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SKY FIGHTERS

FALL
ISSUE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

Yesterday's
PILOT

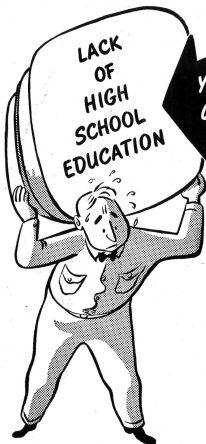
*An Exciting
Novelet*

By **ROBERT S.
FENTON**

LAST FLIGHT

An Action Novelet
By **F. E. RECHNITZER**

George
Rozeh



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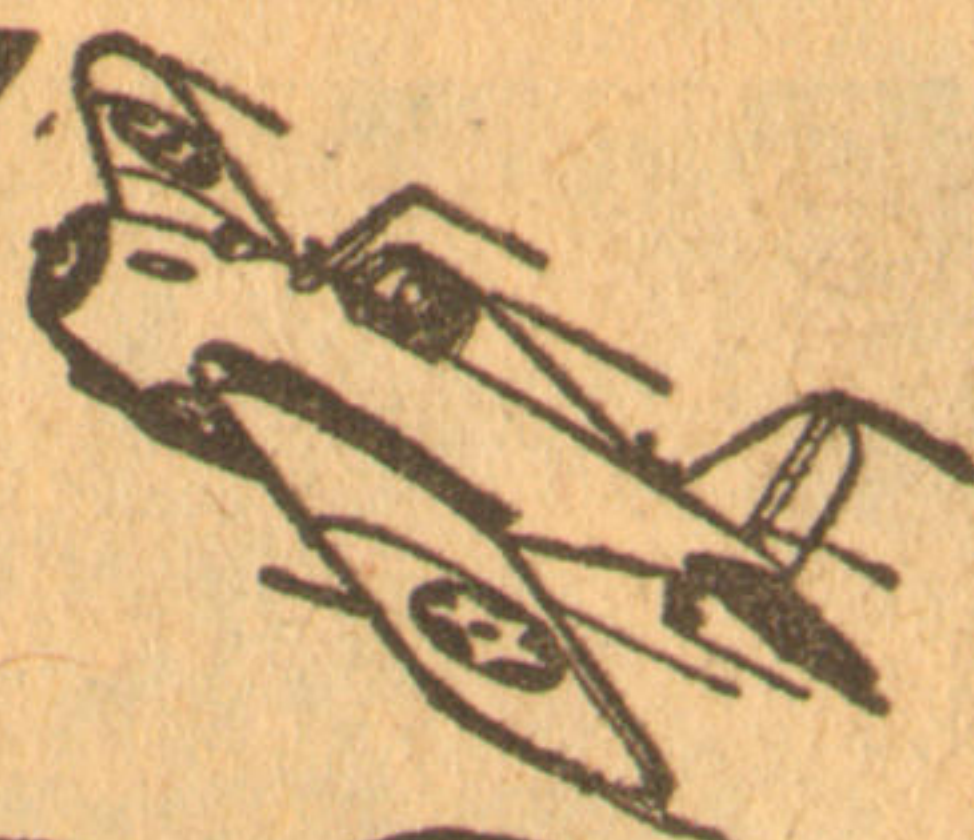
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SKY FIGHTERS

XXXIV, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Fall Issue

FEATURED ACTION NOVELET

YESTERDAY'S PILOT

By ROBERT S. FENTON



War hero Lew Byington, lost in the mire of battle fatigue, suddenly finds himself confronted by the greatest challenge of his entire career!.....

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ANOTHER EXCITING NOVELET

LAST FLIGHT F. E. Rechnitzer 62

Fighting pilot Leo Margol was just about ready for his furlough, but instead he drew an atom bomb mission that hurled him into a roaring ruckus!

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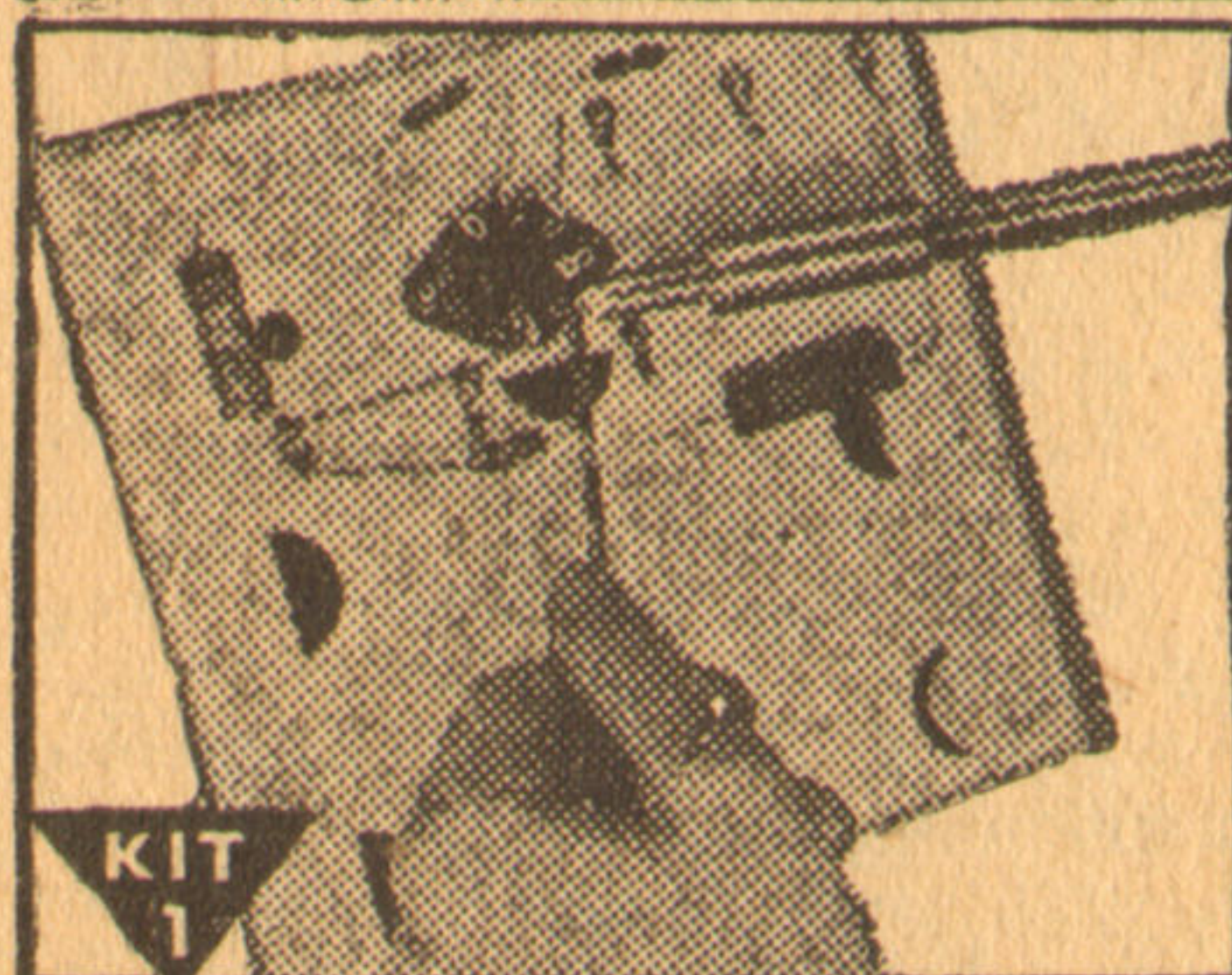
THE ATOMIC PRESENT Major Kenneth Gantz 77

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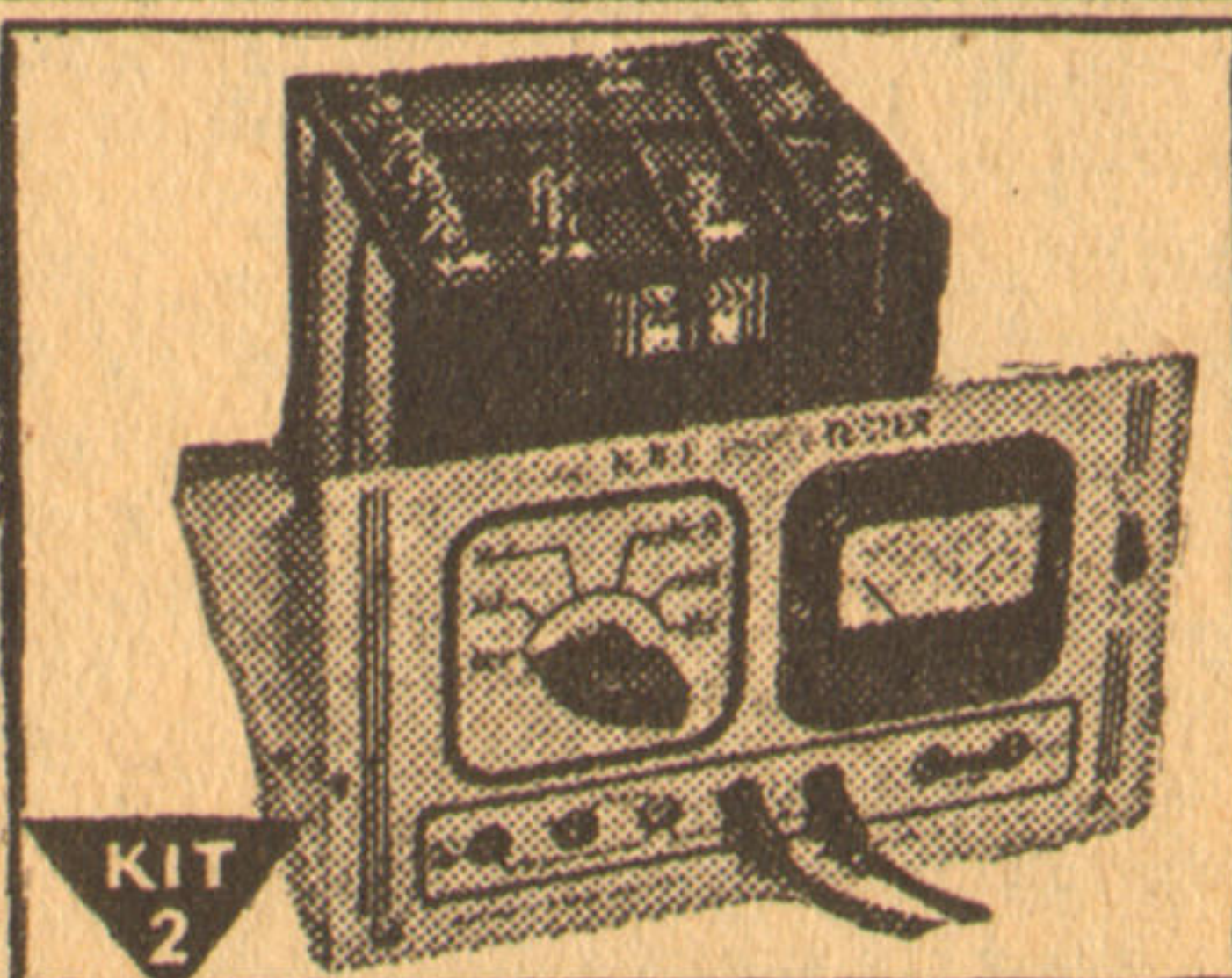


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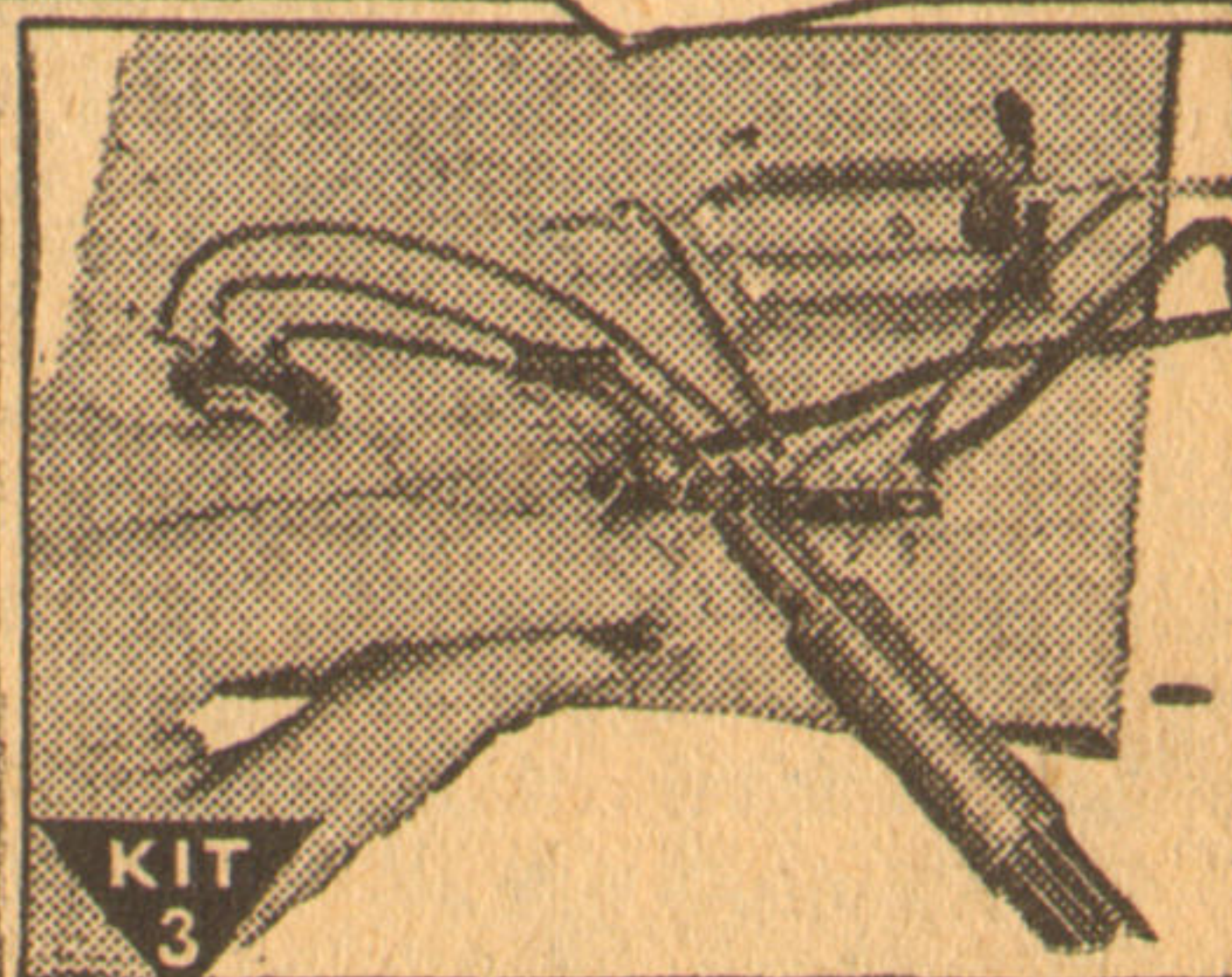
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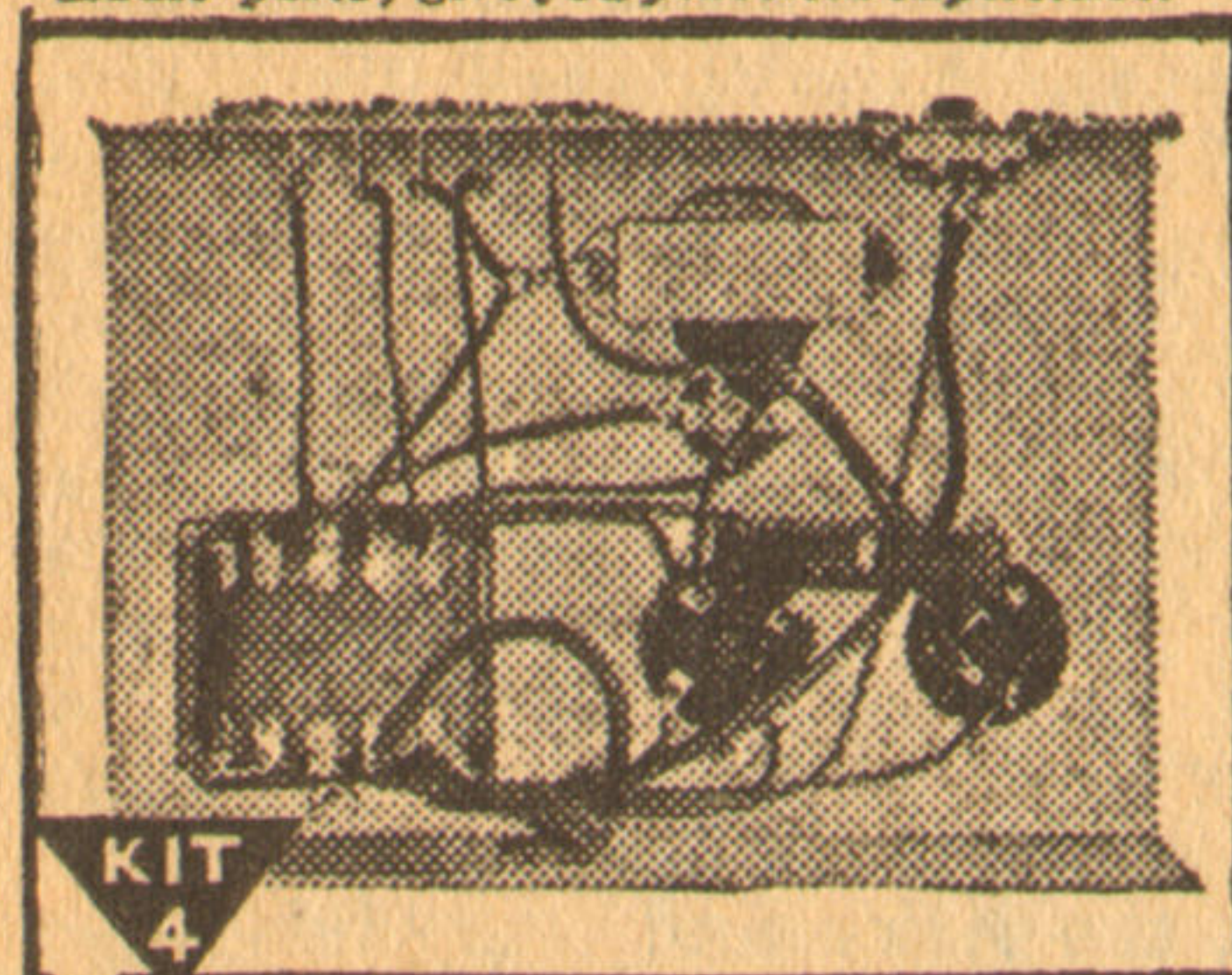
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I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



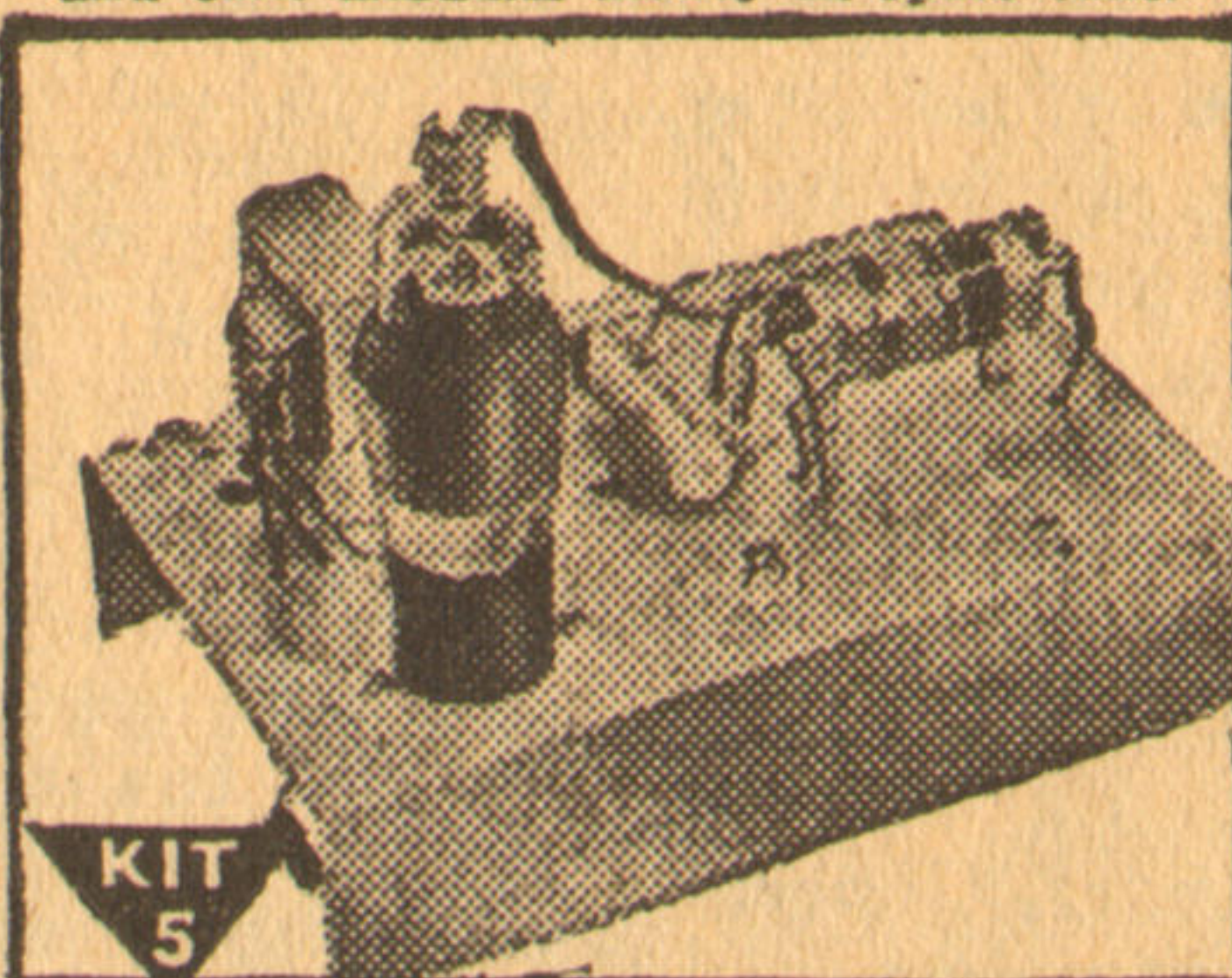
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



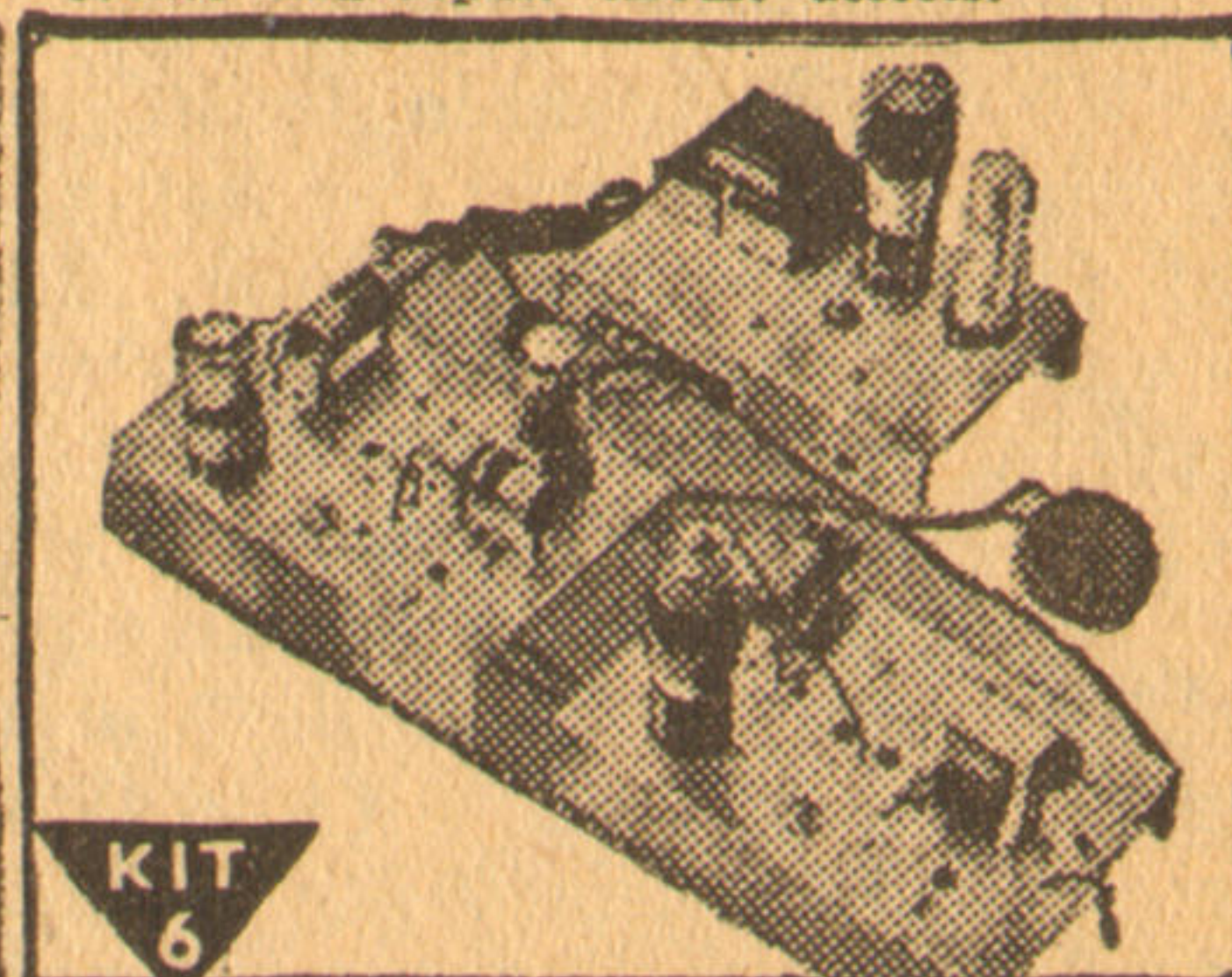
KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4
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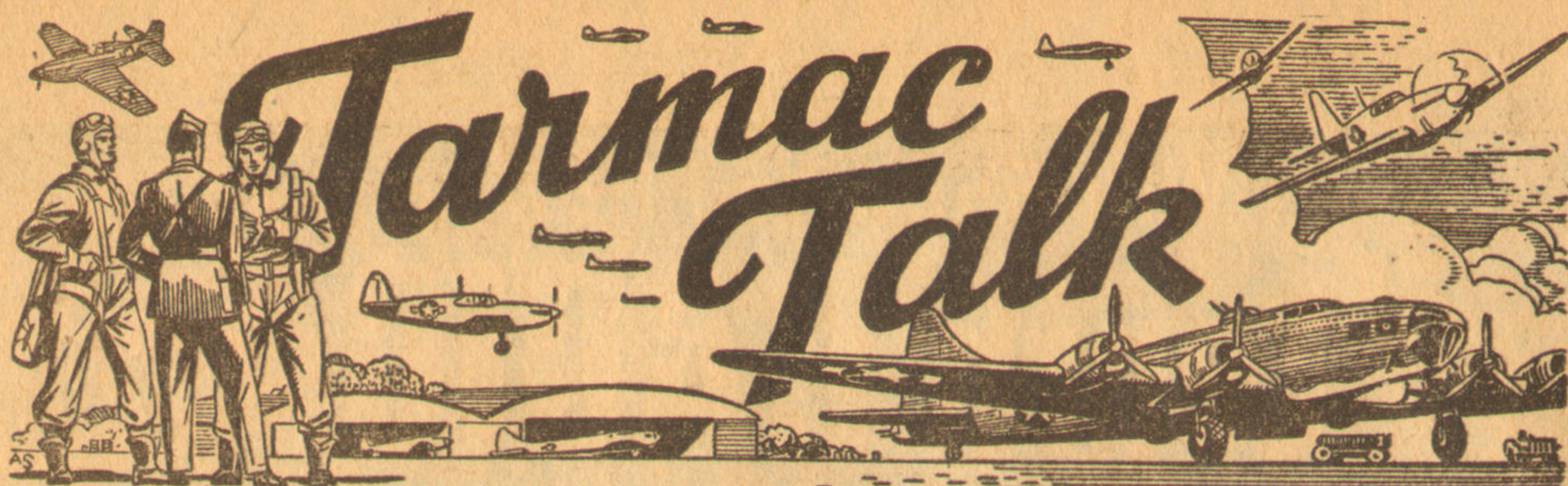
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IT IS beginning to look as if the streamlining and unification of the armed forces of the United States is going to be a typical Congressional football game. With a shuddery sensation along his dorsal vertebrae, your Skipper recalls the fruitless and bitter wrangles that followed World War One.

These wrangles ultimately saw our ablest air leader, General Billy Mitchel, busted from authority, saw old-fashioned cavalry officers back in the saddle on land and battleship admirals walking their quarter-decks as of yore. What their stupidity cost us was every casualty in World War Two—which would scarcely have had to be fought had we readied ourselves for it.

Now the trouble is beginning all over again, with much the same issues in only slightly different clothing. Instead of three departments, the intelligent leaders want one, with Army, Navy and Air Forces co-equal—and the dead-heads are battling viciously to maintain the status quo.

So many half truths and outright falsehoods have been said and printed about the current issue that AAF commander, General Carl "Tooey" Spaatz was recently impelled to take pen in hand and write the following editorial in *AIR FORCE*, the official AAF magazine. Said the General:

Slips of pens and interpolations between the lines are continuing to confuse the American people. Every day some city editor trims a wordy reporter's story just enough to make it misleading.

Serious misunderstanding has come from a recent article in the nation's newspapers. This was phrased to imply that not only the War Department but General Arnold was opposed to a separate Air Force. Of course, nothing could have been more erroneous—nothing could have twisted the truth more effectively.

The article in question has the following background: On December 11, 1945, Congressmen May and Vinson, Chairmen of the Military and Naval Affairs Committees respectively—submitted identical bills henceforth known as the May-Vinson Bills for the establishment of a separate Air Force. The May-Vinson Bills were referred to the Committee

on Expenditures in the Executive Departments under Congressman Carter Manasco. Then, as is customary, Mr. Manasco wrote letters to the Secretary of War, the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Chief of Army Air Forces, requesting their detailed comments.

