who deceived you, Lieutenant Brooks. But pleading the necessities of waging war, I state that I could do nothing else. You'll forgive me?"

Curly fixed him with a hard eye.

"Sure!" he grated. "Think nothing of it. You must do it for the wife and kid-dies sometime!"

Zyttoff arched his eyebrows, switching his gaze to Dusty's scowling face.

"And you, captain," he said, "you've learned your lesson, I hope? You certainly seem to enjoy forcing people to

kill you. It could have been other than paralytic gas, you know."

Dust said nothing. Hands locked on his crossed knees, he simply stared steadily at the Black. There wasn't much else he could do. It was entirely Zytov's party, and to all indications it would continue to be his party. On impulse, Dusty put his thought into words.

"What do we play at next?" he bit off.

The Black shrugged, made a waving motion with the gas pistol in his hand.

"I really haven't made up my mind on that point," he said. "You see, you have served your purpose—both of you—and frankly, I don't know if there are any other games we could play."

Curly stumbled to his feet, bunched his fists.

"Park that gas gun!" he growled, "and I'll play smacking-the-kisser with you—if you've got the nerve!"

"Skip it, kid!" Dusty barked, dragging him down on the cot. "General Baccalaureate here has got a lot more words on his chest. Okay, you, how come we've served our purpose? Got us all fixed for your private zoo, or something?"

"That's an idea," nodded the other smiling. "But I wonder how your memory is, captain? Remember speaking about Morgan and the new Metal-Meltic formula? Well, I guess there isn't any new formula, is there? Didn't Lieutenant Brooks just say so? But something a bit more important to me just now—Lieutenant Horner's men have got suspicious about this region in the Rockies, eh? That, my friend, was what I really did want to know!"

Zytov paused long enough to lick his lips, then went on.

"That was what I meant when I said that I brought you here in order to find out what your friends knew. And now that I have found out—and can take steps to throw off further discovery—both of

you cease to be of very much use to me.

"However, Lieutenant Brooks, I want you to know that I admire your courage and your sense of friendship for Captain Ayres. It's a pity that it led you to such disastrous results.

"You see, had you made ~~no~~ attempt to find the captain out here, I would have become convinced that our little secret hiding place was secret. Now I am forewarned, and ~~yes~~, exceedingly fore-armed!"

Had not Dusty kept a tight hold on Curly's arm, the lean pilot would have leaped to his feet and blindly flung himself at the grinning Black just inside the room. But Dusty jerked him back and gave his arm a meaning squeeze. With a muttered curse, Curly relaxed and sat clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Okay," Dusty nodded at Zytov. "I guess you win the first couple of rounds. But that isn't the whole fight, not by a damn sight. I don't know what kind of a layout you got here. And personally I don't give a damn. But it won't be worth a hoot in hell to you. And that's fact!"

"Brooks came after me but there are ten or fifteen thousand winged hard guys that will come after him. There's a couple of others who know just about where he is, and you can bet your sweet life they're not going to go to sleep on it. So pack up and drift, Zytov. I almost like you—that is, for an enemy—so take my tip, pack up and drift while you can!"

The Black bowed stiffly from the waist.

"Thank you, captain," he said. "But I don't think I will take your advice, you see, having heard you and Lieutenant Brooks compare notes. In this manner, incidentally.

Zytov cut himself off short, moved over to the far wall. Reaching out his free hand, he moved a panel so cleverly hidden in the wall that to all appearances

it looked like a part of the wall itself. In back of the panel, however, Dusty saw the receiving disc of a dictograph. Sight of it sent the blood to his cheeks, and in helpless rage he glanced at Curly Brooks. An expression of bitter chagrin was stamped on his pal's face.

"As I was saying," suddenly came Zyttoff's words, "having heard you and the lieutenant compare notes, I know exactly what to expect—and exactly what to do. No one knows where you are, captain. No one knows exactly, I mean.

"There are, however, one or two who have an idea where Lieutenant Brooks might be. For that reason it would be impractical for me to detain him here much longer. In other words, I believe that I shall return the lieutenant to his friends. And keep you for—shall we say, good measure?"

Dusty nodded grimly.

"Okay, with me," he grunted. "But you're going to be in for a big surprise, Zyttoff!"

"Yes?"

"Yes! Brooks will come back with the others and knock the hell out of this place. I'm telling him to do that right now!"

The Black smiled.

"Tell him anything you wish, captain," he said. "But it will do neither you nor him any good. When Lieutenant Brooks returns to his friends, he will not be able to remember where he has been. And if the miracle happens—if he should remember—he will remember what I say right now.

"The first American plane that we sight near this

particular spot will be our signal to kill you, Captain Ayres! And I promise you that it shall be done!"

Hardly had the man finished when there echoed out of the distance the crash of rifle fire.

CHAPTER TEN

K. O. Twins

AS ONE man, both Dusty and Curly leaped to their feet and stood rigid. Zyttoff, however, didn't move; didn't even bat an eyelash. Then he slowly smiled.

"Don't raise your hopes, gentlemen," he said quietly. "Those shots do not mean we are being attacked. On the contrary, they mean that my men have settled a little problem according to their own judgment."

Half turning, the Black snapped something through the open door in his native tongue. As though by magic, three burly Invader soldiers appeared, and in less than half a minute Dusty and Curly had their wrists bound tightly behind their backs. Zyttoff took a couple of seconds to examine the job, seemed satisfied and motioned toward the door leading into the room where Dusty woke up.

"Walk in there," he ordered. "And if you are wise, make no foolish moves. I'll not resort to paralysis gas next time, captain."

Heart like a lump of lead, Dusty led the way into the other room. Stepping



quickly around him, one of the guards moved over to the other door and jerked it open. It opened into a long corridor, dimly lighted. Zytovf nodded him through, behind the guard.

Along the corridor went the entire party, marching up a short flight of steps at the far end. At the top, the procession turned left, and finally went through another door that led into a large dome-shaped room.

At first, Dusty glanced around him casually. He was too troubled with his spinning thoughts to care much about where they were going. But suddenly, he stopped short and a sharp gasp escaped his lips.

The walls of the room were lined with airplane parts. There were at least fifty dismantled engines, countless wing sections and fuselages, glass cockpits cowlings, struts, tail sections, and everything else that goes into the complete airplane. In other words, the room was a well equipped airplane assembly depot.

"Interesting, isn't it?"

Dusty unconsciously turned to stare into Zytovf's grinning face. The Black made a waving motion with his hand.

"Now you see, captain, why I do not care to take your advice and drift, as you put it? My plans have gone too far for me to abandon them now."

Though the man had not said so in as many words, Dusty knew the meaning of it all. Right here in the heart of America, Zytovf had established a perfect secret air base. The task of burrowing into the Rockies seemed almost unbelievable of accomplishment. But—there about the room was proof that the unbelievable had been accomplished.

And at about the same instant, Dusty saw the mobile airplane catapult by the wall to his left. Zytovf, following his gaze, grinned and nodded his head.

"Taking off from the ledge outside

might be noticed," he said. "So we will catapult from inside the mountain. Look—what do you think of this little invention?"

The Black moved over to a row of levers, such as one sees in the switch house of a large railroad yard. He pulled one back, and there was instantly the whir of hidden gear wheels. And to Dusty's utter amazement the forward wall split into two pieces. Half of it lowered down into the floor, and the other half moved up into the ceiling.

Cold air rushed into the room. But Dusty hardly felt the change. Rooted to the spot, he stood gaping into the room beyond. It was a smaller room—more like a cave, as matter of fact, for there was no front side. It opened out onto a tree-fringed, snow-packed ledge.

Yet so cleverly placed was the opening that even though one was on the ledge the opening could not be seen behind the trees. They were a perfect shield, and permitted entrance to the cave-like room on the right side. There the trees had been removed, leaving an opening just big enough for an airplane to pass through.

All that, Dusty saw and realized in a couple of seconds. And then he saw something that made the blood pound against his temples. In the outer room, not over twenty-five yards from where he stood, was the Silver Flash.

The Flash! Seeing it there, hemmed in like a caged eagle, was almost more than he could stand. A savage curse rushed off his lips, and he would have moved toward it, had not one of the guards grabbed him and jerked him back. Zytovf laughed in his face.

"Sorry, captain," he chuckled. "But I guess that it is my plane now. I don't think that you'll be needing it any more. Rather an attractive show-piece in a museum, don't you think?"

Dusty didn't answer. He was too choked up to say anything. Though Curly had told him about landing, only now did he fully realize that the Flash was here in this damn place. It was almost as much of a jolt as finding Curly Brooks.

Then, he saw something else—another plane beyond the Silver Flash. It was a big, all-red monoplane pursuit. And as he looked at it, he knew instinctively that it was the plane in which Zytovff had kidnaped him.

One thing in particular caught his attention and held it. Just back of the cockpit were two tanks built into the top of the fuselage. From each tank a pipe ran back the full length of the fuselage, up the fin to the top of the rudder where it flanged out.

Instantly, there appeared in Dusty's brain a picture of blue hell spewing out across night-darkened skies, and once again he felt terrific heat—terrific heat that seemed to sear him from head to foot. He also thought of the three valve knobs he had seen at the rear of the cockpit.

"A crude arrangement, I'll have to admit," Zytovff's voice broke in on his thoughts. "But in the time allowed I think I did a rather good job of it. A shame that Major Crandall did not leave either of us the complete formula. I shall have to go sparingly with what there is left in the tanks. That is, until my own engineers and chemists work out a new formula. By the way, they tell me that it will not be difficult."

Though he felt far from it, Dusty forced a grin on his lips.

"Yeah?" he snorted. "And what do you think we'll be doing in the meantime?"

Zytovff shrugged.

"Working on it too, I suppose," he said quietly. "But even if you are successful, too, we will still have the advan-

tage, I'm afraid. Yes, with this perfect starting point for raids, once the snow goes we will be able to inflict considerable damage from within. You follow me?"

DUSTY did, and only too well. Secretly entrenched as Zytovff and his gang were, they could smash into the very vitals of the U. S. and get away with it, too. The Metal-Meltic angle was only a small part of the man's general plan of operation. By good fortune he had stumbled upon it and would make us of it only because it happened to fit in with the general scheme of things.

A secret air base, right here in the very heart of the Rockies! The thought slammed and banged around inside Dusty's brain, as he stood gazing helplessly about. The Black Hawk had been a clever devil. Ekar had been even more clever. But neither of them could hold a candle to the smooth cunning of this one—of Zytovff. What hellish plans lay behind those twinkling eyes of his, only God knew.

At that moment a group of Black Invader pilots, carrying a limp figure between them, entered in at the right corner of the other room. Marching to the rear they dumped their burden on the floor, and then one of them came up to Zytovff, saluted and spoke rapidly in his native tongue.

Zytovff answered with a short nod, and turned to Dusty and Curly.

"They fired those shots you heard," he smiled. "One of my men became just a little bit too ambitious. He took off in my plane, there, late yesterday afternoon. True, he claimed that he destroyed an American plane with the Metal-Meltic. But one plane is too costly. Rather than pass judgment on him myself, I allowed my men to act as the court. They—they pronounced the death sentence on him.

And he has paid for his unwarranted ambition."

"Corbin, of the Twentieth! The one whose S.O.S. I picked up!"

Dusty hardly heard the sharp cry from Curly's lips. His complete attention was riveted on Zyttoff, and for the first time he was beginning to realize the sense of utter ruthlessness in the man's make-up. The grinning lips, the twinkling eyes, and the pleasant mannerism all went to cover up the deadly inner nature of the man.

To gain his end Zyttoff would go to all limits, regardless. Hell yes, only such a man as he could have engineered the establishing of this secret air base—right in the heart of enemy country. Cunning, fearless, and deadly beyond words to describe.

"And I was beginning to almost consider you a white man!" Dusty grated at him. "I should have known better!"

The Black took it without a single show of anger.

"You should have known better in reference to many things," he replied evenly. "I believe in getting things done. Mercy and consideration are only a means toward the fulfillment of what you wish to accomplish. And now—"

There was a wild shout at the far end of the room. A door slammed open and a thin, iron-gray haired little man came dashing through it. He was waving strained hands crazily about, and shrill sounds were pouring out of a cadaverous looking mouth. For a second he pulled up short, then seeing Zyttoff, he came scuttling over, still waving both hands and still shrilling at the top of his voice.

Whatever he was saying had a tremendous effect upon Zyttoff, for he clapped the man on the back, and spoke to him in what sounded to Dusty as a tone of wild praise. Then giving the man a push, he sent him scuttling back across the room

again, and turned beaming eyes on the two Yanks.

"Good news, gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "That was my chief chemist. He came to tell me that he and his associates have worked out the formula, and that no part of it is any longer a secret. I am so pleased that I believe I'll let you see for yourselves. Neither of you would benefit by it anyway."

A nod at the waiting guards put them to work. They immediately took hold of Dusty and Curly and marched them forward in the wake of Zyttoff who was already striding toward the door through which the chemist had disappeared.

Sick at heart, unable to collect his thoughts, Dusty allowed the guard to shove him forward without any resistance. Like a man going to his doom, he stumbled through the doorway and down a short corridor to a door at the far end.

The door was open, and through it he saw a well-appointed chemical laboratory. Zyttoff was already in the room and in excited conversation with three other figures, one of whom was the little old man. They were bending over two small tanks with a pet-cock opening at one end. Two feet away, in a stone tray, was a small pile of junk metal—scraps of dural, brass, and steel and iron.

For a few seconds the little old man talked and gesticulated with his hands. Then motioning the others back, he reached out and twisted the pet-cocks the fraction of a hair.

Instantly there was a sort of whistling hissing sound, and from out of each pet-cock came a tiny thread of blue gas. At a point a couple of inches from the pile of metal the two blue threads mingled with each other, and became a sort of shimmering blue spray that slithered down over the metal.

The transformation that took place on that stone tray was almost instantaneous.

Like a lump of butter struck by the flame of a blow torch, the dural, brass, steel, and iron scraps shriveled up and became a discolored pool that smoked and sputtered. With a wild cry, the little old man shut off both pet-cocks and turned triumphant eyes on Zytovff.

The Black commander nodded his enthusiasm, and into his face came a look that turned Dusty's heart to a lump of ice. It was the look of a man gone completely mad with triumph—and for the moment completely stripped of all humane traits and characteristics.

But the look was gone in almost no time, and when Zytovff turned toward Dusty his expression had returned to normal.

"You see?" he said, nodding toward the hissing pool of molten metal. "You see what we have accomplished?"

Dusty said nothing, nor did Curly, either. At the moment, there wasn't anything that they could say. Trapped—prisoners where they could only be found by a miracle—witnessing with their own eyes a victory that they would have glad-

ly have given their lives to prevent—they were both speechless with frustration.

"YOUR silence is most gratifying!" came Zytovff's voice again. "It is a greater compliment than anything you could say in words. And now, there are many things to be done. I must arrange for your trip back, Lieutenant Brooks. The captain, I believe I will detain as my guest for a while longer. There are others who may wish to see him in person."

Dusty looked at Curly.

"Never mind me, kid," he said. "You know what you're to do. The hell with me! Get it? The hell with me!"

Zytovff cut in before Curly could say anything. He spoke as he shook his head.

"There is nothing that he could do for you, captain. Perhaps I did not make myself plain. When Lieutenant Brooks returns to his friends, he will remember nothing. It will be the same as awakening from a sound sleep."

"Nuts!" Dusty cut in harshly.

"Perhaps," was the quiet comment. "But when Lieutenant Brooks recovers from the effects of the sleep gas I shall administer to him, he will have no memory of what has taken place. In fact, it is doubtful if he will have any memory of anything in his life. It will be as though he were reborn and starting life anew."

"Wonderful!" Dusty snapped at him. "I suppose you thought it all up by yourself. You're just full of inventions, aren't you? What do you think this is, the year three thousand, or something?"

Zytovff smiled.

"I don't think, I know, captain," he said. But we are wasting time. Say good-bye to your friend, and then the guard will take you back—to your rooms."

Dusty glanced at Curly. But Brooks was not looking at him. The lean pilot's eyes were riveted on a table near the



CURLY BROOKS

wall. On the table were several charts and sheets of paper covered with figures and notations.

A quick look at them made Dusty's heart leap. Maybe he was wrong—but were those papers the original formula, with the additional findings of the Black chemist?

As the thought flashed to him, he saw Curly take a quick step forward and kick out with his right foot. It hit the edge of the table, tipped it up, and the papers on the top went sliding off—sliding off and down into the stone tray of molten metal.

The little gray-haired chemist screamed insanely and tried to dash forward. Instantly Dusty thrust out his foot, tripped the man and sent him flying.

Zytoff roared and slashed at Dusty with all his might. Though off balance the Yank was able to roll a bit with the blow. But not enough. He felt as though the base of his skull had been split wide open.

Through a red blaze he saw the Black guards pounding Curly Brooks down onto his knees. And he also saw the Black chemist striving to claw burning papers from out of the stone tray of molten metal. But even as the Black touched them they became charred powder in his hand.

And then the red haze deepened before his eyes—blotted out everything, and he knew that he was falling over backward, flat on the floor.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hell's Passageway

SHARP stinging pains shooting through his face brought Dusty back to consciousness. Opening his eyes, he saw Curly bending over him. The lean pilot was methodically smacking him first on one cheek and then on the other with the

flat of his hand. Dusty groaned, twisted to one side.

"Hey, easy!" he muttered. "I'm okay."

Curly stopped, helped Dusty up to a sitting position. Getting a grip on himself Dusty looked about. They were in an empty room that contained nothing but a single door. On the floor next to him were lengths of chewed rope. As he raised his eyes from the rope to Curly's face, his pal nodded.

"Broke every fingernail and most of my teeth," Brooks said. "But we're free until they come back, anyway."

Dusty was still in a haze.

"How'd we get here?" he grunted. "I thought you passed out, too."

"Almost, but not quite," replied Curly. "They were more excited about trying to save those papers. By God, I really think that we've put them back at scratch again. They must have been the formula!"

"Let's hope so!" Dusty muttered thickly. "And my hats off to you, Curly. Hell, I'd have never thought of that. But I can't understand why either of us is still alive!"

As he spoke he looked at the door. Curly followed his gaze.

"And it's not locked," he said with startling suddenness. "It's unlocked, and it leads out into some kind of a corridor. They lugged us back and tossed us in here. I was a bit groggy, but I think that we're on the same level as that assembly room. I don't recall their lugging us down any stairs."

Dusty started to get up, then sank back again with a puzzled frown.

"Wonder what the trick is?" he murmured softly. "No guards, and a door that's unlocked. That sounds just a wee bit screwy to me. Say, how long have we been here anyway?"

"About an hour, as near as I can judge," replied Brooks. Then, "Well—shall we stick around? What the hell do

you think I woke you up for, Dusty?"

Dusty pushed himself up on his feet, leaned against the wall a couple of seconds, then moved toward the door.

"Okay," he said. "If it's a trick, we might as well find out what it's all about. Come on!"

Curly tagging his heels, he reached the door, opened it a foot or so, and stuck his head out. Nothing greeted him but an empty corridor. He hesitated a couple of seconds, then pulled the door open wide and stepped out into the corridor.

No crash of a gun, and no roar of a voice calling to him to halt. Silence, and a lot of it. Halfway along the right side of the corridor was another door. Shrugging, he moved toward it.

When he reached it, he stopped and stood listening intently. But he couldn't hear a single thing. He glanced at Curly. Brooks grimaced and arched his eyebrows.

"Try it," he whispered.

The door knob yielded to Dusty's touch. He twisted it and slowly pushed the door open. If he expected to see something unusual, he was very much disappointed. There was a room beyond the door—a room as completely empty as the one they had just left.

With a grunt he released his grip on the doorknob and continued on down the corridor to a door at the far end. Its knob did not yield to his touch, however. It didn't twist the fraction of an inch, and when he put the pressure of his shoulder against the door, he realized that it was heavily bolted on the other side. Straightening up, he gave Curly a twisted smile.

"That's that!" he said. "Didn't have to put a guard on us. We're locked up tight as a drum. But I still can't figure why we're still alive."

"Maybe, he thinks we're still valuable

to him," Curly shrugged. "Though I'm damned if I can see it."

Dusty stood glaring at the bolted door.

"I can make a wild guess, now that I think it over," he said, as though talking to himself. "If the bum wasn't kidding about being able to gas you so that you'd wake up without any memory—and I'm inclined to believe everything he says—he probably intends to carry on with the job. It would work out perfect for him."

"How come?" frowned Curly. "I don't follow you. Jack and Biff still know that I headed for the Montana Rockies."

"Quite true," said Dusty. "But look at it this way—supposing you were picked up wandering around a thousand miles from here? You couldn't remember what happened—to you or to the ship. Don't you see—it would look as though you'd run into trouble a thousand miles from here. Damned if I know just how to put it in words. I—"

"I guess I get you," Curly interrupted. "It would be cockeyed enough for Jack to forget the Rocky Mountain angle for awhile, eh?"

"Something like that," nodded Dusty. Then through tightly drawn lips, "But assuming it's all on the schedule, we've got to beat them to it—got to get out of here. I think that what you did in the laboratory has given us an added bit of time. It's knocked them out of stride, I guess."

"Yeah!" echoed Curly gloomily. "But what do we do, now? Hell, what can we do?"

Dusty didn't reply. The germ of a thought was flitting around at the back of his brain; a tiny thread of memory that he was striving desperately to recall. He knew instinctively that it should have a very definite bearing on their present situation and immediate plans for changing it. Closing his eyes tight, he concen-

trated on snaring the illusive thought germ.

And then, suddenly, out of a clear sky it came to him. He spun around, grabbed Curly's arm and started dragging him back down the corridor. At the half open door he stopped, looked inside with heart thumping against his ribs. A second later he heaved a long sigh of thankfulness, pulled Curly into the room and shut the door.

"Say," began Curly, "what—"

"Shut up!" Dusty clipped. "I think I've found the way out. When they nailed me with paralytic gas in that other room, the gas came in through the ventilator—one just like that one up there. Get it? There's just the hope that we can wiggle through it and get out."

Curly's eyes opened wide, and his body trembled as he looked at the ventilator opening high up on the opposite wall.

"Is—do you think it's big enough?" he asked, as though reluctant to speak the words.

"It's got to be!" said Dusty grimly. "Come on—no wait a second!"

Turning back toward the door, he slid home a bolt that was on the inside.

"We may be able to use the time it will take them to break it in," he said. "Now, up with you, kid. I'll pull myself up after you're in."

Curly shook his head.

"You'd never be able to make it," he said. "Nix—up you go, and I'll try to entertain them as long as I can when they come."

Dusty grabbed him, shoved him toward the wall.

"Don't be a fool!" he hissed. "Up with you, dammit! Don't worry, I'll make it!"

BEFORE Curly had a chance to continue the argument, Dusty linked his fingers under Brooks' right foot and heaved upward. It was simple for Curly

to cup his fingers over the lip of the ventilator and pull himself through. The moment he was entirely inside, Dusty backed over the door, steadied himself a moment, then took three quick, springy steps and leaped up, hands flung upward and forward.

For a split second his body hung poised in mid-air, then it dropped. At that instant Dusty's fingers found the lip of the ventilator opening. His body crashed up against the wall, and he felt that his arms were being pulled from their sockets. But with eyes closed and teeth clenched he hung on for grim life.

When the pendulum movement of his body stopped, he sucked in his breath and pulled himself upward inch by inch. Finally he was able to crook his right forearm over the lips of the ventilator. Presently he had his left forearm up, and he was gasping for breath, head and shoulders inside the dark opening and the rest of him dangling into the room behind.

Something struck against his face. It was Curly's foot. Then he heard the soft whisper.

"Grab hold of it—I'll pull you the rest of the way."

Shifting his body he linked the fingers of one hand about Curly's ankle, and pushed out with the other for bracing support. Then began some of the toughest moments of his entire life.

Every muscle in his body seemed to be drawn as taut as a piano wire, and every bone in his body seemed ready to snap in two at the very next second. But finally, though, the fact that he was stretched out flat on rough pine boards, and completely inside the ventilator opening pierced itself through his brain. Curly's anxious whisper was drifting back to him.

"Okay? Are you okay, kid? You let go of my foot!"

"Yeah, I guess so," Dusty heard himself whisper. "Can you see anything up ahead?"

During the moment or two of silence that followed, Dusty raised his head and tried to peer past Curly's body in front of him. But it was too dark to see anything. By feeling around he knew that they were in a two-by-three-foot boarded shaft. Somewhere far up ahead, the shaft came out of the mountain. At least he figured that such must be the case, for he could feel cold air blowing against his cheek. Then Curly's voice came softly back to him.

"Can't see a thing, yet. There's some sort of a light ahead, though. Okay?"

Dusty nodded in the darkness, rapped his knuckles against the sole of Curly's boot.

"Get going," he whispered. "But not too fast."

Unable to get all the way up on his hands and knees, Dusty raised himself up as much as the confined quarters would allow, and started crawling after Curly.

Progress was painfully slow, and when several moments later Dusty twisted his head and succeeded in looking back along the shaft, he calculated that they were not more than twenty yards from their starting point.

He did notice, however, that the shaft sloped gradually upward. That fact jacked up his hopes. Perhaps this shaft was separated from the others and led straight outside. He hoped like hell that it did.

