MARCH

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FOR VICTORY

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PRAISE THE LORD

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and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. For I discovered that when a man finds the dynamic, invisible Power which is God, that man possesses a priceless heritage. Failure, fear, confusion go out of the life, and in the place of these things, there comes a sweet assurance that the Power which created the universe is at the disposal of all. And life takes on a brighter hue when the fact is fully known that at any hour of the day or night the amazing Power of Almighty God can be thrown against any and all undesirable circumstances—and they disappear.

Before I talked with God, I was perhaps the world's No. 1 failure. And then, when the future seemed hopeless indeed, I TALKED WITH GOD. And now?—well, I am president of the corporation which publishes the largest circulating afternoon newspaper in North Idaho. I own the largest office building in my home town—Moscow, Idaho. I have a wonderful home which has a beautiful pipe-organ in it, and I have several other holdings too. Now something very definite happened in my life, and it is this very definite thing I want you to know about. It can happen to you too.

DR. FRANK B. ROBINSON
Founder "Psychiana"
Moscow, Idaho

If you will send me your name and address now, I'll send you two FREE booklets which tell you what happened to me when I talked with God. You will learn from these two booklets where I talked with God, and what I said to God. As I say, these booklets are quite free and there is no obligation whatsoever incurred by sending for them.

BUT SEND NOW—while you are thinking about it. The address is "PSYCHIANA," Inc., Dept. 121, Moscow, Idaho. This may easily be the turning-point in your whole life. Here is the address again: "PSYCHIANA," Inc., Dept. 121, Moscow, Idaho. The prophecy mentioned below is also FREE.

★ AN ASTOUNDING PROPHECY ★

Ten years ago Dr. Robinson predicted this war. He told what nations would be lined up against other nations. He predicted the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The prophecy came true in a remarkable manner NOW—he makes another astounding prophecy. How long will the war last? Which side will be victorious? How will Hitler and Hirohito meet their doom? Will Tokyo go up in flames? A FREE COPY of this amazing prophecy will be included if you mail your request—NOW. We cannot promise to repeat this offer. SO SEND NOW. You might just as well begin to use the invisible superhuman Power of God right tonight—right in your own home. The address again is "Psychiana," Inc., Dept. 121, Moscow, Idaho.

J. E. SMITH
President
National Radio Institute
Established 28 Years

I WILL SEND A SAMPLE LESSON FREE

to PROVE I can Train You at Home in Spare Time to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. FIXING RADIO SETS, (bottom illustration) a booming field today, pays many Radio Technicians $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week extra, fixing Radios in spare time.

I Trained These Men

$200 a Month in Own Business

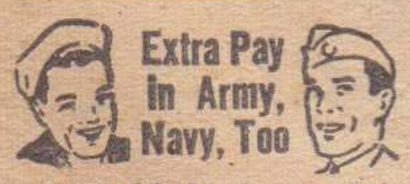
"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field." ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

Lieutenant in Signal Corps

"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work but I can say that N. R. I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)

$5 to $10 Week in Spare Time

"I am engaged in spare time Radio work. I average from $5 to $10 a week. I often wished that I had enrolled sooner because all this extra money sure does come in handy." THEODORE K. DuBREE, Horsham, Pa.



Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the coupon now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

Mail the Coupon for a FREE lesson from my Radio Course. It shows you how N. R. I. trains you for Radio at home in spare time. And with this sample lesson I'll send my 64-page illustrated book, RICH REWARDS in RADIO. It describes the many fascinating jobs Radio offers. Explains how N. R. I. teaches you with interesting, illustrated lessons and SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS!

Act Now! Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Right now, in nearly every neighborhood, there's room for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians are stepping into FULL time Radio jobs, or starting their own shops, and making $30, $40, $50 a week!

Others are taking good-pay jobs with Broadcasting Stations. Hundreds more are needed for Government jobs as Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, rushing to fill Government orders, need trained men. Aviation, Police, Commercial Radio and Loudspeaker Systems are live, growing fields. And think of the NEW jobs Television and other Radio developments will open after the war! I give you the Radio knowledge required for these fields.

My "50-50 Method" Helps Many Make $5,$10 a Week Extra While Learning

Many N. R. I. Students make $5, $10 a week extra money fixing Radios in spare time while learning. I send EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that tell how to do it!

My "50-50 Method"—half building and testing Radio circuits with the six kits of Radio parts I send, half learning from illustrated lessons—makes you "old friends" with Radio before you know it. You run your own spare time shop, get practice fixing friends' Radios, get *paid* while training!

Find out What N. R. I. Can do for You

MAIL COUPON NOW for FREE sample Lesson and 64-page illustrated book. You'll see the many fascinating jobs Radio offers and how *you* can train at home. If you want to *jump your pay*—Mail Coupon AT ONCE. **J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3BS9, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

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Mr. J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 3BS9
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington, D. C.

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CONTACT!

Where Readers and Editors Meet

With Sideslip Jones

TODAY I am as happy as a U. S. pilot with a Jap Zero in his gunsights! I'm in the middle of a cyclone, with a dash of hurricane. In fact, there was so much mail unloaded on the tarmac that it completely buried a whole squadron of P-40's! Everybody is hating everybody so violently by mail that I had to have my goggles lined with asbestos before I could read the letters.

But listen, gang—gather round, everybody on my side—we've been threatened! Not that I'm scared or anything, but just how big are you fellows on my team?

Dear Balloonbrain:

The forces of justice are closing in on you! Your time is almost at hand. We are now thoroughly organized—and that is the purpose of this epistle. You must have feared this coming organization, for you never do print Hawkins' address. I need it, so you had better come across!

I have communicated with Bridges, and have written Outlaw—and now all I need are a few pointers on the technique of mayhem from Hawkins.

Don't try to put me off. We are not to be dallied with.

Your doom is coming!

Hubert F. Smales, of
Hawkins-Outlaw-Bridges and
Smales, Inc.
Hinton, West Virginia

No, that sound isn't my teeth chattering—it's me polishing up my brass knuckles! But if you think you're going to get Hawkins' address from me, snakes, I'd appreciate your holding your breath until it arrives.

Now listen, though, I don't mind you fellows picking on me—or preferably each other—but when you start jabbing at a lady . . . well, the knighthood of Sideslip rises up in clanking armor. So I'm number one thousand and ten on her hit parade—so, it isn't often I get letters from a girl—and that counts for something. You'll see what I mean when you read this from James Aikens.

Dear Sideslip:

I have been reading your mag for some time and have enjoyed your section. I never wrote before, because I thought you could take care of those mutton-heads like Smales, Bridges and Hawkins. But when a girl joins in, you need help—but fast!

Who does Ethel McGovney think she is, anyway? She talks as if Dracula would have her—he'd have to go blind first. Then she called Smales and his mob intelligent! Those drips haven't a thimbleful of gray matter among them—and she hasn't any at all.

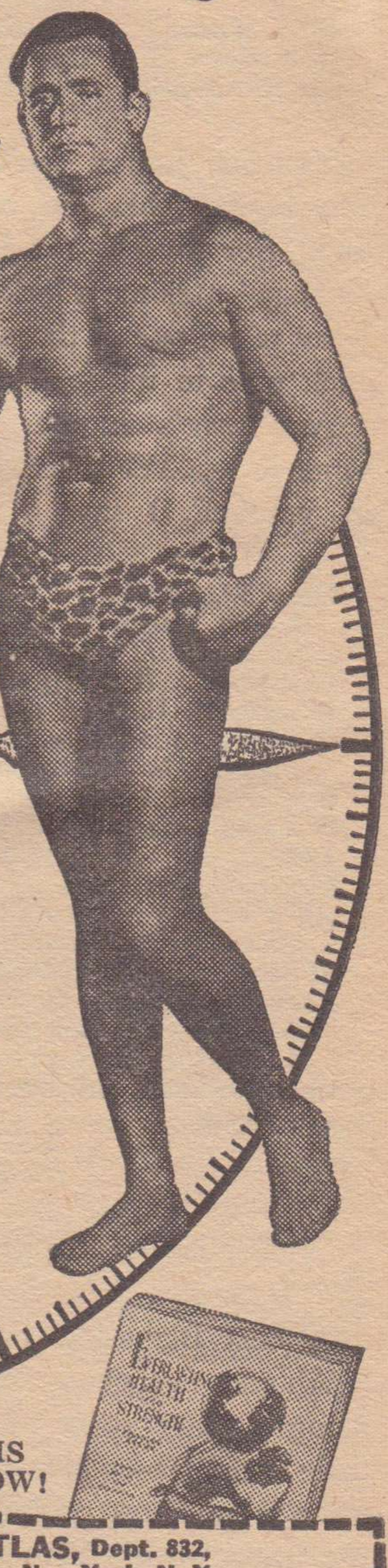
She wishes those heroes were real. Doesn't she realize we have real, greater heroes fighting all over the world? Why doesn't she wake up and die?

(Continued on page 8)

15 Minutes a Day!

Give me just this and I'll prove I can make you

A NEW MAN!



Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them. *Right now* I'm even training hundreds of soldiers and sailors who KNOW they've got to get into shape FAST!

How do YOU measure up for the defense of your country? Have YOU the strong shoulders and back that can haul for miles Uncle Sam's standard *61 pounds* of Army man's equipment? Or if home defense presses you into service, have you the he-man strength and tireless energy that double-shifts of working and watching may call for?

Now as Never Before You Need a Body That's Ready for ANY Job in National Emergency!

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? *Or do you want the help I can give you*—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, 97-lb. weakling. And NOW it knows I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in such quick time? The answer is *"Dynamic Tension"!*

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you *inside*, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

Charles Atlas—America's Greatest "Builder of Men"

Among all the physical intructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT—Charles Atlas!

THAT is the name immediately thought of by men who WANT to attain a physique that will withstand hardship and strain, ready for any possible emergency, personal or national.

In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his capable hands!

And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others, even those already in their country's Army and Navy, are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs!

FREE This Famous Book That Tells You How to Get a Body That Men Respect and Women Admire

Almost two million men have sent for and read my book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It tells you exactly what *"Dynamic Tension"* can do. And it's packed with pictures that SHOW you what it does. RESULTS it has produced for other men. RESULTS I want to prove it can get for YOU! If you are satisfied to take a back seat and be pushed around by other fellows week-in, week-out, you don't want this book. But if you want to learn how you can actually become a NEW MAN, right in the privacy of your own home and in only 15 minutes a day, then man!—get this coupon into the mail to me as fast as your legs can get to the letterbox! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 832, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 832,
115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

☐ Check here for Booklet A if under 16.

(Continued from page 6)

I'm so disgusted I'll sign off now.

James "Hank" Aikens
Cambridge, Mass.

P. S. Doesn't this letter rate a Blakeslee? Even if it doesn't, my contempt for those drips doesn't decrease at all!

You bet, James, you'll get a Blakeslee! The biggest, blackest and whitest I can find. For myself, I'm hoping Ethel McGovney sends me a lock of her hair—then I can make one of those voodoo dolls and stick pins in it!

And here's another sizzler along the same lines. Well, Ethel, you brought it on yourself, I say.

Dear Sideslip:

I just finished reading the so-called letter of Ethel McGovney of San Diego, California. It simply screams for the ashcan. P. U. And the things she said are *very* unladylike.

***Contact* is one of my favorite columns—and I hate to see anyone run it down, even a girl. However, I agree 100% with Calvin "Lucky" McClain of Florence, Alabama. Now there's a boy right after my own heart!**

Please print this letter for the benefit of that no-good Hubert Smales. If he doesn't like you—or *Fighting Aces*—he should quit reading the magazine.

I consider it a privilege to be able to say what I think—and I think you are swell!

Nick (Curly) Petkas
Atlanta, Georgia

Well, Nick, you're pretty nice yourself, and to prove I mean it, there's one of our very best Blakeslees on its way to you!

Ah me, everybody keeps sounding off, using up my space to talk about their little troubles—when *I've* got so many woes a transport couldn't carry them. By the way, you ought to see the pretty new bullet-proof vest I bought myself for Christmas. It already has a nice hole in it—moths, I guess.

Dear Slip:

This hunk of correspondence is purely for the purpose of a long pent-up beef—and I don't mean the kind you fix with corn and cabbage.

Your magazine ain't bad—nope, not bad at all. But—weren't there some other guys flying those Spads besides Texas Tim, Montana Mike and Arizona Art? Jumping Jennies—don't your writers think there were some guys from other states piloting those planes?

Another thing that gets my nanny is the way "Brad Superman", outnumbered twenty to one, and flying a damaged Spitfire, knocks down nineteen Nazis. Wow!

Now, look, Slip, I'm pleading with you—feature more stories about World War I. Why waste valuable printer's ink on those preposterous yarns that drip from the pens of Goodis and Rigoni? The fellows that flicked the gun trips in those Spads really had to use their brain cells to dodge death-dealing Spandau slugs.

Jerry Festerling
Berwyn, Illinois

Don't look now, but isn't that a Blakeslee flying your way, Jerry? I'll try to make it a World War I original.

Which brings me to this World War I vs. World War II story question. The mailman is in bed with a sprained back from carrying all the letters from you who want more World War I yarns. It did old Jonesy's heart good to hear from you, and though I can't answer all your letters individually, I want to point out that there's a super-special World War I story by Arthur J. Burks in this issue! Nor is that the only W. W. I yarn. That ought to make you happy.

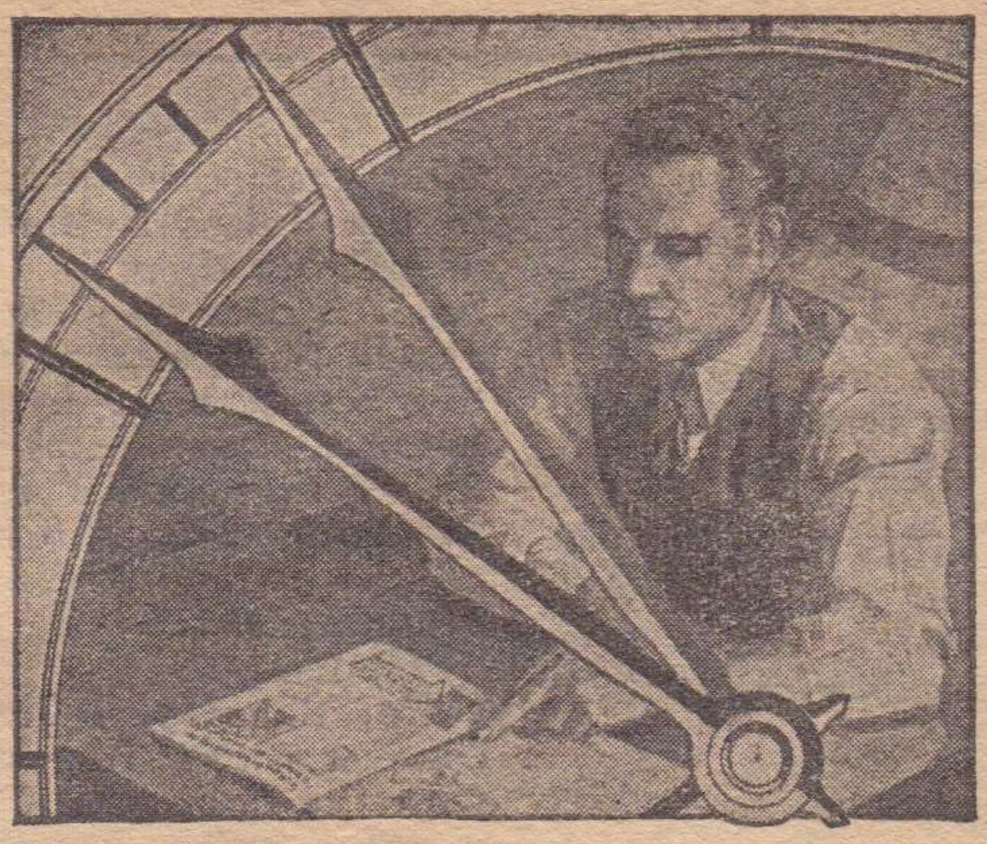
I was happy too, until just now, when I looked at this letter from Bill Perdue—and got to thinking again about that infamous corporation. Oh, well, as long as there are guys like Bill, I should care!

Dear Jonesy:

You have been heckled so much by that Hawkins-Outlaw-Bridges-Smales, Inc., that I think you ought to write them a letter and tell them where to get off. Confidentially, I think they should get off at 15,000 feet without a parachute. Those guys are always shooting off their faces—I wish they'd do a good job with a gun!

Let me tell them something—without the *Contact* column, the whole magazine wouldn't be any good at all. They know it too. If that column were gone, they'd probably quit reading the mag. Not that the stories aren't swell, but they just want to insult somebody.

(Continued on page 10)



How Do You Use The Most Important Hours of Your Day?

The most important—and they can be the most profitable, too. Men—ordinary men in ordinary circumstances—have had returns of as high as $5, $10, $25, even in exceptional cases $50 per hour for these hours.

They are the hours of your leisure time—usually spent in recreation or odds and ends.

These can be your growth hours, the time when through training you can prepare for more efficient service on the job or for the job ahead. During your working hours, you are usually buried in routine details, growing slowly if at all. But in these spare hours, your mind can reach out to absorb the experience of others, to learn the principles and methods behind your job and behind your field. The next day on the job, you will find yourself using something of what you learned the night before to the benefit of your job and the pleasure of your boss.

Interestingly enough, this spare time study can be fascinating recreation, not drudgery. And the few minutes spent this way tone up the remaining hours of your leisure—make them more interesting.

WHAT CAN THEY MEAN TO YOU?

We can't say exactly. But we can tell you what they have meant to thousands of others. They have brought to these men and women promotions, new jobs, more money and prestige, greater success and happiness, security for the future. If these are the things you want, we invite your investigation of LaSalle home study training.

For, from our 34 years' training, over a million men and women, we have learned what you need and how to give it to you. Our training is geared to the busy individual who is ambitious and earnest for better things. Check on the coupon below the field in which you are interested. We'll send you—without obligation our free 48-page booklet, discussing the opportunities and requirements in that field and telling about our training for it. If not entirely sure which field to check, write us rather fully about your problem and let us counsel you.

LaSalle Extension University
A Correspondence Institution

DEPT. 2334-R **CHICAGO, ILL.**

I am interested in knowing how I can use my spare time to advance myself. Please send your free booklet on the field I have checked below.

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- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Business Correspondence
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- ☐ Law: LL.B. Degree
- ☐ Business Law
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Stenotypy

Name _____ Age _____

Position _____

Address _____

(Continued from page 8)

And that Ethel McGovney! She says that she flips right through the pages of *Contact*. If she does do that—how does she know that there are such humans as Hawkins and the rest? (Oh, my mistake, they are definitely not humans.)

How about more World War I stories—and don't forget to tell Hawkins-Outlaw-Bridges-Smales, Inc.—along with junior partner McGovney—where to get off at!

Bill Perdue
San Francisco, California

Now you got me thinking. While I'm doing that I'll wrap you up one of our Blakeslee originals, bub. I should write them jerks a letter, shouldn't I? One that for all time will cut them down to their right sizes.

I think I will . . . when I get that new bodyguard the police have promised me. But now, here is a missive from a muchly maligned Mason. I blush.

Dear Jonesy:

So! I have been classified as one of your enemies. That is the first straw. (The last is probably yet to come.) I here and now challenge any dim-wit that is foolish enough to defy me, you or the mag to pistols at dawn—or typewriters at sundown. Earnestly, I have tried to bring to light a few things that I thought would improve the mag—and what do I get? Correct! I get thrown into the garbage, along with another poor, benighted soul, by a guy who seeks to ignore us.

Of course I buy your mag every month; of course I read the stories; of course I know that all cannot be perfect—but I do think that they are as good as the authors can make them. No, I won't be daunted by guys who do not appreciate the wonderful changes that can be brought about by the improvement of yarns in many ways. The stories are good—but, Jonesy, they can be better! That's what I am aiming at.

What is the matter with Sam Carson? *In Free France Never Surrenders*, he wandered along for several pages not being able to make up his mind on whether the Blenheim has one motor or two. (It has two.) Aside from putting the long ago obsolete tail stripes on the P-38 on page 11, Blakeslee is just as fine as ever. The departments are swell, too.

I will close with the following request for your authors: Will you please base your plots on something feasible; something real; something that pays tribute to the United Nations airmen—instead of putting them in the roles of superhero, spy-catcher and one-man land army. Will you try, for once, to portray the action seen by the men of the bomber crews—and switch the hack-kneed fighters off to something else? In short—keep the airmen in the air, off the ground and out of German spy organizations.

Thanks!

So, Sideslip, I leave you with the fondest wishes for you and yours, and with the hope you finished this before it ended up in the well-worn and much-scarred wastebasket sitting by your desk.

Your friend,
Hub Mason, Jr.
San Antonio, Texas

Did I finish it, Hub? I gobbled it up right down to the final, ego-inflating syllable! Now here's a squib from another guy I like.

Dear Sideslip:

I have been reading your column in *Fighting Aces* for a year now, and all I seem to read are insults addressed to you. For myself I think your mag is swell, but I guess some of the guys don't like you. Maybe it's because they've seen your face—I don't know. But I am enclosing a drawing of what I think you look like.

I hope you send me one of those Blakeslee originals I've been hearing about.

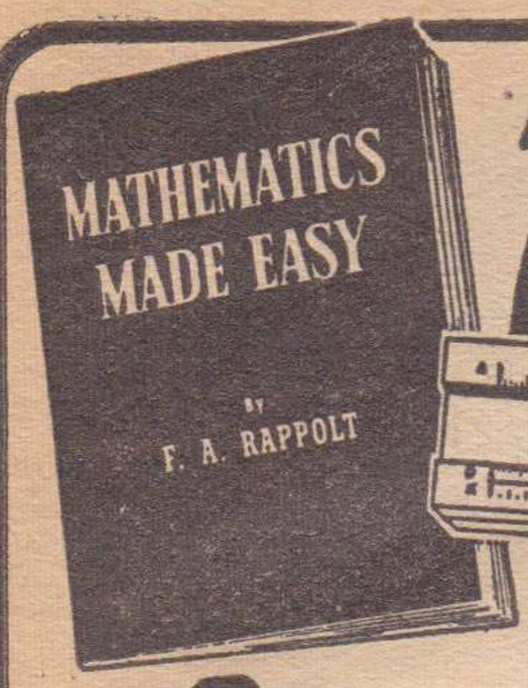
Your friend and sticker-upper,
Jim LeMontree
San Diego, California

If for nothing else, Jim, that beautiful drawing of me you sent would earn you a Blakeslee. Of course, I'm a bit more on the Clark Gable type than Robert Taylor (as you pictured me) but it's a good likeness.

Gosh, guys, sometimes I think there should be a law against my being so handsome. You know I don't want to do anything but hang around the tarmac, figuring out new combat maneuvers—and all the time Hollywood is sending me rush telegrams, begging me to go into pictures.

I had a nice picture taken once—only the numbers across my chest spoiled it

(Continued on page 109)



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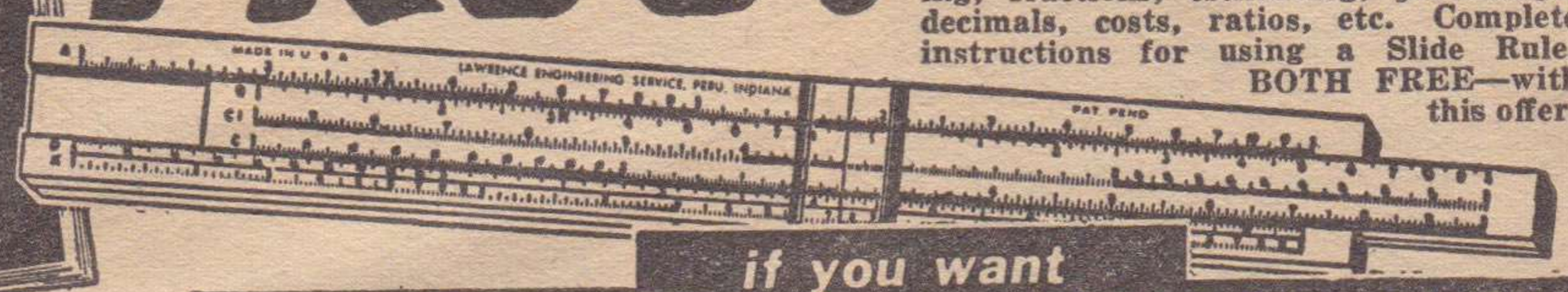

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"Remember me? I'm the guy who got away from you in Spain—the guy that's been fighting you all up and down Europe for the past four years. Well, this is our last argument, Rittmann. Only one of us comes out alive!"

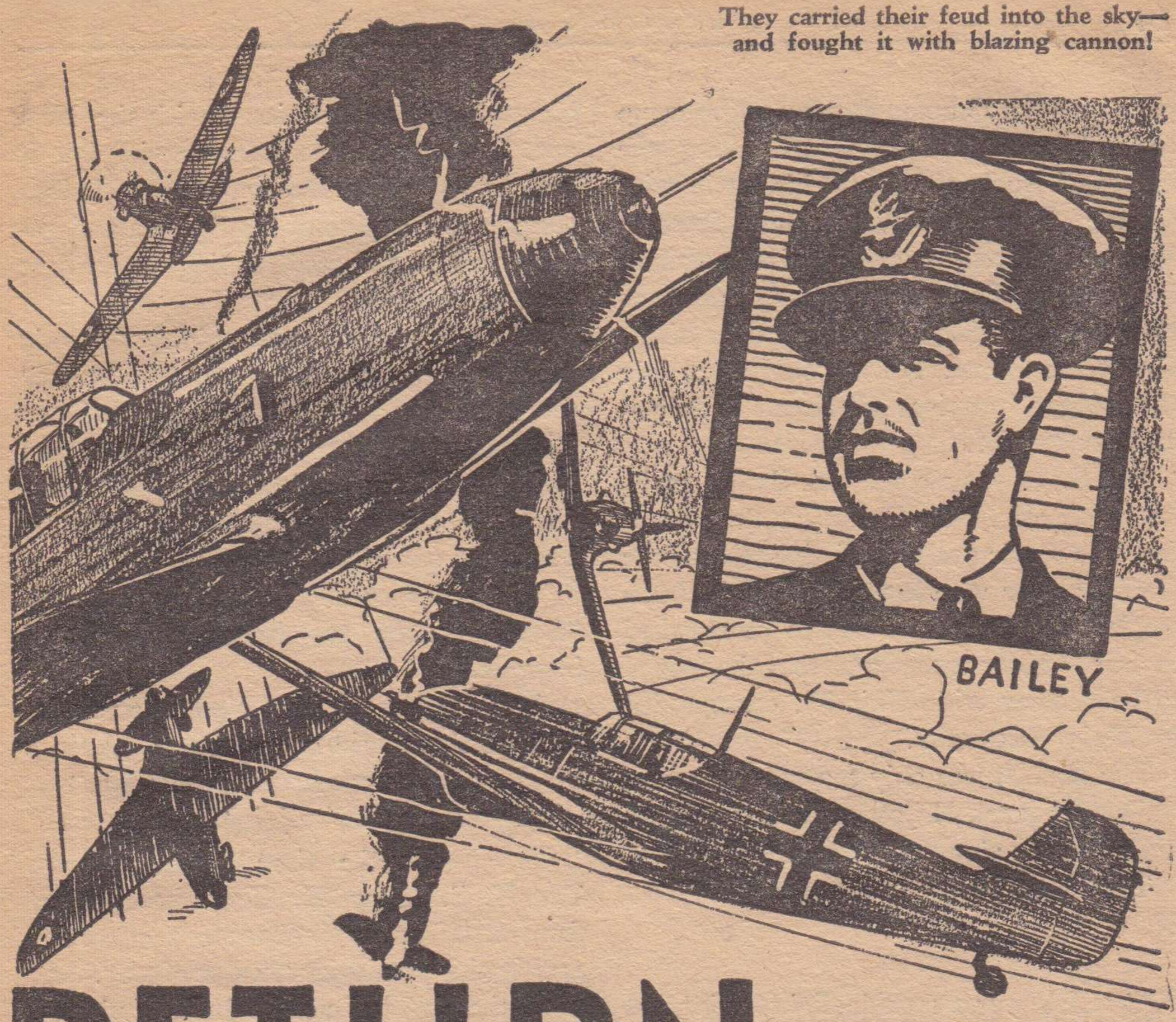
CHAPTER ONE

The Man Who Came Back

SLOWLY they came into the big room that was adorned with fabric and metal strips torn from Heinkels and Messerschmitts, the lounge of the flying officers' mess. It was the main source of recreation for the lads of Fighter Squadron 23, situated a few miles east of Southampton. It was the place where the lads of 23 could flock after a vicious session in Channel skies, where they could forget the sound of Madsen guns, the sickening whine of a doomed English ship.

They came into the room and headed for the bar. There were two white-uniformed men on duty behind the bar, and mechanically they reached for bottles and glasses. The room was filled with the sounds of pouring and clinking glasses, without much talk.

They carried their feud into the sky—and fought it with blazing cannon!



RETURN

A NOVEL BY *David Goodis*

The flyers of 23 were rather exhausted. A short while previous they had been tackling twenty-odd Heinkels in a white-hot encounter 16,000 feet above the Channel. It had lasted longer than usual, and it was fought purely on a basis of hate. The Heinkels carried the insignia of Unit 79, one of the highest-ranking outfits in the *Luftwaffe,* and between Fighter 23 and Unit 79 there was a feud that at times reached devilish intensity. Since the first days of the war the two opposing groups had matched wits and guns and guts in the skies, and they flaunted their battle insignia with a wild combat lust. When they met, slugs and props churned the air to a froth and flames swirled.

But the bitterness that existed between Fighter Squadron 23 and Unit 79 was secondary to the hostility of the two flight leaders.

The *Luftwaffe* outfit was led by a man known throughout the fighting skies of Europe as one of the most dangerous aerial performers of the war—Major Fritz Rittmann, a veteran from the very beginnings of the Nazi attempt to conquer a planet.

And to command the English group there was Flight Lieutenant Bailey, an American.

Frank Bailey had left the States during the Spanish Civil War to fly for the Loyalists, and later for Poland. He es-

caped from a German concentration camp to inch his way downward along the slopes of Europe and cast his lot in with Greece. When the R.A.F. came down to help the skirted warriors of the valiant little nation, Bailey was already known as the greatest individual combat flyer of the Greek Air Force. He was invited to join the winged warriors of Great Britain—and he accepted.

But there was a condition. Bailey, while he hated all Nazis and what they stood for, was particularly vindictive toward the German flyer who headed a certain *Luftwaffe* unit. Bailey wanted to be attached to any fighter squadron that happened to be dealing with Unit 79, commanded by Major Rittmann.

The R.A.F. was only too eager to grant Bailey's request. Pilots of Bailey's caliber did not come along every day in the week.

They sent Bailey to Fighter Squadron 23.

BAILEY was a capable flight leader and a magnificent combat pilot. He had personally accounted for nineteen members of Rittmann's outfit. Although he had failed to conquer the German ace in a private duel, he had engaged Rittmann personally on a few occasions.

When that happened, the sky was a madhouse. The Rittmann-Bailey encounters were definitely extraordinary. Smashing, tearing, lunging and counter-lunging—and no let-up. But so evenly matched were the two combatants that it seemed as though there could be no decision. Rittmann had been forced to jump from a burning plane; twice Bailey had been hospitalized after taking Madsen slugs in his chest and shoulders. It seemed as though the two antagonists were living only for the day when one of them would watch the other die.

The lads of 23 were talking about it as they placed themselves at the bar and gestured for drinks. They were talking about Bailey's latest joust with the Nazi ace, less than ten minutes previously. It had ended with Bailey taking Madsen slugs in the engine of his Spitfire and going down to a forced landing somewhere west of Brighton.

"Tough," someone said. "Bloody tough. For a minute there I jolly well thought he had the Nazi running. Then Rittmann got fancy with a wingover and Bailey's Merlin had a nervous breakdown. But it was gorgeous the way the Yank got out of that trouble spot."

"Gorgeous or not," someone else said, "Bailey's none too happy about it, I imagine."

A third flyer put in, "Well, I have a bit of news that might cheer him up. A flock of Yank pilots are coming in today."

"You mean they're joining this outfit?"

"Well—for the time being, anyway. The U. S. Army Air Corps has not yet fixed itself as an independent operating arm in this particular theater of war. And until the dromes can be built, and supplies brought in, Yank pilots will have to serve as members of our outfits. It ought to be good news for Bailey."

"I wonder," another flyer said.

And the remark brought silence. Somewhat confusedly the Britishers were looking at each other, and then quickly they were turning their attention to the Scotch and soda and ice that tinkled in tall glasses.

WALKING across the field, Bailey was remembering the sky duel with Rittmann. He remembered every detail—certain mistakes he had made; mistakes that Rittmann had made. Imperfections in spacing and timing and anticipation of the other pilot's maneuvers. It was uncanny, the way his mistakes balanced Rittmann's. Everything was too maddeningly even.

Bailey's thoughts on the subject were shoved far back in cold storage as he ap-

proached the squadron office. His eyes were widening. He blinked a few times, looking at men who wore the uniform of the U. S. Army Air Corps.

They were grouped at the doorway of the squadron office, listening as Squadron Leader Hedgebrooke gave them routine directions. Hedgebrooke was a stocky, russet-headed and mustached veteran of Channel and North Sea aerial warfare, well liked by his command.

He was saying, "We'll get along, gentlemen. I know this fight means as much to you as to Britishers. We're all in this together." For a moment his eyes left the group and he was looking at Bailey as he said, "I'd like to be able to tell you that you're the first Americans to honor this squadron by fighting at our side, but another Yank has beaten you to the punch. Maybe you've heard of him. I won't tell you of his accomplishments, or what he's capable of doing in the sky. You'll see that for yourself when you go up there with him. But right now I'd like you to meet—Flight Lieutenant Bailey."

"Hi-ya, fellas," Bailey said, as he came up and stood at Hedgebrooke's side. He grinned at the Americans and they grinned back. There were eleven of them. Eleven experienced and seasoned pilots—men who had been flying for the U.S. Army for many years. They knew what it was all about.

Bailey's eyes went down along the line of faces. Good, strong, hard-jawed faces. A broken nose here and there. A front tooth missing, maybe the result of a crack-up years ago. Not a pretty boy in the lineup. Bailey looked at eight men, and when he looked at the ninth, he gasped. When he looked at the tenth, he gasped again; and as he stared at the face of the last man in line his own face was white, and within himself he was trembling.

In the same moment that it had reached Bailey, recognition struck hard at the three U. S. flyers. They were staring at each other and again at Bailey. Astonishment was giving way to a cold and bitter hardness that came into their eyes and on lips.

THE by-play was not lost upon Squadron Leader Hedgebrooke or the eight other Americans. It was as if they were all spectators, baffled at a performance that was as strange as it was silent.

Bailey managed to say, "You'll like it here, fellas." He had taken his gaze from the last three men in line and was automatically bringing words to his lips. "I know you're hungry for action and I can promise you that this area will provide a big feed. Jerry keeps walking across the Channel and we bump into him all the time. When he doesn't come over, we go out and look for him. So there's something doing almost every day. I—I guess that's about all for now. See you at dinner."

He turned away and quickly walked toward barracks.

Hedgebrooke hastily said, "You can go to the quarters that I've assigned you, gentlemen, and catch a couple hours rest before dinner. But keep your flying gear handy and ready. If there's an emergency call, you'll be in on it along with the others."

As they started to turn away, the squadron leader gestured them to wait. He added, "Uh—there's one more thing, gentlemen. I hope you'll excuse Flight Lieutenant Bailey. I know he seemed somewhat—vague. Fact is, he just returned from a bit of business over the Channel. Was forced down. Needs a drink or two. I know you'll understand."

But Hedgebrooke himself did not understand. Bailey's puzzling behavior had certainly not been induced by the Channel fight. Nor could it be explained by the fact that he had come out second best in this latest meeting with Rittmann.

There had been other times when the German had taken the lead in the stretched-out sky debate, but Bailey had not lost his smile, his friendly manner. And if he had taken a drink, it was certainly not because he needed alcohol as a stimulant. Bailey was definitely no drinker. When he did gulp a Scotch and soda it was for purposes of sociability, and for no other reason.

Hedgebrooke's frown was accented as he walked into the squadron office. He knew that for some reason the last three men in line had caused Bailey to lose his usual balance and calm. The squadron leader was wondering about the three men, and then it was as if he could hear Bailey's voice.

Bailey, offering an explanation that was a puzzle in itself—Bailey, smiling quietly, saying, "It begins in a flying field in the States—U. S. Army flying field—involves a few guys who at one time were my friends. Guys named Rick—Clint—Robbie—and Steve."

For a few seconds Hedgebrooke's memory lost potency, and he was slamming a fist on a desk top, trying to recall the rest of Bailey's statement. And slowly it came back to him.

Bailey had said, "Steve died in Spain—died screaming. He wasn't the kind of guy who screamed easily. That's about all, gentlemen. If I try to tell you any more, I might begin screaming myself."

Hedgebrooke lit a cigarette and sat down at the desk and watched the smoke crawl toward the ceiling.

IN ROOM 9 of the barracks, three Americans sat on the edges of their cots. They were all in their late twenties. They were all hard-eyed captains, all sun burnished and wind reddened.

And the similarity stopped there.

Rick Robertson came from Texas. At Rice Institute he had been a record-breaking shotputter. He was short.

Clint Hadley was tall and wiry and at Oregon State he had been quite a hurdler. Also quite a student.

Robbie Caldwell had been born and raised on a farm in Illinois. At eighteen he had joined the Army and worked himself up to a chance at the Air Corps. He made good on the chance. He had average height and weight and black hair and eyes, and a fast temper.

He stood up and said, "I'm not taking it, see? I'm not—"

"Aw, sit down," Clint said.

Robbie sat down.

Rick muttered, "I just can't get myself to believe it. After all these years—running into Bailey again. And from the way Hedgebrooke spoke, he's quite a big man around here."

Robbie stood up again. "Oh, is he? Well, that doesn't crack any ice with me. Bailey is one guy that I've got figured out from A to Z. A one-hundred-per-cent tried-and-true rat." He held up his right fist. "You see this? I've been saving it up for a long time. Now that I've run into Bailey again—"

"Aw, sit down," Clint said.

Robbie sat down.

Rick was shaking his head and looking at the floor.

"I guess Steve's around here, too," he muttered.

"Steve's a sap," Robbie said. "The guy never had a mind of his own, and where Bailey was concerned he was always a shadow. When every guy in the squadron knew that Bailey was a sneak and a crook, Steve stayed with him. When he was kicked out of the Air Corps, Steve quit too."

"Loyalty—" Rick began.

"Aw, don't give me that loyalty stuff," Robbie crisped. "Steve was nothing more or less than a stooge. He worshiped Bailey the same way kids look up to big-time gangsters. Bailey was fast and smooth and sharp."

"And he could fly like a streak," Clint said.

Robbie yelled, "What's the matter with you guys? You taking up for Bailey all of a sudden?"

"Not at all," Rick murmured.

"We're just making a few observations," Clint said.