As a result of the numerous conferences that followed, the Secretary of War, General Eisenhower and General Arnold agreed that the proposed Bill could not accomplish completely our urgent national security requirements. They concurred in these facts:

That air power is co-equal with land and sea power in its responsibility for, and contribution to military success in battle; that the war just ended had demonstrated the importance of unity of direction; and that a single reply should be submitted to Congressman Carter Manasco as representing the joint views of the three upon the May-Vinson Bills.

This letter, signed by the Acting Secretary of War is, of course, the one referred to in the misleading newspaper article. In that item the clever screening of facts or an editor's overcutting caused the inference that General Arnold was opposed to a separate Air Force.

The letter stated that in his recent message to the Congress, the President strongly recommended the enactment of legislation for a single department of national defense to administer the Army, the Navy and the Air Forces as three co-equal branches.

This would establish an organizational structure providing unified direction below the President and thereby assuring coordination and efficiency for our armed forces. It would give air power a co-equal status with land and sea forces, and it would achieve maximum economy with more security for less taxes.

In determining a plan to give air power co-equal status with land and sea forces, two courses are open. One is the method in the proposed legislation, namely, by provision for three executive departments for the armed forces, one of which would be the Department of the Air Forces. The other is the single department for all the armed forces. It could not be accomplished with the two departments we have at the present.

The Acting Secretary's letter continued that the War Department was of the opinion that all three of the objectives of the President must be promptly achieved in the organization for military security. The proposed May-Vinson

(Continued on page 90)



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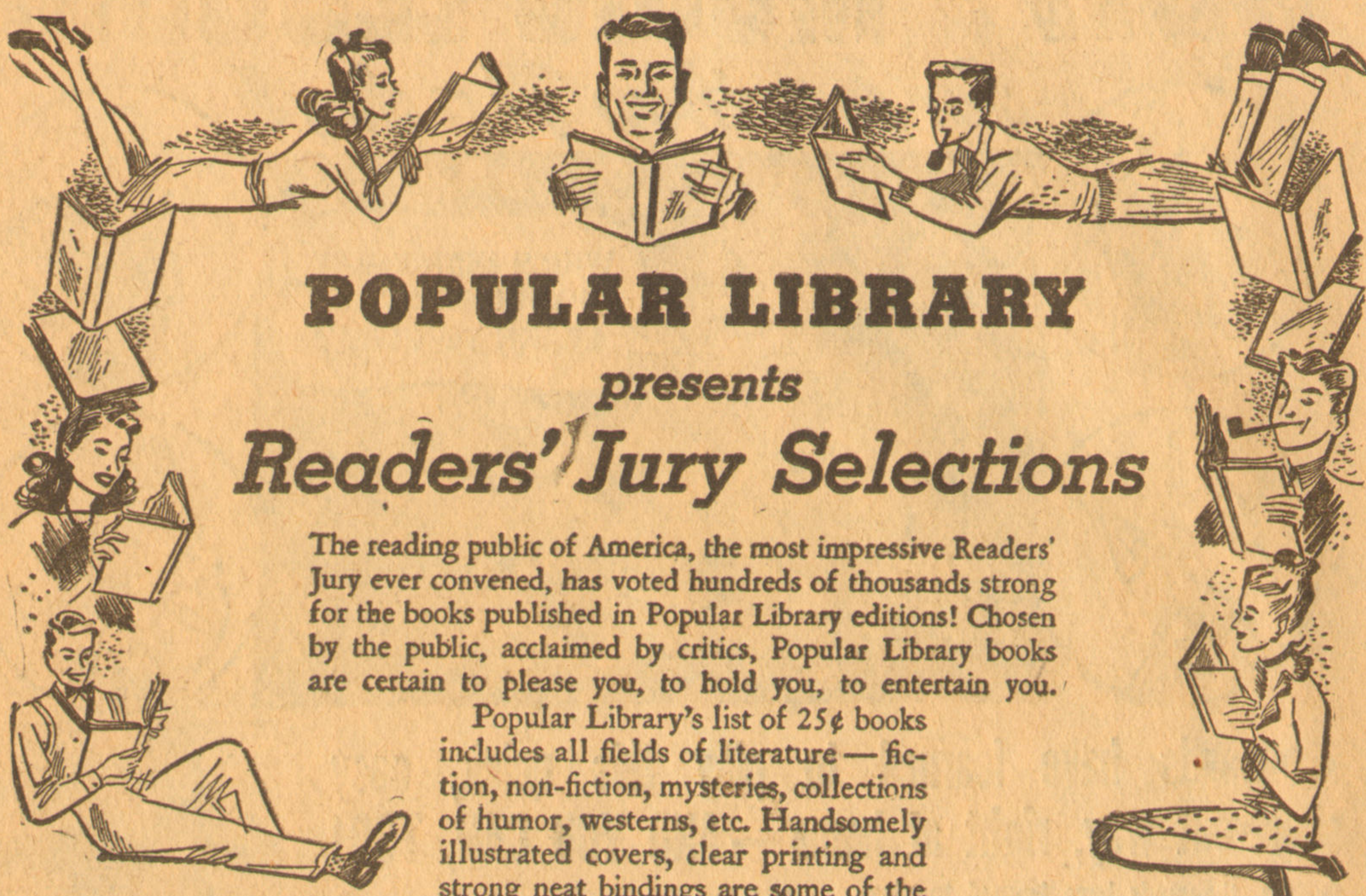
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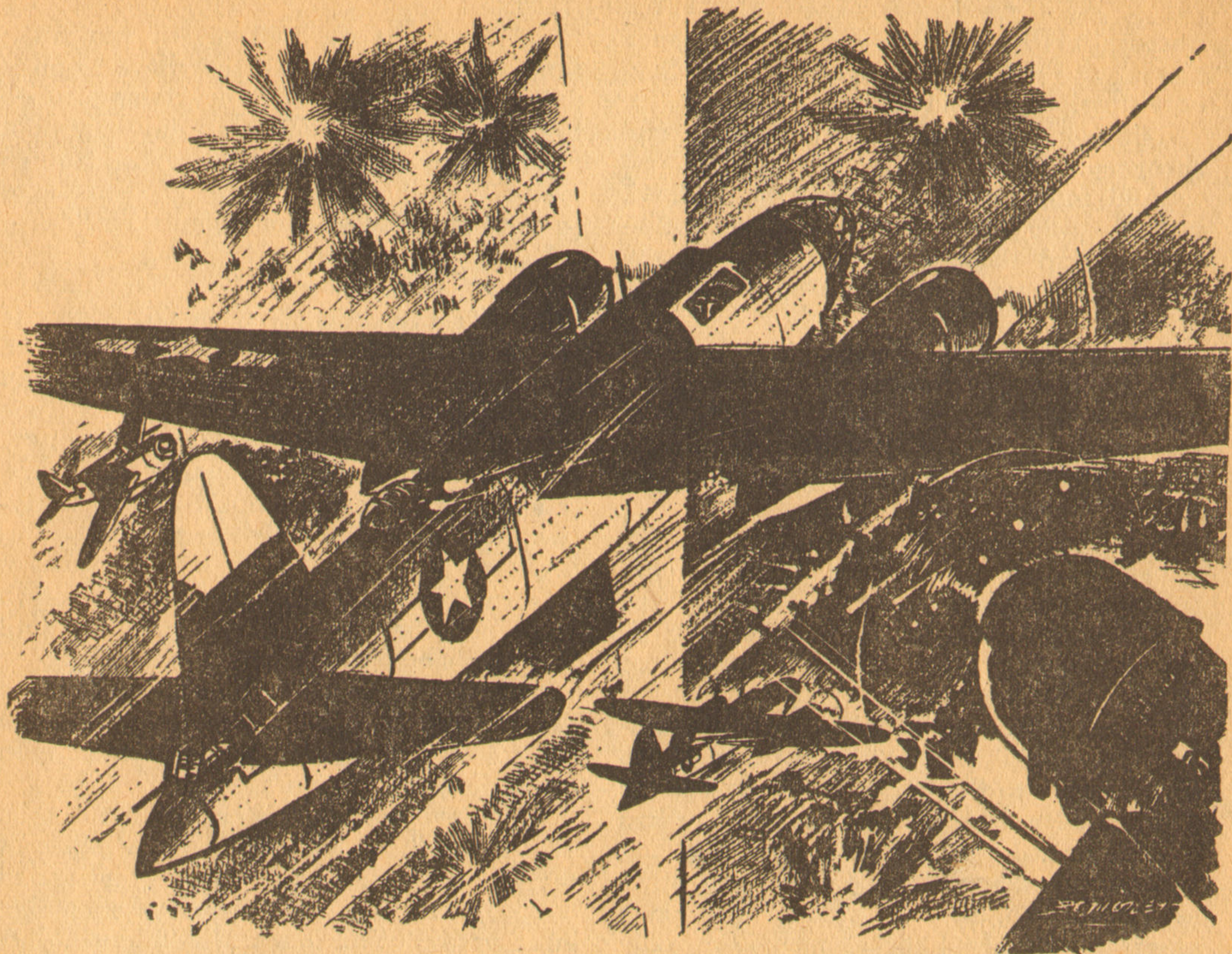
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Searchlights were stabbing at the big B-26 bomber as Lew Byington drove it on

YESTERDAY'S PILOT

By **ROBERT S. FENTON**

War hero Lew Byington, lost in the mire of battle fatigue, is suddenly faced by the greatest challenge of his career!

CHAPTER I

No Job for a Hero

LEW BYINGTON leaned forward in the big leather chair, his new slouch hat hanging limply from the tips of his fingers, and staring at the rich rug at his feet which fleetingly reminded him of a green and purple hillside in Normandy.

Sitting there, listening to the big man of

Western Central Airlines, it occurred to him that things could strike harder against a man than the chunks of stuff that came up from the flak towers. Spoken words, for instance, that sent men to a gallows, to an invalid's chair or into a future that could have no meaning.

"You're only one among hundreds, Byington," John Gurning said, and kept his eyes averted as he bent forward and crushed the hot ash from the stub of a cigar. "I have a

AN EXCITING AIR-WAR ACTION NOVELET

dozen pilots here who would gladly change places with you—to have your record. Seventy missions, wasn't it?"

Byington hardened his mouth and shrugged.

"And four forced landings," he said. "I walked away from them all. Maybe that makes them think I am crazy or, in the polite parlance of the Air Forces doctors, psycho."

Gurning nervously cleared his throat.

"Three years of combat flying takes more out of a man, Byington, than a lifetime of commercial flying. That's not my opinion, but the findings of men who spend their lives making a study of such things."

"Flight surgeons," Byington snapped. "No doubt you have an extensive report on me?"

Gurning nodded.

"Naturally, Byington. We have an enviable safety record and cannot afford to lose it. Accidents are out."

"All right," Byington said, his face becoming more finely drawn. "I'm not in shape to fly a bomber to the target and back, but the war has been over five months and I've had a good rest. Flight surgeons can be wrong regarding a diagnosis as well as any other kind of medico, can't they? Do I look like a physical wreck? Shucks, man, I'm only twenty-four, and how much nerve does it take to kick a passenger plane through a sky with nothing more dangerous in it than clouds and birds? Flying is my life and they want to take it away from me. I can fly anything."

Gurning passed a hand wearily over his eyes.

"Try to understand, son. You've got to face the cold facts. The Army considers you unfit for flying and it is impossible for anyone to reverse the decision. You've taken a lot, kid. Surely you can accept this."

"Yeah?" Byington got up and slammed his hat down on the big man's desk. "So I killed myself maybe a thousand Germans. Maybe two. For that I get pretty ribbons which will get me a cup of coffee if I hand over a dime along with them. These commercial pilots have got to live like the way they been accustomed and we suckers aren't going to chisel in. We beat the old baby with the grass cutter to come home and starve to death. He must be laughing, Gurning. Maybe we aren't considered a part of this reconversion—"

FOR a moment or two Gurning stared at the pilot.

"You don't believe what you're saying, Byington," he said gently. "All pilots re-

turned from the war will have a chance the same as anyone else. All they have to do is prove they are fit. And they'll have to go through the same routine as any new pilot employed by an airline. If they get through ground training, they'll be assigned to planes as co-pilots until we can assign them."

Lew Byington laughed.

"That's rich, mister. That's the funniest thing I've ever heard." He took a cigarette out of a leather case and Gurning watched him hold the flame of a lighter to it and noticed that Byington's hand shook even though he had stopped laughing. "I can see a lad named Rip Orman going to ground school again. Rip only knocked down thirty-two Nips and maybe he needs more training."

Gurning waited until the flyer sat down again and then he watched Byington until the man had control again.

"There's a lot of jobs in aviation, son. On the ground. In the laboratories and in the control towers. With your experience, you could do a lot to help."

"The devil with it, mister," Byington said. "I'm a flier." He looked out the window at the glistening concrete runways and stared hungrily at a big skyliner that was coming in. It was beautiful to see. No drab paint job, no gaping holes in its wings. No stink about it. There was no crash siren going and no meat wagon around. Bosh, that baby at the controls did not know from nothing. He didn't need much nerve under those conditions. Like sitting in a Pullman chair and reading a paper compared to combat.

"If you want a job here," Gurning was saying, "just let me know when you make up your mind."

"Blow it," Byington said, and watched the wheels of the skyliner kiss the concrete. "Funny, how soon they forget. I blew up a billion bucks worth of Kraut stuff and killed maybe a thousand Germans. They got no more use for me." He laughed with bitterness and got up to go. "I could fly those babies out there with my arms folded, Gurning."

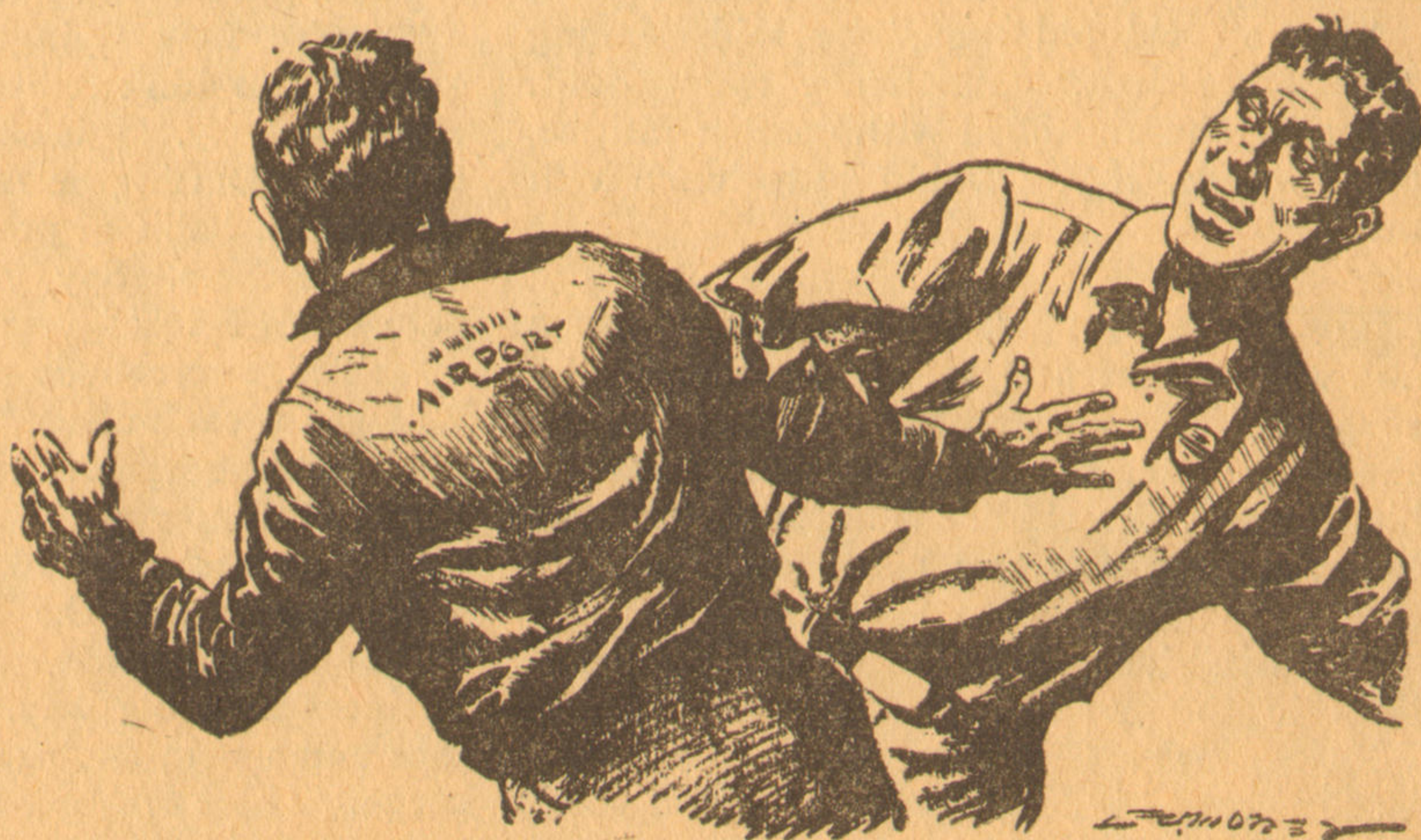
"Think it over, son."

"Maybe," Byington said. "Right now I am thinking of a B-26 pilot dusting tomato plants with a puddle jumper." Byington had paused in the doorway before leaving the office. "Or doing reconnaissance work for a movie studio that wants a location for a Boyer picture. Or would they take a chance on me for even that stuff?"

He shut the door not too softly behind him and went down a thickly carpeted cor-



The Skylark slewed around, cut down a white-faced mech, then went slamming into a hangar and took out an entire wall



ridor to a reception room. It was circular in shape, very modernistic. The girl at the desk was very modern too. She smiled at the flier, a question in her eyes.

"No dice, sister," Byington said. "Don't ever raise your boy to be a soldier. Maybe you'll buy an apple from me. I'll be in town at the corner of First and Broad." He studied the picture of a Western Central pilot that hung from the wall. There were three other young faces in their frames.

"A nice looking guy," Byington said.

"Mr. Gurning believes airline pilots should have recognition too," the girl said. "That one there is Harry Brett. He brought a plane in that had been struck by lightening. The radio was out and there was a heavy fog."

"Well, well," Byington said. "What would the boy have done if the Jerries were throwing flak up at him too? And if one of his engines was dangling like a hangnail and the co-pilot's blood was spilling into his lap?"

"Everybody couldn't go to war," the girl said, her voice a little cold.

"Nobody should," the flier said. "Yes, I guess the Big Boy is proud of this line's safety record. I wonder if I'll get my mug pinned up somewhere, for knocking off all those Heinies and messing up a couple railroad trains, three bridges, and many other things Nazi too numerous to mention. It is a cockeyed world. They forget to remember plenty fast."

"In your own heart you know the job you did," the girl said. "For me that would be satisfaction enough."

She got up and walked to the water cooler and got herself a drink. A neat job, Byington thought. He liked her specifications, her silhouette. He wondered if she had a pilot.

"I'm an old old man," he said, leaning against her desk. "Practically twenty-four. I'm a psycho and filled with combat fatigue, but I wonder if you would go to lunch with me."

THE girl dropped the paper cup into a wire basket and looked at him, mildly surprised. He guessed she was studying the shadows under his eyes and the hollows in his cheeks. She studied him longer than he believed necessary and his nerves began to sing.

"Skip it," he said. "Let's not have headlines in the evening papers. 'Ex-Bomber Pilot Strangles Girl During Lunch Hour.'"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"I've got a lot of places to go anyway," Byington said. "Somebody must need a pilot. Maybe I'll see you around."

He pulled his hat brim down over his eyes with a vicious jerk and opened the door and slammed it behind him.

He went out of the long low building and out onto the walk and watched a big sky-liner unload. Another was taking off. The loud speaker was paging a man. There was the smell of high octane in the air, the wavering hum of many horses. There was no tenseness about the men who walked about wearing the cream-colored coveralls of Western Central. Nobody was sweating the big jobs in or out. He felt regret and strong resentment.

During the war he had had it, all that it took, but men like Gurning told him he was too burned out as a post-war pilot. He turned his eyes away and cut through a narrow areaway that brought him out through the gate. He took a taxi and went over into town. The driver was a reckless jehu and soon Byington grew fearful.

"You want to knock me off?" he yelled "Take it easy, pal."

"Nervous, huh?" the driver shot back.

"Button your lip!" the flier snapped.

In town he went to a tavern and had some drinks. After a time, every time someone passed his table, he would hold up a hand, fingers splayed, for inspection.

"They don't shake a bit, do they?" he'd ask. "Tell me, do they shake?"

When they began laughing at him, some of the strong stuff he had taken wore off, and he got up to leave. He was almost at the door when someone called him by name. He turned slowly and saw a face that was vaguely familiar.

"Yeah?" he said.

The big man held out his hand.

"You're Lew Byington," he said with a grin. "You don't remember, maybe, but I'm Hank Varney. I used to run those crates out at the Darlington Airport before the war. You had a habit of pestering the life out of my boys there. Say, you knocked the devil outa them Nazis."

"It's nice somebody admits it," Lew said.

"I got a car outside," Varney said. "You got anything special to do this afternoon? Like to talk to you."

"I'm as free as a bird," Byington said.

Driving out of the city, Varney told the ex-bomber pilot that he was going back into business in a big way. He had three light jobs and a twin-engined plane that could lug cargo. There was good money to be had in this chartering business. A man could carry the entire Lakeview High School football team in the old Gurning Skylark.

"There's no end to the possibilities, Lew," Varney pointed out.

"Where do I fit?" Byington asked.

"Seems to me I remember you flew a little over across," Varney said. "If you can show me you can handle that two-engined baby, you're my bet."

"Sweet words."

Byington grinned, and lighted a cigarette. His hand shook a little. There was an aggravating tightness in his stomach and a lot of things he wanted to forget came back to him. He had not been in a plane since he had brought that last B-26 in. They had said he should never try to fly one again. Men who should know. Flight surgeons. But even experts made prognoses which proved to be unsound.

CHAPTER II

Penalty of Combat

IT WAS a four hour ride to Lakeview. Varney saw that Byington had a hotel room for the night.

"Meet you there at nine in the morning, Captain," Varney called out as he drove away.

Byington hoped he would sleep sound. A few hours later he wondered if his snoring had awakened him. But he was hot in his bed. He sat all tightened up in the control pit of a bomber and in front of his eyes were great oily black puffs shot through with red and the plane shook under him as the boulders of concussion banged against the plane's flanks.

Other planes were driving in at him—yellow-noses, with jets of fire guttering from their wings. Down below, the countryside was aglow with a horrible, wavering, bloody light. Tracers streaked past the window and the crazy roar of powerful horses shook a man's reasoning.

"I got that one!" Byington heard little Eddie Schott yell from the tail turret. "Come in for some more, you slugs!"

The voice broke too quickly and there was a terrific jolt that nearly turned the B-26 over on its back. The lights went out and the intercom was filled with a meaningless crackling sound.

Lew Byington fought the bomber tooth and nail, his teeth sunk into his lower lip and drawing blood.

On even keel, he checked his crew. Three

voices made themselves heard in the intercom. The co-pilot's head rolled around on his shoulders and cold air drove through the shattered window and sprayed Byington with a red mist. The bomber was bucketing and fighting the controls. One engine was thumping and burning dangerously hot. The port wing was fractured.

"I'll take this baby home," Byington ripped out. "I'll put her down. It isn't the first time, either."

"You do, and I'll write it up for Ripley, Lew," the engineer called out.

"You want out?" Lew yelled above the roar of Hell outside.

"They beat baseball bats against your hams in them Kraut camps," the top gunner snapped. "Anyway, this I got to see, Captain. The third time always tells."

Sure, it was the third time. Twice before Lew Byington had brought a bomber in on its belly and had overcome every kind of a hazard you had to anticipate with such landings. He swept his bloodshot eyes over the vista afforded him from the control pit and saw two of the 190s stabbing down from off to the right. Another Nazi Focke-Wulf was spearing at them through the crazy pattern of searchlights and it was heating up its guns.

Byington felt panic for the first time in his war. He nearly let go. He did yell for his crew to hit the silk, but his voice was stretched thin by his fear and no one heard.

He was drawing away slowly when the 190s cut loose with cannon and machine-gun fire and he felt a violent tug at his shoulder and let the bomber have its head for several despairing moments. Sweat poured down his face and it trickled down his quaking legs and into his boots. What mission was this? Or had there been any others?

All memory was shattered and there was no measuring of time. He kept talking into the throat mike but it was only a stuttering jabber. Eddie Schott would not answer him. From far away, he heard the voices of the engineer and the top turret man. He wondered why they weren't letting the Nazis have a taste of the B-26's cannon.

The 190s kept coming in.

"They've boxed us," he screeched. "This is the works! This—"

He could not talk straight any more. Was it tears or was it sweat that clogged his throat? It had never been like this before. His whole body shook as he tooled the riddled bomber along the fearful skylane and his fear was heavy upon him.

There were scattered voices in his ears.

Dude Oldsmith, the navigator.

"Four wheels, no brakes— Wish we had four wheels—I'm taking bets that Lew walks away from it."

"Shut up!" Byington roared hoarsely, as more ships appeared in the sky. The muck thinned and a 190 flamed down and the pilot felt the heat of its passing. Another Focke-Wulf blew up and threw wreckage against the beams of light. A fighter plane swept low over the crippled B-26 and Lew Byington laughed like a man is not supposed to laugh. A Thunderbolt.

Byington cried as he nursed the bomber along. He looked down and saw a ripple of moonlight on the rough surface of the Channel. He had to fight the shakes that came into his arms and legs, and he began to remember back a little.

DURING the briefing, the flight surgeon had looked at him hard. The medico had been staring at him for a couple of days and it had sawed at the pilot's nerves.

"I wish I wasn't in this thing about now," Oldsmith said. "But in that pub at—"

"I'd hate to be up here without it," the top gunner yelled. "Take her down, Lew. Me an' Chip have got a bet on."

Byington steadied himself with the stubbornness of near delirium and watched his instruments, those that remained to him. He heard nothing and felt nothing as he dragged maximum range from the little octane left to him.

The business of gliding in without undercarriage again glued his tongue to his palate and wrung every last bit of moisture out of his throat. The urge to let it all go in one last fearful crash was overwhelming. It would be over quick. A man would not have to go out there again and take the lumps from the ground guns and the Yellow Noses. The ribbons you got would get you a cup of coffee along with a dime.

Oldsmith's voice penetrated the woolly layers of stuff that were wrapped around his brain and his head snapped up.

"Over the strip, Lew— Green lights on the tower— They waited up for us."

"Lots of room," the engineer said. "Put her down, pal. Remember I got a date with a gal in Bonmouth on Sunday."

"We'll need room," Byington said and then clamped his jaws tight together and shook sweat out of his eyes.

The bomber fell over on a wing and he had some very bad moments before he straightened it out again. Abstractedly, he was aware of the small figures scurrying

around on the field below. There was a confused roar of sound in his earphones and what was left of his crew were holding on and praying, he hoped.

The fear came over him again as the ground came up, a chilling wave of nausea that nearly finished him for keeps. The one active engine cut, he exerted every last ounce of strength keeping the bomber's nose from boring into the concrete.

The crippled plane hit and bounced and threw an engine clear. It slithered off the runway and cracked its belly wide open before crashing into a revetment and shuddering to immobility.

Lew Byington caved in when his head hit hard against the side of his office. He sank down into a great pit with the shouts of men in his ears. . . .

Byington sat straight up in bed, the sweat icy against his skin.

Why did a man have to be thrown back into a nightmare that had already taken its toll? This was the sixth time now that he had put that bomber down after that lacing over Frankfort and every last frightful detail lingered in his head as he sat staring at the lesser darkness of the small hotel room's one window. He trembled violently and got up to get the only stuff that seemed to help him forget.

He took the bottle out of his bag and had a long pull at the fiery stuff it contained. His nerves loosened and he went back to bed and tried desperately to sleep. Tomorrow he had to prove something to himself, to men like Gurning, to all the world.

If the past had to come back to a man in his sleep, why not that part of it that took place on a beautiful island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, where pilots forgot the horrors of war and climbed the salitas to look out over a beautiful blue and peaceful sea? There were stone-pines there and a moon that shone brighter than in any other part of the world. A man could assemble the fragments there and breathe in the sweetish salt air and mend nerves that were pitifully ragged.

Byington arrived at the airport promptly at nine and got out of a bus to stare at the old Gurning transport that was getting some attention from the mechs. A new paint job hid some of its age but the flyer knew its length of service. Its fuselage was much too bloated for the streamline age, and its two engines could only give out with 1100 horses combined.

It was an old girl trying to step along with the modern hep cats, but it was a plane. It was something that would fly and

it suddenly became a thing of beauty in Byington's eyes. Varney trotted out from the long low house that formed a half square at the near corner of the field and called to him.

"We're warming the big baby up, Lew. It sounds pretty smooth and ready to go. How about you?"

The blood tingled in Byington's veins.

"I'm as ready, Varney," he said.

He could not assert he felt smooth.

A SMALL crowd of people came up, seemingly from nowhere. One tall man packed a camera and he began to step back, preparatory to getting a good shot at Lew Byington. Byington went for him and shoved him off his feet and the camera thudded to the turf.

"Lew, what's the idea?" Varney said. "We can use this publicity. It builds fellows like me up."

"Yeah?" Byington snapped. "Look, they aren't taking pictures of me, Varney. I am no longer photogenic. At least, not until I say they can. I got my reasons."

"Okay, pal," the Lakeview newspaper cameraman said in a brittle voice. "Maybe you war pilots got temperament like movie actresses. Maybe my sheet ain't big enough to do you no good. Some day, Byington, you'll beg for a picture of your mug and a couple of lines reminding people you killed some Heinies once. I want to see that day."

"Look, Mike," Varney said. "Come back tomorrow. Maybe he's superstitious. Maybe today ain't lucky."

There were some big kids there.