Regardless of the fact that their predicament would be little changed—they'd be marooned far up the side of a snow-covered mountain, with God knew how many miles between them and help—it would be something just to be in the open air again. Maybe they'd even see the sun. There must be a sun shining somewhere.

Scraps of crazy, disjointed thoughts

rambling through his head, he continued to crawl forward a few inches at a time. Repeatedly he ran his face up against one of Curly's feet. In the heavy, almost stifling darkness it was practically impossible to maintain a pace steady with that of Curly up ahead.

Presently, without warning, he rammed his head up against something that wasn't shoe leather. It was hard, and immovable, and contact with it made stars whirl before his eyes.

Choking back the curse that came to his lips he felt ahead with one hand, and touched a solid vertical beam. He felt nothing to the right of it, nor to the left.

"Curly!" he hissed. "Where are you?"

"Right here!" came the answer. "What's the trouble?"

Dusty placed his pal's voice to the left, and ahead. Instantly he realized what it was all about. They had reached a point in the shaft where another shaft joined it, or else it joined the other.

Curly had continued on to the left, but he had banged his head up against the intersection post. He heard Curly wiggling back toward him. He reached out and stopped his pal's feet when they were but inches from his face.

"What's wrong, Dusty?"

"The shaft forks here, did you know that?"

There was the sharp intake of breath from Curly.

"Hell no! Must have missed it completely. Which one do you want to take? I can still see a bit of light way up ahead in this one. I think it curves to the left."

"Okay then," Dusty whispered. "Go on—"

He bid down hard on the rest, grabbed Curly's foot as a signal not to move. At that moment from somewhere far down the right-hand shaft came a weird sound.

It was so faint that he wondered for a second if his ears were playing him

tricks. The sound was something like a shrill scream coming from far, far away. Not a continuous sound though. It appeared to break itself off repeatedly—short, jerky, yet always the same note.

"You hear that, Curly?"

"Hear what? I can't hear a damn thing!"

"Then shut up!" hissed Dusty. "Let me listen some more."

RELAXING his body, he tried to peer ahead in the pitch-dark shaft, and strained his ears to pick up the eerie sound again. For a full minute he didn't hear a thing save the thumping of his own heart. And then, he did—heard it plainly and distinctly—and this time the sound of it sent the blood surging through his veins.

"Curly!" he whispered excitedly. "We go along this shaft to the right. 'I'm going in now. Back up and follow me!"

Shoving to the side with his hands, Dusty pushed his body into the right shaft. When he was completely in it, he stopped and twisted his head so that his whispered words could carry down past his body.

"You set, kid?"

A hand grabbed his ankle and squeezed.

"Okay! But, why this way? What's up?"

"Listen!" Dusty hissed. "Can you hear it now?"

He pressed himself against the side, as though in doing so he'd make it possible for the faint sound up ahead to get past his body to Curly's ears. A couple of moments later, came Curly's startled gasp. "God! Unless I'm hearing

things, that's a high-speed wireless set in action!"

"You're dead right!" Dusty whispered back. "And that gives me a whole lot of swell ideas. Come on—we're going to town!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

S.O.S. Emergency!

WITHOUT waiting for Curly to make further comment, Dusty started crawling forward again as quickly and as silently as he could. Though it was pitch dark he realized that the shaft swung to the right and downward. There it leveled off and seemed to slope upward again.

Every so often he stopped, checked the sound, which was getting louder and louder, and waited for Curly to bump into his feet before moving on again.

Once when he stopped, he didn't hear the sound. And for a moment his heart stood still for fear that he'd done what Curly did—gone right on past an intersection and not realized it. But when he heard it once more—now a clear high-keyed whine—he let out a grunt of marked relief and continued on.

Bump!

In the darkness he had blindly kept right on going until he had hit the wall of the turn with his head. Twisting to the right, he glanced ahead and promptly forgot the lingering pain in his head.

About twenty yards from him the shaft was cut by an oblong of yellow light. In other words, there was a ventilator opening connect-





DUSTY CAME PILING DOWN ON THE BLACK

ing it with some room. And from that room, up through the ventilator and along the shaft, came the jerky whine of a high speed wireless set.

Twenty yards—sixty feet—and then what?

Inch by inch he wormed his way forward the last few feet, and then flattening out on his stomach, he peered cautiously around the edge of the ventilator opening. He found himself looking into a complete radio and wireless signal station.

To his right, diligently bent over a high-speed key, was a figure in the uniform of a Black Invader. Over his head was a set of receiving phones, and as he tapped the key with one hand, he adjusted instruments in front of him with the other.

To the Black's left, and almost opposite Dusty's position, was a door to the room. It was open a couple of inches, and as Dusty squinted past the opening his heart looped over. Beyond was the big domed airplane assembly room!

Because of the small opening and the angle at which he was looking into the domed room, he was unable to see whether the movable front was opened or not. At the moment, though, he didn't much care. The object of immediate importance was the Black crouched over the wireless key.

Holding his breath, Dusty stuck his head out into the room and glanced quickly straight downward. About two feet down the wall was a voltage meter. At least, in the split second he allowed himself, that's what he judged it to be.

He was content that it was at least something solid upon which he could brace a foot when he flung himself the six short feet of air space that separated him from the Black.

Pulling his head back into the shaft, he twisted as much as he could and groped back with one of his hands, at the same time jack-knifing his knees. Curly's hand

resting on one of his feet came up with it. He grabbed the hand, and using a tight squeeze for a dash and a short light squeeze for a dot, he signaled D-O-N-T M-O-V-E in International Morse. As he stopped Curly squeezed O-K-E in reply.

Freeing his hand, Dusty twisted silently over on his side, caught hold of the near edge of the ventilator opening with both his hands, and pulled himself forward until his head and shoulders were out into the room.

Every instant of the time he kept his eyes glued on the figure at the key—and every split second of the time he breathed a fierce prayer that the Black's ear-phones would shut off any outside sounds.

Holding himself from spilling into the room by his right hand, he doubled his body, drew his left leg up under him, and got it out into the room. He was now in the position of a high jumper going over the bar in what is known as the Western Roll. Further twisting his body made it possible for for him to get his left foot down on the top of the voltage meter.

But as he did that, the Black stopped tapping the key, pulled the phones from his ears and started to turn around. Jet-black eyes, heavy from want of sleep, met Dusty's.

For an instant they blinked in half stupid amazement, then went wide with wild alarm. What they did after that, Dusty didn't know. His body was catapulting through space, and his eyes were riveted on the fang-toothed mouth that was opening to let out a mighty roar. It did let out the first part of it, and then a frenzied American came piling down on its owner—with the force of a catapulted ton of bricks.

As he plowed down on the man, Dusty shoved upward and forward with his hands. He felt leathery skin between his clawing fingers, locked them in it and squeezed with every ounce of his strength.

The momentum of the drop, however, was too great for him to maintain his hold. His hands were torn loose, and the arm of the Black's chair smashed against his shoulder and twisted him over on his side. For a couple of seconds his whole arm from wrist to shoulder socket went completely numb.

Squirming underneath him, half jammed against the floor and the radio table, the Black suddenly gave a hoarse, choking grunt and heaved up like a cat arching its back. Through a filming haze Dusty saw a rage-twisted face glaring up at him, saw a hammerhead fist, rushing for his head.

In that infinitesimal period of time that his brain took to register that fact, he knew that he would not be able to avoid that plunging fist—knew that it was going to catch him square on the jaw with the force of the Chicago-New York streamlined express.

And then, something very queer happened. The plowing fist stopped short in mid-air, dropped down out of sight. And the rage-twisted face took on a dull and vacant expression.

The eyes actually fluttered closed and the jaw sagged open. And it was just about a couple of seconds after that, Dusty realized the fact that Curly Brooks was pulling him up on his feet. The knuckles of Curly's right fist were bleeding. There were blood marks on the limp Black's jaw.

Swaying as he tried to steady himself against the wireless table, Dusty gaped foolishly at his pal. Once again Curly had played Johnny - on - the - spot and saved him from a lot of trouble. Right now, Curly

was occupied with shutting the door, and sliding a bolt into place. He came right back, lips twisted in a half grin.

"Swell idea!" he whispered. "But your execution was just a bit lousy. Glad I was along."

By now Dusty was fully recovered from his wild plunge down onto the floor.

"Yeah!" he nodded vigorously. "So'm I. Thanks. I'll do the same for you some-time."

As he talked, he swept his eyes about the room, spotted the radio transmitter on the far side. Turning back to Curly, he pointed at the Black stretched out on the floor.

"Take his gun, and watch him!" he said. "This is what we're here for. I'm going to send out an S.O.S. Emergency. No matter what may happen to us, we've got to let the others know."

Curly nodded grimly, didn't speak. It was no time for that kind of talk now. He simply bent over and took the holstered gun away from the unconscious Black.

Then, after a split second's mental debate, he reversed the gun in his hand and slammed the butt down on the Black's right temple. Then he went over and took up a position by the door.



IN the meantime, Dusty had leaped across the room to the radio transmitter, and was feverishly snapping on contact switches and spinning the wave-length and volume dials. Then with fingers that trembled he scooped up the transmitter tube from out of its cradle.

"S.O.S. Emergency — all American stations!" he barked into it. "This is a

general alarm from Captain Ayres. Black Invaders have established a secret assembly airdrome near M-Twenty Six in the Rocky Mountains. Send planes and troop transports to capture and destroy it at once. Personal to Agent 10 or X-Thirty-four at Washington H.Q. Enemy has discovered secret of Metal-Meltic. Exert every effort to destroy their hiding place near M-Twenty Six. Look for snow-packed shelf with trees. S.O.S. Emergency! For God's sake send all help possible. We've captured the radio-room, but I don't know how long we can—"

There was an exploding sound in the set, and the green signal light to the left of the panel winked out. At the same time every one of the recording dial needles dropped back to the zero peg.

One sweeping glance and Dusty knew that the set had been put out of commission from the outside—undoubtedly from an adjoining power-room.

He dropped the transmitter tube back into the cradle, and turned around toward Curly.

"Cut off before a check-back could come through," he grunted. "All we can do now is hope. I guess they're wise to what's happened."

Brooks shrugged, fingered the gun he held in his hand.

"We could make a run for it," he said with a side nod toward the door. "I'll go first and use this—maybe you'll be able to get through. Even if one of us—"

He stopped as Dusty shook his head.

"No?"

"No!"

"Well, think up a better idea then! It's a cinch we can't just sit here."

"Why not?" Dusty broke in quietly. "They're—by God, holding everything!"

With a startling suddenness that caused Curly Brooks to scowl at him darkly, Dusty bounded across the room,

and dropped down on his hands and knees by a big four-foot box under a table in the corner. The heavy lid to the box was not locked, and with a grunt he flung it up open. Looking inside, he let out a whoop of joy.

"Are they good to us!" he exclaimed. "Look, Curly—see what Santa has left for us!"

Curly bounded over, and stared down into the box. Its contents consisted of half a dozen sub-machine guns practically all assembled and ready for use. Only the stocks needed to be locked into place. And as Dusty dived in with both hands and unsnapped one of the cartridge drums, they both saw that it was completely loaded—loaded with wicked looking slugs!

"Well, I'll be—"

Curly's exclamation died on his lips. From beyond the door a machine gun snarled into life, and hissing steel came slicing through the wood as though it were so much cheese. Dusty felt something tug at his left sleeve as he dropped flat and pulled Curly down on top of him.

"Roll, kid!" he snapped. "Roll to the left!"

His sharp order was unnecessary. Curly was already rolling over and over and out of line with the door. Dusty followed him, then flattened out and reached back for the machine-gun case.

As more steel slugs cut through the wood of the door and finished up in instruments and meters fitted to the back wall, he pulled the case close, reached in and took out the parts of two guns. A stock and a barrel he gave to Curly, who accepted it without a word and promptly put it together. A stock and a barrel he kept for himself, and did the same thing.

"Now!" he grated softly, swinging the muzzle of the gun around to bear on the splintered and cracked door, "let 'em try to come and get us!"

As though his words were a sort of signal to those outside, the firing stopped, and the voice of Zytovff came through to them.

"You have sealed your doom, you two dogs!" he roared. "You will never leave there alive!"

"That's okay with us, just as long as you join the party!" Dusty shouted back. "I told you, Zytovff, that you were riding for a surprise! And it'll be here, right soon!"

A loud booming laugh greeted his words.

"You poor fool! Do you think for an instant that your message got through to anyone?"

Dusty winked at Curly's tight-lipped expression.

"Of course not!" he called back. "You only put the set out of commission just to see if you could, didn't you? Why you poor boob, think up another one!"

THAT remark was greeted by another savage burst of machine-gun fire, and the instrument-covered wall some ten or twelve feet from where the two Yanks crouched became splintered and shattered shambles. Out the corner of his eye, Dusty saw Curly level his gun, start to crook his finger on the trigger. He reached out and knocked the gun down.

"Nix, kid, nix!" he hissed. "What they don't know is duck soup for us! They may try to rush us—then that'll be our time to let drive. We've got to stall for time—got to let them wonder whether we're armed or not. Don't let on until we have to!"

Curly relaxed his grip on the gun and his eyes unconsciously wandered up toward the ventilator opening. Dusty saw the look that came into them, and knew instantly what Brooks was thinking about

—would the blacks try to gas them through the ventilator opening?

Dusty doubted it—doubted it very much. The shaft was empty, and it would take a lot of precious time to lead a hose through; have one of them crawl through with it.

The shaft in that other room, the room where he had been gassed, must have been shorter, or at least considerably more accessible than this one. Nope! It was a million to one that Zytovff would not try to gas them.

"Not a chance," he spoke his thoughts aloud to Curly. "They don't dare take the time. Besides, they know I'd be wise to them this time. And another thing, the draft is toward that door they've been smacking—they'd get a few whiffs out there."

"Captain Ayres!"

The voice of Zytovff came through the door.

"Captain Ayres! I'm willing to bargain with you. Come out of there, both of you, and I promise to spare your lives. Remain, and you will die!"

The two Yanks looked at each other, each with a puzzled glint in his eyes. Their thoughts at the moment were the same. How come Zytovff was getting big hearted? How come he was willing to permit them to live? It was Dusty who spoke that thought aloud.

"What's the big idea, Zytovff?" he shouted. "Why not come in and get us? That'll be more fun for you!"

"Your answer!" thundered the Black. "Do you wish to save your lives and come out—my sacred promise on that—or do you wish to remain and die? My most sacred promise on that, too. Speak up—which shall it be?"

Dusty didn't answer directly. A heavy scowl on his face, he tried to figure Zytovff's reason for wanting them to leave the room. Rather, why was he so keen

about it, that he was willing to spare their lives?

The Black knew that their call for help had gone out over the air. His bluff remark to them had fallen flat. Therefore he must know that American planes were right now churning air toward the spot. Did he think that the place was so well hidden that the relief pilots would not spot it? Or—

"Got it!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Hell yes, of course!"

"Got what?" Curly snapped at him.

Dusty leaned close to him, hardly spoke above a whisper.

"The radio is on the blink, but the wireless is still okay! That's what he wants to get in for. Wants to send out for a bit of help himself. Don't you see—they haven't got enough of their planes assembled yet and he doesn't dare pull out with what he has got. The wireless set—that's what he wants! Quick—slide over to that opposite corner!"

As he spoke the last he gave Curly a shove. The lean pilot scuttled across the floor to the corner indicated. Dusty followed at his heels, twisted around and raised his sub-machine gun.

"Hey, Zytovf!" he shouted, cupping one hand to his lips so as to offset the direction of his voice. "Hey, you out there!"

"Your answer!" came back the thundering words. "I will count five!"

"Save your breath, sweetheart!" Dusty hurled back at him. "The wireless set is a swell target—lots of glass to break! Listen!"

Dusty squeezed the trigger of the sub-machine gun and swung the gun back and forth. Flame and clattering

sound spurted from the muzzle and the wireless instruments on the side wall jumped and jerked, splintered and shattered, and went spilling down onto the floor in small pieces.

"That's our answer!" Dusty roared as he ceased firing. "And my original tip still goes—pack up and drift, you bum!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Cyclone Ace

UTTER silence greeted Dusty's taunting remark. Though both Yanks strained their ears they heard not a single sound from beyond the bullet-shattered door.

For three full minutes everything remained as still as death, and then suddenly there came to them a familiar noise that jerked them both up straight. It was the noise of an airplane engine roaring into life. Like a streak of light Dusty was up on his feet.

"We were right, kid!" he yelled. "It was the wireless set. Now they're taking French leave!"

"Or maybe to signal from the air!" Curly put in. "Hey, don't be a dope—some of them may still be waiting out there!"

Dusty stopped short, hugged close to the near wall.

"Maybe you're right," he said under his breath. "But the job isn't done yet—we even can't let him get away. We've got to hold them here, bottled up, until the others arrive. Here, give me a hand!"



With quick movements Dusty darted across the room, grabbed hold of the unconscious radio operator and dragged the limp figure over next to the door. Hooking his gun arm around the man he reached out his other hand and slid back the bolt. Then he twisted back to Curly.

"This egg goes first!" he whispered. "He draws the fire, then we dive through. The front of that room must be to the left. And it's open, or we wouldn't have heard that plane. Let drive at anything you see. Okay?"

Curly tightened his lips.

"Okay, kid!"

Twisting back, Dusty shifted his arm holding the Black. Then pushing the splintered door, he wedged his toe in the crack, and swayed back against the wall. A quick shoving kick of his foot and the door slammed open.

In the same split second he hurled the form of the radio operator through the opening. Instantly, clatter of machine-gun and rifle fire broke out.

Crouched low behind the Black, Dusty sensed the man's body twisting and jerking. But he himself was already in motion—diving head first through the doorway, sub-machine gun flung out in front of him.

One flash glance of a domed room and of walls lined with semi-assembled airplane parts, then he saw a group of figures crouched down on the floor to his left. In one movement he swung the gun and squeezed the trigger. At practically the same instant he crashed down onto the floor. But he hardly felt the pains that went shooting through his body. He was only conscious of the crouching group scurrying for cover—of their flinging up their hands and sprawling down to lay still as the steel slugs from his chattering gun slashed and tore into them.

A moment later, though, he was con-

scious of another gun banging out sound practically inside his head. He half twisted and saw Curly's gun not six inches from his head slapping out sound and flame straight ahead. As he twisted back he saw an iron-gray-haired little man spin around like a top and drop flat. Three other Blacks in back of him went down like ten-pins.

So fast had the action been that everything was but a flashing general picture—no time for minute details. But as Dusty twisted over to take up a position behind an engine crate, he suddenly cut short his movement and plunged to his knees with a roaring curse.

The front side of the domed room was opened, as he had guessed. And right now an all-red monoplane with prop ticking over, was taxiing swiftly toward the opening past the sheltering trees on the right side. Through the opening he could see some Dart pursuits swinging around on the snow packed shelf to take off.

Those two facts, however, were not the cause of his roaring curse. On the contrary, it was sight of a figure running toward another plane. Running toward his plane, the Silver Flash!

Totally oblivious to stray bullets that crackled and whined past his ears, Dusty lunged to his feet and started racing madly across the wood floor of the domed room.

"Like hell you will! Like hell you will!"

He drowned out his own words when he squeezed the trigger of his gun. The Black tearing toward the Flash—Dusty realized that it wasn't Zytovff—started dodging this way and that, zigzagging in a frantic attempt to keep clear of Dusty's hissing hail of steel.

That he, himself, was being shot at, Dusty didn't even realize, so intent was he upon the Black thirty yards away.

He didn't even feel the invisible fingers

that plucked at the loose folds of his flying suit. He simply kept the trigger squeezed and tried desperately to bring the gun to bear on the darting, twisting figure ahead.

It was the Black's own fault. At least it seemed to appear that way. With only ten yards or so to go to reach the shelter of the Flash's cockpit, the Black stopped zigzagging and made a final lunging sprint straight forward.

He covered five of those ten yards, and then the slugs from Dusty's gun caught him square in the back. The force of their impact carried the Black the remaining five yards, but he was stone dead, a couple of pounds of hot steel in his body, when he crashed up against the fuselage of the Flash and rebounded onto the floor.

Unable to check his own speed, Dusty continued to pound forward, still firing. And then Fate took a crack at him. Something slapped against the barrel of his gun, wrenching it from his clawing fingers and sending it spinning off into space.

In an effort to hang onto the gun, he unconsciously threw himself off balance. Too late he tried to correct the mistake. His right foot caught behind his left knee, refused to go forward. As though he had run straight smack into a taut wire, his legs stopped dead and the rest of him went arcing over and down. Somehow he managed to drop his hands and break the fall a bit as he hit the floor. But momentum was still having a holiday, and in a perfect belly-slide he skidded into the dead body of the Black and carried it right along as he went sliding clear under the fuselage of the Flash.

GROGGY and almost completely wind-
ed, he nevertheless pulled himself up onto his feet. He heard a machine gun crash to his left, turned that way just in time to see a Black mechanic do a neat

backward loop down onto the floor, and Curly Brooks come tearing around the tail of the Silver Flash.

Dusty gaped down at his own bleeding hands and realizing that they longer held a gun, bent over to grab the dead Black's holstered automatic. Curly, however, grabbed him, and pulled him back.

"Never mind!" he shouted. "I can hold these bums—only a couple left in the room. Into the Flash—get that all-red crate! Get it! Warn the others about what it can do. Get going in the Flash!"

Dusty scowled, shook his head. He couldn't leave Curly down here.

But Curly's mind was made up. He caught hold of Dusty with both hands, practically lifted him up onto the fuselage step.

"It's up to you, Dusty!" he roared. "Warn them—warn the others! They've arrived—you can hear them up there! For God's sake, get going! I'll be okay!"

The air was now vibrating from the roar of airplane engines high up in the winter sky, and as Dusty forked into the cockpit and lunged his foot down on the electric starter he knew that not all of them were Black Invader engines. In other words, Curly was right—Yank planes answering his frantic radio S.O.S. Emergency, had arrived. But up there waiting for them, was Zytov and his remaining supply of Metal-Meltic.

A hesitant glance back at Curly just long enough to see the lean pilot shake his head vigorously and go darting behind a protecting row of half mounted engines, and then Dusty released the wheel brakes and kicking rudder, sent the Flash swinging around and taxiing swiftly toward the opening on the right.

As he shot out into the open, onto a glistening shelf of hard packed snow, he dully realized everything was tinged with the crimson rays of a sinking sun—realized that it must be well past mid-after

noon. When had he last seen the sun? Must have been a couple of thousand years ago wasn't it?

The crazy question went unanswered. At that moment he was staring up into the sky past towering snow-covered mountain peaks—staring up at a skyful of twisting, turning planes. Most of them were American. But high above the whirling pack was a red monoplane, swinging about in slow ever-widening circles. It gave Dusty the flash impression of being a great red vulture waiting for the exact moment to swoop down on its victims.

Keeping his eyes glued to it, he slammed open the throttle, sent the Flash racing across the hard snow, and pulled it clear. Holding the nose up a maximum climbing angle he started to shoot out his free hand toward the radio panel, when at that moment he saw the red light blinking. He continued the movement however, snapped on contact and twisted the wavelength dial knob to S.O.S. Emergency reading.

"All Yank—"

The ear-phones' crackling sound, checked him. Startling words banged against his ear-drums.

"All Yank planes! This is Ayres—Captain Ayres! I've captured the red ship above you! Spread out for formation. I'm coming down to join you! Yank planes—attention! I'm coming down to join you in the red plane; spread out into formation!"

For a second Dusty couldn't think. He'd heard his own booming voice in his own ear-phones! Own voice? Own voice, hell! It was Zytoff! Damn his rotten hide. He was trying to draw the Yanks out for a wholesale slaughter—trap them all at once with his blasted Metal-Meltic.

In one continuous lightning-like movement Dusty spun on full transmission volume and grabbed up the transmitter tube.

"Yanks! Yanks!" he howled. "It's a damn lie—look out, look out for the red crate! This is Dusty, in the Flash—in the Silver Flash below you. For God's sake keep clear of that red plane. Don't let it come down to you—keep under it!"

Dusty groaned, pulled the nose up so that the Flash was almost at the vertical. The twenty-eight hundred horses cowed into the nose roared and bellowed in protest. But Dusty didn't even notice it as he watched the red monoplane come rushing down in a long slanting dive toward a group of Yank planes directly below it.

"Look out—don't let that ship get close to you! Look out for the red plane!"

Even as Dusty shouted his second warning, he knew that it was falling on deaf ears. The Yanks directly under Zytoff's diving ship were making no effort to get out of its way. Perhaps they were deaf, or perhaps they hadn't troubled to tune in on his warning. But at any rate, they were fast approaching their doom.

When the red plane was but a couple of hundred feet above them, it suddenly spun around on wing, streaked back a short distance, then in a curving dive came sweeping back under them. At that instant, pale blue smoke streamed out from the two flanged pipe ends mounted on the rudder post. The flat, wavy ribbons of blue merged together, darkened in hue, and spread out in an ever widening V-shaped layer.

TOO LATE the American pilots saw the danger. Three of the planes dived down through the wavy blue. Instantly they ceased to be airplanes, and became huge drops of flaming molten metal plunging earthward.

The blue cyclone that cut its flat path across the heavens was as a wavy gateway to utter oblivion. Shouting at the top of his voice, Dusty saw two, three, and four American planes plunge down into it—actually saw their metal snouts become

drops of fire, while the rear section of the plane, still above the blue hell, was as yet untouched. A fifth American pilot tried frantically in the last remaining second to pull up and away. But his diving speed was too great, and his left wings swept through the stuff as he tried to arc up. Metal spars, ribs, and wing covering became molten fire. The unbalanced plane flopped over on its other side and the whole thing dropped down into the blue cyclone of death.