Robbie's eyes narrowed and he said, "There's a saying—time heals all wounds. But as far as I'm concerned, that saying is a lot of prunes. It was six years ago that Bailey stole a few thousand dollars' worth of precision instruments from a supply shed and disgraced the entire Corps. I've never forgotten about that, and never will. I've never forgotten the dirty method he used—taking a little at a time, selling the stuff to a mob of crooks who took out the jewels and the platinum and threw the rest away. Throwing him out of the corps wasn't enough. They should have put him in prison."

Rick shook his head sadly and said, "Funny how things happen to break up a team. The five of us—we used to click, didn't we? Remember the time we all went—"

"Listen to this guy!" Robbie shouted. "He's ready to shed tears. He's all set to forget what a louse Bailey is."

"Aw, lay off," Rick grumbled.

"Yeah, take it easy, Robbie," Clint said. "After all, things are different from the way they used to be. I'll admit Bailey pulled a low stunt, but that was a long time—"

"You don't have to say any more," Robbie muttered. "I can see the way the wind's blowing. You guys are soft. After six years you see Bailey again and right away you're all set to have a good cry together. Well, I'm—"

He stopped and looked at the door that was slowly opening.

Bailey came into the room.

THERE was quiet for a few seconds. Then Robbie stepped toward the flight lieutenant and said, "Is this visit official?"

"Not in the least," Bailey said, wearing a smile.

"Then you better get out," Robbie said. His fists were clenched.

"Aw, sit down, Robbie," Clint said.

"I won't sit down," Robbie fumed. "And I won't stay in the same room with a dirty crook!" He waited for a response from Bailey. There was none. Robbie walked out of the room.

Bailey shrugged.

Again there was a stretch of quiet.

Then Rick said, "Where's Steve?"

"Dead," Bailey said.

Clint said, "When did it happen? How did it happen?"

Bailey's lips tightened. "I'd rather not talk about it right now," he said. He took a deep breath, as if he was bracing himself for a great effort, and then he said, "Maybe it's asking a lot from you, fellas, but I want you to play ball with me. I want you to keep quiet about that little deal back in the States. See if you can persuade Robbie to do the same. If anything leaked out, I'd probably get the boot from the R.A.F. And I don't want that to happen—for a good reason. One of these days I'll give out with that reason, and I'll tell you about Steve. But right now I can't say anything. All I can do is ask you for a break."

Rick and Clint looked at each other.

Clint said, "What happened in the States doesn't have anything to do with this setup. I'm mum, Bailey."

"Same here," Rick said.

Bailey grinned dimly. "Thanks, fellas."

"But we can't make any guarantees as far as Robbie is concerned," Clint muttered. "He isn't ready to forgive and forget—not by a long shot. He has it in for you, Bailey. You can see that yourself."

Something cold and hard came into Bailey's eyes. He said, "If that's the way matters are, I'll meet Robbie on his own ground. Tell him that if he wants a fight I'll give it to him. I'll—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a siren screeching across the field. And then, beyond the window, a voice shouted, "It's a scramble!"

"What gives out?" Rick said.

"Plenty," Bailey crisped. He had a hand on the doorknob. He said, "Grab your flying gear and get out on the field—fast! That siren isn't kidding. When it hits the pitch you're hearing now, there's big things doing."

He dashed out of the room. Clint and Rick were throwing themselves into flying suits and pulling helmets over their heads and leaping through the opened doorway.

CHAPTER TWO

Flame over the Channel

NINETEEN pilots faced Squadron Leader Hedgebrooke, who was saying, "It isn't the usual thing, gentlemen. That's why I'm taking extra time to tell you about it. Twelve miles south of here, at Portsmouth, the Navy has a lot of warships. They're big boats, gentlemen. Important boats. And Dornier bombers, escorted by a couple dozen Heinkels, are on the way over. Not one of those Dorniers are to get through, so you've got to ignore the Heinkels. Stay away from them. That's all, gentlemen. Go up there and get rid of bullets!"

The flyers ran toward Spitfires that were already throbbing eagerly. Bailey was climbing into the cockpit of his plane, when he felt a tug at his bootstrap. He looked down and saw Robbie. The black-haired guy was wearing hate on his face.

He shouted, above the roar of Rolls-

Royce engines, "Why did you pick Clint and Rick and myself for this job?"

"I'll tell you later!" Bailey yelled. "Get in your plane!"

"You're not kidding me, Bailey! I know your game—you want to get rid of us, fast!"

Bailey did not wait to hear any more. He was in the cockpit, closing the greenhouse over his head. He fed juice to the Merlin and sent the Spitfire across velvety green fields.

The nineteen planes twanged and boomed as variable-pitch propellers forced a fast climb. Bailey moved out in front and called for a stepped-down echelon formation. He looked into his rear-view mirror. Toward the back of the lineup he could see Rick's plane, and Clint's and Robbie's. It wouldn't make much difference whether they were in the rear or up in front. But when he assigned them to their positions, he figured they might be safer back there.

His mind was drilling back through six years, and he was thinking of the friendship that had existed among them all. He was thinking of America, and things that had happened—little things. Like the time Robbie had gulped too much beer, and they had to fight their way out of a taproom and get back to the field at three in the morning. The time Clint had been forced down on a meadow in Ohio, and a bull went after him, and four planes whizzed down on the bull and nearly frightened the animal to death. And Rick, overboard about a debutante from New York, and punching a certain well-known playboy in the jaw. And Steve—Steve—But he didn't want to think about Steve.

The thought persisted. Again he could see the blood-streaked fields of Spain, the thin line of Loyalists marching out of Madrid to make their grim stand against the trucks and tanks of Franco's legions. He could see the Junkers bombers, the Fiat fighters that Germany and Italy had sent over. In pitiful contrast he could see the crazy assortment of outmoded wrecks that the Loyalists were sending into the air. He could see the grin on Steve's lips. A grin that was forced, as if Steve knew that he was going to die. Steve—waving and grinning on the day they took off to make reconnaissance over Guadalajara. The terrible day of blood and pain and screaming. Steve—screaming.

Again he could hear it shattering against his eardrums, jabbing into his brain.

Bailey fought to rid himself of the memory, to concentrate his entire attention on another level of space and time.

Then suddenly he saw blue-gray sky, and clouds high in the sky. And beyond the clouds was a conglomeration of shapes—winged shapes.

AUTOMATICALLY he used the R.T., shouted, "It looks like Jerry a few miles away. Bombers and escort fighters. Let's go upstairs!"

Nineteen Spitfires pointed noses upward and roared in speedy climb.

At 21,000 feet Bailey was able to diagnose the battle situation. The Nazi squadron had already sighted the British group and the escort planes going up. In order to get to the Dorniers they'd have to break through a wall of Madsen fire.

He issued instructions. "The Heinkels are coming up to play with us, but we won't play. The idea is to break through and smash up the Dorniers. Leave the Heinkels alone."

The British formation was working level at 23,000 feet. The Heinkels, though considerably short of that altitude, were climbing fast. And far below, nine big Dornier bombers lumbered confidently on toward the naval base at Portsmouth.

Bailey said, "We dive in closed-in arrowhead formation at the Heinkels. But it turns out to be a feint, and we do a frog-jump over their heads and then con-

tinue down on the Dorniers. If we get past those Nazi fighters on the first jump, it might not take long to finish this job. Okay— Close in and ready and—tally-ho!"

The English group went down. The echelon had closed to a narrow arrowhead, and Bailey's Spitfire was the frontal point. And they went down screeching and whining.

Twenty-four Heinkels formed a line of challenge—twenty-four Heinkels, carrying a boastful, glaring designation on both sides of each fuselage. "Unit 79."

In the same moment that he recognized the Nazis as members of Rittmann's flying group, Bailey was commanding himself to temporarily forget his personal hostility toward the German ace and the orange-painted buzzards of 79. And his action followed through on the thought as he ripped out of the feinting dive, leaped high and wide of the Heinkel barrier and then continued down again.

The other Spitfires were following. And the maneuver was accomplished with neatness and terrific speed. The Heinkels were completely fooled. They had expected the English planes to take advantage of an altitude lead and momentum, and they were willing to concede this as a balancing factor to their own numerical superiority.

But as the Spitfires whizzed out, ran into the clear and then dived again, the German flight leader shrieked a curse. And into his radio telephone he hissed, "After them—full throttle. We can still destroy them before they reach the Dorniers!"

The Heinkels moved back in a roaring outside loop. Twenty-four exhaust lines described hazy smoke circles in the blue-gray as the German planes went down after the British squadron. The German flight leader was grinding his teeth as he strained to get a sight on the nearest Spitfire. And gradually a silver-blue fuselage was coming into range. A British rudder was entering the Madsen sight-ring. The German's thumb moved toward a dull black button.

BAILEY did not know that one of his planes was being readied as a target for flaming Madsens. He was conscious only of the fact that the Dorniers were coming into range. Automatically obeying Hedgebrooke's directions to the full, he was completely ignoring the Heinkels.

Into the R. T. Bailey clipped, "Break out and come down on them like a rainfall! Slip down underneath and come up at their bellies!"

The rest of what he was about to say became a gasp. His eyes had swerved to the rear-view mirror. And he could see flame far back there. Far back there in the arrowhead formation. Flame, issuing from a Spitfire; and behind the Spitfire a bullet-spurting Heinkel. There were more Heinkels—a lot of them—too many of them.

Bailey begged himself to forget about the Heinkels, to forget about the flaming British plane. He had to think only of the big Dornier bombers that were capable of destroying battleships and heavy cruisers and carriers. In order to destroy them, the Spitfires must be sacrificed. With the flight-line retained, the Heinkels would be able to nip the English planes one by one, with the Spitfires in rear position getting the worst part of the deal. The lads at the tail end of the arrowhead had only the shadow of a chance. Bailey thought of the flyers who were back there—Rick and Clint and Robbie—and he was biting his lip until blood dripped down over his chin.

The guys in rear position might have a decent chance if he gave them the word to fight back. But Hedgebrooke had said, "Ignore direct contact with the Heinkels."

An oath left Bailey's lips. Again he glanced at the rear-view mirror. Another Spitfire was ignited—and still another!

A fourth English plane was breaking out of formation. In glaring defiance of the battle order it was looping back, lunging toward the oncoming Heinkels. Whether the pilot was trying to save his own skin, or whether he was bent on a wild ride of revenge, Bailey could not determine. But he knew that if other Spitfires followed suit, the formation would be wrecked. Instead of smashing at the Dorniers, the English group would be engaging with the Heinkels.

Bailey's mind was made up. He shouted, "Stay in line! Keep your mind on the Dorniers. England can't afford to lose any more big boats!"

He did not have time to say any more, because the Dorniers had come into range and he was sighting the rear turret of a big German bomber over on the left.

The gunner was blasting at him and Bailey's Spitfire took bullets in the right side of its fuselage before Bailey thumbed the button and eight lines of Browning heat went sizzling down. The rear turret was smashed.

Bailey closed in and poured another burst into the front of the Dornier. The big bomber was staggering in the sky. It went over on its side and placed itself on an angle that was convenient for a third burst. Bailey offered a single second of flame. The line of bullets pierced the right engine and the Dornier was burning.

OTHER Dorniers were burning. They were falling into the Channel and the Spitfires were whizzing down in their wake, then darting up to pour fire at the bombers that were still able to fly. The Heinkels ripped down after the English planes, sent Madsen lead into the vitals of Rolls-Royce motors, into the vitals of Englishmen. At 11,500 feet, above the southeastern area of the English Channel, the sky was a mass of fire and smoke and twisted metal and ripped flesh. Like maddened birds trying to destroy each other in the glowing depths of the inferno, the planes threw lead and took it.

Bailey was working on his second Dornier. A front gunner was giving him trouble and he eased down and rolled over and came in again, nose edging upward. He sent an underside burst into the belly of the Dornier. The big bomber shuddered, and then three Heinkels came running at Bailey and he was forced to dive.

The Heinkels chased him. At slightly less than 8,000 feet he pulled out and zoomed and broke away. The German planes tried to initiate another line of pursuit and he crossed them up by breaking his defensive sprint and coming in at them head-on. He sliced through and lunged at another Dornier. He pressed the gun-button and grinned as the big Nazi bomber broke out in flames.

His grin widened as he saw that the other Spitfires were following his example. Although it was necessary for the Britishers to send an occasional burst into a Heinkel in order to get rid of a direct obstacle, they were concentrating on the big bombers.

And the Dorniers were being annihilated. They were burning, cracking up in the sky. The crews of doomed bombers were leaping out and tugging at ripcords. Parachutes were blooming, and far below, against the silvery expanse of the Channel, Nazi rescue boats were already at work, pulling survivors from cold, vicious water.

Three Dorniers remained in the sky.

Bailey rushed in. His guns spoke for three seconds. One of the Dorniers was fountaining flame. The other two bombers were getting the concerted wrath and power of four Spitfires. And on the outer fringe of the battle area other Spitfires were trying to ward off the furious attack of the orange Heinkels.

Gun-chatter reached Bailey's ears, echoed by the sound of crackling Plexiglas. Bullets were smashing through his

greenhouse and trying to tag his skull. He ducked, threw the plane into a roll-out. As he faded from the bullet line he was grinning.

And the reason for his grin was not merely that he had escaped death. There were no more Dorniers in the sky!

BUT there were plenty of Heinkels. And they were winged demons, gnashing a melody of revenge as they lunged at the Spitfires. Four Nazi planes, piloted by sky veterans who were well acquainted with Bailey, came roaring in with Madsens yelping. They came in a horizontal formation that curved in to form a forceps.

Bullets clunked into Bailey's wings and he dived.

He dived hard, prop pointing toward the Channel. He veered out of the dive, eased into a wingover and started up and went down again and broke the second dive by initiating an outside loop. And when he was at the crest of the loop he forgot about the Heinkels that were trying to chew him up and concentrated on the troubles of a Spitfire that had a Nazi on its tail less than a hundred yards away.

Bailey got a close look at the orange Heinkel, saw the insignia on the side of the fuselage—a black devil with wings. Rittmann!

As always when he sighted the German killer, Bailey let go with a softly whispered string of curses, expressionless except for a strange light in his eyes.

The American ace came tearing in from the side. Although Rittmann's fuselage was in his sights, Bailey did not thumb the button. He was following his usual practice of making his presence known to the Nazi flight leader—flaunting his wings and his guns before the eyes of the man he hated; flinging down the challenge and then zooming up and taking position for the duel.

Rittmann had never failed to accept the challenge. As Bailey's ship braced, the German responded by swerving away from the Spitfire he had been tailing. He climbed fast, making a hairpin turn and then streaking toward Bailey head-on.

The Spitfire swished back in the start of a loop. Rittmann followed. Bailey cut the loop and went down in a vertical left turn. Rittmann faded out and followed. Again Bailey was breaking the maneuver and coming up again and crossing the German's attack line with a single-second burst. Disconcerted for a moment, Rittmann zoomed and grabbed for wider fighting area.

Bailey refused to let him have space or time. At an even 7,000 feet, Bailey faked a frontal lunge, then slipped under, cutting the shallow dive and bringing his plane up in an underside attack. He poured a three-second burst and Rittmann was working a neat break-out by easing the Heinkel into a left wingover. Bailey threw his Spitfire over the peak of an invisible hill in the sky and chased the German. And Rittmann again jumped away from the bullet line by working into a barrel roll. Bailey continued to press the issue. Rittmann straightened and feinted a climb and then went down again. At 4,500 feet Bailey was using a capacity throttle, edging in from the side and then banking hard and straightening. Although his features remained expressionless, the light in his eyes seemed to glow with fury and joy.

And there was good reason. He was on Rittmann's tail.

HE WAS sighting the Heinkel's cockpit, and then his thumb was moving toward the button. And he was about to release eight Brownings when he noticed that the Heinkel's greenhouse was opened. Rittmann's arms were raised, signaling.

Bailey continued to close in, puzzled. Then the German's gestures were more distinct; he was pointing toward his wings

and moving his arms in a hopeless gesture.

Bailey understood. The Nazi had run out of ammunition.

For several seconds Bailey retained his position behind the Heinkel. When it was evident that Rittmann was not attempting a trick, the Spitfire edged away. It ran in on the side, so that it was flying parallel with the German plane. Bailey gestured to indicate that he was discontinuing the fight. He could see the pale smile on Rittmann's face. The German was indicating his appreciation of an enemy's chivalry—and he was using the radio telephone.

Bailey wondered as to the message that the Nazi was crisping into the mike. Within a short space of seconds the American's question was answered. The other orange Heinkels that were swirling and diving and exchanging fire with silver-blue Spitfires, were gradually edging their way out of the combat area. They were moving toward Rittmann's plane, which was aiming at the coast of France.

The flight leader of Unit 79 had conceded the fight to the English squadron.

Bailey made a quick count of the Spitfires that remained in the sky. Including his own plane, there were eleven. Nineteen had gone out. Fighter Squadron 23 had lost eight planes and eight men, but all that mattered was that Fighter Squadron 23 had stopped a Dornier raid on Portsmouth.

Bailey used the R. T. He said, "The party's over, fellas. Let's go home. Follow me in on a stepped-up string."

Eleven Spitfires whizzed toward England. Eleven Spitfires—and there was not one that did not have Madsen bullet holes in wings and fuselage. A few were slightly wobbly. A few lurched now and then. Two planes were forced to leave the formation, because they could not keep up with the speed of the others. And several planes carried Englishmen whose arms and shoulders had been nicked by Nazi slugs. They were returning to England, the sky knights of Fighter 23. They were battered and they were reeling, but they had won a battle. They carried their colors high.

CHAPTER THREE

"You Killed Your Buddies!"

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT BAILEY walked into the squadron office and handed a hastily written report to the squadron leader.

Hedgebrooke already knew what had happened in the skies above the southeastern Channel area. Crisp praise from Headquarters had been followed by messages of congratulation from other battle units in the Southampton and Portsmouth vicinity.

Nevertheless, Hedgebrooke read the report carefully. When he was done, he placed the paper in the top drawer of the desk.

He avoided Bailey's eyes as he muttered, "I imagine you feel the same way about this as I do."

"I'm not sure that I know what you mean, sir," Bailey said.

"I mean those eight men. It's not easy, losing them. It's all very well to know that Fighter Squadron 23 has done another excellent piece of work. And it makes us feel downright proud to realize that those big boats at Portsmouth have been saved from German bombs. But we've lost eight good men."

Bailey's lips barely moved as he muttered, "It's all in the game, sir."

A thin smile formed on Hedgebrooke's lips and he said, "That's the logical thing to say, Bailey, but it's not what you're really thinking. I know what's in your mind. I know what you're going through."

Bailey said, "You might as well know, sir. Two of those men were my friends. I'd known them back in the States. I—"

He choked and lowered his head.

The squadron leader tightened his lips. For an instant he wanted to ask the American a flock of questions, the answers to which would clear up the swirling puzzle surrounding Bailey's icy hatred of Unit 79 and Major Rittmann. But it was a poor time for that.

He said, "I'm sorry, Bailey. I know it's tough to take your flight out on a sacrifice mission, and particularly when two of the men are—"

"I didn't realize the way things would shape up," Bailey said, and his tone carried condemnation. "If I'd been able to anticipate the battle situation, I'd have never let the new men go up. Don't you see, sir? I—I wanted them to get experience. I knew for a fact that they were keen pilots with plenty of guts. But they didn't have a chance."

"If you hadn't done what you did, the Dorniers would have reached Portsmouth," Hedgebrooke said. "That's all you need remember, Bailey. The Dorniers would have reached Portsmouth."

Bailey forced a smile. He said, "Is that all, sir?"

"Just about," Hedgebrooke said. He stood up and grinned broadly and extended his hand. As Bailey took it, the squadron leader said, "I want to extend congratulations for a magnificent victory."

Leaving the squadron office, Bailey headed toward barracks. He was weary. Two white-hot aerial battles in fast succession had taken a lot of the jump and go out of him. He was gratefully looking forward to a stretch of sleep as he opened the door of his room.

HE ENTERED the room and stepped toward the bed. Then he stopped short and stared. He was facing Robbie.

Robbie was leaning against a window-sill at the other side of the room. His shoulders were hunched and his arms were folded. A cigarette slanted from his lips. Slowly he took the cigarette from his mouth and said, "I've been waiting for you."

Bailey was ridding himself of flying gear. He asked, "What's on your mind?" He was turning his back to Robbie, placing the heavy leather jacket on a hanger.

Robbie said, "You know what's on my mind."

"Not exactly," Bailey said. He was sitting on the edge of the bed and taking off his thick-soled boots. "You've got a few ideas that are slightly off-center. For instance, that brilliant statement you made just before we took off."

"That statement was true—" Robbie began.

Bailey's voice was low as he said, "Wait a minute, Robbie. Before you say anything else I want you to clear a lot of mist from your mind. Forget everything that happened six years ago. I'm a flight leader with a job to do."

"You did a job, all right," Robbie gritted. "A dirty, sneaking, murderous job. But you didn't quite finish it. You killed Rick and Clint—but I'm still alive." His voice was rising to an almost hysterical pitch. He screeched, "You hear me? I'm still alive!"

"Robbie—snap out of it!"

"I know what I'm saying," Robbie hissed. "You had murder in your heart when you assigned Rick and Clint and myself to a job that had suicide written all over it. You were afraid we'd talk—afraid we'd tell all about your dirty dealings back in the States. So you put us back there in the death-spot of an arrowhead formation, and the Heinkels came running down and showered us. You could have given us an even break—a chance to fight back. But you wouldn't give the order."

"Listen, Robbie. Listen to me. Let me—"

"Let you talk your way out of it? Let you build up a case for yourself? Who do you think you're selling ideas to—a poor, brainless sap like Steve? I know you, Bailey. I know what you're made of. I know the way you operate. For all I know, this flight lieutenancy in the R.A.F. may be a cover-up for some new kind of dirty racket—"

"You're talking too much, Robbie. You're getting on my nerves." Bailey's voice was slightly louder than a whisper now.

Robbie did not seem to hear. Rage had brought blood into his eyes. His features were strangely purplish. His lips were quivering and then his hands were quivering and when he spoke there was a tinge of madness in his voice. He said, "You killed Rick and Clint. Clever—too clever for a military court. But you deserve to die." And then he was ripping off his tunic and rolling up his sleeves and gritting, "Come on, Bailey. You're going to fight for your life!"

Slowly Bailey was unbuttoning his tunic, measuring Robbie with his eyes. Physically, it was an even match. But Robbie had worked himself up to a throbbing rage that was multiplying his strength and speed. Bailey threw his tunic onto the bed, looked at his fists and shrugged.

He moved forward.

ROBBIE growled, rushed forward, threw a wild right. Bailey ducked and planted a left to the ribs. Robbie went back, rushed again and once more was missing with a right. He took a right to the jaw and a left to the ribs again and fell against the wall. Bailey moved in, thinking that it might not be as difficult as he had expected—and he was careless for part of a second.

In that time Robbie was up. He threw the rule book away and butted Bailey in the belly. Bailey tripped backward and the black-haired guy let out a crazy laugh and smashed a right to the jaw and a left to the jaw and another right, and Bailey was hurtling backward and landing on his shoulders. Robbie lunged at him.

Bailey brought his knees back toward his chest and then let go with both legs. Robbie wheezed as the air was blasted out of his lungs and he catapulted across the room. He landed against the wall and gathered himself up slowly. Then he let out a curse and leaped at Bailey with fingers clawing for a throat hold.

Bailey dodged and slammed a left to Robbie's belly. Robbie doubled up, took a sizzling uppercut that lifted him from the floor. Bailey brought back a right fist. His lips were tightly clamped as he threw the fist with all the strength in his body.

The fist landed on Robbie's chin; the

black-haired guy flew backward and crashed against the bed. And the bed moved.

Robbie was on the floor and only his madness was keeping him conscious. And he was looking at a revolver hanging in a belt looped over a chair. He was grabbing at the revolver, lifting it, pointing it at Bailey's head.

Footsteps thudded in the outside corridor. The door opened. A mob of flyers barged into the room, looking at Bailey, who was torn and ripped and bleeding and heaving; looking at Robbie, who was trying to keep the revolver pointed at Bailey's head.

"I say, chaps. This won't do! Can't have such things going on."

"Beastly business—ought to save it all for the Nazis."

"Doesn't look right, chaps. Doesn't fit, y'know."

Robbie let out a laugh that was partly a sob. And the revolver fell from his limp fingers and he rolled over on the floor. His arms were spread wide, and he was unconscious.

Bailey came forward and leaned weakly against a bedpost.

He said, "Better take him to the infirmary. And I'd be grateful if you fellas would forget about it."

"Sorry, sir," a flying officer said. "I'm afraid it's our duty to report this. After all, he was pointing a revolver at you. That takes it away from the category of an ordinary fight."

Bailey was about to say something, but he was looking at the grim faces of the Britishers. And he knew that it would be useless to put up an argument. He watched them as they carried Robbie out of the room. When the door was closed he sagged onto the bed. And he was thinking of five guys who had once been real friends. A feeling of loss and sorrow pervaded him and a sigh left his lips. Gloom came into his eyes.

IN EARLY morning of the following day, Flight Lieutenant Bailey walked into the squadron office, stepped up to the desk, saluted and said, "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Hedgebrooke nodded. "I heard about that difficulty in barracks. I wanted to get your version of it before I start any action against Caldwell. But I'm afraid the investigation must wait. Headquarters expects another try at Portsmouth. Although they haven't any specific information, they don't want to take any chances. They're calling for a close-packed Channel patrol. That means we'll be busy as bees for the next few days. As soon as things quiet down, we'll go ahead with this Caldwell matter."

"Does he—does he feel any better, sir?"

"Well, he's causing plenty of excitement in the infirmary. We had to tie him down to the bed last night. He seemed slightly improved this morning. But I don't want you to worry about it, Bailey. Keep your mind on the skies above the Channel. That's the most important matter right now. In fact, I'm sending you up this morning. You'll lead six other planes in a two-hour patrol. That is—" he smiled slightly as he looked at Bailey's bruised features—"unless you don't feel up to it."

Bailey did not return the smile. He said, "I'm ready, sir."

"Good," Hedgebrooke said. "The men who will make up your flight have already been notified. By this time they're probably out on the field. You'll use patrol course R-G-784. That's all. Cheerio."

Bailey saluted and left the office. He hurried to his room and stepped into flying gear.

A cold, gray wind was blowing across the field as Bailey approached the six pilots who were grouped to one side of their roaring Spitfires. The flyers had turned up their coat collars to protect their faces from the raw, biting air that was knifing in from the Channel, and

Bailey was unable to recognize their partially covered features.

He was not interested in recognizing them. He did not care who was going along on the patrol; did not particularly care about the patrol itself. For the first time in his career as a war pilot he was finding it impossible to concentrate on battle.

And instead of the usual cheery greeting, he was saying stiffly, "We'll use R-G-784—two hours. Follow me up to ten thousand and then we'll go into a stepped-down echelon. Keep it wide until I call for a change of formation. All right—let's get going."

As he climbed into the cockpit he felt the need of a drink. He wanted something to sizzle and burn out the dull, dreary ache that throbbed within him. For a moment he was tempted to climb out of the cockpit and head for the lounge of the Flying Officers' Mess. He wanted to throw a double Scotch down his throat.

But he closed the greenhouse over his head, juiced the Rolls-Royce and watched the grass running backward and away from his wings.

The seven Spitfires hit 10,000 and moved out across the Channel. They were aiming in a southeast direction, cutting through a sky that was bright blue and clear. But when the squadron was scarcely thirty miles out from the English coastline, Bailey saw trouble.

ELEVEN fast-flying Nazi buzzards, working at slightly less than 15,000 feet, coming on aggressively and confidently and without a semblance of a surprise attempt. The sun bounced away from their wings and fuselage and caused orange paint to glimmer.

And Bailey knew that he was walking into another debate with Unit 79.

Major Rittmann was leading a hunting pack across the sky, leading winged bloodhounds on a mission that was spiked with revenge. Unit 79 was raging as a result of the defeat suffered on the previous day. And they were anxious again to meet up with warhawks of Fighter Squadron 23.

Bailey gauged the Nazis' position, and then into the R. T. he said, "We're going upstairs. Spread out in a straight horizontal formation."

The British group swished up through the blue. Swished up past 15,000 and 17,000 and 19,000. But the Germans were making the most of their initial altitude advantage, and the orange Heinkels hit 23,000 feet and then leaped from the high platform and came down screeching.

Bailey saw that the Nazi group was using an echelon, a convenient attack design in view of the fact that the English squadron was outnumbered. It meant that the Heinkels would be able to encircle the British contingent and close in with deadly streams of Madsen flame. The German flight leader was assuming that the Spitfires would try to break through the initial attack by retaining their defense line and meeting bullet with bullet.

Playing chess, figuring three and four moves ahead, Bailey snatched at a plan. When the Heinkels were scarcely four hundred yards away, he radioed, "Break formation and kick out wide! Zoom up and back and fake a getaway. And if you get through—come back at them and chew them up!"

The Spitfires broke out of the straight horizontal. Like a rocket splashing blue flame in all directions, the seven English planes were radiating with terrific speed. And their wild sky-scribbling made queer contrast to the precise attack pattern of the oncoming Nazi planes.

Following the flight lieutenant's directions, Allied pilots were riding up and back and away from the first burst of Madsen guns. Immediately the German flight leader sensed the British strategy, and ordered a direct attack.

But Bailey's timing and perception were getting fast results. As seconds tumbled from the vaults of time, the Spitfires came back booming and hacking, and they had grabbed the initiative and were carrying the fight to the enemy. Browning guns ripped flame across the sky, and the English planes were slicing through the wall of orange Heinkels. They were offering bursts of one and two seconds and they were turning and swerving and looping like mad hornets as they increased their combat intensity.

Bailey juiced the Merlin and rammed up at the belly of a Heinkel. Two other Nazis were after his Spitfire, but he was more than williing to take the fire so that he could land an effective counter-blow. Madsen slugs thunked into the Spitfire's fuselage, but in the same instant Browning lead was ripping into the belly of another German plane. The Heinkel, carrying a corpse in its cockpit, went spinning down toward a maw of deep and mean water.

Bailey zoomed away from the two Heinkels that were biting at him from the side, and he sizzled up toward another orange plane that seemed to be offering itself as a target for Browning lead.

But as the Spitfire closed in, the German went into a neat wingover, and rolled and then dived. And for an instant Bailey was able to see the insignia on the side of the orange fuselage.

A black devil with wings!

And Bailey was expressionless—except for the light in his eyes, the light of hate and revenge.

He leaped after the plane that carried Major Rittmann.

THE German pulled out of the dive and faked a zoom and dived again. Bailey followed. Rittmann rolled out and Bailey measured it closely and danced away and came in again when the orange Heinkel was level. Rittmann crept out of the defensive position by looping tightly and streaking back on an inverted basis and then jumping into a right vertical. As Bailey tried to regain attacking position, the German zoomed again and then broke out of the climb and came down with Madsens clicking a rhythm of fury.

Bailey tried a right wingover.

The Heinkel veered hard and Rittmann was stretching the burst. He yelped with glee as he saw his Madsen tracers striking the engine cowling of the English plane. The Spitfire shuddered and threw green flame from the glycol tank.

Bailey sent the Spitfire into a dive. Rittmann followed. Relentlessly he continued to stab fire into the crippled British plane. And Bailey, although his features remained expressionless, was forced to tell himself that the German was winning the round. More than that—if Madsen slugs continued to tag the Spitfire, if a single slug made its way into the cockpit and hit a certain spot, the entire fight would be terminated on the instant.

Bailey was working hard to eliminate the threat. Although he realized that his plane was doomed, he continued his battle with Rittmann. And he was maneuvering for a fast descent, hoping that he could edge into a position that would pull him away from the Madsen fire and give him an opportunity to jump out of the ignited ship.

The Spitfire fell into another wingover. Bailey repeated it, and then he was opening the greenhouse. The plane was rolling again, and Bailey was releasing the safety belt. The Spitfire was burning brightly, and flames were crawling into the cockpit, and then the plane was momentarily free from Rittmann's bullet-bursts. At the same time it was inverted. Gravity beckoned to Bailey and he went out of the cockpit and plummeted head-first toward the Channel.

At 9,000 feet the chute opened. Bailey looked up and could see the dogfight con-

tinuing high above. He looked down and saw the metallic expanse of the Channel. And he was thinking that the lifebelt would give him a break. He was sufficiently near to the coast of England to have a chance of being picked up by a British patrol.

But as the chute pulled him down toward water, he noticed that the wind was carrying him southward toward France.

He cursed.

The wind was getting the best of the argument. With increasing speed Bailey was carried southward. And although he was making a descent, his downward progress was maddeningly slow. It seemed to him that he was being given a free if undesired sky trip to France. It seemed that he was passing over miles of water.

He cursed again, looked down and saw that he was only a few hundred feet above the Channel. Then he could see something else that forced away the cursing and brought a grin to his lips.

A boat. A patrol boat, moving southward. Bailey was telling himself that it was preparing to pick him up.

He splashed into water. It was icy, dragging him down. He freed himself of the chute before the lifebelt pulled him up to the surface. Then he shivered and shook the wetness from his eyes and turned and looked at the boat.

It was scarcely fifty yards away. It was moving fast, cutting the water sharply. And as it came closer, Bailey could see the marking on the side—a large black swastika.

CHAPTER FOUR

"One of Us Must Die!"

HIGH waves were breaking on the rocky coast of France. A guttural voice was trying to be polite while saying,—"Sorry, but we must blindfold you from here on. Too many escape attempts have been made lately."

A thick black bandage across Bailey's eyes, and steel on his wrists, and then a bumpy motor ride across a road of sun-hardened mud. There was the sound of an approaching train. Thick fingers held his arms, helping him to board the train.

Bailey said, "At least tell me where I'm being taken."

The guttural voice that tried to be polite was saying, "In a geographical sense, you must be kept in complete ignorance. But I can tell you that you are bound for the aerodrome of *Luftwaffe* Unit 79, commanded by Major Rittmann, one of Germany's greatest aces. Doubtless you have heard about him."

"Sort of," Bailey said.

There was a pause, and then the guttural voice was saying, "You might be interested to know that the boat that picked you up is part of a small fleet that operates under Major Rittmann's command. The boats move out from the French coast each time that Unit 79 is on a Channel sky patrol. Whenever a flyer is forced to leave his plane, to parachute toward the water, he is picked up. It makes no difference whether he is Allied or German—he is saved from death in the Channel."

"That seems like a fair way of doing things," Bailey said.

"Major Rittmann is an extremely fair-minded officer," the polite voice said. "Naturally he expects an expression of gratitude from those Allied flyers whose lives he has spared."

Bailey nodded slowly and a thin smile came to his lips and he murmured, "I get it."

The voice lost its politeness. It was cold and bladelike as it said, "You can take my suggestion or you can ignore it, as you prefer. But if I were you I would cooperate with Major Rittmann. He is extremely displeased when an Allied pilot refuses to express his gratitude."

"You don't have to tell me about Rittmann," Bailey said. "I've been acquainted with him for quite a while. In fact, you might say that I've followed his career with persevering interest. I know exactly what he's made of."

"Indeed? Perhaps you'd like to tell me —what is Major Rittmann made of?"

"Scum."

Knuckles cracked against Bailey's mouth, and he fell back. And the voice that had been polite was hissing, "The major will be informed of that insult. I can assure you he will not treat the matter lightly."

"Is that so?" Bailey said, and although blood was dripping from his lips, he was grinning. He said, "Well, as long as Rittmann is going to make things miserable for me you can tell him a few more things. You can tell him I said that he has the eyes of a snake, and the lips of a sewer rat. In general, his features resemble those of a hyena, and his soul is that of a fiend. Tell him I said it."

He waited for the Nazi to hit him again. But the owner of the guttural voice made no move toward the prisoner. Nor did he venture a reply. There was silence in the compartment, and beyond the silence there was the steady chugging noise of the locomotive, and the clanking and thudding of wheels against steel rails.

Later on there was another automobile, and the mixture of guttural voices. Then a long walk across a field. And through a doorway, down a stone stairway. Then the handcuffs were taken off.

SLOWLY he reached up and took the black bandage from his eyes. He blinked a few times and then he was looking at the walls and the ceiling of a large stone chamber.

He was looking at the men in the chamber. Twelve men, ragged and bearded and dirty-skinned. Most of them wore the remnants of R.A.F. uniforms. Others were attired in the tunic and trousers of the Free French air units. Bailey was able to recognize several former members from his own squadron. He smiled at them and they smiled back.

Someone said, with good-natured sarcasm, "It can't be Bailey. That's one chap they couldn't pull out of the sky."

"They couldn't—but they did," Bailey said.

"Who did?" someone else said.

"Unit 79," Bailey muttered.

And a third Englishman said, "Can you be more specific?"

Bailey looked at the stone floor and he said, "Yes—I can be more specific. It was Rittmann."

And the men who knew of Bailey's struggle with the German ace were looking at each other and then looking at the American flyer and there was a blend of disappointment and sympathy on their faces.

Bailey's eyes dragged it in. And his lips let it out again as he said, "You fellas are acting as if it's all over. Ain't. Rittmann's still alive and so am I."

And at the far end of the room, where the faces were hidden by wall shadow, a voice flicked, "You tell 'em, keed."

Bailey stiffened. He knew the voice. He knew it well. It had Oregon stamped all over it.

And before he could make a reply, before he could say anything, he heard another voice saying, "Sho' nuff!"

Bailey moved quickly across the room. And then he was looking at them—looking at Clint Hadley and Rick Robertson. They were leaning back against the stone wall, looking him up and down and grinning.

"Hi-ya," Bailey said.

"Howdy," Rick said.

"Hello," Clint said.

Bailey looked around and murmured, "What say we move over to the other side of the room? More or less private over

there. I think we've got things to talk over."

"Good idea," Clint said.

They walked over to the other side of the room. Bailey uncapped a waterproof cigarette case, and flicked a lighter attachment beneath the lid. The three flyers lit up.

Bailey said, "Well?"

"I guess we had the same kind of deal as you," Clint said. "We had to get out of our planes for the very good reason that neither of us cared for the idea of being cooked alive. We used a very famous invention known as the parachute, and a patrol boat with a big black swastika on it fished us out of the Channel and with black bandage across our eyes we were taken on a sight-seeing tour of picturesque France. Finally they dumped us here. It looks as if we're here to stay."

Dryly, Bailey said, "Well, if the food's good—"

"We-all wouldn't know about that," Rick said. "We haven't tasted it yet."

Bailey exhaled cigarette smoke and blew tobacco from the tip of his tongue and said, "Thanks, fellas."

"For what?" Clint said.

"For being white about it. For understanding—or at least pretending that you understand. If I hadn't used that arrowhead formation—"

Rick said, "Mister, if you hadn't used it, I'd have punched you in the snoot."

"Likewise," Clint said. "When we were in the Nazi patrol boat, we couldn't have had a better consolation than watching those Dorniers fall out of the sky. And by the way—how did Robbie make out?"

Bailey glanced to the side and kept his voice level and casual as he said, "Oh, he did okay, I guess."