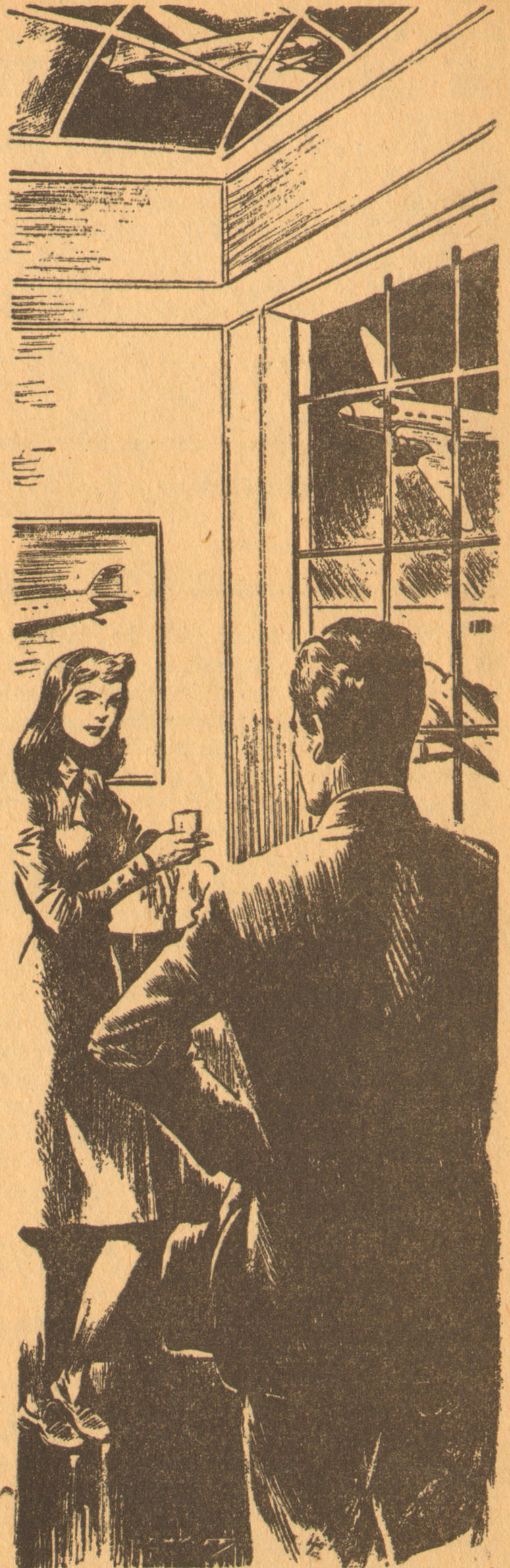
"What you say his name was?" one asked another. "How many planes did he shoot down?"

Lew Byington laughed without moving his lips.

"Get that, Varney! You ask that red-head how much Joe DiMaggio hit seven yeas ago and he'll come right out with the correct figures. They sure forget the averages of the war fliers pretty fast. A guy is responsible for knocking off a thousand Huns, maybe two thousand, but they have to look it up with the war only over a little while ago."

"A lot of fellows flew in the war, Lew," Varney said. "They killed a lot of people and knocked off a lot of planes. Maybe people are too busy trying to forget blood and thunder. It is a good thing to forget."

"Yeah," Lew said. "Ribbons and a dime for a cup of coffee. Let's take a look at that crate and see if it flies."



"I'm an old man of twenty-four," Byington said to the girl at the water cooler

Two light planes took off and Byington stopped and watched them lift into the air like startled quail. Toy stuff. They were little bigger than some models, he thought. And they'd suggested that he could fly the midgets and dust off boll weevils or other crop pests.

He grinned as he stepped aboard the Gurning Skylark. He got into the pilot's seat and checked the controls. He fed the idling plane some gas and listened for bugs in the engines. They sounded nice everything considered.

"Let's take her out over the town," Varney said. "We'll have a talk later."

CHAPTER III

Disaster

BYINGTON nodded. His hands began to get moist as he prepared for the takeoff. A wad of something thick and cold formed under his breastbone and his heart was thumping against his ribs. He cursed the weakness he could not explain as the transport slid along the hard-packed ground and turned into the runway.

Relax, he told himself. This is like sitting in a Pullman and reading a good book. Why, that dame back in Gurning's reception room could take this crate up and set it down again.

He opened the throttles and let the plane gather speed until the border of stunted pine at the end of the runway was just the right distance away. He lifted the transport and cleared the trees with plenty to spare and threw it into a long climbing turn in the direction of Lakeview.

"Acts nice," he said to Varney.

"I put a lot of dough in this baby," Varney said and slowed the tempo of his gum chewing. "I been looking for the right pilot. A hundred a week, Lew. How about it?"

"You got yourself a pilot," Byington answered with a smile.

He thought of Gurning and a couple of flight surgeons and his smile grew wider. Sure, that pretty receptionist could handle a job like this one in her spare time. Somehow he hadn't been able to forget the girl. The one he had planned to marry had not waited long enough. She had heard he was not going to fly any more.

The thrum of the engines settled down to an even thundering sound and they were

over Lakeview at about nine thousand. It was a day filled with heat haze and maybe that was the reason Byington's underclothes were sticking to him.

Varney settled back and half closed his eyes. Making a turn, Byington happened to spot the plane off to the left and slightly higher than the Skylark. Another appeared above it and a nerve in his face jumped.

The cold lump in his chest thickened and for a moment or two he was back in a war and seeing yellow noses on those harmless Army ships.

He must have cried out because Varney was straight in his seat and looking at him closely.

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

"Nothing," Byington said and pressed his lips tight.

He could not tell this man who had just hired him not to mind at any time if he saw ships in the sky that really were not there. That it was like a person who had been startled by a sound as he passed a spot on a lonely road at night, or saw a shadowy figure appear and as quickly disappear in the dark. That person would always hear that sound or see the shadow every time he passed that way again.

There was a flash of light off to the left and Byington winced. His nerves were reminding him that things had happened to disturb them not so long ago and he felt a weakness in his legs.

"Might as well take her down, Lew," Varney said. "This job will work out all right."

Even as Byington nodded, an engine sputtered and became cold. The cold sweat came out on the war pilot's face and the shakes got him and held on. The engine picked up as he fumbled crazily with the controls. "Okay, okay, Lew," Varney yelled. "Why so excited?"

"Yeah, Varney," Byington said, but the old terror was riding him.

Three times he had survived a forced landing and he never wanted another one. A man couldn't lick the law of averages forever. Take her down, sure. He wanted down. His throat was leathery and the harmless transport plane was flying him when it should have been the other way around.

"You can go along too far with everything, Captain," the flight surgeon had said. "You can do too much of a thing in too short a time. All of your flying—all you had in you—was used up in three years. . . ."

He thought, No, I can still fly. This baby will do just what I want it to do. I'll put it

on the roof if I have a mind. I'll show those grease monkeys down there something to lift them out of their pants.

He nosed the Skylark down and came over the pine clump with little to spare and with engines wide open. There was a kind of madness urging him on and he did not hear Varney scream at him nor feel the man grab him fiercely by the arm.

"You gone crazy, Byington?"

"I'll give that cameraman a show, Varney," the war pilot bit out and zoomed the two-engine job up again just as it seemed it would take the roof off a hangar. "They said I would never fly again! Let's go over to Bridgeton and land it on Gurning's roof."

"Put it down, Lew!" Varney yelled. "That's an order!"

"Okay," Byington said and banked sharply.

THE balky engine acted up again and icy fingers clawed at his heart. It kept going out and coming in again and once it threw sparks that came back at the windscreen.

Lew Byington's nerves were breaking when the field came up at him. It looked no roomier than his backyard at home and when the wheels hit the ground, the far end of the runway looked closer than it was and he slewed the Skylark around, braked it hard and snapped off a wheel.

He saw a mech's face only briefly and it was chalky white and full of terror. Then the man disappeared and the plane slammed against a hangar and took an entire wall out.

Varney climbed out first. Blood trickled from a cut on his forehead. He reached in and yanked Lew Byington out and flung him off his feet.

"You're washed up, mister. I was a sucker to take a chance with you. Get off this field, you flakhappy dope!" He turned when a man in greasy coveralls caught him by the arm.

"It's Willie," the mech yelled. "I think we better call an ambulance. That wing caught him and cut him up plenty."

Varney turned and ran.

Lew Byington drew a sleeve across his eyes and then looked out over the turf at the injured man.

The last few minutes had been like a nightmare and he scarcely believed all that had happened after the engine had conked out. He heard Varney yelling for a man to phone the ambulance. Then Varney came stumbling toward him and in close he stopped and poured it on.

"You made a nice mess of it, you sap!

Maybe you have killed a man. I believed you could still fly and took a chance with you, Byington, even though you had no license to take a plane off the ground. I'll be in a spot over this thing and you can dismiss all responsibility by just saying you got battle fatigue. I haven't got a leg to stand on and you won't have if you don't get out of here, but quick!"

"Something happened, Varney," Byington said and let a sob jerk loose from his throat. "I needed a little more time, I guess, but I wanted to get in a crate so bad, I—I got some dough saved up and if it will help out."

"Get going, mister," Varney said, his voice cracking up. "Don't ever let me see you around here again."

"Yeah," Lew said. "I wish I could—everything is all mixed up—something happened quick up there—"

He stumbled away, toward the road. He heard an angry voice.

"You lettin' him go, Mr. Varney? That slug should be arrested."

"Sure, I'm lettin' him go—he's a war hero," Varney answered. "He wasn't responsible. I was flying that plane, understand? Everybody here, remember that. I took the controls up there and an engine cut out and I cracked that plane up. That's my story and try and disprove it."

Byington walked down the dusty road, barely aware of locomotion.

It had not been his nerves, he told himself. The realization that he was handling a plane again and getting it to respond to his every whim had caused him to let go. That landing could have been made easily enough with a crate that was built to stand the gaff. There wasn't a pilot anywhere who had flown up to a thousand hours without having been in trouble of some kind or another. There was no perfect mechanism, human or otherwise.

But in his heart he knew different.

He thought, You keep trying to talk yourself out of it, Lew. You have been in a war too long and you were trained for war flying and no other kind, see? What have you got to offer to men like Gurning?

Byington tried to find an answer to that one. There had to be something the war pilots had brought back that the big men in the business could use. You learn plenty of tricks when you have to fight against flyers like Goering's Abbeville Kids. They save your very life.

As he climbed aboard the bus, Lew Byington could not think of even one that would look good in a book.

He got to Lakeview and changed for another Greyhound that went to Bridgeton.

His nerves became more steady and he began to think of the days ahead. Flying was his life. It was his business. He knew no other. The world was taking to the air.

After the last war, he recalled, there were ways for a pilot with an elastic conscience to make a good living. Stuff that was dangerous to take along the roads could be flown through the air. As yet there was not much of a police force wearing wings. There was a war going on somewhere all the time. A man could pick the side he wanted to fight on. The enemy were the lads who paid the least amount of dough. He had known a flyer who had done all right below the Border after the last war.

THERE was a club in Bridgeton called The Wing. All those who had ever flown and were flying were eligible for membership, and it was quartered high up in the towering Leveridge Building and had a big lounge and a very nice bar. Ladies were welcome every Thursday night. Lew Byington took a chance and went up there after he had washed up and had his dinner. The radio was on full blast and several couples were dancing.

Byington thought he knew one of the girls but he couldn't be sure. He went into the bar that was getting a heavy play and wedged himself between a uniform and a gray pin-striped suit. He called for a drink, had two of them neat and let his tongue go. After the uniform spoke about reconversion and the flyer's chance in the new scheme of things.

"Pick yourself a spot for a good filling station, my friend," Lew said tartly. "You've been in a war and maybe got your picture published, but it won't pay off. Not like one that is hung on the walls of the room at Western Central Airlines. They hang the picture of a flier up there who can land a transport crate while it is raining. We should have been smart and stayed back to grow up with the business. A war pilot hasn't a future because he used it up in two or three short years. What did you bring back they can use?"

"I'll get along," the uniform said. "You got the wrong slant somehow. I didn't get your name."

"It's Byington. I got my picture in the papers once. I flew over in France and Germany and I guess I must have knocked off over a thousand Huns on the ground. My crew got themselves over a hundred Jerry

planes but nobody cares to remember that any more. Some lad in a Gurning passenger plane will set a record from here to New Orleans pretty soon because a woman in the plane will be racing the stork. Gurning will hang his picture up and put a plaque under it."

"Sure," the uniform said. "That's a reason to be remembered, Byington. If you get what I mean. Right now and far into the future, I hope people will be thinking up ways to grow bigger and prettier roses, how to control cancer, or pay off the mortgage on their house. The man who will perform a miraculous operation and save a life will be—but maybe you don't see what I am driving at, Byington."

"I've been through the eighth grade, pal. War is a horrible thing now and we have got to put our ribbons and decorations away so they won't remind the public we went out and killed a lot of Japs and Nazis. We'll get songs like that old one, 'I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be A Soldier.' But what will it get me? They claim I brought nothing back with me that they want in this peacetime flying business and suggest I go out and keep a set of books. The devil they say."

The uniform was not convinced.

"A man doesn't go through all the flying we have done without becoming expert in some phase of the business," he said. "I'm going to discover what I brought out of that mess and cash in on the open market."

"I'll see you here six months from now," Byington sneered. "We'll learn who came out with the most dough. You stick to hearts and flowers and I'll go work at my trade. It's the only one I know and the one they taught me. They want to forget but I'd just as soon remember. I'm kind of proud of the score I turned in."

"I hope you'll change your mind," the uniform said. "Or that somebody changes it for you. You've got to forget that every plane that flies is an instrument of destruction. It can be used for directly the opposite, mister. Your talents could also be used."

"This is where I came in," Byington said.

He went out into the lounge and sat down and watched the dancing. A couple moved in close and the girl turned her head slightly and met his glance. His brows lifted and he smiled for the first time in many hours.

There was no mistaking the slightly turned up nose and rich full mouth, nor the sparkle in her grayish-blue eyes. Her recognition signal stepped up his pulse and he knew that, three years ago, he would have made a bid for more than just her smile.

The bitterness thickened as he let himself think too much, and suddenly he got up and walked out into the foyer and tossed a hat check to the girl at the window. Yesterday's pilots had to train all over again—for tomorrow. Bunk!

CHAPTER IV

Leila

RAIN was falling when he reached the street. He felt jumpy and ready for sleep and hoped he would not wake up early in the morning with the sweat rolling off him and with the memory of a crash landing too crystal clear inside his head.

He angled toward a taxi stand, wondering what that girl's name was. Maybe if he had somebody like her to help him forget—

He spun around when somebody called to him.

His heart pounded as he tried to make out the face of a man who stepped into the blotch of light coming out of the window of an all night grill. The eyes were hidden under a snap brim, the man's chin was sunk into the collar of his topcoat. Byington wanted it to be Oldsmith or Mike Perry or Nicksy Vioni or any of those fellows who used to ride the bombers with him.

The man came in close and Byington was sure he had never seen him before. He studied the angular face for a moment. Its good features were ruined by a mustache that had been shaved too thin.

"You called my name," Byington said.

The stranger smiled briefly.

"Yes, I was at the aero club and I could not help but overhear your interesting conversation, Captain. Let me introduce myself. I am Arturo Perra."

"Somewhere I heard that name before," Byington said.

"Perhaps," Perra said. "I was once head of the Venezuelan Air Force. I flew in Spain, Captain. Perhaps I have something that will interest a man of your—shall we say—talents?"

Lew Byington studied Perra's face for a moment, then nodded.

"What can I lose, Perra? Let's go in here and hash it out over a nightcap."

They went back into a small booth in the rear of The Wing and Perra ordered drinks. He lost no time putting his greasy cards on the table.

There was trouble in Caracas and a certain faction needed a man with experience and very little conscience to direct the operations of a small air force. Perra's countrymen could fly but they had no actual war experience.

"The same old story," Byington grinned. "You Latins always catch the fever after a big war is finished. You step in and have one of your own. I have no doubt you will pay well for a pilot with my talents."

"Five hundred for every flight, Captain. You are the boss. No interference. No questions asked. If you are interested, you will meet me in New York at the Plaza two weeks from tonight. Of course, you will hold what I have told you in the strictest confidence. I warn you that it will be very unhealthy for you if you forget."

"I'll be in New York," Byington said. He refused a third drink and reached for his hat. "I have one trade, Perra. If I say so myself, I am pretty good at it."

He led the way toward the door and then suddenly put on the brakes.

The girl was looking at him again and this time there was trouble in her eyes. The man she had been dancing with at the club was with her and there seemed something wrong

[Turn page]

**TOPS
FOR
QUALITY!**



with him. There was very little color in his face and he sat back in his chair, his eyes half-closed.

Byington crossed to the table.

"Anything wrong?" he asked. "Nice to see you again."

"I'm afraid Freddie ate something that did not agree with him," the girl said. "Would you call a taxi, Mr. Byington?"

"Sure," the flier said. "I'll be glad to. Sit tight." He turned to Perra. "I'll be seeing you, my friend."

"Bueno," Perra said.

He found out later that the girl's name was Leila Thaw.

After they had dropped Freddie off, he took her to her own door. She hesitated while bidding him good night, looked at him steadily.

"Would you care to come in for a few minutes?" she asked him. "It isn't too late for a cup of coffee."

Byington was quick to accept the offer.

He stepped into the snug little apartment and dropped into an easy chair. Gurning's receptionist hurried into the little kitchen and put the coffee on.

A few moments later, over steaming cups, she was asking the war flier if he had made any plans.

"Perhaps," Byington said guardedly, and stirred his coffee.

"That was Perra with you, wasn't it?"

"You know the man?"

"Slightly. I cannot say that I trust him. There are stories going around that may not be true but considering the source, I'm inclined to credit—"

"Forget Perra," Byington cut in. "Gurning—you like working for him at Western Central?"

DIMPLES appeared in the girl's cheeks as she laughed.

"Very much," Leila Thaw said. "In a year or two, it should be one of the largest airlines in the country. It is the only one now that can say it has not had one serious accident."

"You don't lick the law of averages," Byington bluntly reminded the girl. "Gurning's been lucky. He'll blow his top if one of his crates has a hundred percent wash-out."

"Perhaps," she said, her lips tightening. "He is proud of the record, but he picks his pilots very carefully, Mr. Byington, as you may know."

Byington stiffened.

"Touché," he said. "Right on the target,

sister."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," Leila Thaw apologized. "It's only that Mr. Gurning's heart and soul is set on guaranteeing the public the safest kind of flying. His mechanics are experts, too."

"The very best, sure," Byington said. "They never were in a war. Even the mechs get nerves over there. Sweating them in." His tone grew bitter. "No place for tired nerves—Western Central. Let's wish Gurning luck and three more years at least with a perfect record. Yeah, a bad crackup would set him back ten years. He must be sitting on tenterhooks and biting his nails. He should have been a C.O. over one of those airstrips in France. He'd be with me now, looking for a chance to eat regular."

"It isn't that bad," the girl said, and he seemed to detect definite interest in him as he studied her eyes. "You need a rest and then you'll find you have your feet on the ground. Everything will look different to you."

"I can't afford to rest. I do not want my feet on the ground, that is the trouble." He got up and looked at his watch. "It's late and I have to be going. Thanks a whole lot for asking me in."

"I've enjoyed talking with you. Won't you stop in sometime at the office and let me know how things go?" She picked up his hat and handed it to him and gave him a warm smile. "I really mean it."

"Call me Lew," he said. "I'll maybe do that, Leila."

He took a cab when he got outside.

The rain was pouring down. Reality struck him full in the face and so he thought of Perra. Doubt crept into his mind but it was soon gone when he allowed himself to think clearly. She had really got under his skin, he told himself. But there was Freddie and he was a nice looking fellow. People are kind to men who have been through a war. It was the thing to do.

Before he got to his hotel, he knew he would go to New York.

* * * * *

The big Western Central Skyliner was ready to go. Its glistening wings and long sleek fuselage sparkled in the sun and the idling props of the 2,100 horsepower radials made twin-shimmering discs in the haze of midafternoon.

It was a neat job all around, Lew Byington admitted as he made himself comfortable in his seat and adjusted his safety belt.

He was one of thirty passengers going to New York. He had never been a passenger

before and he felt like a bird sneaking a ride on the top turret of a Mitchell. He felt pretty useless and out of it all. He took a pocket magazine from his bag and was idly scanning the story's buildup on the inside cover when somebody snatched it out of his hand. He looked up quickly, ready to tell the book snatcher off.

The face he saw made him forget his anger and for a few brief moments he was back in the driver's seat of a bomber flying over the Rhine.

"Lew!" the man in the blue visored-cap yelled and slammed the passenger on the shoulder. "Lew Byington!"

"Hopper!" Lew cried out. "Hopper Whyte. Well, you old gold brick."

"Yeah, feller. It's me. I'm co-pilot of this baby. Fancy meeting you here. On an airplane of all places! And just so much excess baggage."

"It hurts," Lew snapped. "It ain't good, Hop."

Hopper Whyte had come to the wars two years behind him and he had most of his stuff left in him. Enough to qualify him as a co-pilot for Western Central Airlines. His eyes were very clear and there was a lot of meat on the bones of his face.

Hopper had not been too hot a pilot. Lew remembered the time over the Reich when Hop went a little haywire. But it was good to see him.

"I got nerves, Hop," Byington said. "So tell the pilot to be extra careful. Tell him about the safety record of this company, will you?"

"Sure, Lew. I'll see you, feller. I got business up ahead. I'll send the stewardess to hold your hand and stuff cotton in your ears. She's a redhead."

"I got me a girl," Lew said. A fellow could dream, couldn't he?

THE engines stepped up their thunder. The Skyliner slid along the long smooth runway and became airborne before Byington was hardly aware of motion. A cinch job, even for a man with battle dust still on him. No bombs to worry about, just passengers.

Byington looked around him. There was no tenseness in the faces within his line of vision. Men and women and kids sitting there as if they had been in their own homes and listening to Benny on the air. Why not? There were no Focke-Wulf's around, no flak. Western Central had never had a fatality.

The airport faded swiftly behind and the

Skyliner purred beautifully and settled down for the eighteen hundred mile trip to New York. At eight thousand, the clouds were woolly and above them was a sun that looked a little too red to Byington at that hour of the day.

He went back to his book again but could not seem to get his mind on it. He built up a picture of himself in a war crate over Caracas and wondered who was in for a blitz in the South American country. The redhead came by and smiled at him.

"Hop wanted me to make sure you weren't air sick," she said.

Lew Byington grinned. "He's a comical guy, huh?"

He knew he had a good chance of dating this number for New York but he had too much business there, very important business. He brushed her off as easily as he knew how and she went on toward the tail. He looked over at a little blond girl about four years old and winked.

She got her pretty little face all out of shape when she tried to wink back at him. The child's mother was crocheting.

It was a peaceful scene. The war might never have taken place. There was a couple in front of him and he was sure they had not been married very long. There was a little old lady who slept peacefully, and her glasses were slipping off.

Byington shook his head. This was not for him. It was worse than running a trolley.

He tried the book again and managed to use up another hour.

When he looked out at the sky, he saw that it was opaque, and for the first time realized that the plane was bucking a headwind. A man across the aisle was very sick. The stewardess was hurrying back and forth, having a time keeping on her feet. The first signs of nervousness crept into the faces around Lew Byington. The Skyliner was riding out a storm. The lights were on. He looked over at the little blond girl. She had her face buried in her mother's shoulder.

Rough going, they thought. They should have ridden through a sea of muck and through a score of Messups and 109s. This was still a picnic. It was ugly outside the rain-spattered windows. It was as dark as night and the Skyliner bucketed its way through the soup. Lightning flashed and the little girl cried. The old lady was awake and she reached out and tugged at the redhead's sleeve as the stewardess passed.

"There is nothing to worry about," the redhead said.

CHAPTER V

Storm in the Air

A TINGLING sensation ran along Lew Byington's scalp and down his back and he knew then that everything was not going to be all right. When the needles got him, he got set for trouble.

He felt the plane whoosh down and jump up again like a frightened gull. Somebody screamed. Everything seemed to happen at once on the tail of the frightened cry.

There was a blinding crackling flash of light mixed with thunder, that turned the Skyliner over on its side. Next came a sickening break in the roar of the engines and the stewardess was catapulted toward the pilot's compartment.

Byington felt shock. His right arm was a little numb as he loosened his belt. The lights went out, came on again dimly. He knew that the lightning had struck up ahead.

The redhead stumbled down the aisle and a lurch of the plane nearly upset her again. Byington managed to get her by the arm and he pulled her toward him.

"A rough night," he called out and forced a laugh. The girl stayed close to him and held on to his arm.

"Look, Hop wants you up there. Right away, Lew. The pilot is hurt."

"Keep your voice down," Lew snapped and got her by the shoulders and held on. Her cheek was close to his lips. "What was that you said?"

"Hop wants you," the stewardess said and her voice was smothered. "He sent me to get you. Please go up there—Norbert has been struck by lightning. He—Hop said to hurry. Won't you please go? He said—"

"I got a hunch what he said. Sure, I got a hunch." Lew was grinning now. "All right, let me past you."

Lew Byington went through a door and into the pilots' compartment of the Skyliner and for a brief instant thought he was back in a war again. The pilot was slumped down in his seat and he was out cold. Hopper Whyte was at the controls, fighting a plane with a fracture in the starboard wing and with only one engine turning over. His face was white as he turned it toward Lew.

"Look, feller, take over. You've got to get this crate in. You can land them when they're hurt like this, Lew. On a dime, remember. Three times they said you have

done it."

Byington laughed crazily and hung on.

"Three times? You mean a dozen times, Hopper. In my sleep. Over and over. Listen, this is your job, not mine. I got nerves, remember? Or didn't you hear? Show me some courage, Hop. Let me see why Gurning never had an accident. He hires the right boys, Hop. Okay, I'll coach you in!"

"It's my first run, Lew. Listen, there's only one man can bring this down without killing everybody back there. There's a couple of little kids, Lew. Women—their lives are right in your two hands!"

Byington held on as the plane took a sickening plunge down through the storm. It keeled over like an ocean liner that has been struck by a mountainous wave. Hopper bared his teeth and fought to keep it from spinning. The oily shine of sweat was on his face and when it was turned pleadingly toward Byington, he knew Hop was not adequate for the job which had to be done.

"Let me in there," Lew said. "Go back and kid the customers along! Tell 'em funny stories. Tell them to relax as Gurning hires the best in the business. That's the funniest story I ever heard, Hop! Yeah, I been trying to stop having nightmares in my sleep and wide awake I walk into this one."

Lew Byington was at the controls.

The wind howled and whistled and nearly drowned out the thunder of the one remaining engine. Rain splashed into the compartment and stung Byington's cheeks. Beside him, the pilot still rolled about in his seat, his head dropped on his chest. The crate weighed twelve tons but it was buffeted about like a badminton bird.

Checking hurriedly, Byington saw that the compasses were knocked out, their needles spinning crazily with too much electricity. He picked up a field with the radio and got its bearing but the boys at that field could not be sure exactly what Byington's position was.

Then there was only a whining, crackling sound and communication was nil.

"Well, that's that," Byington muttered.

The altimeter said six thousand. It was enough, Byington thought. Another thought occurred to him that put a cold grin on his lips. He wondered how Gurning would feel if he knew his Skyliner was storm-tossed and crippled, with Lew Byington at the controls. The big man would be squirming in his chair and chewing up cigars and thinking of the business he was going to lose after the fatal crash.

A WAVE of bitter resignation swept over Byington. He could let it all go and finish it with one great crash and he would take some of the future of Western Airlines with him. Gurning had not been too much concerned about a man named Byington's future. The wild recklessness was in him again and froze him in his seat.

He figured the odds against him and found them tremendous. A man can walk away from three forced landings. He couldn't walk away from another, except only in his sleep. And then he thought he heard a child cry. It might have been the wind playing tricks but he thought of the little girl with the curly blond hair, and the wildness poured out of him with a kind of sob.

He had not thought of it at the time, when he had hovered over the targets and checked with the bombardier. Down on the ground there had been little kids. Maybe one had looked much like the little girl who was back there smothering its fright against a mother's shoulder.

Maybe he had even killed little kids. You never thought about that when a factory or a bridge or a road had to be taken out. And it was that killing he had wanted people to remember. Sure, it had been war, and everything had been fair. Everything had been forgiven. People were quick to forget. . . .

He dropped down through the soup and saw that it was clearer and he was sure he saw a dim stretch of terrain below. The wind was blowing the storm up and away and the rain was no longer battering against his face. He crabbed the Skyliner closer to earth and gave it hard left rudder to compensate for the dead weight of a cold engine.

The fracture in the wing seemed to widen as he glanced at it. He thought he heard a grinding sliding sound.

He set his teeth and got ready to match wits and skill with the stricken plane and asked it if it had not been told that Lew Byington was an expert at this business of putting them down and walking away. He started to talk to the crippled plane.

"I guess you haven't heard, baby. This is the savvy I brought back from the war. This is my specialty. This will be something nobody will forget. You weren't made to destroy, baby. You're a peaceful old dame and you ain't going to hurt a living soul."

He kept up the run of crazy talk as he eased the transport in. Through the side window he watched the evergrowing vision of the earth jumping up at him and forgot to wonder at the steadiness of his nerves.

He slipped the Skyliner in toward a small stretch of pastureland between two long, low hills, until a wingtip seemed about to slice a frightened cow in half. With a desperate effort, at the right second, he pulled the nose of the Skyliner up and slammed both heels against the brakes.

He did not hear Hopper Whyte yell in his ear or hear the cries of fear that boiled out of the steel cocoon behind him. There was too much to do all at once and in a short space of time.

The twelve-ton plane sheared off a wheel and nosed into a sandbank, lurching violently. There was a rending of metal and the screams of the passengers and then a violent shock when twelve tons of airplane came to a stop. Byington pitched out of the seat and hit his head on something. He fought against his dizziness and managed to stay on his feet. His shout was instinctive.

"Get them out, Hop," he yelled. "Get them all out. There's a little kid—"

He swayed and fell against something that smelled good.

"You're wonderful, Lew," the redhead said.

He turned and got his arms under those of the pilot, found he did not have enough strength to move him. He could smell gasoline. He shouted for Hopper Whyte.

After a while, Byington was out on the grass with the passengers. The woman in the blue serge suit was slumped down against an apple tree holding the little blond kid tightly in her arms.