As the red plane cut around in a spinning turn in an effort to trap two other American ships, Dusty kicked rudder with all his might, and jabbed both trigger trips forward.

He knew instinctively that the range was too great. The Flash's engine had done its best. The plane was practically hovering motionless on its prop. Nothing—nothing could stop that pilot of the red plane now. The two Yank planes Zytovff was diving for would be caught cold.

And as Dusty snapped his eyes toward them, his heart seemed to turn to stone. One of them, the nearest one, was an X-Diesel. On its fuselage were the personal markings of Biff Bolton!

Zytovff was almost on top of the two American planes—almost on the point of cutting back under them and thus trapping them between a double layer of his deadly blue hell when Dusty saw Biff Bolton's plane whip over and start down in a spin.

The pilot of the other craft was staking his all in an effort to skid sidewise out into the clear. He was

partially succeeding, leaving Biff Bolton the lone target for Zytovff.

"Biff! Biff! For God's sake, move!"

Dusty uttered the words in the same breath that he cursed the Flash on to greater speed. His Brownings were hammering out their messengers of death, but he was still too far away from the red plane. A moment later he was forced to cease fire altogether. A spinning twist of Biff's plane brought it right into line with Dusty's fire. It wasn't Biff's fault, however. Had he not spun away at that exact moment his right wing would have swept through the blue layer.

The big pilot was still in danger, though. Whether Zytovff realized that his prey was Dusty's friend, or whether it was sheer savage determination to get another victim while his supply of Metal-Meltic held out, there was no telling. But at any rate, the Black was ignoring every other craft in the heavens, and concentrating on Biff. And Biff was flying a losing battle. Like the tentacles of some weird and horrible blue octopus, the wavy strands of Metal-Meltic were slowly but surely hemming in Biff's ship.

Dusty knew that it was but a matter of seconds. Unless something could be done to alter the present course of Zytovff's plane, good old Biff Bolton was doomed to a hellish death.

Reckless fury surged up in Dusty. He ceased to be a human being at the controls of a fleet sky chariot and he became a roaring, raving automatic machine of death. Without even giving the idea a single thought, he slammed the Flash around in wing-groaning turn and plunged it straight between two floating layers of blue



death. Not a dozen feet separated either his upper or lower wings from the terrible stuff.

Hunched forward over the stick he felt as though he were streaking straight through the very bowels of hell itself. Feet, legs, hands, body and head seemed seared to a crisp. The world all about him was on fire.

And then he came streaking out from between the two layers. Streaking out, and heading straight for the red plane that was curving away from him—curving away to spew back over him its hissing oblivion.

"Not this time—or any other time, by God!"

The rasping sound of Dusty's shout blended in with the savage yammer of his two Brownings. At the same instant he hurled the Silver Flash to the left, darted clear of the trailing blue death, and cut back in again with the speed of a striking cobra. A wild yell of mad triumph spilled off his lips as he saw his slugs smash into Zytov's ship. He knew that they were bouncing off armor plating, but right at the moment that didn't matter. They were coming too close to the glass cockpit cowl for comfort, and Zytov was being driven away from Biff Bolton.

Foot by foot, yard by yard, the red ship swung away, leaving a great gaping hole of clear air through its twisted and interwoven blue web.

"Biff!" Dusty shouted. "Go down through that hole! Signal the other planes! Go down onto that shelf! Curly's there—he needs help! Go down to Curly. I'll take care of this mug!"

The red signal light blinked, and he heard Biff's thankful voice.

"Sure, skipper, sure! Gee, thanks! I'll go down! But I guess there isn't—"

The ear-phones made a clicking sound and went silent. Dusty didn't waste the

time or breath with a check-back. Biff had heard him and was going down to help Curly. Please God that Curly was still all right!

The thought of his pal down there alone; of Curly's sacrifice that he might go after Zytov, sent Dusty's determination soaring up to the peak.

He banged his already wide open throttle with his fist, and cursed at the Flash as though it were actually something human, with ears. And every instant of the time he kept trying to edge in closer to the red plane—edge in close enough to let drive a fatal burst of shots. But there was no greenhorn pilot at the controls of that red ship. In fact, very far from it. Each passing second brought home that truth more forcibly to Dusty.

TRUE, Zytov had the advantage. Streaming out from the top of his rudder post was a form of death far, far more effective than aerial machine-gun bursts. It not only covered a wider area, but it also prevented an attacker from getting into a cold-meat position.

But, apart from that, Zytov was tossing his craft this way and that with every bit as much skill as any other pilot in the air. And at the same time that he kept clear of Dusty's bursts, he also made sure that he didn't back-track into the hell he was trailing across the sky.

With grim doggedness Dusty clung to him, however, followed through with every trick he did and slammed home a burst every time he got a chance. And then suddenly he realized what Zytov was really trying to do.

Fully aware that the clinging Yank was too clever to be trapped by the Metal-Meltic, Zytov was trying to make his escape—make his escape in a huge billowy cloud bank to the north.

Even as the truth came to him, Dusty heard the rapid jabbering of Black In-

vader jargon in his ear-phones. For no reason at all he threw back his head and looked up. There, a thousand feet above him were three Black Darts. They were tagging along at his speed but making no attempt to come down for fear, undoubtedly, of getting into Zyttoff's trail of Metal-Meltic.

At least, that is the way it appeared to Dusty at that second. But as he snapped his eyes back to Zyttoff's ship again, he saw something that brought a roar of surprise to his lips.

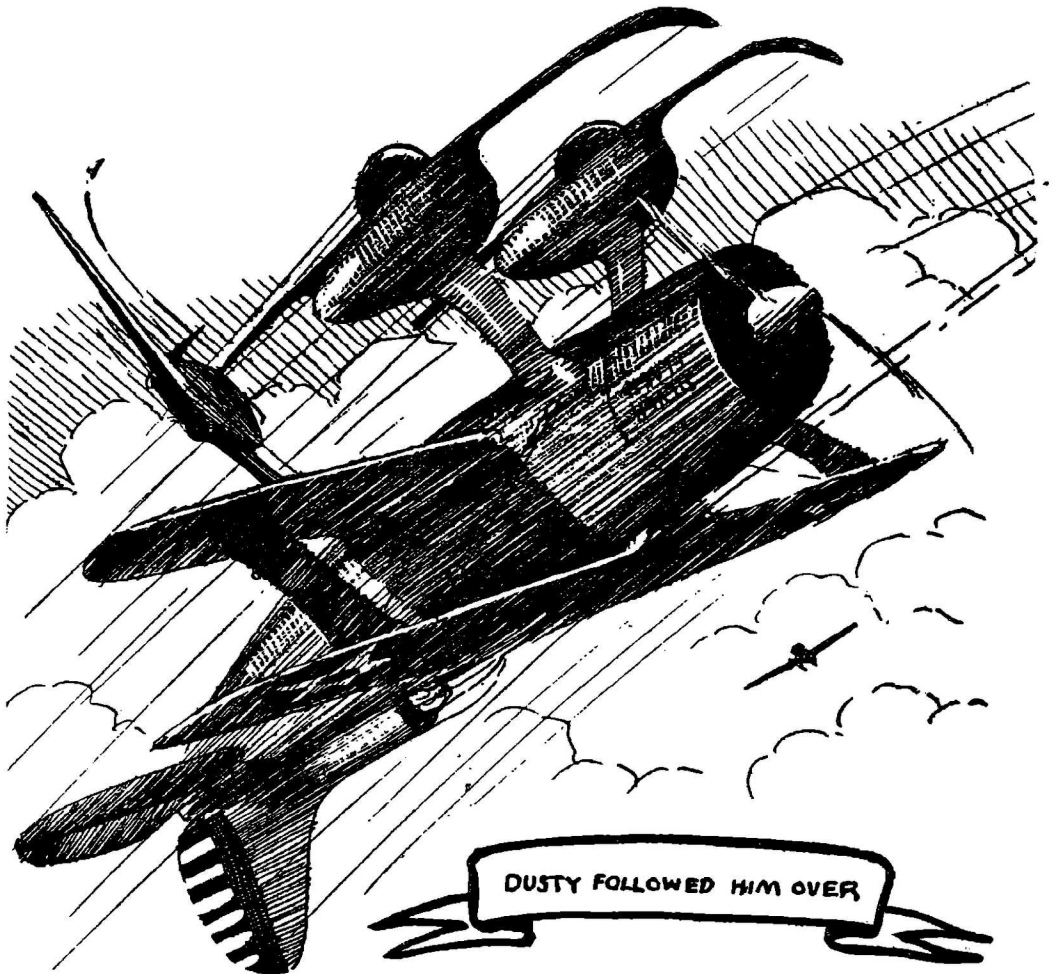
The blue hell was no longer coming out from the flanged pipe ends in a steady stream. It was jerky; popping out in short puffs that were practically whipped into oblivion by the prop wash. A sec-

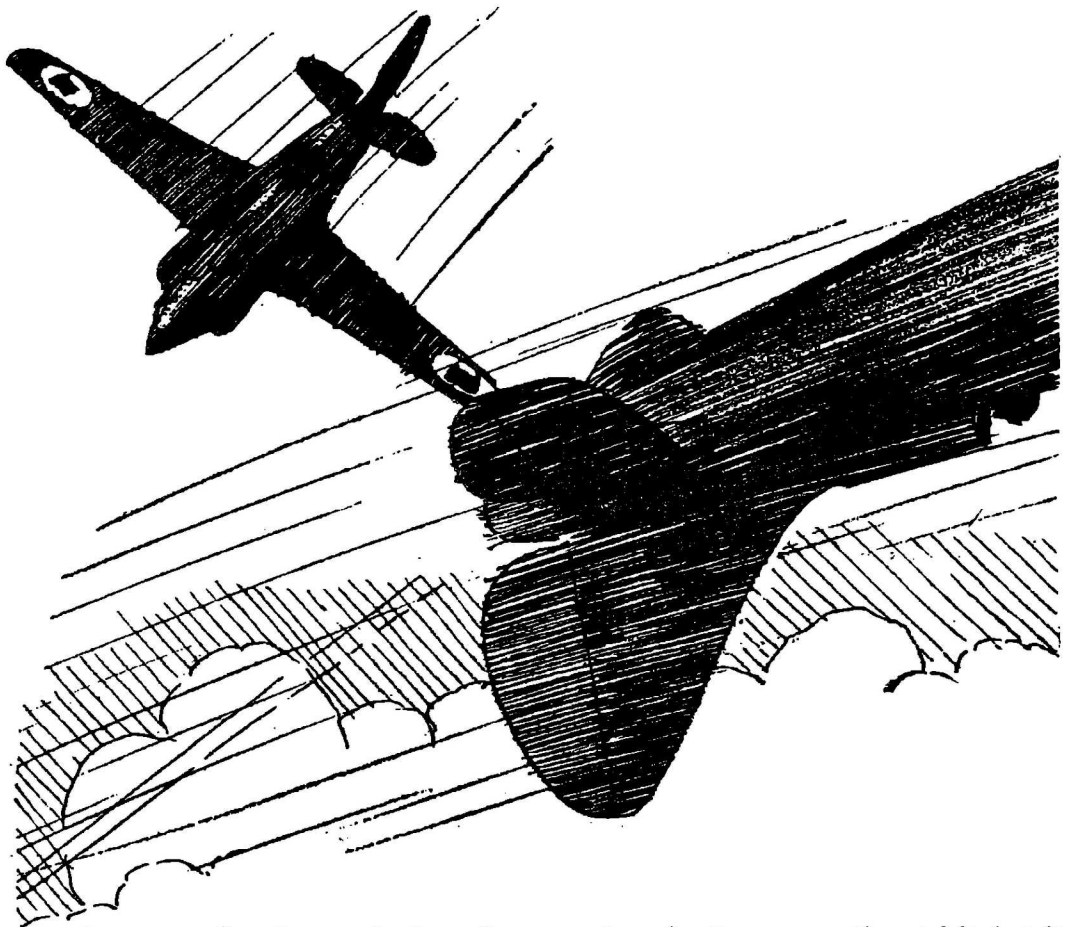
ond or two later the right pipe stopped gushing forth blue vapor altogether. And then the left pipe followed suit.

The reason was instantly obvious to Dusty. So was the crazy Black Invader jargon he had heard a few moments before. Zyttoff's supply of Metal-Meltic had run out. His tanks were empty, and he had signaled to three of his pilots to cover his retreat.

As Dusty started to close in behind the red craft, slam in for a cold-meat burst, the fury of hell smacked down on him from above.

With that he rolled. A three-quarter roll, and then down he dropped. The left hand ship of the three zooming up, jerked to the side as its pilot tried des-





perately to cut off and curve back up for a sort of broadside attack.

That was the last mistake that its pilot made in this world. Dusty followed him over, jabbed his Browning trips home. The smoking steel slugs from the two muzzles did the rest.

Dusty didn't have time to watch the rest of the dead man's descent. There were still two of his gang in the air. And how, too!

Two Blacks against one Yank! In the next three seconds those Blacks must have thought it was the two of them against a couple of hundred Yanks. Feet and hands, and shooting eye working in perfect co-ordination, Dusty raced and spun and tore around them as though they were tied to a post.

One of them decided that he'd had too much, and in a vicious maneuver he spun down, leaving his pal to carry on with the

good work. It was a yellow trick, but it did manage to save the Black's life.

His pal lived just about long enough to get a two-second look at the Silver Flash boring in. And then it was curtains! Armor plate or no armor plate, Dusty's savage fire practically blew the Dart apart in mid-air, and the Black went slithering earthward in small pieces.

"Now, that other tramp!"

But as Dusty hastily scanned the surrounding skies he relaxed his tensed muscles, and grunted. The other Dart was fading into the clouds a good four miles away, traveling at a speed that should put him over the North Pole in nothing flat. And as for Zytov and his red plane—it was absolutely nowhere to be seen. It had long since faded out of sight.

Hardly realizing what a crazy quirk of his brain was causing him to do, Dusty grabbed up the transmitter tube, spun on full long-wave volume.

"Captain Ayres calling Zytuff!" he yelled. "Captain Ayres calling Zytuff. Drop in again, you bum, sometime when you can stay longer!"

He grinned at his spontaneous action, started to put the transmitter tube back on its hook, when the red light blinked and a pleasant voice spoke in the ear-phones.

"I will, captain, I promise you! And thank you for the invitation!"

As the red light blinked out, and the ear-phones went silent, Dusty snapped his eyes toward the station direction finder. As he noted the position of the recording needle, a split second before it dropped back to the "No Register" peg, he grinned tightly. Zytuff had been making tracks too. According to the station direction finder dial he had broadcast from about three hundred miles due north.

"I'll be waiting to greet you!" grunted Dusty and snapped off his own set.

But as he did, he suddenly let out a sharp curse, and spun the ship around on wing-tip and sent it roaring south over the snow-covered peaks. Curly! How was Curly making out? Had Biff and the others gone down to help him?

A group of towering peaks hid the shelf that formed the secret drome. But as Dusty strained his eyes about the heavens through which he raced, he saw not the sign of a single plane, either Yank or Black Invader.

For several minutes he roared southward and a moment later he went roaring down over the edge of the circle of mountain peaks and saw the snow-packed ledge. It was not only snow-packed, but plane-packed as well. There seemed to be every damn ship in the U. S. air force squatted down there.

Cutting his throttle, Dusty curved down lower, picked out a narrow strip on the far side and headed toward it. Out the corner of his eye he saw figures running

between the planes. But he didn't have time to take a good look at them. Landing on what space the others had left was not fledgling's undertaking.

Feet steady on the rudder pedals, hands firmly gripping the stick, he guided the Flash down the last few feet and allowed it to settle. He leaped out and started running toward the mountain side of the ledge.

"That you, Ayres?"

A voice called to him but it wasn't one that he recognized, so he didn't stop.

"Hey, Ayres! What happened to you? We thought that you'd gone down."

Another voice that he didn't know and again he went on. Side-stepping parked plane wings, but not once checking his speed, he tore across the ledge, around the fringe of trees and through the opening on the right. Only then did he make any attempt to come to a halt.

The first thing he recognized was Biff Bolton's broad back. He fairly leaped at the big pilot, spun him around.

"Biff! Where's Curly? Is Curly all right? Speak up, damn you!"

"Sure I am—now! But they were just trying to tell me that you'd got yourself shot down!"

Dusty shoved Biff to one side and saw Curly, Jack Horner, Major Drake, and a few other pilots in a group. He leaped, grabbed hold of his pal and pounded him on the back.

"So it's you—are you okay?"

"Okay?" echoed Brooks. "Hell yes, I didn't have anything to do after you left. They scuttled for cover. And then some of the boys landed and gave me a hand. Transports with sappers to smoke out the place will be here soon. But Zytuff! Did he—"

Curly stopped.

"He did," nodded Dusty grimly. "But he took only memories with him—nothing else!"

As Dusty spoke the last he looked at

Agent 10. The Intelligence man knew what he meant and a grateful look came into his eyes. He took a step toward Dusty.

"I don't know what to say," he began in a choked voice. "I don't know how to thank—"

"Hell, thank him!" Dusty said, twisting him toward Curly. "He's the bright-

haired boy of this show! All I did was to fall down so that he could be there to pick me up!"

"Nix on that!" Curly came back. "Skip it! One hero in Group Seven is enough! No need of giving the major two headaches!"

For once Dusty had no ready comeback. But he didn't care—just this once.

Next Issue—

The inter-department call-set buzzed harshly. General Horner reached out a hand, snapped on contact, and announced himself.

Faces strained, Dusty, Curly, Agent Ten, and General Bradley listened to the voice crackling out of the small oval amplifier.

"Special emergency report from the Atlanta, Georgia, area, sir. The Twenty-fifth Air Concentration Depot was completely destroyed fifteen minutes ago. All communication has been cut off. Signal H. Q. unable to make contact as yet. No details available. We received but one signal saying that the depot had been destroyed. This is Jordan, sir. Have you or General Bradley any orders?"

Seconds of tense silence. Then a low growl rumbled off General Horner's lips.

"Damn his hide! We're too late! Fire-Eyes has already started! Come with me—all of you!"

And beginning with that moment, the fate of one hundred and forty million Americans hung in the balance. Fire-Eyes had returned from Europe to strike his smashing blow—to strike again and again, until—

Don't miss—

The Telsa Raiders

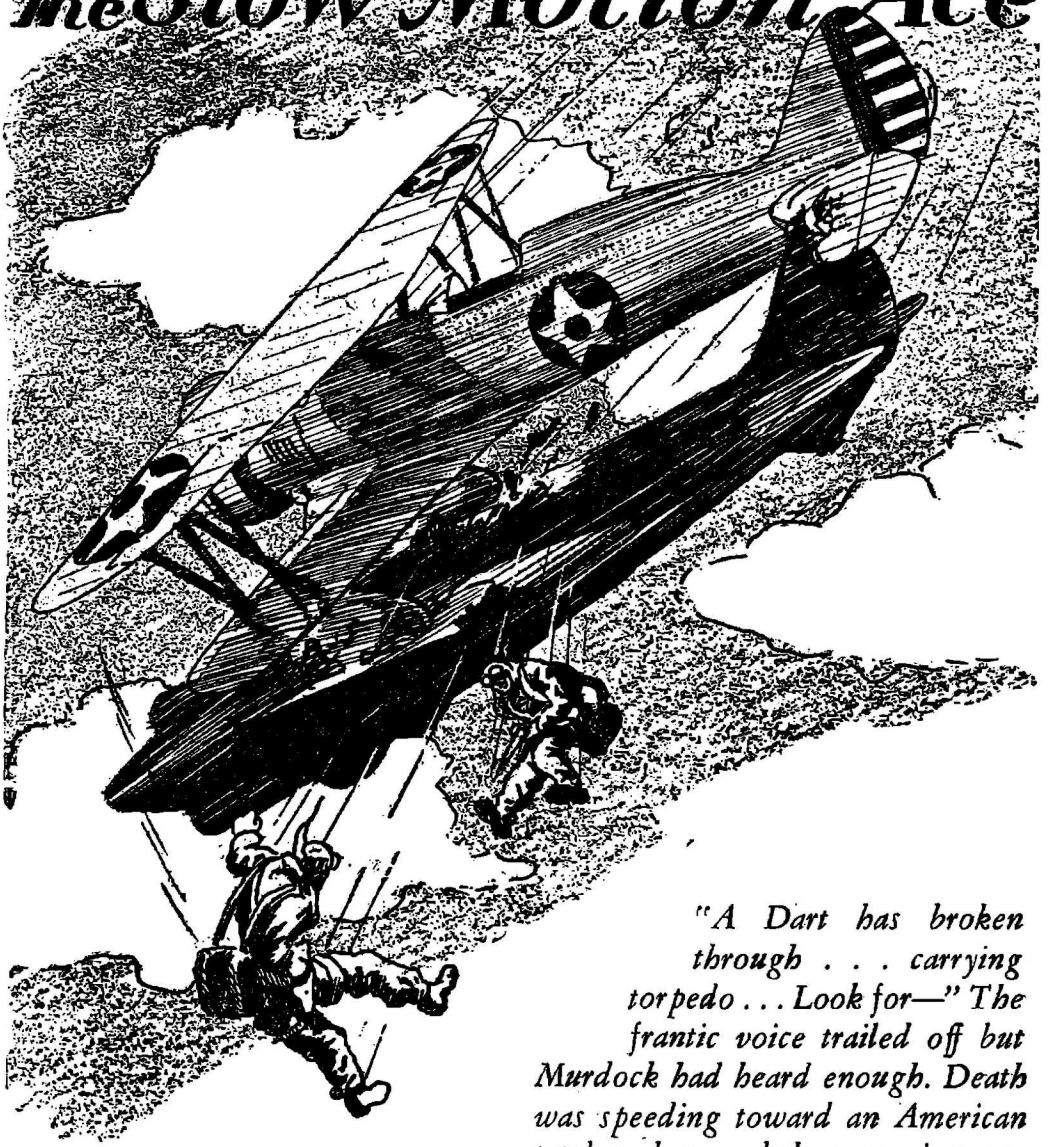
In the July issue of

DUSTY AYRES

and His

BATTLE BIRDS

The Slow-Motion Ace



"A Dart has broken through . . . carrying torpedo . . . Look for—" The frantic voice trailed off but Murdock had heard enough. Death was speeding toward an American tetalyne base and there was just one way to stop it—a way that only a slow-motion buzzard would be crazy enough to think of!

HALF a dozen members of the Thirty-fourth pursuit unit were lounging about the tarmac of their Richmond, Va., drome, listlessly listening to "Big Ben" Swanson air his views on the progress of the conflict being waged between the United States and the Black Invaders.

It was a favorite topic with Big Ben, and although his audience was not particularly attentive, it had enough respect for Big Ben's fists to let him rave on

without advancing any interruptions.

"Quick, lightning-like thrusts!" proclaimed Big Ben for the umpteenth time. "That's the way we're going to put these Black bums where they belong. You know, like a good boxer, don't give the other guy a chance to get set. Smack

him hard, and smack him often. Now if I was on general H. Q. staff, I'd—"

"For God's sake, what's this coming in?"

The sharp exclamation drew everybody's attention to a red-head in the group, who was pointing toward the far side of the field.

About a quarter of a mile beyond, and some five or six hundred feet up, an airplane was floating down toward the drome. And that's exactly what it was doing—floating. As a matter of fact, it seemed to be almost hovering at a dead stop in the air.

Foot by foot it eased down lower and lower, as though its pilot was fearful lest the ground would leap up and smack his undercarriage. The only possible comparison to it, would be a ninety-seven year old, wooden-legged gray-beard trying to come down a flight of highly-polished stairs.

In dumbfounded silence the Thirty-four gang watched the plane ease lower and lower. Then with a loud snort, Big Ben shattered the silence.

"What in hell's eating that guy? Is he balancing a Tetalyne drum on his nose? The damn fool, what's he want to do? Squash in and wipe out his crate on our field?"

By now everyone had seen the markings on the plane, and knew that it was a strange ship. It was a Yank crate, of course. But apart from the regular U. S. air force insignia, there were no other markings.

Lower and lower it came down, just missed the trees on the far side, and floated down the few remaining feet to settle on clear, level ground. As its wheels touched, an audible sigh went up from the gang.

"Wow!" gasped some one. "That's the first landing I ever made without having hold of the stick!"

"Me too!" grunted somebody else. "And there's five years of my life lopped off, just like that!"

It was Big Ben who, as usual, made the final comment.

"A guy who comes in like that," he growled, "should be shipped back to training field for extra instruction. Wonder who the hell he is?"

None of them had an answer to that, and in speculative silence they watched the strange ship slowly taxi in to the line and come to a dead stop.

The glass cockpit cowling was shoved back, and a long, lean figure legged out. It seemed to most of them that he would never get his legs out onto the ground. But he finally did, and smoothing out a few wrinkles in his brand new uniform, he ambled over to them.

The face, which was sort of oval shaped was almost of peaches and cream complexion. As though its owner had been out of the sun since babyhood. Only the eyes stood out. They were a pale grey, and held a peculiar light that could be either an amused twinkle, or a flicker of anger.