FOR almost a full minute there was silence. Bailey was gazing at the wall and then he was turning slowly and he was looking at the faces of the other Allied prisoners, grouped at the other side of the room.

Rick said, "Any ideas?"

"A few—none of them much good," Bailey muttered.

Then his attention was caught by the sound of footsteps in the outer corridor. Guttural curses, and something that resembled scuffling. The big iron door was opened. Someone was being thrown into the cell. Someone who wore an R.A.F. uniform. Someone who was taking a black bandage from his eyes and showing black hair, black eyes and a line of blood running from forehead to chin.

Clint gasped, "Well I'll be—"

Rick said, "Can't believe it. It must be a ghost."

Bailey was unable to say anything. He was paralyzed as he stared at Robbie Caldwell.

The black-haired guy took a red-smeared handkerchief from a tunic pocket and wiped the blood from his face. There was a dim grin on his lips as he said, "Maybe it was in the books for us guys to stick together."

Bailey said, "How—?"

"I'll tell you how," Robbie murmured. "When I was in the infirmary, tied to that bed so that I could hardly move a muscle, I had a good opportunity to think things over. Yeah, Bailey, I was thinking of that arrowhead formation and it didn't take me long to realize what a fast-tempered fool I'd been. I wanted to make up for it in some way—but I couldn't hit upon anything except getting out of the infirmary and facing you and offering an apology. And while I was making my getaway a guy in full flying gear happened to grab me. I clipped him in the teeth and then I saw seven Spitfires preparing to take off. I saw six guys in a huddle. And I told myself that I would be the seventh. I changed outfits with the English guy and I took his place in the

flight lineup. Later on, when we were playing games with those orange Heinkels over the Channel, my motor developed a headache due to a few Madsen injections. The Spitfire took a dive and hit water and I climbed out and a Nazi patrol boat picked me up. And a black bandage was placed over my eyes and I went for a ride and here I am."

"Want a smoke?" Bailey said. It was the only thing he could think of.

Robbie grinned and accepted the cigarette. He inhaled tobacco fragrance and then his grin sobered somewhat and he extended a hand toward Bailey.

Bailey shook his head. "Not just now," he said. "We haven't reached that mark yet, Robbie. Before we shake hands we ought to have a clear slate. We'll have it as soon as you and Rick and Clint hear the truth about what happened back in the States."

"Okay—let's have it," Robbie said.

BAILEY took a deep breath, and then he began, "I wasn't the guy who stole those precision instruments. It was Steve. He'd managed to get himself in debt and he needed money fast. I knew about it and I was remembering times when Steve had gone to bat for me. So I took the rap for it. Steve didn't want that. He was all for making a full confession, and yet I knew that it was a closed matter and nothing further could be done about it. Anyway, Steve figured that the least he could do was to stick with me. When I went to Spain, he tagged along."

"What happened in Spain?" Clint said.

Bailey's lips tightened. He said, "A dogfight over Guadalajara. Steve was forced down in enemy territory. I thought I could pick him up. I made a landing and before I could do anything we were both captured. The enemy wanted certain information and Steve said nix. They tortured him. They used fire. I saw it; they made me see it. They made me stand there and watch his suffering and listen to his screaming. But he wouldn't talk. Just before he died he looked at me and his eyes were asking me if the black mark was taken off his record. And I managed to smile at him. And I nodded. Then—well, I sort of went crazy."

"You got away?" Clint said.

"Smashed somebody in the jaw and ran a few hundred yards and swam a river and climbed a big hill," Bailey said. "I reached the Loyalist lines and grabbed a plane and went out to settle matters with the guy who killed Steve, the German air officer who supervised the torture. Quite a famous name in Nazi aviation."

"Who was it?" Rick said.

"Rittmann," Bailey replied. He watched the amazement grow on the faces of the other three flyers and then he added, "It's been a long fight. A hard fight. It seems to me that I've traded bullets with him across the length and breadth of Europe. And now—"

"It looks as if the German has high score," Clint said.

"Yeah, but hold your bets," Bailey muttered. "I get another turn at bat."

"What's the angle?" Robbie said.

Bailey pointed to the door.

And then he said, "If it works, every guy in this room has a chance to escape. If not, we die. But I think it's worth the chance. Whaddya say?"

The four Americans were grinning at each other. And their arms were extended, and their hands were clasped.

It took Bailey less than a half-minute to explain his scheme, and then he hurried across the room to let the other Allied prisoners in on it. And the faces of Englishmen and Free Frenchmen were lighting up with hope. And there was battle in their eyes.

Bailey stepped backward. He stood in the center of the room and he said, "It's going to mean black eyes and bloody noses

and skinned knuckles. And a lot of cursing and name-calling. And the sooner we get started, the better. So—go to it, fellas, and don't pull your punches!"

Somebody hauled off and punched somebody else in the mouth.

And that started it.

MAJOR RITTMANN, a tall, somewhat stout man with narrow eyes and thick lips, was studying a flight report when a subordinate officer rushed into the office and shrieked, *"Herr Major* —they're escaping!"

Rittmann whirled in his swivel chair and said, "What are you talking about?"

"The prisoners, *Herr Major.* The Allied flyers!" The subordinate officer paused to catch his breath and then he blurted, "They seemed to be fighting among themselves, as if they were trying to kill one another. The guards came in and tried to stop it. And the prisoners overpowered the guards—swarmed out of the cell. They killed the orderly who was trying to set off the alarm. I saw it happen from a far end of the corridor. I—"

The subordinate officer did not have to explain further. The sound of a commotion on the airfield dominated Rittmann's attention. Staring through the window, he saw men in Allied uniforms waging a hand-to-hand fight against Nazi pilots and mechanics. For dangling seconds Rittmann was motionless, rigid. He was too astonished to say anything or to do anything. And he saw the Allied flyers gaining a quick triumph. Already several of the escaping prisoners had taken possession of rifles and revolvers. Unarmed Nazis were running frantically and trying to seek cover. Three men in R.A.F. uniform were manning a machine-gun emplacement.

Protected by a wall of bullets, Allied aviators were leaping into German planes. Motors were roaring. Wings were quivering. It was as if the orange Heinkels were weary of serving the cause of Nazism and seemed eager to aid the fighting birdmen of Democracy.

Rittmann gritted a curse. He grabbed at a telephone and rifled orders into the mouthpiece. Then he leaped away from the desk and tore out of the office.

And he was running down a corridor. And down a flight of steps. And he was screeching orders. Nazi pilots and mechanics and armorers and orderlies were grabbing rifles and revolvers and running out on the field. Bullets zinged and a few Germans fell. Rittmann dashed out on the field and a bullet missed his head by inches. He dashed back to the protection of a stone-bordered doorway.

Rage blended with frustration kept the major speechless as he watched the Allied prisoners completing their escape. One by one the orange Heinkels were whizzing across the field. And several pilots had each revved-up two and three planes, for the benefit of the men who were keeping the Nazis back. With a merger of speed and caution, the Allied flyers were jumping into the remaining Heinkels. Many of the fugitives continued to use rifles and revolvers after they were settled in the cockpits of the German fighter planes.

Finally twelve Heinkels were in the air, streaking westward.

Rittmann watched the orange planes slicing through the sky. He knew that a chase would be useless, because the escaping flyers had grabbed sufficient lead to assure a safe run-back across the Channel.

The major was grinding his teeth. His eyes narrowed and to a flyer who stood at his side he murmured, "I may be mis-

taken, but it seems that one of those planes is having trouble."

"It certainly looks that way, *Herr Major,*" the flyer said. "The plane is losing speed, losing altitude—"

Rittmann hissed, "At least I'll bring one of them back here. And when I get him back—"

His voice rose to a crazy pitch as he shrieked, "Ready my Heinkel! I'm going out after the Allied swine! I'm going out alone. I'll force him down to earth. He'll be squealing and kicking when I bring him back here—and after that it won't be long before he's screaming!"

Mechanics and armorers raced toward the orange Heinkel that carried a black devil with wings on the side of its fuselage.

And an orderly ran back to the squadron office, and returned with black leather flying gear. Rittmann grabbed the helmet, ignored the knee-length jacket. His eyes were soldered to the orange Heinkel that seemed to be waiting for him at 2,500 feet.

Rittmann's lips curved in a fiendish grin.

A propeller twirled, a motor boomed, and Major Rittmann ran toward his plane.

USING an all-out throttle, Rittmann laughed elatedly as he watched the gap quickly closing between the nose of his ship and the rudder of the fugitive plane. He snatched at altitude as he approached bullet range, and he was planning to use a gradual come-down, supplemented by casual bullet-bursts, to force the other Heinkel to earth.

Then a frown was forming on the German's brow, because it seemed that the other plane was gaining balance, stabilizing its flight line. Its speed was increasing and yet it was not trying to resume the getaway. Instead, it was turning, assuming a fighting stance!

Rittmann's surprise was replaced by a haughty, jeering laugh. He was hunching in the cockpit, preparing for the kill. And then there was a buzzing in his earphones, and it was causing his eyes to widen. Then he realized that during the take-off he had catered to instinct, and had attached the wires of his helmet earphones to the radio apparatus.

The voice came into the earphones, saying, "If I remember correctly, Rittmann, you understand English. You spoke it fairly well in Spain, about six years ago. Remember Spain, Rittmann? Remember the taste of Amontillado sherry? And the rows of olive trees in the northern hills? Yes—and do you remember the women and children in the streets of Madrid—trying to run away from the bombs? I think you remember that, Rittmann. Sure, I think you take pleasure in remembering it. And also you'll probably be able to recall the day when you captured two Americans who were flying for the Loyalist Army. And how one of them died—died screaming. The other guy got away. Well, I'm the other guy. Yes, I'm Flight Lieutenant Bailey, the guy who's been fighting you up and down and across Europe ever since the war began. The guy who usually uses a Spitfire marked '23-F-1'. But I guess this Heinkel will fill the bill. At least it will give me an even break. That's all I want, Rittmann, an even break. This is our last argument. Only one of us comes out alive!"

A flood of curses left Rittmann's lips, and he ripped a raging reply into the mike. Then, remembering that the Allied pilot did not have earphones, the German took action instead of words. He sent the Heinkel into a head-on lunge, and thumbed the button that forced streams of fire across the sky.

BAILEY went into a roll, veered hard on the come-down and zoomed. For an instant he had the enemy in his sights,

but before he could edge a burst, Rittmann was swerving away from the target position. The German screeched down, came up in a turning zoom, fell over on a left wing and tried another burst.

The American's plane took bullets in its wings. But Bailey leaped out of the trouble spot at slightly less than 2,000 feet. He walked upstairs and Rittmann raced him for the high galleries and then Bailey crossed up the Nazi by ducking under and trying a belly attack. It forced Rittmann to grab at another roll-out.

Bailey followed him down. At 1200 feet it seemed that the German was running away. Then he was executing a neat and graceful Immelman. He inverted and rushed Bailey with his Madsens flaming.

Again Bailey's plane was taking bullets.

A wide and screaming loop dragged the American from the fire area. On the come-down Bailey started another loop, then cut it short, and rolled again. He faked a dive, and then he was running wild in the sky and sizzling up, so that he was in front of Rittmann's guns. But he was away before the German could flip fire. And he was diving again. Then Rittmann was going after him and for a few moments it looked as if the German was going to leap into the killer spot on Bailey's tail.

But the American used another loop, fast and high. He measured it well, and at the top of the circle he broke out and came down with guns blazing.

Fire lanced the cockpit of Rittmann's plane. Fire sliced the German's shoulder. He screamed. A slug took flesh away from his ribs. He screamed again. He squirmed and sagged and then he was rigid. He died screaming.

Bailey was riding uphill as he watched the orange Heinkel go down. A dim smile came to his lips as he watched it crash against green flatland. The Nazi's plane was burning brightly.

The American muttered, "Get used to it, Rittmann. Get used to the fire. You'll be having a lot of it from now on."

And then the orange Heinkel was moving at capacity throttle, aiming at the coastline of France. There was the Channel, and beyond the water—England.

RICK and Clint and Robbie were in the lounge of the Flying Officers' Mess, talking about the glowing blend of strategy and luck that had enabled twelve orange Heinkels to negotiate safe landings on the Channel shores of England. Instead of coming in together, the escaped prisoners had spread wide. They had wiggled wings and had utilized every possible form of surrendering signal as they lost altitude. British anti-aircraft and interceptor squadrons had been curious enough to withhold fire, and along a five-mile strip of beach the orange Heinkels had rolled landing gear across sand.

"Yeah, we did a smart thing by waiting for Bailey," Clint said. "It takes a real flight leader to give signals the way he did—without benefit of an R. T. set."

Robbie glanced at his wrist watch and said, "He's sure been in the squadron office a long while. I bet Hedgebrooke is making him repeat the details for the hundredth time."

There was quiet for a few moments and then Rick placed fingers around a glass that contained Scotch and soda. And he said, "Well, guys, it's hard to believe. But here we are—back again with Fighter 23—all set to have another shot at the swastika."

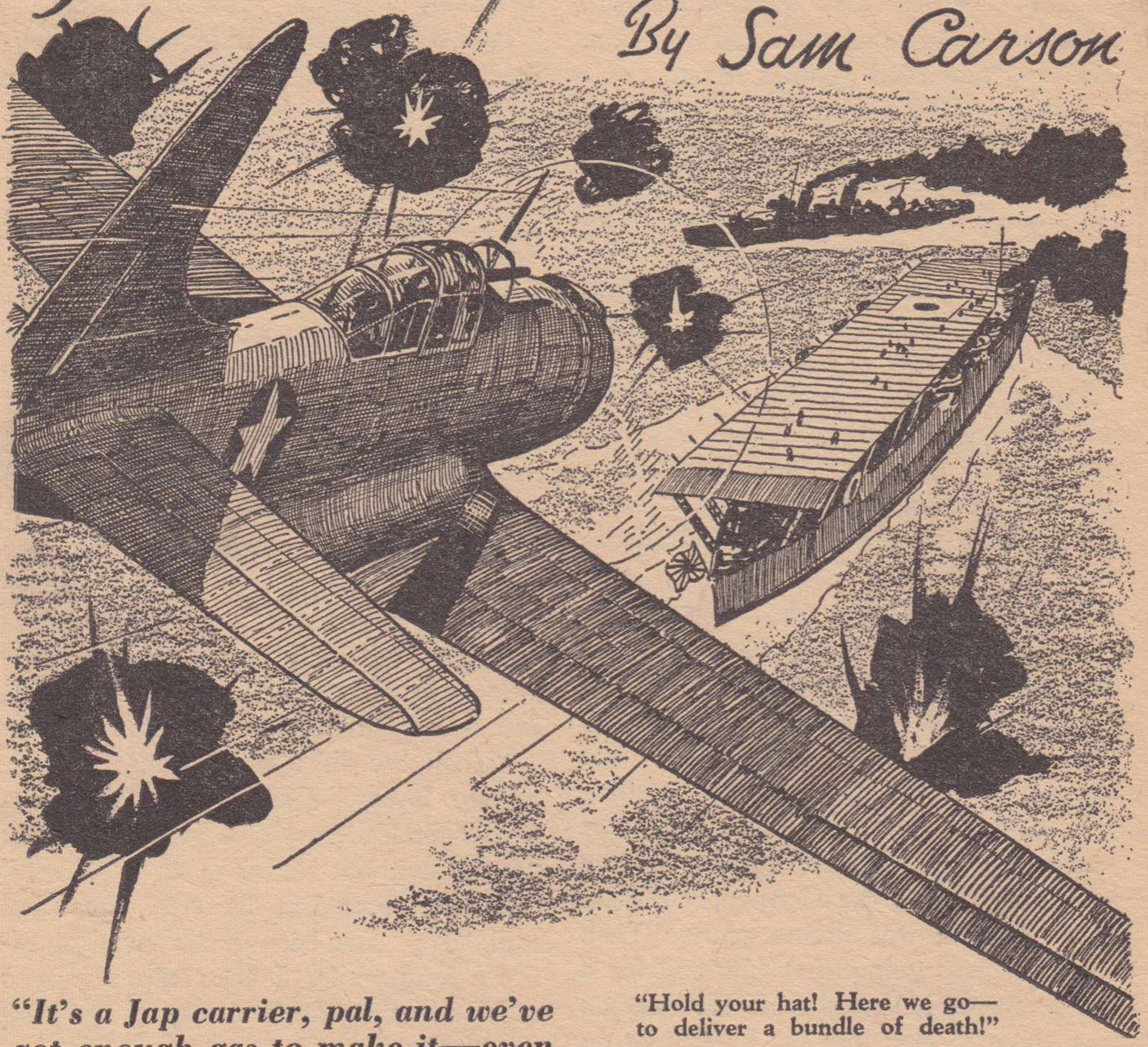
"Let's drink to it," Clint said. "It's the kind of break that doesn't happen often."

And there was a smile on Robbie's lips —a quiet smile, with a lot of thought behind it.

And he said, "No—let's drink to Bailey. Because—he's the kind of guy who doesn't happen often."

Get that Carrier!

By Sam Carson



"Hold your hat! Here we go—to deliver a bundle of death!"

"It's a Jap carrier, pal, and we've got enough gas to make it—even if there isn't enough to come back. So hang on tight—and look out below. Here comes the Navy!"

ANGRY cloud masses spewed upward with alarming speed, obscuring the stretch of southwestern Pacific waters north of New Ireland. The five Douglas SBD-3 dive-bombers were thirty minutes from the *Champlain's* flight deck, and beyond the uprising thunderheads was a Japanese fleet. A PBY patrol had flashed the alert before lapsing into an ominous silence.

"Just over the horizon," Lieutenant Breck Sheridan said over the interphone to his radioman. "If the PBY knew his stuff."

They were holding radio silence, of course. Sheridan was riding the top level, behind formation. "Allee samee mean cloud," he added maliciously. "You savvy?"

Captain Wang Koo, former Big Ten backfield star and observer for the Chinese Air Command, chuckled. "Yeah, chum," he retorted. "Taking that thunder squall high or kissing the waves?"

"We're down to three thousand. And

if Mac Worley holds the whole formation at three, so be it."

Captain Wang, who had begged for such a trip since coming aboard the *Champlain* a week before, offered one more word. "Mac could be fooled. These sudden squalls have a terrible lift in them."

"Been thinking that myself," Sheridan admitted. "By the way, you can get off if you don't like my brand of piloting."

"I'm sticking around," Wang laughed. "Thick clouds, eh?"

They were thick, those clouds. They swallowed Mac Worley's division of Scout-bomber Five.

Breck Sheridan's thoughts went back to the bad news Lieutenant Commander Friele had given him. Sheridan was up for a physical re-examination.

That was Friele's work. The skipper of SB Five had just come to the *Champlain,* and he was going to ride Sheridan all the way. Sheridan had expected rough riding, but not a call for the physical. Still, he reflected, Friele had turned in an adverse report while Sheridan was still a fledgling pilot at Pensacola, and when the skipper was prejudiced, he stuck to his guns. Friele had held that Sheridan wasn't up to Navy standards.

Now Friele was the new skipper, and Sheridan knew, after washing out his plane three days before, that he was in for trouble—but not this.

That was why Wang had asked for the trip today, serving as rear man. Wang and Sheridan were old friends, had played football against each other in the old days. Now Wang had turned up as observer for the Chinese Nationals.

Sheridan sighed. This sweep and others —provided he made the physical test again —had better be perfect. He'd have to convince Lieutenant Commander Friele.

Sheridan transferred his attention to the present abruptly as they emerged from the first cloud, to find a blacker area ahead and to both sides.

And in that clear patch a flight of Zero fighters attacked.

"I think we are going to be very busy," Wang said over the phone. "Where is the rest of the division?"

LOOKING for Mac Worley and the others, and preparing for the dive of a flight of Zero fighters was a job Breck Sheridan had to do, and quickly. He banked, streaked for the nearer cloud wall, which happened to be to the west.

As the Douglas slanted over, Wang's gun let go. The leading Zero had come in very close and with speed. It crossed the path of tracers Wang had sent out and the Japanese plane fell to pieces.

"Beginner's luck," Sheridan jeered. He was aware of Wang's record of twelve Japanese planes.

Wang made no retort. He was mixing his bursts among three enemy craft seeking to flank him with two planes while the third zoomed, then reversed and headed for the dive-bomber's tail.

Wang was firing short bursts. Sheridan was concentrating on the business of reaching the thunder squall. When they were within yards of the fleecy mass, one of the Zeros bracketed the Douglas. Plastic went to bits. The instrument board seemed to explode. Sheridan's head was slapped. And then they struck the cloud mass.

At once the dive-bomber was on its own. It whipped into a stall, fell off on a wing, entirely out of control. Sheridan was thrown first one way, then the other, all the time feeling that he was being forced upward. It grew suddenly cold. Lightning flashed continuously and was followed by a black darker than night. Rain sluiced through holes, which were a souvenir from the Zero. But the motor roared on jerkily, as if inclined to call it a day.

They were fairly hurled from the cloud into too thin air. Sheridan cut the motor

as he saw they were nosing down, and with more than enough speed for safety.

As he pulled out of his involuntary dive Sheridan let the motor take hold, but he kept dropping.

"Wang," he called over the phone, "have you joined your honorable ancestors?"

"Not yet, you lug. But push her down for air. We're halfway to the moon. Hit?"

"That last Jap took a slice out of my helmet. Busted the greenhouse and made it leak to beat hell. My instrument board's a mess."

"And Mac's flight has departed to other fields," Wang said quietly. "How about a radio check?"

"Good idea," Sheridan told him. "But, unfortunately, I have about five per cent of a working radio aboard. Shot to bits."

"Compass bearing then?"

"I wish you could see where it was. We're on our own, Wang."

"Compass smashed, eh? We—hey, don't spin on your wing like that."

"Look—Jap carrier and three destroyers, at eleven o'clock."

Sheridan was thinking, as he started upstairs, that if he could drop his big bomb on the carrier, it would help him with Friele. But he wondered too, as he saw destroyers start smoke screens, where the cruisers and transport were that the PBY had reported. Maybe Mac and the others would find the cruiser.

"Fourteen thousand," he told Wang. "I'm going to dive flat till I'm a mile up. Then I'm going in. See any Jap fighters?"

"No. Her decks look clear."

"Yeah. Be funny if they were hunting the *Champlain*. Here comes the flak. Hold your hat. Here I go."

Brownish blobs of smoke materialized ahead and below.

"Bomb armed?" came from Wang.

"Bomb arming releases off," Sheridan replied. That meant the bomb's arming wires were freed, that the bomb was prepared to explode at the slightest impact.

"Don't miss," Wang admonished. "I've got butterflies in my stomach."

"Nerts. My tummy just freezes solid."

Sheridan felt the ship lift as anti-aircraft shells, a quartet of them, burst underneath and close. The carrier was making a perfect S. The destroyers were firing all guns and making huge circles, stacks belching greasy black smoke. It struck Sheridan as odd that those white wakes in the jade green sea tipped off the course so well. He adjusted his course for interception. The carrier had pom-poms, machine guns, big sky guns going.

As tracers converged upon the lone dive-bomber, Wang let out a whoop. "China, for ten thousand years!" he cried.

Sheridan saw men about the spouting guns. They were trying desperately to blast him from the air. The altimeter told him he was at the bottom of his dive; his vision told him the same.

He yanked the bomb-release handle. As the Douglas lightened, Sheridan unbraked, pulled up and fairly leapfrogged the enemy carrier. A destroyer was close in, and the dive-bomber was raked by machine-gun fire.

Wang let out a yell. "Right at the water line," he exulted, "and amidships. You got that flat-top!"

Sheridan had the Douglas climbing. But he was turning too. He saw a column of smoke rise from the heeling carrier's stacks. He still felt cold at the stomach. This was his first carrier. He reached mechanically to switch on the radio, then remembered there was not even a dial or switch left.

THEY were miles away, and still climbing when a break in the clouds gave them fair visibility.

"She steers in a circle," Wang observed over the phone. "But she's not on fire, Breck."

"Well, you can write her off for an at-

tack on the Solomons. Now if we could only get word back."

"The overcast is closing in," Wang observed. "How about gas?"

"Enough to reach the *Champlain*—if I knew where she was. We'll climb out and try for a squint at the sun."

"Without a sextant that won't help so much. Listen, Breck, maybe if we could examine the damage, we might repair the compass or radio."

"And where, my friend of many ideas?"

"An atoll. It should be inside fifty miles, if I am not wrong. I can't place our carrier, at its speed and with no radio to correct interception. But I feel we can reach this point of land. I do happen to know this corner of the world fairly well."

"Okay, feller," Sheridan decided. "If these clouds thin out, and you're right, we'll try for the atoll and check up. Otherwise, we swim."

"Not I. Swimming was never one of my accomplishments."

"Fine time to bring that up," Sheridan retorted.

They pulled away from the thunder squalls. Into the sun they forged. Sheridan saw a line of white, with a dark area in the center. Inside minutes he recognized it for Wang's atoll and a fringe of coral reef.

The lonely point of land was approximately two miles long and a half mile wide. A few palms decked the sandy, flat surface. Sheridan circled the atoll, studying it. He chose a sandy spit, rode in toward the west and the wind.

The Douglas made it and Sheridan grunted in disgust. "What a place."

They climbed out and examined the ship. It showed signs of battle. Wang laughed. "At that, it's better here than using our Mae Wests to dodge sharks."

Sheridan had a package of cigarettes. "Have a smoke, pal." He stared at an oncoming storm. "Going to be dark inside an hour—and damned little shelter. Wang, you think we got that Jap carrier?"

The Chinese nodded. "Plenty. I'm more concerned about the others. My opinion is that Mac and his crowd slammed right into the middle of the carrier's planes." He pinched off the end of his cigarette, thrust it into his jacket pocket. "We'd better ride this storm out inside the plane, Breck. And spend the night, maybe. I know these pinpoints of land very well. Very few of them are without a cache of supplies. The Japs had years to look after that."

"You mean they might have gas tins hid around somewhere?"

"We can always hope. And it's a good bet. Better than trusting to our life jackets by using the rest of our gas."

Sheridan nodded. "Maybe you're right. But if you're wrong, we'll have to pray for a PBY to be on the prowl, and that's a damned faint hope."

THE radio was beyond hope of repair. With surprising speed the rain squall came, bringing darkness which gradually merged into night. The two men stayed in their cramped quarters until dawn.

Sheridan awoke, sore and barely able to make his muscles perform. Captain Wang was gone. He was back, however, at the American's first hail.

"How much gas did you find?" Sheridan wanted to know.

Wang shook his head. "I have to admit the truth, Breck. I can find no evidence of an emergency cache on the atoll."

Sheridan took that in thoughtfully. He met Wang's eyes. "We could stay here for quite a time," he said slowly.

"A Japanese patrol will find us—eventually," Wang said. "Not that I intended to comfort you with that suggestion."

"Let's hunt for gas again," Sheridan told him.

They were a quarter of a mile from the

plane when Wang turned, listening intently.

"Plane," he said. "Coming in from the west."

"I hope it's our gang looking for us." Sheridan saw a speck on the horizon. It was approaching.

It was Wang who started toward their Douglas on the run. "Jap," he shouted over his shoulder. "That's none of your type flying boats."

Sheridan caught the tiny silhouette also. "Wait," he cried. "Fall down, and stay there."

Wang went to the sand. Sheridan sprawled, face upturned. The plane came on, motors wide open. He saw the ship bank. That meant the crew wanted a closer look. They wouldn't land. Not with that surf, and the jagged reef perimeter so close to land. The boat was a Jap four-motored seaplane job.

Big as the PBY's, Sheridan thought.

The one danger was that the Japs would choose to blast the Douglas where it sat. And when the flying boat came on in, just above the palms, Sheridan figured it was all over. Through half closed eyes he saw faces aboard. The rush of air made the Douglas rock. Then the flying boat was gone. It made a wide circle, heading into the northwest.

Slowly the two men rose. Sheridan joined Wang, who was frowning.

"We're about to get behind some more eight balls, Breck."

"Yeah. Meaning they'll come for the ship, eh? They think we kicked off from thirst and exposure. So before long a land plane will drop around."

"With extra gas," Wang said quietly.

Sheridan's jaw sagged. Then he let out a bellow and clapped Wang's back. "Yeah, they'll bring some extra juice for the Douglas. And they'll fix us up, if we're not dead."

Wang nodded. "So that puts it up to us, Breck."

"How?"

Wang laughed. "I think we'll have to shed our clothing first and arrange a couple of dummies. Then we dismount the rear guns."

"And fix a trap. Yeah. We'll use palm leaves and bury ourselves in the sand. It's a chance, you gem of the far east—it's a chance!"

Eight hours later two men waited, their bare bodies covered with sand, palm leaves above their heads. They were dry, tired and Sheridan prayed for darkness again. He was dozing when the drone of a plane reached his ears. Wang was calling. A seaplane was coming in, skipping the waves.

Sheridan identified it as a three-motored Aichi AI, a navy plane used extensively for bombing and reconnaissance among smaller islands and tight landing coves. It skipped the surf, turned into the wind and its floats took hold near the beach.

Sheridan's heart was thumping. He and Wang had planted themselves in a V, commanding the Douglas. Each had a gun off the plane. There could be no time for the Japs to examine the Douglas at close range and discover the missing guns. Their strategy was simple. Either they had to surprise the Japanese crew, or get blasted themselves.

Now a hatch slid back and a man slid off a wing into shallow water. He dragged the seaplane in with the help of a second man. That meant at least three men were aboard, probably four.

ARMED with sub-machine guns, the the Japanese hurried ashore. They approached the Douglas. One, evidently in command, spoke to the first man to alight. He trotted over toward the dummies. Sheridan drew in a big breath. He felt relaxed. Very carefully he shifted the machine gun on its buried stand. He let out a yell, picking the nearer Japanese.

As he let go with a blast, Wang joined him.

Sheridan traversed his gun, caught the figure near the dummies. He whirled, saw two prone figures.

But Wang was shouting, jerking to get his gun support free. "There's one still aboard," he cried.

The seaplane motor was wide open. The nose of the vessel cleared from behind the Douglas and Wang turned loose a burst. Sheridan aimed at the plastic hatch of the pilot's compartment. The seaplane swung around. As it did the pilot lifted his body, bringing his gun down. As he opened fire, sand spurted about Wang. Sheridan took advantage of that. He fired. The pilot slid down and the seaplane came toward them till it beached.

Sheridan was on his feet. "We got him, Wang. Come on."

Wang didn't move. He lifted his head, shook it. He pointed to his right leg. "Busted," he said. "I think you set them afire."

Smoke was welling up from the Aichi AI. Sheridan thought of the gas. He dashed into the surf behind the steps, clambered to a wing. Sheridan went up, the Jap pilot suddenly appeared, aiming a pistol. He fired within a yard of Sheridan. The latter was too amazed to react. He felt a hot wave, but no slug. The Japanese pilot slowly slid back down, this time to stay.

Sheridan saw the fire was back in the tail of the seaplane. But first he looked for a reserve gas supply which he and Wang had hoped the Jap would bring.

There was no reserve gas.

Nor was there time to consider this unexpected state of affairs. From the beach a patter of slugs bit into the seaplane. There was a second burst and all was quiet ashore. Sheridan saw Wang on one knee, saw a Japanese, also on his knees, pitch forward.

But, though Wang had attended to the second foe, damage to the seaplane was complete. The wing toward the beach was aflame, and as fire welled from two directions, Sheridan went over the side ahead of the inevitable explosion.

He got to Wang, dragged him to safety.

As the seaplane disintegrated, Wang found a cigarette, lighted it. "I hope," he said wryly, "your instruction in first aid covers smashed ankles. Mine is rather bad." And then Wang passed out completely.

SOME twenty minutes later Wang was reclining more comfortably, thanks to Sheridan. The seaplane was still burning merrily. And it had been proven now that the Japanese on the beach were most thoroughly dead. But there was no gas for the Douglas.

"Damned funny," Sheridan said. "Damned funny they brought along no gas. That fourth man was a pilot too."

Wang raised himself on an elbow. "Breck, you big idiot, you're as dumb as I am. If the Nip didn't bring gas, he knew there were emergency tins on this place. Don't you see? They flew in a pilot and regular crew. The extra pilot was to take the Douglas out."

"All of which adds up." Sheridan became excited. "Sit tight, big boy. It's got to be here—and if it is I'll find it."

"Then you'd better hurry," Wang told him. "They'll be looking for the seaplane next—and they know where to look."

The sun was low when Sheridan came back. He was haggard. Wang had the remaining water container. Sheridan took a meager swallow.

"Lord, how I'll just sit by Niagara and gloat at the water going over, if I ever get back," he sighed.

"No dice?" Wang asked.

"No dice. I've divided the place in three sections and walked it. It will take hours, maybe half tomorrow, to cover the entire beach."

Wang nodded. "Listen, Breck, those tins are buried shallow as a rule. They're usually close to a landmark. Maybe if there is an unusual cluster of palms—"

Sheridan smote his leg. "There's a stump of a big baby between two smaller trees. To the south—see?" He jumped to his feet and trotted away.

Even then it was by accident that Sheridan found the gas. He stubbed his toe against metal, went sprawling. But he didn't curse his luck. Instead, he let out a whoop.

The tins held approximately ten gallons each. There was plenty of gas. Wang read the stamped inscription on the first tin Sheridan lugged toward the stranded dive-bomber.

"High octane," he said. "Help me into the ship, Breck. That way I can help."

Perspiring, straining to lift the big tins, Sheridan labored. Wang, showing the effects of his wound, insisted upon doing his part. Night caught them half through their task of refueling, and they voted postponement till daybreak.

Then Sheridan made Wang easier, with a better job of bandaging and the application of sulfa powder into the wound.

"Butcher," Wang managed to say.

"Getting even with you for a tooth-jarring tackle I got in that State game," Sheridan told him.

But Wang was grave. "Breck, I can give you a flight course to Guadalcanal. But as a machine-gunner I'm a bust now. Can you shoot a course, considering the compass is shot?"

Sheridan laughed. "Brother, I took navigation. You show me our location on the chart. We've got enough gas to make it."

That night Wang ran a temperature. He was worse than Sheridan had thought.

Just before dawn Wang called Sheridan from the rear cockpit.

"Planes," he said. "Can't you hear them?"

Sheridan could. By the sound there were several. They were coming in from the north, and swiftly.

"We've got to pull out," Sheridan said. "With the gas we took on. Sorry, Wang—"

"One can't always have luck. I think I can man the gun, Breck. My temperature is down."

"Well, hang on. I'm getting this baby started."

As Sheridan spoke, the foremost plane dropped a flare. Palms and monotonous sandy wastes materialized. A whistling sound was audible, just before Sheridan got the Douglas' motor going. He would have to risk the engine cold, for the first bomb struck at the water's edge, near the wreck of a seaplane. The concussion rocked the dive-bomber.

Sheridan felt the motor catch. It was solid, unwavering, as he made the fin catch the airstream. The run was short. It had to be. Twin shrieks began their dreary duet in the sky.

From a lower altitude a gun was spitting tracers.

"Hold your hat," Sheridan cried. "Here we go!"

THE Douglas bit into the crisp air, clearing the reluctant sand. From behind, two geysers of flame erupted. A vague wraith, but with prodigious sound, whisked by, well above the fugitive dive-bomber, to vanish into the tropical blackness of pre-dawn.

Sheridan lifted his ship, lifted it with a prayer and none too steeply.

The rear gun crashed into his consciousness. A sharp series of bursts came, and then Wang subsided as Sheridan eased the throttle back and went on a mad hunt for the dawn upstairs. A dark shape crossed his path. But Sheridan was not hunting trouble now.

Just as he admitted that fact, Wang let go again and there was a streak of flame

to starboard. Sheridan sighted a two-motored ship ahead. It was banking when the pilot tried out a burst from his guns. The Japanese went by, taking a row of tracers.

"No time to check on a hit," Sheridan grunted. "Save gas—that's my motto."

The Japanese were gone. So were the stars. Sheridan saw they were in the soup, and he called Wang. "We've got to get cleared of this mess," he said over the phone. "It's cloudy."

"My guess too," Wang came back. "In simple words, we're getting lost, and quickly. I think this cloud formation must be low. Perhaps a thousand feet."

Minutes later Sheridan saw stars again. A gray light was in the east. Dawn was coming, but Sheridan had no cause for relief. There were clouds on all sides. Some were high enough to reach the belt of light just ahead of the sun.

"We'll wait for the sun," Sheridan said. "But we'll never make Guadalcanal."

"Then why not our island again?" Wang suggested. "The Nips won't stay there long now that we're gone."

"Okay," Sheridan agreed. He figured he had been heading toward the south. Now he banked, and at 10,000 feet Sheridan backtracked. The clouds grew thicker and he met a succession of rain squalls.

Wang spoke presently. "Breck, while I'm no pessimist, I am sure we should be near the island."

"I'm just guessing, Wang. To be perfectly frank, I'm diving through the soup. What's below, I don't know."

The overcast was lowering. Sheridan broke through at no more than five hundred feet. The jade sea was purple beneath the dark clouds and visibility was not more than two miles. True, the sun was lighting the higher clouds, but there was no island. There was no white circle of coral reef.

"And so they blew up their yellow Mae Wests and floated with the sharks," Wang said. "Breck, you have your automatic?"

"Have. Why?"

"We may have to use it. But let's forget that for the present. We've missed the island?"

"I'm circling. I think— Look! Do you see what I see on the horizon? A flat-top!"

"So it is. It seems to be still. And there is no smudge from her stacks."

"Funny. It's not the *Champlain,* or any of our carriers. It's a Jap."

As Sheridan threw the plane over Wang cut in. "Don't! Head for the carrier."

"Nuts! After what we went through to survive? What's eating you?"

"I tell you, something's screwy about that carrier, Breck. She looks like a deserted ship."

"Yeah. And how does a deserted ship look?"

"I couldn't explain. If I'm wrong—"

"You won't live to apologize, nor I to accept. Okay, feller, here we go."

Nearer, and as the morning light grew swiftly, Sheridan noted an oddness about the carrier. "Why, she's too low in the water," he exclaimed. "Like she—like she's aground."

Now he saw the boil of surf in odd spots. There was a reef. "She is aground," he said.

"Check," came back from Wang. "But watch. If she is aground and abandoned, there'll be a party aboard."

There was a break in the clouds. The sun was streaking through, to tip the topmost layers.

Breck Sheridan, as he circled the carrier at a mile, swore fervently. "There's a hole amidships. And—great jumping grasshoppers! As I live and breathe, it's our carrier, the one we socked with our bomb yesterday!"

THERE were figures on the flight deck, a tiny group.

From a gun near the island of the carrier came flashes.

"So you don't like us," Sheridan muttered.

He tilted the Douglas down to strafe the deck. The firing ceased as the little knot dissolved. Sheridan raked the deck. And as the Douglas leaped onward, Wang reported that figures were on the deck.

Sheridan made his bank and came back. This time nobody challenged. The Japanese had vanished from the flight deck. Wang could be heard grumbling because he had no chance at a burst. But Sheridan paid no attention. He was doing some rapid thinking.

"We've got no more than an hour's flying left," he reflected. "There isn't but a handful of the slant-eyes on that baby. Wang and I—hold on, Wang. I'm going aboard."