"Norbert's coming around, Lew," Hopper Whyte said. "Everybody's all right. Not a serious injury anywhere. A lad here broke his arm, is all. Lew, you son of a gun, you can bring 'em down! There isn't another pilot in the world who can do it like you!"

Byington felt very light in the head and he keeled over.

"My specialty, Hop. I brought it back from the war. They said I didn't have a thing they could use in this peacetime bus—"

The last few words did not carry far. Lew Byington fell against Hop, a dead weight.

THE room in which he recovered his senses had a pungent familiar smell and there was a screen next to his bed. A little table stood on the other side of the bed and on the table was a vase of flowers—and a campaign ribbon and a cup of coffee! Lew thought the girl raising the window was a nurse.

"Where did you get the dime?" he called

out hoarsely. The girl turned on her heels quickly and stared at him. It was Leila Thaw. She did not catch on for a few moments.

"Oh! I took the ribbon out of your pocket. The coffee is for me."

"Did I break something?"

"Not quite, Lew. Just a concussion." She came over and sat down and put a soft palm on his forehead. "Stay quiet now."

"You came to see me," Byington said. "That is all the medicine I'll need. I'll get up in a little while."

Leila shook her head.

"No, you won't. Sure, I came here. I represent Western Central Airlines. Mr. Gurning sent me. He wants you to work for him, Lew."

"Me?" Byington stared at her. "Don't make me laugh. What does he want with me?"

"He wants to hang your picture up on the wall," Leila Thaw said. "There'll be a plaque under it that will say you saved the lives of thirty-three people and nobody will ever forget that, Lew. Don't you see? People who save lives are remembered long after those who destroy lives are forgotten. Gurning needs what you brought back from the war, Lew. All your skill and knowledge of flying, even though you may have to stay on the ground when you teach it to the kids coming up. You've got to be reasonable, Lew."

"And just why do I have to?"

Leila Thaw leaned closer until he felt her sweet breath brush his cheek.

"Because why, mister? Because I can only go for a man who has both of his feet planted firmly on the ground. Going around fighting revolutions for people will not make you a fit husband for anybody, Lew. You would not live to see your kids through grade school. Lew, I knew you were in love with me when you left that night. If I am wrong, I'll go somewhere and die."

His mouth opened wide. He was pretty slow in using his arms and getting her head

against his shoulder.

"You sure know everything, baby. You are right in every way."

He knew there would be no more nightmares. He saw that little blond kid again and knew he had done something far greater in that storm than he'd ever done in seventy bombing missions. It made him feel washed clean inside and very proud.

"Yeah, we'll have a son and he'll be the best transport pilot in the world. No war for him. We've all got to be sure of that. I'll hide my ribbons and decorations in a trunk in the attic so he won't get ideas. The thing he'll have to go on will be that picture of his old man in Gurning's office at Western Central."

"Yes, Lew," Leila said in a smothered voice. "That's the way they'll always remember you. For the good things. Yes, you have everything straight now. Destroying, even made legal, is not worth remembering. Your best service to the country is still to come."

"Guess that's true," Byington said, and held on to her tightly. "I sure got the biggest break of any war pilot in this business of reconversion. I don't need to fly any more because I got my angel."

"You get another kiss for that," Leila said, then drew away from him. "I have to go, Lew. I'll be back tonight."

When the door closed behind her, a plane thrummed somewhere overhead and it was just as well she was not there to see the eager, hungry look in Lew Byington's eyes. She would have known then that some day she would have to compromise. Listening to the sweet sound, Lew was pretty sure he could get her to anyway.

Once a flyer, always a flyer, and anyone with brains knew that. Leila had more than her share. He knew the future was going to be very bright indeed. He could forget his ribbons and he drank very little coffee, anyway, as it was bad for his nerves. He would show them all sooner or later that he could still land a plane on a dime.

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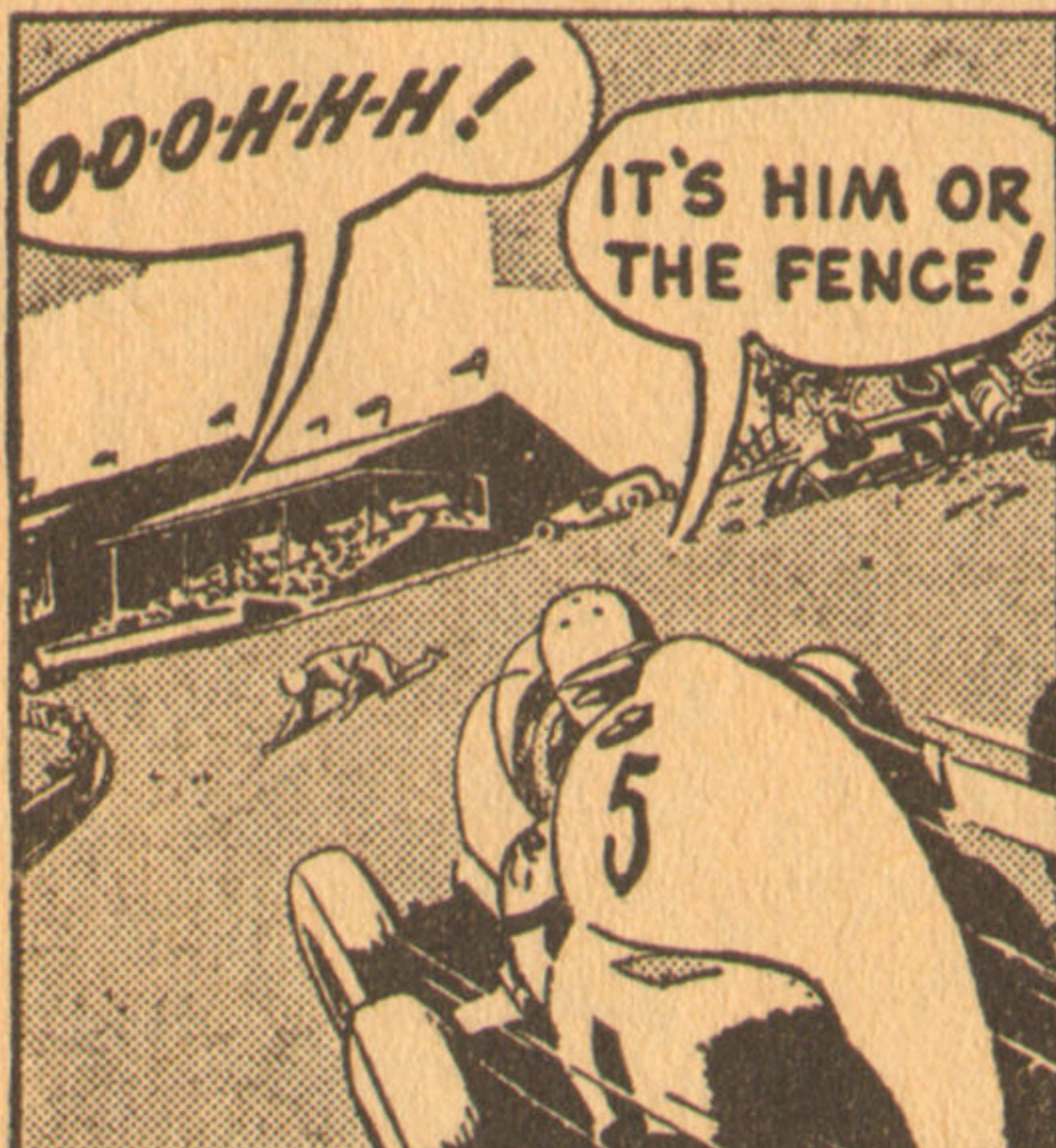
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FOSS IS A CINCH IF NOTHING HAPPENS!





Ambrose busts the bottle of Schnapps over the Kraut's head

ERRORNAUTICS

By JOE ARCHIBALD

When Ambrose Hooley and Muley Spink run into Sergeant Schickelgruber in the first guerre, Heil breaks loose!

I WAS telling some of the boys in Hickey's barber shop just the other day that if me and Ambrose Hooley knew as much in the late summer of 1918 as we do now, there never would have been a second world war. It was just too bad our hind sights was not as good as our gunsights and that Uncle Willie Hooley did not have a brother christened Nostradamus.

Nostradamus was born in the Middle Ages

and predicted aerial warfare and the burning of London and even knew the Frogs would some day build a Maginot Line. About the only thing the old M.D. could not predict was Ambrose's Uncle Willie. Maybe because Uncle Willie was something of an oracle himself.

Be that as it may, we will go back to the last guerre when me and Ambrose flew with the Ninety-Third Pursuit Squadron near

Commercy, France. The only charming thing about the homely little turtle, was his life as he could get caught in a sky all alone with a Spad and without ammo by forty Fokkers fresh out of a factory and come back with nothing more than a touch of hay fever. Ambrose could do more things with a Spad than Willie Hoppe could do with a billiard cue and he was one reason we won the last war.

Well, it was during July and the Krauts have been more dangerous than usual as they are in their own corner and want to fight out of it, and Allied observation planes have been taking quite a pasting trying to wash up what ammo and supply dumps the Huns have got left back of the lines.

A rat is always the most testy when it backs against the wall and puts up its dukes. And during these hot months, there have been rumors flying around France thicker than relatives gathered around an old rich recluse's death bed and they say Bullsheviks have trickled into the Kraut lines and are starting a revolution.

The brass hats of the last fuss were just as inhumane to inferiors as they were reported to be by topkicks in this one and it is one day at dusk when we come back from a patrol, looking like seven moths that have flown through a corn hopper, that our C.O., Major Bagby puts his cards on the table.

"Chaumont is inclined to believe there is something in this story that Germans are beginning to revolt, gentlemen," Bagby says. "So far Intelligence hasn't succeeded in uncovering anything. That means—"

"One guess," Ambrose snaps. "The air corpse is the hope of the Democracies, huh? Awright, I'll put on a beard, git a bottle of vodka and some caviar an' drop down some night out of a D.H. Four. Only thing is I never learnt to speak Russian in no grammar school. I could make out I got a cleft in my palate, though."

"You get out of here, Hooley!" Bagby yelps. "Go to your hut and wait until I send for you."

"I'll never volunteer for nothin' ag'in," Ambrose says.

HE STARTS for the door when the siren screeches and then we all duck as a plane whooshes right over the mess shack. Then there is a blood-curdling crash and we all rush out to see a crate piled up against two apple trees. There is a man hanging over a lower limb like a sack of rice and he is trying to spit out his goggles. Another

character crawls out from under a wing and says why don't the highway department put up signs when roads are slippery and wet.

After a while we get the crew of the D. H. 9 to talk and they ask first for a transfer.

"I'm not your C. O.," Bagby snorts. "Come now—try and think."

"Awright, but I hate to," the pilot of the two-seater says. "Who put out the proper-gander the Krauts is licked? We made a try for a fuel dump over back of Metz and seventeen Albs jumped us. We had to drop our eggs fast and let them fall where they may. Things are gittin' awful tough if the guerre is most over, and am I happy I wa'n't here when it started. Who has cognac?"

"Just a last minute show of power," Major Bagby sniffed. "It'll peter out faster than a football stabbed with an ice-pick. We got 'em on the run everywhere."

"Yeah," Ambrose says. "Right toward us."

Major Bagby chased Ambrose half way to the Nissen hut. I enter sometime later and the little tomato is stretched out on his cot reading a letter. The envelope is on the bed and I pick it up, then drop it like it was a live grenade. The postmark scares me.

"Uncle Willie is way ahead of the times," Ambrose says. "Just listen to this, Muley. Uncle Willie don't write very plain and I have to read it to you."

"I wouldn't mind if you didn't bother," I snap.

"'Dear Ambrose'," he begins to read aloud. "'Hopin' this finds you still somewhere in France and not under it, I got a suggestion to make. I've writ the war department but they don't seem to want no help there so I'll just tell you what I think. I got the idea last Fourth of July when we was shoot-in' rockets off and one set fire to the bushes next to our house. It burned the ell out of it but we got the fire department in time. Now, they must have dry spells over there and why couldn't the Allies shoot rockets from airplanes into places where the Germans have stored shells and gasoline and stuff. It would save planes and lives as the bombers wouldn't have to git right over the dumps. You see, Ambrose, you would set the rockets off while you was headed for home as the chute could be built out over the tail. I have made a rough drawin' for you.'"

"No," I groan. "No more, Ambrose."

But he goes right on reading, regardless.

"There must be fireworks stowed away

in France as they celebrate Bastille Day there, don't they? Well, Ambrose, it is only a idea. I'm so full of them I got to get some off my chest or bust. Miriam is goin' to have pups and I hope they will have beagle blood in some of them. Hopin' you are the same. Your Loving, Uncle Willie."

"You should send him a souvenir," I says. "What did Napoleon ever do with his hat?"

Ambrose lets it pass. He is studying the rough drawing his Uncle Willie sent him.

"You can scoff, Muley Spink," he says. "They said the Wrights was all wrong when they made a airplane. Do people laugh at Ben Franklin now every time they turn on a light or plug in a flatiron? Let's go into Commercy tonight."

"With the early patrol starin' me in the face?" I snap. "I will have the jumps enough as it is without wearin' myself out all night runnin' away from gendarmes and M.P.'s."

"I am in no mood for horseplay, Muley. I won't even speak to a dogface or a A.E.F. cop," Ambrose says and seems to mean it. "The C.O. will see we git a motorcycle as I caught him with a king of diamonds up his sleeve last night."

"When are you startin' to blackmail the Old Man?"

Ambrose Hooley takes a soiled looking envelope out of his pocket. It is pale lilac in color.

"I managed to pick this up, Muley. It is from a dame in Paree named Juliette and she calls Bagby, Toopsy. We will have no trouble goin' off the airdrome, Muley Spink."

I GET ready as I do feel in the need for some vin blanc. A half hour later we are in Commercy and peering in through the door of an oasis called Cafe Tabac. It looks safe enough so we go in. We are having a snort of eau de vie when Ambrose speaks in a voice which could be heard at Dunkirk.

"I think we made a mistake, Muley," he says. "We are in Chaumont. Look, a brigadier general, a full chicken colonel and a captain. I wonder is it the Intelligence Corpse got lost, maybe?"

"I heard that remark!" the colonel snaps. "You come over here!"

"Me?" Ambrose asks. "Well, it is about time a brass hat offered me a drink. Excuse me, Muley."

I tell Ambrose I will meet him later where we left the motorcycle and hurry out. But I stand just outside, and it is an education watching Ambrose get into trouble. One word leads to another and the captain shoves

Ambrose. It is like scratching a match to see if a gas tank is empty. The little crackpot pushes the captain.

"Oh, you lookin' for fireworks, are you, Lieutenant?" the colonel yelps then.

"Why, how did you know?" Ambrose says. "Maybe you are intelligent after all!"

"That does it!" the captain howls.

"Come now, gentlemen," the brigadier begins. "Let's—"

The colonel swings on Ambrose and misses and clips the captain in the ear. Ambrose Hooley never misses and I see the colonel pirouette like a bally dancer and an eagle flies off his shoulder.

The Frog bartender whistles for cops and the last thing I see when I turn to run is Ambrose getting knocked right through a window in the rear of the estaminet by a Frog who fights with his feet.

I get into a narrow alley, slip into a dark doorway and listen to the whistles blowing. There is the sound of a shot.

I do not venture abroad until close to midnight. When I get to the motorcycle, I hear a voice close by.

"Start it up, Muley. I'll catch the tin bathtub on the fly."

Ambrose comes running as I turn the mechanical bug loose and we are on the outskirts before the gendarmes and M.P.'s tumble to the fact that their quarry has escaped. Half way to the drome I notice Ambrose is hugging a bulky package to his bosom.

"How in blazes did you jump aboard holdin' that?" I ask him.

"I'm here is all I know, Muley. A guy can't go in no Frog pub without gittin' insulted. I sure would like to know how they figured I was after fireworks. When that Frog caught me with his right foot, I went right out into a little storeroom filled with bottles and things."

"Somebody shot at you, Ambrose?"

"No, I threw a firecracker into the estaminet, Muley. It was about a foot long."

"Don't tell me you've already found—"

"It was luck, Muley."

Early the next morning, we walk out to the Spads and there is Major Bagby with a look in his eye that says it will be a very good thing if you two gland cases never get back for what will happen to you if you do will be a caution.

"He knows," Ambrose says under his breath.

"I don't see how things git around," I sniff and pass the time of day with the ack-emma. The grease-monkey says my oil line

shouldn't act up again like it did the last time out.

"If it does, I will come back even on just a wing and make you eat what is left of the stuff," I says.

We go over back of Metz and watch two D.H. Four's circle over what looks like a camouflaged dump. One starts unloading when a dozen Albs squirt out of the sun and shorten the already dwindling Kraut ammo supply in a hurry.

I see some pieces fly from Ambrose Hool-ey's Spad and hope part of them did not belong to him as I play ring-around-rosy with a checkered Alb. Bugeye Boomer whizzes past and points to something behind me and it is not a mallard duck. A tracer or two curls past my dome and tries to show the other Spandau bullets, my vital spots. A strut vanishes and I go into a sideslip that takes me right down on top of Ambrose who is just shooting an Alb's prop off.

OUR wingtip did not miss the little tomato by more than the width of a sheet of carbon paper, I'll bet, and I thought I heard him cussing me as I climbed. Bugeye Boomer is coming down and a nice fat Kraut tries to slip between us and we could have made a sandwich out of the bum if we had had some lettuce.

Instead we shot off his tail and one wheel and some of my Vickers stuff took a piece of an aileron off Bugeye's Spad. We avoid an embrace by a miracle and I says to myself it looks like we are fighting this aerial epic in a closet, there seems to be so little room.

Then I reach for a cloud as four Albs are after me and there is a Spad behind the Albs.

When I come out of the cloud, only one Alb is left and the Von is standing up in his cockpit trying to hold the top wing on. Ambrose Hooley lets go at the Heinie who soon has a monoplane, and he waves to me.

Ambrose has more holes in his Spad than there are mosquitoes in a jungle and his Hisso sounds like a hippo with asthma and is throwing more smoke than an Elk's stag party. But he lands before I do and steps out and takes a little notebook out of his pocket. "Five more Krauts today, Muley. Put your name down here as a witness!"

"We have two visitors, Hooley," Major Bagby says. "They are just dyin' to see you. A colonel and—"

"They started it," Amrose yips, and takes the lilac colored missive from his pocket. "Didn' they?"

Major Bagby's eyes bug out and he lunges for the evidence. Ambrose sidesteps and the

C.O. nearly runs into a prop that has not quit spinning.

"I have been intending to send this to Mrs. Bagby," Ambrose says, hurrying toward the Nissen hut.

The upshot of it is that Major Bagby has to go to bat for the fliers of his squadron and he says he will take the case all the way to Pershing if he has to, which seems possible as the colonel is a very stubborn cuss.

"I saw you hit the captain, Colonel!" Ambrose says. "I was defendin' my superior officer. Captain, I suppose you deny you got boffed by the colonel?"

"It was an accident, and you know it, Lieutenant."

"Tsk-tsk," Ambrose says. "A likely story. No A.E.F. jury would believe it!"

"All right, Major," the colonel snaps. "You aid and abet this shocking lack of discipline, do you? Well, let me tell you something. I happen to have married a second cousin to the Commander-in-Chief, is all. We are like that!" And the Brass Hat holds up two fingers pressed close together. "Inside of thirty days, you'll be saluting Captain Grop- per here—first! I'll make it my life work to bust you!"

Major Bagby sighs and eyes the Service persuader the colonel is carrying. Ambrose Hooley notices this and excuses himself and slips out of the Operations shack. Fifteen minutes later the car carrying the Brass Hats goes past the sentries and me and Ambrose saunter over to watch mechs patch up a wrecked D.H. Nine.

"You ain't goin' to tell me the C.O. thinks that could fly again?" Ambrose says to a sarge.

"Yessir. And if anybody flies it—"

"Don't look at me like that!" Ambrose says. "An act of Congress wouldn't git me even to taxi it off this pea-patch."

Three days later, word comes from Chaumont that they have got to have proof that the Bullsheviks are trying to give the Kaiser the old shiv in the brisket. And the brass wants to know why a certain Kraut fuel dump over by Forbach is doing business as usual after the Intelligence Corps has tipped the aviators off as to just where it is situated.

Of course the brass does not mention that ninety percent of all the A.A. batteries owned by Kaiser Bill are ringed around the dump and that there is a Heinie Fokker D-7 squadron just a mile from it.

"Have some good news for you, Hooley," Bagby says one night when we huddle. "That colonel who is after your pelt took

himself a pigeon and dropped down behind the lines to get that fuel dump. He told the brass he would do what the whole U. S. Air Corps couldn't. What a lucky stiff you are!"

"He has more nerve than brains," Ambrose says. "That Brass Hat is so dumb he thinks they sold orangeade at Custer's last stand. Ah—er—I wonder if I could see you in private later, Major?"

"You try and blackmail me out of cash as well as my rating and I will shoot you in cold blood!" Bagby yelps.

"Oh, it is business, not pleasure," the little crack-pot says.

JUST two hours later, I am writing to a dame back home when Ambrose Hooley enters the hut. He assumes a cocky gait and I start sweating.

"Well, Muley, I got his consent," Ambrose says. "You know that D.H. 9 they have been workin' on? The Old Man has promised we can use it for experiments with the rocket bombs."

"He has? What is the idea of the 'we' stuff? I won't set a foot in that flyin' coffin! Rockets?"

"Look, Muley. I will build a wooden chute like we used to build for shootin' off rockets when we was kids. All you got to do is stand in the rear pit and light the rockets while I fly the D.H. 9. It will revolutionize air war, Muley. We will get famous."

"When I git applause," I says flatly, "I want to be where I can hear it and not get it posthumorous. Don't ring me in on no suicide compact. From now on, Ambrose, I never saw you before in my whole life."

"I am disappointed in you, Muley. I thought you had moxy."

"Shut up," I says. "The incident is closed."

It is a week later the D.H. 9 is pronounced fit for the air by a flight sarge. Major Bagby is just sweating over news that three two-seaters were knocked off over Forbach when he is notified the Ninety-Third Squadron is stronger by one crate. He sends for me and Ambrose.

"I know what you want," I says to Bagby. "I refuse to go up in that thing."

"Spink, this is only an experiment," the C.O. says. "You won't have to fly more than a mile or two from this airdrome. There has been a drought in Europe for nine weeks and the woods and grass and bushes are as dry as a prospector's boots. Hooley might have something here."

"Let him go," Ambrose says. "I will take Lieutenant Moody. Go back to your cro-

chetin', Muley Spink!"

An hour later I am helping Ambrose build a rocket chute on the D.H. 9 and non-coms stand around and whisper to each other. Once I overheard the flight sarge say that aviators can go up in a Spad once too often like a pug can get in a ring once too often and I do not bother to censure the bum.

When we are all set, Ambrose Hooley goes and gets two rockets and brings them over to the D.H. 9 which is already warming up about as slow as a corpse yanked out of a watery grave.

"You are partakin' in a new phase of aerial combat, Muley," the little halfwit says. "When I say the word, put a rocket in place and set it off. Contact!"

We take off. The D.H. 9 waddles across the field like a ruptured goose and finally lifts. We circle and then head toward Toul. Ambrose turns his noggin and gives me the signal and I put a rocket in the chute and then pull out my briquet. I light the fuse.

Wh-o-o-o-o-sh!

I duck a shower of sparks as the rocket breaks loose and describes a fiery arc through the scraposphere. Ambrose, surprisingly enough, does not go over to Forbach to fight with the Krauts, but heads back to Commercy and sets the D.H. 9 down. A strut caves in and we are dragging loose wires. For a couple of bad seconds I tell myself we are down for a D.H. 9 count and will be lucky to walk away by ten P.M.

"Well, Hooley?" Bagby asks.

"The experiment was a success, Major. Wa'n't it, Muley?"

"I preserve my decision," I snap.

It is sometime later we get the word that a Frog Spad outfit near Pagny was not insured and had to move their drome in a hurry. Our rocket set fire to the woods just back of their outfit and three canvas hangars went up plus one Spad which was sick and couldn't be flown out. The Frog C.O. arrived at the Ninety-Third Squadron in a Renault boiler and says the Krauts have let loose a new secret weapon.

"Don't say one word!" Major Bagby gulps. "Run out and tell the mechs to wheel that D.H. 9 into a hangar out of sight. I hope this snail-eater doesn't know much English!"

"Why, it was successful, Muley!" Ambrose exclaims. "We are ready to launch the attack against the Kraut dump. Tomorrow at dusk!"

I try to leave the Operations shack but my legs are two wet ropes. To think I could have joined the infantry much easier than I did the air corpse!

MOST of that night I spent in writing letters to loved ones, and try and give my old man some advice as to how he should spend the ten thousand he will get as soon as my obit appears in the hometown sheets. Ambrose Hooley sleeps as sound as a babe loaded with paregoric and nothing could scare him, not even a cobra if it crawled in the cot with him. He is the nearest thing to an apeman I know and alongside of him Tarzan played with dolls.

It is dusk. The D.H. 9, repaired once more, is ready to hop off. Ambrose carries his whole sack of pyrotechnics to the two-seater and crams them in the rear pit along with me. If I'd had a pair of Lewis Betsies in the crate, I would have been too cramped to use them.

"Here's my hand, Muley," Ambrose says as we get set for the hopoff.

"Leave me alone," I choke out. "Soon I will be pickin' up one of your legs somewhere."

We shoot across the field, the two-seater flapping its wings like a vulture and splitting at the seams. We get airborne and fly toward Forbach where an X is waiting to mark the spot for us.

Some Spads on their way home drop down and have a look at us and one of the bums nearly goes out of control. Another one waves goodbye at us, and then salutes like pilots do when they see a comrade heading for the other side of the veil.

Something rattles against the fuselage.

"Boche!" I yelps.

We are close to our objective when I realize the rattling sound is the sweat beads that are dropping off my pan. Ambrose lifts a hand and I put a rocket in place and whip out my briquet. There are some Fokker D-7's greasing a runway below and Kraut scrap-iron begins busting up all around us. Ambrose clears the target, then turns back toward Commercy. I light a rocket.

Who-o-o-o-osh!

I put another rocket in place and light it, just as a Spandau burst hits the wooden chute and knocks it bow-legged. The rocket backfires and I duck.

I feel a million sparks bite at me and the D.H. 9 goes into a fit. Bullets are still flying and I feel like a dame in a basket with a drunken Hindu magician sticking knives through it. I hear Ambrose let out a yelp and I think he said something about the engine being missing.

Then he pulls the crate out of the spin when we are about five hundred feet up and I smell leather and hair burning. I yank a splinter out of my chin and lean forward

and wrap my arms around Ambrose Hooley's neck.

"I am on fire!" I howl. "Land quick, Ambrose!"

"Just as if I could help it! Stop chokin' me, Muley."

We hit and it is not like me and Ambrose are in a big feathered four-poster and having a pillow fight.

I counted six bounces the D.H. made before we hit a haystack and when I tumble out there is a pitchfork sticking out behind me. Ambrose finally comes out of the haystack working like a corn borer and calls to me. Krauts answer him. There are six ugly looking squareheads surrounding us and they are crawling with ordnance.

"Handen hock!" a little Potsdam stooge with a big handlebar mustache says. "Snell!"

We do like he says. We are kicked and pushed across a farmyard and into an old Frog house. There is a character sitting at a table and he needs a haircut worse than a French poodle. He has eyeglasses so thick a Spandau bullet would ricochet off them and all he needed was a Russky bomb in front of him to make the picture any plainer.

"Bullsheviki, Muley!" Ambrose says. "It is like falling into a pit with diamonds in it, as what good are they to you?"

It is quite a screwy layout. There is a box of oil paints and an artist's palette on the table. I pick up a painting the size of a postcard and get a quick gander at it. Whoever smeared it on was no Mike Angelo but you can see it is a kind of chateau on top of a mountain with a flag flying over it. The flag has a funny looking cross on it. The funny looking squarehead with the big lip curtain is no Herr Obust but he seems to run the place. A little Kraut comes in and holds up a hand like he is warding off flies.

"Herr Schickelgruber!" he says.

"Ja?"

"Der munition materiallager—kaput!"

"The dump!" Ambrose translates. "We got it, Muley!"

"Stille, Schweinhund!" Schickelgruber snaps, but he grins at the Russky Intelligence bum. "Ja, it will not be long, mein freunds! The verdammt Junkers—"

"We are watchin' history bein' made, Ambrose!"

SCHICKELGRUBER chases all the Heinies out and quizzes us about the secret weapon the Allies have got. The Russky must have been a Road scholar as he translates for the squarehead.

"Tell him to go take a good running jump into the Rhine, Tovaritch," Ambrose sniffs. "Tell that half-pint Kraut if he calls me a swine hound oncet more, I'll cut him down Steppe by Steppe!"

The Russky does. Schickelgruber goes into a dither and gets down on the floor and bites a rug. Then he throws a stream of Heinie at the Bullshevik. The Volga addict tells us that the squarehead has seen a vision like Joan of Ark and will lead the Krauts to mastery of the world the next time out.

"He is wacky, Muley!" I says. "We got to git back and tell Chaumont about Russia and this beer garden Napoleon. I'd like to git hold of that notebook over there on the table. Look at the sky, Muley. We must have set fire to a cellerloid factory."

Schickelgruber goes into a huddle with the Russky and then both characters nod. The Volga villain says we are to be shot as, if we live, the future of the world is in jeopardy.

"What country is that?" Ambrose asks me.

I shake my dome. Schickelgruber picks up a book and studies it as he paces the floor. He says something to the Red and the Trotsky stooge relays it to us.

"You are a threat to the new Germany, gentlemen, ja! Schickelgruber sees it in the stars. When Scorpio is in the same house with Taurus, the Bull—"

"Ambrose," I says. "Let's ring up Mary Antonette and ask how Louie is."

"They will be surprised, Muley, when I tell them I am Rasputin in disguise."

The Russian says there is another citizen of the hated democracies to be shot with us and is in the next room. Schickelgruber opens a door and we see a colonel sitting on a stool and it is the colonel who wants Ambrose's scalp.

"Fancy meeting you here," Ambrose says. "I guess you know who washed up that dump, huh?"

"And I thought I could meet my fate in peace," the Brass Hat says.