When the lanky figure neared them, he grinned broadly and started to salute, but checked himself in time.

"Begging your pardon," he said in a soft voice, "this here is the field of the Thirty-fourth, isn't it?"

Big Ben acted as spokesman.

"It is!" he nodded, eyeing the other quizzically. "And just who might you be?"

"Me?" echoed the tall one. "Why, I've just been assigned to this unit. The name's Murdock. I'm from down Memphis way. Most folks just call me plain Memphis. Sure am glad to make the acquaintance of you gentlemen."

"They call you Memphis, huh?" Big Ben chopped out. "Well, I'd say that Slow Motion, was more appropriate.

What the hell were you trying to do? Wait for the field to come up to you? Didn't they teach you that planes stall when they haven't got flying speed?"

The other's eye seemed to flicker like the shutters over a camera lens. But the grin still remained on his lips.

"Guess they taught me everything they could," he said quietly. "But I guess you're not used to the way I fly. I don't hanker to do everything in a rush, when there ain't no sense to it. I just sort of take things easy. Suits me better, that way. Guess maybe it looked funny to you veteran pilots, but she wasn't anywhere near the stalling point. Gosh! I know that old bus better'n I know myself, I guess. But could any of you tell me where I could find Major Dawson? Guess I'd better let him know I'm here."

"We could!" Big Ben clipped at him. "But I'm not done talking to you yet. I'm Skipper Swanson, of A Flight, see?"

Memphis Murdock nodded his head.

"Sure glad to make your acquaintance, captain," he said.

"Skip it!" Big Ben cut in. "I'm giving you a tip, Slow Motion! We do things fast around here! And we don't stand for numbskulls messing our drome with crack-ups. It's only by the grace of God that you didn't stall and spin in. Give her more hop next time and come in like a real pilot."

Swanson's remarks were unnecessary, but, although the rest of the gang didn't approve, they made no comment. Memphis Murdock, however, slowly tightened his grin, and his gray eyes took on a sort of hypnotic glaze.

"Reckon a pilot flies his plane the way he can do it best, don't he, captain?" he got out slowly. "Begging your pardon, but I guess I ain't wrong until I do something wrong. Gosh! I'd as soon take out my right eye as run the risk of cracking

that old bus up! Yes sir! Just as soon take out both eyes!"

ONE of Big Ben's few faults was never knowing when he was well off. And the present moment was no exception. He stepped close to the newcomer, jabbed a stubby finger against his chest.

"Listen, Slow Motion!" he grated, "maybe you don't know it, but you're scheduled for my flight. And that makes me your flight commander, see? Now, I'm telling you by words what to do. Get funny, and I won't be telling you by words, next time! Savvy?"

Memphis Murdock blinked, slowly ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip. A puzzled look came into his eyes. It was tinged with a bit of injured confusion.

"Never figured I had more than the usual amount of brains," he said. "But I don't think I do savvy you, captain. Don't mean to tell me that I'm not to fly natural-like, do you? Why, at the school they told me to—"

"The hell with what they told you at the school!" Big Ben roared. "They're a bunch of nitwits who never saw Front service and—"

"Wait a minute, captain! I reckon you're dead wrong about that! My instructor, Captain Stanton, has close to a couple of dozen invaders to his credit. Guess you don't know very much about the Nashville training school, captain, or you sure wouldn't talk that way. No sir! You sure wouldn't!"

It was the greenhorn's earnestness, more than what he said that inflamed Big Ben. He stopped jabbing the man's chest, and curled his fingers in the front of his tunic.

"You looking for an argument, with me?" he roared.

The newcomer glanced at the others, a puzzled expression on his face. Then he returned his eyes to Big Ben.

"Reckon not," he said slowly. "Not unless you crowd me. Can't let no man do that, you know."

The other pilots instinctively stepped back a couple of paces, glanced dubiously at one another. In their estimation the lanky one from Memphis was asking for buzz-saw treatment. They knew from personal experience the safe way to handle Big Ben. Not that the A Flight skipper was a bully. He just had his own ideas, and he'd fight at the drop of the hat to uphold them.

"Well, I'm crowding you, right now!" Big Ben boomed. "I'm skippering A Flight, and you'll fly as I tell you to fly—even if it means beginning all over again. You're on active service now!"

The tall fledgling nodded.

"That's what I've been aiming to be—on active service," he said. "But like I said, I can't let no man crowd me. So I guess you'd better let go of my tunic, captain. It's the only one I've got. And you're getting it all mussed up!"

Big Ben's eyes bulged, and he swallowed with a choking sound.

"Mussed up?" he echoed huskily. "Mussed up? It's more than your tunic I'm going to muss up, you loose-lipped bean-pole. Put up your hands and take it!"

The A Flight leader stepped back, waited a few seconds for the newcomer to raise protecting fists. Then Big Ben leaped forward and arced up a terrific right hand smash.

Memphis Murdock seemed to see it coming toward his jaw, but he didn't move. Some one in the group groaned aloud, and the others echoed it. They waited with baited breath for the crunch of bunched knuckles against rigid jaw bone.

But the sound never came. Big Ben's fist swept up. The newcomer's eyes took on a queer, almost eerie glint. Without

appearing to move, his body did move. It swayed backward, twisted slightly.

Big Ben's fist continued up, and up, and up. In fact it whistled up so fast that its very momentum carried him off balance, and before he could check himself he pivoted about on one foot, got his legs all tangled up, and fell flat on the tarmac.

"My God!" yelled someone. "He missed him by a foot!"

Snarling, Big Ben was untangling himself and struggling up onto his feet. Hands still poised in front of him, a half amused, half baffled look on his pink face, Memphis Murdock stood watching him.

"Clever, eh?" Big Ben roared when he finally got up. "Well, I'll give you that one. Now, it's my turn. Watch it!"

The A Flight leader started to sway forward, left fist out, right cocked.

"Swanson! Here, what the hell is all this!"

The bellowing roar froze Big Ben in his tracks. He relaxed, and with the others turned toward the unit office at the end of the tarmac. The well-built figure of Major Dawson was racing toward the group. As he pulled up to a halt he swept them all with sparking eyes, finally let them come to rest on Big Ben.

"Well?" he barked. "Are you tonguetied? Who's this officer? And what's the idea of fighting? Don't you lunk-heads get enough of that upstairs? Come on! Speak up, Swanson!"

Big Ben shrugged, avoided the C.O.'s eyes.

"A little personal argument, sir," he mumbled. "The fledgling didn't seem to know his place."

"And you decided to show him, I suppose?" Major Dawson snapped.

"Did you see his landing, sir?" the big pilot questioned doggedly. "He says he flies like that all the time. And I—"

"Wait a minute there, captain!" Memphis Murdock broke in. "I didn't say

nothing like that at all. I said that I like—”

“You calling me a liar?” Big Ben bristled.

“I’m telling you what I said,” the other replied. “And that was that I don’t do things in a rush unless I have to. Reckon you’ll have to take that any way you see fit.”

BIG BEN would probably have lunged at Memphis had not Major Dawson grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“Just park where you are, Swanson!” he bit off. And then to the fledgling,

“You’re Lieutenant Murdock? Well, I can’t say that I particularly admired your landing, Murdock. You were pretty close to the stalling point, as I saw it.”

The newcomer seemed to heave a sad sigh.

“I had her under perfect control, major. Fly like that lots of times.”

Before the C.O. could make any comment, Big Ben spoke to him.

“He’s just up from training school, sir. Hadn’t I better take him aloft and put him through his paces?”

Major Dawson hesitated. He knew full well what was in the back of Swanson’s mind. The A Flight leader wanted the chance to put the fear of God into the newcomer. The chance to give him a real taste of the kind of flying he could expect when he went against the Blacks.

And if there was any pilot who could do that, that pilot was Big Ben Swanson. His record for taking the starch out of cocky fledglings was just about as good as his record for slapping Black planes out of the heavens.

Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad idea at that. Murdock had a certain atmosphere of dogged self-assurance that might do with a bit of pruning.

“All right,” Dawson suddenly nodded. “Take him up and see if he can stick to you. The rest of us will watch from down here.”

Big Ben grinned broadly, turned to the newcomer.

“Meet me at three thousand right over the field,” he ordered. “Make believe that I’m a Black, out to get you. And let’s see what you can do about it.”

Memphis Murdock nodded.

“Sure will try to do my best, captain,” he said. “And I hope it meets with your okay.”

Big Ben didn’t answer. Chuckling softly to himself he walked over to his ship and legged in. Five minutes later when he roared out in a wild take-off, and went careening up into the blue, he was still chuckling to himself.

Waiting for him at three thousand was Memphis in his ship. Big Ben tore up toward him at top speed, leveled off, and without giving any signal, went charging in.

As he lined the other plane up in his sights, and made believe jabbing the trigger trips forward, his chuckle changed to a wild laugh of delight.

“Okay, thick-head!” he shouted. “Here’s how us experienced guys do it!”

And just about then, something happened. Neither Big Ben, nor those on the ground, were able to tell just what it was. Somehow, though, Memphis Murdock’s plane darted to one side, twisted over a couple of times, and finished up sliding down on Swanson’s tail.

Big Ben was flabbergasted for a moment, and then when he realized that he had been fooled by a neat little trick, he went haywire with rage. The rage included his handling of his plane.

Cursing at the top of his voice he flung it this way and that all over the sky. But every time he glanced around, there was Memphis Murdock sitting neat as you please, right on his tail.

The funny part though, the part that dumbfounded every one watching, was that the newcomer did not follow through

with every maneuver of Big Ben's. In some uncanny way, he seemed to sense just what the other pilot was going to do in his next maneuver.

And so, instead of tearing down, or in, at break-neck speed, he seemed to float out into a position that placed him on Big Ben's tail when the A Flight leader had completed his vicious "shaking" maneuver.

For fifteen minutes the sham scrap continued. In justice to Big Ben's flying ability it must be admitted that he did shake the newcomer a few times. And had it been real, he would have gotten in a few good cracks himself.

But on points, Memphis Murdock held the edge. And he did it with his crazy, slow-motion flying. Rather, it was what looked like slow-motion flying.

But regardless of what it may have looked like, it was salt in a raw wound to Big Ben. And in a desperate frenzy, he made one last effort to show up the fledgling.

Rolling off a loop he sliced down under the other plane and came tearing up in a vertical zoom. One hundred out of every other hundred pilots would have kicked rudder and tried to skid away from Big Ben's zooming attack. But not Memphis Murdock.

He pulled his own plane up into a zoom, then cut the throttle so that he started to slide back. The result was that the two planes passed each other with little more than inches to spare.

So unnerved was Big Ben, that when he finally floundered out, he didn't even glance at the other ship. But when he did see it, his heart came up the rest of the way into his throat. Memphis Murdock was practically sitting on him—sitting right up above the top of his glass cowling.

Had he wanted to, Big Ben could have slammed open his cowling and reached

up with his free hand and touched the other's wheels.

He didn't bother about doing that, however. With a wild shout of alarm, he shoved the stick up against the instrument aboard, and went tearing down. And right down after him, came Memphis Murdock. In fact, the fledgling followed him right down to the ground.

That is, almost to the ground. In the last couple of hundred feet, Big Ben succeeded in shooting out from under the other ship, and managed to make a landing. Tail up, he taxied into the line where the others waited, and legged out fast.

"DID you see him—did you see him?" he roared. "The blasted fool damn near flew into me!"

Nobody paid any attention to his remark. Like so many wooden soldiers they stood watching Memphis Murdock float down and finally settle. And they still watched him as he ambled his ship into the line and braked slowly to a complete halt.

When the tall one climbed out, Big Ben rushed over and grabbed him.

"I've a mind to break your damn neck!" he howled. "What the hell were you trying to do—crash into me, so that we'd have to bail out?"

The lanky pilot shook his head.

"Shucks, no, skipper," he said. "Of course not. I was only doing what you told me to do!"

"What I told you to do?" Choked Big Ben. "Why, of all the—"

"Sure. You said I was to figure you a Black, and show you what I could do. Well, that's what I tried to do. Sometime I might not want to shoot a Black down. Might want to force him down—like I did to you. Hope I didn't scare you too much, captain. Gosh! I wouldn't be fool enough to crash into you. Heck no!"

Big Ben was speechless with wrath. He struggled desperately for words, but they

just wouldn't come. Lips twitching, and the rest of his face doing tricks, he simply stood there glaring.

Major Dawson walked over and broke the spell.

"That was the damnedest kind of flying I ever saw," he said to Murdock. "But I guess you know how to handle your ship, all right. You—"

"Knows how to handle his ship?" yelled Big Ben, as words came to him with a rush. "Why, the crazy fool damn near killed me, that's what he did!"

The C.O. turned and gave him a hard look.

"Maybe!" he said tightly. "But he also gave you a flying lesson, if you ask me! Be regular, Swanson, and admit it. He had it all over you like a couple of tents. You should be mighty glad that he's assigned to your flight."

That took some of the wind out of Big Ben's sails. He relaxed and half nodded. But an angry glint still remained in his eyes.

"Yeah," he growled. "I'm glad that he's in my flight, right enough. Mighty glad. He has yet to learn that a real scrap can be different."

Giving the newcomer a final sizzling look, Swanson sauntered off toward the mess. The others hung back for a couple of seconds, and then followed him.

That is, all save Major Dawson. He stood looking at Memphis, a queer look in his eyes.

"As I was saying before you went up, Murdock," he bit out suddenly. "You'll find this place a lot different from a flight training school. We may not be close to the lines, but we see plenty of action on coastal patrol—bomb raids, photo patrols and so forth. So, in a friendly way, let what I tell you sink in. We don't make it a practice to force Blacks to land—we shoot them down! Understand?"

"Sure, sir, sure!" gulped the pilot. "I reckon that I understand."

"Good!" grunted the C.O. "And another thing—your slow-motion flying is—"

A field orderly skidded up and saluted. Words tumbled off his lips in breathless haste.

"Your office wire, sir!" he gasped out. "Washington H.Q. wants you at once. Says it's very important. They want you right away!"

Turning on his heel, Major Dawson raced down the length of the tarmac and bounded in through the unit office door. In a leap he reached his desk, scooped up the radio phone.

"Dawson on the wire!" he snapped.

"Hawks, at Washington H.Q.," came the sharp voice at the other end. "How soon can you get your whole unit into the air?"

"In five minutes, colonel! Why?"

"Then get them up!" barked the H.Q. officer. "Intelligence has received the tip that there will be an attempt to bomb the Tetalyne plant near Winston-Salem. It will probably be made from the Black carrier fleet off the Georgia coast. Units Six, Twelve and Twenty will take care of the coast. Your unit will cover the Winston-Salem area. Don't let anything through. I don't care how you stop them, but stop them! Is that clear?"

The C.O.'s jaw tightened, and his eyes went steely. He knew full well what kind of an order that was—what it meant.

"Yes sir," he said. "Perfectly clear! Any particular time the bomb raid is expected?"

"We haven't the faintest idea," came the reply. "It may be a false alarm, but we're not taking chances. Those devils can be tricky when they have to be. That's all. Arrange how your flights will patrol, yourself. 'Bye."

A click at the other end told Dawson

that the H.Q. colonel had snapped off contact. He did likewise himself, and stood staring thoughtfully at the instrument. Then, suddenly, he reached out and punched the siren button.

The eerie wail brought the Unit pilots pouring out of the mess and hutments, almost as soon as he was able to bound out of the office. He ran over to where they stood waiting on the tarmac, eyes wide with eager excitement.

"A constant patrol around the Tetalyne plant at Winston-Salem!" he shouted. "We're to guard it from a bomb raid. Nothing goes through. Stop them at all costs. We'll fly a unit patrol and refuel at the Salem emergency field in relays. There must be two flights in the air all the time. If you see anything, use your own judgment. That's all. Into your ships and get going as fast as you can. Never mind formation!"

WITH a whoop, the gang started racing for their ships. Memphis Murdock, however, hung back. He fixed questioning eyes on the C.O., seemed reluctant to speak whatever was in his mind. The major didn't notice him for a second, then whirled on him.

"Well, what the hell are you standing there for? Didn't you hear my orders?"

"Yes, sure, sir! But I'd like to ask—where do you figure they'll come from? Maybe we could just kind of loaf out and meet 'em. Plumb dangerous scrapping over a Tetalyne plant. No telling but what one of the crates might be slapped right down in it."

The C.O. forked into his cockpit, turned and glared at the tall pilot.

"Maybe!" he bit off. "But, it'll be our job to stop them before they get to the plant. Use your head. Now get the hell into the air!"

The roar of the engine drowned out the C.O.'s. disgusted curse as he rammed

the throttle wide open, and sent his ship streaking out onto the field.

Holding the nose down for speed, he presently pulled the stick back and zoomed straight into the blue at a steep angle. At twenty thousand he leveled off and pointed the nose toward the Winston-Salem area. Then he reached out his free hand, flipped on radio contact and called Unit 6 scheduled to patrol the North Carolina coast.

A couple of seconds and its commander came on his wave-length.

"Okay! Go ahead!" barked a voice in the ear-phones.

"Thirty-four in the air," spoke the major. "Closing in on objective now. Anything special to report?"

A moment of silence, then.

"Nothing so far, Thirty-four. Clouds forming in the east and visibility is getting pretty punk. Keep your wave-length open, will you?"

"Okay," Dawson called back. "Let me know the instant you spot anything."

"If we do," came the grunt in the ear-phones.

The C.O. made no comment to that. Making a finer tuning on the wave-length dial, he twisted in the seat and glanced back. Spread out in catch-as-catch-can style the rest of the unit was clawing air toward the Winston-Salem area.

And far back, way back at the tail of the whole gang, was Memphis Murdock's ship. The plane was loafing through the air as though its pilot were on a little joy-hop by way of killing time.

For a moment Dawson was tempted to contact the newcomer on the radio and burn him up a bit. But with a shrug he gave up the idea. Let the damn fool do as he pleased. It didn't matter much, anyway. No sense in counting on a greenhorn for any help on his first patrol.

Turning front, he focused his eyes on the ground far ahead. He could just see

the government Tetalyne plant. See its double row of squatty buildings, and stacks that poked into the air like so many sore fingers.

Raising his eyes, Dawson searched the heavens above it. There were pock-marked here and there by fleecy, wind-whipped clouds. But as he studied each group in turn, he saw nothing to excite his fears. So far, so good. Nothing had happened before Thirty-four could get on the job.

Throttling a bit, he relaxed back in the seat, but kept his eyes fixed on the skies ahead, nevertheless. The words of Colonel Hawks were still ringing in his ears.

And although the H.Q. officer had not said so in as many words, Dawson knew full well that if the Blacks did get through to the Tetalyne plant, and destroyed it, it would be good night to one unit commanding officer, even thought he did come out of the scrap alive.

"Too many units patrolling the coast!" he muttered to himself. "Should put more than one unit on this objective job. Yeah! What's he think we are, a—"

The red signal light blinked rapidly, and the voice of Unit Six's commander crackled in the ear-phones.

"Thirty-four! Thirty-four! On the alert. A flight of high-speed Black bombers are headed our way. We're going into action now. Will report to you later. In case I don't—keep your eyes open!"

"I'm likely to!" Dawson snapped, and twisted the wave-length dial to his Unit's reading.

"In case you didn't pick up that message!" he barked, "bombers have been sighted. Form a two-line formation on the east side of the area. Swanson! You take the top line. I'll take the bottom. That's all. Tune your sets in on Unit Six—reading seven, nine, twelve!"

Re-adjusting his own set, the C.O.

swung toward the east of Winston-Salem area and circled slowly while half of the unit fell into line behind him. In the meantime he kept his ears tuned for the slightest word from the Unit Six commander on the coast.

Five minutes later there was a sharp cry—like a cry of pain in the ear-phones—and immediately, clicking sound. He grabbed the transmitter tube, jammed it to his lips.

"Six, Six!" he roared. "What's happening? What's the matter?"

There was no reply, and he repeated his call three times, at one minute intervals. And still there was no sound coming from the ear-phones. As a matter of fact, they remained so silent that he became convinced that contact had been broken. The clicking sound might possibly have meant that.

Cursing softly to himself, he waited another minute or so. It was torturing hell to wait. Perhaps there was a hell of an air scrap raging far east of him.

Damn Hawks! Why the hell had he given Thirty-four this kind of a patrol. The job of waiting, waiting, waiting for action to come to it. Thirty-four should—

The red light blinked, and the ear-phones gave forth hoarse choking sound.

"Thirty-four—on guard! Bombers driven back. But a Dart has broken through. Heading southwest, and flying high. It's carrying a single aerial torpedo. We were fooled! The real bombers were only a bluff. They drew us off before we realized that the Dart was breaking through. Look for—"

THE voice trailed off in a rasping sigh, and died out completely. Dawson shouted and bellowed into the transmitter tube, but it didn't do any good. No further words came from the commander of Unit Six.

Cursing, he spun the wave-length dial knob to Thirty-four's reading.

"Dart has broken through!" he thundered. "Broke through to the southwest. That may mean he's going to sneak up from the south. Aerial torpedo aboard. Cover the southern end, all of you!"

Even as he finished his order, Dawson realized that he might just as well have saved his breath. Every pilot had been tuned in on Unit Six, and had heard every word he'd heard.

Already they were spreading out fan shape, and drifting in formidable array toward the southern end of the Winston-Salem area.

Automatically, he counted the planes. As he reached the last one he jerked up straight in the seat with a sharp exclamation. The unit was one plane short. Somebody was missing.

Eyes narrowed he studied the markings on each ship, and grated out a curse. The plane that was missing was the only one that didn't carry Unit Thirty-four markings. In other words, Memphis Murdock was missing.

Twisting around, Dawson searched the skies in all directions. And saw nothing but clouds and sky, and the veterans of Thirty-four. He turned front again, a heavy scowl creasing his brows.

"Probably hasn't reached here, yet!" he grunted. "Or maybe he throttled his engine down so much that it quit, and wouldn't come back. Wonder if the others spotted him?"

He transformed the question into action, grabbed up the transmitter tube.

"Attention! Anybody sighted Lieutenant Murdock?"

"Saw him five or ten minutes ago, sir," came somebody's voice. "Haven't seen him since, though."

Nobody proffered any further news, and Dawson let it go at that. With a shrug he started to dismiss the fledgling from his mind, when, for no reason at all, he happened to glance back and up.

There, almost out of sight, was a plane.

At first glance he knew that it was an American plane. And at second glance—when he saw how it munched through the air—he knew that it was Memphis Murdock. But what brought the blistering curse to his lips was the fact that the fledgling was flying due north. Flying away from the Winston-Salem area!

He grabbed the transmitter tube again.

"Murdock!" he thundered. "Murdock, you blasted fool. Come back down here, where you belong! That's an order, damn your hide! Come back down here, where you belong."

For all the change of course of Murdock's ship, the C.O. might just as well have bellowed for all the clouds to fade out of the sky. The fledgling kept right on floating north, gaining altitude slowly but surely.

And as Dawson continued to roar himself hoarse, Murdock munched into a cloud bank and lost himself to view.

It was then that Dawson realized that he had simply made his throat sore. A glance at the radio panel told him that Murdock's set was not open to his call. The fledgling's instrument was either out of commission, or else he had deliberately shut it off and kept it that way.

"Just wait until he gets back! Just wait until I get my hands on him! I'll break his blasted neck and love it. Damn all greenhorns to hell anyway!"

"Want me to go herd him back, sir?"

The sound of Big Ben's voice in the ear-phones awoke the C.O. to the fact that the others had been listening in all the time. He shook his head, as though the leader of A Flight was right in front of him.

"No!" he snapped. "Let the fool go. I'll take care of him, later. We stick to the present job."

That job, however, proved mighty boring at the end of the next fifteen minutes.

And it proved even more than that at the end of half an hour. Dawson searched the southern heavens until his eye-balls were ready to pop, but he didn't so much as even see a cloud shadow that might be a torpedo loaded Black Dart trying to sneak in.

Rough calculation resulted in the deduction that the enemy crate should show up, for sure, within the next fifteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes! Fifteen years, they seemed to Dawson. And when the last one had ticked into history's oblivion the picture in the skies to the south was still the same.

A lot of blue, a lot of fluffy clouds. And that was all. Not even the ghost of an enemy plane!

The C.O.'s thoughts were obviously being shared by the other members of Unit Thirty-four. They too, were becoming fed up with patrolling around and around in useless circle formation. The way that they were now flying, plainly showed it. From trim battle formation they had slumped into half-hearted maneuvering—putting just enough effort into it to retain a semblance of position.

The fact that he was practically doing the same thing, himself, irked Dawson. He started to grab up the transmitter tube, and give them a blistering verbal going over. But before his fingers touched the tube, the ear-phones crackled out a short imperative order.

"That's far enough! Just drop that thing, right now!"

HAD it not been for the glass cowlings over his head, it is possible that Dawson might have leaped right clear out of his cockpit. The voice in the ear-phones had been the voice of Memphis Murdock! The fledgling was on the unit's wavelength, but it was evident that he was talking to somebody else.

Snapping his eyes to the station direction finder, the C.O. saw that the signals were coming from a section of sky about fifty miles due north of his present position. He had to grab at the transmitter tube twice before he finally got hold of it.

"Murdock!" he thundered. "What are you up to?"

A couple of seconds of nerve-wracking silence. And then the fledgling's voice. "Just met up with a Dart, sir. And I figure to take him into camp. Now there, you, don't go doing that sort of thing. I'm telling you to drop that, and drop it right now!"