"You dumb ox," Wang protested. "I came out here to observe, not to commit suicide."

"You should have picked another guy to go out with," Sheridan retorted. "Boy, what a break! She's right in line with the wind. Or almost," he added. "Ever land on a ship when they didn't use a hook?" he asked.

"My imagination is far ahead of you," Wang observed. "So what?"

Sheridan was nursing the Douglas in. His brake flaps were down and, as the deck came up level with his vision, Sheridan fishtailed the ship. "So we'll soon find out if it can be done," Sheridan told him. "Here we go."

The carrier was a small one. The Douglas had too much speed. Sheridan had weighed both these factors as he took the risk. He struck, bounced once and felt the deck. He kicked over, right, to the left and back. One wing struck, lifted, and the other scraped the deck. The Douglas skidded, but Sheridan saw the plane would straighten toward the center. Not till that happened did he use his brakes.

Ten seconds—or was it hours—later Sheridan found himself facing back down the deck, commanding the elevator and carrier island. The plane's motor was still ticking. Both wings were mere stubs. The plane itself careened to Sheridan's right.

"You alive?" he called to Wang.

"No thanks to you. Watch sharp."

"I'm watching. With my wheels jammed down I'm low enough in the nose to sweep the deck. Let 'em come."

THEY waited. Sheridan was considering how to help Wang to the island. He forgot that problem when two men popped up from the elevator and let go with a machine gun. It was Wang, with sufficient angle to use his gun, who attended to this unexpected defense. The Japs vanished.

"Listen," Sheridan said, "there can't be many of 'em. Probably a detail waiting

for a salvage vessel. I'm going to look around."

But that commendable resolve wasn't carried out. Out of the sky came planes. They were light bombers and looked familiar. And over the horizon came a PBY.

Sheridan's first reaction was to yell to Wang.

"Our bunch," he shouted. "Hooray!"

Wang slid back the hatch. He was grave. "Look!" he called. "They're fixing to bomb us."

It was true. The bombers most obviously were on course. They were coming in line, and a whistling sound grew in the sky. Sheridan shouted, as if that would help. He waved, then ducked.

The first bomb struck astern, lifting the carrier. The second was fifty feet away. But the third crashed into the flight deck and in seconds flame and smoke funneled upward.

As the bombers circled, Wang let out a yip. The Japanese survivors boiled out of the open elevator, their hands upraised. Wang fired a burst over their heads. Two of the yellow men ran to the side, went overboard. The other three didn't move. And now the bombers were chasing each other's tails, crew members staring in amazement while the PBY, on the more practical and urgent need for getting the men off the blazing carrier, came around smartly for a landing.

"I think," Sheridan said, as the PBY plowed a furrow through the sea, motors holding it against the wind, "that the skipper is going to find this hard to believe."

Wang grinned. "I'm more interested in your getting me over the side so the flying boat crew can salvage me. After all, I'm a casualty and I think I'm going to feel bad, as soon as this is over."

THERE was explaining to do, after the rescue, and the Japanese aboard were exhibits of a complete victory over the troublesome carrier. The PBY was in the air again, the bombers already vanishing to the southward, when the radioman notified Sheridan that Lieutenant Commander Friele wanted to speak to him.

"Why can't he break his bad news to me after I get back?" Sheridan protested. But he took over the mike.

Mac Worley spoke instead of the skipper. There was a sound of celebration. "Breck," Mac cried, "how did you do it? How did you take over their damned carrier after bombing it?"

"It's a long story, Mac. Wang's got a bad foot. We ran out of gas. Compass and radio shot up. So we landed. They didn't have much use for a grounded carrier, it seems. She's burning now. But listen, is Friele sore because I missed my physical today? And I washed out another dive-bomber."

"Sure." Mac's voice was doleful. "Too bad. By the way, the skipper wants to talk with you. Come on home, boy, without any more stops en route."

"Breck." That was the skipper's voice, and it wasn't bleak, impersonal as it had been before. "We got a report from the bombers and the PBY commander. Maybe you can't land 'em right side up every day. But anybody as persistent as you, who gets a carrier for keeps, is okay in the second. Just wanted to tell you."

"But the physical, sir—"

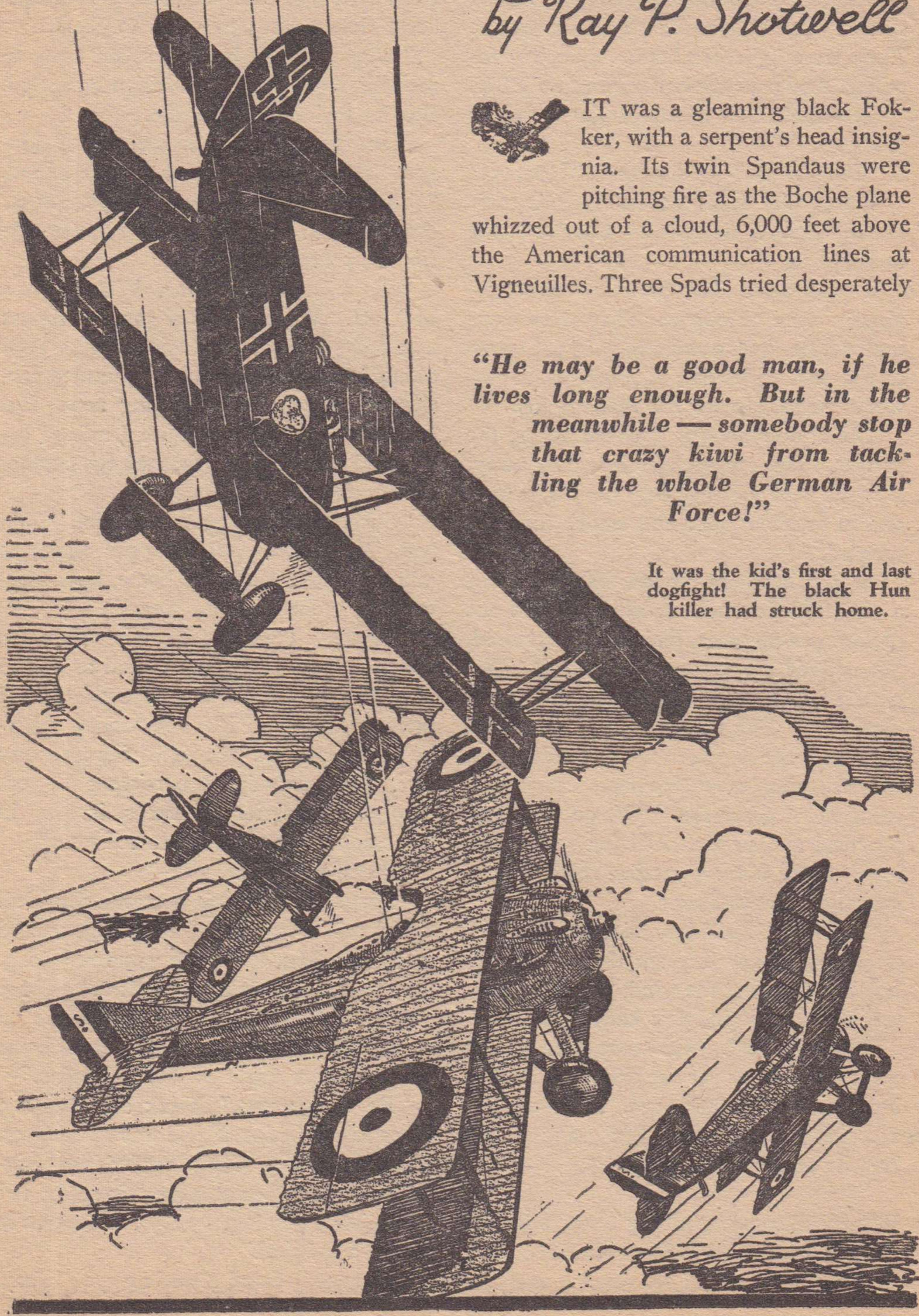
"Forget it." Friele actually chuckled. "And tell Wang we all hope that wound won't keep him out of the game very long. You two will have to go back to the base and unload Wang. After that, come on back. We've got some dates. Maybe some more carriers north of the Solomons."

"Be seeing you," Breck said happily, forgetful of the fact Friele was his skipper. He went back to Wang, handed him a cigarette. "Already got a new dressing, eh? Well listen, you lug, I've got to see you're put in a hospital."

Wang smiled and closed an eye. "Okay, toots," he said.

BLOOD & FIRE

by Ray P. Shotwell



IT was a gleaming black Fokker, with a serpent's head insignia. Its twin Spandaus were pitching fire as the Boche plane whizzed out of a cloud, 6,000 feet above the American communication lines at Vigneuilles. Three Spads tried desperately

"He may be a good man, if he lives long enough. But in the meanwhile — somebody stop that crazy kiwi from tackling the whole German Air Force!"

It was the kid's first and last dogfight! The black Hun killer had struck home.

to leap away from the deadly chatter of Spandau fury.

In the cockpit of the Fokker a lean-faced pilot smiled thinly. A Spad cockpit was in his sights. He could see the leather helmet in the center of the cockpit. He pushed the trigger button and watched the line of tracers streak across the sky, crash into the target. The leather helmet sagged and the Spad faded into a spin.

The two other Yanks were turning away from their highways of retreat and lunging at the Fokker. Vickers guns chattered a vicious promise of revenge.

But the German flyer had put in a busy afternoon and, in addition to his own fatigue, his plane was running short of gas. Despite the fact that his gunsights showed empty sky, he sent a final burst from white-hot Spandau muzzles and then manipulated into a hairpin turn, heading back toward Germany.

The two Spads gave chase. For several miles they trailed the black Fokker. Gradually they were inching up, moving toward attack position. But when they were almost within range, a swarm of Boche sky-hawks came sweeping down, and the Yanks were forced to concentrate on their own necks. They were veteran cloud sluggers, and they handled the situation with speed and precision. They dived, rolled, zoomed away from the bullet offering of seven Fokkers. As they broke the climb, they feinted at a straight-line run homeward.

As the Fokkers reassembled in formation, and the flight leader signaled them not to take up the chase, the two Spads screeched into smooth and flashing Immelman turns. They had a slight altitude advantage and they were making the most of it as they speared at the Boche planes and hurled Vickers heat.

They were able to make three of their shots go home.

The remaining Fokkers were jumping wildly in all directions, and the two Spads buzzed in and out of the chaotic area, delivering a succession of effective bursts. Two more Boche went down, and the surviving Germans decided they'd had enough for one day.

Hissos booming a desire for further combat, the two Spads remained in the vicinity. Their pilots were searching the skies for another flock of Fokkers, but there were no further bids for battle. Finally the Yank flyers decided to give up. The fact that between them they had knocked down five Germans seemed unimportant. They knew only that they had failed once more in their effort to rid the skies of a certain gleaming black Fokker that carried a serpent's-head insignia.

BUT as the two Spads came to a landing at the 96th Pursuit, located seventeen miles southwest of Vigneuilles, the pilots were not thinking of the black Fokker. Their thoughts were centered on the kid who had gone up with them less than an hour before. The eager-eyed, tow-headed kid from Kansas, the novice flyer who had arrived at the 96th less than two days previously. He'd been a happy kid—happy because his first big patrol job placed him in between two of the finest Yank flyers on the Western Front. It was something he had dreamed of, but never hoped to experience—to fly side by side with Mulloy and Hildebrand.

He would never fly with them again.

Mulloy was trying to push the kid out of his mind as he climbed from the cockpit. He was a stocky, flat-nosed guy who had been a third-rater in the ring during the wild and foolish days of his youth. He was still young, a few years under thirty, but war had shaken him and hardened him.

It was the same with Hildebrand. He came from a blue-blood family that had a mansion on Park Avenue and another in Florida and a third somewhere in New England. He had been a classy football carrier at Princeton, and after that he had

been a famous highball carrier in Manhattan. At the age of twenty-six he had dunked himself in enough hot water to be heaved out in the snow by his dear old dad. He was going down the ladder at full speed ahead when the United States entered the war. Not long after that he was in France, flying a Spad. He was a lean guy of medium height and at first glance he didn't look like much trouble. But closer inspection showed that Hildebrand was all steel and fire. His features marked by the lines of a hard, perilous existence. It was hard to believe he was only twenty-six.

He and Mulloy headed silently for the squadron office to make their report. They were inside for a few minutes and when they came out they were silent again. On the way to the canteen bar they had nothing to say. In response to greetings from mechanics and other flyers they nodded curtly while looking straight ahead.

In the canteen bar they took a small table, away from the noisy crowd composed mainly of guys who were slated for late noon patrol in a red-hot sector. The men were blowing off steam in a healthy manner, and ordinarily Mulloy and Hildebrand would have been in there making as much noise as anyone else.

But as they seated themselves at the splintered, rickety table, they glanced darkly at the loud-talking mob and then at each other. They remained quiet as they waited for bottle and glasses, and through the first few shots.

Then Mulloy said, "A college boy. That's all he was, just a college boy—"

"Shut up," Hildebrand said.

"I tell you he was just a college kid. He shoulda been back in the States, on the track team, goin' to fraternity parties. Just a—"

Hildebrand grabbed the neck of the bottle and gritted, "If you don't shut up I'm gonna break this over your head."

Mulloy did not seem to hear. He poured another drink and said, "Four times we've walked into Von Brechner. Four times we've come out second best. And every man who's been on the job with us has gone west. Von Brechner hides up there in the clouds and rips down and—"

Hildebrand had forgotten his threats. He was thudding bent fingers against the table and muttering, "The Boche is clever—and he's lightning. He's everything that the serpent's-head insignia implies. He's mean and he's poison. Already he's accounted for three of the best flyers in this squadron—Jenkins and Filchok and Barber."

"Don't forget the fourth casualty," Mulloy said. "Don't forget Wisner, the kid who went down today—the laughing bright-eyed youngster who thought he was getting into the big time."

Hildebrand looked up; again his eyes held a fierce gleam as he said, "I told you to stop talking about the kid."

"I can't stop talking about him," Mulloy said. "I can't stop thinking about him. Those other three guys who went down—at least they had an even chance. They were experienced. But this kid was new, untried."

Once more Hildebrand grabbed the neck of the bottle, but even as he lifted it he frowned puzzledly, wondering why Mulloy was not even looking at him.

Hildebrand let go of the bottle and turned slowly, following the focus of Mulloy's widening eyes.

HIS own eyes began to bulge. He grabbed hold of the table edge, and he gasped, "I only had three drinks. Three drinks can't do this to me. But I'm seeing a dead man in the doorway. He can't be dead because he's walking toward me. Maybe it isn't Wisner. Maybe it's another kid who looks like him—"

Mulloy's voice was faint as he said, "It's Wisner. It's the kid from Kansas. It's

the kid who was laughing and eager—and so proud to fly with us. It's the college boy—"

"Right now he doesn't look like a college boy," Hildebrand said.

Wisner was expressionless as he approached the table. Without saying a word he pulled over a chair and sat down. He gestured to the barman and a few moments later there was a third glass on the table. Wisner downed his drink, then looked at Mulloy and Hildebrand. "When do we try again?" he asked finally.

Mulloy gaped at Hildebrand and blurted, "Maybe you better hit me on the head with that bottle, after all. Maybe it'll drag me out of the fog."

Wisner repeated, "When do we try again?"

Hildebrand was pulling himself together and saying, "We saw you get hit, Wisner. We saw you go down in a spin. We figured—"

"You figured it ended in a crash," Wisner said. "But I pulled out at five hundred feet. I had to make a forced landing, because oil was spurting all over the place and I could hardly see. The Boche had sent slugs into the cockpit and the hot stuff missed my head by something less than an inch. It was so close that I actually figured I was hit, and I went out cold for a few seconds. When I came to, the Spad was spinning, and there was oil in my eyes—"

"Yeah, that's the way it is," Mulloy said. "It happened to me—when I was a beginner."

"I'm not a beginner any more." Wisner said. He poured another drink. "When do we try again?" he asked again.

The two veteran flyers were looking at each other; they were reaching silent understanding and agreement.

Hildebrand turned to the kid from Kansas and said, "Look, Wisner, you had luck—a lot of luck. But it doesn't come in double portions. Particularly when you're stacking up against an operator such as this Von Brechner. The C. O. made a mistake when he assigned you to the patrol. But you can rest assured he won't put you in a spot like that again. You need a lot more training and experience before you can—"

"I never liked the taste of soft soap," Wisner said, staring at the center of the table.

Mulloy leaned toward the kid from Kansas and earnestly exclaimed, "Don't get us wrong, Wisner. We're all for you. But this combat flying is just like the fight game. If you're brought along too fast, if you step up into the main event before you're really ready—it's just too bad. That's why it just don't balance for you to mix with someone like Von Brechner."

Wisner reached for the bottle, started to pour a drink and then changed his mind. He slumped in the chair and his head was low. For several moments he had nothing to say.

Then a slow, sheepish grin came to his lips and he murmured, "Maybe you're right. Maybe I better take it slow and easy for awhile."

"Sure," Hildebrand said. "That's the only way to look at it."

Mulloy said, "You're showin' good common sense. And it'll pay off in the long run."

Wisner smiled and nodded. Then he stood up and he was saying, "Well, thanks, fellas. Thanks for showing me what's on the dial. I guess I was just a bit too anxious. I had a lot of crust, thinking I was good enough to box Von Brechner."

The kid from Kansas turned and walked out of the canteen bar.

FOR several seconds Mulloy and Hildebrand did not look at each other or say anything.

Finally Mulloy nodded slowly and said, "Good kid—sensible."

"Yeah," Hildebrand said.

"You don't find many youngsters like that," Mulloy went on. "Most of them are stubborn and cocky and general nuisances. But this Wisner, he's okay, you can reason with him. He reminds me of a welterweight I used to know. It was back in—"

"Why don't you shut up?" Hildebrand said. His voice carried weariness and disgust.

"What's eating you?" Mulloy said.

"The same thing that's eating you," Hildebrand shot back. "The only difference is that you're trying to hide it. We're both disappointed that Wisner didn't put up more of an argument. We're sorry that we were actually able to sell him the idea. For awhile we figured that he was high-grade. Even though we wouldn't admit it to ourselves, we thought that he had the stuff that makes an ace. But now—well, he's just average material, maybe not even that."

Mulloy nodded. "We played it wrong. We took all the spark out of him." The stocky guy banged the glass against the table and stood up and said, "It's not too late. I'm gonna have a talk with the kid."

"There's nothing you can say," Hildebrand muttered. "You'll only make things worse."

But Mulloy was already walking toward the doorway.

Hildebrand shrugged and poured another drink. But when the glass was halfway to his lips, he wasn't thirsty suddenly. He was thinking of his first days in the clouds above the Western Front. He was thinking of the fear and the struggle to push fear aside. He was thinking of the uncertainty, the heaviness in throat and muscles and mind. He was remembering the day when he had gotten rid of all that, the three Fokkers that had jumped out of the clouds above the Argonne. Again he could sense the surprise, the terror. But the terror had given way to the bite of a Spandau bullet, ripping into his shoulder. After that there had been nothing but rage, cold rage that sharpened his speed, skill, daring. He had knocked out two of the Fokkers. He had forced the third to run home.

He could see the factors that added up to mold ordinary guys into fighting men now. He could see playboys and bank clerks and college kids and stumblebums, all walking into a chaos of fire and blood. Out of that group there were a few who were destined to become great warriors. It was because they were motivated by something that stretched beyond the bounds of duty. They were seized by a flaming fury.

It had almost happened to Wisner. For a time the kid from Kansas had known the white-hot rage brought on by enemy bullets.

But the kid had not been given a chance to put in action that rage.

Hildebrand was blaming himself, when suddenly a voice smashed at his senses—Mulloy's voice. Mulloy was shouting that Wisner had pulled a fast one.

"A grease monkey told me," the ex-pug gasped. "He said that Wisner climbed into an idling Spad, and without saying a word to anyone—"

"The kid's crazy," Hildebrand muttered. He was forgetting his thoughts of a few moments previous. "The kid doesn't know what he's doing. He'll get himself killed. We gotta get out there, Mulloy. We gotta get out there and try to stop him from tackling the entire German Air Force!"

TWO Spads were moving at all-out throttle, at 7,000 feet. They were passing above the communication lines at Vigneuilles, clearing the ribbon of blood and fire that was No Man's Land. They were deep into the German lines when Hildebrand moved out in front. He signaled to gain Mulloy's attention, then

pointed at a winged shape about two miles away.

There were clouds above the winged shape, a thick collection of whipped cream. Even as Hildebrand and Mulloy aimed their Spads at the other plane, something came out from behind the clouds.

It was a gleaming black Fokker, with a serpent's-head insignia. It carried twin Spandaus that were pitching fire, and a Boche killer whose lips were twisted in a fiendish grin.

Spandau slugs streamed down toward the kid from Kansas!

Von Brechner was sustaining the burst; he could see the string of bullet holes curving around the spine of the Spad, moving up toward the cockpit, into the cockpit. The Boche showed his teeth in eerie pleasure as he rejoiced in claiming another Allied victim.

But Wisner was not finished. He had a bullet in the fleshy part of his left arm, but with his other arm the young Kansan was working the stick. He started a roll, increasing throttle; then he was twisting out, zooming and coming in for an underside attack.

The Boche was astonished. A few seconds later he was uncomfortable. Vickers lead was thunking into the belly of his plane; he made fast plans for avoiding further heat. The gleaming black Fokker was screeching back in a stall.

Wisner followed. He was muttering curses; his eyes were wild torches; he was forgetting pain. He had both hands on the trigger handles and he was hurling another burst of fire at the Boche plane. Von Brechner was sliding out of the stall, initiating a roll and breaking out of it.

Wisner followed.

The black Fokker went into a Vickers slugs thunked into gleaming crosses on gleaming wings. The German ace was frantically pulling out of the dive, trying an acute turn. He climbed, broke away, turned, dove again.

Wisner followed.

The German plane was pulling out of the dive. It was starting another climb. Von Brechner was congratulating himself on a neat and delicate maneuver. He was figuring that he had shaken the Spad from offensive position. In the following instant his self-assurance was all gone. A stream of fire demons danced around the Fokker's exhaust pipes. He glanced over his shoulder and he could see the Spad, glued to his tail. He could see the jets of flame emanating from the muzzles of vengeful Vickers.

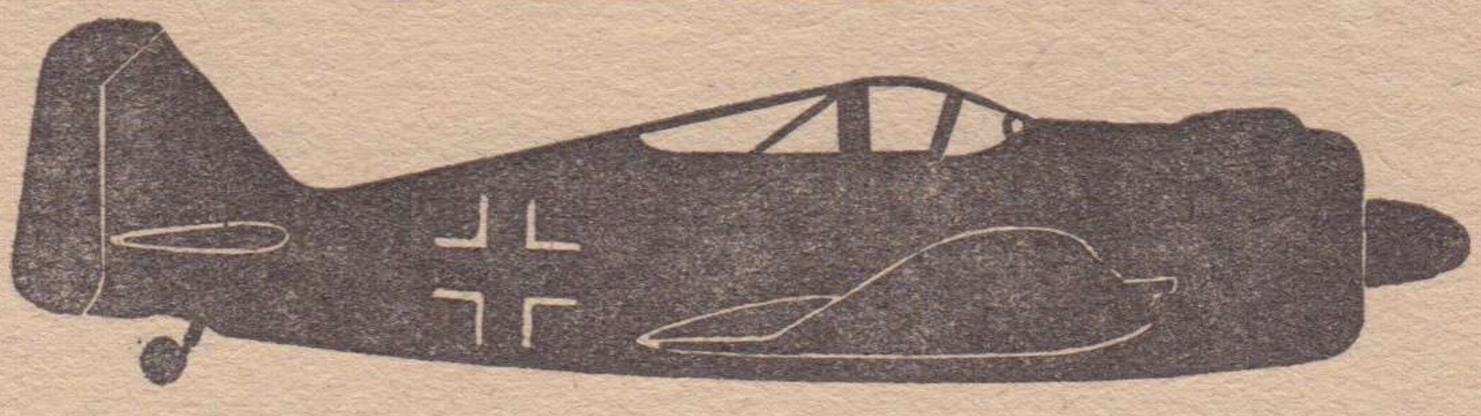
Von Brechner screamed again. But the scream terminated in a gurgling sound as bullets smashed into the German.

THE Spads whizzed westward, aiming at the drome of the 96th Pursuit. The plane in the middle of the echelon design was piloted by an elated young sky warrior—elated despite the pain in his left arm and the weakness resulting from considerable loss of blood. Mixed with Wisner's joy was his throbbing and eager anticipation of future cloud combat. The emotion was somewhat puzzling to him, because it was something that he had never before experienced.

He did not realize he had become a first-class sky warrior.

But Hildebrand knew, and so did Mulloy. The two veterans were grinning, waving to each other, pointing to Wisner and then nodding. It was a brief gesture, but it carried significance. It meant that the kid from Kansas was right up there with them in the "big time."

THIS SHIP IS AN
ENEMY



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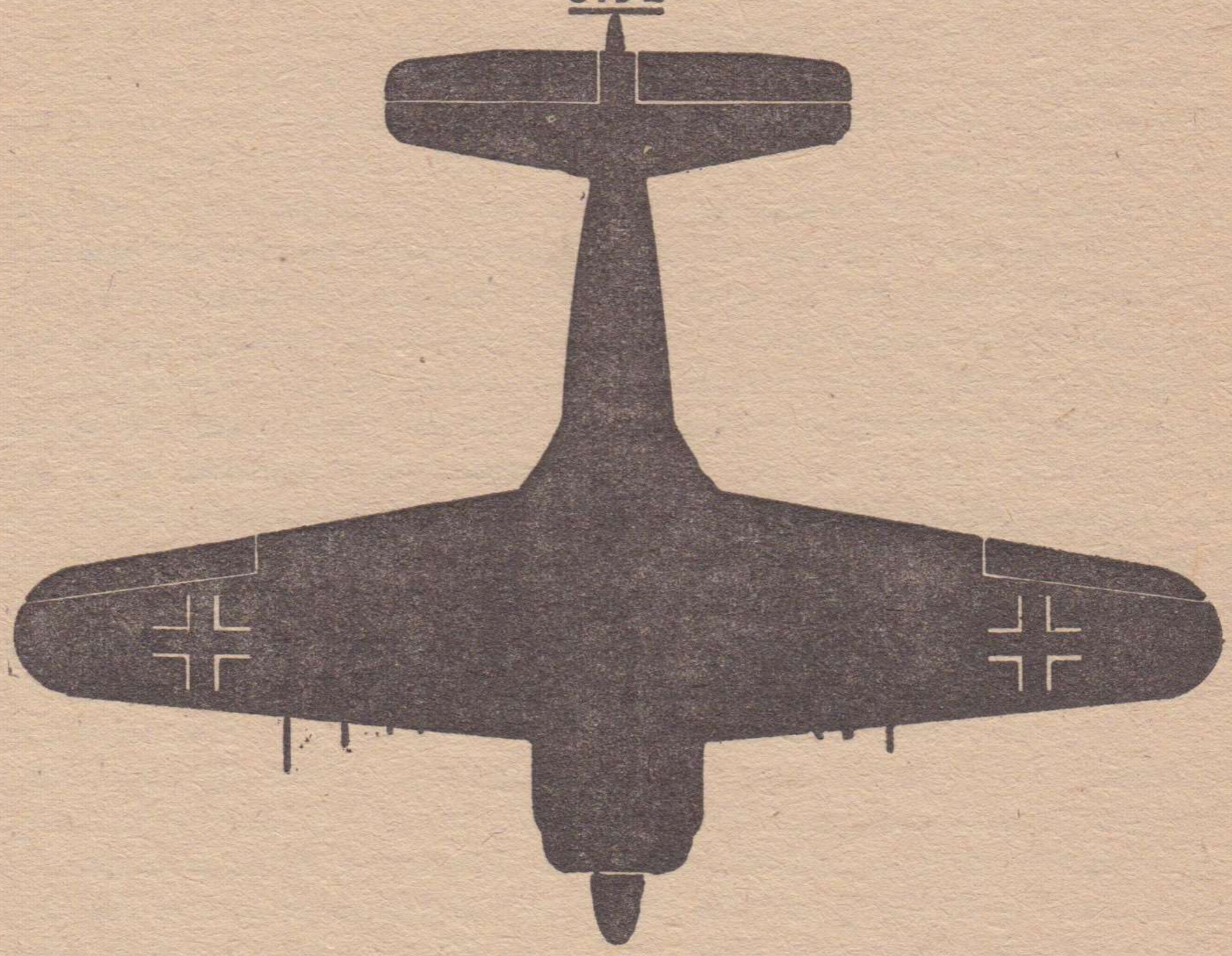

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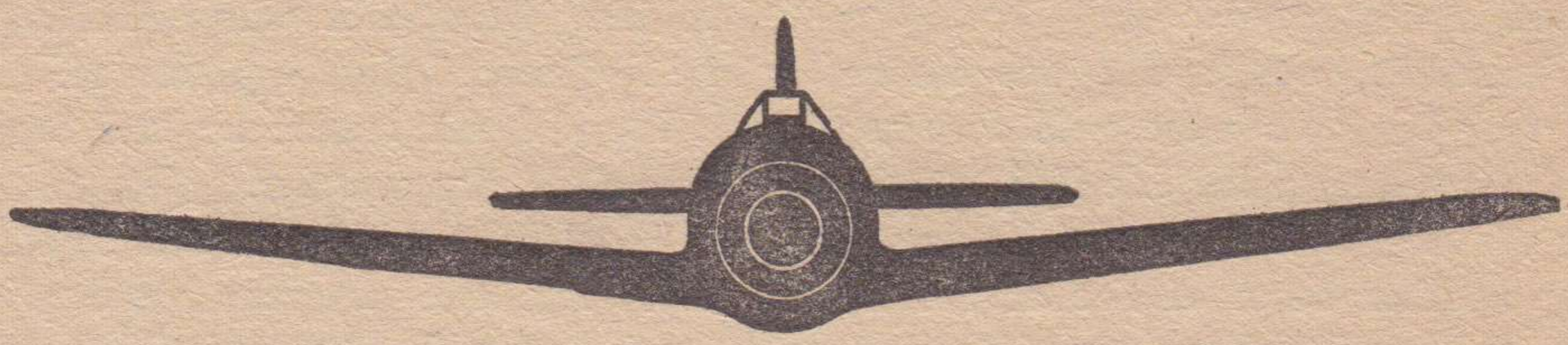


DEAD AHEAD

Nº 8A

AIRCRAFT SPOTTERS' GUIDE

FOCKE-WULF 190

THIS SHIP IS WHAT THE GERMANS THOUGHT WOULD BE THE ANSWER TO THE HURRICANE, SPITFIRE AND THE FLYING FORTRESS. IT PROVED TO BE ONLY PART ANSWER. IT COULD FLY FASTER AND HIGHER THAN EITHER THE HURRICANE OR SPITFIRE, BUT IT LACKED THE FIRE POWER. NEVERTHELESS, IT GAVE THE R.A.F. QUITE A RUN FOR ITS MONEY.

THE AIR-COOLED ENGINE IS A NEW DEPARTURE FOR THE NAZIS IN THEIR FIGHTERS AND IS MODELED ON OUR OWN PRATT & WHITNEY. IT DEVELOPS 1460 H.P., WHICH GIVES IT A SPEED OF 370 M.P.H. AT 18,500 FEET.

IF YOU WANT TO KEEP IT OUT OF AMERICAN SKIES, BUY WAR BONDS NOW!

IF YOU SEE THIS SHIP—

GET TO COVER!

Nº 8 B

HELL'S AMMUNITION

By Arthur J. Burks

"They tell me you're no part of a fighting man, Hurd. I wouldn't know. I only know one thing. This is war, and you'll have to stand on your own feet—even though they're shot out from under you!"

CHAPTER ONE

Wings for a Coward

CAPTAIN Jared Roth sat in his hutment and stared at the wall. It seemed to him that he had been all his life at the front—and always within hailing distance of Masmunster. What was the good of two great armies fighting, destroying one another by thousands, if neither gained an inch of ground—or any inch they gained was worth exactly nothing?

It was a hellish thing, war. Thank

heaven Hurd Roth, his younger brother, was out of it. When he thought of Hurd he closed his mind against possibilities, refused to remember. He'd understood Hurd, when they had been kids together. Nobody else had, and that was why, tonight, he wondered what would happen if—

He refused to think further about Hurd and what this war would mean to him if he were here. Instead, he sat and stared at the wall, and thought, *I'm leader of A Flight, Seventh Pursuit Group. It seems impossible, even after so many weeks, to believe that. I almost have to pinch myself. And why have I survived? There isn't a man left of those who were here when I came up. I'm an old man to my wingmates—and I'm all of twenty-three!*

He pinched himself, following his whim. His ears were so attuned to the chattering of machine guns, the blatting of Mills grenades and potato-mashers, that he scarcely noticed them. They were normal things, like eating and breathing and —he had almost said sleeping, until he remembered that he seldom slept. This front was too hot. Something was always happening. It seemed impossible that men could go so long without sleep. Their eyes got bright and feverish, and their cheeks sunken. They staggered a little when they walked, like men who have taken a glass too much. But when they straightened, and stepped into their Spads, they never looked sleepy. And they never slept aloft, for whoever slept, or dozed, or even napped with his eyes open for a second or two, died in the next instant. The Germans were out for aerial supremacy—and they sacrificed men like flies to attain it.

He shifted a little, uncomfortably. It should be such a vast relief to be sitting here, doing nothing. But his bones ached. His stomach ached, too, because every muscle in it was stretched as tightly as a bowstring. He couldn't remember when every nerve hadn't been on edge. He didn't know how his nerves were in actual combat, because when the shooting started he became a part of his plane and his Vickers. He went through without thinking—taking whatever came.

He lifted his head a little as a new sound came through the night. Few men would have heard it. It was, he was sure, the uneven barking of a night-flying Gotha, drifting across the lines to drop hellish eggs upon ammo dumps, concentration camps and maybe a hospital or two. He held his breath for a moment, waiting for an orderly to knock on his door, bringing word from the Old Man to turn out and go after that Gotha. Meanwhile its uneven motor drone hammered against his eardrums, and the command did not come. Wing must have sent word to some other squadron. Jared Roth sat back with a sigh of relief. Then he sat bolt upright. He'd almost rather tackle one of those Gothas than sit here, doing nothing. It was inactivity that got you—when you were accustomed to going forever without rest.

Through the walls between his hutment and the camouflaged hangars he could in imagination see the Spad that was his own special property. There were tiny black crosses all over it, with plenty of them on the fuselage. They indicated where German bullets had come close to taking his life. That Spad was friend, buddy—wife even. It was closer to him than any human being could be—except Hurd, and Hurd was not here. Hurd, whose battles he had fought when they were in grade school together. Hurd, who hadn't thought it necessary to fight for himself when he had a big brother who was willing to fight for them both. Now, looking back, it seemed even a little funny.

But he did not smile. At that moment, as though it probed for the field, an H.E. fell in the woods to the north. It exploded with terrific impact. It shook the

earth all around. In the eye of his mind Jared Roth could see a great column of dirt and trees catapult toward the sky, settle back again. Probably there was more than dirt in that column, because the dead of both sides had been hastily interred through all this sector.

Why did his thoughts have to be so unpleasant? But had he had any pleasant ones since coming here? He couldn't remember any, but he could remember, even when he tried not to, the wingmates who had gone, been shot apart in the air, sent down in flames.

With a wrench he refused to think of that, and his mind veered to the broken glasses on a shelf in the mess shack. A score of them, even more—he had never had the heart to count them. Each one represented a wingmate gone West, to whom a final toast had been drunk by them all. Once, for a week, empty chairs had been left at the table, to indicate the fallen, but the survivors hadn't been able to stand that. They could avoid looking at the glasses on the shelf, but they faced or sat beside the empty chairs. . . .

AGAIN a big one came over with a shriek like an express train approaching. It landed, a bit closer this time, and it shocked Jared Roth until his brown hair crawled on his scalp.

For when the air vibrated to that second explosion, it seemed to him he could see the youngsters who had faced that shelf when it had been empty, and sang a toast to the first to go, "Drink a toast to the dead already—and here's to the next one to die!"

The first broken glass had gone onto the shelf. That had been for Jon Reade, nineteen years of age, who fell before the Spandaus of Von Hartweg without a chance to speed a shot in return. The kid had never known what hit him. It was just as well, perhaps, that Hartweg had shifted and sent a burst into the motor section, burning Reade as he fell. He'd never felt the burning—had been dead before his Spad erupted in flame.

Jared Roth had got Hartweg right after that, he remembered. Then, the next glass. Strange that it should have been devil-may-care Roscoe Burns, who thought he'd never die, and expected to be lynched at the age of a hundred and fifteen—so he said—for marrying a girl young enough to be his great-great-grandchild.

Burns it had been who had tried to lend a mocking note to the proceedings: "Did you ever stop to think, as the hearse rolls by, that sooner or later, both you and I—"

He shook his head. He couldn't think of the rest of that one without getting a bit sick—especially since he remembered that Burns had got it next day, far closer to his fifteenth birthday than even his thirtieth.

A third big one came over. Jared Roth rose to his feet, stepped to the door of his hutment. He doused his candle, lest a gleam of light get out and make a signal for some high-flying Fokker which would lead strafers to the field. Jared Roth was six feet tall, but he felt, tonight, as though he were three feet tall one second, seven feet the next. It was a strange feeling.

Something was going to happen, something out of the ordinary. He sometimes had strange hunches, and he had one tonight. But what did it concern? He couldn't for the life of him make out. But the thought persisted that something was due to happen.

Fatigue tugged at him, pulling him down. He was a fool to stand or walk when he had such few opportunities to merely sit—except in the pit of his Spad. And what good did it do to sit or lie down, when his mind was so active—almost madly so—that he couldn't sleep, or even rest?

There was a knock on the door, just as he relighted his candle.

"Come in," he said. This was it, all right. Rather belated, but here came the command to get out after that Gotha. The Gotha would be behind its own lines before they could reach it.

"Well?" he snapped, without looking up.

Then he heard someone enter, and the door close.

"Hello, Jary," said a soft voice.

It brought him around, snapped him to his feet as though a giant hand had jerked him erect. For a moment he stared at the man, only a fraction of an inch shorter than himself, who had just come in. Then, without speaking, he lighted two more candles, the better to see the man's face.

"Well, Jary," asked the other, "aren't you glad to see me?"

Jared Roth tried his best to keep any friendliness out of his voice as he replied, "Anywhere else, yes. Here, no."

THE other looked hurt for a split second. Then a white mask, the mask of the soldier who never shows his feelings, came over the face of Hurd Roth. Jared studied him. How trim and straight and just right his younger brother looked in uniform. A second lieutenant. Two in the family had commissions. Then he noted the wings on the tunic, and his heart sank. Why had he never been told that Hurd had entered the air service?

"What are you doing here?" he asked hoarsely.

Hurd misunderstood, or pretended to. "Oh, I forgot, Captain Roth! A second lieutenant should never get fresh with a captain, or even a first lieutenant, or even a second who rates him. I'll leave at once."

Hurd Roth had set the tone of the strange meeting. Jared took it up from there.