It looks like the end for me and Ambrose Hooley. Krauts are bad enough when they have all their marbles, but if you get in the clutches of one who has lost them all, it's worse still. But Fate came in and joined the Allies. She arrived in the form of a canvas sack that is very familiar to us.

A little Potsdam rebel lets out a string of Kraut gibberish and plunks the sack on the floor at this Schickelgruber's feet. Ambrose Hooley shoves a cigarette into his face and snaps a briquet to flame. Schickelgruber yanks the sack open, takes out some pin-

wheels, lays them down, gets up and bends across the table for some more. Ambrose attaches one to the tail of his coat and lights the fuse.

There is a flash that lights up the room and Schickelgruber cuts loose with a horrible shriek. A pinwheel passes close to my ear and red and green and blue lights break up close to the ceiling. It was the rocket that raised the roof.

It whooshed right through Schickelgruber's legs and parted the Russky's hair, bounced off the wall and chased Ambrose under a table. It hits the jamb of the door through which Krauts are barging and a bomb in it goes off.

When I recover I am riding something across the floor and find out it is the tough colonel. The Heinie non-com, Schickelgruber, is groping his way to an exit and all his mustache, save a little splotch of black under his big beezzer, is gone. A big lop of hair is tumbled down over his left eye and I remember the last Charlie Chaplin picture I saw.

"Make snell!" Ambrose yowls. "Come on!" Then he ducks a pinwheel which has decided not to remain a dud. "That Russky never got here by steamboat or the Santa Fe. There is a airplane near here somewhere."

We rush outside and Ambrose is shoving a notebook into the pocket of his flying coat. His other hand clutches a Schnapps bottle. Just as seven Krauts charge us, I realize I am clutching a little oil painting and I shove it inside my coat and help Ambrose clean up the Huns. Not that he needed too much help. He busts the bottle on the pate of the seventh Kraut and we hightail through a woods.

"M-Muley!" Ambrose yelps. "The whole works has caught fire. Hurry up, Colonel. What do you think this is—a fat man's race?"

"I'll bust you—you—menace!"

"Let's leave him behind, Muley," Ambrose yelps.

"Er—I was kiddin', Hooley. I didn't know what I was sayin'. How could anybody remain sensible after what busted loose?"

IUT in a field is a plane the like of which we never saw before. It is painted black and has a hammer and sickle painted over it in white. The camouflaged tarpaulin that was thrown over it has been blown loose by the wind. Three Krauts are guarding it.

"Kamerads," Ambrose Hooley whoops. "Save Schickelgruber as we must flee. The

Junkers are comin'. We will wait until you get him, mein freunds."

We start running but it does not work for the Krauts start shooting at us. But so much smoke boils out of the woods they miss us with the first barrage. Before they can line us up for dead ducks, we are on them and fighting like we was beserker.

Ambrose gets into the Russian crate first and starts trying out the controls. When we climb aboard, the little tomato says for somebody to search the Krauts for the combination to the heap.

"Well, we tried," I choke out.

Ambrose swears a blue streak and wallops the instrument board with his fist. The engine coughs and I jump out quick and go and swing the prop. Ambrose belts the panel

part of the tail assembly flapping in the breeze. The colonel says any man who asks to join the Air Corps is not right.

"I won't argue that one," I yelp.

"You know something?" the colonel says with a groan, "I forgot that pigeon. It was in a little wooden cage."

"That squab will make a nice breakfast for Schickelgruber," I answer. "Why do I shiver when I think of that mental deficit, huh?"

"He told us he'll conquer the world, Spink."

"Ha-ha," I laugh. "Well, hold on as we are home. All we have to do now is walk away from this thing."

Ambrose Hooley could take a kitchen sink up without a stick, stunt it, and then land it like a feather bed held up by parachutes.

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THE AFRICAN MISSION

By CHARLY CLAPP

in the next issue!

again and the prop nearly throws me over.

"Contact!" Ambrose yelps and I climb aboard again.

Half the German army is coming out of the woods when we bump across the field.

"Don't let this crate have its head, Ambrose," I yell at him. "It is not safe in Moscow these days."

Bullets rattle against all parts of the Bullsheviki bus as we skim over the rooftops of an Alsatian town.

A stork leaves her nest and rides the top wing for a few minutes and loses most of its feathers. I have a mouthful of pillow stuffing and can't answer Ambrose.

It is a race to Commercy against five Albs and some D-7s and we roar over the Meuse with an aileron hanging by a thread and

He slid the Russian crate in and spun it around in a half circle not six feet away from the door of the Operations Office. Major Bagby is half way up a drain-pipe when we unload.

Three big Brass Hats we never saw before, Bugeye Boomer and all the pilots gather around the strange two-seater and gape at us. Major Bagby comes down and staggers toward us.

"Where in blazes did you get that airplane?" he says in a hoarse voice.

"We went to a auction," Ambrose says. "That ought to be proof enough there is revolution afoot behind the Kraut lines, huh? Let us go inside and talk this over, Major. I got somebody's diary or memories here."

The notebook has nothing but Kraut in it

so the C.O. sends for an ackemma named Schmidt from Milwaukee to read what it says in English. The non-com does and he rattles off some raves against the Kaiser and all Junkers and that Schickelgruber will run the next guerre as he has heard the call and read it in the stars. He will bomb all the big cities from Warsaw to Walla Walla and will sink all the Allied Navies over a weekend.

"Hooley," Major Bagby says cuttingly. "You would drop into a German home for the feeble-minded. Of all the bushwah I ever heard, this tops 'em all."

"Huh? I guess that Russian plane was cut out by paper-doll experts, huh?"

"And look at this paintin' I got," I says. "It is a chateau on a mountain top and look at that funny lookin' cross on the flag flyin' over it. That Schickelgruber is dotty."

"Gentlemen," Major Bagby says. "If you destroyed that dump like you said, you will get recognition, of course. But let's forget the rest of it, hah? I've already read Grimm's Fairy Tales."

THE colonel looks at Major Bagby and shakes his head.

"Maybe some day you will scoff on the other side of your face, Bagby, and I will look you up and say I told you so."

"All right, men," a brigadier says. "Let's remember these three officers have been through a very trying experience and need a rest. I suggest a week or two in Paris."

"Wonder if his mustache will ever grow in again, Muley?" Ambrose says. "I never saw nobody change so fast before. And you Intelligents better read a little more of what is in that diary of Schickelgruber's as you will see a name he mentions which did not come out of Hans and Greta. Goering! He is a Junker who once flew with Richtofen and who is still doin' business in the Kraut air corps. If he has thrown in with Schickel-

gruber and the Bullsheviks, sometime there'll be trouble."

"We'll let them see the book at Chaumont, Spink," the big Brass Hat says, and winks at Major Bagby.

"I wish they'd take this a little more serious," I says to Ambrose. "I am scairt."

"You know, Muley, I am myself," Ambrose admits, and that was enough for me.

"Did it with rockets," the brigadier says. "H-m-m! Where did they get that idea?"

"My Uncle Willie," Ambrose says. "Sometimes I think he is more intelligent than anybody. In the next war, rockets will fly from one country to another, and maybe a plane will work like a rocket. What we did to that fuel dump without droppin' even a bomb, is somethin' to remember."

"What good would they be in a rainy war?" Major Bagby sniffs.

"Let's go to the hut, Muley," Ambrose says. "They will rue the day they couldn't see no farther than the ends of their schnozzles."

Like I told the boys in Hickey's barber shop, me and Ambrose were the first U. S. citizens to meet Adolph Hitler. It looks like Schickelgruber did not grow the big mustache again as at the time me and Muley blitzed him, the Junkers most likely had a reward out for him and so he kept the little mustache and the hairdo that resulted after the fireworks and took to the hills.

The boys won't believe the grubby oil painting I got is on the level and that Schickelgruber planned the hideout at Berchtesgarden during the World War.

Well, a prophet never gets out from behind the eight-ball in his own country and I have stopped sounding off for good as this psychiatry is getting too fashionable nowadays and people are beginning to look at me in a strange manner. I have written Ambrose Hooley and told him to keep his lip buttoned.

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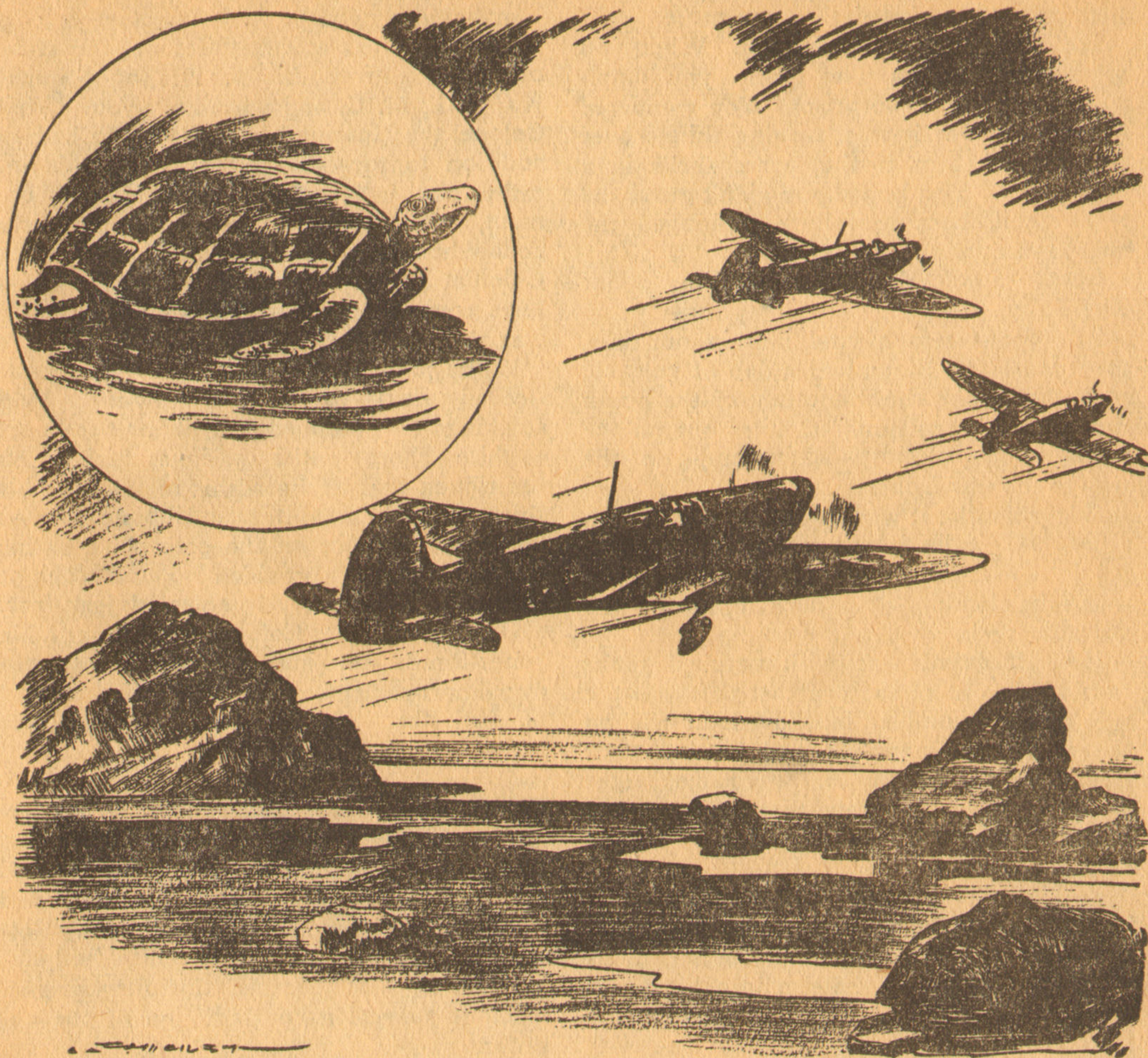
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HIS MAJESTY'S TURTLES

By WILLIAM J. O'SULLIVAN

Yank airmen on an isolated isle begin dining in style—and wind up in an hilarious private war with their own allies!

HE WAS standing at the window of his office in the combined Operations-Headquarters shack, staring out over the ocean that stretched sixteen hundred invisible, impossible and unattainable miles toward the mainland, trying to figure it out.

They were playing some little game with him again, his staff was. It was like the time they turned up those few cases of

Canadian Club unexpectedly—or had that Simmons Beautyrest smuggled in for him—or came up with a staff sergeant who played a bang-up game of chess.

He could tell. He could tell by the slight grin with which his young adjutant studied him, when he thought the Old Man wasn't looking. He could tell by the way the executive officer now and again looked at the adjutant, winked, smiled and shoved the pa-

pers around on his desk some more.

He didn't rush them about it. When you were stationed on The Stone, you didn't rush any pleasant surprises. You wondered about whatever it was, turning things over in your mind as if they were shells in a shell-game. You hoped you didn't guess the right shell, because failure prolonged the suspense.

Suspense was the really big thing about The Stone.

The Stone was a vital link in our late, great war. The Stone was a dab of volcanic rock that broke the monotony of the ocean not quite sixteen hundred miles out on the perilous—for aircraft—water-jump on the way to the war front.

Conveniently, it was owned by our British allies. Magically, it was converted by America into a fueling spot, distinguished by a mile-long landing-strip hacked out of the volcanic rock.

Here birds of war with parched tanks rumbled in out of the overcast that was the rule by day—rumbled in, shaved the cliff on the northwest approach and burped their tires down the runway that was flanked right and left by leaning peaks that stretched five hundred feet overhead—a narrow canyon with a runway bottom.

By night, The Stone was tabu for aircraft because of the swarms of gooney-birds that appeared at some unfathomable summons with the dipping of the sun into the westward waters. They circled in uncountable swarms, sobbing their weird cries like restless and lost souls, never alighting, never quieting—and vanished somewhere into the water-girt distances with the re-appearing of the sun out of the waters to the east.

"The Wideawake Birds," they were called by some, because if they rested or slept, none ever saw it.

By day, gusty winds lifted whorls of lava-sand and eddied the gritty, stinging stuff intermittently and irritatingly about for the crews that stopped to slake fuel tanks and take off again with the dawn. For the luckless personnel that manned the base to service the visiting planes and crews, it was just another step down the ladder that led to their personal hades.

Not that things hadn't improved after the arrival of "Rusty" Farson, Lt.-Col., Ferrying Division, Air Transport Command, Army Air Forces, A. U. S.—they had, and plenty, despite the fact that the aging but young-in-heart Rusty Farson was not Big Boss of The Stone. He was merely Commanding Officer of the AAF detachment sentenced

—or based, as you prefer—there.

The Big Boss was one Colonel the Honourable Geoffrey L. M. N. Jones-Smith, K.C.M.G., M. C. and what-have-you. What Colonel the Honourable Jones-Smith had, in addition to top-rank authority on this infinitesimal, imperial pinhead of British domain, was a beef-red complexion, blondish-yellow handlebar mustaches and an all-white Colonial military rig of clothing that could have come from a fancy-dress costumer, it was that typical.

White pith-helmet—white, polo-type, half-sleeved shirt—white shorts—white, long stockings that stopped just below the knees—white shoes—white swagger-stick—even the ribbon that anchored his monocle to his shirt was white. Military ribbons formed an island of color on the polo shirt, as his rheumy blue eyes provided isolated blobs of half-color in his beefy-complected, lean face.

He had all that, Colonel the Honourable Jones-Smith did—and the power of veto over improvements on the sea-going pinhead of earth that was The Stone. And it was not a neglected power.

THE water for drinking purposes was formerly flown in, brought by C-47 transports with tanks built in. Rusty Farson had demanded a distilling plant so that unlimited water could be redeemed from the sea. Colonel the Honourable Jones-Smith had demurred, at first, because this new-fangled machine seemed a contradiction of the old order.

And the Old Order was Bible, Regulations and Law to the doughty colonel.

When the Cinema—movies to you—was installed in the west lee of the 1500-foot peak that boasted the island's only spot of green vegetation, and when a U. S. Military Road was extended from the Tent Area to service it, the colonel harrumph-ed and haw-ed and blew noisily through his mustaches. But he finally consented to let the British garrison attend.

He even, it was said, viewed with disfavor the engineering marvel that was the runway, and from which British fighters took off to patrol the sea-lanes in guard against "Louie the Louse," a playful German submarine commander who managed, in diverse ways, to make a nuisance of himself. For the runway was what attracted Louie.

Things had improved on The Stone, for the British as well as for the Yank GI's and the ferrying crews, with the arrival of Rusty Farson. Rusty had been a U. S. Army pilot in World War One, and he had the true

pioneer spirit. Where others asked, Rusty did.

But the improvements had been despite, and not because of, Colonel the Honourable Jones-Smith. And improving The Stone was much like trying to cool hell—there was always room for so much more.

Rusty stood at his window, thinking about everything and nothing, when a sharp bark came from the Operations Room down the hall from his office.

"Ten-n . . . HUT!"

He twisted his graying head, his brown eyes squinting. No Vipers—Very Important Personages—had been announced by the ever-watchful Tower.

An answering bark told him what the "Attention!" had been inspired by.

"Keddy on, keddy on! Harrumph! Haw! Visiting the colonel, doncher know? Keddy on, men!"

Rusty groaned.

"Carry on" was British for "As you were." Harrumph and Haw meant something was cooking. Rusty Farson was turning to his desk when a sporadic burst of gunfire sounded from the near beach. He looked questioningly at Swanson, the adjutant.

"Some of the crews or base personnel target-practicing. With forty-fives or Tommy-guns."

"Oh, well. Show the colonel in."

When the colonel visited, something was impending. But Rusty's mind was only half on this fact. For again he detected the secret communication that flashed between his aides, Swanson and Hall.

"What are they up to now?" he wondered as he dropped into his chair. He kept his feet under him ready to spring to when the white clad British commander stalked in. His eyes brightened as he worked on the puzzle.

"A swank USO show? Or maybe some old pals of mine flying in? Or—a transfer! Well, anyway, something. . . ."

He jumped to his feet when the colonel loomed in the doorway.

"Well, Colonel! A pleasant surprise! Come in, come in!"

"Hello, old boy," Colonel Jones-Smith said through his nose, his over-large teeth showing in an intended grin. "Nothing special, doncher know. Merely dropped in to chat."

"We're both accomplished liars," Rusty thought, as he wheeled a chair up for the man. "Isn't the major with you, sir?"

The major was Major Pliny Jangstraw, Jones-Smith's aide. He was a stocky man, beefy-complexioned like his C. O., but wore a

clipped, tooth-brush mustache of nondescript color and sported khaki gear in contrast to Jones-Smith's bleached glory.

"Er, don't know, doncher know. Here and about." The man waved a manicured hand negligently. "On some routine, no doubt."

"No doubt," Rusty thought darkly. Pliny Jangstraw was the colonel's gestapo. Jangstraw gum-shoed about with all the subtlety of an elephant crashing through a cane-brake. He was eternally and forever on the prowl, scanning, examining, regarding, watching, observing. "No doubt!"

"Anything new, old chap?"

"I should be asking you!" Rusty mused, wondering what was behind the visit. He became official. "You got our report on Louie the Louse? He's taken to lying about a hundred miles west, and he is getting to be a nuisance with his radio."

"He operates on The Stone's frequency, sending a beam when static is making ours fuzzy. He flashed cones-of-silence—blot-outs, as if they were over The Stone's station—to four planes several days ago. They let down out of the overcast and blooey! He's going to hit one of our boys, some day."

"Haw Harrumph. Ow, yes! Louie . . . the Nazi submersible. The patrols are watching him, you know. Beastly annoying. Anything else?"

"We've had a new shipment of Spam. Or what they pass off as Spam," Rusty said, with a grimace. "What we need is a new cook-book to tell us some new ways to fix it. Fried for breakfast with powdered eggs—cold for lunch—chopped up for supper with some stringy corned-beef trying to hide in it. How's it with you?"

RUSTY knew how it was with the British personnel. Argentine beef was carried to The Stone by British transport—Argentine mutton, Argentine lamb, Argentine veal. In a far-off corner of Patagonia, in Argentina, some zealous and shrewd-thinking Western senators had found evidence of hoof-and-mouth disease in a cattle herd, and laws were passed by Right Thinking Americans to keep Right Eating Americans from the mistake of enjoying prime Argentinian beef. Even unto The Stone. . . .

Jones-Smith screwed his monocle into his eye, single-focused Swanson and Hall, and deftly popped the monocle out of his eye and caught it in his hand again.

"Tolerable, doncher know," he murmured. "There's a war on, old boy."

"I seem to have heard rumors of it," Rusty

Farson said drily. "About your recent complaint of the runway being out of order—one of our lads came in flying a Baker-Two-Six, a Marauder, with one fan feathered. He landed pretty well down the runway—you know how it is? One third up-grade; one-third level; one-third down-grade?"

"Well, he purposely shot high, to miss the cliff on approach, and landed well along the runway. When he went to his brakes, he collapsed the nose-wheel and scuffed the sun-hot surface a little."

"Unfortunate, doncher know," Jones-Smith drawled. "My lads find it deuced rough. It will be smoothed out, eh?"

"Has been already," Rusty said, getting a nod of confirmation from Swanson. "Are your lads enjoying the movies, sir? Er—the cinema?"

"Quite, quite," the colonel said, not altogether enthusiastically. "Raw-ther! But—how about a few British films, eh, old chap?"

"The films we have are courtesy of the American producers," Rusty observed. "I'll inquire if they own any British companies so we can get a few free of charge. Er—are the showers working out all right with the new pipe-line we laid to your Area?"

"Quite pleasant." The colonel paused, stared around him. Then, "Would you care for a bit of sport, old boy? Fishing for some of His Majesty's creatures, perhaps? Barracuda, horse mackerel or sailfish?"

Rusty blinked.

"His Majesty's creatures?" he echoed. "You mean—fish?"

"Exactly, old boy. The waters surrounding the island are His Majesty's waters, doncher know? The creatures abounding in His Majesty's waters are His Majesty's creatures." He fell silent as a burst of small-arms fire spattered the silence.

"Be glad to have you join me in sporting for His Majesty's creatures. Any time, old chap. Just say the word, eh?"

"I'd much rather have the sport of tackling a choice cut of His Majesty's Argentinian beef," Rusty thought. But he managed to beam his thanks to the invitation.

"Very nice of you, Colonel. I'm busy now. Details. Planning a new parking area, and two new roads. And we are going to enlarge the movie seating. Laying some more pipe-lines, too—for when the water-capacity is increased. I'll be glad to join you after that, though."

Colonel the Honourable Jones-Smith untangled his gaunt length and towered to his feet. He returned Rusty's salute with a

heel-clicking, half-bowing, open-handed salute of his own and paused at the door.

"Delighted to have you join me in some sport awfter His Majesty's creatures any time, old chap. Toodle-oo!"

"Ten-n-HUT!" the Ops sergeant squawled, as the colonel went along the way to the open.

"Keddy on, keddy on, men."

Rusty blinked and stared at Swanson.

"What's the deal? What is our noble ally laying the groundwork for now? I think I'll set up a counter-espionage system and have Major Jangstraw watched while he watches us. The old boy has something up his sleeve!"

"Could be," Hall said, rubbing his chin. "By the way, how about having evening mess with us, Colonel? At the Permanent Mess? Or are you going to give Transient another try?"

"It's a deal," Rusty said, without relish. "What is the big surprise? Something new in Spam? Maybe Spam-on-Spam, instead of just plain Spam?"

Hall was innocence itself.

"Would you perhaps like a Spam-and-Powdered-Egg omelet, sir? Very tasty, I'm told. Our new chef, straight from the Ritz, says that it is Spam Supreme. He says—Please, sir! Don't throw the ink-well! I'm in my best sun-tans!"

"Well, hold the comedy, then." Rusty grimaced. "I'll eat with you with the greatest of pleasure, gentlemen. Know why? Because The Honourable Jones-Smith didn't invite me to eat his beef!" He crooked his finger, dug it into his eye-socket, and made motions of screwing it into place. "Keddy on, keddy on!"

RUSTY let the savory steam hit him full in the face, and he said through a gurgling intake of the liquid and through the steam of it:

"More! For Pete's sake, have another ready. If you can spare it?"

Lieutenant Hall chuckled, his blue eyes delighted.

"Gallons of it, Colonel. But leave some room! We do have a new cook, but he is from Antoine's, in New Orleans, which is perhaps a few cuts better than the Ritz. Something else follows this, sir."

"More of this turtle soup," Rusty begged. "Nuts to what follows. This is certainly my dish!"

He had two more of his dishes; and then he went speechless at sight and taste of the meaty fillets that were set before him. He

cut into one, tasted it experimentally, then grinned and held his thumb and forefinger in the "O" sign that means "Okay!" in the AAF.

"Where," he asked, between mouthfuls, "did it come from? Did the guy bring it with him, the new cookie?"

Swanson chuckled.

"That's the heck of it, sir. Or the gosh-danged beauty of it. These huge sea-turtles have been here as long as The Stone, I guess. But until this New Orleans lad got assigned to us, nobody'd ever thought of eating them. The boys are shooting plenty, now. Some of them trap the eggs, but we aren't quite that hard-up yet—to try the eggs. You like?"

"I'm recommending you both for the DSM—and the cookie for the Medal of Honor." Rusty grinned. "You say we got plenty?"

"The sea is full of them! You heard that shooting going on today?"

"All turtles?"

"Mostly. They're big and tough. They run to over three hundred pounds apiece. And large around as washtubs. It takes a few shots to damage them."

"Target practice should be compulsory," Rusty murmured to his Exec. "On a slow moving target, especially. Make a note of that, please."

"Duly noted and will be so ordered," Hall laughed. "May I make a suggestion, sir? For morning mess? Fried, thin slices of turtle, in butter; with scrambled powdered-eggs flavored with Worcestershire. Fit for a king, sir."

Swanson's eyes crinkled in a laugh.

"Even fit for a Yank Looey-Colonel, if it comes to that. How about it, Colonel?"

"It's a deal. Now, boys, let's hit my bottle for a drink or so of Canadian Club; and then we'll take a short drive in the jeep and see what's at the movies."

"Betty Grable," Hall told him. "Humphrey Bogart tomorrow. Martha Raye, in person, night after that. And then Bob Hope."

"If I can spare time from the turtles, I'll see them all," Rusty chuckled. "This is almost too good to be true! Brother, The Stone isn't so bad, after all! Good old Stone!"

Later they drove on a short inspection trip through the parking area on the southwest tip of The Stone, pausing momentarily by the "gun crew" that guarded the runway approach—a set-up of a dummy gun, manned by a number of wooden figures who were attired in British tin-helmets and uniforms

—a picture of On the Alert.

It had been speculated that Louie the Louse ran a big enough sub to carry a dismantled observation airplane and that it would be no tough trick for Louie to send the Obs crate up with some small bombs and wreck the runway some bad day. That would put a lot of airplanes beyond the Point of No Return behind an eight ball large and black as death, unable to turn back to the mainland and unable to land safely on The Stone.

So far the British Fighter patrol and the dummy gun-crew had proved an effective deterrent.

Rusty flashed his headlights at Tower, got the green light to cross the runway and tooled over slowly, the nightly cool breeze from the sea pleasant on his face, his eyes vaguely aware of the circling Wideawake birds swarming overhead like winged ghosts.

There was deep contentment within him when he rolled into his blankets in his tent-bed and let the breeze fan him to sleep while the hiss and rush of the breaking surf deadened his ears, a contentment that spread through him like a rising tide of well-being.

For seven days, turtle was a thrice-daily treat—in various forms. On the seventh day, Rusty's appetite was almost ruined when, in the rain-swept, smut-gray dawn, Louie the Louse sneaked close in to lie in wait several hundred yards off the end of the southeast runway and unload some hate on a Mitchell that was roaring up in a take-off.

Blam-boom-BOOM!

The Mitchell rocked in the violent gunfire and shed eight feet of its port wing. It dropped off sickeningly, then picked up when the desperate pilot yanked the Two-Stage Superchargers into high-blower and poured the mercury to the stricken plane.

"X-Ray Nona Pete to Tower! X-Ray Nona Pete to Tower! Emergency! Emergency! Attacked by hostile surface craft! Clear the runway, old man, I'm trying to make it back in!"

TOWER went into action. A Liberator that was squatting for take-off blasted down the runway to the first turn-off, then screamed partway around in a wild turn, braked and scuttled for safety. A Marauder slammed across the runway from the stacked-up line that was waiting to take off, and crowded close to Ops. An A-26 Invader turned on a dime and cleared the taxi-strip to huddle in the lee of a Fortress.

The siren-alert moaned alive like a tor-

mented spirit, and the base personnel jumped to arms under the alarm, taking up positions for raid-defense.

And three Spitfires, loaded with light bombs and depth-charges, appeared as if by magic and howled down the runway in their racing take-offs.

The choking cough of the garbage-cans hitting the water was followed by whooming geysers of water standing in disordered rows as the aerial fighters strove to bracket the now submerged Louie.

The British staff came on the double and barked orders to ground the ferrying crews who were waiting for take-off, as the disabled Mitchell came in with good wing low-cocked for a precarious landing. The fire-trucks lined up at the runway head and spurted after the stricken craft with sirens moaning when it settled, gear up, for a landing.

One of the sub's shots had pierced the rear compartment, narrowly missing the radioman at his liaison set, and effectively severing the hydraulic lines so that the gear could not be re-extended.

But the crew walked out.

"Let the planes take off!" Rusty yelled to the British staff.

"There's a war on. The Spits can patrol the island and stand guard while the crews hit the air!"

Major Jangstraw pulled at his prow-shaped jaw.

"Er—it's almost an order—Colonel Farson, sir, doncher know? The Stone is a British possession; and the British commawnder's suggestion, sir. . . . Doncher know?"

"No, I don't know, sir," Rusty bellowed. "The runway is a U. S. runway, the planes are U. S. planes, and they are going to help U. S. troops win the U. S.'s war! And I'm the U. S. commander. My planes take off on my runway! NOW!"

He was so upset, he almost didn't enjoy his turtle the next two days.

Then on the ninth day, toward evening, he did lose his appetite. Major Jangstraw appeared, all punctilio and salutes, and left a piece of paper with Lieutenant Hall. On the piece of paper was an account, stated as follows:

Due to His Majesty's Government from U.S.A. AAF Detachment, The Stone, for Sixty-two of His Majesty's Turtles at Five Pounds Sterling Each. . . . Three hundred ten Pounds Sterling.