The last, Dawson knew wasn't meant for him. He started to speak, then clicked his lips shut, and rammed the throttle wide open. Trying to talk to Murdock wouldn't get him a thing. The goofy nut had met the Dart—or some Dart—and was up to some crazy start. Best to get to where he was—and get there fast.

Pounding rudder, and belting the stick over, he whipped around and went tearing north at top speed. Suddenly, a new thought struck him, and he grabbed for the transmitter tube.

"Swanson!" he barked. "You trail with me. The rest of you stick at that patrol. This may be another trick. We can't take any chances!"

"Reckon this is the one, sir," came Murdock's voice. "He's got one of them there torpedoes on his crate. But he'll be dropping it in a minute, don't worry."

Dawson shouted half a dozen questions but Murdock was too busy to answer. Or else he didn't want to be bothered with answering. At any rate the ear-phones remained silent. Remembering how Murdock had drifted north at a high altitude, Dawson nosed the plane up slightly, and went plowing through the drifting clouds into clear air above.

It was a couple of moments later that

he saw the two planes, twisting and turning around each other, far ahead. Instantly he recognized one as Murdock's plane, and the other as a Black Dart.

From what he could see at the distance, The Black pilot was trying every trick in the book to cut away from the Yank and lose him. But with seemingly effortless ease, Murdock was sticking right to him—but not firing a single shot!

He was simply sitting on top of the Dart, as he had sat on top of Big Ben, and, apparently, perfectly content to remain that way.

It didn't take a veteran of Dawson's ilk to realize that something was going to happen before he could reach the two planes.

For one thing, there was the matter of minutes it would take to cover the distance. And for another, the Dart's maneuvering was evidence that the Black pilot was staking everything on one last, desperate effort.

And even as that realization came to Dawson, he saw the snub-nosed aerial torpedo, slung under the Dart's fuselage, drop away and go shooting downward.

Fascinated, the C.O. followed its course down—saw it smack into some marsh land and belch flame, mud and water upward in gigantic fountain effect. Then he snapped his eyes back to the two planes, and groaned aloud.

The Dart, minus its extra load, was now being corkscrewed out from under Murdock's plane. It went out like a flash of light, and cut back in again. Its sleek nose spat twin streams of jetting flame, and Dawson's heart stood still as Murdock seemingly made no effort to skid out into the clear.

But a split second later, the C. O. realized that the Black was missing the fledgling's crate by a dozen yards or more. Like once before, without appearing to move, Murdock had moved. And now he

was swinging up and over into a perfect position for a cold meat shot.

But no streams of flame sizzled out from the cowed nose of his plane.

"Shoot—shoot, Murdock! Now's your chance. For the love of heaven, shoot!"

Dawson was hardly conscious that the bellowed words were rushing off his lips.

He was conscious only of Murdock's plane practically standing still in the air, and of the fledgling's guns that hadn't fired a single shot yet.

As for the pilot of the Dart, he was striving desperately to cut out from under Murdock's crazy maneuver. Trying to cut out, and slam in for a kill. But he wasn't even getting to first base.

Like a fog layer slowly settling down on the ground, Murdock's plane was settling down on top of the Dart. Closer and closer it came, no matter what the Black pilot tried.

He even looped, but the crazy fledgling drifted around in a tighter loop, and they both came out the very same way they went in.

"Oh my God!" Dawson grated. "What is this, a game? Why in hell don't you shoot, you damn fool? Stop showing off!"

"Huh?" Murdock's voice suddenly came to him. "I ain't trying to show off, sir. I only figured that—"

At the same instant that the voice cut off, Dawson let out a roar of alarm.

Murdock's plane had been but a foot or two over the Black ship, forcing it lower and lower. But suddenly, the Dart had either nosed up, or else the American ship had nosed down. At any rate, Murdock's wheels jammed into the wing of the Dart. And the under side of his fuselage slapped down on the top side of the Dart fuselage.

For a couple of seconds both planes shot forward in double-decker style. Then the prop of each ship began to fowl

things, and a shower of airplane pieces went flying off in all directions.

A moment later a giant invisible hand seemed to pry the two planes apart, and each slid over on wing.

RUSHING in as close as he dared, Dawson saw the lean, lanky figure of Murdock rise up out of his opened cockpit cowl, poise for a second on the rim of the pit, and then go shooting off into the clear.

By now the Dart pilot had also flung himself clear, and as both pilots went spinning head over heels down through empty air, something in the Black's hand spat flame and sound.

Helpless to do anything about it, Dawson saw the Black's chute billow out, check his fall. He also saw the Black take steady aim at Murdock, who had not yet pulled his rip ring.

The Black couldn't miss. There wasn't fifteen yards between them. His gun spat flame!

Dawson held his breath, looked at Murdock. Then a wild shout of joyous relief burst from his lips. The Black had missed. Missed, for the simple reason that Murdock had pulled his rip-ring at the right moment. In other words, checked his free fall even as the Black was pulling the trigger.

Too late, the Black realized that he had been fooled, and his bullet whammed harmlessly off into space.

"That's it—get him!" howled Dawson, as he saw Murdock slowly reach for his own holstered automatic. "Get him! Teach the dirty rat a lesson. Oh for God's sake, hurry!"

But it was as though the fledgling thought he had all day. With nerve-wracking slowness he pulled his gun, pointed it at the dangling figure now twenty yards away from him.

The Black's gun spat flame twice more,

and Dawson groaned bitterly. Then Murdock's gun answered.

The Black's body spun completely around at the end of the shroud lines. His gun arm dropped limply to his side, and the gun slid from his fingers and dropped out of sight. The C. O. didn't need to take a second look at the swaying figure to know that it was the figure of a dead man. Murdock's one and only shot had scored.

Throttling his engine, Dawson coasted around in slow circles about the fledgling, following him down foot by foot to the ground.

When finally the lanky pilot bumped ground on the edge of a small field, and cut himself loose from the silk folds, the C. O. cut down in a fast wind-break landing, leaped out of his plane and ran over to the man.

"Well, you lucky fathead!" he barked, "what the hell's the idea of your one-man patrol?"

The fledgling stirred himself from his thoughts, looked almost reproachfully at Dawson.

"Sure wish I hadn't spoken to you that time," he sighed. "Took my eyes off that plane to grab the transmitter tube, and an air current carried him up into me, before I knew it. Gosh! The best damn old bus a man ever had! Reckon I'll never have another one like it, either!"

"Listen, Murdock!" the C. O. cracked down, "I asked you what the hell the big idea was? Speak up, before I lose my temper."

The other gave him an odd look as he answered.

"Nothing special, sir," he said. "I just got to figuring things over, when I heard that a Dart had broken through toward the southwest. I says to myself—'Why go tearing way down to the south, when if that Black has any brains, he knows that we'll be after him down there?' Sure! So

I just naturally drifted easy like toward the north—saving energy, you might say, And, shucks, I was right. I saw him trying to sneak in.”

“But why didn’t you answer my radio order to you, to come back?” demanded Dawson.

Murdock grimaced.

“Well, to explain the idea to you, sir, might have tipped him off. Besides, I guess my kind of flying ain’t the same as yours. So I just figured that it would be no use getting all het up and wrangling about things. Figured I’d just better go my own way, and take the chance. And—well, I just guess the chance came out all right.”

“Yeah!” grunted the C. O. “I’ll admit that you used your head more than the rest of us—even though you did go against orders. But for God’s sake, why didn’t you shoot him down? Don’t tell me that you didn’t want to exert trigger finger energy?”

The withering sarcasm simply made Murdock smile. In fact, he chuckled softly.

“Reckon I ain’t that lazy, sir,” he said. “Truth of the matter is—I ain’t in no hurry to die. And maybe that torpedo exploding might have blown both of us out of the air. So I just took my time and worried him enough to drop it. Then I tried to force him down, all in one piece.

I figured that maybe if we captured him, we could get him to tell us all about where he come from. That would save us a lot of trouble.”

Big Ben had landed, and for the last moment or so had been standing at Dawson’s elbow. They exchanged looks, sighed hopelessly. The big pilot suddenly stuck out his hand.

“Shake, Slow Motion!” he grunted. “I still don’t savvy you. But I guess you’re okay.”

Murdock broadened his grin, grabbed Big Ben’s hand.

“Shucks!” he said. “Lots of folks, always in a hurry, don’t savvy me. But I don’t reckon I’ll never change. Just wasn’t built for speed. Always got better results when I took my time.”

The C. O. was still trying to fathom it all. On impulse he leaned toward the fledgling.

“Listen, Murdock,” he grunted, “maybe we’re all crazy, but will you do me a favor?”

“Sure! I sure will, sir.”

“Thanks! Well, after this use your guns. I don’t want to rush through life, either. But if you’re going to lop ten years off every time I take you on patrol, well—”

He gave the slightly puzzled fledgling a meaning look, and started back toward his plane.

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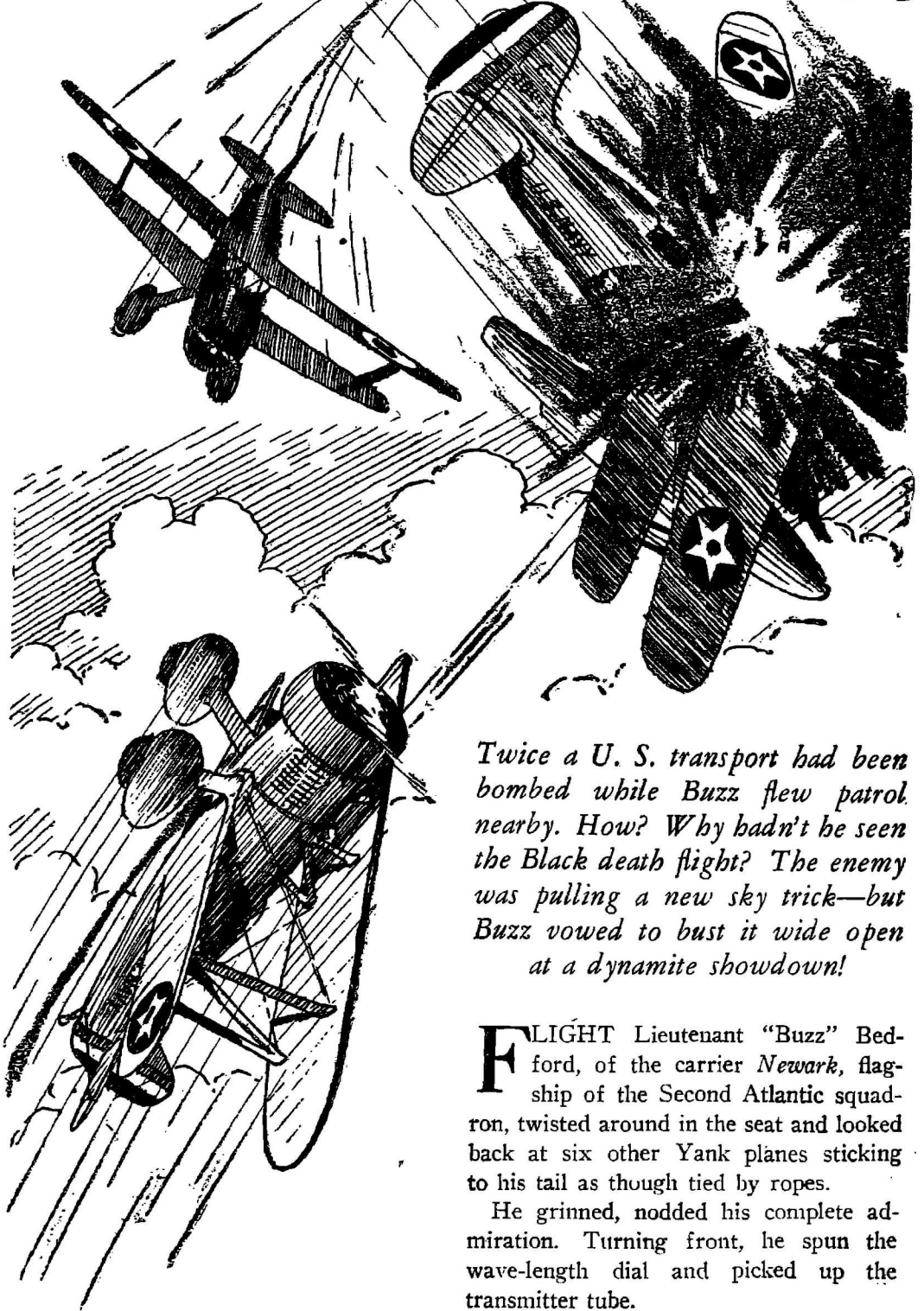
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The Phantom Pilot



Twice a U. S. transport had been bombed while Buzz flew patrol nearby. How? Why hadn't he seen the Black death flight? The enemy was pulling a new sky trick—but Buzz vowed to bust it wide open at a dynamite showdown!

FLIGHT Lieutenant "Buzz" Bedford, of the carrier *Newark*, flagship of the Second Atlantic squadron, twisted around in the seat and looked back at six other Yank planes sticking to his tail as though tied by ropes.

He grinned, nodded his complete admiration. Turning front, he spun the wave-length dial and picked up the transmitter tube.

"Okay!" he called. "Break formation and circle ship for landing!"

Slapping the transmitter tube back in its cradle, he rammed the throttle wide open, and pulled the nose skyward. Five hundred feet higher he leveled off, throttled and started swinging about in slow, lazy circles.

Below him, the six other ships dropped out of their perfect V formation, and in follow-the-leader style curved down toward the *Newark* steaming slowly into the wind through the rolling swells of the Atlantic.

At forty second intervals each of the six planes "hit" the long narrow deck, were pulled to a dead stop in the landing trap, and then taxied clear of the landing area.

Dropping in behind the last ship, Buzz coasted down, took the flag signals from the officer on the landing bridge, and set her down light as a feather.

As carrier grease-balls grabbed his wings and guided him toward the elevator platform, the deck officer came running over, leaped up on the fuselage step and stuck his head in through the opened glass cockpit cowl.

"The old man wants to see you in his quarters, Buzz," he said. "And I guess that the eggs must have been lousy this morning!"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that he's plenty steamed up about something," replied the other. "But don't ask me. How should I know?"

By that time Buzz had stopped the plane and cut the switch. He grinned stiffly at the deck officer and legged out, peeled off his flying jacket and tossed it back into the pit.

"Well," he grunted, "if I'm to be the goat, I might as well find out why. See you later."

Making his way forward and up the companion ladder, Buzz paused before

the ship captain's quarters, smoothed out a couple of wrinkles in his tunic, tilted his cap a hair, and knocked on the door.

A booming voice ordered him to enter. He did, closed the door behind him, and saluted the grizzly-faced figure seated back on the desk.

"Flight Lieutenant Bedford reporting on orders, sir."

Captain Yates, back-breaking skipper of the *Newark*, fixed him with tempered steel eyes.

"What have you to report, lieutenant?" he suddenly shot out.

"Nothing, sir," Buzz replied. "We sighted nothing during the entire patrol."

"No enemy planes?"

"No sir."

"Bombers, I mean!"

"No sir. No enemy planes of any type."

"What about submarines?"

"None, sir. No enemy surface or under-surface ships at all. I beg to repeat, sir, that we sighted nothing."

Captain Yates snorted. It sounded more like a wintry blast of wind striking against the side of a frame house. Buzz inwardly stiffened, steeled himself for the real blow that was about to come. He recognized the signs from past experience.

"So you sighted nothing, absolutely nothing, eh? Perhaps you spent the time practising blind flying?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Buzz said evenly. "I don't believe I understand the captain."

"Then I'll make myself clearer!" boomed the other, and flung a radio dispatch across the desk. "Read that!"

Buzz picked it up, glanced at the typed message.

Navy H.Q. to Newark CC.

Auxiliary transport, Boston, sunk without trace near AT-5 at ten twenty-two A. M. Explain (code) why you made no report.

Caldwell.

"What have you got to say about that, lieutenant?"

The pilot frowned at the dispatch as though he expected to find the answer on it. Then he raised his eyes to the senior officer, half shrugged.

"That's news to me, sir," he said. "We sighted the *Boston* twice, even circled her. I didn't notice anything unusual. Are you sure that this report is correct, sir?"

Skipper Yates snorted again.

"Quite sure!" he snapped. "I've checked with Navy H.Q. They got just one message from her operator. He radioed—'Airplane explosion. Ship sinking.' He gave her position, and then his signals went dead. When a Navy coastal ship reached the spot there was only floating wreckage—no survivors were picked up."

"Airplane explosion?" echoed Buzz, scowling. "What do you make of that? Did the *Boston* carry planes?"

"Of course not! She was loaded with Tetalyne drums, out of Norfolk for New York. It's perfectly clear that the operator meant airplane bombs. The *Boston* was bombed by the Blacks—when you weren't looking, undoubtedly!"

The pilot flushed but kept his temper.

"I can only repeat, sir, that there were no enemy bombers over the area we patrolled this morning. The rest of my flight will bear me out in that, sir!"

"The rest of my flight, be damned!" barked the Newark's commander. "As the leader, you are responsible. A fine mess this is. I'll talk with you again later. Dismissed!"

EARS burning, righteous anger seething through him, Buzz snapped a salute, about faced and stumbled through the door out onto the deck. As he went down aft toward his quarters he bumped into someone, and would have continued on had not a hand grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop.

"Hey, you're out of control! Watch your course, flyer!"

Buzz jerked his head around, blinked into the grinning face of "Terry" Towers, second in command of his flight, and, incidentally his closest ship-mate aboard the Newark.

"What's up, kid?" Towers questioned when Buzz said nothing.

"Everything! The Old Man says that the *Boston* was bombed and sunk without trace!"

Towers rocked back on his heels in astonishment.

"He's goofy!"

Buzz shrugged, and cast brooding eyes out over the port rail.

"He's more than that!" he grunted. "But the dope came official from Caldwell at Navy H.Q."

Buzz told of the radio dispatch and of Captain Yates' check-back with the department.

"And so that leaves me sitting out on the end of the boom!" he finished up savagely. "Yates will get hell from Navy H.Q. Then he'll multiply it by a million and pass it on to me. You know, the old Navy game—'Something happened, and why didn't you see it?'"

"But there weren't any enemy bombers in the air!" Towers insisted. "We all know that. Hell, the only thing we did sight, was that pontooned scout pursuit from the *Texas*! And, by God, the rest of us are ready to back you to the limit!"

Buzz grinned thinly, slapped him on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Terry! I know you will, but I doubt if it will help. Got a couple of marks against me already, you know. Nuts! Guess I'll go get the executive officer's okay on a solo flight. Want to be alone, and think. Be seeing you, kid."

Half an hour later Buzz roared off the Newark's deck and curved up toward the cloud-filled sky. As he had no par-

ticular objective—just wanted to get aloft and think—he held the nose up until some twenty to twenty-five thousand feet of air were between him and the Atlantic. There he automatically leveled off, half throttle and allowed the plane to amble along in a general southerly direction.

Far to the right was a thin line, low down on the horizon, marking the coast of Delaware and New Jersey. And to the left, the limitless expanse of the Atlantic. At intervals he gazed first at one and then at the other, without seeing them. His mind was too occupied with none too pleasant thoughts about one Captain Yates to take any notice of ocean and coastline scenery.

This wasn't the first time that he'd been up on the carpet before the skipper. But he had the feeling that it would be the last. The skipper's nickname, the Back-Breaker, was not an unjust one by any manner of means.

An officer of the old school, Captain Yates made no bones of his disgust at being placed in command of an airplane carrier. He wanted the deck of a first line battleship under his feet, and like many before him, he took it out on those under his command.

"Aw nuts to him! Let him kick me back to shore duty, if he wants to. At least I'd be under a flying commander!"

The echo of his words coming back to him, roused Buzz from out of his thoughtful trance. He straightened up in the seat, smacked the throttle open, and took a look around.

It was then that he spotted the tiny dot just under the cloud bank to the east. He peered at it intently, trying to make out its type from its silhouette. But it was too far away, and too small.

With a shrug he turned his eyes front, and snapped on his radio set to call the Newark and find out her exact position. He didn't want to add to his troubles by

making the unforgivable mistake of losing his own ship.

But as he started to spin the wavelength dial, the phones clapped over his ears gave forth a sort of shrill, staccatic humming sound. It was almost like the sound of high-speed wireless signals, only there were no regulated pauses, such as a wireless operator makes between completed sentences.

"Like a dynamo going haywire, if you ask me!" he grunted, turning down the volume.

For no reason at all, he turned his head and stared toward the cloud bank. The dot was still hugging close to their underneath surfaces. It was a bit bigger, but still not big enough to mean anything to him. Not even when he put the glasses on it. A plane, probably a biplane, but that was as far as he could make out.

By that time, however, curiosity got the better of him. He tapped rudder, shoved the stick over and sent the plane arcing around toward the distant cloud bank.

For several minutes he flew straight toward it, eyes glued on the dot underneath. Presently he relaxed and grunted. The dot had changed into a biplane—a pontooned scout pursuit with U. S. Navy markings on its side.

Additional insignia told him that the plane was from the U.S.S. *Mississippi*.

THE craft was drifting about in a series of lazy circles. As though its pilot was trying to get in a lot of extra flying time in his logbook, without going any place in particular.

Swinging past it, Buzz waved. But no acknowledging wave came back to him. He swung in closer, then suddenly let out a yell and veered away sharply. The other craft had swung toward him in a lazy turn that would have missed his spinning prop by inches, had Buzz not cut away in time.

"You damn fool!" He roared "What the hell's the matter with you?"

The plane from the Mississippi was now swinging around in the opposite direction, as though nothing at all had happened. Cursing, Buzz spun the wavelength dial to the general Navy communications reading.

"Hey, you, from the Mississippi!" he bawled into the transmitter tube. "What's the big idea? Anything wrong?"

The ear-phones gave forth no answer, and he repeated his call, and added a few vitriolic comments.

Still there was no answer, and he was about to call the third time, when the red signal light on the radio panel blinked, and a rough voice spoke in the ear-phones.

"Everything's all right, Newark! Go on back to your ship. I'm busy!"

"Oh you are, are you!" Buzz snapped back. "Who the devil are you?"

"Get back to your ship. Lieutenant Bedford!" roared the voice in the ear-phones, "or you'll damn soon find out! I'm giving you an order. Get away from here, and now!"

Buzz was on the point of handing out another piece of his mind, but thoughts of Captain Yates checked him. It would be just his luck if some ranking officer from the Mississippi was in that pontooned crate, and on some special mission—God knew what. The bum knew who he was, anyway. Better let things stand as they are.

"Okay!" Buzz grunted into the transmitter tube, and snapped off his set.

But as he banked away, he swung in just a bit closer and stared hard at the glass cockpit cowling of the other ship. Perhaps his eyes played him tricks, or perhaps it was the way the light struck the glass, but he could have sworn that there was no pilot in the cockpit.

Impulsively he started to cut back for a check-up, but the other craft banked

away, and the red signal light on the radio panel started blinking.

"Have it your own way, then!" he grated aloud, and made no move to snap on his set. "Stay there, and I hope you fall into a spin!"

Tearing back in toward shore he picked up the Newark on the radio, got her bearings, and headed home. On the way he passed over a transport ship plowing doggedly north, gave it a hard look as he thought of the Boston, and continued on.

A couple of hours later he sighted the Newark, signaled his intention to land, and coasted in. Terry Towers greeted him as he braked to a stop, and cut the switch.

"Spoke to the others, Buzz, and they agreed. It couldn't have been an enemy bomber that got the Boston. Each fellow swears that he saw nothing in the sky. Falkner and I have been appointed a committee of two to tell the old man. And if we have to, we'll damn well go over his head—go right to a Navy Board. Hell, it's no secret that Back-Breaker has been taking most of his spite out on you. You're senior flying officer!"

"Now hold it, hold it!" Buzz interrupted. "Going to the old man will only get you in trouble. Maybe you all will be busted. I'll scrap my own scraps, thanks just the same."

Towers cursed softly, rammed his hands in his tunic pockets.

"You always were a stubborn cuss, Buzz!" he growled. "But I never rated you stubborn enough to be busted back to shore duty without lifting a hand!"

Buzz laughed.

"Hell, I haven't been busted back yet!" he exclaimed. "Why rub the old man's fur the wrong way until you have to? It's possible, you know, he may forget the whole thing, and—"

A deck signal amplifier just above Buzz's head blared out words.

"Lieutenant Bedford wanted at the captain's quarters, immediately!"

"Yeah!" snorted Towers, "he's forgotten the whole thing! Like hell he has! Get going, Buzz. But remember, the rest of us are going to go the limit! Falkner has an uncle, or something, in the department. And he says—"

Buzz didn't wait to hear what Falkner said. Giving Towers a slap on the back, he hastened forward to Captain Yates' quarters.

IF the *Newark's* skipper looked angry before, he looked three times as angry when Buzz clicked his heels and snapped a salute. He didn't even give the pilot a chance to announce his presence.

"Lieutenant Bedford!" he thundered out, "just what the devil are you trying to do—aid and abet the enemy?"

"What? What, sir?" Buzz managed to get out.

The ship's senior officer grabbed up some reports from the radio room, ran his eye down the notations on the top one.

"A little over two hours ago you signaled to our operator for the ship's position, didn't you?"

"Yes sir. I wanted to check my—"

"And your position at that time was in the AT-Nine area?" the captain broke him off. "Is the radio officer's reading of the station direction finder correct?"