"You'll wait until you're dismissed, sir," Jared snapped. "I asked you what you were doing here?"

"If you mean with the Seventh Pursuit, I was assigned here. If you mean here, in this hutment, I came because we used to be brothers, and I thought we might be glad to see each other after a year. But it seems I was wrong—about both of us. Now, have I the captain's permission to leave?"

"Not just yet. Did you ask for assignment to this squadron?"

"No, sir. I took what came my way. But if I had been asked, I wouldn't have chosen to come here. Maybe you know the reason; maybe you remember things. And at risk of court-martial for such language to a superior, let me say this—if the same thing happens here I shall knock your teeth down your throat!"

"Save that for the Germans!" said Jared, a queer pride stirring in him at Hurd's vehemence. "I gather, then, that neither of us has anything to do with your assignment to the Seventh Pursuit. I did not ask for you, because I did not even know you were in the air service."

"I asked Mother not to say anything when she wrote. She is, though you haven't asked, quite well."

"And you didn't ask to be assigned to me. Therefore, we've both to make the best of a bad bargain—"

"Should it be so bad, Jary? Beg pardon—Captain Roth?"

"Every man, up here, runs his own show—as long as it does not interfere with the show of the team. What you do is up to you. Don't expect me to—"

"Go to bat for me? That's what I meant when I said I'd sock you. Here, I fight my own battles, Captain. Now may I—?"

"Yes, beat it!"

How grand and straight and proud his brother looked when he about-faced smartly, walked to the door, vanished

into the night that covered the tarmac. Jared's eyes shone as he watched him go. But afterward he sat down and his thoughts fell into the same dismal channels.

He saw, back in the past, a small boy being beaten by a larger one. The smaller one was Hurd, screaming, begging for mercy, trying to escape the bigger one—not even trying to fight back. He saw another boy, himself, dash in and pull the bigger one off; then start fighting while Hurd rose and scuttled away, not even looking back—crying as he ran.

How much had Hurd changed, if any? Right up to the last time Jared had seen him, he had been like that. Hurd Roth, he knew, was a physical coward. The thought of violence against his person turned him into a sniveling—

No! thought Jared. *No! I won't even think it!*

Then he heard the sound of many motors, flying high and fast. He recognized them instantly. Benz, Mercedes—Fokkers, moving through the night, straight out of German-held skies, into the skies about the tarmac of the Seventh Pursuit. He dashed out onto the tarmac. It was filling with pilots, greaseballs, cooks, medical men.

Some of the crates were being dragged out swiftly. Jared saw at once they would not all be dollied to safety—even with all hands helping.

For almost at once the first Fokker shot down toward the field, and the sharp command came from Major Drago, commanding the squadron, to take cover.

A light flared somewhere, and Jared saw a face for a split second in its glare. The face was a sickly white. The eyes were wide with horror as they stared at the black speck in the sky.

Then the light was smothered. Bracketted Lewises, among the hangars, began to chatter on their tripods as the strafe began.

Jared's fists clenched until the nails cut into his palms.

The white face he had seen had been that of Hurd Roth—his brother!

CHAPTER TWO

Strafe of Doom!

ALL members of the Seventh Pursuit moved deeper into the woods as the first Fokker dived over the field—a night bird on swift wings. Incendiary bullets, streaking the sky with pencils of flame, probed for the hearts of the camouflaged buildings. Jared's heart sank. Most of their planes would probably go up in flame.

He heard the Lewises chatter as bullets whined at the diving German hawk. The gunners were firing at the belly of the German—and the German was probing for the men behind the gun. Jared, staring through the weird light, forgot Hurd for the second, and knew at what exact moment the gunners jumped aside to escape those Spandau slugs.

Then the first crate was over, and the gunners were back, playing a lethal guessing game with the next rocketing Fokker. The Spandaus yammered sickeningly. A hangar took fire, exploding like tinder. It seemed to go all at once, and the Spads inside it at the same time. Almost instantly their wings burst into flame and showed red ribs through the orange glare. The fire reached tongues toward the sky, licking up as though to catch those who had fired the hangar.

The gunners were fully exposed in the glare of that burning hangar. Through the chattering of guns, the racketing of motors, came the hoarse cry of the Old Man.

"Get some of the planes out—at whatever cost!"

Then all members of the Seventh Pur-

suit entered into the guessing game—with Death as the referee. The gunners behind the Lewises were already in it, and stayed there—imps out of hell behind their guns.

Planes were hard to come by; men could be brought in for every one that died. The Old Man was remembering that now. Jared, racing for the hangar that housed his own crate, saw one of the gunners fall limply over the Lewis mount, rendering the gun for a moment useless. He saw two other men jump in, drag that one aside, out of the way, and drop him without a second glance—he was past help.

But in the next moment another crate dipped close above the Lewis—and the two who had moved the dead were dead themselves. As though they refused to repeat the error their buddy had made, they flung themselves aside as they died, leaving the gun free to be operated—but there were none to operate it. The major bawled hoarsely again. The major himself was on the Lewis by the time another officer and an enlisted man—a greaseball—jumped to his assistance. Jared went on, flung the doors of the hangar back. Men were coming in with him, officers or greaseballs, he did not stop to see which.

And while all hell held possession of the skies, they joined hands to get what crates they could to safety. Such bedlam Jared Roth had never thought possible. Even in the thick of the toughest, longest dogfight, he had never listened to such clattering, such noise. Men fell on either side of him, moaning—dying in the next second.

But his own Spad was dragged to comparative safety under the shell-blasted trees.

Not that it would matter greatly, he thought, for when the Fokkers had ceased their strafing, the long-distance guns would start dropping their Gargantuan cargoes on the tarmac. That they would miss any of the grounded planes seemed an impossibility. He heard, time after time, the hoarse voice of the major yelling to the gunners. He was telling them when to hurl themselves to safety, when to serve the Lewises.

Jared had forgotten about Hurd until he had helped drag out a dozen planes—enough, if they lasted until morning, to give point to American retaliation for the night strafe. Then he remembered, with a quick stab of emotion. But he must not allow himself to be stampeded. This was war. His brother had no more right to his consideration than the least greaseball left alive. He'd have to look out for himself. Always, long ago, he had gone to help. Now he must not. He gritted his teeth and tried not to think of him. Was Hurd already among the dead?

If he were, it might be merciful. But Jared himself would rather die. He knew what it would do to their mother when she got the word. He had always known Hurd was her favorite.

How long the strafe would have continued there was no way of knowing. But Wing must have seen the flames against the skies, and issued commands. The Seventh didn't get a single plane off the ground; there had been no time. But all at once the sky was crowded with planes. Jared heard Spads swing in above the Germans. He caught the sound of Nieuport motors.

And shortly thereafter the Germans were fighting for their lives, and being hazed home by twice their number of Allied flyers.

As they went, Jared thought, *Leave some of them for us to handle tomorrow!*

It never occurred to him that he might be dead tomorrow.

SOMEHOW the men got the fire under control, saved a few of the hangars, most of the administration buildings. But

Jared knew, by the intensity of the German strafe, that not one building had escaped being sieved by Spandau lead.

As though the far gunners, deep in Germany, had seen everything, knew exactly when the German flyers started home, and were in no danger on the tarmac from German H.E.'s—the big ones started dropping on or near the tarmac.

By the light of the fires, and the horrid glare of the explosions themselves, Jared could see much that was transpiring.

He saw a great column of earth geyser skyward from the very heart of the tarmac. He saw a man, running from the woods beyond, knocked flat on his face by the concussion. There was something about the man's build, the way he ran, that struck a chord in his memory. Just so, long ago, had little Hurd Roth gone running home to his mother!

He saw his brother rise, continue his run, but staggering. And Jared knew with what methodical care Germans laid down such fire. Hurd Roth was running right into the path of the next one to come!

Jared listened for a second, his heart stopping to help him listen, for the tell-tale, express-train shriek of the H.E. But he did not hear it until he was halfway across the tarmac, running to knock Hurd Roth down. He thought of nothing else. He did not think of all the implications of what he was doing. All he thought of was that little Hurd was about to take another beating from a bully he couldn't whip if he tried—and that he must help him.

He tackled Hurd about the middle. Even as he did so he heard that shriek for which he had waited with dread. He picked up Hurd like a sack and ran with him over his shoulder until the shriek reached its crescendo. Then he plunged to the ground, almost breaking Hurd's back, but bringing him out of danger.

The thing that stood out the most clearly, however, was that white face he had seen in the glare of the first tongue of flame—the white face of Hurd Roth. Hurd had not changed. He was still a coward.

His very cowardice had almost been his undoing. Safe in the woods—when he should have been helping the others to save crates, and man that Lewis—the strafing and artillery fire had unnerved him and he had started running. Watching the big ones land, he had run straight in the direction he was facing—and he had almost run to his death.

Jared had saved him from that.

But now he was conscious of something else. Under him, Hurd was cursing, deeply, from his very soul. He must be out of his mind with terror. Jared gathered him up, carried him into the woods, propped him against a tree. He stared at his face, so strangely twisted. Then, disgusted, he turned and left him sitting there.

Over his shoulder, in a voice he did not recognize as his own, he said, "The others might need help, Lieutenant!"

He didn't wait to hear Hurd's answer. As he walked back to what he considered his own duty, he realized that half the men of the Seventh who remained alive, must have seen what he had done. What would they think of it? Would they know the truth? Would they know that Hurd was yellow? Sooner or later, he thought, they must know—and he couldn't stand it if they did.

AFTER a time the firing of H.E.'s ceased. The Germans were always methodical, routine. They figured they had done enough damage for now. Tomorrow they would strike again, at this same hour and minute, perhaps. But by this time tomorrow the tarmac would have been moved just enough that it would not matter.

There was a second tarmac, a little to the south, which could be used. It had been cleared for this very purpose. There would be weeds on it, but they could be cleaned up.

As though in answer to his thought he heard the hoarse shout of the major, bidding the field move, en masse, to the second location.

"A Flight will turn in at once," came the shouted command. "They will make a raid tomorrow. Move their bedding to the trees near the second tarmac."

There were twelve flyers in A Flight. Seven would fly at the same time. Jared Roth would lead the flight. His heart jumped, hammered. He, Jared Roth, would have the honor of repaying the Germans for what they had done here tonight, for the men and officers they had killed. It was a never-ending, hellish exchange of vengeance that went on day and night.

He yelled to the greaseballs and orderlies who served the pilots of A Flight, telling them where to take their bedding —enough of it to provide them with a place to rest, if not to sleep.

When he saw his pilots—whom he did not at the moment pause to count—gather at the spot he had mentioned, he went back to the old field. He wanted to find Major Drago and ask if there were any special orders.

He was angling through the almost leafless trees, toward the east end of what had been a row of hangars, when he saw a group of shadows to his left.

He halted, his heart pounding, when he heard a hoarse, harsh voice say, "Do you expect special treatment because you're the flight leader's kid brother?"

He started to turn away, but he could do nothing, not even breathe. He saw Hurd standing in the midst of a group of a dozen or so men. And facing him, saying the insulting words, was Lieutenant Miles Purdy. Purdy had been a prize-fighter before he had joined the air service. He had never lost a fight in his life. He could whip Hurd Roth with one hand tied behind his back.

But Jared, moving up closer—though inside he was numb—almost prayed to his brother, "Hit him, Hurd! Break his nose, just this once, though he mops up the ground with you!"

"I expect nothing from my brother!" he heard Hurd Roth say.

"No? You didn't ask to be sent here, so he could look out for you, by any chance?"

Again Jared Roth whispered, "Hit him, Hurd. You can't let him say things like that!"

But Hurd Roth said, "I did nothing of the sort. I did not ask for the assignment. I did not want it. I can take care of myself."

"Sure, of course you can! We all saw that tonight! You must be the baby of the family—from the way he carried you!"

Hurd stood very straight. He even clicked his heels as he said, his words stiff with formality, "You are quite wrong, sir! Naturally, there is nothing I can say, if you insist on believing what you wish. In the circumstances, we'd better let the matter drop!"

God! thought Jared. *He's trying to act as though he's not hitting Purdy only because Purdy is a first lieutenant! How far does he think he will get with that?*

Jared could have stepped into the group, pretended he had heard or seen nothing, ordered them to go about their duties or turn in. They would think nothing of it—or would they? But Hurd would realize that now, as always, he could depend on Jared to get him out of jams.

Hurd made a sharp right face and strode away. Bitter, sarcastic laughter followed him. That laughter was like a cat-o'-nine-tails laid across his heart.

CHAPTER THREE

Fight or Die!

THE dawn was cold and gray—as cold as the heart of Captain Jared Roth. He had had no sleep. He had sprawled face downward on his bed and thought the night through, trying to find a way out for Hurd. What Hurd must be suffering he could guess. And there was nothing Hurd could do about himself.

Seven Spads were ticking over at the deadline, his own black-crossed plane—the little black crosses over old bullet holes—on the right of the line, when Major Drago came to him later. That was before the other pilots showed.

"I'm sorry it's working out like this, Captain!" he said stiffly. "But five of your pilots were killed in the strafe last night—and I've no alternative."

He didn't explain what he meant. The major's face was cold, as though he hated Jared. Jared wondered how much he knew, how much he surmised. Then the pilots were coming out—and his heart turned over. Now he knew what the major meant, at least in part.

Hurd Roth was among the pilots of A Flight! Jared Roth whirled to stare at the greaseballs busy with his plane, trying to make up his mind what to do. He didn't miss the sneering grin of Purdy who stood back of the line watching preparations for the dawn flight. Purdy was second in command of B Flight. Jared had never liked him; the dislike had been mutual.

That grin of Purdy's said a great deal.

Purdy had a black eye, not bad, but still a black eye, Jared noticed with surprise. He wondered where he got it. There was no one in the Seventh Pursuit—enlisted man or officer—who could hand him a mouser like that. Maybe he had bumped into something.

Last night, when Purdy had been baiting Hurd, he had seen two members of A Flight in the group that listened. He looked along the line to those two flyers: Lieutenants Carlie and Jacobs. Neither of them had a mark on him. Could it be possible then, that—?

But no, there came Hurd now, his face white, his mouth set and grim, his eyes blazing straight toward Jared Roth. There was no mark on Hurd, and no one man could possibly fight Purdy and come through the scrap unmarked.

Hurd now faced his brother. "Just what did you have to do with this, Captain?" he demanded, his voice low and terrible. "I told you last night I would not be coddled and that if you tried it, I would smash your face in!"

"Go ahead and smash, Lieutenant!" said Jared, his jaw muscles knotting. "And I'll send you to your quarters under arrest, pending trial by court-martial."

"I won't give you the satisfaction," Hurd snapped, "or maybe that's another way of looking out for me? If I don't go with you, I'm safe—is that it?"

"You haven't changed," said Jared abruptly. "I heard what Purdy said to you last night. You quit cold, as you did when we were kids. You turned and walked away—but I could see you running and crying, just as you used to do."

How white went the face of Hurd Roth then. His right fist, clenched at his side, lifted almost imperceptibly. Jared's eyes narrowed. Over the stiff shoulders of Hurd he could see Purdy's grinning face.

"Go ahead," said Jared. "You know *I* won't hit back!"

Hurd did not even look around to see whether anyone was watching. He swung with his left for Jared's jaw. Jared parried the blow, and drove his right, with all the power he possessed, straight at the jaw of Hurd Roth.

Even as the blow traveled he thought,

If I hit him hard enough he can't go—at least not on this flight.

The thought added power to his blow. He saw a look of amazement take the place of the sneering grin on the face of Miles Purdy. At the same time, Purdy deliberately turned his back; he didn't want to be a witness.

Hurd sprawled out, limp as a rag, his face dead white, his lower jaw twisted to the right. Jared raised his eyes, looked along the line. Every other pilot was in his plane, each one staring fixedly at his instrument panel. If any had seen, he could not know. Maybe all had, but none would say so.

THEN Jared was in his crate. With but a cursory checking of instruments, he waved for the chocks to be kicked free. Then he looked along the line to his left. Now every pilot was staring at him. He did not look again at Hurd Roth. He raised his hand, brought it down in a chopping gesture, giving his Hisso the gun as he did so.

Six crates shot down the tarmac. The seventh, at the far end of the line—because Hurd was the junior member of the flight—merely stood, its prop idling.

Jared checked his mileage, map, his air speed, and guessed at when they should be directly over the German airfield. He looked back, waggled his wings. The V broke into a line, with plenty of interval between Spads. They were taking no chances on colliding with one another as they dived through the white smother of a huge cloud bank.

Jared was soon alone, though he knew that wingmates were close on either hand.

Then the bottom dropped out of the cloud, and Jared discovered that he had sped his flight squarely into the heart of almost a squadron of Fokkers! They had just taken off from their field, and were swinging into formation for the morning flight to the lines!

He forgot his men for the moment. From now on every man must look out for himself. Jared hunched over the stick trigger, held the stick with his knees, glued his eyes to the ringsight. He spotted a Fokker in his sight, set his Vickers yammering. He saw the tracers reach for the crate he had selected as a target. He knew his aim was true, kept his Vickers blazing. His bullets were going to

their mark, for instantly he saw the pilot of that Fokker slump into his pit—going limp even as Hurd had gone limp before the smashing blow of Jared's fist.

Jared did not take time to speed bullets into the motor section, to destroy the plane beyond repair. There were too many Germans to take time out for that. He was still diving. Now he performed a swift, bulletlike double-thrust. He jumped the first crate, sent bullets into the next one beyond. He had got two Fokkers in as many seconds.

Surprise, and altitude, were in favor of the Americans for the time being. They made the most of it.

Jared pulled out. He saw three more Fokkers, over a wide area, going down. Then he saw a Spad go, flaming. That would be Carlie.

The loss of one Spad, to the Americans, was a greater loss than all the Fokkers that had gone down, to the Germans—when figured in material loss. The lives did not matter; in war they never did.

The remaining five Spads worked toward one another. Their pilots were fighting like demons. Their Vickers were never still. The Spads looped, dived, spun. Each American had one chance of coming out whole. He took desperate, impossible means to give himself that chance. He was never hovering, but always the swiftest moving target in the sky, snap-shooting at the Germans. Their only out—

And right in the midst of the savage, blazing dogfight, another Spad dropped like a bullet out of that treacherous white cloud. It came down with guns flaming viciously. It came down almost straight at Jared Roth. He didn't see that its Vickers lead worked any execution—but as the plane shot past him, he saw and recognized the pilot. Hurd Roth!

Jared thought desperately, *Major Drago sent him on. He could not refuse to obey commands. But he's got the wind up so badly he doesn't even know what he's doing!*

The Germans never missed the main chance—especially when there were enough of them to make it possible for them to take advantage of them all. Hurd had dived too far. He was below the dogfight.

Three Fokkers tilted their noses down, went after Hurd Roth—just as he brought his nose up, and was for a moment pinned against the horizon like a fly against a windowpane.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Get That Fokker!"

JARED ROTH almost forgot his own danger and the danger to his wingmates, as he looked down and away at Hurd. Hurd was going to be boxed in. Jared, watching the same thing happen to any other of his men, would already have been diving down to take out one or two of the Germans. But Hurd had made this mistake, and by going to his aid, Jared would be taking too much fire volume away from his wingmates. Still, he'd do it for anyone else—

He almost tilted his nose down when he remembered what Hurd had said—that he must not try to coddle him.

But it wasn't necessary, not right then. For Hurd did something, by accident, or in sheer terror, which eased him out of the spot. He came on over, and while on top of a loop flew for a hundred yards upside down. The Germans had expected him to go on over.

By an accident, he saved himself. Whether he realized what he was doing, or was in too great a panic to know that he was looking *up* at the earth, there was no way of knowing. But Hurd must have realized, at the last, for he half-rolled out.

Then, before the Germans could maneuver him into another box, he had nosed up, given his crate full gun, and was clawing for altitude, for the middle of the dogfight.

And then Jared lost sight of his brother. Hurd swept into the thick of German planes that hemmed in the Spads like wolves hemming in a herd of elk. Jared tried to forget him for the moment. He knew how a coward fought when he was forced to. Hurd would fight like a madman to save his own life—that much he could be sure of.

Thought of what Hurd was going through, spiritually, made him sick—and coldly angry. He set himself the task of blasting down all the Germans he could before he himself went down. Bullets hammered across his shoulders, smashed his dash, filled the cockpit with flying glass splinters. Something hot and wet spilled down his cheeks past his goggles. He touched it with his gauntleted hand. Blood!

But he felt no pain, his hands and feet worked. He was rolling out of line of sights without even looking back. His Vickers never ceased their yammering—for every time he looked into his ring-sight there was a Fokker within range. He held the stick with his knees, kept the Vickers going. And he saw no more Spads go down. Coldly furious, and sick at heart, he no longer cared—and because he did not, he fought like a man inspired.

His wingmates, taking their cue from him, fought like three combat pilots. They were everywhere, in and out of the German formation. They scattered it, hazed it back together again.

The air was filled with the smell of hot oil, of burning petrol. The stench of powder was in his nostrils. His belts fed smoothly through his guns.

A Spad dived past him on the tail of a falling German. He heard the snapping of Vickers, very close. The wings of the diving Spad almost touched his, forcing him to veer off. He jerked a glance at the Yankee pilot. A queer feeling gripped him, left him breathless.

That diving pilot was Hurd Roth, and there was a bloody mask on his face!

He saw Hurd slamming bullets into the motor section of the Fokker. Its pilot was already dead.

"Pull up, Hurd, you fool!" he screamed. "Pull out. He's done for. He can't hurt you now!"

But Hurd could not hear. His face was set; he was leaning over his stick. Smoke curled about his spinner-cap, was erased on the instant, proof that his guns were working perfectly.

The Fokker burst into flames just as a trio of German planes shot down from upstairs, on the trail of Hurd Roth.

Now, there was no escaping his responsibility, brother or no brother.

Those three Fokkers were too much for any Yank to get off his tail. Jared Roth spun out of his own particular part of the dogfight, dived after the trio of Fokkers. As he slanted down he yawed from side to side to get as many bullets into all three as he could—taking care at the same time that Hurd himself was out of line of fire.

One of the Fokkers slanted away. Jared dropped his left wing and speared after the crate to the left. He saw Hurd pulling swiftly out to come up and over and down on the crate that still rode his tail. It was sending bullets the length of his fuselage and dotting his wings with tiny holes.

Jared Roth had his hands full with that third German. The man was a good fighter, a clever flyer. He knew all the tricks there were—and used them. It was almost as though this whole thing had been planned. Make Hurd dive; follow him. Bring the leader down; keep him away from his men—while the rest of the Germans annihilate them.

But that was foolish. How could they know Hurd was his brother? They couldn't—it was all guesswork. He was imagining things. Still, he had his hands full. He jerked a glance at Hurd, and saw Hurd's adversary hammering at his jammed Spandaus, holding up his left hand to show his enemy that he could not figth back.

Hurd Roth let the man go!

Jared screamed at him, "Get him, you fool! There's no place in this war for knighthood of that kind!"

But the German went on down in flat spirals toward the field below. Hurd Roth, apparently not even looking at Jared, jumped into the sky. He dived straight across Jared's upper wing, taking Jared neatly out—and taking over his fight with the third German.

Hurd now had a single adversary. No one could ask for help in such a match, good as the German was.

Jared nosed up, hurtled back into the dogfight.

Maybe there was a signal from the ground. Maybe the Germans felt that their losses were too heavy in return for getting so few of the Americans. Whatever the reason, they were diving for the field under full power and drawing out of the fight. Maybe they realized that their very numerical superiority was against them.

Jared, on the point of signaling his men to follow, decided against it. Fate was with them for a moment. Let it be like that. They had lost two flyers—that was enough.

He signaled for formation, and the flight back to the tarmac of the Seventh Pursuit.

The flight drew together. Nobody looked at anybody else. Jared checked his men, saw that five badly battered crates, all riddled with bullets, rode with him into the west. Hurd Roth flew in his proper place, to the left rear.

The five landed, somehow. Jared got out of his crate, leaned against it, wondering why he felt so sick, so done in. Nobody came to speak to him. Pilots left their crates, headed for the major's office to make out their combat reports. Hurd Roth did not even look at him.

Jared saw Purdy standing at the edge of the tarmac, near squadron headquarters. He saw Hurd veer in his stride, head straight for Purdy. No blows were struck—they just stood for the moment, talking.

What had happened to everybody? Nothing, at the moment, seemed as it should seem.

He wished he did not have to go into headquarters to report while Hurd was inside. He didn't want to see Hurd's shaking hands as he wrote out his own combat report.

THAT business of making out combat reports, under Drago, was a merciless thing—like facing a police lineup.

The flyers came in, fresh from combat, with grease and blood on their faces. Their eyes, deep-sunken and wild, met those of the squadron commander. He didn't have to ask questions to know whether things had gone well or ill—all he had to do was read the signs. Oh, not the expressions on the faces of the fighting pilots! Those faces were almost always military masks when juniors faced a senior. They could almost keep their lips from twitching, so strong was drilled-in habit. But the major, who had been in the service when these men had been swinging on gates, could read even the signs his men sought to hide as they picked up the blanks to make their reports.

Jared Roth no longer dreaded that lineup. He had become accustomed to it. Major Drago knew what kind of a flyer he was. If his hands shook, or his face was haunted, it didn't matter—he had already

proven himself. But he could never accustom himself to the brave, pitiful show fledglings made when they came in to write out their first reports under the probing eyes of Major Rush Drago.

It was like that now, as Jared Roth stepped through the door, last of his flight to report. He looked swiftly about the room at the hunched bodies of his wingmates. They were busy with their work. Jacobs' hand was shaking until he could scarcely shape the necessary letters. How could he even spell words—feeling as he so obviously did about the passing of Carlie? They had been closer than brothers. They had come into the service together. They had spent wild vacations in Paris together. Now Carlie was gone, and Jacobs couldn't have suffered more if both his own legs had been taken off at the hips.

And this was only the beginning. Tomorrow Jacobs would feel worse.

Eventually one of two things would happen—Jacobs would throw his life away in a wild plunge into the middle of some German flight, or lose his nerve entirely. Maybe he would escape the first alternative, and become a great American ace with a stone for a heart, and no mercy in him. Every adversary would be seen through his hate-filled eyes as the one who had shot down Carlie.

There was Gaylord, Hotnik, Geyer, Hurd Roth, Jared Roth.

The hands of all of them were shaking—except those of Hurd Roth! Jared stared in amazement at his brother. The youngster didn't seem in the least confused. He was writing freely, easily, steadily, without looking up from his paper. Jared Roth wondered what he could have to say—when all he had done was fly like a madman, risking the lives of his wingmates who had to get out of his way in the midst of the dogfight.

Jared snapped a quick glance at the major. The ghost of a smile touched the major's lips. He glanced at Hurd, then back at Jared. But Jared, not wanting to read something in the eyes of Drago that would indicate knowledge, did not meet his eyes. Instead he held out his hand for the report.

He bent over the end of the major's desk, on which he placed the paper to write. He crossed his ankles, hunched his shoulders, got it over with as fast as he could.

He heard a muttered, strangled curse behind him. That would be Jacobs. He heard a pen or pencil flung to the floor with the curse. He heard a paper savagely crumpled—and knew from the sounds what it had cost Jacobs to report the death of Carlie. Then he heard Jacobs go out, almost running. He didn't turn. He heard a little sigh erupt from Rush Drago.

One after the other, while Jared wrote, his wingmates finished their work, rose, muttered something to the major, went out. The adjutant was standing by, waiting for the reports. Jared could hear them rustle in his hands. Could see him, without looking, pick up the crumpled report of Jacobs, smooth it out. That paper, whatever the words written on it, was the most eloquent of all the reports on this latest flight.

Soon they were all gone. Jared knew that Hurd had gone out without even looking at him. It was just as well.

But he had finished his report, stood up now, handed it to the major. The paper rattled like chattering teeth. The major raised his eyes to Jared's. Jared could not read them, but he saw that Drago was going to say something he preferred not to hear.

"Pretty good, this brother of yours, Roth, on his first time over. Usually they manage to get themselves killed without firing a shot."

"Someone has to live through," muttered Jared, "me, for instance."

"This is a concise, excellent report, Roth," continued the major. "Since he's your brother, perhaps you'd care to glance over it? My word, shoots a triple his first time across!"

JARED was suddenly free of the shakes, like a man turned to stone. He extended his hand for Hurd's report, and the arm that pushed it forward felt as heavy as lead. He took the report, glanced through it.

Jared forced his eyes to focus on the words.

Hurd Roth had shot a triple! An almost unheard of thing! Three enemy planes in one dogfight. Even with as many Germans around as there had been, it wasn't possible—not for a newcomer who was fighting his first battle. No flyer like that could expect to knock down three crack German flyers.

Yet there it was, in Hurd's handwriting, claim for three Fokkers! And the writing was even, uniform—almost like an etching. Hurd was an expert penman. He would have made an excellent forger. That thought made Jared Roth wince.

A forger was a man or woman who lied in writing—made it say something that was not true. Hurd Roth, trusting that in the heat of battle none of his wingmates had seen enough of him to know whether or not he wrote the truth, had deliberately made a false combat report!

And he had written it without trembling, almost as though he himself were convinced of its truth. He had damned his eternal soul with a hellish lie.

Jared Roth managed somehow to grin at the major as he handed the paper back. He tried to show pride in his brother as the major said, "Efficiency in air fighting seems to run in the Roth family, eh? I hope now that I'm forgiven for assigning him to your flight?"

Not a word about the fight which had preceded the take-off; not a word about ordering Hurd to get into his crate, follow A Flight into German-held skies. If Drago knew, he was going to say nothing. Here, in Drago's hands, was the reason. He couldn't seem to notice ordinary infringements of military discipline by two men who were such hellers aloft.

Jared Roth straightened, nodded briefly to the major, walked out of the building. He wanted just one thing: to get Hurd deep in the woods somewhere, and hammer the living daylights out of him. Three Fokkers, shooting a triple, on his first flight across the lines! Hurd Roth had had the incomparable nerve to write such a thing into his report. And what of the reports of the others?

Drago would check the total planes sent down by A Flight. Jared himself had set them down in his report, sure that he had accounted for every last one. The total had been impressive. He himself had claimed two, for certain. He thought he had got three—which gave him a feeling of hope. The one he hadn't been sure about might fit into Hurd's claim. But when the major counted the crates claimed by the rest of Jared's flight, and found that they did not agree with Jared's total, he would know Hurd had lied.

Drago would believe the rest of A Flight, for all had been tested. They were all aces, each had got his traditional five.

Hurd Roth would be caught in his lie, without a shadow of doubt.

There was just one thing to do. Knowing how Hurd felt, he did it officially. He sent an orderly to bring Hurd to him, at the east side of the tarmac. Hurd came at once. He was obedient, anyhow.

Jared had followed the forms in addressing the orderly, "Present my compliments to Lieutenant Roth and tell him I wish to see him at once!"

WHEN Hurd came, straight as a sapling, he halted at the prescribed distance, saluted—though no salutes were necessary so close to the front. His voice was cold as ice.

"The captain sent for me, sir?"

"Yes. Follow me."

Jared turned and strode into the woods. Behind him he heard the firm footfalls of Hurd Roth. They were marching toward the lines. In Jared's ears should have sounded the endless chattering of machine guns, the rattling of musketry, the cracking of hand grenades—the cries of charging infantrymen. But he heard none of that. He heard only the footfalls of his brother behind him.

And when he was deep enough in the woods he whirled on Hurd, came straight to the point.

"You claimed three Fokkers!" he snapped. "I want an explanation."

"Are you addressing me as Lieutenant Roth, or as—"

"As your brother, who refuses to be disgraced by you if it can be avoided! When you claimed three Fokkers you lied. You tried to make a hero of yourself—because you knew you were a coward! There's just one thing to do now, go back to Major Drago and say that now you've thought it over, perhaps your first report was in error; perhaps someone else should deserve credit for that triple!"

"You, perhaps, Captain? Aren't you satisfied with your own list of victories? You're an ace, a couple of times over. Are you jealous because your kid brother, without your help, almost becomes an ace the first day?"

"If I were sure you'd done it I'd be the proudest flight leader in all France today. But you didn't. You lied—"

How it happened Jared could not be sure. He noticed that Hurd looked back over his shoulder, as though to make sure what he did was not witnessed.

His right fist shot out—though not until minutes later did Jared know it. The fist connected, flush, with the jaw of Jared Roth. He went down, and out like a light. He did not even feel the blow land.

He simply regained consciousness lying on his back in the woods, to find himself alone. Hurd Roth, his kid brother, had knocked him cold!

"But he knew I wasn't expecting the punch!" Jared told himself.

He rose to his feet, a bit dizzy. He wondered how long he had been out. By this time, surely, Drago had checked the combat reports, one against the other, and ferreted out the lie Hurd had set down.

He walked out of the woods, stood for a moment at the edge of the tarmac, stared toward headquarters building. A line of pilots was filing into that office! Hurd Roth was among them, and they were all that remained of A Flight!

"Rush Drago has caught it! He's calling the flight in to put the lie squarely up to Hurd!" Jared muttered.

Jared Roth had never expected to be afraid of anything or anybody—unless Hurd were somehow involved. He should be over there with the rest of the flight, listening to Drago, making explanations. Yes, he should be going. He could save his brother again—by correcting his own combat report. For Hurd he could do that, would do it.

But Hurd had told him he wanted to stand on his own feet. Well, let him! If they were feet of clay, he still must stand on them—if he could.

Jared Roth turned back into the woods. Questioned later by Drago, he could say he had gone for a walk and wandered farther into the forest than he had expected to.

His wingmates had confessed to legal murder of Germans, because this was war. That was bad enough. But Hurd

had confessed three murders of which he was guiltless—and by the strange circumstances of a great war, Hurd was the one who was guilty of the greatest crime!

CHAPTER FIVE

Destination—Eternity!

JARED ROTH came back to the tarmac half an hour later, went to his hutment without looking at ony one. B Flight was taking off, but he did not even glance at the deadline. He wished he could forget all about flying and fighting, killing and being killed.

Jared Roth dropped on his cot and wished he might never have to go out through the door again. But it was not to be like that. There came a knock. It was a hesitant one. Not Hurd, but an orderly came in. His face was wooden.

"The major's compliments, sir, and the captain will report to headquarters immediately!"

"How did he look?" asked Jared.

"Rather grim, sir," said the orderly, ducking out.

Jared wasted no time. Now he would have to do something, tell some lies on his own. He stepped through the door he had just been wishing he would never have to pass again, started across the tarmac. He felt as he had felt the first time he had flown into actual combat—as though he were marching to face the executioner.

He knocked on the door of headquarters. He did not usually do that. He bit his lip, hoping the major would not notice, and read something into his hesitancy.

"Come in!" barked Drago's voice. It sounded ominous.

Jared looked swiftly back as he opened the door. Officers and men were scattered about the tarmac. He was wondering why they, too, were behaving strangely. Not an officer had seemed to notice him on the march across the field. Most unusual. Someone always called out to him—but not this time.

Rush Drago looked up, pushed a report toward Jared Roth.

"I suppose you've heard," he began, his voice cold as ice, "and perhaps would care to change your report? There is one plane unaccounted for."

"I don't understand, sir," said Jared, knowing he lied as he spoke, because he understood all too well. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes, and the sooner you straighten it out, Captain, the better everybody will feel toward you!"

"Toward *me,* sir?"

"Yes, you. You'll find out soon enough. I believe you deliberately falsified your report to put someone in a bad light, because of jealousy—"

Jared straightened, his own face going hard. His eyes glared into those of the major.

"The total victories claimed by your flight were more, by two, than you reported, Captain! Two of your men changed their reports at once, admitting that in the excitement of battle they could have been mistaken. That I can accept and understand. They reported that someone else may have fired as they did, and so claimed the same crates they did. There is still one crate unaccounted for—and I find it strange that you were absent when I sent for you and your flight. I'm almost moved to suspect you knew you would be found out, and were putting off the reckoning—though I find it almost impossible to believe such a thing of the elder brother of a gallant officer like Hurd Roth!"

Then, in a flash, it came to Jared what had happened. His own men, realizing the truth, knowing all about Hurd, had

done some lying on their own—not to protect Hurd, whom they must despise—but to protect Jared himself. But they hated to lie for him, and that was why, out on the tarmac, they had chosen not to call out to him.

"I don't understand all this, sir," said Jared grimly, "but I intend to find out. If Hurd Roth—"

"Never mind Lieutenant Roth!" snapped Drago. "But for the fact that I refuse to allow personalities to interfere with the work of my squadron, I would transfer Hurd Roth to another flight—to that of Miles Purdy, who asked for him! But I can't allow this adolescent jealousy of yours, of your own brother, to break up what was an excellent flight. I may say, too, that if he were not the junior officer in the Seventh, I would give your brother command of a flight!"

Jared's brain whirled. He could make nothing of all this.

"Keep that clearly in your mind, Captain!" Drago went on. "Your brother is just the same as any other flyer in the squadron. He gets what he merits, whatever you may think of it. And my advise to you is to play the game as you always have. I've never known you to be envious of any other member of your flight."

Jared had to take it. He could not deny jealousy without giving an explanation.

"Very good, sir," he said. "However, there is just one thing—I am not changing my combat report, sir. To the best of my knowledge and belief it is correct."

The major's lips twisted in an expression of contempt. His voice was low, almost savage, as he said, "Dismissed, Captain! Get out!"

THE sky was as dark as the shadows over Jared's heart as he stepped back onto the tarmac. He stared aloft, with the airman's habit, to see what sort of weather promised. He knew, before even the first few drops fell on the tarmac, that a deluge of rain, guaranteed to keep all crates on the ground, would be starting shortly.

But the weather had changed no more in those few minutes than had the spirit of Jared Roth. Something was terribly wrong somewhere. Enlisted men gave him the right of way as he marched toward his hutment. They did not look at him. Officers, pilots of his own flight, elaborately contrived not to see him.

By heaven! Impossible as it seemed, Captain Jared Roth was being placed in coventry—that aura of silence which the service sometimes used, calculated to eat the heart out of the victim.

He rolled and tossed on his bunk, both glad and sorry of the rain that kept all aircraft grounded on either side of the lines. Any other time he would have blessed this interlude. Now he didn't know; it might be almost impossible to stand it, piling up grisly anticipation against the day when everybody would know the truth, know about Hurd.

Restlessly he got up, stepped to the door, looked out. His eyes flashed over the now rain-drenched tarmac. He saw two figures at the north end of the field, walking with their heads down, deep in conversation. He could not believe what he saw. Those two were obviously friends. There was no strain in their bodies as they walked. And the two were Miles Purdy, who had issued a challenge Hurd had refused to accept—and Hurd Roth!

"Well, he's certainly doing the best he can for himself," Jared murmured. "He's rousing everybody against me, selling even his enemies on his worthiness. I may have expected plenty, but never this!"

Still, it was a relief that Hurd had got away with it. Jared did not mind for himself. He hated coventry—but he could take it.

Then he slept, for the first time in many hours. He slept so soundly that the orderly must have pounded for all of a minute on the door of his hutment. At Jared's command he came in, tendered a slip of paper.

"Major's compliments, sir. The captain is to study this, make his plans—to be carried out as soon as the weather permits."