Rusty Farson sat in the emergency meet-

ing he had called, his eyes worried.

"How about it, Hall? What'll we do? You know how much of a chance we have to pry—let's see—three hundred ten pounds—thirteen hundred dollars loose from Mainland QM!"

"Don't make me laugh," Swanson said. "Those paddlefeet wouldn't authorize you two-bits worth of expenditure if you captured Louie the Louse singlehanded and intact!" He frowned. "So that's the deal! That's what the old boy was driving at with his 'His Majesty's creatures' talk!"

Rusty nodded. He worried his close-cropped, graying thatch with strong, square fingers.

"Old Jangstraw heard the shooting and investigated, I suppose. He and Jones-Smith probably sat up nights reading British law about His Majesty's creatures. At five pounds the copy for the turtles. I wonder if he can—omigosh, Hall!"

A burst of gunfire came from the direction of the beach. Swanson winced and got up.

"There go another twenty pounds Sterling, sir. Brother, those aren't guns, they are cash-registers!"

"Stop them," Farson ordered. "Not that the British can make this stick. What do you think, Hall?"

The executive officer blinked when Swanson slammed out of the room.

"Well, from what I know of Colonel Jones-Smith—look out!"

Farson nodded, his eyes troubled.

"That's my only worry. I'd say that the turtles belong to whoever wants them. But the old boy is very careful about his punctilio, precedents and all of that. If he presents a bill for His Majesty's Government, he must have thrashed the whole thing out thoroughly."

Hall worried a knuckle with strong teeth.

"Look! The turtles we got came up on the beach, at our side of the Area. Right? Okay, then. They are American turtles. I don't think Jones-Smith can make it stick, either. But to avoid argument, we can claim that."

Farson thought about it.

"I wonder! The roads, the runways and the movies are ours. Also the water-distilling plant. But about the beach strip, now, I don't think so." He made a wry face. "I guess I'm back on my Spam diet again, blast it!"

SWANSON came dragging back into the room.

"Five more. And Jangstraw is acting as official score-keeper. You're not going to let them get away with this, are you Skipper? I mean, they get steak and roasts and like that regularly. These turtles are not important to them. Heck, I bet they never even tasted any!"

"Telephone them and make an appointment for zero-nine-hundred hours, tomorrow. We'll straighten this out. Meantime, no more turtle hunting."

"Roger, sir, will do," Hall said. He turned the crank vigorously on the field telephone, which was lashed to the wall.

". . . Colonel the Honourable Geoffrey L. M. N. Jones-Smith would be delighted to see Lieutenant-Colonel Russell D. Farson at the suggested hour in the morning. A pleasure. Thank you for calling, old chap. Tooodle-oo. . . ."

They ate turtle that meal only because there was so much of it stacked up. But Rusty hardly enjoyed Jack Benny in the movies that night. Nor were Hall or Swanson balls of fire at levity. They were all suffering from too-rich food.

After all, fifteen hundred dollars worth of turtle is apt to lie heavily on the stomach.

THE whole thing was as cut-and-dried as a ration of GI corned-beef.

"Not my idea, doncher know, old chap," Jones-Smith murmured, his eyes carefully on the account of the AAF detachment. "British Law, what? 'Any creature that comes upon His Majesty's shores is His Majesty's creature.'" He pronounced it as if it were spelled "creet-chaw." "Thus the sea-turtles are His Majesty's creet-chaws. His Majesty's turtles, doncher know."

"We have no appropriation for it, Colonel, and no chance of getting one," Hall said. "You see, we didn't know. To us, turtles are turtles. We don't admit them to citizenship, in the United States."

Jones-Smith's pale eyes froze the Executive Officer quite thoroughly. Swanson flashed Farson's other side a warning look and cut in desperately. "Now that we know about it, we can—er—take steps to stop the turtle hunting. Can we let it go at that, sir?"

"Several cases of wanton destruction of His Majesty's turtles have been reported by Jangstraw. Indiscriminate shooting. . . ."

"The offenders shall be severely punished," Farson cut in. "But we'll probably find they were members of crews ferrying through and can't be identified positively."

"I dare say," Major Jangstraw said, not moving even his thin lips. "Steps must be

taken. But about this accounting. . . ."

"I can't authorize payment," Farson said. "Nor can I get anyone else to. It would take an Act of Congress to reimburse me if I paid it. Which I can't, anyway. I have family responsibilities."

"And we have Empire responsibilities, old chap," Jones-Smith murmured. "Oh, well, I s'pose it is another of those beastly issues that must be taken up with your State Department."

Farson groaned inwardly. He could see the picture now. The British Ambassador in Washington would submit a complaint to the U. S. State Department. The State Department would frown and turn it over to the Chief of Staff, U. S. Army. Hap Arnold would get it from them. And get it!

Then it would go to General George, of the ATC. General George would refer it to General Walsh, of the SAD, the division which supervised The Stone. And Farson would be called to the Mainland to explain. If he could.

Besides the fact that he might have to pay, Farson didn't have the time. There was a war on. And he was responsible for getting planes fueled and serviced and crews fed and rested and then re-briefed for the further flight of 1200 miles from The Stone onward. There just wasn't time. And he didn't intend to have this deal hanging over him eternally, worrying about who did what to whose turtles and who got the money.

"I'd like to have a few days to think this over, Colonel," he hedged, as he sought for a way out. "Agreeable?"

"Think what out, old chap—British Law? The turtles are His Majesty's turtles, and that is that. Says so in the books, doncher know. However, there are further offenses in this matter to be added to the complaint—more turtles.

"We'll submit our count—Major Jangstraw's calculations—to you for comment before we forward it through proper channels. That will be tomorrow awfternoon, let us say? Veddy well, gentlemen! Sorry, you know, and all that. But Law is Law. His Majesty's creetchaws are His Majesty's creetchaws!"

Outside, Hall spoke darkly.

"I wonder if they vote, the turtles? Holy cow, did you ever hear such a lot of gum-beating? And a war on! Louie the Louse? Okay! Crack-ups? Okay! Bum food? Okay! Lose planes and crews in the water? Okay! But just let us improve our rations with His Majesty's turtles and it gives with Gehenna!"

"Here's a good argument, Skipper," Swanson offered. "We will say these turtles are identical with those we have off the United States. In fact, they all are turtles from the United States. They can't prove otherwise. How about it?"

"They get naturalized, or something, when they land here," Farson growled. "They become British."

"Why don't we, then? We landed here. We aren't British!"

"Maybe the runway is British, too," Hall said. "And the roads and the movies. Heck, this was Lend-Lease and it is ours on rental. Now if the beach strip were ours on rental, too, then it is U. S. property, and we can grab the turtles and no questions asked. How about that?"

Farson sighed.

"I looked that up already. The beach is theirs. No question of it. Well, we've got twenty-four hours to come up with a good one. But it burns my Yankee pants off to think this Old School Tie laddie is sticking it to me and I can't do anything about it—maybe."

"Huh? What do you mean, 'maybe'?" Hall asked.

"Well, I've still got one card up my sleeve. I hate to play it unless I have to. When I flash it, it is the desperation play. The old college try. Meantime, issue an order raising Cain about the turtles. Another one. Make it stiff as you can."

"Roger, sir," Hall said. "Er—maybe we'd better add that all of His Majesty's turtles are to be saluted henceforth?"

"You're not a bit funny," Farson said. But he was grinning when he went slowly on his way, deep in thought.

COLONEL JONES-SMITH scanned the compilation and nodded.

"Jangstraw estimated seventy-eight turtles, old chap. At five pounds each. A total of three hundred ninety pounds Sterling. Fair, what?"

Farson shrugged.

"I suppose so. Incidentally, it is just about the exact count we have on you. For toll purposes."

Jangstraw sat erect and blinked.

"Eh? Us? Toll? What are you driving at, sir?"

Hall and Swanson blinked and stared at one another and then back at Farson. The U. S. commander shrugged.

"The runway is ours. The roads are ours. The water-distilling plant is ours. The movies are ours. Just as the turtles are yours.

It doesn't say anything about your using the runway for patrol planes.

"It does say, our agreement, that Allied aircraft may use the strip for ferrying purposes. Now, about the roads—they are my work, without question—and the movies and the water-distilling equipment. Have you ever heard of a toll-gate, Colonel? Or you, Major Jangstraw?"

JONES-SMITH was so wide-eyed his eye couldn't grip the monocle.

"But, of course, old chap! Where you pay a fee to use a road or a bridge, eh? To be sure! But I say, man, it is unthinkable that you should bring this up! We are your allies, old boy!"

Major Jangstraw sucked on his lower lip. "He wouldn't do it, you know," he told Jones-Smith. "It's a bluff, what? Like that bally game of poker! Raw-ther! Oh, no, a bit too thick, what?"

"Think so, eh?" Farson drawled. "Well, you've got just the same sort of fleas biting on you that I have on me. Your superiors. You don't want them yelling at you and asking for receipts and make five copies and reply by indorsement any more than I do. But you will have!"

"I'm computing your tolls at five pounds for each British plane that takes off daily. Five pounds for each time your Jeeps move down our roads. Five pounds toll for parking the Jeeps at the movies, and like that." He grinned.

"You know how long your boots would last if you short-cut across that sharp, knifing lava-rock. Heck, a tractor couldn't even make it. About the water? Well, I'm afraid the showers will be no more.

"I have no authority to use U. S. pipe to supply British baths. Or drinking water. Maybe I can't make it stick. But it will bring your superiors down on your necks if I send in my bill."

"I say, I say!" Jones-Smith murmured, stunned.

"Another thing," Farson said, quietly. "If you report that we are eating His Majesty's turtles, it will probably give your superiors the idea that maybe you don't need that Argentine beef you are getting, after all. Do I—er—make myself clear?"

Jangstraw sat with jaws slacked and eyes glazed. Colonel the Honorable Geoffrey L. M. N. Jones-Smith murmured, "Painfully, old chap. Painfully!"

Swanson and Hall gazed at their skipper with admiration shining in their eyes. The old goat had plenty of kick in him yet! Far-

son sat with his brown eyes bland in his weathered face. Then he moved.

"Well? I guess that is all you want, eh, Colonel?"

"Sit down, old boy, sit down!" Jones-Smith barked. "Harrumph. Haw! I say, deuced embarrassing, what? Blawst those turtles anyway, coming ashore to create this issue!"

"They're pretty good eating." Farson shrugged. "As you will no doubt find out. Of course, nothing like mutton or roast beef. Would you care to try some at our mess, Colonel?"

"No, no, no, no, NO!" Jones-Smith clipped out. "I prefer to take your word, old boy. Raw-ther! Hmmmmm. You know, old chap, they depend on us, at home, to be—er—diplomatic about this sort of thing. Still, there is the duty of protecting His Majesty's creetchaws. His turtles, in this instance. Jangstraw? Any suggestions?"

The major sighed.

"If we could perhaps have assurance that the Yanks would cease machine-gun practice on the creetchaws? And—perhaps permit

them one of His Majesty's turtles daily? How would that be, Colonel?"

Jones-Smith grimaced. He stared at Farson.

"Are they really palatable, old chap? I mean really?"

"Well." Farson shrugged. "I think you'd find it much more to your taste to have us"—he indicated Hall and Swanson—"to dinner while we seal this secret agreement with some Scotch, than to join us in some turtle at our mess while we talk it over. However, perhaps you'd prefer Spam and powdered-eggs?"

"At six, then," Jones-Smith barked, banishing the idea. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Farson said, getting to his feet. "I like my beef rare, if you don't mind? Ready, Hall? Swanson?"

The Britishers came to their feet with them. They saluted one another with dignity and decorum. Then Rusty Farson walked to the window that faced out onto the beach strip and came to another salute.

"To His Majesty's turtles," he murmured.



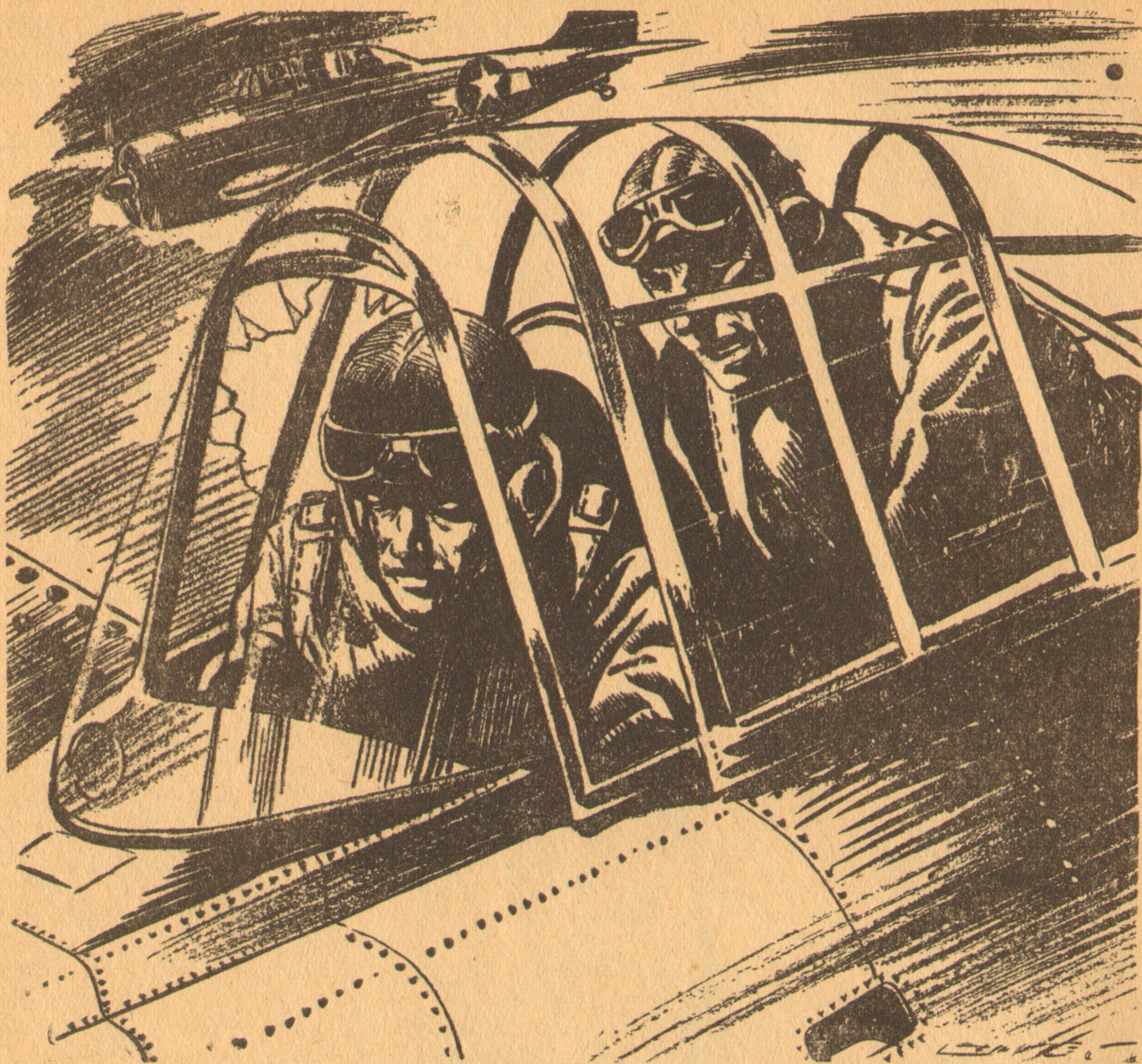
"It May be Asparagus to You, but It's Flying to Me—and I'm Going to Fly or Else!"

That was the explosive comment of Buck Maynard—the founding genius, chief pilot, business manager and half owner of Maynard Air Service—when Sid Martyn tried to console him about the loss of his cargo. Buck didn't want consolation—he wanted action—and he was ready to fight for the success of his air freighting line against the stiffest, dirtiest competition any man ever faced! You'll root for Buck as he combats the unfair tactics of his foes in a civilian flying novelet that sets a new high sky-mark in thundering thrills—

COLUMBUS WAS A SCREWBALL

By WILLIAM J. O'SULLIVAN

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!



The test pilot slumped in his seat and Casey took over

TESTED WINGS

By DANIEL PRESCOTT

It was a new plane, but bald-headed mechanic Casey could fly it—as he proved when there was a sudden emergency!

JIMMY REGAN, chief test pilot for Baxter Aircraft Corp., took a cigarette from the pocket of his oil stained flying jacket, stuck it between his lips, and lighted up. Down the tarmac a ways a half dozen mechanics were fussing over the latest thing off the Baxter drafting boards. A two seater scout-bomber, built to do its job any place in the world, it was armed so that enemy fighters would receive as much as they dished out. And probably more.

For quite awhile the Baxter "Slugger," as it had been named, was one of those hush-hush things that nobody talked about, except enemy agents when they were alone. However, the Slugger had been out in the open for over a week, now, and had passed all of the Navy acceptance tests. Today Regan would take her up for a routine check-off flight, while a lot of other Sluggers were moving along the factory's assembly line.

Standing with Regan was Tabor, who had

designed the Slugger, and M. G. Baxter, president of the company. They watched the mechanics fuss over the plane for a few minutes, and Tabor looked at Regan and said the same words he had been repeating over and over again for the last week.

"You like her, Jimmy?"

The test pilot nodded without taking his eyes off the plane.

"She's a honey," he said. "A honey. You've really given the boys something this time. What are you worrying about?"

"Me?" the other echoed with a short laugh. "Not a thing, Jimmy, not a thing. If she had any bugs you'd have found them by now."

Regan nodded again, but said nothing. He wasn't worrying, either. Or was he? For some reason he wished very much that this routine flight was over and done with. But, as far as that went, he was always mighty relieved when a new "baby" was definitely accepted as a member of the war plane family. Somehow, though, he couldn't help but feel that he would be doubly thankful when he could check the Slugger off his list.

"Rats!" he muttered under his breath. "I must be getting old and jittery. She's the sweetest thing with wings in the world."

"What was that, Jimmy?" Tabor asked and leaned forward.

"Nothing," the chief test pilot grunted. Then, pointing with his cigarette, he asked. "Who's that old, bald headed bird in the blue pull-over? Every time I look around here, I see that guy."

"Which one?" Tabor echoed, and then looked. "Oh. Casey, you mean. I don't know much about him. He's just one of the mechanics around here. A good one, too, or Williams wouldn't keep him on the pay-roll. I've noticed him a couple of times, myself. He sure is a worker. Particularly on the Slugger. You'd almost think he'd designed her, himself. I—oh-oh. I guess they must be set, Jimmy. And here comes Casey to tell you so."

"He always does," Regan said with a grin. "So, he's Casey, eh? Every time I go up he fusses over me like an old mother hen. Once I had a 'chute strap unbuckled, and he acted like I was his kid going to Sunday school without my tie. I guess the others let him have the kick of telling me when a ship's set to go up. And, to him I'm always, Sir, if you please. Makes me feel like a general. Just watch, now."

Casey looked like a man of forty-eight or nine, but maybe was sixty or sixty-five. His face and his bald head were the color of

treated leather, and his hands looked like they'd been in a can of grease for months and months. He walked with a little stoop, and when he got close, you realized that he had only one good eye. The left one was fixed and expressionless.

He approached to within a few feet of Regan, and touched a finger to his leathery-skinned forehead.

"She's all set, sir," he said in a slightly grave voice. "Any time, now, sir."

"Fine, Casey, fine," Regan said and toed out his cigarette. "Okay, then we'll get it over. I'll—What's the matter, Casey? Something on your mind?"

CASEY looked as though he did have something on his mind. Something very important. He hesitated, and glanced half apologetically at M. G. Baxter, and then quickly returned his serious gaze to Regan's face.

"Oh, I guess it's nothing, sir," he said with a shrug. "I—Well, she's all set, sir."

Regan suddenly had a great fondness for the old fellow. He didn't know why, and didn't bother to analyze his sudden feeling.

"No, tell me what it is, Casey," he said and pulled on his helmet, and goggles.

Maybe it was the presence of the company's president, or maybe it was the "old man" that caused the flush to show faintly in Casey's cheeks. At any rate, he hesitated a moment or two, as though carefully choosing his words, before he spoke.

"I've only done what I could to help, sir," he said. "But—Well, this is only a routine check flight, and so—Well, could I make the hop with you in the rear pit?"

Regan instinctively started to shake his head, not that it was against the rules to take up passengers but simply that he didn't like anybody flying with him, unless it was absolutely necessary.

However, as he started to shake his head something caused him to check the movement. Perhaps it was the almost childlike appeal that glowed in Casey's face. Anyway, Regan checked the shake of his head and looked at Tabor and M. G. Baxter.

"What about it?" he said. "It's your airplane, you know. I don't mind taking him along, though. And, I'd say that he rated the ride."

"All right with me, if you want to take him, Regan," the company president said. "Sure, go ahead, if you want."

"Sure, go ahead," Tabor echoed, and smiled at the mechanic. "I guess Casey deserves a ride, right enough."

"Okay, Casey," Regan nodded. "Go over to the office, and get yourself a 'chute pack, helmet and goggles. I'll wait for you in the ship."

Casey beamed and then turned and hurried over to the hangar office.

Regan was in the forward pit buckling up when Casey climbed in behind. Regan checked his instruments, and plugged in his radio jack. He was all set then, and was about to taxi slowly out when he realized that Casey was in back of him.

"You hear me, Casey?" he spoke into his tube.

"Yes, sir!" came the instant reply. "I'm all set, sir."

"Good," Regan grunted with a nod. "Just relax, and have fun, Casey. I won't do anything tough. But, keep your hands off things back there. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Casey assured him.

Regan nodded again, and then got down to the business of flying an airplane. He rolled out onto the long concrete runway, trundled into the wind, and looked around in all directions. The field dispatcher in his little hut atop one of the hangars gave him the sign that all was clear. But, Regan was never the one to take chances, or rely on somebody else's judgment.

To do that might prove fatal in his kind of business. Besides, he still had a slight case of nerve jitters, or whatever it was that made him wish more and more that this routine flight was over. Satisfied himself that all was okay, he started the take-off.

In less time than it takes to tell, the powerful scout-bomber was clear of the concrete runway, climbing upward with the speed of a rocket. Regan let her climb, and from force of habit checked and re-checked the engine instrument readings, and the feel of the ship under him.

He leveled off considerably below the oxygen-needed point, and began to coast about here and there, letting the Slugger have its head one minute, and sticking her through a few mild paces the next.

From four bladed steel prop to trimmer flap-fitted rudder the Slugger was the perfect airplane. It was almost as though it sensed Regan's next maneuver, for she answered the controls instantly, and didn't so much as quiver a wingtip. And for the hundred thousandth time Jimmy Regan agreed with himself that the Slugger was the smoothest, neatest airplane he had ever flown. And he had flown plenty of them.

Then, suddenly, it happened! He had dropped the Slugger into a short power dive

when suddenly sound and movement came to him as one. The sound was something like a pistol shot, and the movement was the eight inch oval inspection plate fitted top center in the radial's cowling.

It tore free, and sliced back through the windshield glass like a gleaming knife. Regan saw it and ducked, but he couldn't duck fast enough. He felt bits of shattered glass spray against his face, and then he was hit a stunning blow square in the middle of his forehead, just above the center piece of his goggles.

White hot pain tore straight through his brain, and spinning red balls of fire filled his eyes. A crazy lightness took hold of his head, and it seemed to be floating away from his neck and shoulders. He heard himself cry out with the pain. His first instinctive move was to clap one hand to his forehead. He felt a wet jagged gash there. The edges seemed to swell under his touch. He pulled his hand down and saw the palm and fingers red with his own blood.

HE TORE off his goggles because the lenses were smeared with blood. But that didn't help any. Blood trickled down through his brows and into his eyes. He dug at them with the knuckles of one hand and automatically pulled the Slugger out of its short dive with the other. And when he continued to remain blood-blinded he tugged off his neck scarf and swabbed his eyes.

But even that didn't help much. There seemed to be a waterfall of his blood pouring out of the gash, and added to that a dizzy weakness closed in on him. In a crazy sort of way he knew that he was gripping the joy-stick, that his feet were on the rudder pedals, and that he was flying level. Or was he flying level? He couldn't see the instrument board. It was just a red smear before his eyes. And prop-wash was tearing through the shattered windshield to make his eyelids flutter like butterfly wings in a gale.

"You hurt bad, sir? You hurt bad?"

The sound of a voice that he knew was not his own startled him, panic gripped him as he remembered Casey in the rear pit. He heard the mechanic say something else, but he could not understand. There was a roaring in his head, now, and it felt as though it was coming apart in four quarters. He tried to call out to Casey to climb up on his seat and bail out, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

Half blinded, half crazed with the pain in his head, he tried to twist around and mo-

tion to Casey to get free of the ship. Darkness closed in, he knew he was losing consciousness, and the world before him faded into darkness.

He opened his eyes to find he was still in the plane. A red film still covered everything but it wasn't as deep as before. He could feel that the plane was not in a dive, but in level flight, and— But, no! The propeller was only idling, and the nose was up slightly. In that split second he thought that he had cut the throttle, and that the ship was about to stall.

Then he knew he was wrong, for he felt the Slugger sink belly first, just a bit too rapidly. There was a jarring jounce that made his head feel as though the top had

been pried off. Then another jounce, a little less violent, another, and then finally, the familiar motion and movement of the plane rolling forward to a stop. Half dazed, bewildered, with lightning striking in his head, he pushed away from the cockpit rim, and stared agog at the familiar sight of Baxter field.

That cleared his head for a moment, and he twisted around to look back at Casey. The mechanic's eyes were wide, blinking, and he was licking his lower lip, swallowing in gulps. He looked at Regan, blinked and gulped a couple of times, then scrambled out of his pit and onto the wing stub by Regan.

"Take it easy, sir!" he said breathlessly.

[Turn page]

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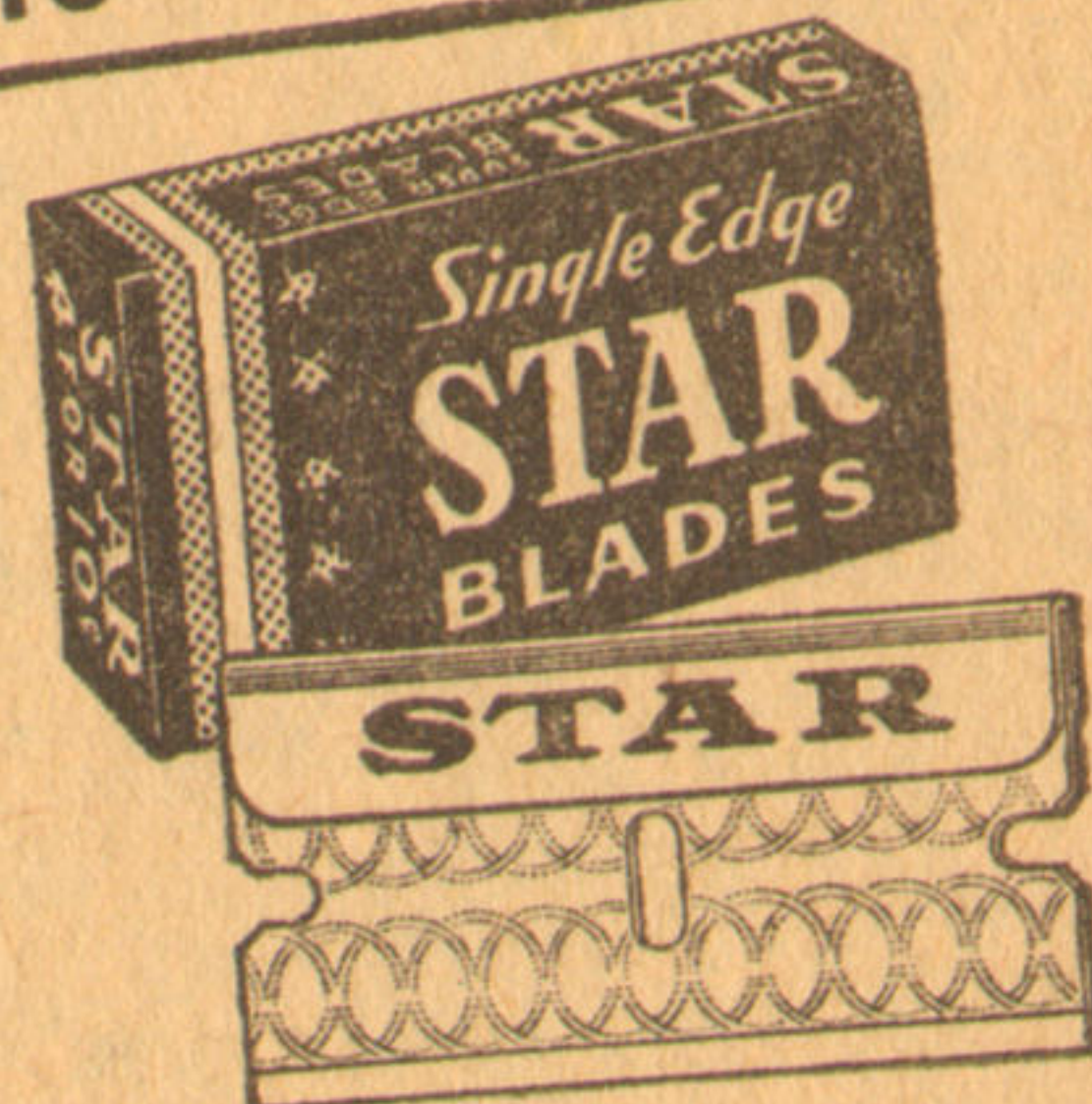


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"I'll help you out. Here comes the ambulance—I radioed you'd had an accident."

"An accident, and a miracle!" Regan gasped. "When did you learn to fly, Casey?"

"In the last war, sir," the mechanic said. "That's when I got wounded. And like what happened to you today. It's my fault, sir. I should have said something, instead of being afraid of speaking out of turn."

"Said something? What do you mean, Casey?" Regan grunted, and peered at him through the faint red haze that still clouded his vision.

The mechanic nodded toward the radial's cowlings.

"I didn't think that inspection plate had big enough clips to hold it, sir," he said. "One came off my Camel in the last war. Came right back through the windshield, and hit me in the head. But, I figured the clips on this job weren't strong enough, and I wanted to say something, but— Well, you know. I didn't think Mr. Tabor would like me sticking my nose into his business. I thought that if I could see it flutter in the air, it would be all right for me to mention it to you. So, I asked you for that ride. I didn't think it would come off, or I would have spoken to you. I thought I'd see if it wasn't okay completely."