"That is correct, sir," Buzz nodded, an eerie sort of clammy sensation stealing through him. "I was—I was patrolling around at AT-Nine area."

As though he had gained a very important admission, Captain Yates leaned back in his over-stuffed chair, tented his fingertips and bored his steely eyes into Buzz's face.

"Interesting, very interesting," he said with a note of heavy sarcasm. "A very uneventful patrol, I suppose?"

Buzz didn't answer for a couple of

seconds. He had to take that time to put a curb on his rising anger. He was almost willing to chance court martial and a firing squad for just one good smack at the grizzly slave driver back of the desk. That is, almost willing—but not quite!

"I guess so, sir," he finally said. "I wouldn't exactly call it a patrol. I was solo—my flight was not along."

"And you sighted nothing?" asked Captain Yates, as though he almost enjoyed putting the question.

Buzz was about to shake his head, but he caught himself in time and nodded.

"Yes sir. I saw a plane from the *Mississippi*. It's pilot didn't seem to be doing anything. I flew along-side, called him on the radio—he damn nearly ran me down—and when he answered he told me to go back to my ship. He wouldn't tell his name. I—well, I figured that I was in enough trouble for one day, so I flew away from him and left him alone. Then I radioed the *Newark*, and returned."

The senior officer cocked one eye, fixed him with a skeptical look.

"A plane from the *Mississippi*, eh?" he echoed softly. "And though he almost ran into you, you made no further effort to find out who he was?"

"No sir," replied Buzz bluntly. "I didn't. He called me by name, and I judged him to be some senior officer who knew the markings of my ship. I didn't have my book of ship markings with me, so I couldn't look him up. And—as I said, sir, I figured it best not to get into any more trouble. His business was his own!"

"From the *Mississippi*?" Captain Yates echoed again. Then added, "We'll check on that!"

Bending forward he snapped on the switch of the inter-ship communication system on his desk. Almost instantly the small built-in speaker unit intoned,

"Lieutenant Parker, radio! Yes sir?"

"Call the *Mississippi*, at once!" Yates barked. "Ask for a complete report of the movements of her planes during the last five hours. When you get it, bring it right down here to me!"

The speaker unit said, "Very good, sir" as Captain Yates snapped off the switch.

Not even glancing at Buzz the Newark's commander started rummaging through some papers on his desk. He seemed to have forgotten the pilot's presence. Buzz shifted from one foot to the other, chewed nervously on his lower lip. Eventually he coughed softly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "Has anything happened?"

The skipper lifted his head and gave him a frozen look.

"Do you think I sent for you, just for a talk?" he rapped out. "Of course something has happened. I'll speak about it shortly!"

With a curt nod of finality, Yates returned his attention to the papers on his desk. Half consumed by curiosity, and half consumed by seething rage, Buzz battled silently with his thoughts.

What could have happened, he had not the slightest idea. He guessed that it was connected with the pontooned ship from the *Mississippi*. Had its pilot reported him for something? No, that didn't seem possible. The old man had shown surprise when he mentioned meeting the *Mississippi's* plane. So what? So what in hell was it all about, anyway?

He was still wrestling with the question a few minutes later when Parker, the radio officer, came into the room and handed Captain Yates a sheet of paper with one hand, and saluted smartly with the other. The skipper gave him a nod that sent him on his way, and scrutinized the paper.

A few seconds later he looked up at

Buzz, and a tight smile tugged at the corners of his big mouth.

"You met a plane from the *Mississippi*, eh?" he barked out the question.

Buzz inwardly cursed the fact that there ever was a name *Mississippi*, and nodded.

"Yes sir! I couldn't possibly have mistaken the markings. There was the M with the diagonal line, and—"

"Never mind all that, lieutenant!" the other cut in sharply. "It so happens that the *Mississippi* is in the Charlestown navy yard—in dry dock for repairs. And her planes haven't taken the air for the last two days!"

Buzz gulped, fought for words.

"But—but that's impossible, sir!" he blurted out. "The plane was from the *Mississippi*! I swear to it, sir!"

The Newark's commander was far from impressed. He leaned back in his chair again, like a trial judge considering an objection raised by defense counsel.

"Lieutenant Bedford," he began slowly, "the transport, *Taft*, loaded with munitions was destroyed a little over two hours ago. As in the case of the *Boston*, she went down before her radio operator could do any more than send out an S.O.S., and give her position. And that position was the AT-Nine area!"

"Why, I saw her!" Buzz gasped in his astonishment. "I flew over her on the way back to the Newark! No cause? You don't know the cause, sir?"

Captain Yates shook his head.

"No. I was hoping that perhaps you might be able to throw some light on it, lieutenant. You admit that you were in the AT-Nine area at that time. You even give me a cock and bull story about seeing a plane from the *Mississippi*, that—"

"Damn the *Mississippi*!" Buzz cried as his temper let go. "Say I was mistaken! Say that it was a crate from some other ship. It was there, just the same. Do you

hear me, sir—a U. S. navy plane was there!"

"Silence!" Captain Yates cracked down. "Damn your hide, I've a mind to clap you in the brig for your insolence! Return to your quarters. In an hour you'll take off and report to the Newport News base for shore duty assignment. If we weren't out on special maneuver orders, I'd damn well have you put ashore in chains. That's all. Get out of here!"

BUZZ swayed drunkenly on his feet, somehow managed to catch himself in time, saluted quietly and retreated outside. The blow had fallen. Hell, he'd expected it, of course. Yet—

He stumbled aft, let himself into his quarters and dropped down on the edge of his bunk. With unseeing eyes he stared straight ahead of him.

"Busted!" he mumbled, as though not quite able to fully comprehend the meaning of the word. "Busted—because there wasn't anyone else for him to pick on!"

Completely submerged in his bitter thoughts, he didn't hear the cabin door open, didn't see Terry Towers come in and walk over to him. As a matter of fact, he hardly heard his friend speak to him.

"What happened, Buzz, old man?"

He looked up dully into his pal's face.

"You called the turn," he muttered thickly. "I'm busted. Go to Newport News Base in an hour. Another ship was destroyed."

"Another?" gasped Towers. "When? Where?"

Buzz nodded, and told Towers of the flight, and of its aftermath in Captain Yates' quarters. As he talked, the other's jaw tightened, and a look of sympathetic rage filtered into his eyes.

"It's a shame, a dirty rotten shame!" he grated as Buzz finally lapsed into brooding silence. "But if that crate wasn't

from the *Mississippi*, it can only mean one thing!"

Buzz turned, stared at him.

"Mean what one thing?" he grunted.

"It means that its the answer to what happened to the *Taft*!" Terry exclaimed. "Don't you get it? That crate was probably one of our jobs that the Blacks captured! Or, maybe they even built it themselves!"

"But the pilot!" Buzz interrupted. "He knew who I was!"

Towers grimaced angrily.

"You poor fish, what of it?" he snapped. "Isn't it possible that the Blacks may have a listing of our registration markings? Hell, the department has a listing of theirs. That was how he was able to get you out of the way!"

"But a pontooned scout pursuit!" Buzz argued grimly. "How the hell could it bomb a transport and sink it before those aboard could get out word of what was happening? Why, hell, its first couple of bombs would only dent the deck—probably not even touch the munitions in her holds!"

Towers scowled at his bronzed hands.

"Yeah, that's true," he said reluctantly. "But maybe it was a case of—"

Buzz suddenly twisted all the way around and grabbed hold of him.

"Terry!" he shouted. "You know Parker—you know him well, don't you?"

The other nodded.

"Yeah, sure! We were in the same class at Annapolis. Why?"

"Listen, Terry," Buzz continued. "I want you to do something for me. Go top-side and see Parker. Get him to radio the *Texas*, and find out if her planes have made any patrols in our area today. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will," nodded Towers, a puzzled look coming into his eyes. "But why radio the *Texas*? What's her planes got to do with this?"

"I don't know," Buzz replied "I've only got a hunch. And I've got to find out something."

"Find out what?" the other asked stubbornly. "Let me in on it."

Buzz shook his head.

"Playing it solo, Terry," he said grimly. "It's all too fantastic to even tell you. Win, lose, or draw, I've got to play the thing through alone. Get going, will you? Get Parker to send out the inquiry—but on the quiet, see? Don't for God's sake let the old man find out."

Towers started to speak, but snapped his lips shut, and turned toward the cabin door.

"Right!" he grunted, jerking it open. "I'll do what I can. Keep your pants on until I get back."

"Swell!" beamed Buzz. "Thanks, kid, plenty. Make it as snappy as you can."

When Towers had gone, Buzz got to his feet, and softly pounding one clenched fist against the palm of the other hand, he fell to pacing restlessly up and down the length of the cabin floor.

"That old moss-back would never believe me!" he muttered aloud. "Wouldn't give me the chance to work it out, in a thousand years. Of course he wouldn't—wants my hide, that's all. But, by God, if I'm right— Dammit, I've got to be right. Yeah! You've got to be right, Buzz!"

Lapsing into silence, he continued pacing up and down. Each time he turned to face the door, he scowled at it, sucked in his breath in a nervous, anxious gesture. A dozen times he glanced at his watch. The seconds seemed minutes, and the minutes seemed hours.

Would Terry never get back with the information he wanted? Perhaps he hadn't been able to get Parker to make the call without authority from Captain Yates. Hells bells—would Terry never show up?

SUDDENLY the door burst open and Terry came bustling into the room. He held a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Here it is," he said, holding the sheet out, "for all the good it'll do you!"

Buzz grabbed the sheet and glanced at the pencil-scrawled writing.

Flight A of the Texas made a short patrol over AT-20 and 22 areas at dawn this morning. No other planes have been launched from the ship.

"Well?" Towers asked as he saw Buzz's eyes widened with a look of grim satisfaction. "So what does that get you?"

"It adds to my hunch!" Buzz replied in a hushed voice. "Terry, I'm going whole hog or nothing. I'm either going to clear myself, or land in the brig for life. Thanks, kid, for doing this for me. And pass the thanks on to Parker, with interest!"

"Glad to!" growled the other. "But if you're up to some crazy stunt, I'm making it a team of two—you and me. Now I don't care what—"

Buzz cut him off with a quick gesture.

"Out!" he said. "That's out. You've got to leave this to me, Terry. It's got to be my risk, and my risk alone."

Towers billowed his cheeks, let out a long helpless sigh, and half shrugged.

"Okay," he said in an injured tone. "I just wanted to be a pal. But if you look at it that way—"

He didn't say any more. He simply gave Buzz a half hearted punch in the ribs, and turned toward the door. As he reached it, though, he paused and glanced back.

"I'll see you on deck, before the take-off," he said quietly. "In the meantime, I'm going to have a little session with the gang. Nuts! If anyone ever needed a nursemaid, you certainly are it! Good luck, anyway, you old bum!"

With that, Towers jerked open the

door, stepped out into the companionway, and slammed the door shut behind him. Buzz stared at it a moment, a sad smile tugging at his lips. Then sinking down on the bunk again he stared fixedly at the porthole.

Exactly thirty-seven minutes later he was sitting in the cockpit of his plane. The prop was ticking over, and he was giving his instruments a final checking before waving his hand at the signal officer on the take-off bridge.

To the side, clear of the take-off deck, stood Terry Towers and the other members of A Flight. A few minutes before, they each had shaken his hand, and mumbled something about seeing him again soon. And now they were waiting for him to take off. Six tried and true pals bidding him a reluctant, silent farewell.

For a second, as he raised his eyes from the instrument board and glanced across the deck at them, he forgot the wild plan in his brain, and thought only of the bitterness and heartache at leaving so swell a gang.

But with grim savageness he thrust the thoughts from his mind, looked toward the take-off bridge and waved his hand. A split second later a siren wailed out its eerie note, and the checkered flag that the signal officer held aloft dropped down.

"So long, gang!" Buzz got out in a half choked whisper. "Here's hoping that I'll be seeing you!"

With that, he rammed the throttle wide open. The engine thundered into life, and the plane streaked down the deck. With feet to spare before the safety line was reached, he pulled it clear and curved up into the afternoon sky.

Not once did he turn to look down back at the *Newark*. For seven months it had been his floating home. Regardless of its commander, he knew and loved every square inch of the carrier. And now he

was leaving it—leaving it to return with the slate cleared. Or leaving it, never to return again.

Hunched forward over the stick, he grimly held the nose up, pointed toward some clouds in the west. Minutes later, when he plowed into their enveloping mist, he leveled off, and with eyes glued to the instruments, swung the plane sharply around and sent it thundering south and a degree or two to the east.

For two solid hours he held that general course, sliding from cloud bank to cloud bank, not remaining in clear air for a split second more than he was forced to. But at the end of two hours he changed his course again. He swung due east and started flying away from the sun.

A little over half an hour of that, and he slid down through the clouds until his top wings were virtually scraping the underneath surface. For a few minutes he floated along at half throttle, and chewed nervously on his lower lip. Then, on decisive impulse, he reached out his free hand for the radio panel.

"Go on through with it, you sap!" he grated aloud. "Waiting around isn't going to get you anything. Step on it!"

Flipping up the contact switch, he then twisted the wave-length dial to the general Navy communications reading, and picked up the transmitter tube. With the tube to his lips, he hesitated, then tightened his jaw doggedly.

"Transport *Newark* calling destination port. Starboard engine broken down, but still making good headway. Position at present, slightly south of AT-Fourteen. Expect to make port at dawn tomorrow."

THREE times he sent the words out over the air. And then he snapped off the set and slapped the transmitter tube back in its cradle.

"It's up to you bums, now!" he breathed fiercely, shoving the throttle

open wide. "It's up to you bums now—or else one Buzz Bedford is scheduled for a permanent fare-thee-well!"

Nosing up into the clouds, he leveled off and flew steadily northeast. At intervals of every five minutes or so, he eased up until only the top half of the plane was above the top of the clouds. Each time he did that, he put the glasses to his eyes and intently studied every square foot of clear sky to the east and to the north. Five, six times he did that. And on the seventh time he almost dropped the glasses in his excitement.

Far to the east, he saw a tiny dot streaking along like a comet gone crazy. It almost appeared as though its pilot was being pursued by a thousand torturing devils. It was a plane, of course. The very instant he picked it up in the glasses, he realized that.

It was the plane's speed, more than the fact that it was a plane, that set his heart to pounding against his ribs, and the blood to surging through his veins. It was roaring west across the heavens, engine full out. In other words, proof positive that he who controled it was in one hell of a hurry to get it over the AT-Fourteen area.

"I'm right, by God!" Buzz yelled.

Holding his own plane so that it continued to mush forward through the crest of the clouds, he kept the glasses fixed on the other ship and waited tensely.

Little by little it grew bigger and bigger in the glasses, until finally he was able to see its outline clearly. That made his heart loop over. The other craft was a pontooned job—a navy job.

And a couple of moments later he was able to tell, what navy. He saw the markings of the U. S. Navy on the fuselage. And almost at the same time he saw the other and smaller markings—those of the U.S.S. *Utah!*

His lips curled back in a grim smile,

and he nodded his head in a gesture of admiration.

"Very neat!" he murmured softly. "If it hadn't been for good old Terry, you'd still have me guessing. Okay, now let's have a look for the other crate!"

Taking his glasses off the Navy plane he focused them on the eastern heavens, and peered through them intently. Seconds ticked past, became a minute, two minutes.

His eyes smarted and watered from the constant strain, but he made no effort to relieve them for the single fraction of a second. He had to find the second plane.

And then, he let out a whoop of joy.

"Dope!" he chided himself. "Of course it wouldn't be at the same altitude! About time you used your brains!"

Adjusting the focus of his glasses, he clamped them on a point high up in the sky and to the east. It looked at first like a moving shadow cast by a cloud passing over the face of the sun—a very small cloud, too.

But he knew instantly that the moving shadow had not been cast by any cloud. It was something far more tangible to his hopes than a cloud. It was an airplane. A stubby fuselaged monoplane. And in the matter of a few seconds he knew that it was an all-black Invader radio plane.

Dropping the glasses back into the cockpit case, he glanced ahead. The Navy plane had eased up in speed and was starting to nose down through the clouds. Buzz shot out his free hand, and rammed the throttle open to the last peg. At the same time he shoved the stick forward.

"We'll settle your hash first!" he roared, as he tore down into the enveloping mist. "And then we'll take care of the other one!"

Thundering into the clear, he immediately looked toward the north. The Navy plane had broken through the clouds and was continuing to coast toward

the water far below. Flattening his dive a bit, Buzz sent his ship streaking straight for it.

"A thousand says I'm right!" he breathed softly. "But I want one good look, anyway!"

Body tensed and alert for any changing movement on the part of the other ship, Buzz roared in close above it, arced over and went streaking straight down. The other plane continued in its lazy dive earthward, not veering a foot to the left or right of its course.

And as Buzz thundered down past it, face practically jammed against the glass cockpit cowling, he suddenly let out a mighty bellow of triumph.

"Right, by God!" he howled jubilantly. "It's just as I figured!"

Hauling back on the stick he went zooming back up for altitude. Then down he streaked again, and jabbed both electric trigger trips forward.

The twin Brownings clattered out sound and flame. Singing steel showered the other plane from prop to rudder fin. As though hit by a giant unseen fist, it suddenly lurched over crazily on one wing. Buzz pounced upon it like an eagle gone crazy.

"Down into the water, you!" he roared. "Down into the water!"

Not once did he relax the pressure against the trigger trips. He held them jabbed forward hard, and two steady streams of destructive steel slashed into the other craft. But seconds later, as Buzz cut sharply away from the floundering plane to avoid ramming into it in his wild excitement, the craft belched forth a great towering sheet of flame.

The whole heavens rocked and trembled in a thunderous roar of sound. Like a leaf in a gale of wind, Buzz's plane was flung end over and out across the air-space. Before he could save himself, a terrific invisible force slammed him for-

ward against the instrument board, jerked him back and flattened him so hard against the seat back that he thought his chest and lungs had been caved in.

GASPING for breath, he tried desperately to get his whirling plane under control. He had the weird impression that the wings had been torn off. That only the fuselage was left, and that it was hurtling through the sky like the projectile from a long-range coast defense gun.

Everything was a gyrating blur before his eyes. He couldn't see the nose of the ship, or the instrument board, or even his two hands tugging at the control stick.

Finally, though, his vision cleared, and he realized that the plane was thundering down in a terrific dive. A sob of crazy joy spilled off his lips when he saw that the wings were still attached to the rest of the plane.

Still a bit giddy, but conscious of what he was doing, he gingerly eased the plane out of its mad dive, brought it up to an even keel, and eased back on the throttle a bit.

Then he twisted around looking for the other plane. He didn't see it. That is, he didn't see it all in one piece. To his left, and below a great billowy cloud of sooty smoke, bits of airplane wreckage were slithering down toward the rolling waters of the Atlantic. He shivered involuntarily.

"Lord!" he got out in a husky voice. "Dumb, I was! It's a damn wonder that—"

The savage snarl of aerial machine guns blasted against his ear-drums. Steel hammers belted the turtle back of the fuselage just behind his head.

Instinct and nothing else made him instantly kick the plane into a full roll, curve it up in a half loop, and then let it slide off the top. Flipping it over right

side up again, he threw back his head and stared skyward.

A few hundred feet above him, and as many more off to his left, a jet black radio plane, with Invader Navy markings on its stubby fuselage, was thundering down like something mechanical gone absolutely crazy.

Double streams of jetting flame spat down from its rounded snout and cut smoking paths down through the air.

Kicking rudder, Buzz skidded his ship farther into the clear and laughed wildly.

"Didn't expect you this soon!" he shouted at the diving Black ship. "But I guess I made you sore, eh?"

As though the man at the controls of the radio plane had actually heard his words, the craft veered sharply toward him, and steel fingers began to poke holes in his left wings.

But only for a couple of split seconds. A snap roll, that made his already strained wings groan in protest, shook off the poking steel fingers. And as he came out of it he pulled the plane up to the vertical, and let it slowly arc over on its back.

Hanging head downward, he saw the radio ship bank to the side and start to cut around and back. At that instant Buzz pulled the stick all the way back into his stomach, and sent the plane careening down on the back side of the loop.

Trigger trips jabbed forward, he slammed burst after burst at the glass cowling of the other ship's cockpit. His fire was returned with emphasis.

A hundred steel hammers beat against his plane. A hundred more smashed their way through his cockpit cowling and reduced his instrument board to so much junk. He knew, though, that his only chance lay in continuing his dive toward the Black. If he tried to pull out, he would be doomed.

A white-hot coal raced across the top

of his shoulder, brought a yelp of pain to his lips. Something smacked the top of his head, and myriads of colored lights danced around in his brain. And then, through a red haze he saw the radio ship heeling over on left wing.

Like a top it spun around twice, started dropping straight down. Oily black smoke spewed out from under its engine cowling. Then a tongue of flame shot upward, and spread out fan shaped.

"That'll teach you a lesson—that'll teach you a lesson, you two-faced tramp!"

Dully realizing that the sound in his ears was his own roaring voice, Buzz ceased fire, pulled the ship slowly out of its dive. The top of his head was hurting like hell. There was a continual pounding in his ears, and everything was starting all over again to go around and around in circles.

With a tremendous effort he reached out, eased back the throttle, and allowed the plane to coast gently downward. He tried to snap on radio contact, but found out that the panel was splintered ruins. A wry smile twisted his lips.

"Best bet is to land!" he heard himself mumble thickly. "Can't hold out—to shore. Going to pass out soon—know I am. Yeah, better sit down while I can. Maybe be picked up. Yeah—maybe not!"

He stopped talking. It hurt too damn much to try and form words. The top of his head was on fire—so was his shoulder. So was every damn part of his body. If he could only get down onto the water—mush into it.

The float tanks, that formed a part of the underside of the fuselage, would keep him from sinking. Yeah, keep him afloat for a long time. Right—until he starved to death, too.

Steady! There was the water. Don't steepen the gliding angle, you fool! Flatten out—flatten out! Do you want to dive in? Flatten out! There—now mush her

down easy. Not so fast! That's got it!

Nuts to you, Yates! Try and bust me, you damn back-breaker? Like hell you will. Probably will never know—figure that I lit out. Well, what do I care? I did it, see? I damn well did it—and blast you! Steady, Buzz. Let her mush in easy—easy—easy—

"Steady, Buzz old man! Just hold still and take some of this! Here, take some."

Liquid fire going down his throat pried Buzz Bedford's eyes apart. In foggy, stupefied amazement he looked about. He was in a nice white bed. A Navy medico was fussing at a table in the corner. Close to the bed, and holding a glass of amber-colored liquid in his hand, was Terry Towers.

Buzz closed both eyes, then just opened one and looked. Then he closed that one and opened the other. Either way, Terry Towers was still there, grinning down at him.

"What happened?" Buzz heard his own voice ask. Then, "No—wait! I remember. I crashed. No, passed out as I was landing in the water. But you? How come you're here? And where am—"

Towers' hand came down and closed over his mouth.

"For God's sake!" he grunted. "Do you have to be totally unconscious to give your tongue a rest? Of course, I'd be where you were. I like to bask in the glory of a hero, as much as the next guy. Even if that hero is a stubborn mule at times!"

"But this place!" Buzz broke in. "How come I'm here?"

"It's the Baltimore Naval Hospital," Towers replied patiently. "And you were picked up by the coastal patrol boat, *Norfolk*. Did you think that Black radio ship would be the only one who picked your goofy message out of the air? Why—"

"Then you know that it was a Black radio ship?"

"I do! And so do a lot of others. Since yesterday you've been babbling of how you remembered hearing strange radio sounds on your solo patrol. How you later figured that there couldn't have been a pilot in that crate from the *Mississippi*. How you figured that the Blacks must be using a fake Yank radio controlled plane loaded with Tetalyne. How it could easily be sent down and crashed into a surface boat before those on the boat realized what was happening. And of how you decided to chance a crazy radio message that would maybe make them try the stunt again on some ship that wasn't there. And finally, how you nailed the Tetalyne plane and then got the radio control job. Right?"

Buzz nodded, grinned weakly.

"Yeah," he said. "But you gave me the first steer, kid. When you sprung the fake Yank plane suggestion. And maybe I didn't babble this—but I damn near got myself blown up. I plumb forgot about there being Tetalyne in that fake crate when I went down on it. Can you tie that one?"

"I could try," replied Towers, "but let it pass. You're alive, and—"

"Say!" Buzz suddenly broke in. "The old man! Does he know all about it?"

Terry Towers laughed.

"Does he?" he echoed. "Boy, you're lucky even when you're unconscious. Caldwell came down to see you this morning—right while you were babbling the whole story for the umpteenth time. Well, Caldwell's a white guy even if he is an admiral! And, the latest report is that the *Newark* is getting a new captain!"