"I'm to report to headquarters?" asked Jared.

"No, sir," answered the orderly uncomfortably. "It's all there in the paper, sir."

So Drago wasn't even sending for him now! Didn't want to see him even in line of duty. It seemed childish, this writing of orders instead of verbal transmission of commands. But he shrugged, dismissed the orderly, sat down to read the order.

It listed everything the major had in mind. It was so formal it crackled. But in its essence it carried a terrific impact. The Germans, according to Intelligence, were already making use of inclement weather to bring a huge ammunition dump closer to the lines. It was behind a sector—opposite Seventh Pursuit—where for a week they had been concentrating the crack shock troops of the Crown Prince.

It was imperative, since Germany had taken care to protect the dump from artillery fire, that the dump be blown up as soon as the rain finished—whenever that might be. It would be the most dangerous mission ever attempted by any squadron. Major Drago had refused the help of other squadrons—wishing to have the honor of pulling off this show alone. Therefore, the honor of the squadron was in the hands of A Flight, which would lead off the raid.

It would be dangerous because of many things. The Germans would expect just such an attack and would be lying in wait everywhere. At the first tinkling of a telephone bell, sending word back from the German front lines that Spads were a-wing, the Germans, in great numbers, would leap aloft to guard their precious ammunition concentration. If they did not, and the dump were blown up, the forces concentrated in the lines, in preparation for a terrific push, would be starved, literally—but for bullets instead of food. They could live without food for their bodies, but not without food for their guns.

Jared had a qualm of doubt before his excitement began to rise. He could see A Flight arrowing through great tiers of Fokkers, Aviatiks, Albatross. It wouldn't take much, a light bomb dropped in the midst of the dump, to do the job. The problem was to get there!

But there would be those light bombs in each crate. They could be set off at any instant by a single bullet from a German Spandau, or even from a Mauser fired from the ground. One bomb thus exploded, in the midst of a formation, would destroy it all.

Which gave rise to the obvious plan. The flight would penetrate the German squadrons singly.

But then, what about Hurd? He would be entirely, utterly on his own. What he did, everybody would be sure to know. No possibility of camouflage in such a case.

Hurd must not go, he thought, *but how can I keep him from it now? I'm in the wrong. He's put me there. I—*

His lips went tight. His orders were plain. He stepped to the door of the hutment, called for an orderly.

He said, "If the east-end hangar is not in use—it wasn't this morning—take my compliments to the members of A Flight, and tell them to report there immediately to receive orders."

"Very good, sir."

Captain Jared Roth walked to the east-

end hangar, let himself in, and awaited the coming of his wingmates.

HURD ROTH was the first to arrive. He did not speak. It was enough that he was there, reporting in silence. Jared looked once, merely to identify him.

One by one the men came in. They exchanged jokes among themselves, but not one said a word to Captain Jared Roth. Once Jared accidently caught the eye of Hurd, and thought he saw in his face—surprisingly—a look of bitter disappointment. For what?

Jared checked the flight. All were present. Calmly, he read the order, offering no additional explanation.

When he had finished, he spoke to them, "I am open to suggestions."

Yesterday, and the day before that, they would have been bursting with suggestions — more than he could possibly use. Every flyer, of course, felt that he could lead a flight better than his flight leader. But not today. No one spoke.

"I suppose, however, if you do not approve of the plan I am about to suggest, you will offer objections?"

Still no one answered. But their attitude was plain. It said, "You're the flight leader. Your job is to make plans, ours to follow them. Don't expect us to do your work for you."

"Then," said Jared, "since we will of necessity carry small bombs, your first step will be to equip your planes for carrying them. This done, you will make your own individual plans. The dump mentioned here will be—"

He gave them grid coordinates they would understand, could find on their maps, and ended with, "We won't go over in formation. We'll leave here together, but we'll separate, each man for himself, as we cross the lines. Each man must try his best to reach the dump by whatever way he chooses—avoiding combat if humanly possible. He will retain his bombs at all costs—until he has reached the area indicated. He will drop them then—unless he is shot down before. That is all, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER SIX

The Brave Die But Once!

IT WAS three days and nights before the rain ended. Jared had held school on his plans. There hadn't been a single word addressed to him in friendliness. Hurd had avoided him outside of duty.

The day came, finally, when it must be done. The rain slacked during the night, and men were busy working at the tarmac to make it possible for the wheels of Spads. Tiny bomb racks, and triggers, had been placed on each plane. Extra belts of ammo for Vickers were placed in the pits.

Cold dawn again, and the first flight in three days—also the most dangerous to date. Seven members of A Flight, standing beside their crates with Hissos ticking over.

Miles Purdy was there, too. He was not smiling now—just watching.

When Jared caught Purdy's eyes, Purdy strode forward. He held a white paper in his hand. He gave it to Jared. It was a sealed envelope.

"Not now," said Purdy softly. "Read it later. It's a bit private, you know."

Jared stared at him, then shrugged and stepped into the pit of his Spad.

He glanced along the line as motors

were let full out, then throttled to idle. All A Flight was watching him. He raised his right hand slowly, chopped it down. From this moment on every man of the flight was on his own. Five minutes later B Flight would follow, then C Flight. He did not know their plans. His own were enough to keep in his head.

Approaching the lines, he looked around for his wingmates. One of them was heading straight east into Germany, at five thousand. His line of flight would take him south of the dump. Another man was heading the same way, but once past the archies he had dropped down until his wheels were almost in the tree-tops. He was traveling at top speed. Jared studied that crate.

It was flown by Jacobs, who might go out in a blaze of glory but would be glad to go no matter how he went.

Jared looked around for Hurd's crate, but could not see it. He felt a familiar sinking sensation. Had Hurd already ducked out, afraid to face death even in line of duty?

Then Jared swore, savagely, and brought his nose up. He had his own plan. It had a chance to succeed, even if he were killed. He would fly up to the ceiling of the crate, get over the dump, and dive straight down. Let his wings come off, let anything happen, so long as his Spad fell straight. It would be suicide, perhaps, but he did not give that a thought. Moreover, he'd reach the dump ahead of anybody else—and maybe give his wingmates a chance to get back.

He went up swiftly until his motor began to labor. Then he leveled off until it hummed again sweetly, and at top speed, nosed up once more. He was climbing as fast as the Hisso would lift his crate.

Nine thousand, ten, twelve. He couldn't go much higher. Fokkers could fly higher—and faster—but they would be clustered about the dump to fight off attacks from the sides. Germans would not expect any man to kill himself in a straight dive.

HE LOOKED down, when he was almost over the dump, and spotted one plane fighting like a fury against half a dozen Fokkers. It was too far away for him to recognize the Spad. But even as he knew it for an American plane, something happened to it.

Where it had been was a great splash of fire. Then, falling debris, not only of the Spad itself, but of two of the German crates. The A Flight pilot, then, in dying, had taken two with him on his last journey. But he hadn't reached the ammo dump—or even come close.

One man gone. Had it been Hurd? No—Jacobs, perhaps.

And then the Fokkers came for Jared, but he did not pause to fight them off. He was in line above the dump. He knew it by the ferocity of the Fokker attack. He nosed over, without hesitation, and gave his Hisso full gun. Having planned this, he had reinforced his wings to stand a sustained dive—though never such a one as he was now starting.

He looked back as he got really going, and saw that he had left the Fokkers standing still. He was safe from them, anyhow.

They began shooting, but with little hope. Diving straight down as he was, he offered about as much target as a falling knife would have done. Faster and faster. His Hisso raged and screamed. His wings danced. His flying wires—all the extra ones he had added—shrieked like a thousand banshees in conclave.

The earth was a black smear, far below. There were wisps of white clouds in between. They were gone the second he saw them. Even now, he knew, if he tried to pull out, however slowly and carefully, he had an excellent chance of

losing his wings. He was a goner. But far below, winged things were beginning to take shape—and he knew that he was aiming his propeller truly for the dump.

When he crashed in—well, there would be a cataclysmic flash he might see, an explosion he would never hear. He liked for it to be like that.

He peered through his windshield. There was a great deal of activity down there. A squadron of Fokkers shot across his line of dive, straight below. Their pilots saw him just in time, veered off. His wingtips almost touched two of their ships. He looked back along his fuselage, and the Fokkers were already dots in the sky behind him. He knew, then, that he was falling faster—and remaining conscious, alive—than any human being ever had to date. What his speed was he could not tell. The air speed indicator told him nothing. It had reached the limit.

And his wings still held.

He gave his full attention to the business at hand, directly below. Three Spads had reached the area of the dump, but scores of Fokkers were keeping them away.

He saw dirt geyser aloft, below one of the crates, and cursed. Someone had dropped his bombs far from the proper objectives. Dollars to doughnuts that had been Hurd! But it didn't matter. Even if he had got that far, he had done more than Jared had ever expected of him.

A thought flashed through his mind. The note Purdy had given him. He ought to know what it contained, before he finished his job and died. Grinning as he thought of the impossibility of the situation—reading a note from a man who hated him—while diving at suicidal speed toward an ammo dump, he flicked open the note with his thumbnail. He snapped a glance at the first line.

"You've got the kid all wrong. He's aces—"

There was more of it. But, coming from Purdy, who had made the kid back down, his leading statement had to be believed. Jared gasped. Maybe, after all, this was not a brilliant, brave way to exit from the world—and the war. Why did he have to kill himself, without ever reading all that note, or knowing just what had happened to put him in coventry?

But how, at this terrific speed, could he pull out? He tried it. His controls seemed to be locked. But he kept at it.

He glanced to right and left, at his wings. They were bowed back with the terrific speed of his plunge. When he brought the wind of his own passage—hard now as a brick wall—against his airfoils, the wings would never stand it.

But he had to keep trying. Sweat beaded his forehead as he fought the stick. Had he gained another inch? When the air finally caught his foils, he would be turned over on his back—if he did not lose his wings.

Gradually he nosed up—and a miracle happened as he lengthened his glide. The air smashed under his wings, but did not fold them up around his neck. For the first time in the war a Spad had outdived not one Fokker but many—and kept its wings.

But by now the dump was behind him, and no more than a thousand feet below. Blood was trickling down his lips from his nose.

He looked back—just as hell broke loose over the ammo dump! It seemed to erupt at the sky, all at once. And out of the mushrooming earth and trees, came tumbling a Spad that flopped all over the sky like a leaf.

That much Jared saw, before the outward force of the hellish explosion reached him and turned his Spad into a jackstraw—as it was turning into jackstraws every Fokker aloft.

Jared, trying to discover which direc-

tion was which, while his crate spun about, utterly out of control, whispered a command to his wingmates, wherever they might be.

"It's done. Get home. It's your chance. Get home!"

And then, somehow, he leveled off and watched the mighty explosion's debris settle back to earth. Fokkers were fighting themselves, too. And fully a score of them were heading straight for the Spad that had come dancing out of the midst of the geysered dump.

That Spad, so close to the explosion—and left whole by a miracle—was still rolling around, out of control. The pilot hadn't a chance against those Fokkers. Jared, grinning, dropped his bombs. It made him feel better when he didn't have them.

Then he was moving, at top speed, motor full out, to the assistance of the Spad pilot. As he went, the Spad regained control, the pilot saw his danger. There was no way of escape. Jared knew that not all the dump could have gone, that there would be fire and explosions for days. Thus the other pilot was surrounded—with the erupting dump at his back.

JARED shot through the first of the cordon of Fokkers, his Vickers flaming. And as he did so, the other Spad banked. He recognized it. Hurd Roth!

A great shout of joy burst from the throat of Jared, to be broken off sharply when Hurd did a strange thing—he banked and flung himself straight back through the middle of that falling mass, where it would be almost impossible for anything to live! As he went he nosed up. Then, at about fifteen hundred altitude, he dropped his left wing and shot into the black pall like a thrown sword. He had, by so much, lessened the target of the exploding dump.

Jared grinned tightly. "If that brat can do it," he told himself, "so can I!"

And with Spandaus letting go all around him, there was nothing else to do. He dropped his left wing down, when he had his maximum of speed, and shot into the maelstrom.

He looked down as he sped, hunting for Hurd, but could see nothing—not even the ground.

And then, he broke through. The Germans had been taken by surprise by these two suicidal moves on the part of mad Americans—and far ahead of him, traveling like the wind, sped a single Spad. It was Hurd's.

He was a mile away from the dump before the first Germans saw him and gave chase. He did not even look back after that. His eyes were glued to the crate ahead. It flew steadily, at top speed, homeward.

Then, nearing the lines, he remembered again the note Purdy had given him. He got it out, read it as he deadheaded on.

"I have the whole story, Roth, from the kid himself. And I've something to say on the subject. I understand you heard me apparently bluff him down that night. But you didn't find out later that he came to me, asked me to go into the woods with him, without witnesses. He punched me in the eye with a left. I didn't even see the right start. I woke up later to see him sitting with his back to a tree, regarding me thoughtfully.

He really did get three planes his first time over, Roth. Not only that, as soon as he got over that sock you gave him, he got into his crate and high-tailed it after you. If he is yellow, then I don't know what to make of the rest of us. As for that schoolboy stuff, are you sure he was a coward, that he didn't use you because it was a smart thing to do—in a kid's mind—to let somebody else take the busted noses, if that someone else were not only willing but eager?

But this coventry business. I can see it puzzles you. Maybe, now that you're straight about the kid—who has told me everything—you can find a way out yourself."

Jared Roth raised his eyes, tucked the note into his flying tunic. He stared

ahead toward Hurd's Spad with eyes that were solemn and yet shining. . . .

He landed at the home field, waited for his flight to return. The blowing up of the dump, he soon knew, had cost the lives of two men.

Jared gathered the rest about him for a few words before they all went to Drago to report. He looked them over.

They were grinning, strangely, as though they had forgotten all about coventry. Jared made a clean breast of everything. He'd been mistaken about his brother. A Flight had a right to the truth—so he told them all. They could take him out of coventry or not, as they liked.

"I didn't get wise how mistaken I was," he said, "until I knew that the kid had been first to reach the dump, drop his bombs—"

"Take it easy, Captain," said one of his newest men. "It's all right to make a mistake, but not to hand anything to your brother on a silver platter. He did reach the dump, yes, but he wasn't the first to bomb it. Perhaps you remember pulling out—after the longest dive in history—directly over the dump? Well, old man, you lost a couple of bombs that simply couldn't hold on, gravity being what it is! Give the kid all the credit you care to, and he'll deserve it, but don't give him any of your own! And what you keep, my friend, will take care of coventry, unhappy suspicions, everything—including some decoration for the brothers Roth!"

Jared could think of nothing to say. He looked at Hurd, who had nothing to say, either.

"That will do," said Jared hoarsely. "Dismissed. Report to headquarters to make out your reports! Lieutenant Roth, one moment!"

Hurd stayed behind while the others turned away.

"Yes, Captain?" he asked softly.

"Nothing! Nothing, after all. Carry on!"

But even though the brothers said no more about it, ever, that day they walked to headquarters side by side.

Jared entered first, snapped a sharp glance at the major. The major's lips twitched, but being a major he wouldn't have smiled for all the ammo dumps in Germany—dropped right into his lap!

The Last Dog-fight

Val was in a spot—and I couldn't fire at the Jap without hitting my own flying mate!

"You shot down my pal in cold blood. Maybe you'll get me, too. But—here I come. This is my last dog-fight, Nippon. But it's goin' to be my best one!"

By Orlando Rigoni

I HAD always been accused of getting what I wanted, even at Pensacola, and some guys held it against me. Like Harry Vance, for instance. He and I had run neck and neck in our preliminary training right up to the Grumman Wildcats, but when it came to the 11 G's he couldn't take it. He had a black spot in the wrong place and his pull-outs were dynamite to anybody within a mile of him. He almost broke his neck twice before they gave him the red light. I came through with flying colors, and he seemed to resent it.

Of course there were other things, like the way I worked myself into an assign-

ment on the aircraft carrier, *Granger,* the greatest floating tarmac in the world, through an idea I had about operating routine patrols. It wasn't that I was smart—I just went on the theory that ideas don't grow unless you cultivate them in the right places. And maybe the way I took Harry's girl away from him while at the training station might have had something to do with his distrust of me.

"Coopy Lemons," Harry said to me, "some day I'm going to get even with you." That was before he had washed out on Wildcats.

I thought, after that, I was rid of him, but when I landed on the *Granger,* there was Harry's square, red head glaring at me. He was holding down the rear bucket of a Douglas TBD torpedo bomber.

"Hello, blight," he greeted me as though I was some kind of a termite. But a termite six feet tall and weighing a hundred and seventy could be a dangerous bug.

"So they're using you for ballast," I quipped back, not meaning it. I remembered that Harry Vance had always been good at coördination and hell on the camera guns.

"You pigeons do more squawking than magpies," Val Roberts grinned. "Save your yaps for the Japs."

I forgot to mention Roberts. He was a young kid, who looked younger because of his blue eyes. But sometimes those eyes could turn to ice, especially across the sights of a gun. He didn't look strong, but he had pulled me out of the drink, off Number Four Ramp at Pensy, when my trainer had ducked into the brine and knocked me cold. Since then I felt I owed him something and always kept a close eye on him. We got pretty close, Val and I, like brothers.

I had no trouble with Harry for days after that. We were all busy as hell trying to find Japs and still not have them find us. We heard about the *Saratoga* going down and it made our necks burn. We heard about the Marines landing on the Solomons and demanded to know what the Marines had that we didn't have.

Commander Friesen, called "Icicle" by the crew, put it this way. "A carrier is a weapon composed of a hundred kinds of hell and can do stupendous damage to the enemy if it strikes at the right place and time. But it's vulnerable and must be kept out of reach of enemy torpedoes."

Things became grimmer as the days went by and more long, gray cruisers and destroyers joined our unit. We knew we were heading close to danger. Then Icicle called us fighter pilots into the ready room for a conference.

He brought the orders from "airplot" with him and talked to us earnestly for a few minutes.

"We're going to send out you fighters as preliminary patrols. You'll fly in pairs, each taking the direction assigned to them. We believe there is a Jap carrier and some protecting cruisers within striking distance of our TBD's but we've got to make sure. You must try to keep your presence in the air unknown and if you spot any Jap ships return at once with your report. Don't use the radio unless it's absolutely necessary."

THERE were some more details and a few minutes later we climbed to the flight deck where the Wildcats were already growling deep in their throats. Val Roberts was paired off with me and he boomed down the chalkline first and clawed his way up off the bow of the ship. I scrambled after him, and we hoiked our planes for the green sky which blended with the water all about us.

We wound up to ten thousand and choked down the 1200 Wasps to cut down on the noise. We flew about a quarter of a mile apart, from which distance we could still signal with our wings or hands but our exhausts didn't blend into one

loud blast. We had to keep from being spotted by any ships lurking below. After about an hour of flying S.S.W. I took one last look at the gray water below us preparatory to heading back for the *Granger*.

Val and I were both so intent upon finding something to report that we forgot the sky above us until there was a shrill whine and the vicious rattle of machine guns!

I felt my throat constrict and waited for the bullets to beat into my back. I was conscious of gripping the stick too hard, but for a moment I couldn't pull it toward me. I was paralyzed. It wasn't exactly fear; it was a sort of dismay at the suddenness of the attack.

But the bullets didn't come at me. I jerked a look across the sky and felt my chest crawl as Val's Grumman wallowed under the beating of the Zero fighter which was snarling across his back.

I whipped my controls across against my knee and kicked the rudder hard. My Wildcat did a wingstand as it verticaled around against top rudder. I saw Val slumped forward in the cockpit of his Grumman and it looked like he was trying to fix something. Then I knew he had been hit and a choking fury swept over me.

The Jap bellied out of his dive and zoomed on the far side of Val Roberts, making it impossible for me to get in a long shot. But Val wasn't entirely done with fighting. He gamely pulled his Wildcat up, flopped over and came down with his guns spurting flame.

Then suddenly Val's guns stopped spouting and I knew they had been shorted.

"Kick out, buddy. For God's sake clear the way!" I yelled. I still couldn't get a clear shot, and the Jap was making it harder for me.

That Jap fighter was no ordinary pilot. He seemed to know every buzzard trick there was. As Val's guns choked off, the Jap did a whip-stall, walked off the top and nosed down with his guns going like hell.

Val's engine exploded in a sheet of flame and I saw the kid claw his way out of the cockpit and hit the silk. That should have been his exit, his final bow, but the Jap didn't think so. With fiendish skill he whipped about and hosed cupro into Val's helpless form dangling on the chute!

It might sound as though I hadn't been doing anything during all this, but I was doing all I could. The action lasted only a fraction of a minute and the Jap had been clever enough to keep himself in such a position that my bullets would hit Val if I fired my guns.

With Val gone, the Jap waggled his wings as though in salute and gunned his Zero toward the northeast—the direction from which Val and I had come. I saw that Val was dead and I could do nothing for him. My next thought was of revenge. I kicked my Wildcat around and poured go-grease to the Wasp.

I JABBED out one long burst, but the range was too far for a direct hit. I cursed and figured out how the Jap happened to be there. Like Val and I, he must have been sent out to scout around for American ships. The Japs must have suspected the proximity of the *Granger* and had hoped to sneak up on it. I realized that this Jap must be knocked down before he sighted the *Granger* and could radio the news back to his own carrier.

Gradually I gained on the slower Zero. Soon I was close enough to attack. I nosed down a little, caught the turtle-back of the Zero in my sights and gave out with the Brownings.

The results were satisfactory, though not too devastating at first. I wanted to play around with that Nip and kill him off slow. It's a hell of a thing to say, but that's how I felt—I was so damned upset over the death of Val Roberts.

The first burst caused the Zero to turn in a slow circle, but the Jap rectified about the time I came even with him. He turned and smashed one burst at me. I heard the bullets ping through my cowling, smelled the acrid odor of the tracers. I jerked around and cut a hole through the belly of his ship but somehow I failed to hit him.

He turned and tried to run away again, toward the *Granger*. He was game enough, and he gained some speed by losing altitude. I gritted my teeth and went after him again, hate still boiling in me. I smashed out my next burst too soon, but it damaged his elevators and the next moment he was diving sharply for the water.

I followed him down, suspecting a trick. Far ahead I caught the smoke of a destroyer—one of ours. If the Nip had seen it, he would be radioing back the information this minute. I must stop him.

But as I zoomed down on him I saw that he had his hands full trying to steady his Mitsubushi Zero. He managed to flatten a little and I noticed he had the greenhouse open. At the shock of hitting the water, he seemed to catapult from the cockpit. For a moment he was lost in a volcano of water and foam, but as I swung back over him I saw that his rubber raft had already popped out and he was clinging to it.

It was then I had to battle with myself. Every fiber of my being cried out for me to kill him, every surge of my pulse shouted the word, "Kill—kill—kill. . . ." My thumb settled against the gun button as I craved revenge for the way he had killed Val.

But my better judgment prevented the mistake. A live Jap prisoner from a carrier lurking in these waters would be worth ten thousand dead ones. If he could be made to talk, he might save us the loss of a thousand men, the carrier and some of the supporting cruisers and destroyers.

I told myself too that there would be little satisfaction in killing a rat lying helpless in the sea. If I did that I would put myself down to his level and be what I hated him for being—a murderer. But far back in my brain lurked the sly hope that I might somehow contrive to kill him later in a fair fight.

Then I headed my plane for the plume of smoke on the horizon and, wheeling in for the wind, I settled toward the stern of the *Granger*. I caught the signal officer's paddles against the white spot and nosed in blind for the deck. I cut my motor at the signal and saw the hot-pappas standing by with their fire squashers, but I made a normal landing and felt the arresting cable snag the hook.

Icicle happened to be on the bridge. When I reported to my squadron leader that I had knocked down a prisoner and gave the location, a talker relayed the information to the bridge. Icicle was so tickled he congratulated me there and then.

"I never hoped for such luck, Lemons," Icicle said over the speaker. "I'll have him picked up at once. Thank God you didn't kill him—"

"Not that I didn't want to, sir," I said grimly, thinking of how Val Roberts had died.

"I understand," Icicle said, pulling his long nose.

LATER I was sitting under the propeller rack on the hangar deck to the right of the plane elevator, enjoying a fag. There were some other men lounging on the steel deck while some plane handlers were hoisting a TBD topside.

Suddenly Harry Vance legged up to me, his face as flushed as his red hair, and his big fists balled. I never knew, until then, how much Harry had thought of Val Roberts.

"Damn you, Coopy," Harry snarled at me, "you're still a sly weasel!"

The hair stiffened on my neck and I rose slowly to my feet. I was taller than Harry, but not as heavy.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, a little puzzled.

"I mean you let Val Roberts die just so you could capture the Nip alive. You knew it would be a feather in your hat, so you didn't try to kill him. You let him live long enough to kill Val—"

I saw red then. "You're a damned liar!" I bellowed.

The hangar deck seemed to come alive as the men rose and edged toward us. I ducked a little too slow and Harry's first blow got me on the side of the head, knocking my teeth loose. That made me all the madder. I lunged in, threw my fist at the red splotch of his face and felt my knuckles explode against his mouth.

Harry lost his balance and fell back against the slanting bulkhead, ending up in a cubbyhole cut back into the steel wall. He looked sort of funny and the rest of the men haw-hawed him, which didn't help his disposition any.

Before Harry could get back into action a crew chief lunged in between us and cried: "You crazy galoots, you can't fight here. Do you want to be caged for the duration? Bust it up!"

That was good common sense and I walked off, leaving Harry behind to glare at me.

THE NIP prisoner was brought aboard from a destroyer after dark. They had found him serenely smoking in the rubber raft. How he had kept his tobacco dry is a mystery. He proved to be a graduate of an American university and spoke English better than most of us.

Commander Icicle Friesen called me up to his quarters later, when he was questioning the Jap pilot, wishing to check up on some of the Nip's statements. The Nip refused to admit that he had murdered Val in cold blood.

As I sat across from him in the small room my fingers itched to tear into his short, brown throat. There he was, a product of our American education, flying planes the design of which had been stolen from our own planes and using guns either bought in America or designed after such guns—and he was smiling at us disdainfully.

I realized, as I looked at him, that we Americans had been fools long enough. We had showered Tokyo and Yokohama with food and money after their disastrous earthquakes, and all for this—that they might spit on us and tell us we were fools.

"You deserve no mercy, Kobioko," I told him grimly. "You shot a man who couldn't defend himself."

"You are fools, you Americans," Kobioko said with a lift of his flat eyes. "This is war, and a dead pilot cannot rise up to fight again. If you think I will tell you the truth, you might as well kill me."

"We don't fight like that," Icicle said calmly. "You know that Americans don't kill for pleasure so you can afford to be brave. However, we might borrow some of your countrymen's 'civilized' methods of getting information."

Kobioko grinned his foolish grin and shrugged. "As my countrymen say, *shigata ga nai*—it can't be helped."

Icicle went on patiently, "I could have you shot for killing a prisoner of war. A pilot who has bailed out of his doomed ship unarmed must be considered as such."

"I'd love to do the shooting," I put in fiercely, and Kobioko gave me a venomous look.

"What do you wish to know?" the Jap said flatly.

"Is there a carrier out there to the southeast of us?"

"Do you think I came from a planet?" Kobioko replied. "Of course there's a carrier."

"Where is its general location?"

"They move continually. How can I tell where it is?"

"How many naval vessels are in the unit?"

"Enough to send all of your pitiful task force to the bottom," Kobioko said arrogantly.

More questioning drew the same meaningless answers, and finally Icicle gave up in disgust. He ordered the Jap stripped of all his personal effects, including tobacco, and put on a bread-and-water diet.

As I left the room, Icicle muttered, "It would be worth ten years of my life to surprise that carrier and sink her."

I remembered the words and the way he had said them, and my mind began to function.

THE NEXT morning we failed to sight the Jap carrier on our early patrol, and though it seemed logical that the Japs would send out planes to search for the missing pilot, they must have been afraid such action would endanger their position.

After patrol I went up to talk to Icicle personally and beg permission to visit Kobioko and batter the truth out of him. All the night before I had dreamed about Val and how helpless he had looked dangling on the chute with Jap bullets puncturing him. I wasn't sure just what I would do if I got with Kobioko alone.

Icicle seemed to think the same thing, and at first refused to grant my request.

"We haven't got time to fool with him," I insisted. "If we're going to contact his carrier we've got to do it soon. I've got a hunch they're about to rendezvous with some Jap warships somewhere ahead of us."

"Suppose you can't make him talk?"

"I can try."

"And kill him maybe." Icicle looked at me shrewdly as he said this.

Finally he gave me some confidential advice and finished by giving me the green light on the conference with the Nip. It wasn't going to be any ordinary conversation, I made sure of that. I still had a score to settle with the yellow dog and I wanted to do it my way, alone and without interference.

I wore my sidearm—a Colt automatic—as I prepared for the visit. Thinking I might be called for patrol while in the cell with Kobioko I dressed in my full flying togs, including my Mae West and goggles—everything but my chute. Then I intercepted the galley slave who was bringing the bread and water to Kobioko and offered to take it in myself.

The cell in which Kobioko was kept was a small storeroom at one end of the hangar deck. There was no regular guard before the door because it was locked; besides, a man could hardly escape from a ship manned with two thousand crew members.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Fighting Aces, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1942. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Fighting Aces, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fictioneers Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Popular Publications Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders, owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of October, 1942. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 4W359. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

I let myself into the storeroom and didn't bother to lock the door behind me. Kobioko looked up quickly and the hate in his eyes turned to surprise at finding me there. He looked me over quickly, careful not to let his eyes dwell too long on my automatic.

"So. You have come to kill me," he said angrily.

"I wish I could. But we Americans like to give a man a chance. I'm giving you one. Where is the approximate location of your carrier now?"

"I told you before; I don't know."

"That's a lie, Kobi," I said. "This is the way we cure liars." I stepped forward and struck him across the mouth with the back of my hand.

His breath hissed in and if ever hate crawled in a man's eyes and flesh, it crawled over the Jap. The insult to his pride was much worse than the pain of the blow. I knew how the Nips dreaded losing face. They must always appear to be heroes, even if they are cowards underneath.

"You shall regret this," he snarled.

I laughed at him and his anger increased. "I'll take my chances on that," I said. "Tell me where your carrier was heading and how many ships were in the force."

"You're wasting your breath."

I struck him harder this time and he fell back against a box, but quickly regained his feet. I lit a cigarette with maddening deliberation and blew smoke into his face. I saw the hunger for tobacco grip his throat, but he was too desperately angered to admit of such trivial things.

"That's just a sample," I warned him. "Next time I'll knock your teeth out."

I JEERED him, goaded him. I wanted to break his neck, but I didn't, for I remembered Icicle's advice. I lost one smoke and in trying to light another the match flipped out of my hand and fell on the deck. I stepped past Kobioko and bent down. I felt something tug at my hip and when he whipped around there was the Jap crouching like an animal near the door, my automatic bulging angrily from his fist.

"I told you you are a fool," he said slowly.

I stiffened and forced a smile. "You wouldn't dare shoot me," I told him. "At the sound of the shot the whole crew would come running."

"You insult my intelligence. I'll not shoot you unless you force me to. Get out of your clothes!"

I undressed, trying to appear awkward so that he would think I was afraid. He managed to squirm into my rig by changing the gun from one hand to the other, but to make sure I didn't attack him, he made me turn my back and hang by my hands from a beam at the back of the room.

I got a glimpse of him as he slipped through the door. For a Jap he was taller than average and though my clothes were too long for him, the ankle straps held the legs in place and the Mae West held the rest of it close about him. I noticed that he held the automatic hidden under the Mae West and, with the goggles down, he was quite effectively disguised.

I gave him time enough to make the ladder to the main deck before I dropped to my feet and hurried through the door. From here on I couldn't afford to lose a minute. There was no chance for donning another flying suit. I rushed out in my dungarees and undershirt and lunged for the ladder.

As I piled topside I heard Harry Vance screaming behind me, "Coopy turned the Nip loose! Stop him—"

I didn't hear any more. As I reached the flight deck I saw an old Grumman shooting off the tune-up line. I fought my way through the confused mechanics who had been driven back by Kobioko's

gun. There was one more Grumman idling over and I scrambled aboard just as I was.

I boomed off without waiting for clearance. I heard the chief mechanic yelling something at me, but I couldn't make out just what it was.

I wound up fast and took out after the Jap. He was making a bee-line toward the southeast, never looking back, and I felt a glow of relief when I realized I had guessed right. The Nip's bravery had left him, and he was so thankful at being free that he would head directly for his carrier and report the location of the *Granger*.

I chuckled softly to myself and lifted up another thousand. Kobioko's Wildcat was without radio—I had checked that. It was an old ship ready for the scrap heap, but still able to fly and fight so long as nothing failed because of the action of the salt water.

I reached for my own radio plug and then a cold chill gripped me. My ship had no radio! It must have been taken out for checking. Or could it be that I had the wrong ship? Did Kobioko have the ship with the radio? If he had he would broadcast the position of the *Granger* as soon as he could contact his carrier.

For a moment I felt whipped. I gunned the Wasp determined to stop the Jap at all costs. I had two reasons for wanting to kill him now, and I had to kill him fast if at all.

It took me some time to reach a spot over him and make the attack. I held my eyes on the sights as I felt the Wildcat pick up speed. The Jap's plane grew in the sights, and I could see with it the bloody face of Val Roberts cheering me on.

I had deliberately planned for this moment—this chance to kill Val's murderer on equal terms. But the Jap didn't want to be killed. I got in one burst which hit a wing but failed to slow him up. Before I could turn and get into position for another shot, he was out ahead of me again, steadily forging in the same direction.

I screamed after him, thumbs tight, eyes steady. My tracer crept along the back of the Wildcat below me and then the Jap slipped off the groove and kept on going. Cursing, I made the mistake of trying to bluff him into turning and zoomed across his nose.

I ran right into a burst of bullets which clawed through my pit like hailstones fresh from hell. I felt my right arm go numb. Pain raked across my back. I had a hard time trying to keep my right foot in the rudder boot.

"Damn you to hell, here's one for Val!" I screamed, and wheeling tightly I bored in with a deflection shot.

At first I thought the hit he had scored on my cockpit had given him courage, for he slipped around to charge me, but soon I saw he had other reasons for feeling cocky. Three Zero fighters were buzzing up from the surface mists, and far below I saw the dim outlines of the Jap carrier.

I began to suspect that my plan had gone haywire. I was in a spot from which escape seemed impossible. By now Kobioko had certainly radioed the position of the *Granger* to the Japs. For one moment of revenge I had jeopardized thousands of lives. . . .

But all this was swept from my mind as I saw Kobioko's plane heading straight for me. I saw his monkeylike face behind the windscreen. I didn't think of dodging. I pumped out death and saw his prop splinter, saw holes punch through his windscreen. Then I caught a glimpse of his ugly smile being blotted out by blood.

I lifted my Wildcat over his doomed plane and felt a sensation akin to drunkenness over having killed him. Squaring off for the attack of the other Zeros, I was stunned to see them diving in a vain attempt to stop ten Yank torpedo bombers which were roaring down upon the trapped carrier.

THE NEXT half hour was one of hellish confusion, and though my guns were empty I hung around to see the show and follow the TBD's home. Some of the fighters managed to get into the air, but four of our torpedoes made direct hits upon the Nip carrier, leaving the fighters with no place to land.

Back on the *Granger,* Harry Vance did a lot of crowing. "I saw the Nip escape and got the TBD's into action," he kept saying. Everyone was too thrilled with the victory to dispute him at the time. Harry even seemed to find some affection for me, declaring that if it hadn't been for me he would never have had the chance to become a hero.

But later, after having had my flesh wounds taken care of, I was alone with Icicle in his quarters and smoking one of his finest cigars.

He grinned across at me and said: "Do you think I'll be suspected of having a hand in the business, Lemons? It certainly wasn't very conventional naval strategy—"

"I'll take the rap for it, sir," I offered. I was guilty.

"Rap, hell!" he exploded. "It was a fine piece of figuring on your part. You had to be able to understand the Jap's psychology."

"I was scared for a minute when I found my radio missing," I admitted ruefully.

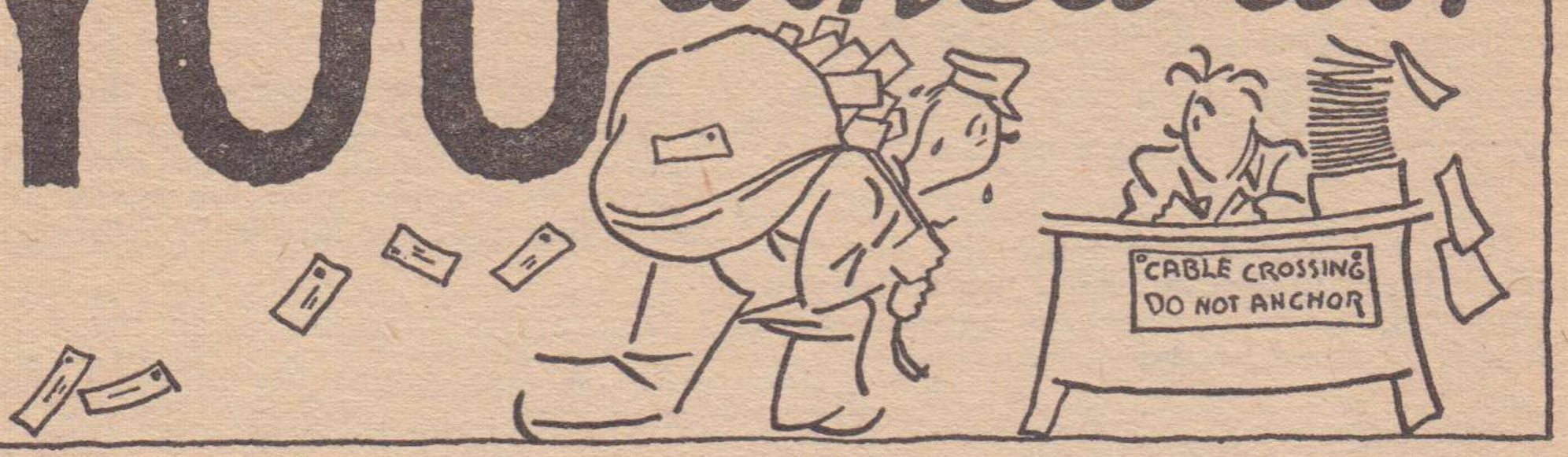
"We decided to take the radios out of both ships at the last moment, fearing the Jap might take the wrong one. He had to believe he was making a legitimate escape or he wouldn't have headed straight for his carrier," Icicle explained.

"I wasn't expecting the TBD's so soon, either."

"Had 'em keep you in sight, Lemons. It meant faster action and greater surprise. I'll have to report this whole action as stemming from your negligence while visiting the prisoner, but in view of the circumstances I'll recommend your offense be overlooked and you be given a decoration instead."

"Never mind the medal," I protested. "Give it to Harry Vance. All I wanted was the hide of that Jap jackal—and I've salted it down in Davey Jones' smokehouse!"

YOU asked us!



If you have an aero query that has been puzzling you, fire away and we'll try to answer it here. All questions will be answered in the order in which they are received.