"You know, a little strained from the acceptance tests. And—I think I added ten years to the forty-eight I've already got. If this ship didn't practically land herself, we'd never have made it. It's been a few years since I've done any flying. Old duffers like me have had their day."

"A pilot, yet you were willing to get into the grease and oil!" Regan breathed. "Well, I'll be—that's what I call serving."

"Oh, I don't know, sir," Casey said with a shrug. "There's a lot of old pilots like me who want to fly, but can't. I've got a son, you see. Nineteen, and he's taking his Navy Pre-Flight right now. If I can do a little to help him, and his pals, get them the best ships, and lots of them, then— Well, it sort of makes me feel a little that I'm still doing my bit, even if I do have to stay on the ground."

THE test pilot shook his head to clear away the grey fog, settling in his brain.

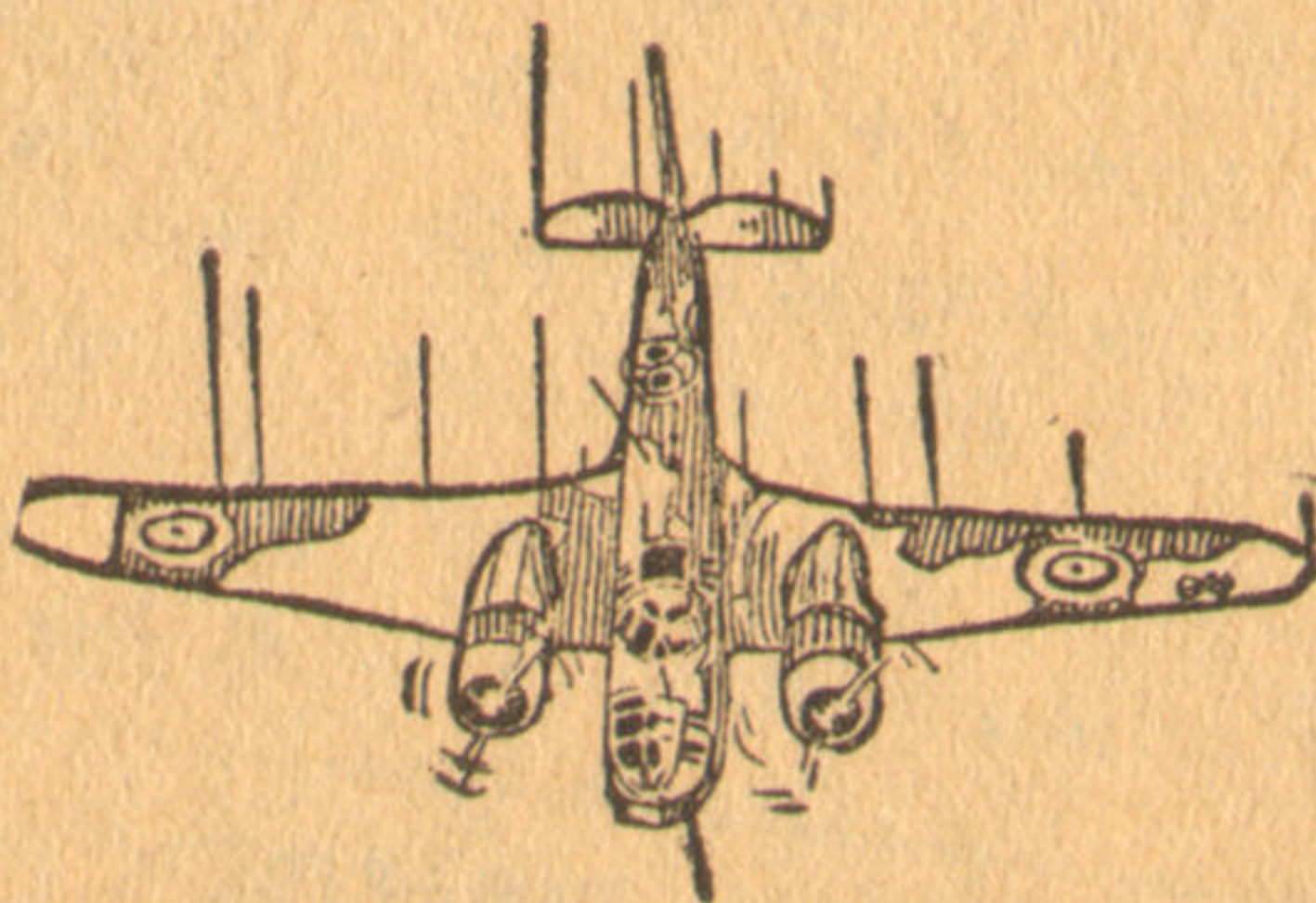
"Do a little to help, he says?" Regan murmured and looked at the shattered windshield. "He calls it doing a little to help when he grabs the spare controls and saves a forty thousand dollar airplane. I . . . Well, here comes the ambulance, and I guess maybe I will take a little ride. The old head isn't so steady, yet."

"But, look, Casey, I want to have a talk with you when they patch me up. A guy with your experience and knowledge rates more than a job swabbing wings, and the like. So I'm going to change a few things, and—"

"Oh, I don't know, sir," Casey said, and looked embarrassed. "I—"

"Well, I do!" Regan snapped. "And the first thing I'll change is this sir business. From now on you get the sir stuff, because that's the way it should be. And you get a few other things, too, or M. G. Baxter digs up another chief test pilot. Now, shut up—sir—and give me a hand out of here. We'll do some more talking later. And flying, too, I hope."

"And so do I, sir!" Casey said in a husky voice.



When supplies ran low in Burma, the boys thought the C. O. had let them down—until they took over the supply job themselves in

BIG BOY

By JOE GRECC

One of Next Issue's Many Smash-Packed Yarns!



THRILLS IN THE AIR

BY *Jack Kofoed*

THE SAGA OF OUR FIGHTING BOMBERS

THIS is about bombers.

Without them the invasion of Europe and the conquest of Hitler would have been impossible. They shattered Germany's war potential. They battered down many of the robot bomb launching platforms. They hit the supposedly invincible Westwall with a snowstorm of explosives that allowed the ground forces to land on the bloody beaches.

I served with the Eighth Air Force, whose B17s wrought havoc never before known in warfare. I knew hundreds of those grand kids who made up the combat crews.

This story is about some of them.

They weren't all boys. Some were mature men, professional soldiers, who had gained high rank. One was Brig. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest. I flew with him to England. He was the youngest general in the Air Forces then, handsome and blond, a grandson of the old Confederate, Nathan Bedford Forrest, whose formula for victory was "git there fustest with the mostest."

Seeking to study strategy and tactics in combat, the young general was shot down in flames on his third mission.

Then there was Ira Eaker, balding and jutting-jawed, who went to the United Kingdom as commanding general of the Eighth Air Force Bomber Command. He was a brigadier then, an airman of fame, with many great achievements to his credit. Later, Eaker became boss of the Eighth, and then of the Mediterranean Air Force. Now he wears three stars as deputy commander of the Army Air Forces. I am proud to have served on his staff.

Small Beginnings

In the early days our striking force was pitiful, compared with what it became later. There were neither divisions nor groups. We were happy to be able to send out squadrons. The first attack was on Rouen, where Joan of Arc had been burned at the stake.

Gen. Eaker led that one himself, flying in the lead plane. The crew of a crate in which

a general rides always tightens up a little. I remember a funny gag . . . but it wasn't just a gag, for it really happened, though not on this mission. It came when we had reached a point where we could bomb Berlin regularly.

An ambitious brigadier, on his first mission, led this attack. He was determined to make a good showing. When the formation reached the capital of the Reich, the target was obscured by heavy clouds. The general gave orders to circle around until the bombers found an opening in the overcast. Much to the dismay of the nervous crew, they kept circling.

The bombardier of the plane in which the general was riding shook his head disgustedly.

"I wish this gee would make up his mind, so we could drop our bombs and get the heck out of here. I'm getting dizzy."

The words carried over the intercommunication system, and the general heard it. His vanity was hurt. He meant to punish the maker of that remark.

"The individual who made that remark will please identify himself," he ordered.

Cloaked by anonymity, the lieutenant answered, "Not a chance. I'm not that dizzy!"

First Mission

But the first mission flown by the Eighth Air Force was against Rouen, and the bombers went out with a fighter escort. Later, how often we wished the fighters could go all the way with the bombers when the first attacks were made on Germany. But it wasn't until the P38s and P47s were equipped with extra tanks, which gave them much greater range, that they were able to fly into the heart of Germany.

In the belly blister of the "Birmingham Blitzkrieg" rode a young sergeant named Kent L. West. He had never been on a mission, but neither had any other member of that crew, nor any other crews in the squadron. Everything had been theory up until now. This was the real thing. Sgt. West had shot at targets in practice, but never at targets which might shoot back.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This feature by Lieutenant Colonel Jack Kofoed brings you in each issue true stories of gallantry and courage, peril and adventure in the war skies—exciting, inspiring episodes that form a deathless saga of combat flyers in action.

As a former officer of the Eighth Air Force in England, Lieutenant Colonel Kofoed is equipped to give you the "inside story" of many stirring events that will make you proud of America's airmen. In civilian life, Jack Kofoed is famous as a radio commentator, newspaper columnist, sports and air writer.

Kent felt very alone and naked in his blister. He had none of the confidence veterans gain in their pilots and fellow crewmen. His muscles were tight, and there was a cold chill up his spine.

There was a sufficiency of flak along the way, but it wasn't accurate. German anti-aircraft gunners were not as adept as they became later. Actually the feathery blooms of the bursts didn't seem formidable. Anyway, there was nothing Sgt. West could do but watch. His job was to take care of any German fighter planes that might attack from below.

It was pretty certain they would attack. Reichsmarshal Goering had promised the German people not a single enemy bomb would be dropped on the homeland. He couldn't afford to have his reputation dimmed. But though he did not know it, the B17s and their crews were going to spoil his boast.

The sergeant raked every bit of air he could reach with his keen eyes. The bomber was steaming along at 180 miles an hour over the fair land of France, and it wouldn't be long until they were over the target. So far no fighters. So far, so good!

First Blood

Kent, who came from West Bocton, Alabama, couldn't relax. He didn't think he would ever relax. And then, for the first time in his life, he saw a German plane flying toward his ship. His knowledge of airplane identification was all right and, in the brief flash he had, he saw it was a Focke-Wulf 190. Not that it mattered what it was. It was a Nazi!

The fighter was coming at the bomber like a streak of light. West caught it in his sights and fired. He missed. Then he cooled. It was like being nervous before a fight, and then, as soon as punches are thrown, getting hold of yourself and knowing what to do.

He caught the 190 in his sights again and squeezed the trigger. The plane seemed almost to stop—then it burst into flame and roared down toward destruction.

"Yipe-ee!" yelled Sgt. West. *"I got him!"*

That scene was repeated hundreds, and hundreds of times in the many months that followed . . . months in which attacking squadrons grew from a dozen to many hundreds. But this was the first German fighter pilot to be shot down by an American gunner!

Sweating It Out

So many times afterward ground crews sweated out missions, waiting and worrying until their planes came back . . . sometimes shivering all night by the hard strips. But this first mission was different. The sun was setting when the bombers of Rouen returned and began to set down.

The men below counted the big birds. They were all there . . . everyone. They had bombed their target without losing a ship. And, there was Gen. Eaker in the observation turret of his plane, grinning and waving. There would be many times when there'd be no smile on his face because of heavy losses, but on this occasion he was the happiest man in the whole, wide world.

The funny thing about this raid was that

Pierre Laval of the Vichy government protested. He took the attitude that all installations in France except those actually of a German military nature were under the protection of the Vichyites. He added that 15 soldiers had been killed. Since no French soldiers were stationed in occupied France, the dead ones must have been German, which rather spoiled Laval's premise.

Gen. Eaker chuckled when he read that protest. Perhaps it was because of his sardonic sense of humor that he sent his bombers back to Rouen ten days later. Again, no bombers were lost . . . but this time Sgt. Kent West failed to shoot down another Focke-Wulf, and he was very unhappy about it.

The First Big Mission

I remember the first mission in which more than 100 bombers took part . . . 115 as a matter of fact. The planes flew in a tight formation, almost wingtip to wingtip, so German fighters couldn't swarm through. Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay figured out that plan. He was a colonel then.

I met him when he took over command of the Third Division from Maj. Gen. Frederick L. Anderson, who was to become chief of operations for the Eighth Air Force. There were only four American bombers lost on that mission, and it was the first which really convinced the high command that such attacks could be made without impossible losses.

The Luftwaffe hadn't been able to do it. In the battle of Britain, when 500 German bombers attacked the isles, 185 were shot down in a single day. That was why expert opinion believed massed daylight raids were doomed to failure.

In every great operation, thousands of men live through hours of excitement and terror. This attack on French-held installations of the Germans was a tremendous success. The loss, according to all known standards, was amazingly light. But, that is merely a matter of statistics.

No Ducks

Lt. James Sammons, of Louisa, Ky., took out a Fortress. His boys had been complaining. They claimed other bomber gunners had had a chance to shoot down enemy planes. They had gone along, and dropped their explosives, but hadn't been bothered by the Focke-Wulfes or Messerschmitts. They wanted a chance to throw lead. That's what they said, anyway. Later, when they became veterans, they were perfectly willing to let well enough alone. It is only the young and brash who go looking for trouble.

Well, these boys had been looking for it, and this time they got it. There were plenty of fighters along . . . Americans, the Royal Air Force guys in those lovely Spitfires everyone in the Eighth came to love as they loved their mothers, Poles, Canadians and Australians. But fighters aren't always close when you need them, and a lot go on what is rather laughingly known as diversionary sweeps. Then the guys in the bombers have to look out for themselves.

Sammons had a gunner named Sgt. John D. Sullivan, of Minneapolis. John had shot down

one Nazi plane, and won the Distinguished Flying Cross. Until that time it was the only enemy fighter credited to the plane. The other boys were jealous. They wanted a couple of notches on their own guns.

There may be something in thought transference. Sammons' crew wanted action. Maybe, in some way or another, they wafted the idea to the Germans. At any rate, the Nazis came after Sammons' ship!

Too Many Ducks

They came in swarms. A few bombers had no trouble at all and did nothing but warm up their guns. But Sgt. John Sullivan was the busiest man in the mass attack. He'd shot down one plane. That was enough. He wasn't looking for records. He'd had it. But the Focke-Wulfes didn't know. They kept coming in. The estimate was that, during the course of the mission, at least 50 different Heinies made passes with blazing guns.

You fly high and you fly fast in a bomber, but fighters fly faster. If you're hit, and go down in a spin, nobody has a chance to bail out. The plane can take evasive action against flak, but not much against fighters. When they race in with spitting guns, it's up to the crewmen back of the .50 calibres. They've got to be quick, and they've got to be right!

Sullivan was quick and right. That day he blasted three 190s out of the sky. The squadron as a whole brought down 15. It didn't turn out to be a record in the long run, but it lasted for a little while, anyway.

The Other War

While the Eighth Air Force was making their start against the continent of Europe, the boys in the Pacific were getting under way too. In October, 1942, they didn't have much. Pearl Harbor was only ten months behind. But I live in Miami now, and because two of the men who hit Rabaul were Floridians, I became interested. Capt. Dick Essard of Winter Haven, a pilot who had been a professional boxer good enough to fight Baby Stribling, and his bombardier, Lt. Feaster Norwood of Miami, caught my eye.

In the light of later events, these missions were small time. The first day the boys dropped 60 tons, the next 40. But if you've seen what 100 tons of high explosive can do to life and property . . . well, you wouldn't think it was so small time, after all.

The first attack had been successful. There was no fighter defense, and the Japanese anti-aircraft fire was weak, frightened and inaccurate. The B17s were able to go in at almost tree top level to lay their eggs of death.

There's a nerve tearing, murderous thrill in that. The second mission arrived several hours before dawn on Saturday morning. Rabaul was awake and suffering from what had happened only a few hours before. Fires were roaring beneath a vast blanket of smoke! Again the scorched harbor and docks and air-drome were hit.

Flames raced across the area. The first bombers, having dropped their load of death, let loose orange flares to light up the rest of the scene for late arrivals.

In the great overall plan, it was a trifle, a comma in the history of war in the Pacific.

But to Essard and Norwood it was a thrill beyond all expression.

"Buildings were blown to pieces, fires were everywhere. American planes came and went so fast it was almost impossible to keep track of them."

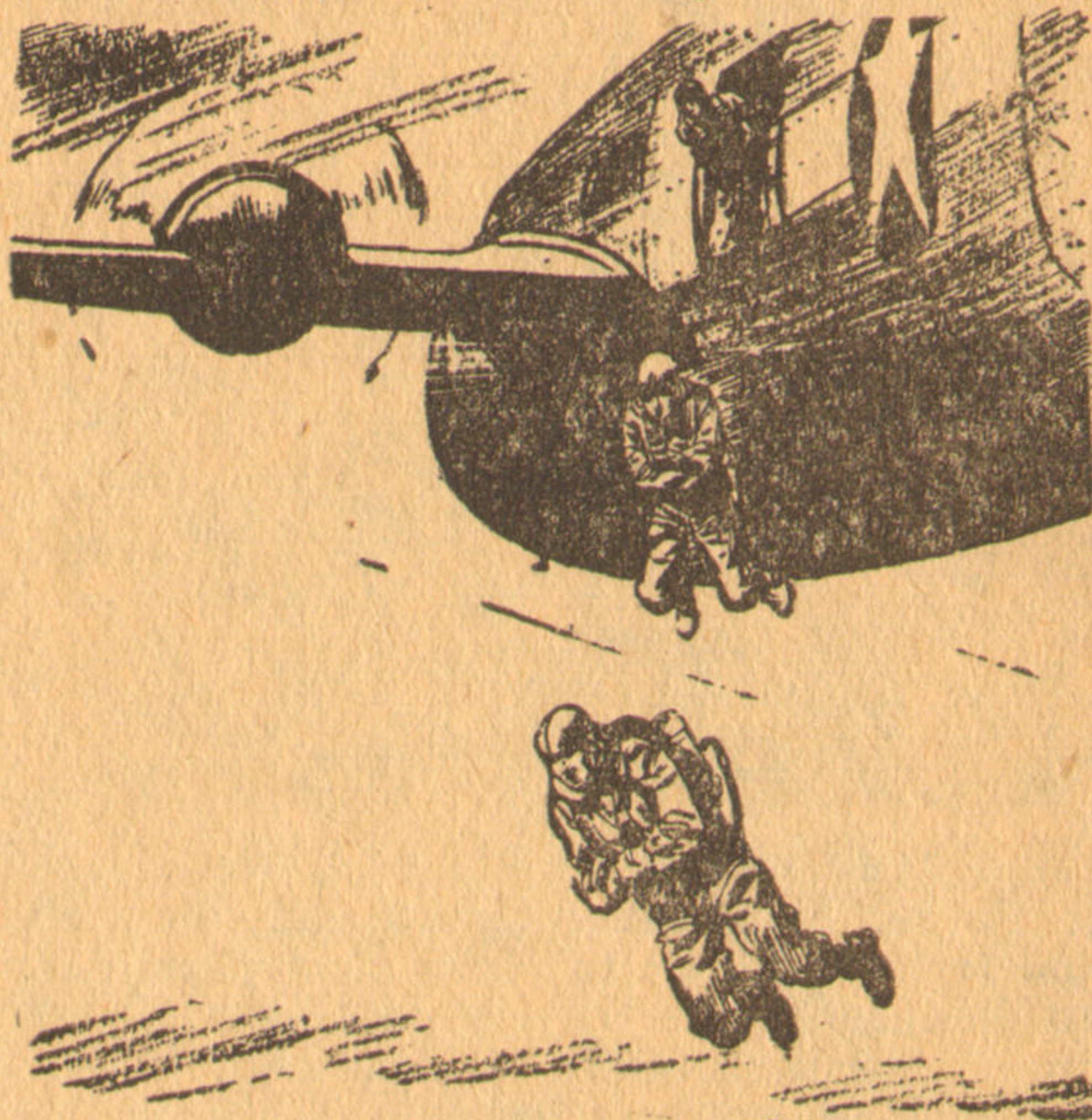
And, that was in a day when Yankee air power in the Pacific had hardly come into being.

There was always a spirit of self sacrifice among the bomber crews. The men, coming from every part of the country and not knowing each other before being assigned, found a brotherhood they had never dreamed of. The slogan of the Three Musketeers, "one for all, and all for one," became theirs in everyday practice.

First Lieut. John J. Howell, of South Miami, commanded a B26 in the European Theatre. He was new to the business of war when he took the plane on its first mission; an attack at roof top level against the Velzen power plant, which bristled with anti-aircraft guns.

A Marauder Is Winged

In roared the B26, and the instant after its load was dropped on the target area shells and



bullets hit it. Oil covered the windshield, forcing Howell to fly blind. The control column was knocked out. Lt. Howard Short, the co-pilot, wiped the instrument panel with his flying jacket and found they were only thirty feet above the ground!

When Howell regained altitude, they made a survey of damage. In addition to countless shell and bullet holes, the bomb bay doors wouldn't close, the landing gear would not let down, and one of the gas tanks was pierced and nearly empty. Though the pilot's control column was useless, the co-pilot's was still intact.

The B26 roared on. When the plane was near its home field, the young pilot ordered his crew to bail out. One by one they jumped. Short stayed to help bring in the plane, which was nearly falling apart.

"We can't land this thing," said Howell. "Get out of here, Short. That's an order."

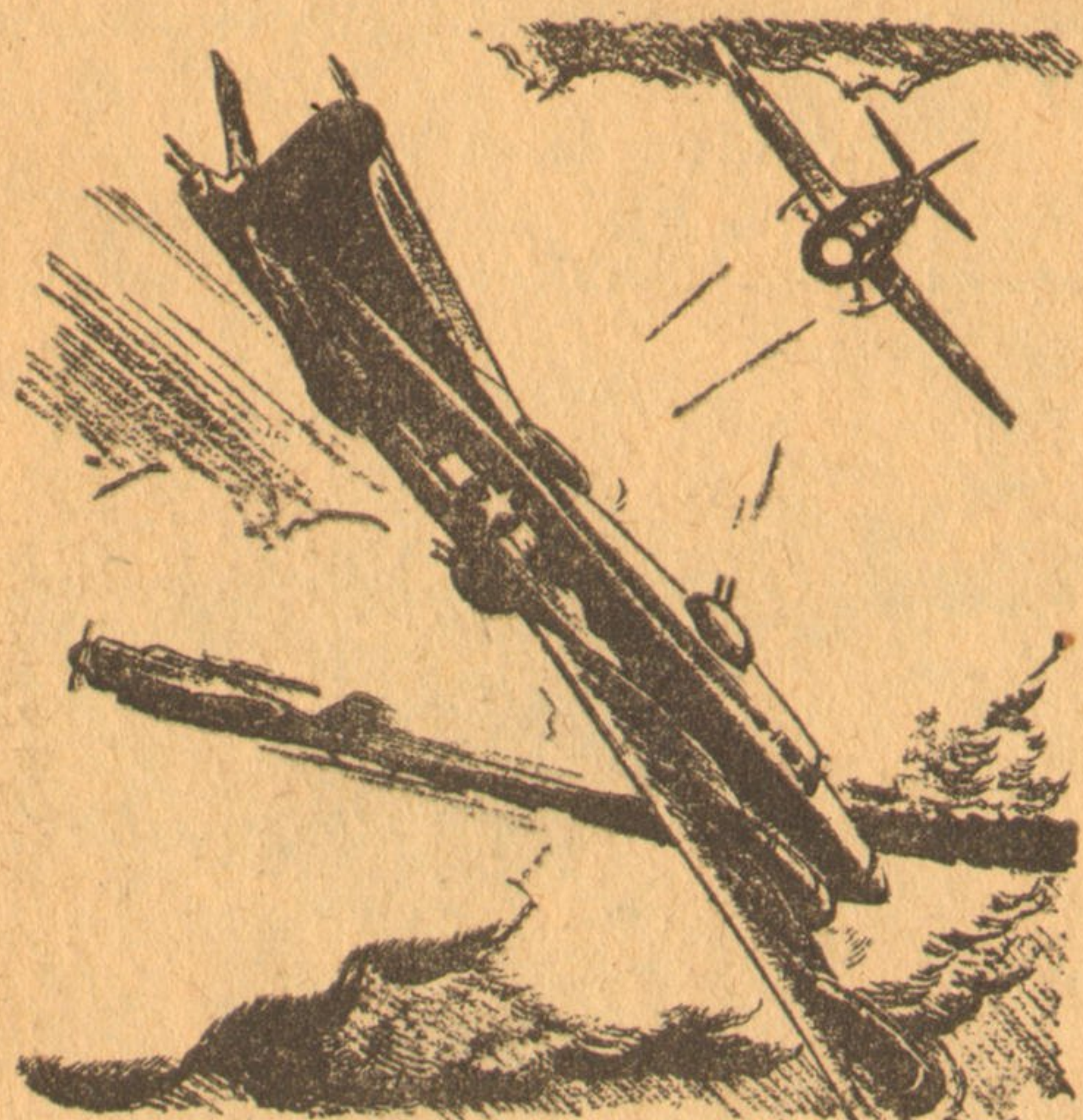
"I stood by the open bomb bay door," the co-pilot said afterward. "Howell was flying the

wreck by himself. With his controls shot to shreds, he was operating the pilot's rudder controls with his feet and reaching across the cockpit to the co-pilot's control column. He turned and waved to me, and I jumped."

Gallant Sacrifice

It is easy to jump from a medium bomber when it is flying level, but in the shape this one was in it couldn't stay level by itself. This young pilot, on his first combat mission, knew he didn't have a chance in a million. But the code of the air demanded that the pilot stay at his post until all other crew members of an abandoned ship had jumped. Then there was no chance for Howell. White, grim lipped, he fought the controls until the left wing dipped and the B26 roared into its plunge of death.

There are other things than battle damage that slow down a bomber. Take the B24 "Mudfish," for example. It belonged to Maj. Claire



Chennault's famous China-based Fourteenth Air Force. It had struck up and down the coast from Rangoon to Hong Kong, and deep into the interior, destroying port installations, shipping, supply dumps, railroad centers. And the "Mudcat" gunners had knocked a number of Zeros out of the sky, too.

Tech. Sgt. Bernard Ferguson was a member of that crew. He had flown missions, over "The Hump" and back, time after time, but the one he'll always remember was the first.

They were taking off for Haiphong on the French Indo-China border. The "Mudfish"

clipped its nose wheel on a roller at the end of the runway. The plane joined formation, but the wheel presented a wind-drag. Worst of all, the pilot didn't see how he was going to land with the wheel all out of whack. Something had to be done . . . and Sgt. Ferguson decided to try.

Emergency Repairs

He crawled into the hole over the wheel. He hung by his knees while his mates gripped him and worked to free the thing. It was too close quarters to wear a parachute, even though there was 20,000 feet of air between himself and China. His oxygen mask wouldn't reach, so the sergeant would work for awhile, and then his crewmen would pull him up for a bit of oxygen.

This kept up for nearly two hours. Ferguson finally succeeded in loosening the wheel, and letting it drop away. It was pretty much touch and go, for by this time they were nearly at the target and the Zekes were beginning to buzz around.

Zekes or no Zekes, the "Mudfish" dropped its bombs, and turned for home. The pilot would have to make a belly landing, but he was a smart guy. Nobody was too worried, even though they might have been squeamish about what could have happened had they hit dirt with that crooked wheel to turn them over on their side.

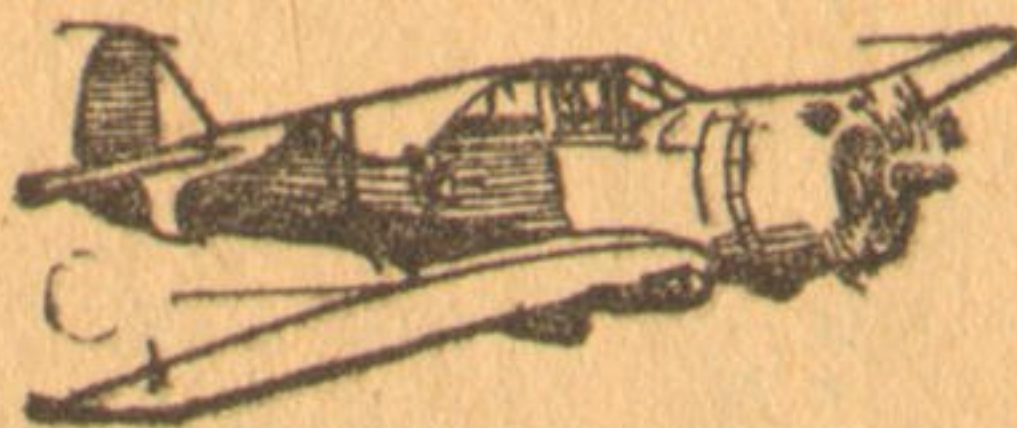
Saga of the Bombers

This, then, is the saga of the bombers and the great guys, who rode them—fine pilots, who knew what to do when in trouble, like Capt. Edwin P. Maliszewski. Over Romilly-sur-Seine, his plane was smashed by flak and bullets. To make it worse, the pilot was hit in the leg by a cannon shell.

Wounded and with two engines out, Maliszewski decided his only chance to get from France to his home strip in England was by a long glide. The bomber was at 27,000 feet when they started . . . and at 6,000 when they reached the coast. Nazi fighters buzzed them, as they buzzed every wounded and limping Fortress, but Maliszewski's lived through these attacks.

Over the Channel, they were down to 2,000 feet, but the other supercharger started kicking then, and they slid home.

So when you meet a former bomber combat crewman, even though he is in civilian clothes and wears the "ruptured duck" in his lapel buttonhole, you'll know you have met a man!



THE SAGA OF OUR FIGHTER PLANES IN THRILLS IN THE AIR

NEXT ISSUE!