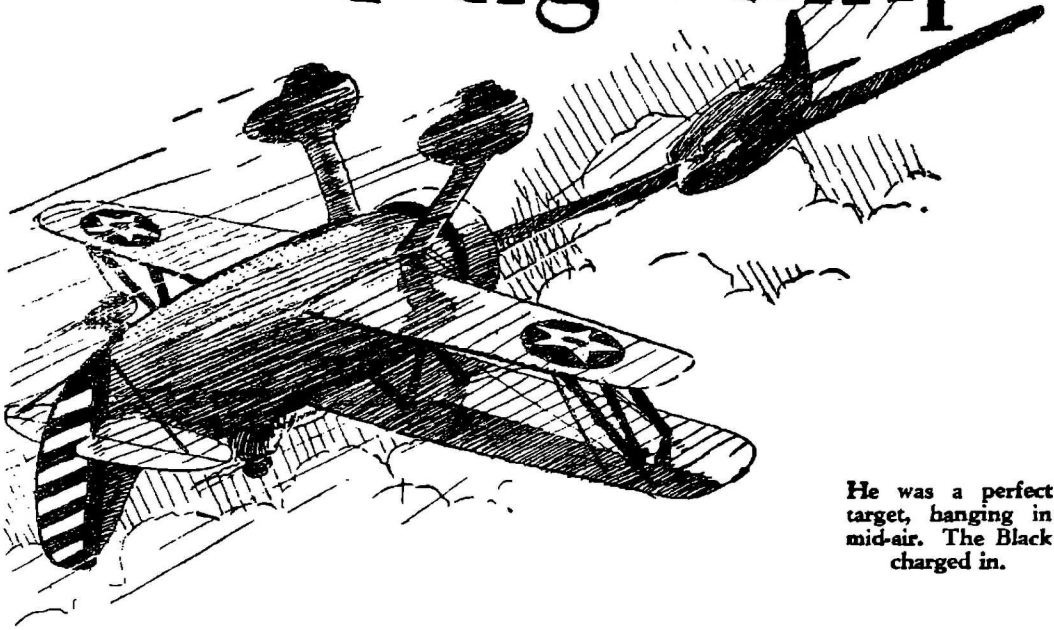
Buzz stuck out his jaw.

"Smack it, Terry!"

"Huh?"

"Smack it! I've got to make sure that I'm really and truly awake!"

The Looping Blimp



He was a perfect target, hanging in mid-air. The Black charged in.

When a fledgling takes off for a sham sky battle and meets a Black ace instead, it looks like curtains. But young "Elephant" Talbot was a tough guy to kill!

LEGGING out of the cockpit, Skipper Tim Dolan, chief instructor at the 15th aerial gunnery school, fished a cigarette from his tunic pocket and lighted up.

"She O. K. now, sir?"

Dolan turned and nodded at the corporal mechanic.

"Yeah," he grunted. "I guess she'll do for awhile. Hate like hell to use her in a real scrap, though. Sloppy as the devil on the turns. Oh, well, maybe they'll ship us some new crates some day."

With a parting wave of his hand the pilot walked over to the field office, shoved in through the door. Major Milson, C. O. of the field, and Dolan's best friend, glanced up from a pile of reports, frowned slightly.

"If you've come to belly ache about getting new ships, Tim," he grunted, "save your breath. Talking with the colonel ten minutes ago, and he says there isn't a

square foot of fabric left at Replacement Depot. The bum's lying, of course—but, what can I do?"

Dolan shifted his cigarette to the other side of his mouth, and perched himself on one corner of the desk.

"You know, Bill," he mumbled through a cloud of smoke, "one of these days I'm not going to be here. That crate of mine is just naturally going to fall apart."

"You can always jump."

"Aw nuts, you think of everything, don't you? But, listen, what do you say we call it a day, and go into town for a bender?"

The C. O. shook his head.

"No can do. You, either. There's a fledgling on his way here. I've got to give him the usual pep talk. And you've got to put him through his paces."

"He can wait!" growled Dolan.

"Not this lad," replied the other. "A distant relative of the colonel's or something. The old man wants us to give him

extra instruction. Keen about the lad—wants to rush him through to active service.”

Dolan snapped his cigarette down onto the floor, glared at it a moment, then moved himself enough to stamp a foot down on it.

“Maybe if the kid broke his neck,” he grated, “the old man would do something about getting us some new crates.”

“Maybe. Why not proposition the kid when he shows up?”

The chief instructor cursed, heaved himself up, and started toward the door.

“Maybe I will,” he growled. “Nuts, what a war! Nothing ever happens!”

As though Fate had waited for that exact moment, the door opened and an elephant waddled inside. It really wasn't an elephant, but that was Dolan's first impression as he stepped back in amazement.

The newcomer was a young man. Two men moulded into one form. From the top of his football shaped head to the bottoms of his battleship feet he was one continuous roll of fat. In fact, his face was so full that his eyes seemed little more than wrinkles at the tops of his fleshy cheeks. The second lieutenant's uniform he wore could be used for a circus tent, or a couple of horse blankets. In short, the newcomer was slightly corpulent.

Floor boards creaked as he walked. He moved over to the desk, swung up his right hand and saluted with a grunt.

“Major Milson?”

The C. O. gulped, got his popping eyes back into their sockets, and nodded.

“That's right. And you?”

“Second Lieutenant Talbot, sir. Reporting for aerial gunnery examination.”

“You've gone through flight school?” the major gasped before he could check himself.

The fat fledgling beamed, and the slot that was his mouth went up at the corners in a grin.

“Oh yes, sir,” he replied. “I've got sixty-four hours in my logbook. I'm sort of a tight fit in the cockpit, but I get along.”

The C. O. laughed at the man's jovial nature.

“Well, I wish you luck here,” he said. “By the way, how'd you happen to get into the air force? I would have thought that the recruiting officers would have rated you—er—a little overweight.”

“They did, sir. But Colonel Crocket's my uncle—uncle on my mother's side, sir. And he got me through.”

“Sort of a favorite nephew, eh?” asked Dolan in back of him.

The newcomer turned, nodded his head vigorously.

“Guess you might call it that, captain,” he said. “Uncle Crocket gets me most anything I want—and I wanted to get into the air force.”

Both Wilson and Dolan had to smile at that remark. If there ever was a vinegar-tempered, close-fisted officer in the air force, Colonel Crocket was it. It was difficult to imagine the old man doing anything for even his own wife.

“That's Captain Dolan, Talbot,” the C. O. introduced. “He'll be the one to put you through your paces.”

The fledgling beamed, shook the chief instructor's hand.

“Glad to meet you, captain. Hope I'll prove O. K.”

Dolan grinned.

“I've got a hunch you will, Talbot,” he said. “Yeah, in more ways than one, I suspect.”

“I'll sure try, sir. When do we go up for the first sham scrap?”

The other shrugged.

“Any time you say,” he replied. “How about meeting me on the tarmac in an hour?”

“Swell, sir, swell! I'll be waiting for you.”

GIVING them both a salute, the human mountain waddled over to the door and went outside. When it had closed behind him, Dolan broke into a jig dance around the room.

"Hot dog!" he yelled. "Is he a gift from heaven?"

The C. O. stared at him.

"What the hell do you mean?" he grunted. "Hey, cut out the act, you Indian!"

"Can't you just see 'em?" Dolan asked. "Nice brand new, shiny ships instead of the flying wash-outs we've got! Boy, there'll be nothing to it!"

Watson cursed.

"Have you gone nuts?" he snapped at his dancing friend. "Quit that, and explain what the hell you mean!"

The chief instructor stopped hopping around and came over to the desk.

"Talbot, the old man's nephew!" he said. "With that load he carries around, he won't be able to get any of our haywire crates off the ground without it falling apart. Yup, I'll have him use a different bus every flight, until he's wrecked the whole bunch. Then the old man will have to get us new ships. And he won't be able to raise hell with us because it'll be his favorite nephew who'll do the busting up of 'em! Don't you see?"

The C. O. snorted, shook his head sadly from side to side.

"No such luck," he grunted. "Ten to one he's a sweet pilot, and won't even break a strut. My God, he'd have to be, to get this far with his weight."

"Maybe so," shrugged the other. "But just leave it to me. Little Rollo is going to get us some new crates, even if I have to cut a couple of flying wires to make him crash."

"Well, for God's sake, don't kill the kid!" the C. O. cautioned. "We would be out on the limb if anything happened to him. Hell, why did Crocket have to send him to this field!"

"Don't worry," grinned Dolan, starting toward the door. "That kind can't hurt themselves—they bounce too easily. Keep your eye on the window, and see the fun."

With a final knowing wink, Dolan ducked outside and went over to the hangar line. As he reached the ships, the corporal mechanic came running over. There was a worried look on the non-com's face, and he was shaking his head slowly from side to side. He was obviously so worried that he forgot to salute.

"There was a Lieutenant Talbot here a couple of minutes ago, skipper," he began. "Said for me to get a ship ready for him. But, gosh, I don't know."

The pilot grinned at him.

"You don't know what, corporal? Because he's fat?"

"Yeah, that's it, skipper! I don't think that any of these crates will hold him. Even at that, we'd have to put him into the pit with a shoe-horn. You really think he can fly?"

Dolan shrugged, ran an eye over planes on the line. A look at them dulled his enthusiasm. After all, he didn't want the newcomer to break his neck. Suddenly he switched his eyes back to the corporal.

"Which do you rate the best ship?" he asked. "The strongest one?"

The non-com squinted a calculating eye, then pointed to the third plane on the line.

"That one, there," he said. "She's got a brand new undercarriage for one thing."

"Crank her up," ordered Dolan. "I think I'll give her a test myself."

Five minutes later he taxied the plane out onto the runway, took a good look around to make sure that all was clear, and rammed the throttle wide open.

The engine kicked-back a couple of times, but decided to keep running. Eventually, Dolan pulled the plane clear and nosed it up toward the cloud-filled sky. At ten thousand he leveled off, and started tossing the craft about.

A quarter of an hour later he leveled up, eased back the throttle to the three-quarter mark, and cursed softly.

"Just as bad as the rest!" he grated. "Just another load of junk. Damned if I will take a chance with the kid."

He started to nose down for a landing when the red signal light of the radio panel started to blink. He stared at it in surprise.

"What the hell? Who—"

At that instant he noticed that the wave-length dial showed that the signals were on the S.O.S. emergency wave-length. Shooting out his hand, he snapped on contact, and spun the dial knob. The ear-phones crackled out sound.

"... all planes! Emergency call to all planes in O-24 area. Enemy pursuit sighted flying due south at high altitude. All units are warned to be on the look-out for this plane. Central States Area H.Q. keeping this wave-length open for all reports."

The message was repeated three times, and then the ear-phones clicked silent. Instinctively Dolan twisted about in the seat and gazed at the sky.

"A Black crate down here over O-24?" he mumbled aloud. "The guy must be nuts! Or else he's lost. Huh! Now wouldn't it be just my luck to run into him with this load of junk! Oh well, no harm in taking a look. I can always radio for help—and then dive like hell for the ground."

FOR the next half hour he circled about at varying altitudes straining his eyes for a glimpse of what might be a Black pursuit plane sneaking south through the clouds.

But though he imagined a dozen different times that he was seeing a couple of flights, nothing definite materialized.

Finally, he gave it up, banked around toward the 15th field and started sliding

down. As he neared the ground he saw Major Milson and several of the mechanics standing on the tarmac. They were all looking up toward him.

Impulsively he half raised himself out of the seat, and took a look down at his undercarriage. Both wheels were down, and seemingly okay.

"Maybe they just want to see me pile up this junk," he grunted, and dropped back into the seat.

A couple of minutes later he touched rubber, rolled to a gentle stop, and then taxied into the line.

Milson came dashing over to him.

"Tim! Where the hell did you leave him?"

"Leave who?"

"Talbot! My God, you mean to tell me that you haven't seen him?"

Dolan looked down the line of planes. One of them was missing. It was the sloppy controlled crate that he usually flew. He snapped his eyes back to the corporal mechanic.

"When the hell did he go up?" he roared. "Why the devil did you let him go? You know damn well that's the worse crate of them all!"

The non-com gulped, and nodded.

"Yeah, I know, skipper. But he was in it and away before I could stop him. I yelled, but he just waved his hand. And away he went!"

"I've been trying to get him on the radio," Major Milson broke in. "Did you get that Emergency S.O.S.? My God, if he should meet up with that Black. The damn fool—doesn't even know how to use a radio!"

Dolan suddenly let out a yelp.

"Hell!" he shouted. "There isn't any in that crate. I took it out yesterday to have it checked. There's only one thing we can do. Corporal! Which way did he go after the take-off?"

"He swung south and lost himself in

the clouds, skipper," the man replied.

Dolan groaned aloud. The Emergency S.O.S. had stated that the mysterious Black ship was flying south over the area. He reached out and grabbed Milson's arm.

"It's up to us, kid!" he barked. "You fly at ten, and I'll fly at fifteen. Head straight south for half an hour. Then we'll zigzag our way back. Come on—meet you upstairs."

Without waiting for the C. O. to make any comment, Dolan spun around and forked back into the pit. In one continuous movement he belted the throttle forward, kicked the plane around on one wheel, and went streaking across the field.

Yanking the ship clear, he prop-clawed up to fifteen thousand at maximum speed. There he throttled a bit, snapped on radio contact, spun the dial knob to Milson's reading and picked up the transmitter tube.

"Okay, Bill?" he barked.

A few seconds of silence and then the C. O.'s voice crackled back in the ear-phones.

"I'm high enough, I guess. Start south at three-quarters throttle. Many clouds up there?"

"Enough," Dolan grunted. "Stick on this wave-length. We'll let each other know, the second we spot anything. The damn fool!"

The last was directed at young Talbot. Racing south Dolan pictured all kinds of unpleasant things. In his imagination he saw Talbot's ship a bullet-riddled heap on the ground. He saw Colonel Crocket's rage-trembling form. Saw the officers of a general court-martial. And last of all, saw Milson and himself seated in a nice gloomy prison cell.

For four long months he had hardly even thought of a Black plane. And now, the very day when the colonel's pet

nephew had wandered into the air by himself, a Black would show up. Hell!

Cursing softly to himself, Dolan flew south, continually searching every square foot of sky ahead. It was worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack. As the minutes dragged past, his heart slid farther and farther down into his boots. Where in hell was that fat fool?

"Tim! I think I sight something ahead. Yes—a plane! Can't make out the type. But it's heading up through the clouds. Keep your eyes open, Tim!"

Milson's voice crackling out of the ear-phones, jerked Dolan up straight in the seat, and sent the blood surging through his veins. He let out a grunt of relief, and opened the engine wide.

"Must be that dummy!" he breathed fiercely. "Boy, what I won't say to him when I get him down!"

SKIRTING the crests of the clouds he went thundering forward, expecting with each new second to see the familiar sight of a 15th ship nose up into the clear. But at the end of five minutes he was staring through aching eyes at nothing but drifting clouds and blue sky.

"Sighted him yet, Tim?" barked the ear-phones.

"Not a damn sign!" Dolan snapped back. "You're sure it was a plane, Bill?"

"If it wasn't then I'm crazy!" came the reply. "Sure it was a plane. I saw the flash of the propeller disc. It should be up near you by now."

"Should be, but it isn't!" Dolan growled. "I think that maybe you're—"

A flickering flash of light appeared off to his right. Sight and action became one. He belted the plane around. About six or seven miles away a plane was mushing through the crest of the clouds. Dolan let out a whoop that made his own ears ring.

"I've spotted it, Bill!" he bellowed into

the transmitter tube. "It's Talbot, all right. I'm heading for him now. Come on up above the clouds!"

So intently was Dolan's gaze fixed on the fledgling's plane far ahead, that for several seconds he did not notice the tiny dot piling down from above the new pilot. And when he did, he let out a howl of alarm.

Too many times had he met enemy planes in the heavens not to know instantly that this was one slamming down on Talbot.

"For God's sake, Bill!" he roared into the transmitter tube. "Get up here, hell bent. A damn Dart's coming down on him! Oh, my God, he doesn't even see him yet!"

That was true. The fledgling was coasting along over the tops of the clouds, as though he didn't have a worry in the world. The diving Black had not yet opened fire. But that was the thing that worried Dolan the most. The Black was going to make sure of his kill. He was trying to slam down close and make one telling burst do the job.

All that, Dolan realized in less than a split second. With a wild curse he jabbed both trigger trips forward, and pumped steel out of both guns.

"Wake up, Talbot!" he roared. "For God's sake, man, are you blind?"

A choking gulp of relief gushed off his lips. The yammering of his guns had attracted the fledgling's attention. The new pilot was banking his ship around. But Dolan knew that the man did not yet know that certain death was streaking down.

Reaching up with his free hand he slammed the glass cockpit cowling open, and heaved himself half up out of the seat. The distance was still three or four miles, but there was nothing else he could do. Flying with one hand he waved

the other frantically above his head, and pointed at the diving Black.

Perhaps Talbot saw him and understood. And then, again, perhaps he didn't. At any rate, a couple of seconds later, jetting flame spouted from the sleek nose of the diving Dart. Dolan's heart stood still as he saw Talbot's plane seemed to lurch off on one wing. For one horrible moment he thought that the fledgling had been nailed by the first burst.

That was not the case, however. Talbot's plane skidded to the side then dipped by the nose a bit and went arcing up in a wild half loop. It was without question a suicide maneuver, and Dolan wanted to close his eyes, but couldn't.

He saw the twin streams of jetting flame from the Black's guns cut down across the sky and plow into the tail section of Talbot's plane. Then something very queer happened. The fledgling's plane seemed to pivot twice, and then it skidded in vertical position out to the left, just as though a giant fist had smashed into it.

"Oh my God, those sloppy controls! It's getting away from him! He's sunk!"

Dolan's words echoed back to him from a long ways off. In helpless desperation he jabbed the electric trigger trips forward and held them fast. He was too far away to do anything but fan thin air. But he hoped that the attacking Black would see him and duck away for cover.

The Black, however, had no idea of passing up a cold-meat fight. He must have known that there was still plenty of time left. In a dime turn the Dart whipped around and charged toward Talbot's plane that was still skidding outward.

This time, it would be the end for sure! The words pounded through Dolan's brain, and he suddenly felt sick all over.

However, the Black pilot was a bum

shot. The fledgling's plane fell out of its skid and went plunging down.

"Keep going down!" Dolan roared. "Keep diving, Talbot!"

But the fledgling didn't stay in his dive. Up came the nose and the plane went zooming toward heaven in a gigantic loop. Like a flash, the Black pilot cut up after it, swung his flame-spitting guns around.

The fledgling was now upside down on the top of the loop. The plane had lost most of its flying speed, and it seemed to hover motionless in mid-air. A split second later Dolan saw Talbot's head and shoulders sag down through the opened cowling.

He groaned out a curse as he realized the truth. The fledgling's belt had broken under his weight, and the sloppy controls were doing the rest. Unable to do anything but try and hold himself in, the fledgling was a perfect target hanging in mid-air.

The Black pilot must have realized what had happened too. For he ceased fire for a couple of seconds, and maneuvered around for the final kill. In he charged, both guns blazing, just as Talbot dropped farther out of the cockpit.

At that moment, however, the miracle of miracles took place. Dolan's own guns were pumping steel at the Black, but he also realized that Talbot's guns had spat flame.

LIKE a bird caught in mid-flight, the Dart whipped over in a crazy roll. It shot straight forward for a couple of seconds. And then plunged down.

"My God!"

Dolan choked out the words in dulled amazement.

Talbot's plane was still in the air. Gravity was pulling it off the top of the loop. As Dolan watched he saw it fall down into a wild dive.

A thousand feet below, the fledgling pulled his ship out of the dive, and came climbing back up again.

It was then that Dolan saw Milson charge up out of the clouds. He stuck his hand up through the opened cockpit cowling, waved a cheery greeting and pointed at the fledgling's plane.

The C. O. waved back, then flew in close to Talbot. He made motions with his hand, and Dolan knew that the C. O. was signaling orders for the fledgling to follow him back to the field.

They landed together—a perfect landing by Talbot, incidentally—and taxied up to the line. As Dolan legged out he suddenly saw the tall hawk-featured figure of Colonel Crocket standing on the tarmac.

The area C. O. started over toward him. Dolan saw the glint in his eye, and steeled himself inwardly.

But before the colonel could reach him, Talbot waddled over.

"Thanks, skipper, thanks a thousand times!" he exclaimed. "I thought that I was a goner that time. But your shooting saved my life. I never flew such a lousy ship in all my life. It's a damn crime to permit ships like that on any field. Hell, the belt broke and the controls went all screwy. But thanks to you, skipper, I'm still here!"

Before Dolan could say anything, the fledgling turned to Colonel Crocket.

"I want you to recommend him for a medal, uncle!" he went on. "He saved my life! And another thing, there isn't a good plane on this field. It's a wonder that all of us aren't dead. Can't you do something about it?"

The area C. O. went red to the gills; puffed out his cheeks and made funny noises in his throat. He looked sidewise at Major Milson.

"Why—er—I didn't realize they were that bad!" he blustered out. "Major,

send me a replacement order and I'll—"

"You already have it, colonel," Milson cut him off. "Had it for a couple of weeks."

"Eh, oh yes, so I have. Well I'll send it through at once. And, captain, I-I-I want to thank you on behalf of Lieutenant Talbot. I'll mention you in my report. Good day, gentlemen."

Before either of them could say anything, the area C. O. walked down the tarmac and climbed into a waiting staff car. As it moved away, Dolan turned to the fledgling.

"You were wrong, Talbot," he said. "My bursts didn't come anywhere near that Black. I guess you didn't know that you'd fired your own guns."

The other's jaw dropped.

"Gosh no!" he gasped. "I did? Must have done it when I grabbed the stick with both hands to stop from falling out.

Well, I'll be damned! That makes us all even, I guess."

Dolan and Major Milson stared at him. "Huh?" grunted the latter. "What do you mean, makes us all even?"

The fat fledgling grinned, shifted his weight uneasily.

"On not knowing something," he said finally. "I heard you talking about needing new ships, after I'd left your office. And of how maybe I could get them for you—the colonel being my uncle. Well, I was going to crack up a few for you. Guess I don't have to, now."

It was Dolan who found his tongue first.

"Do you drink, Talbot?"

"Huh? Yes, now and then, captain."

"Then come with me!" grinned the chief instructor. "That's one of the best ways I apologize!"