I would like to become an Army Flying Cadet, but since I wear glasses I understand that my chances are pretty slim. I use glasses only for reading purposes, though. Is there any way I can become a military flyer? Earl Just, Bronx, N. Y.

Unfortunately, the Army Air Force is not accepting for flight training candidates who wear glasses, unless their vision is 20/20 without corrective lenses. You can, however, become a glider pilot. Your vision must still be good, of course, but applicants wearing glasses are accepted. After completing the course, there's a good chance of being commissioned.

From all the pictures of the Republic P-47 I've seen, it appears that six wing machine guns are fitted. And yet I've read that the ship is the most heavily armed fighter in the world. I would like to know if it carries any synchronized guns, and whether or not it is fitted with a supercharger. William Yerkow, Keyport, N. J.

I have had opportunity to inspect the P-47 quite thoroughly and can tell you that it mounts more than six guns. The blast tubes of only six are apparent, but there are others set in the leading edge of the wing outer panels. Because of military restrictions, however, it would probably be unwise to state here the exact number and caliber of guns. I can tell you, though, that one pilot on landing had neglected to cut out the gun relay and that by mistake he squeezed the stick-top trip. Bullets from the plane ripped into the garage and almost tore it to shreds before the pilot realized what was happening! There is also a supercharger, a huge one, of the turbo type, driven by exhaust fumes, but I cannot tell you its location—also because of secrecy.

In magazine articles I've noticed that reference is often made to mock-ups. Can you tell me what a mock-up is and and how it is used? Joel Horowitz, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Roughly speaking, there are two types of mock-ups used in aircraft manufacture, one for making plaster-casting molds and the other for placement purposes on a new plane—though any model or dummy structure can be called a mock-up. As a general rule, however, when a writer mentions a mock-up he is referring to a dummy airplane. Before a plane is built, the experimental section makes one full-size model of the ship in wood. By utilizing this, engineers can place various installations and be sure that their calculations are correct. Also, production men can make various breakdowns, so that necessary parts can be built for construc-

tion purposes. All this might sound confusing, but, simply, a mock-up is actually nothing but a full-size model used to make the whole job a little easier and to check up on the calculations of engineers.

The Wright Brothers made the first airplane flight in history, but I wonder if you could tell me who made the absolute first flight? Leonard Gordon, Chicago, Ill.

The very first successful venture into the air was in 1783, and the man who made the ascent was Francois Pilatre des Roziers. Stephen and Joseph Montgolfier made the balloon, which was constructed of paper with linen lining. It was 74 feet high and 48 feet in diameter. The bottom opening was 15 feet across, surrounded by a wickerwork gallery three feet broad. Des Roziers made several "captive" flights, and on November 21, 1783, he and the Marquis d'Arlandes undertook the first "free" flight. The balloon rose to a height of about 3,000 feet and flew for approximately one and three-quarter miles before finally coming down.

I would like to know why dive-bombers are fitted with diving brakes. If you put brakes on a plane it makes it slower, and I always thought that dive-bombers were supposed to dive at a very high speed. Hollis Mawson, Rochester, N. Y.

Dive-bombers are supposed to plunge at a high rate of speed, yes; but if they go too fast the pilot has no control and cannot aim with accuracy. That's the reason for diving brakes. The main advantage of dive-bombers is not necessarily the speed attained in the dive, but that the ship can be used with greater accuracy, as a rule, than high-level bombers. Too, they are used for demoralizing effects, as by the Germans during the Battles of Poland and France. Both the U. S. Army and Navy have dive-bombers—and have used them well against the Japs—but the British are still not "sold" on the idea and have no true dive-bombers in service.

I've seen various figures on the number of guns installed in the Defiant, but these figures differ greatly. Could you tell me exactly how many guns are mounted and where they are? Joe Micals, St. Albans, N. Y.

There has probably been more prop-wash written about the number of guns on the Defiant than on any other job. Some say that it has a total of 21, and others say that there are up to six turret guns and from four to eight wing guns. But none of these are accurate. The machine has only four guns—and they are mounted in the rear power-operated turret. There are no guns provided for the pilot, and the gunner is usually a commissioned officer and in command of the ship. The Defiant was developed as a night fighter and it saw its first combat action during the Battle of Norway. Because of this rear armament, the Germans had to evolve new tactics in order to fight against it.

What happened to all those Curtiss P-36A Mohawks that were shipped from this country right before France was defeated—and what about those that were in active service when the French eventually gave in to the Nazis? Also, I would like to know if our Army is using the P-36A for fighting purposes. Samuel Bucher, Philmont, N. Y.

Scores of Mohawks are still down in Martinique, according to all reports. They were shipped that far before the fall of France, and then it was useless to try to take them any farther. It is also reported that the Nazis were using some of these craft, which were turned over to them by the French, for operations against the British. No, the P-36A is no longer being used by the Army for fighting purposes. As far as I have been able to determine, they have not been used at all by our forces, but it's possible that there were a few in the Philippine Islands. The Filipino Air Force used old Boeing

P-26A's against the Japs, and there's a possibility that they also had a few P-36A's. The P-40 series craft are merely more refined versions of the P-36A, however, and they are very definitely in service.

Can you tell me anything about the de Havilland Mosquito bomber? This is one British plane about which I haven't been able to dig up any information. Leo Strieby, Sheboygan, Wis.

You haven't been able to find out anything about the Mosquito because it's an entirely new ship; as a matter of fact, data came through on it only recently. It has a span of 54 feet 2 inches, a length of 40 feet 9½ inches, a height of 15 feet 3 inches. Armanent consists of four 20mm. cannon and four .303 caliber machine guns. Classed as a reconnaissance-bomber, it is built entirely of wood and appears somewhat similar to the Beaufighter. The top speed of the Mosquito is still a military secret, but their pilots while raiding have outrun Focke-Wulf Fw. 190 fighters which have a top speed of 375 m.p.h.

I would like to have the records of the highest aces of the first World War. These are for a school composition, and I would appreciate it if you could dig them up for me. Douglas Pearson, Pontiac, Mich.

Highest-ranking First World War aces were: Richthofen, 80 victories; Fonck, 75 victories; Mannock, 73 victories; Bishop, 72 victories; Collishaw, 68 victories; Udet, 62 victories; McCudden, 58 victories; Lowenhardt, 56 victories; Barker, 53 victories; Fulland, 53 victories; Guynemer, 53 victories; Proctor, 52 victories. Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, of course, was the greatest American ace, with 25 confirmed victories.

What's the difference between the PBY-5 and the PBY-5A? They are both called Catalina, and I don't quite get it. Ernie Aaron, Chattanooga, Tenn.

The PBY-5A is merely an amphibian version of the PBY-5 flying boat. They have the same dimensions, use the same engines, and have the same performance, so there is really no reason to have two names. Of course, they are both built by Consolidated. They are also used by the British, and the Russians have a similar machine.

Can you tell me if our manufacturers ever reached that 60,000 plane quota for 1942, and whether they will be able to turn out 125,000 in 1943? That's an awfully large order. I've never seen actual production figures. Ben Johnson, Birmingham, Ala.

And you probably won't see production figures, either. Our Army doesn't want the Axis to know how many planes we've turned out, for understandable reasons, but a few months ago, according to reports, we were well ahead of the schedule. That 60,000 figure, you know, included all types and not only combat models. Cargo planes, liaison ships, personnel transports, and all others were included. As to this year, that is also something that cannot be discussed.

A short time ago I saw pictures of the Japanese Zero in the newsreel, and I was amazed at the striking similarity to the Focke-Wulf Fw. 190. Do you think that it's a copy of that German type? Robert Salmon, San Francisco, Calif.

Yes, there is a very definite similarity, but from comparing detailed drawings and photographs of the two planes it is easy to see that they are not identical. As far as copying is concerned, the Fw. 190 itself appears to be a cross between the Curtiss P-36A and the Vultee Vanguard!

THESE BABIES CAN TAKE IT!

By DAVID C. COOKE

The giant of death which can outblitz anything Nazi-made —the Flying Fortress!

FROM the blood-soaked soil of Hunan Province of the scarred ruins of industrial France and the Rhineland, American airmen are blasting the Nipponazis to hell. In a cold-blooded, methodical way they are forcing the totalitarian pirates to give ground in the air, to sacrifice their best equipment, to withdraw desperately needed first-line sky forces from other fronts in the fruitless task of defense.

The Gilbert and Marshal Island deeds will always demand a page in history books, because of the havoc that was wrought there by Yank airmen; the Coral Sea and Midway will demand chapters for the defensive actions which proved in reality to be offensive blows; the Solomon Islands campaign will demand a section to explain fully the dynamic first planned offensive carried out against the Japs.

But the initial days of battle in the Philippine Islands will always stand foremost in the annals of American courage, side by side with Bunker Hill, Valley Forge and the Second Battle of the Marne. For there, with the barest of formidable equipment and the smallest number of troops, American air and land forces held the enemy at bay for weeks, utterly destroying his timetable of blood

lust. And one of the outstanding flights of that outstanding campaign was that in which the Army Air Forces captain, Hewett T. Wheless, acted as pilot of a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bomber.

Operating from the island of Mindanao on a Sunday, five Flying Fortresses winged toward Legaspi Gulf on the lower tip of Luzon to attack Japanese transports which were landing troops on the Philippines. The enemy had a comparatively large fleet in the Gulf, and it was up to the bombers to destroy as many of the vessels as possible.

After covering only approximately 100 miles of their 400-mile route to the Gulf, the flight ran into very bad weather and the pilots were forced to fly on instruments. Then, at 14,000 feet altitude, Captain Wheless' number two engine overheated to such an extent that it stopped running completely. He dropped out of the formation and descended to a lower altitude, but the crew got the ailing power plant working again and they were able to proceed toward their destination.

In commenting on the flight, Captain Wheless said, after the defective engine had started running again, "We lost the others and so I figured that I might get there first. Of course, the Japs had pursuit ships on the ground and I knew that I'd have to get in and out before they got me. I was also figuring on protection of the clouds to dodge the pursuits afterward, me with a bum number two engine."

The Fortress continued on toward Legaspi, keeping about 50 miles out to sea. They were on top of a cloud layer and were trying desperately to find an open spot. And even though the ground was still blanked out by the low-hanging clouds, Wheless ordered the bomb-bay doors opened and the bombsight set up for use. They were at 9,500 feet and approximately five miles from the objective, according to the captain's calculations.

Then they received still one more lucky break, for immediately over the target there was a hole in the clouds and Wheless was able to observe the objective—six Jap transports lined up near the shore.

The other Fortresses had already paid their visit and Wheless knew that this time the Japs would be ready and would not be caught by surprise, as they probably had been by the four-plane initial attack. At 2:25 P.M. he ordered his bombardier to line up the transports according to orders and regardless of opposition.

In describing what happened, Captain Wheless said, "There the target was, waiting for us to go in, when the rear gunner told me: 'Two squadrons of pursuits are coming along. One's on the right and one's on the left.'

"I said: 'Open fire as soon as you think they're in range. We're going in now.'

"I could have turned around, of course, and dived back into the clouds. But I was in position for the run and I figured I might just as well get rid of the bombs. Meanwhile, the first two of the Japs—pursuits, with the red ball of the Rising Sun on them—came in from the sides. A gunner on each side got them. The gunners were holding their fire until the Japs were close; then they let go. The Japs came right into the fire and probably we delayed too long because a third Jap was coming in directly into our tail.

"They were flying in for us fast and bullets were striking the fuselage. Our bottom guns—the tunnel guns—were going and bullets were coming past me, so I had no doubt that there was somebody behind them who didn't like us. But I was going in; it took, I guess, about thirty seconds when the bombardier called up: 'Bombs away! Bomb-bay doors closed! Kick them in the behind!'

"I made for the cloud cover then."

AFTER the bombardier had dropped his bombs, anti-aircraft fire caught the Fortress and shot out the number two engine. The plane slipped off in that direction and dropped to 3,500 feet.

As the machine turned back on its homeward journey, a running fight between the bomber and 18 Japanese Zeros and fighters that looked like Messerschmitts continued for 75 miles.

During the first minutes of the fight, the radio operator was killed, the engineer's right hand was shot off and one gunner was crippled. Also, one engine was shot out, one gas tank was hit, the radio was shot off and the oxygen system was entirely destroyed. Out of 11 control cables, all but four were shot away. The rear landing wheel was blown off completely, and the two main landing wheels were shot flat.

The Fortress moved away from the base fairly fast, considering all that it had suffered.

Williams, one of the gunners, had his thigh split from the knee to the hip by an explosive bullet. He had been operating the top gun, and when he was hit he was knocked to the floor and couldn't stand up, although he continued to try to get up to the gun. A tourniquet was put on his leg after they finally escaped the enemy. The other gunner—Sgt. Russell Brown, now nicknamed "All Guns"—although slightly wounded in the wrist, manned all of the rear guns. He jumped back and forth like a madman and personally accounted for four Japs for certain, and possibly more. The engineer, whose hand had been shot off, also operated a gun, steadying it as well as possible with one hand.

Members of the crew said that bullets were everywhere, like swarms of red-hot bees. They flowed up from the rear of the ship and shot past Wheless and his co-pilot. But due to the strength of the armor plate at their backs neither was scratched, although the dashboard was "pretty well tinkered up."

The fight continued until the remaining Japanese pursuit ships had exhausted their ammunition and were forced to turn back. The number four gas tank was leaking badly and had lost about 200 gallons of fuel. Wheless also had to cut out his number one engine, because of the damage it had suffered. And to make it worse, the number three engine was smoking badly. That left only one good engine and one damaged engine to pull a plane that normally used four!

BECAUSE of the damage to the control cables, Wheless was able to fly only straight, without turning or banking. And by the time he had reached the home base back in Mindanao, one of the two remaining engines had run out of gas. There they were, without fuel or daylight, to circle around until the ground crew had time to remove the barricades which had been set up to keep Jap planes from landing unexpectedly!

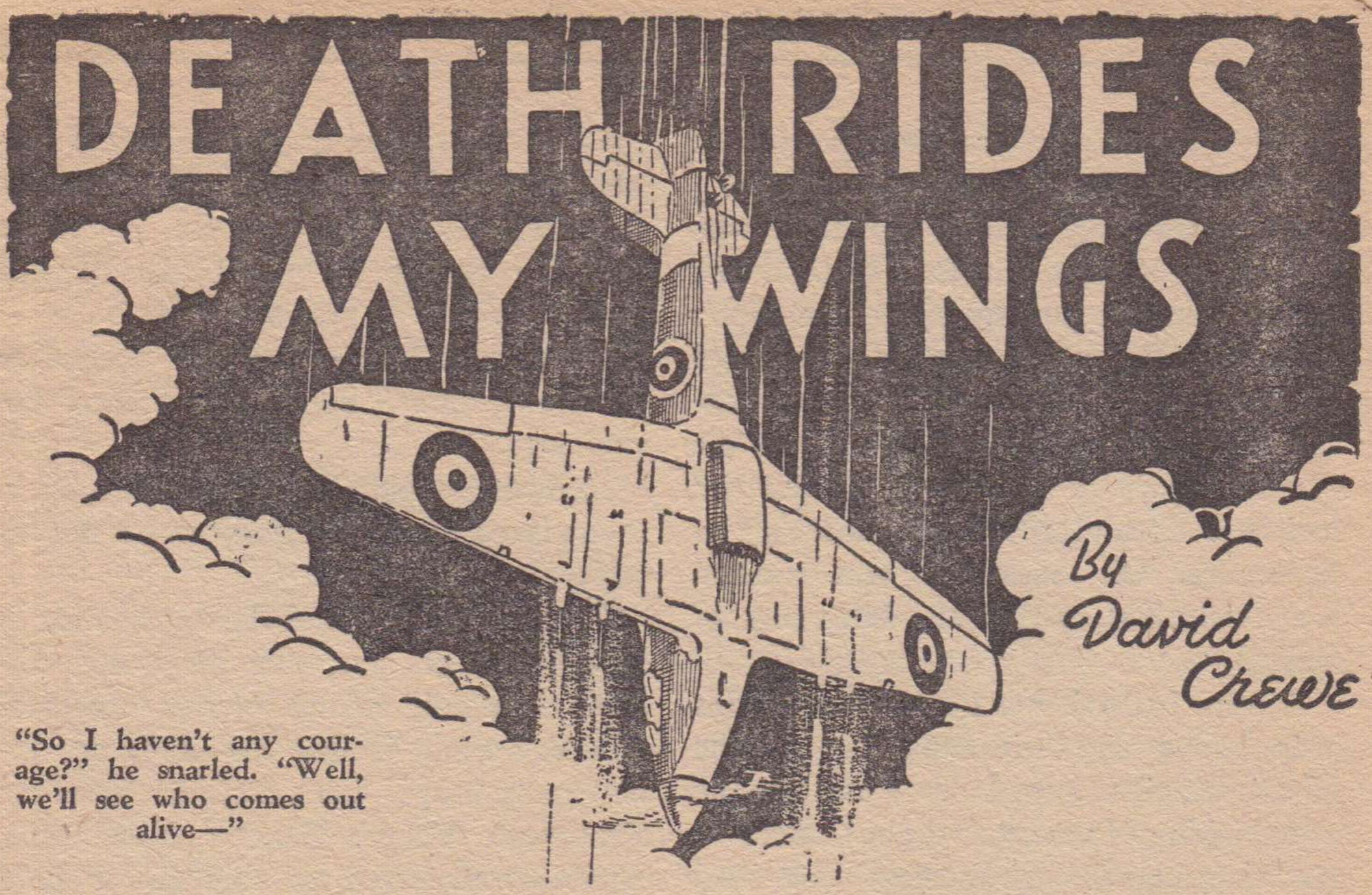
Even though the captain felt certain that the landing gear was next to useless, he let the wheels down. He said that he couldn't risk a belly landing, because there was no way of strapping the wounded down.

It had to be a crash landing.

It was too dark to see anything but a dim outline of the field, but because of lack of gas the Fortress had to come in anyway. They broke off the top of a palm tree in making the approach, and then the wheels touched. The ship skidded along on its flat tires, which the captain had locked, and then suddenly stopped and went up on its nose.

"When we got back the plane looked like a sieve," Wheless said, "but the holes just gave us more fresh air inside. These babies—Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses—can take it, and they certainly live up to their reputation!"

DEATH RIDES MY WINGS



By David Crewe

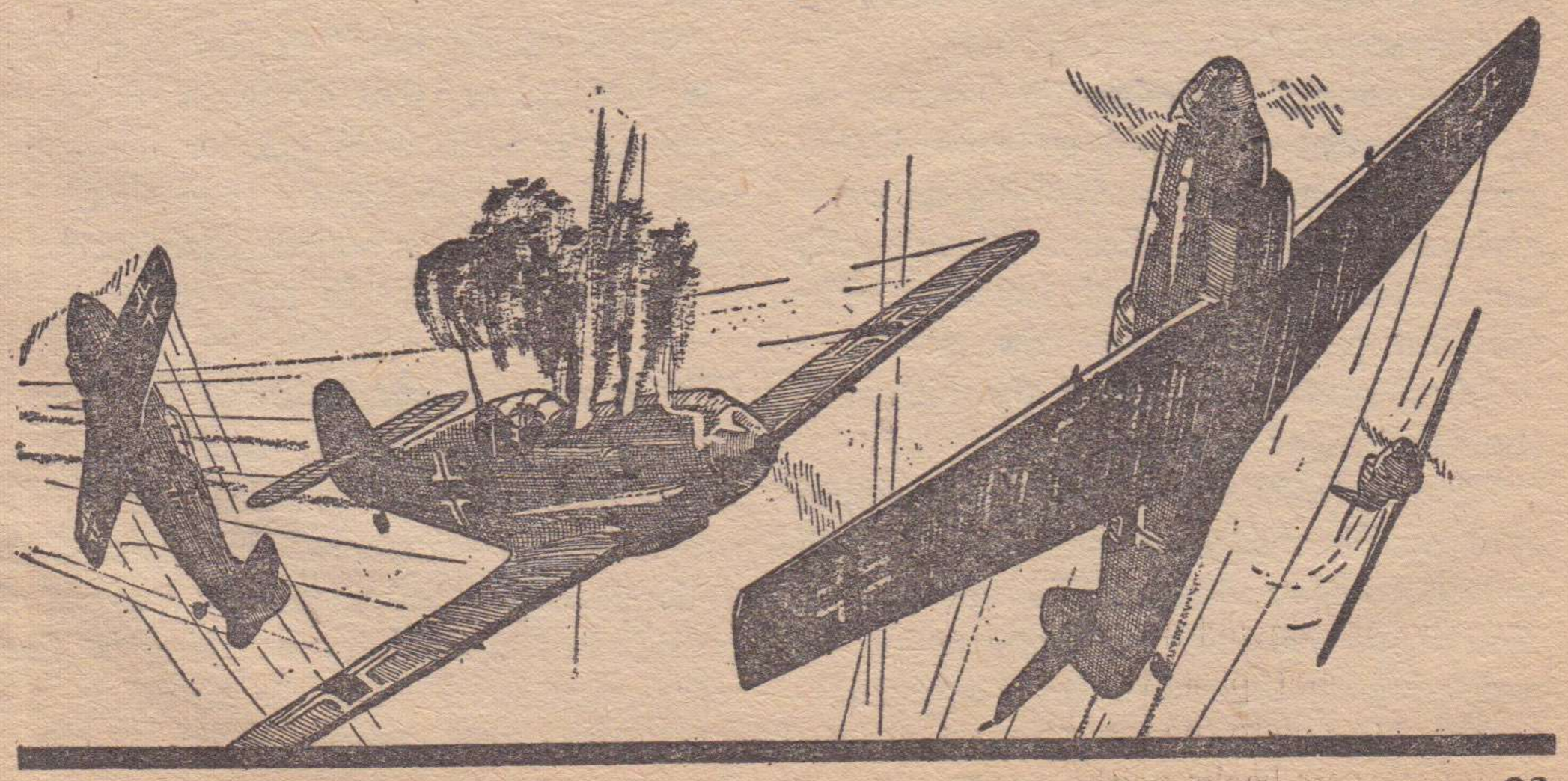
"So I haven't any courage?" he snarled. "Well, we'll see who comes out alive—"

AT 8,500 feet above the scorched sands of Libya, Flight Lieutenant Ainslee's hands suddenly tightened on his plane's controls. Four Messerschmitts were running down on him in a neatly executed surprise attack!

It had never happened to him before, and Ainslee thought dryly that it would never happen again. For as surely as he was alive now, he would be a dead pigeon within the next few minutes.

The lads back at Fighter 12 had always looked up to him as a flyer who at all times demonstrated the perfect blend of caution and daring. He planned carefully before going into action. Always he made sure that the various factors added

"Have a good time, Heinie. Yuh got me where you want me. But remember—some day my bullets will be chasin' you down from the sky—an' then it'll be my turn to laugh!"



up and fitted together—and always the lads of B Flight had come out on top.

There was only a single individual who refused to look at Ainslee's method and record from the positive side. The chap's name was Redworth, and he was leader of D Flight—which until Ainslee's promotion, had held the high bracket in the combat record of Fighter 12. Redworth had been openly critical of Ainslee's battle tactics. On more than one occasion his words had carried the bitterness of malice.

Ainslee had tried to ignore Redworth's insinuations and criticisms, but as the Messerschmitts leaped down on him he was thinking of the other flight lieutenant. He remembered an incident that had happened a few nights before.

The flyers had finished dinner, and they were gathered in the steel and canvas lounge that adjoined the mess tent. Redworth was monopolizing the conversation, giving forth his views on the proper mental approach to sky combat.

"It's purely a matter of courage," he was saying. "Either a man has it, or he lacks it. There's no in-between mark."

Another flyer said, "But don't you feel that a proper amount of caution is necessary? Don't you agree that there are such considerations as adequate planning and strategy?"

"Nonsense," Redworth answered. "Sky combat is waged on open battleground. There's no such thing as cover and geographical handicap. There's only the factor of individual bravery. The toughest pilot wins out—always."

"And caution is out of the picture?" the other flyer prodded.

"Precisely," Redworth said. He sipped at a Scotch and soda and went on, "Of course I know what all this will lead to. You chaps will jolly well gang up on me and bring up the subject of Flight Lieutenant Ainslee—and the phenomenal success he's currently enjoying. You'll tell me that Ainslee is an enthusiastic exponent of the wary-and-careful school of fighting. You'll challenge me to explain the fine record his flight has marked up."

"You're a good prophet," the other flyer told him. "Suppose you meet the challenge."

Redworth took a long gulp of his drink, then placed the empty glass upon a nearby table.

"I'll be glad to. And the explanation is so easy, so obvious, that it's almost absurd. The only reason for the success of Ainslee's flight is that his pilots are individually brave. Let's consider them for a moment. There's Gannon, from South Africa—transferred to this sector only three months ago after a magnificent showing in Channel warfare. And Lunning, formerly of the famous Fighter 91 in northern Scotland. Also Drayton, with his record of thirty-seven victories. And Hummond, Neddington and Price. Aces, all of them. Hard and fierce and gallant. It stands to reason that the flight as a whole is going to enjoy a long list of triumphs."

The other flyer frowned slightly and asked, "But don't you think that Ainslee's leadership has something to do with it?"

"Emphatically not," Redworth replied. "In fact, I'd say that his flight would do even better if it were not for his—caution. I'll go even farther than that. I'll say that B Flight is not successful because of their leader—but in spite of him."

THE remark was followed by silence—a chill silence. It was plain that Redworth suddenly realized the implication of his statement. He seemed to understand that he had taken a step out of bounds but while he was trying to find words that would ease the situation, the other flyers walked away.

Redworth shrugged.

Ainslee did not shrug. He was seated at a small table near the other end of the bar. He had been there, unnoticed, throughout the conversation. He had heard everything, and his fingers were wound tightly around a glass. It was almost as if the glass were Redworth's throat.

He wanted to get up and smash his fists into the other man's face.

But caution held him back. And it was not the type of caution inspired by a fear of receiving a beating. It was merely an acknowledgment of the criticism that had been made. It could not be erased by a fight.

Redworth had implied that he lacked courage in leading his flight into sky combat. There was a possibility that the other flyers, despite their cold refusal to accept Redworth's views, might ultimately change their minds.

Ainslee stared at the empty glass. Could it be possible that there was a suggestion of truth in Redworth's claims? Could it be possible that all the preparation and planning and strategy was merely a cover-up for a vague but significant streak of yellow?

He tried to laugh at the idea—but it was difficult. The worry persisted—was he really a coward?

But he couldn't be! He reminded himself of all the danger he had leaped into—the skies of fire above the North Sea, and later, the blistering cloud battles against Italian aces in the Sudan, in Ethiopia and Somaliland. He thought of odds he had faced and hurdled. It had been due to proper approach and careful timing.

Superior officers had praised him. Aerial strategists had stated that he was one of the foremost sky warriors in the entire vast theater of the War. Even captured enemy flyers had shrugged and grudgingly muttered that they had been completely outwitted by Ainslee.

Upon being promoted to a flight lieutenancy, he had automatically impressed his individual style of air battle into the minds of the men under his command. And he had done so with only one thought uppermost—to increase the fighting effectiveness of B Flight—and at the same time enhance the safety of his flyers.

The result was a string of brilliant victories for B Flight—a glowing record for the seven silver-blue Hurricanes that sliced through desert skies and exchanged flame with Axis hawks of war.

It was therefore utterly ridiculous—this business of allowing himself to be annoyed by what Redworth had said. Once more he tried to laugh at it.

And once more he failed.

He had another drink, then threw a few coins on the table and quickly rose and left through a side door. He went into his tent—but he could not sleep.

And on the following day he found it difficult to concentrate. He had to plan an escort job which was to lead three Hampden medium bombers deep into Libya. In late afternoon of that day the seven Hurricanes and three Hampdens met up with a flight of Heinkels. Ainslee played it careful and called for a defensive set-up. B Flight disposed of four Heinkels and the others fled for home.

The Hampdens released their bombs on a vital Axis supply line—and the British group made their way back to Egypt without the loss of a ship or a man.

It should have made Ainslee feel better—but it didn't. He couldn't forget Redworth's insult. He was thinking that if he had not been so careful about the situation, B Flight might have downed six or eight Heinkels instead of four.

For the remainder of that day he avoided the other flyers. At dinner he gazed at his plate glumly. He had no desire to eat—and for the second successive night he was unable to sleep.

AT DAWN he was forcing black coffee down his throat as he bent over maps and charts. He was making plans for a patrol over the North Egyptian battle line. But his preparations were interrupted when an orderly came in to state that the squadron leader wanted everyone out on the field immediately. It sounded like an emergency order and Ainslee found himself growing excited. That puzzled him.

Out on the landing field the squadron leader was facing the assembled personnel of Fighter 12. For a moment he studied the faces of the men and then began to speak in low, almost casual tones.

He spoke of the need for a volunteer—a single volunteer to undertake a mission of the utmost danger. British Intelligence was concerned about certain aspects of the Axis strategy. With uncanny persistence the enemy was concentrating troops and supplies in the exact sectors where the English were preparing to attack. Intelligence had asked for an aerial check-up on the newest instance of Axis cunning. They wanted someone to spear deep into hostile territory and make a close investigation of a certain terrain known as Area J-67.

"I had the choice of assigning someone to this job—or asking for a volunteer," the squadron leader said. "And I'm taking the latter step because I feel that it amounts practically to a suicide job. If the enemy is making special plans in Area J-67, it stands to reason that they'll be on guard—heavy guard. And death will be quick for whoever they capture, to eliminate all possibility of a detailed radio message. That's about the size of it, gentlemen. Who wants to go?"

Before the final word left the squadron leader's lips, Ainslee stepped forward. He knew that the eyes of all the flyers were upon him. He thought grimly that they were surprised; they had not expected him to volunteer. He glanced to the side, and his eyes met those of Flight Lieutenant Redworth. There was mockery in Redworth's expression.

It was as though the other flight leader were saying, "You're doing this for show, Ainslee. You're doing this because you're afraid. Yes—afraid that some day soon the other flyers will agree with me when I tell them that your caution is actually a form of veiled cowardice. So you're trying to prove that you have courage. You think that this is sufficient impression—but it won't work. This is the kind of job that calls for something else besides caution. You'll be out there—alone. And you'll be afraid. You'll come back uninjured, but also—you'll come back without any information—"

Ainslee dragged his eyes away from Redworth's face, and looked again at the squadron leader. Without the use of words he was mutely begging the squadron leader to give him the chance—to allow him to make the lone reconnaissance flight. He did not stop to realize that under ordinary circumstances he would have volunteered anyway.

The squadron leader said, "It looks as if Flight Lieutenant Ainslee has beaten everyone to the punch."

Ainslee's lips curved slightly in a tight grin. Again he glanced to the side, at Redworth.

His eyes said, "I'm going out there to prove that I'm not afraid. Then I'm coming back and either I'll listen to your apology or you'll listen to a doctor telling you your jaw is broken—"

Mechanics were moving toward a Hurricane. Ainslee stepped closer to the squadron leader, ready to receive flight instructions.

THESE were the thoughts that flashed across Ainslee's mind as the four Messerschmitts moved in upon him.

Silently he called himself a fool. Proper caution could have prevented a situation such as this. With proper caution, he would have made certain the skies were clear before coming down so low for a look at the desert.

But regret was anything but an aid to matters, and in the same instant that Madsen guns began to rattle Ainslee went into action. He feinted the start of a climbing turn, then broke out of it and banked on the acute—trying to cut his way through the Messerschmitts' line of fire.

Axis slugs thunked against the wings of the English plane, and Ainslee expected they'd soon find the cockpit. But even as he hunched low, his plane was sliding out of the danger area. The four Nazi ships were forced to break their attack formation, and make other plans.

Taking full advantage of the change in the picture, Ainslee moved out wide, faked a breakaway and lured the Messerschmitts into a thrust. He waited until they were within 300 yards and then he pulled up into the starting rim of an outside loop.

The Rolls-Royce engine was roaring as the Hurricane twisted away and came down with its left wing at right angles to the earth.

Then Ainslee caught a Messerschmitt in his gunsights. He thumbed a quick burst at the enemy plane. The Messerschmitt shuddered and lurched—then it was a sickening mass of wreckage and fire, falling out of the sky and carrying a trapped pilot to his doom.

Ainslee stayed in the dive, and his rearview mirror showed him that the three Messerschmitts were roaring down upon him. Their guns yammered in a frenzied attempt to cut him from the sky before he could work into another maneuver.

Ainslee's reaction was mechanical. He sent the Hurricane into a vertical left turn. At 5,500 feet he was cutting down again, but before the Messerschmitts could close in, the English plane was tearing back in a stall.

The Germans tried to recover the offensive. They were working back, turning on the acute. But Ainslee was not idle. He twisted away, and moved smoothly into the start of another climb.

He had a Messerschmitt in his sights at a range of less than 200 yards. His Brownings sent a stream of death that smashed through the Messerschmitt's cockpit.

The Nazi plane shuddered, then went screaming down in a spin.

Ainslee retained his climb and watched the two remaining Messerschmitts narrowly. The Germans were not on a purely defensive basis, however—they were trying to trap the Hurricane between them.

The Englishman anticipated the move and met it with a swiftly executed vertical left turn. The Germans had nothing to fire at.

Then Ainslee rushed in fast. The Nazis turned, climbed, turned again. For an instant Ainslee saw a swastika-marked rudder in his sights. His Brownings chattered and the tail assembly of the Nazi plane became a blotch of fire and streaking splinters. The Britisher knew that the enemy ship was completely out of control. Only one more to go!

But the single surviving German was flying like a madman. Veering away, the Messerschmitt took advantage of slightly better altitude and lunged at Ainslee from the side. Madsen slugs smashed into the fuselage of the Hurricane.

Ainslee saw flame blossom. Great green-orange tongues licked around the glycol

tank. He cut the motor and edged the Hurricane into a steep downward glide—hoping that the air current would sweep smoke and heat away from the cockpit.

But the wind would not work with him. At 4,000 feet he realized that he would have to jump or die! The flames were stabbing into the cockpit and black smoke was choking him. Gasping, he opened the greenhouse and climbed out of the cockpit.

Braced on the wing, he looked up and saw the lone Messerschmitt, circling slowly above him.

Ainslee was angry, but defiant. A parachute exit did not necessarily mean complete failure. The desert was vast, but he had a compass in his pocket and a small canteen strapped under his chamois jacket. He might still be able to do the job he had started.

He took a deep breath, shrugged slightly and leaped away from the burning wing.

FOUR seconds later the chute opened and Ainslee was swinging slowly from side to side. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a small map and navigational chart. He saw that he was coming down in Area J-67! But in the next instant, a roaring, vicious sound filled his ear. He looked up, saw that the Messerschmitt was moving toward him!

He remembered hearing of instances where Nazi aviators had relentlessly poured machine-gun bullets into parachuting Englishmen. He could see the gleaming snouts of Madsens in the wings of the oncoming Messerschmitt. But there was nothing that he could do about it. Nothing but to look at the face of Death and try to take it without cringing.

The German plane was slightly more than a hundred yards away. It was aiming at the bloom of white silk above Ainslee's head. For a moment the Englishman wanted to shut his eyes. He wanted to offer a gesture of surrender. But something strong and fierce and stubborn surged through him.

He grinned at the approaching Nazi.

Streaks of flame flashed from the Madsen guns.

Ainslee looked up at the circle of white silk, expecting to see bullet holes, expecting to see the lines of fire spreading across the silk, causing it to shrivel and fold up.

But the German had missed the burst.

It failed to give Ainslee any hope. He knew that the Nazi would try again. He knew that even if another burst failed to hit the mark—the enemy flyer would not give up.

The waiting was torture. And yet Ainslee kept a grin on his lips. He wanted the Nazi to see the grin; he wanted to show the enemy flyer how an Englishman accepted death.

The Messerschmitt swooped again. It was about seventy yards away, then fifty—and Ainslee knew the Madsens could not possibly miss from that distance. He thought of the mistake that had led to this. It had been a lack of caution—he had allowed Redworth's criticism to sway him.

But this was a fine time to take inventory of his mistakes. He remembered a phrase that Americans had for this sort of thing—something about closing the barn door after the horse had been stolen.

But before the moment had passed, Ainslee knew that the horse had not yet been stolen. It was difficult to believe, but it was there before his eyes. Fifty yards away the blades of death were turning away from him. The Messerschmitt was zooming!

The Englishman was puzzled. Everything being equal, he should be dead by now. He watched the German climb, then aim westward. Perhaps the Nazi had suddenly become merciful. It didn't

seem likely, but Ainslee wanted to yell with relief.

He looked down at the desert, saw that he was rapidly approaching its sun-baked sand. He braced himself for the landing.

Over to the left, he saw a dune. That would be the best place to land. He tugged at the guide lines, steering the chute toward it. But suddenly some instinct warned him—and he jerked his head around.

The figures of men were outlined against the sand! Crouching there, waiting for him.

Nazi infantrymen!

That explained why the Messerschmitt had turned away. The German pilot had seen the figures against the beige blanket of desert, had decided that the Britisher might be more valuable as a prisoner than as a corpse.

Ainslee's right hand crept beneath his chamois jacket. As he took the automatic from his hip holster, he looked down at the Nazis and he could see that they were waiting for him. The men had spread out in a wide circle, moving in ratio with the speed and course of the descending chute. They had their rifles raised, ready for the slightest sign of resistance on the part of the Englishman when he came down in the center of the circle.

Ainslee shrugged. He dropped the revolver, watched it fall toward the sand.

It did not matter that he was going to be captured. Of sole importance was the necessity of getting on with the job—and he would find some way!

FIFTY-FIVE German infantrymen marched their prisoner across two miles of desert. They reached some trucks, and after eleven more miles of lumbering across sand—they arrived at a German base camp.

Ainslee was making a thorough observation of the emplacement. Seated in the front seat of the first truck—with a burly Bavarian on his left, and a crisp but polite English-speaking Prussian officer on his right—he was looking at long lines of tanks, trucks, mobile artillery. Over to the left was a wide column of infantrymen.

There were planes lined up behind the infantry. Messerschmitts and Dornier DO 215's—about sixty altogether. It was a huge set-up, and it gave every evidence of power.

The Prussian, a captain, was saying, "You seem rather interested, but not very surprised."

"I expected to find something here," Ainslee replied. "However, I didn't think you were making preparations on such a large scale. I must admit I'm sort of puzzled as to why you keep a unit of this size so far behind the battle area. It doesn't seem logical—particularly when you have no means of knowing when and where Allied forces will attack."

The Prussian smiled and murmured, "You are mistaken. We most certainly have means of knowing. And the information has been reaching us at well-timed intervals during the past three weeks. As soon as we receive word of a coming Allied attack, we move up this unit as an auxiliary force. If you will think of our successes during the past twenty days, you will be forced to acknowledge the complete failure of Allied strategy."

"I wouldn't call it that," Ainslee said. "The show isn't over yet."

"But it soon will be. This unit is only a small beginning. Very shortly it will be supplemented by large forces from the European front. When that time comes, the Axis armies will counter-attack. And they will smash at the weakest points in the Allied line."

"How will they know where the weak points are?"

"Through the same channel by which

they are receiving the current information," the Prussian said. He studied Ainslee's face and then he added, "You hide your feelings well—but it is useless to pretend that you aren't intensely interested."

Ainslee shrugged. "It can't affect me personally," he answered. "The war is over as far as I am concerned."

"Not quite," the Prussian told him. "Despite the fact that we've been receiving valuable information—we can always use more. You will be questioned by General Bernberg, who is in command of this unit. I heartily recommend that you cooperate with the general. He is—shall I say—temperamental."

"Thanks for the tip-off," Ainslee murmured dryly. "I've always been rather adept at dealing with temperamental individuals. There's an art to it, you know."

The Prussian did not reply. He sat stiffly, hands clasped onto knees, and stared directly ahead.

THE big truck came to a stop before a large tent. The Prussian officer leaped onto the sand, ordered Ainslee to follow. They entered the tent, walked past a row of desks at which staff officers were bent busily over maps and reports.

At the far end of the tent a short, stout German was seated at an ornately carved table. The German wore a glittering collection of decorations. He scowled as he snapped orders at subordinate officers who surrounded the table.

As they received the orders, the officers stiffened, snapped to rigid salute and turned in mechanical stiffness.

The Prussian officer leaned toward Ainslee. There was a mixture of fear and worship in his tone as he whispered, "You are looking at General Bernberg."

Ainslee nodded in pretended respect. Then he followed the Prussian officer. They stopped exactly five feet away from the edge of the table and stood waiting.

Bernberg was shrieking at two orderlies and an adjutant. The two orderlies subsequently marched off to the right, the adjutant clicked heels and walked toward the left. Then General Bernberg turned his attention to the two men who stood in front of the table.

He looked at the Prussian, then pointed at Ainslee and demanded, "What do we have here?"

"An English pilot, *Herr General.* He was shot down thirteen miles to the south. I thought you might want to question him."

From pure habit, Bernberg was ready to shout at the Prussian officer, and say that he was concerned with more important matters than the questioning of captured flyers. But even as the general opened his mouth, he stopped. A gleam came to his tiny eyes.

He leaned forward and asked craftily, "What were you doing in this area?"

"Reconnaissance," Ainslee told him.

The stout Nazi folded his hands across his paunchy middle, leaned back and said, "That is a vague answer. I require a complete, detailed description of your flight instructions. I want to know the course you took. I want to know the specific reasons for the flight. I want to know—"

"You want to know too much," Ainslee said.

Bernberg's features became a dark, mottled red. He half rose to his feet. His fists were clenched as he shouted, "I will warn you once, Englishman—only once—answer all my questions and show me the proper respect or you will suffer!"

Ainsley shook his head slowly. He smiled, saying, "You're not dealing with a fool. If you're trying to scare me into betraying my country, you've picked the wrong customer. I—"

The Nazi stood up. And in the big tent all activity ceased. There was silence

—frigid silence. It was as if everyone knew what Bernberg was going to do. As if they had seen him do it many times before. And the general seemed to be well aware that he was the target of all eyes. Despite his show of temper, it was evident that he was enjoying the situation.

Ainslee realized that he was probably in for considerable pain. The thought brought fear—an objective sort of fear. He was thinking that a merciless beating might result in his senses being fogged. Above all else, it was necessary for him to retain mental clarity, to know exactly what was taking place about him. He made a quick decision.

In the same moment that the Nazi raised a huge fist, he stated clearly and calmly, "I am sorry, General Bernberg. I apologize for my arrogance. I will answer your questions to the best of my ability."

THE Nazi was astonished. In a way, he looked slightly disappointed. But everyone in the tent had heard the Englishman's statement—and brutality now was out of the question.

Bernberg went back to his seat behind the table. He opened a notebook, picked up a pencil and said, "We will proceed slowly and methodically. First, I want your name and squadron number."

"Flight Lieutenant Ainslee—Fighter 12."

The Nazi stared. "Did I hear you say —Fighter 12?"

Ainslee nodded.

Bernberg began to laugh. He had difficulty bringing out the words. "He says he comes from Fighter 12! Never have I heard anything so funny—" he finally managed.

The Englishman's eyes were puzzled. He said, "Maybe my sense of humor is lagging, but I certainly fail to see—"

His words were drowned by increased laughter from Bernberg. It had a contagious effect on the other Nazis. Soon everyone was laughing. Even the officer beside Ainslee lost his rigidity.

Anger flushed the Englishman's face, but he forced himself to remain silent.

The general's laughter slowly subsided —and his subordinates reduced their chuckles accordingly.

All of Benberg's rage, of a short time before, was gone now. His smile was genial as he said, "It will not be necessary to question you further. Since you were willing to cooperate, I must give concrete proof of my appreciation. Although I usually offer no special comforts or accommodations to prisoners of war—I am making an exception in your case."

Curiosity filled the Englishman, but his expression did not change. "Thank you, General," he murmured.

Bernberg crisped an order to the Prussian officer—who was again stern and rigid. The officer spoke a word of command to three orderlies who were lined up behind the table. They moved forward and formed a triangular wall around Ainslee, then marched him out of the tent.

AT THE end of twenty hours Ainslee was a tired man. Hard as he tried, he could not figure it out. There had been plenty of fairly good food; plenty of beer that was passable despite the fact that it was rather warm. He'd had a few cigars that might have come from Bernberg's private supply.

The guarded tent was large and the mattress was comfortable. Under ordinary conditions he would have considered himself somewhat fortunate, despite captivity. He would have taken full advantage of the comforts provided and used the time in planning various schemes for escape.

But as matters stood, he could only walk back and forth, staring at the sand floor of the tent, remembering the way

Bernberg had laughed. What was behind it all?

The footsteps of a guard, pacing in front of the tent were a constant reminder that he was a prisoner.

It was just as he closed his eyes to try and get some sleep that a voice said, "You have a visitor."

Ainslee sat up and looked at the helmeted head of the guard that was framed in the partially opened tent flap. The guard had been rather pleasant, considering that all during the early noon hours he had been marching up and down beneath broiling Libya skies. Periodically he had inserted his head through the flap and had smiled as he asked if there was anything he could do for the comfort of the prisoner.

But the guard was not smiling now—and his expression was anything but pleasant. His eyes were troubled and annoyed.

"What seems to be the difficulty?" Ainslee asked.

The question was ignored. The guard growled, "I said—you have a visitor."

"Send him in," Ainslee replied. He rose from the cot, stood at the far side of the tent.

The tent flap opened wide. The visitor walked in. The man was wearing flying gear. His smile widened as he watched amazement spread across Ainslee's features. He seated himself on the edge of the cot and took a pack of cigarettes from the side pocket of his flying coat. He extended the pack, but Ainslee ignored the jutting cigarette. The visitor shrugged and lit a match.

He murmured, "If I had a flask with me, I'd offer you a drink. You look as though you could use one."

Ainslee swallowed and tried to keep his face expressionless. But it was almost impossible.

He was looking at Flight Lieutenant Redworth.

AFTER a few moments of dazed silence, he demanded, "How did you know I was here?"

"Radio," Redworth said. "A special type of radio that receives and sends messages across a somewhat private wave-length. When you failed to come back to Fighter 12, I was somewhat curious. I wanted to know what had happened to you. And so I used the radio. I've been using it for quite a while, as I find it rather convenient. Besides it makes a lovely little ornament for my hutment—since when it isn't in use it looks like a clock."

Ainslee's voice was strangely quiet as he asked, "How long have you been in this business?"

"Since the start of the war," Redworth said. "But up until now my work has been relatively unimportant. The present set-up is giving me my first great opportunity."

"I imagine your family is partly German."

"Not in the least. As a matter of fact, the line goes back to the very beginning of England. So if you think I'm mixed up in this game because of a personal faith in the Nazi scheme—you're wrong."

"There's only one other possibility, and it's—"

"Money," Redworth said. "All the money I can lay my hands on. Before the war I, shall we say, borrowed some diamonds that were not mine by legal right. I was about to enter the extremely lucrative field of swindling when a certain German agent made an offer. When the war started I was already in the R.A.F. and I was sending information to Germany on a commission basis. The strange part of it was that I liked flying and I particularly enjoyed knocking Messerschmitts out of the sky. The Nazi Intelligence didn't mind—as long as I continued to use the little radio and send certain

(Continued on page 104)

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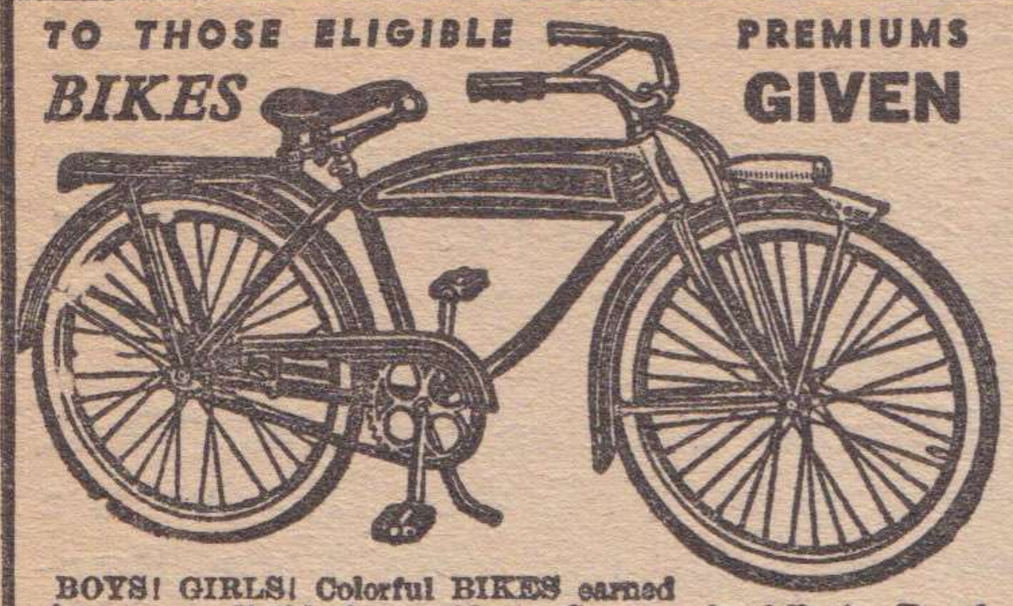

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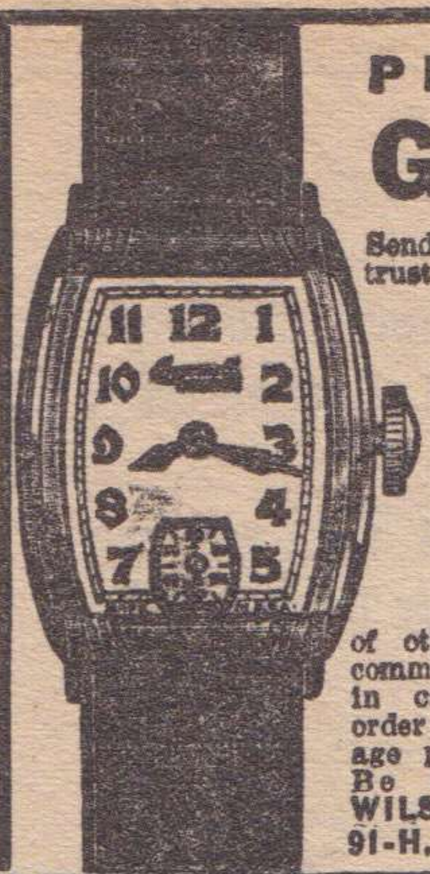

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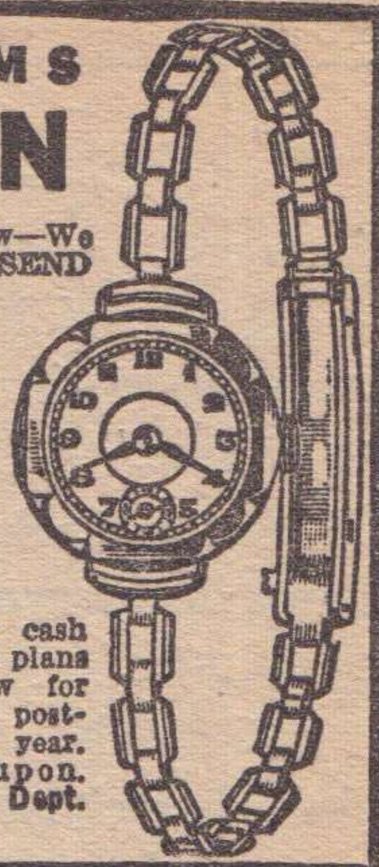

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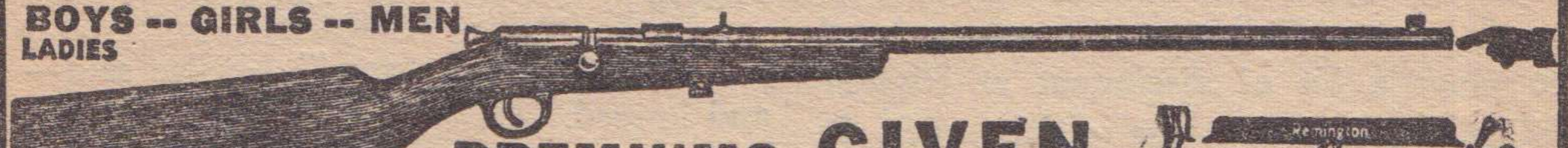

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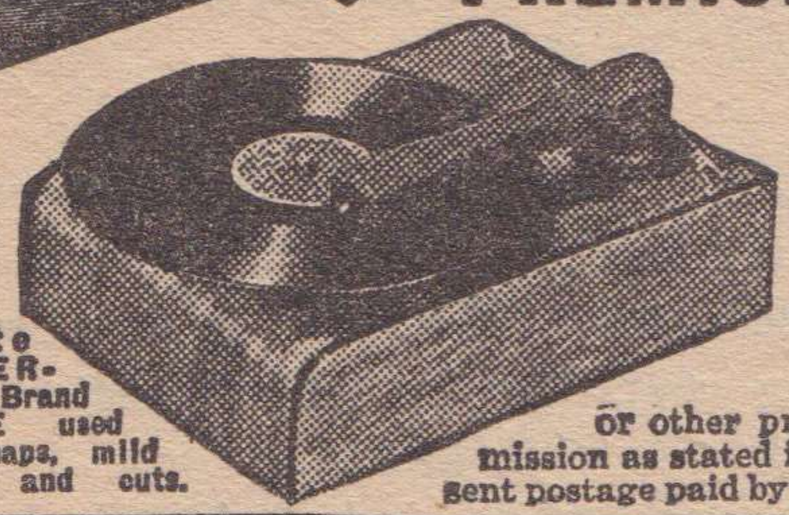

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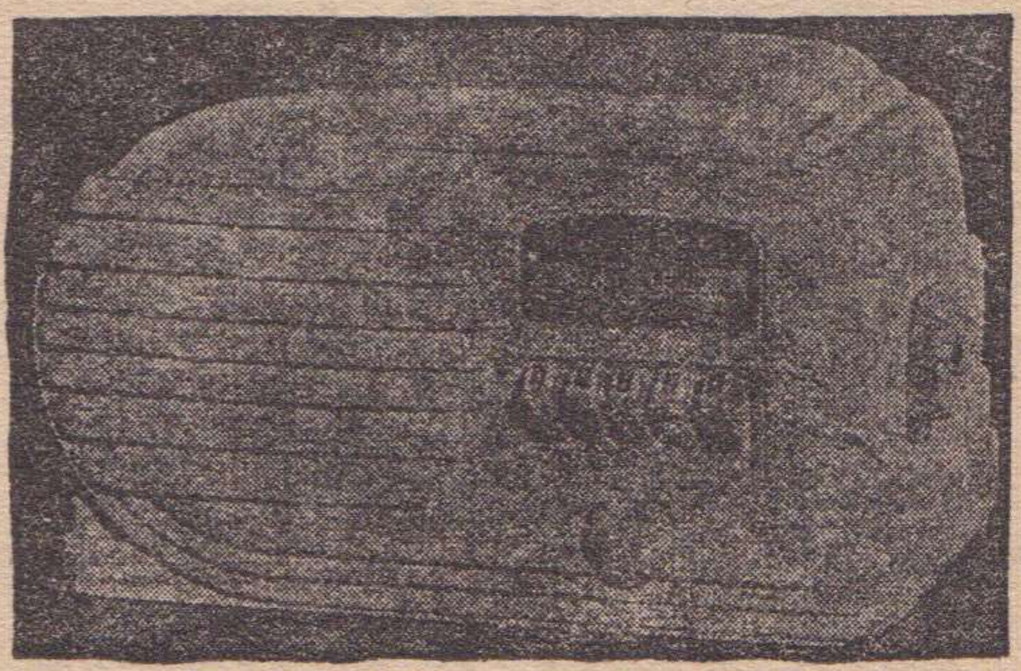

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(Continued from page 102)

facts concerning British plans. I was also doing a bit of fifth column work. Destroying morale—in a subtle and discreet way, of course."

"Is that why you tried to drag me down in the eyes of the other flyers in the squadron?"

"Certainly. For some time you and the other chaps in B Flight have been a source of great annoyance to the *Luftwaffe*. As a sideline task, I was ordered to plant a bit of discontent at Fighter 12, with yourself as the initial target. It was the tried and true policy of boring from within."

Ainslee nodded slowly, and said, "No doubt you're receiving good pay for this job."

"A fortune," Redworth grinned. "And the Nazis are just as happy to pay as I am to pocket the cash. Fighter 12 happens to be in a position wherein it's necessary for all pilots to know of the more significant Allied troop movements. When I get the information I walk into my hutment, unscrew the bottom of a pretty little clock and—"

"How long do you think you're going to get away with your double-crossing?" Ainslee said.

"As long as I can keep from making a mistake," Redworth replied. "It's all a matter of fitting various factors together and taking advantage of every opening. For instance, when I learned by radio that you had been captured I saw a perfect opportunity to come over here and have a chat with General Bernberg. So I volunteered to go out and look for you. Just before taking off, I radioed Bernberg. He ordered his flyers to ignore a single Hurricane carrying a certain number. Now I'm going to have lunch with the general and we will discuss various matters such as services rendered and payment due."

Ainslee shook his head slowly and smiled wryly at the tent floor. He said, "And I always believed that it paid to be honest—"

Redworth stood up and said, "Don't take it so hard, old chap. I'll put in a good word for you when I see Bernberg, and—"

"Maybe you won't be seeing Bernberg," Ainslee answered, his gaze still fixed on the sandy floor.

"What do you mean?"

"This is what I mean!" Ainslee said—and lunged.

His fist was a piston, smashing into Redworth's jaw.

THE traitor sagged, but before he reached the floor, his right hand flashed toward the lapel of the leather flying coat, and his fingers snatched at the handle of a knife.

Ainslee rushed and Redworth lunged up from the floor, thrusting the knife at the prisoner's chest. But the path of the blade was deflected as Ainslee grabbed and twisted the traitor's wrist. Redworth made a frenzied effort to pull away—but he lost his balance as he stepped backward. He tripped, taking Ainslee back with him. And as they went to the floor, Redworth's wrist was bent so that the knife pointed at his own chest. His eyes were panic-stricken, and he opened his mouth to yell.

But the knife was faster.

The blade ripped into Redworth's heart. He was dead before he could utter a sound.

Rising, Ainslee heard a movement at the tent flap.

He looked up.

And he was facing the guard. The Nazi's rifle was pointed at his head.

All hope died in the Englishman. He reasoned that either the guard would pull the trigger—or that he would be before a firing squad on the following morning.

The guard's eyes were expressionless. He gazed stolidly at the corpse on the tent floor. Then he was looking at Ainslee and said, "You are brave. You are fast and clever. You don't deserve to die."

Ainslee pointed to the dead traitor and said, "He did."

The guard nodded. Again his lips were twisted; his eyes were troubled. "Yes—all parasites deserve death. I have long been familiar with Redworth and his work. Despite the fact that his services have been valuable to the Nazi armies, he felt no loyalty toward the cause. He was faithful only to his own desire for money. Ultimately he would have betrayed Germany—just as he betrayed England."

"Others have betrayed Germany. Others—in high places," Ainslee said.

The German nodded slowly. "I know—I know that my country is being cheated and robbed by the very leaders we trusted. I know that they are reaping gold and living in luxury while the people starve and the lifeblood of youth runs in an ever-widening river. For many weeks I have been thinking of this. Thinking and suffering. I—have lost faith."

Ainslee shrugged and said, "When a man loses faith in a cause, there is no sense in his fighting further."

The guard's voice was almost a whisper as he said, "I was misled—like so many others. But now I see, I understand. I look at the corpse of Redworth and it is like a prophecy of what is in store for the other betrayers. And the sooner it comes—"

"Maybe you can help," Ainslee interrupted.

A sad smile crossed the German's lips. He answered "Yes—I can help. I can give you a chance to escape. And it will be treason—but not Redworth's kind of treason. It will be treason against treach-

ery itself—" There was a wild glow in the German's eyes as he gestured with the rifle and commanded, "Stand back against the edge of the tent!"

Ainslee obeyed. Then his eyes widened as he saw the German quickly stoop and pull the knife from the dead traitor's chest.

The guard stared at the blood-stained blade and said, "I must do this now, while my mind is clear, while I can think only of such things as freedom and righteousness—while I can remember another Germany, the Germany of long ago. I can remember the quiet fields and the peaceful days and little, unimportant people who wanted only to lead simple, honest, happy lives. Maybe I will find all that again—"

He plunged the knife into his chest, and slumped to the floor. He was smiling as he died.

Ainslee's throat tightened, and for a few moments he could not breathe. Then he forced himself toward the corpse of Redworth. He removed the leather helmet and flying gear from the traitor's body. Within a half minute he was wearing the outfit. He pulled up the collar—so that his features were partially hidden.

He took a deep breath, stepped out of the tent. There was a line of Messerschmitts over to the right, and several yards in front of the Nazi planes there was parked a single Hurricane. Ainslee walked fast—but with nonchalance—as he passed a group of mechanics, a few flyers, a few staff officers. He nodded to some, ignored others. All the time he was expecting to hear a shout of alarm from behind. But luck was with him and finally he was climbing into the cockpit of the Hurricane.

Then the Rolls-Royce broke into a roar—and the plane went skimming across tight-packed sand.

AT 3,500 feet Ainslee looked down and expected to see some sign of pursuit. But the Nazi planes were still on the ground. There was nothing to indicate unusual activity on the part of officers or men.

Ainslee stretched the climb. At 5,000 feet he looked down again. Still no planes were starting in pursuit. He shrugged, glanced at the instrument panel and checked his course. He opened the throttle—and the silver-blue Hurricane ripped eastward at close to 350 m.p.h.

The Englishman grinned tightly as he thought that even if the Germans discovered his escape now—they were too late.

In a short time he would be back at Fighter 12.

But suddenly the grin faded and Ainslee's lips were stiff. He threw the ship into a steep-angle dive. Five Messerschmitts were coming out of the sun straight for him!

The Nazis had worked it shrewdly. Upon finding out that it was not Redworth who had taken off in the Hurricane, they had flashed an alarm to various *Luftwaffe* dromes located within the area. Out of that number it was logical that at least one German patrol would intercept the Hurricane.

Planes or no planes, Ainslee realized he must get back with his important information.

But there were five Messerschmitts between him and home—and there was no doubt that the Nazi pilots had been sufficiently impressed with the significance of the Hurricane. The quintet of German ships was spreading wide to hem him in as he pulled out of the roll.

He saw that the Germans were trying to anticipate any move he made for escape. Ainslee tried another roll and the Messerschmitts gauged it correctly, moving in accordance with the path and speed

of the English ship. Madsens were yammering, and Ainslee realized it was only a matter of seconds before he would go hurtling down—a flaming torch.

Yet even as the seconds ticked off, the Englishman formed a hasty plan. It was based on the fact that the three Messerschmitts on the left were coming down in a straight line—and therefore only one of them could use guns.

It was wild, incredible—yet he might be able to do it!

He started a climb, then cut back and streaked across the upward rim of an outside loop.

And at the same time he was trying for the impossible. His guns chattered viciously, filling the air with lead, and even as he watched, he was unable to believe that it was actually happening—that he had three targets instead of one—and that all three targets were being hit!

But it was there—in front of his eyes. The flaming result of the Germans' error in using a straight-line formation, failing to break away quickly enough.

The three Messerschmitts formed a ghastly chain of fiery doom as they plunged out of the sky.

Ainslee watched them for a brief moment, then he turned hard and aimed at the two remaining Messerschmitts. They were below the Hurricane, a few hundred feet to the right. But the German pilots were completely demoralized by what they had just seen—and there was no fight left in them. They wheeled and fled.

Ainslee feinted a chase—then he banked hard and resumed his course eastward. It wasn't long before he glanced down and saw the landmarks that indicated Allied area. In that moment he remembered the way General Bernberg had laughed at him.

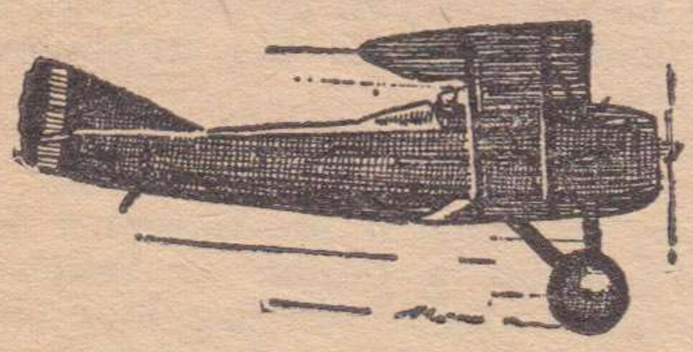
And he laughed back.

CONTACT!

(Continued from page 10)

a little. Those were the days. Jumbo Jones they called me, because of my wonderful memory. How we used to sit around while I spun yarns through the bars! All about how I was an ace even before I had been off the ground. You see, I shot down five Fokkers with nothing but my little sixteen-inch coastal defense gun. Of course, it was trifle difficult getting the range—clear across the Atlantic—but I made it!

That's one thing I like about me, besides my honesty. You can always depend on good ole Jonesy to give you the straight goods. I don't guarantee it'll be all wool and a yard wide, however. You know what the rationing has done to wool.



Time for a letter. Okay, everybody stand back, give him air—he's on my side!

Hello, Jonesy:

It seems you have gained a comrade in "Lucky" McClain. You have also gained one in me. Why do you keep printing those letters from those bums? They make me sick. More than that—they are revolting. Maybe if Hawkins would take off his dark glasses he could see the light. His followers must be a

bunch of third-class morons—at least they sound that way.

I know one way to scare them, though. You see, I am a native of Huntington, West Virginia. I saw the Hinton ball team get the pants beaten off them this year. Why, they were beaten so bad at the half, there were rumors going around that they were going home. All you do to scare a Hinton guy is tell him you're from East High School in Huntington. Hawkins is no different.

If he hates your magazine so much, why doesn't he quit writing? Doesn't he know that the mailmen have enough trouble as it is without having to carry all that trash around with them?

There's no reason I can see why Joe and his gang should dislike your mag. I think *Fighting Aces* is just about tops. Except that there could be a few more World War I stories in it. Why not divide them up?

I'm not stupid (despite the voices to the contrary); I know what a Blakeslee is, and I have a nice space reserved for mine when it comes. I only wish it could be one of you giving Hawkins a nice neat punch in his unhonorable smeller.

Incidentally, Smales said in the January issue that anyone should just pick on Hawkins if he wanted a fight. Well, I know a bunch of fellows in Huntington who would just love taking apart a few more screwballs from Hinton—and I'm one of 'em. 'Bye now.

Hugh George
Springfield, Illinois

Hey, I've heard about you feudin' Southerners. Just let me know when you start—so I can run the other way! And that space on your wall won't be empty much longer—a Blakeslee to you! I hope you'll like it. Arthur Zigouras did his; he wrote us a nice note in thanks that made us beam like a twenty-thousand candle power searchlight.

Bright—isn't it?

Oh, now for the correction of corrections department. I admitted I was wrong, you see—now I have to admit I was wrong in admitting I was wrong. My. Here's one of the letters that called it—but sharply—to my notice.

Dear Slip:

Of all the spineless, no-good, ignorant thus-and-so's I ever heard of, you are the worst! Why—you ask?

CONTACT!

Because you sit back and admit you are wrong without attempting to defend yourself. Namely, I mean Kenneth Pray's letter to you in the January issue of *Fighting Aces*.

"Mister" Pray says, and I quote, "Now the question is—since when does a Boulton Paul Defiant have forward guns?"

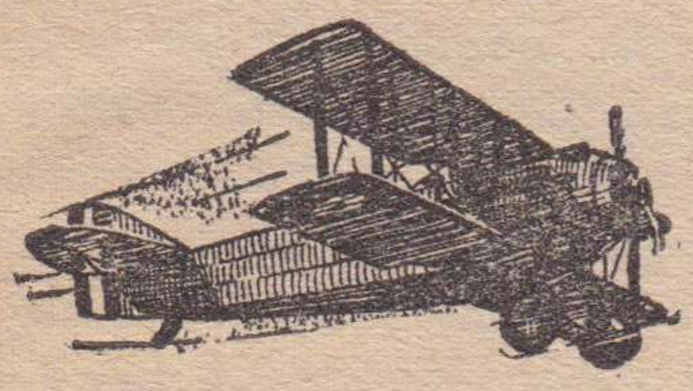
The answer, my dear Drip—I mean Slip—and also you, "Mister" Pray, is in the November issue of *Fighting Aces* on page seventeen, column two, last paragraph of the page. Again I quote.

"Now as to the plane you will use; it's a special model Boulton Paul Defiant. In addition to the four Brownings in the electrically operated turret, there are six guns in the wings."

Now if Kenneth Pray had read the story carefully, I would not have needed to waste my precious energy in writing to you.

Yours, till I know what you're talking about,

Bill Vasbinder
Kane, Pennsylvania



See that stuff on my head? No, not the dandruff—the ashes. And I'm having a new burlap suit made. I should have stood up and fought like a man—well, anyway, fought—but I didn't.

Think I'll get my mind off myself and

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tell you a story. I, as you know, was one of the greatest pilots that ever flew a Spad. Oh, was I good! I remember, as if it were yesterday, the time I fought the ace of Hunland—the Baron von Schnitzelbank. He was good—but the terror of the tarmac, Sideslip Jones, was gooder.

He came at me, his guns yammering, while I hummed *Send Me One Dozen Fokkers* under my breath. I banked. (Let's see, I think it was about twenty cents I banked that week). He zoomed. I did a snap roll, a half gainor and ended up with a fancy breast stroke. I caught him in my sights—what a sight that was! —and let fly with everything I had, including my suspender buttons. He came at me, but I stood my ground—or rather, my air.

It was the battle of the century, and the next thing I remembered I was lying in a nice clean bed and someone was holding my hand and saying, "He'll live."

I fooled them, though. I died.

As I said, those were the days. Let me see, I guess that's all for this time—no, wait—there's that mailman again!

Shucks, only one letter. Let's see who it's from. There's a slight odor of brimstone about the envelope. It can't be—yes, it is! It's from Hawkins!

Dear Goon-boy:

I thought I would write and see how you are. Dead, I hope. I have noticed that the legion of my followers is growing steadily—and small wonder. There really isn't any choice between you and me—now is there? Anyone with half a brain can see that you're as phony as movie snow.

Speaking of snow, I am sending you a bucket of icicles. I earnestly wish you'd sit with your feet in them. It would be so much nicer to die of pneumonia than to be murdered.

For, my uninspired excuse for a pilot, I have already hatched my plot to erase you! You don't know it, but the ink on this letter is made with a very powerful poison that works through the skin.

I guess those icicles won't be necessary, after all.

Do you feel strange? Any odd pricklings in your fingers? Ah, that's the first sign. You won't last long now.

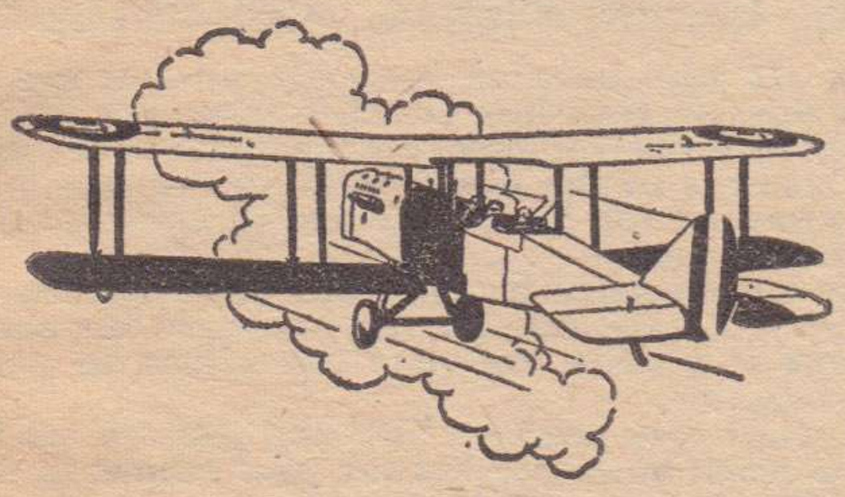
In fact, I doubt if you live long enough to finish this letter. But if you do, I want you to know that when you are gone *Fighting Aces* will take a boom upward in circulation that will surpass any other magazine on the stands.

That's what I think you and your column do to *Fighting Aces*. In a word —you ruin it.

Now, how are your hands? Oh, I thought so—they're beginning to burn. Well, so long, morbid—it's been nice insulting you. And I'll come and dance at your funeral!

Joe Hawkins

Well, that was a very nice letter, Joe. Now I think I'll take off my gloves. *Naa-ah!*



Well, playmates, I think this will be about all for now. First, though, I want to give you the name of this month's honorary editor—and the listing of the January stories in order of the voting. He is Richard Dowin, of Bridgeport, Conn., and his list is the same as ours:

1. **Wings of the Blue Banner**
2. **Raiders of the Dawn Patrol**
3. **Dish It Out, Yanks!**
4. **Free France Never Surrenders!**
5. **Dead Man's Sky**

If you see anything creeping over your doorsill, gang—don't step on it. It might be Hawkins.

And don't forget to keep buying those War Bonds and Stamps. Write and tell me how many you have, and also what to do about this corporation that seems set on making my life a short one.

Contact!

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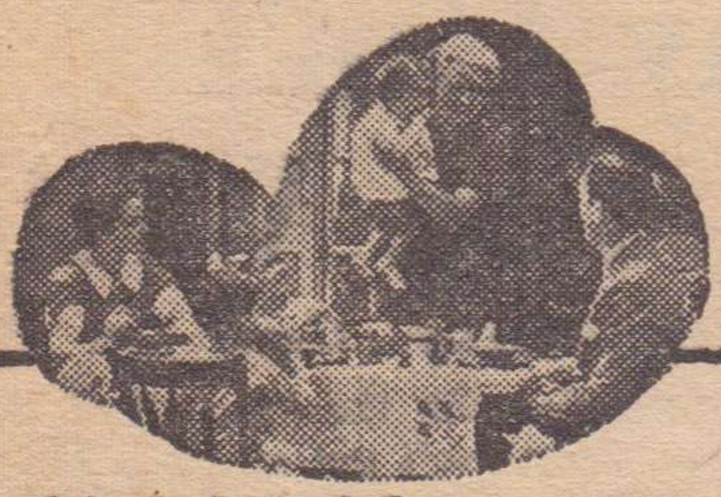

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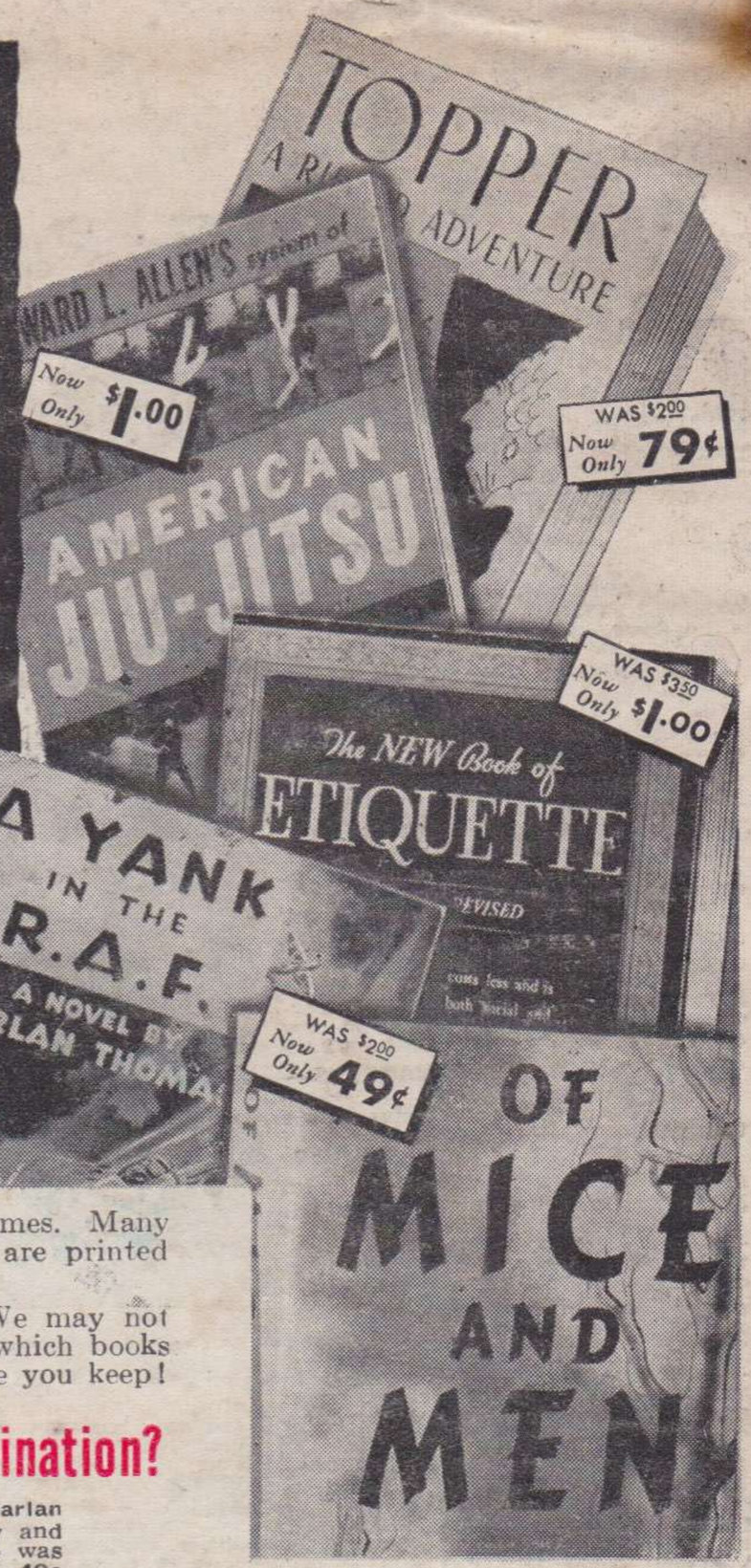

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