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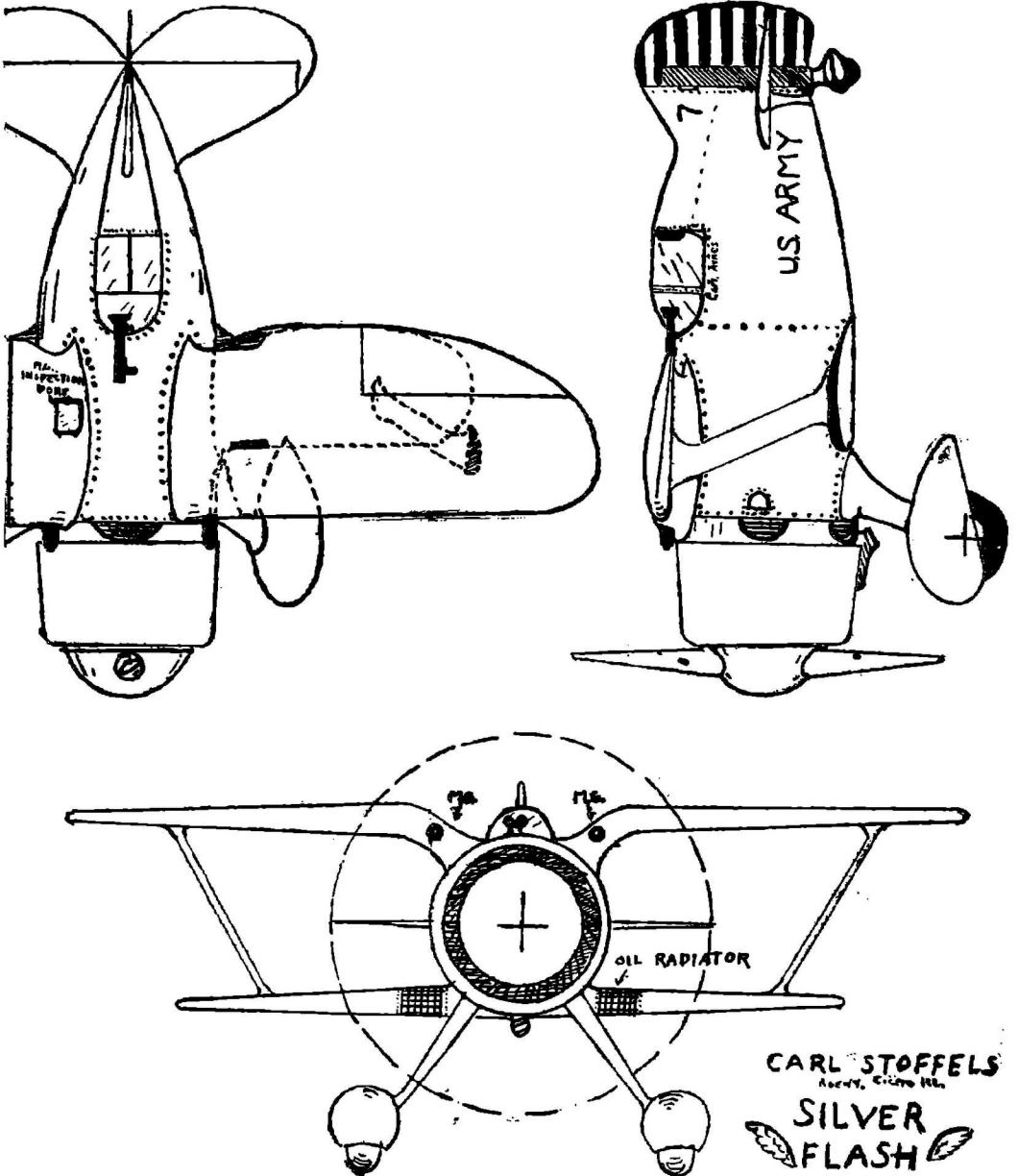
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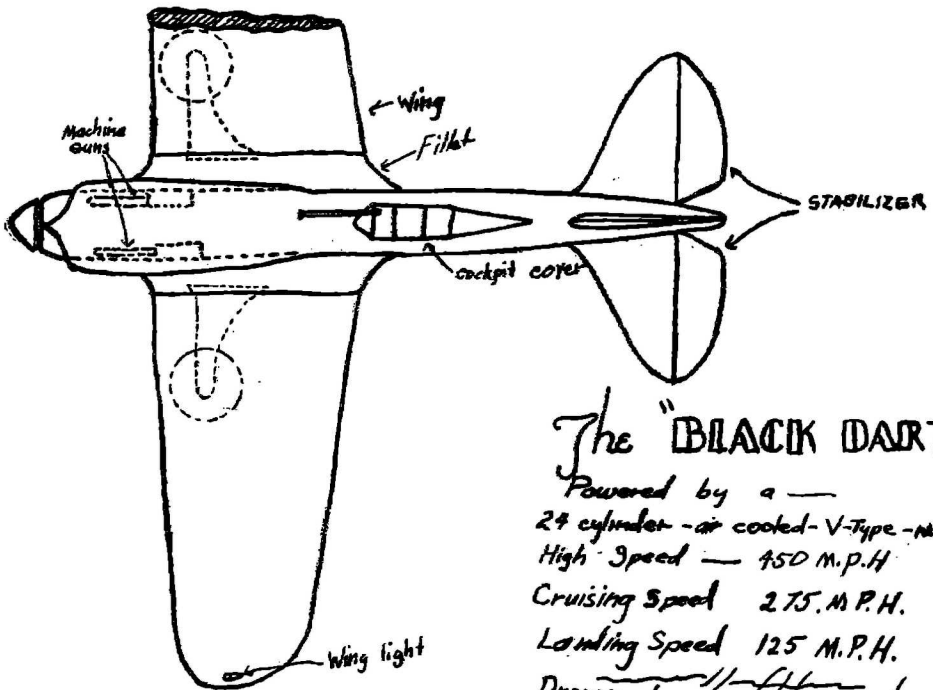
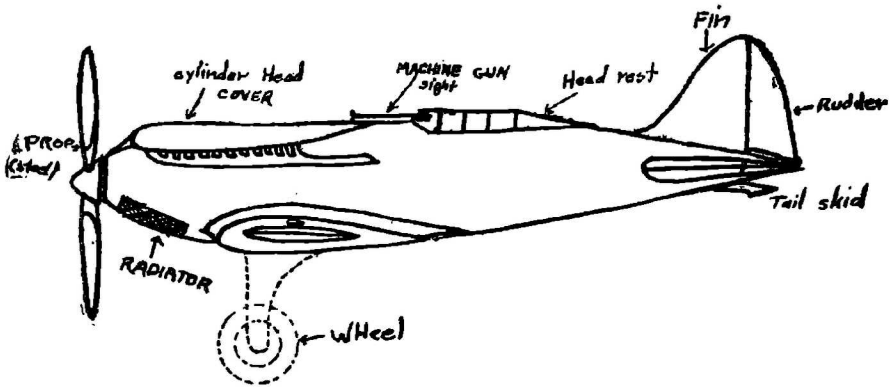
PLANES OF TOMORROW

Three-view plans for model building

Submitted By Our Readers

What is your idea of Dusty's new fighting plane, or of the Black Darts or of any other ship mentioned in this book? Your guess is as good as anyone's as no one can predict accurately how the airplane of the future will look. Send in your design drawings addressed to: Dusty Ayres, Three-View Models, 205 East 42nd St., New York City. The most interesting and futuristic designs will be published each month.

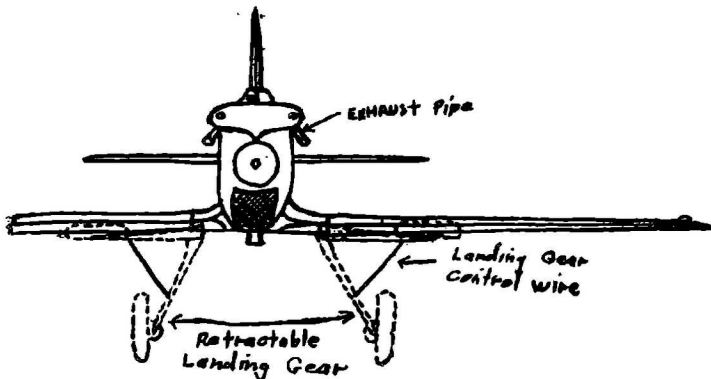


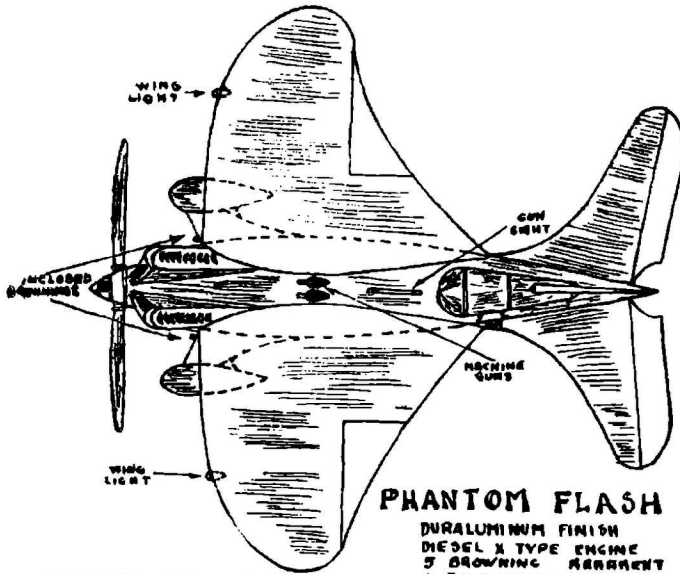


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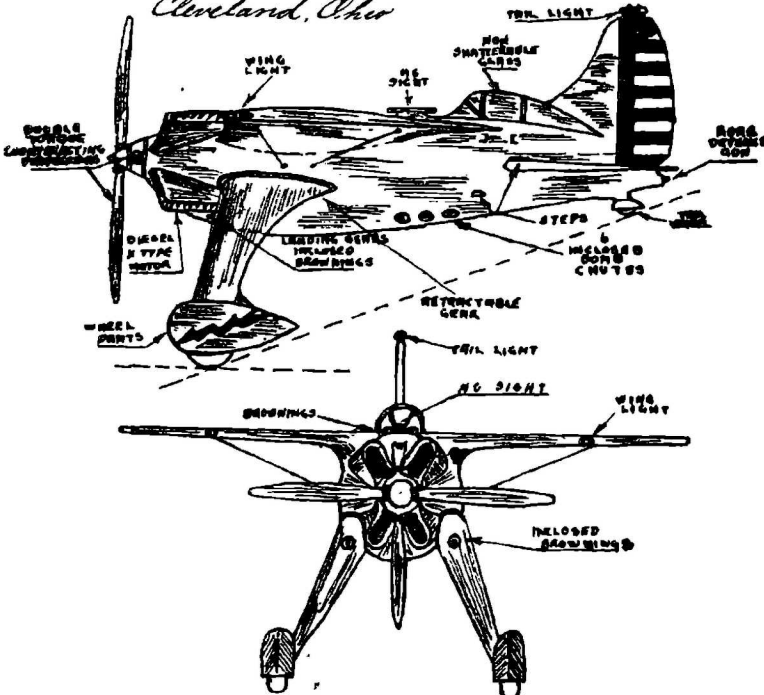


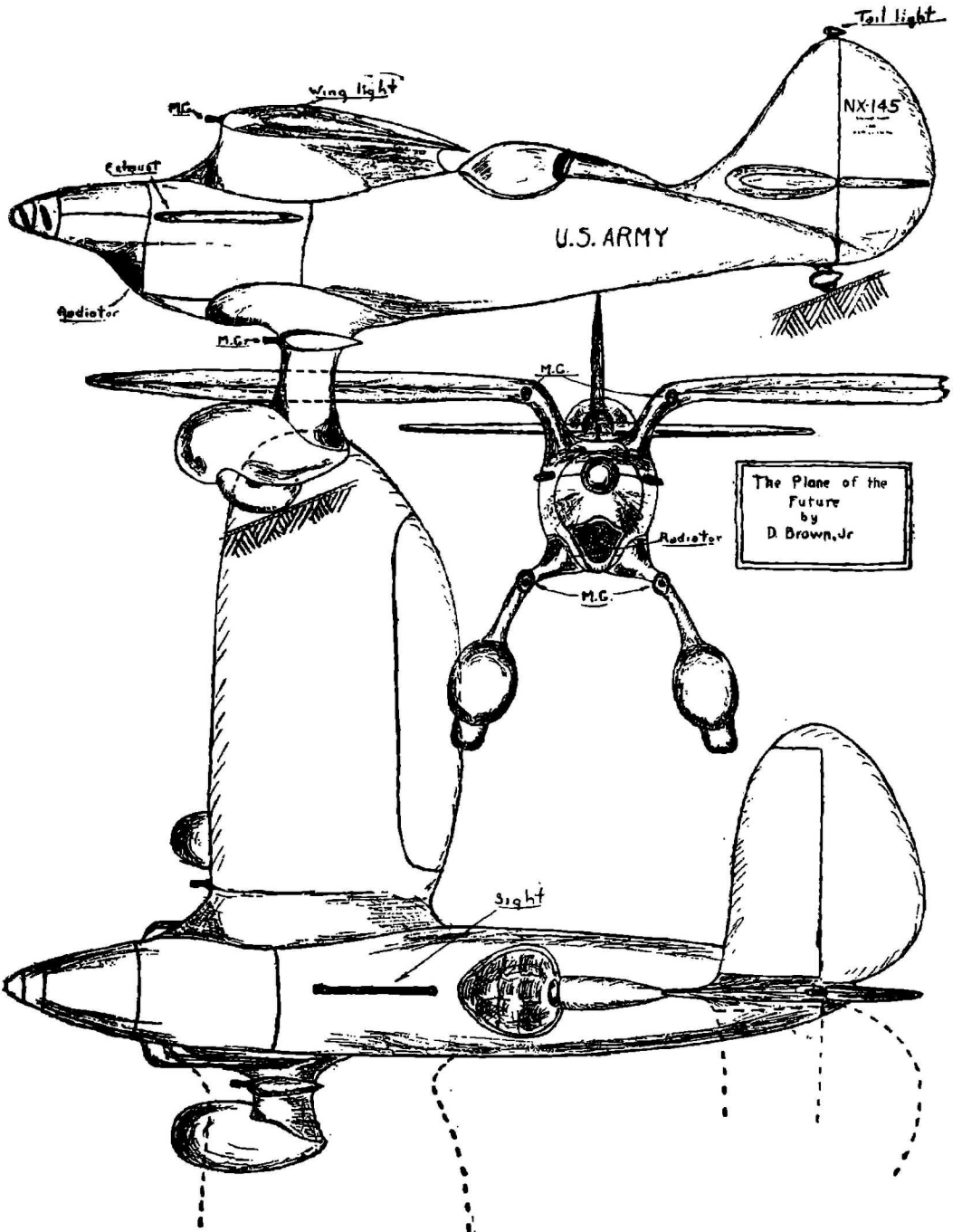


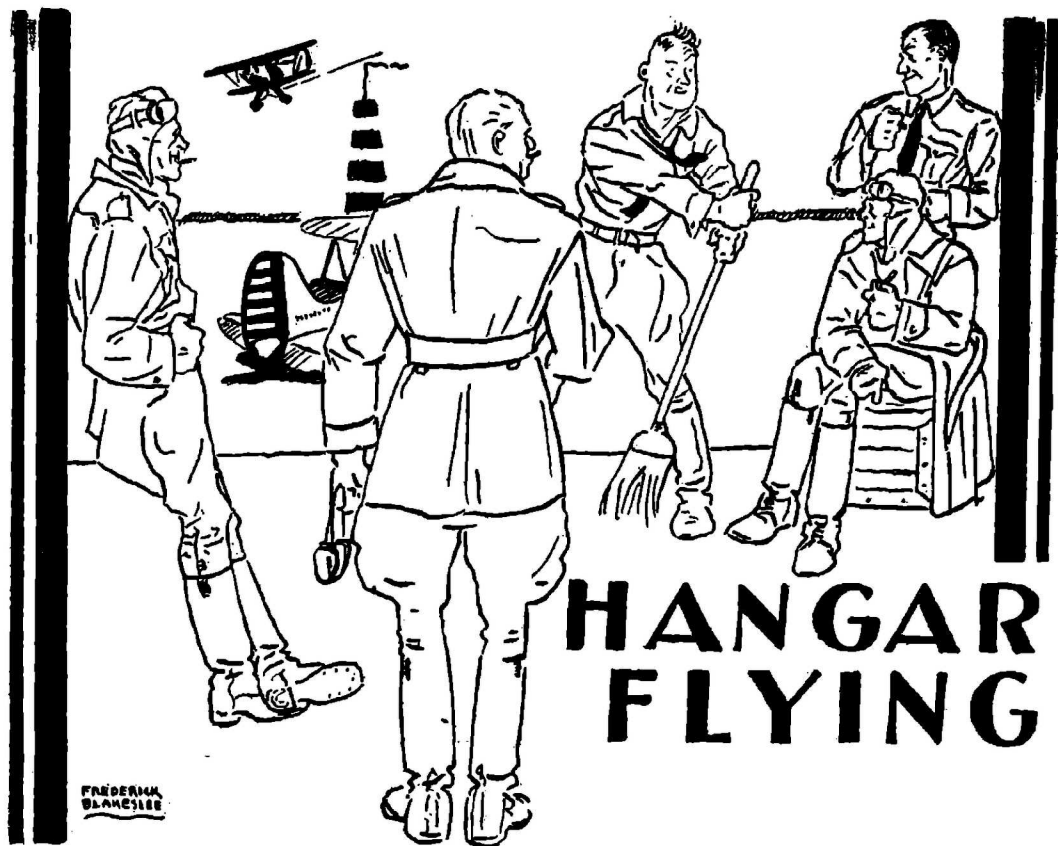
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HANGAR FLYING

WELL, here we are again, fit as a fiddle and all set to do a couple of outside loops.

I guess that you lads will think it's getting to be a habit with me, starting the monthly chin-fest off the same way each time. But I simply can't resist saying that you sure do pile up my mail box with a swell lot of stuff.

The letters that you've been sending in are darn good ones. And as for the three-view drawings, well, I hope to walk into a spinning propeller if they aren't the berries. I used to think that I was the only gray-beard in the whole world who knew anything about what the ships of the next war would look like. But I now admit that I was mistaken—and how!

I've got a hunch that some of you fellows can even read my mind. (And not with the aid of a microscope either!) A couple of months ago, or maybe it was at our last meeting, I suggested that

you concentrate more on new ideas in your three-view drawings, instead of on the conventional type of plane.

Well, I had no sooner got it off my chest, than in comes the mail man with a bag full of bright ideas. My gosh, some of them made my brain go in circles.

Most of the ideas indicated a bit of thought behind them. There were just a few that would make a bow-legged aeronautical engineer break down and weep.

However, I've got a hunch that all of you can do just a bit better. You're still using the conventional type of tail section assembly. Maybe you think that I'm all wet on that tail section stuff. Well, perhaps I am. But just for the fun of it I'll bet any one of you a second-hand issue of Dusty Ayres against a chewed lead pencil that you will see lots of changes in the tail construction of airplanes before many more years have passed. Anybody want to bet with me?

Maybe it was because it was his first

ship, but Dusty's Silver Flash sure has taken your fancy. I've received a bunch of letters asking me to put the Silver Flash back into the yarns. Well, read "The Blue Cyclone" and be happy. By the way, how do you like the Flash with its ski-pants? A neat job by Fred Blakeslee, huh?

Those who don't like to see the Flash buzzing around so much can still be happy, because I'm not going to stick it into every yarn. I'll just let Dusty fool with it once in a while. For old times sake, if you know what I mean.

Oh yeah, here's something that may be of interest. Years and years ago—it seems like—I asked you lads if you'd like to see Dusty Ayres and his gang in the movies. Well, just about six million lads wrote in and gave three big cheers (not Bronx) for that idea. That put the rest up to me. What do I do but find out that ideas such as the Dusty yarns usually get into the movies via the radio.

Yeah, you can guess the rest. Shall we try to get Dusty on the radio? If you think it would be a good idea, and you'd tune in on such a program, then sit yourself down and drop a line to your local broadcasting studio.

I think that would be better than writing your wishes in to me. Just tell them that you'd like to hear the Dusty Ayres yarns (special radio yarns, of course) and we'll see what we shall see.

And now, before I forget all about it, I guess that I'd better list some more of the lads who have joined the pen-pal gang since we had our last talk.

If you've written in to me, and don't see your name in this batch, just keep your shirt on. It'll be listed at the next meeting.

Okay, here they are:

Bob Graydon, 1081 Munich St., San Francisco, Calif.

Don Timlin, 278 Falcon St., Long Beach, Calif.

Bob Binder (age 14) 510 East Potter Ave., Milwaukee, Wisc.

Elmer C. Schillo, 3317 Clark Ave., Cleveland, Ohio.

Bill Mellinger, 355 Marshman St., Highland Park, Ill.

Jimmy Mewshaw, 3329 Alto Road, Baltimore, Maryland.

Bob Soulsly, 3329 Alto Road, Baltimore, Maryland. (Do you and Jimmy read the same issue, huh?)

Ray Weddle, R. R. 1, Box 76, Fort Scott, Kansas.

Frederick Jones, 35 Corwin Ave., Middletown, New York.

Harris Roy, 3001 Frederick Street, Shreveport, La.

Raymond Villemarette, Hessmer, La.

Chester Crockett, 1319 East Leafland St., Decatur, Ill.

Daryl M. Hogan, 4042 42nd, S. W., Seattle, Wash.

Clifford E. Schindele, Toluca, North Dakota.

Don Eaton, 2643 East Admiral Place, Tulsa, Okla.

Don Roberts, Wampsville, New York.

George Seals, 836 Gibbons Court, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Burton Cassey, 1204 West Locust Street, Shawnee, Okla.

Brutus Preston, 723 Essex Street, Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Eddie Hamilton, Route 2, South Vienna, Ohio.

Bob Weakley, 3408 Sunnyside Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Wilfred Bouchard, 9 Bourque Street, Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Prynce Wheeler, 210-4th Ave., North, Great Falls, Montana. (Looks like this months yarn was right in your back yard eh, Prynce?)

Leo Hershkowitz, 18 Fern Ave., Newark, New Jersey.

Harold Roach, 814½ East Green Street, High Point, N. C.

Kenneth Jones, 31 Lebanon Street, Malden, Massachusetts.

Bill Simacek, c/o Fredricks, 531 East 82nd St., New York City.

Donald Hagger, 3 Verdun Ave., Wilton Road, Eccles Old Road, Pendleton, Manchester 6, England. (Gosh, is that a lot to put down on an envelope!)

Well, that's the list for this chin fest. I'm sure I can hear a lot of you lads bellowing out that your name wasn't included. If it isn't just take a good look next month—and there it will be.

Speaking of letters. Some of you have written in to me demanding why I didn't answer your first letter. Well, I'm trying hard to keep pace with the mail. And as I've said many times before, the good Lord only gave me one pair of hands with which to operate this here typewriter.

But I've noticed in a few cases that there wasn't any first letter received. Maybe the mail man got sore at me and tossed a few into the river just for luck. And then again maybe you didn't realize it, but stuck the wrong address on your envelope. That has been known to happen. Anyway, just give me the tip-off—and time.

Well, that's off my chest. Let's see what else we can get off for your benefit.

Oh yes, here's something I've been wanting to ask you. How about a naval air force yarn? A few lads have asked did I know that battleships do a couple of things now and then during a war, and why not have Dusty join the naval air service for an issue? If you want it I can have him join the local glee club.

By the way, here is an idea that might prove interesting. Right now the idea of continuing the development of lighter-than-air aircraft is more or less in the balance. I guess it's something that all of us have very decided opinions about. What's yours?

Don't go off half cocked, now. Give it serious thought. Look at it from all the various angles and then let me know. To spur you on, I promise to publish a few of the best letters, whether they be for or against the idea.

There's one lad among you who is going to reach for his pen just as soon as he reads this. He's dropped me a line

about lighter-than-air aircraft before. Bet the rest of you could never guess where he lives. The name of the town begins with Ak, and the first letter of his state comes after N. Can you guess? My, but you're bright!

Anyway, all letters will be very much welcomed. And just to be different, I promise to read them all with an open mind, and not check them against my own ideas on the subject.

I don't believe that I've mentioned this before, but I'm interested to learn how the short yarns in each issue stack up in your opinion. Of course (am I modest), there is a lot of room for improvement from cover to cover. But, seriously, are they the type of shorts you like to see with the big yarn? Maybe you've got some trick ideas that would go better. If so, shoot them in to me and I'll bless you for the rest of my life, and maybe six days afterward.

There are still some of you lads writing in to me and not signing your names. Come on—be good sports and let me know who you are. I don't bite people—honest I don't!

Also, some letters that I've sent to you chaps have come back marked "Not At This Address." So, just make sure that you put your correct address on your letters.

As you will see from this issue I've increased the size of the three-view plans department. So many swell plans have come in that it would take me a lifetime to put them all in the book.

Speaking of three-view plans, sketches of your ideas and so forth, there's something I'm going to start doing with this issue. At the end of the department you'll find what I've called a Certificate of Truth. Some of the stuff that you've sent in strikes me as being copies of stuff I've seen before.

Anyway, here's what I plan to do. I'm

going to put a bunch of your drawings in each issue. They may not be all three-view plans. Some of them may only be rough sketches of ideas that come to mind. But I want all of them to be original.

You can send in just as many drawings and sketches as you want to. Only, with each separate batch fill out the Certificate of Truth, or a facsimile of it, and send it along.

You may ask—"How does that prove I didn't copy them, or had somebody draw them for me?" The answer is, it doesn't. But I know a lot of you chaps personally and I consider you the type who are not going to say you did a thing when you didn't.

Then, too, there is another advantage to sending in the Certificate of Truth. There's a place for the date. And when two or more are practically alike, I'll be able to tell who thought up the idea first. Another thing—the Certificates of Truth being the same size, it will make it easier for me to file the ideas for future publication.

In other words I'll be able to make a swell file of lads interested in airplane design. Then when I get stuck some day, I can drop a few of you a personal letter and consult with you on new designs for Dusty and the gang.

And remember, I want idea sketches as

well as three-view drawings of completed ships. And please, if you possibly can, do them in black ink. They get into the magazine much faster than if you do them in pencil or in blue ink.

Gosh, almost forgot. What do you think of Fred Blakeslee's full-page drawing of Dusty Ayres? He's a good looking egg at that, isn't he? Next month Fred's going to draw one of Curly Brooks.

After that we'll have Jack Horner—that is, unless Biff Bolton doesn't push him to one side and hog all the space. But Biff's a good-hearted guy, and I'm thinking he'll let Jack make his bow first.

Oh yeah, we've stuck the Black Hawk and Ekar about six feet under the ground, but would you like to have a full-page drawing of what they used to look like? Just to make the set complete? Personally, I think it would be a good idea.

Well, much as I hate to admit it, I guess my time's up and I've got to call it a day. I'd love to ramble on and on, but you fellows do enough sleeping at night, without doing more during these chin-fests.

S'long until next time.

Shipper Sid Bowen

To Dusty Ayres and His Battle Birds,
205 East 42nd St.,
New York, City.

I hereby certify that these drawings are my own original ideas, and are submitted for approval and publication as such.

Signed _____

Street _____

City _____

Date _____ State _____

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30 x 5.00-20		2.85	1.05
32 x 5.00-22		3.65	1.05
27 x 5.25-17		2.90	1.15
28 x 5.25-18		2.90	1.15
29 x 5.25-19		2.95	1.15
30 x 5.25-20		2.95	1.15
31 x 5.25-21		3.25	1.15
27 x 5.50-17		3.35	1.15
28 x 5.50-18		3.35	1.15
29 x 5.50-19		3.35	1.15
30 x 5.50-20		3.35	1.15
.. x 6.00-16		3.75	1.45
29 x 6.00-17		3.40	1.15
30 x 6.00-18		3.40	1.15
31 x 6.00-19		3.40	1.15
32 x 6.00-20		3.45	1.25
33 x 6.00-21		3.65	1.25
29 x 6.50-17		3.45	1.35
30 x 6.50-18		3.50	1.35
31 x 6.50-19		3.60	1.35
32 x 6.50-20		3.75	1.35
31 x 7.00-17		3.85	1.55
34 x 7.00-20		4.60	1.65
35 x 7.00-21		4.60	1.65

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32 x 4	2.95	.85
33 x 4	2.95	.85
34 x 4	3.25	.85
32 x 3 1/2	2.70	.80
32 x 4 1/4	3.35	1.15
33 x 4 1/4	3.45	1.15
34 x 4 1/4	3.45	1.15
30 x 5	3.65	1.35
32 x 5	3.75	1.45
35 x 5	3.95	1.55

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