Eyes bulging, the child was staring at Connor

THERE'S MILLIONS IN IT

By KERRY KENMARE

*With the future of his air transport company at stake,
ex-Army pilot Connor flies in quest of lost treasure!*

HE WAS an old hand on the Valley Route through Burma into China, so Pat — John Patrick — Connor, eased back the throttles of the UC-78 and let it balloon up on the spout of hot, humid air that jetted up from the jungle below. Connor, an ex-Army pilot, was between twenty and thirty years old. He had dark hair and blue eyes.

"Bounce, Useless! Bounce, you Leapin' Lena!"

"Useless Seventy-eight," was what they had christened the wood-and-fabric deal. It sported two small engines and variable-pitch props. That was back when the war was still a war and fledgling pilots were getting their Instrument-teeth cut and their backs nearly broken from the bumps it took while making the Hump Run.

But you can only afford to sneer at a small, light Advanced Trainer if you have a parking-area jam-packed with C-47's and C-60's

and C-87's. If it was all you had between you and starvation, you just smiled and said, "Useless," as Pat Connor did.

The rising column of air petered out in a fluff of cumulus. Pat Connor notched the throttles forward again and drilled on for Calcutta. His eyes were steady on the instrument panel but his thoughts were on two different conditions: "What could be; and, What is."

What "Could Be" was a neat little, sweet little Valley run which would lap up any crumbs that the giant airline company dropped, just as a sleek cat might ignore the bones of a picked fish for succulent slices of whole meat.

Such a prospect had lured Pat Connor into returning to India from the States after getting his Army discharge.

"What Was?" Well—not as many pukka sahibs were going from Calcutta to their outlying plantations rich in tea and rubber and teak and in rare-metalead mines—not as many as Pat knew there would be later on. The trouble, in commercial affairs, was that time meant money. And with his money sunk in a pontoon-job Cub Liaison outfit he'd picked up, plus his classy—to him—UC-78 cargo-and-passenger deal, time was running out for Connor.

"That darned smooth-talking sahib, Cedric Glendening!" Pat Connor growled, as he eyed with interest the cloud formation to the north to the right of his course. "Hmm! The old Hump will be booming tonight, for sure! Ghosts will be riding the controls of those missing ships!"

The condemned Cedric Glendening was a personable Britisher of Connor's ken who had shaken off his Old School Tie aplomb long enough to aid Lord Louis Mountbatten in running the Little Brown Men half-crazy and all the way across Burma. Then he had returned to his Calcutta, his club, his gin-and-bitters, and his twinkling-eyed contemplation of Man in his mad chase after money.

"Why run awfter it, old boy, doncher know?" he would say to Pat Connor. "Just sit tight. Pfft! And it will be there, old boy, without your having to run awfter it. Relax, old fellow, relax!"

"Look, you are an old man. I mean, middle-aged, anyway. You got your pile. I haven't."

GLENDENING stared at him for several moments out of cold, fishy eyes.

"Thanks for the compliment, old boy," he drawled. "About my remarkable preservation in the face of my antiquity. I hap-

pen to be forty years old. But you were saying I have my pile, as you put it; and you do not have my pile. It angers you, eh?"

"I mean, compared to me you're old," Connor said. "And I didn't mean I wanted your money. The thing is, with some capital to ease me over the waiting period before things boom, I can make money. For us both."

"Thank you, old boy, thank you! Quite thoughtful of you."

"Cut the kidding," Connor said. "I meant, if you put up some of your money—in my outfit—we can make plenty. I need better maintenance. I need some small ports out in the rough country that I can use to stretch my service out. I've sunk my dough in the planes. I can't get by with the Cub; and selling it would only give me enough to operate a few weeks more on. Beyond what I have."

"I see." Cedric Glendening sipped his drink and eyed a passing Sweet Young Thing with absent interest. "So I just give you my money. If you lose it—Cheerio! Pip pip! And, for you, toodle-oo. And for me, work." He made a wry face. "Cawn't, old boy, just cawn't. Unless it is a sure thing."

Pat Connor persisted. "You are a smart manager. You have important connections. You are good at financing. I'm—well, I get by as a pilot. I'm a hard worker. There's dough in the flying game out here. Lots of dough. Millions! We can get our share and more. Heck! One good year and you can retire!"

Glendening shook his head. "Awfter all, fellow, I am retired. And you are trying to un-retire me." He looked at Pat with a clear blue eye, an eye the color and quality of an innocent tot's. "Er—millions, you say? Dollars, I presume. Ah—Chinese, or Yank?"

Connor sighed and downed his drink. "What does it matter? The way the U. S. is pegging the Chiang dollar, it's a good deal. Not interested, huh? Well, I could go to a bank, you know."

Glendening didn't say, "Why don't you, old boy?" He didn't say anything. He started to, but on second thought he jammed his glass between his lips and nodded good-by to Pat Connor over the rim of it.

Connor was down the steps of the porch when Glendening's voice reached him.

"Relax, old chap, what? Relax! It will come to you." . . .

Connor clipped the tip of the Bay of Bengal and contacted Tower for landing instructions. He circled into traffic, eying with a sad shake of his head the patch where

Tommy Loomis had gone in, that time. "Eagle Squadron" Loomis, who had later ferried in the States and had blown up in a C-47 while letting down on instruments into Calcutta.

"Hunch for me, Tommy!" he murmured, as he ran the prop-pitch flatter and dropped his gear. "Pull for me, fella!" He visually checked his pedestal and the engine instruments.

"On downwind, Tower," he called. "Gear down and locked; pressure up. Roger, old man, I'm number three to land? I have the other two in sight. . . . Will call on final, Tower. Connor out!"

He taxied up to his parking space and climbed down to talk to a weathered mec who stood near.

"The left engine is rougher'n a cob," he said. "When can you get to me, Hunchy?"

The maintenance man chewed a cud of tobacco and laid a brown line of juice downwind.

"Next week," he said. "Got the dough?"

Connor showed him some.

"Come to think of it, I can get to it tonight." The mechanic grinned slowly. "Now, Pat, don't say it! Look, I'm like you, see? I got to live. Now, if you could hire me regular, it'd be different."

"Relax," Connor told him with a grin. "It will come to you."

"Sure, and I know the landlord and my old lady and the lottery man will come to me, too. Only, they're sure. Where you gonna get this dough you keep telling me to relax for? Out of Heaven? Like manna? Brother, maybe I can eat manna, but I got to get it on the table first. Me, I'm relaxed. I'm too undernourished to be any other way."

Pat Connor went into town in a beaten-up old car driven by a wild-eyed and wilder-driving jehu. He washed up, got into his last clean suit of white linens, jammed his topee-helmet askew on his cropped head, and went through the teeming streets and the steaming smells to talk with Glendening. He found Glendening sitting in the same place and looking just as he had left him seven days earlier. He came up and dropped into a rattan chair.

"Haven't you moved since I left you?" Connor asked. He motioned the boy to bring him a drink. "Sign the chit, eh? Until I get to the bank?"

SLOWLY Glendening grinned. "I never move unless it is a crisis," he said. "What's up with the bank, old egg? Planning an armed robbery?"

"Your pals gave me a check," Connor said. "You know. The pukka sahibs? I had to leave cash with Hunchy, for some engine work. Darn it, if only I could hire him full time! But I'll need another ship or two, first. And a coupla stick-wranglers. Pilots. Well? You thought any about buying into Connor Air & Mining?"

"Haven't even given it a thought," Glendening confessed. "It's so beastly hot I must use my wits to keep cool. Incidentally, old boy, if your air venture fails, perhaps you can dig up some money. Eh? That impressive title: Connor Air and Mining! What?"

"Wait until I get up and then kick me," Connor grunted.

The Britisher smiled. "Sorry, old boy. Bad taste, that quip of mine. How's for a spot to eat? Later, eh? Good lad! My guest, of course. Well, old fellow, relax. What? It will come to you."

"Like manna," Connor glumly quoted Hunchy. "How about it, Glendening? If you don't make a decision, I've got to go to the banks. You know them! They'll steal my planes. I'm on a note now, and if I ask for more, they'll only call the note I owe. And—blooie!"

"What decision, Pat? How do you know I am considering it?"

The pilot shrugged. "You'd come out flat and say so, if you weren't. Look, Cedric"—he pronounced it "Seed-rick" and the Britisher winced—"what's holding you back?"

"Well, now . . ." Glendening pulled at his lantern jaw and looked at an American Army nurse going by until she was out of sight. "I don't have too much faith in my own judgment. If the banks were to think you really good enough a risk to put up heavy sugar, well, I might just say, 'Sorry, bank, old boy, I shall save you the trouble. Of lending and of collecting.' As it is—No, old boy, not yet. I like a sure thing, doncher know."

"Don't I know," Pat Connor agreed. "Don't I! Well, let's eat."

"I'm going to pick up those sahibs of yours in three days, if the weather doesn't close in on them," Connor said later, as he prepared to take his leave. "Thanks for the business."

"Pleasure, old boy. Er—need any money? I mean, until you get to the bank, next week?"

Pat Connor showed the check. "When I tell you a thing, you can hang your hat on it. Your friends gave me this. Like I said. It goes into the bank tomorrow. Thanks, though."

"Relax," Glendening loudly called out after

him. "Remember!"

But Pat Connor was anything but relaxed as he fought his way back over the jungle, four days later. Driving rains and low clouds made any attempt to land at the small, jungle-clearing impossible. And the ground was such a quagmire when the rain did clear that he knew it would invite disaster to set the UC-78 on such turf.

Sadly, he wrote a note, shoved it into a message-drop, and eased it out as he zoomed past the clearing. It was a let-down for his prospective passengers. And it was a total loss, to Connor, for the long trip up.

Grimly, he faced southeast and bucked a raging storm. He kept carefully beneath the cloud-layer, to conserve fuel. He could climb up through, all right; but that would mean increased power, increased fuel consumption. And in the treacherous, unpredictable weather over Burma, it was always wise to be ready to keep going.

Besides, the big stuff worked up top. The airliners. It was not a healthy practise to drill up out of a mass of clouds and part your hair with an airliner's tail-wheel.

The rain slacked off, but he was droning along in broken clouds that now revealed, now obscured the gray-green-brown endless carpet of jungle below. Now and again, a tiny clearing where some native was working a paddy field would show. And then, the endless trees.

He was hauling a cigarette out of his pocket when a convulsive shock ran through the fragile plane. It tipped crazily on a wing-tip. A kick at the left rudder should have brought the plane on an even keel again, but it didn't.

Connor sat straight, his eyes alert. Then he noticed that one of his wings was in ruins. He brought his wheel into play to help the wing up with the ailerons as well as the rudder.

"What in heck did I hit?" he wondered. "Or what hit me?"

He had slued around one hundred-and-eighty degrees in his heading by the time he came wings-level again. His right wing tip was a jagged wreck, about six feet of it. Pieces of the spar and ribs were still tearing off and streaming back into the wind.

HE REDUCED power until he was barely maintaining flying speed, to take the stress off the injured member. Then he stared down at the green-gray carpet below, looking for some sign of whatever it was that had hit him. Or that he had hit.

"Heck, I know an aircraft didn't pass me.

Of course, it just could have been something faster than I came in under me, and climbed up into this plane. But I don't see him in the air. And if he crashed, I maybe could see him below . . . What the devil!"

He squinted his eyes ahead as a blur, a pale, fast-traveling blur, lined across his vision. His eyes followed it to the trees. Then he raised his gaze, riveted it on the thick mass of clouds ahead and above. He shouted his surprise.

Another something—and another. And a third. Hurtling out of the mass of clouds and plummeting straight for the trackless jungle below.

"Someone in trouble, jettisoning cargo," he knew. "And darned near got me in the doing! Brother, was that close! Why, those big bums!"

But even as he said it, he knew the answer. He realized that the pilot unseen upstairs was in serious trouble if he was shoving his cargo to the jungle below. Hundreds of tons of war material lay scattered from Everest to Kunming, from Ledo to Rangoon, scattered to the snows and the monkeys and the rains and the tigers.

Pat Connor grinned when he thought of the frame of mind of that pilot above. He remembered his own when he had been caught in a monsoon, an engine went out, and he reluctantly decreed that the cargo should be jettisoned. And his rage when the cargo officer told him, at Kunming:

"It was lemon drops. Scurvy preventive. Forget it."

"Lemon drops!" Connor had raged. "You mean I been risking my crew and my plane and my own neck to trundle lemon drops over the Himalayas? Brother, what a war! Last time it was empty beer-bottles going back to be re-filled. And now it's lemon drops! Well, that ought to cure monkeys of beri-beri for the next million years!"

"This is our only way in, you know," the man had reminded him. "There's nothing queer about it when you think everything must come the same way. By air cargo. Fuel; ammunition; engines; spare parts; bombs; mosquito netting; candy; underwear; boots. Even beer and lemon drops."

Connor wondered what weird freight it was that had clipped his right wing as it hurtled past.

"Spam, I hope!" he chuckled. "Or canned codfish! Well, now to try and get home. . . ."

He swung back on his course. But he was a glum disheartened man. Even if he could prove what airline had dropped the cargo, he still would have to establish that it was

the cargo that had disabled his plane. And to do that, he'd have to establish where he was. And he had no witnesses. Nobody would believe a story like that—a million-to-one shot, plummeting out of the clouds, that had hit him.

"And even if they do pay, it means old Useless is laid up! Bankers, here I come! If I make it back to Calcutta!"

He looked to his left when something caught his eye. There was a clearing below. A group of tiny figures were dancing about in the center of it, waving at the low-flying plane.

"The Grounded Gremlins!" Pat Connor grinned. He recognized the place—a small native hut and clearing, and the children who waved to him whenever he went by. Usually, he dipped his wings in return salutation or zoomed.

"Sorry, kids," he murmured, as he held a slow and steady course. "I got to hold this crate together. . . ."

Over Myitkyina, scene of the bloodiest jungle-fighting of the war, he circled the small airport and landed.

"Good old Mission-ah," he murmured, as he got out. "But how the heck they get that pronunciation out of Myitkyina, I don't know, any more than I know how I get out of here again. Oh, well—I'll have a look-see at the wing."

The damage wasn't too bad, but it was still a major repair job. Connor expressed himself freely about his luck, about Useless, about Burma. He even found time and reason to include Cedric Glendening.

"If Johnny Bull had just come in with me, I'd have had a runway back there to land on—instead of standing up the pukka sahibs. And that deal won't help my reputation any. Oh, well, I can patch up the wing enough to keep any more of its innards from spilling out. And get enough gas to carry me back to Calcutta."

When he taxied to his parking area, Hunchy regarded the bandaged wing morosely and shook his head.

"So you are taxi-happy, huh? So you can't even taxi any more! Holy smoke! Why'n't you look what you are doing? Or make enough dough so you can take me on as co-driver, or something? Then I can help you get around those postage-stamp fields without you should take a fence down. That the way it happened?"

PAT CONNOR had decided he had best keep the actual happening to himself until he could inquire and pin the blame on

the culprit. After all, it could be Army. Or the British. Or the airlines. Or a private mining outfit that had its own plane. Or the Chinese.

"Hunchy," he said, "I just got hungry."

"Huh?"

"Fact! I am up to my ears in rice and Spam, so I nibbled some of the wing away."

The mec grinned. "Oh. I get it! One of our dear sacred cows got close to it, huh? Well, old Useless is sure useless now. When do we start work on it?"

"Order the parts, Hunchy," Connor said. "Dough on the barrel-head for those, of course. I can fix the thing myself."

Hunchy grinned and chewed on his wad of tobacco. "I guess you are a good enough prospect to run you a line of credit, Pat. Besides, I hate to see you commit suicide by jobbing up your own plane so it won't fly."

"You'd rather kill me with your own messy work, huh? Okay, keed. And—thanks!"

He looked for Glendening at the club and at first he didn't see him. He was turning back down the steps when a cheery voice hailed him.

"I say, Yank! What's up, old boy? Fall down and have a drink."

Connor hadn't seen him because he wasn't in the usual chair. He was in one two removed from it. He explained, not bothering to lower his voice.

"Some blighter purloined my usual nook. Looks like a bit of a bounder, eh, doesn't he?"

Connor flushed when the blighter-bounder turned a beefy face to stare at them both.

"Take it easy, Seed-rick. He can hear you."

"Jolly right, he can. And he'll feel me if he does it again! I'll give him five where it will do him the most good, next time. Well, old boy? Have you flown any of the millions out that are in it? Or are you going to mine them out?"

Connor sighed. "I call myself Connor Air and Mining," he said, "for the simple reason that the 'mining' part of it gives me rights to land that I'll need for runways. You know that."

The Britisher nodded. "Like incorporating a firm in your State of Delaware, back home, eh? It lets you operate anything but a church or a saloon. And perhaps you may do that, too, if you shout about it loud enough. Things looking up?"

Connor decided again to keep his troubles to himself. Glendening certainly wouldn't jump at a chance to buy into a wrecked aircraft.

"If I'd had a runway I could have picked

up your pals. As it was, I stranded them. Had to."

"Do 'em good," the Britisher chuckled. "Lots of fresh air—simple living—hobnobbing with their help. Democratic thing to do, what? Don't worry, Yank. You can pick 'em up tomorrow, and it is still two weeks fawster than any other way they could come and go." His eyes keened on Pat's somber face. "Or—can you pick them up tomorrow?"

"Why not?"

THE ENGLISHMAN shook his head.

"I dunno, if you don't. Well? Still millions in it, old boy? Aren't you going to awsk me again to join you in your bagging of the filthy stuff? Or is the bank being kind to you?"

"A little work to do on the plane," Connor said. "But I'm still of the same mind. There's still millions in it."

"A sure thing? I mean, for you?"

Connor shook his head. "Truthfully, no. Unless I can get enough backing to dig in and wait."

"Show me the bank likes it, and I'll buy in." The Britisher looked at his friend. Then he grinned. "Have you tried Lend-Lease? Every other laddie seems able to get some!"

"I'm an American," Connor said. "No Yanks need apply."

They both laughed. But Connor wasn't laughing when he trudged back to the airport Operations office. He didn't even smile when he saw the pilots gathered in the Operations room roaring and howling with mirth. Glumly, he waited to have some of them clear so he could ask the Ops man confidentially about that jettisoned cargo, or if there had been any word of such an emergency procedure.

He was only half-listening to the good-natured banter being exchanged, when he caught the mention of a familiar name. Eric Briggs. Eric was an airline pilot, a Britisher, on the Valley run.

"So Eric says, 'You're jolly right I think it was worth it! My sainted hide for a filthy eighteen million of Chink paper-money and the plane saved to boot? Jolly right! A real deal, I call it, old boy, and cheap at twice the price!'"

The pilots roared their mirth. Pat Connor grinned, sensing an especially amusing yarn.

"What gives with Eric?" he asked.

"Oh, my precious aunt!" one of the other fliers laughed. "Haven't you heard, old chap? It seems Uncle Sammy printed oodles

and oodles of the new Chiang dollar for the Gissimo. Here in Calcutta. They were shipping it, Briggs flying it, you know. And the scamp lost an engine and had trouble holding altitude. So what does he do but bail the whole eighteen millions of it—eighteen millions, mind you!—all ink-fresh engraved notes, out into the very heart of the untracked jungle. And when the Yank chappies at the other end awsked, 'Do you think it was an economic decision, that it was worth it?' old Eric said . . . 'My sainted hide for a filthy eighteen millions?'"

Connor stood rooted at the counter, his eyes round. When he could, he asked a question.

"Where did it happen?"

A howl of laughter greeted the question.

"Don't you think we haven't been discussing just that, Pat! We'd all be right on the spot, what? Raw-ther! Eric himself doesn't know, other than it was over hopeless country. Oh, well! The monkeys and the cats can have fun with it. Anyway, the notes are numbered, and will be crossed off as non-negotiable."

"It would still raise Old Ned if anyone should find that money," another pilot said. "Millions of it are already in circulation. A chappie could have himself a fair dinkum time before he got caught up with."

"When did it happen?" Connor asked. "How far out was he?"

"Yesterday," was the answer. "How far out, or in, he was is a secret, of course. Not that anybody could ever find it. It would be easier to find a cake of soap in the Pacific Ocean than uncover the hiding place of that money of Eric's. Easier—because a cake of soap might float on top, eh?"

Pat Connor went away and found Hunchy. "I'm going on a personal trip tomorrow. Take a few days off, for myself. Hunting. In the Cub."

The mechanic blinked. "Oh! One of them cat-hunting deals with a rajah, huh?" He nodded. "Maybe you'll save his life, like, and he'll reward you by putting dough in your outfit." He spat. "And end up taking your company away from you."

"No," Connor said. "This is—different. It's a solo deal, sort of. I'll take the Cub but pull the pontoons and slap on the wheels."

"Millions in it, like you always say," Hunchy laughed. "Well, just relax. It'll come to you. Like you tell me."

Connor thought, his eyes far-away: "Manna. Manna from heaven! Cross your fingers, Hunchy, old boy. Just maybe you

are a better guesser than I am!" He stirred. "Well, I got stuff to pack."

Hunchy watched him move away and shook his head.

"Ledger-wacky," he murmured. "There is a good pilot going nuts trying to finance himself. 'There's millions in it!' Poor Pat! Walkin' on his heels!" . . .

When he hauled the featherweight liaison plane up into the air, Pat Connor carried carefully packed in back, an important list of supplies:

Mosquito boots; netting; gloves; two machetes and a sharpening stone; a Navy .44 six-gun and ammunition to spare—because Connor had had his share of trouble with automatics in the humid jungles—and ample atabrine for protection against malaria; and compact rations he could pack with him in his perilous trek into the brush.

JUST to the rear of his seat was a five-gallon can of gas with hose attachment to reach the gas-cap of the plane's limited fuel tank immediately in front of the windshield. A movable plexiglas disc had been fashioned into the windshield by Connor to accommodate the filler-hose. A wobble pump, installed on the spare can, supplied the pressure to transfer the fuel, thus extending the plane's cruising possibilities by fifty percent.

"There's some fire hazard," Hunchy had speculated, when Connor worked the improvisation, some months before.

"Uh-huh. But I'll use it only when I need it. And I'd just as soon burn as crash out of fuel in that brush!"

But for now, for his investigation of the mysterious cargo that had wrecked Useless's wing in hurtling past—if indeed he could ever find it—Connor was going to use the wobble-pump spare can as a regular thing. He had to, to stretch out his range so he could re-fuel at the tiny jungle landing strips he had set up.

"I'd rather be flying Useless on this deal," he mused, as he climbed to get tail wind. "Useless has a good range and I can set it down as low as thirty-eight m.p.h., with full-flaps. . . . But this should do it. I hope!"

The stuff was piling up in the heavens above the jungles when he started on his fifth and final leg. Heavens that were darkening with the menace of the towering masses of thunderheads. The rain laid a silver curtain across his course when he was still twenty minutes from the sight of his "Grounded Gremlins," as he called them.

It wasn't bad until the wind started to

whip and lash the small plane in gusty fury, but the seasoned pilot let the wind-tossed aircraft roll with the blows instead of fighting the controls. He picked up the small stream that bordered the clearing he was looking for, and followed it dangerously close to the trees.

But he reviled his luck in running into steady rain. He had hoped to find the hiding place of at least one bale of the cargo from the air. Or at least to have a try at it. As it was, he was lucky to sight the clearing as he droned past the edge of it.

The Grounded Gremlins were nowhere in sight when Pat Connor banked steeply, cut his throttle back, and skinned in over the trees to the risky landing. His wheels banged down in a calculated stalled-in three-pointer and he trod the brake pedals just enough to slow the plane into a wide turn at the edge of the tiny clearing.

"Brother!" he muttered. "Getting out will be another deal!"

He had about decided the shack was deserted when he detected a slight movement in the darker shadows of the doorway. Connor grinned and dug into his supplies for a bag. He spilled out the contents and, with what he hoped was an ingratiating smile, selected some strings of colored beads, lengths of colored cloth, and an armful of packets of cheap candy, tinsel baubles, rhinestones, gaudily colored rubber-balls.

A small naked brown figure appeared for an instant in the door and was snatched back by a rough hand. Connor banged the ball on the ground and let it bounce and jiggled the beads and hoped it wouldn't start raining again. Not just yet. . . . He kicked the ball from him and that did it.

With a cry of delight, another native child dashed into the open, and another and another. They stood shyly watching Connor as he rolled the ball to them, and they kicked it back, as they had seen him do. Then a squat, suspicious-eyed native with a wicked-looking kris stuck into the waistband of his skirt appeared and stood watching from the doorway.

Connor yanked a small cloth bag from his pocket and made with it sounds of clinking silver coins within. Thoughtfully selecting a few, Connor tossed them to the man, who caught them deftly. Connor pocketed the balance. Then he tried a bit of Indian dialect out on the man but didn't get any place. He resorted to pantomime and Pidgin-English.

"Me allee samee fella-lad fly over. Bzzz-bzzz. You savvy?"

The native savvied, with just the faintest relaxing of his suspicious study of Connor. He came out and looked long at the cloth Connor was displaying.

"For the 'mem'," Connor said. "Allee samee wiffee. You gettee?"

The native came close enough to accept a length, which he draped around his shoulders. And then when his eyes beheld his splendor, he smiled. He bowed low to Connor in a series of salaams, and with glad cries the children recognized this mark of friendship and rushed to Connor for the candy and the other toys and baubles.

PRESENTLY, the mem—the woman—appeared, a small, furtive, timid creature with great dark eyes and stringy, unkempt hair. Her teeth were black with decay, and the red juice of the betel nut stained her chin. She gazed with longing at the cloth but Connor knew when he heard the man chatter brusquely at her, and point to the goods on himself, that all she would see of the cloth would be on her lord and master's frame.

The skies were threatening to drip again so Connor got to his business. Pointing at the near jungle, he made sounds that he hoped would pass for a tiger. Then, pointing his .44, he went, "Bang! Bang!"

The man pointed to himself, inquiringly. Pat paused.

"Aw, these natives don't even know what paper money is," he murmured. "They understand silver coins. Period. Heck, he can guide me!"

The children were trying to drag Connor to a small fire they were fanning alive at the edge of the clearing. Connor shook his head.

"No!" and pointed at the plane, and the flames. "Tabu! Tabu! Forbidden!"

With appropriate cuffs and shrill screams, the native father emphasized that the plane was Sacred. One of the children made a ball of soggy leaves and papers and playfully threw them at the pilot. Connor wiped the drops of water from his face and laughed. But when the next wadded ball hit him squarely in the eye, it was different.

"Okay, Gremlins!" he said. "Maybe my Sunday-pitch will hold you little monkeys."

He stooped to pick up the wad, patted it for firmness, and looked at it to get a good hold.

The rain started again but Connor stood staring with bulging eyes at the wet wad in his hands. Then he was laughing, laughing until the monkeys in the trees gibbered back

at him in mockery.

"Relax," he murmured. "Relax, old boy. It will come to you."

The wad of paper in his hands—the ball the Burmese kids had devised—was made up of new Chiang Thousand Dollar bills.

* * * * *

He got up from his chair alongside the Britisher and stretched elaborately.

"Well, Seed-rick, I sorta am taking a leaf from your book. I mean, you say if the bank will back me heavy, you'll think I am a good prospect as a partner. Well, I'm thinking that way myself."

The Englishman smiled and craned his neck to watch a girl going past. It was the same American nurse.

"Eh? What, old boy? You mean—"

"I mean, if the bank thinks I'm a good deal, maybe I should keep my development to myself. Anyway, I got plenty good bank money to show. But I don't think I'd care for bankers as partners. Too—well, conservative. Still I need the money to develop."

"Seed-rick" quaffed his drink and wiped his thin lips absently.

"Show me money and I'll match it, old boy. Or a tender of a contract. Eh? My word on it!"

Connor pulled a wallet out of his blouse pocket and opened it for Glendening's inspection.

"Two ten-grand bills and thirty ordinary grand. Right?"

Glendening's eyes became an opaque blue and shut until they were mere slits.

"I say," he murmured. "I say, old boy!"

It was the nearest Connor had ever seen the suave Britisher come to a display of surprise or emotion. He grinned.

"And you know what a dope I am, Seed-rick? I'm going to take this right back to the bank where it came from, and tell them I can't use it. Give it back to them. Just like that!" He snapped his fingers.

The Britisher opened his eyes again. He looked unmoved. But his hand shook when he signaled for a drink.

"Then you'll be back here to hold me to my word?"

Connor shrugged. "Look—if I can make money for you, I can make money for me. Sure, I'd like some more backing. But if I weather it through, I'm twice as rich." He cocked his helmet over his eye and raised a finger in salute. "Toodle-oo, Seed-rick."

He was at the steps, his heart sinking, when Glendening called to him.

"Hold on, old boy. Relax, relax! Let's discuss this a bit, eh?"

Connor fought the grin off his face. It took a Yank to outsmart a cagey Englishman. He came back.

"Something?"

"I gave you my word, old boy. Right?" Glendening was blue and innocent of eye. "And you gave me yours that I could—er—participate as a partner. Eh?"

Connor made a show of reluctance. "Well-l, now, maybe I did." He tried to yawn but his jaw didn't function properly. "How much would you want to put in?"

Glendening said, "I'll match what you showed me. Er—fifty thou. American. I'll be treasurer, business manager, front man. Eh? Fifty-fifty. Right? I'll give you a tender of contract, the forms to be drawn up later. Your hand on it, partner, old boy? As you say—shake!"

They exchanged signatures to a simply worded agreement, drawn up by the Englishman on a sheet of club stationery. It was witnessed, at Glendening's insistence, by two other members. One of the witnesses, after seeing what the contract was, raised his eyebrows. "I say, old chap, taking a bit of a flier, eh?"

GLENDENING smiled in a bored way. "Pun, what? A bit of a flier in Connor Air? Ha!" He winked at Connor. "Millions in it! Positively millions! Eh, Pat? Tell them!"

Connor held his face straight. "I swear to it," he said with feeling. "Well, I'm off to the bank. See you for supper, Seed-rick!"

He held himself in very good check, when he came back up the steps from the bank.

"Hi, Seed-rick," he said. "Sure. I'll have a drink. A double!" He eyed the man and

said confidentially, "I—I am a bit shaky. I thought I had taken a smart Britisher over and found out he took me!"

Glendening smiled. "So they told you of the reward, when you went to them with the money. Fifty-thousand reward. Pikers, what? Should be able to clip them at least one per cent of the total. Say—a hundred and-eighty thou. Leave it to me, old boy. Relax!"

Connor blinked.

"But how did you know I'd found the money?" he asked.

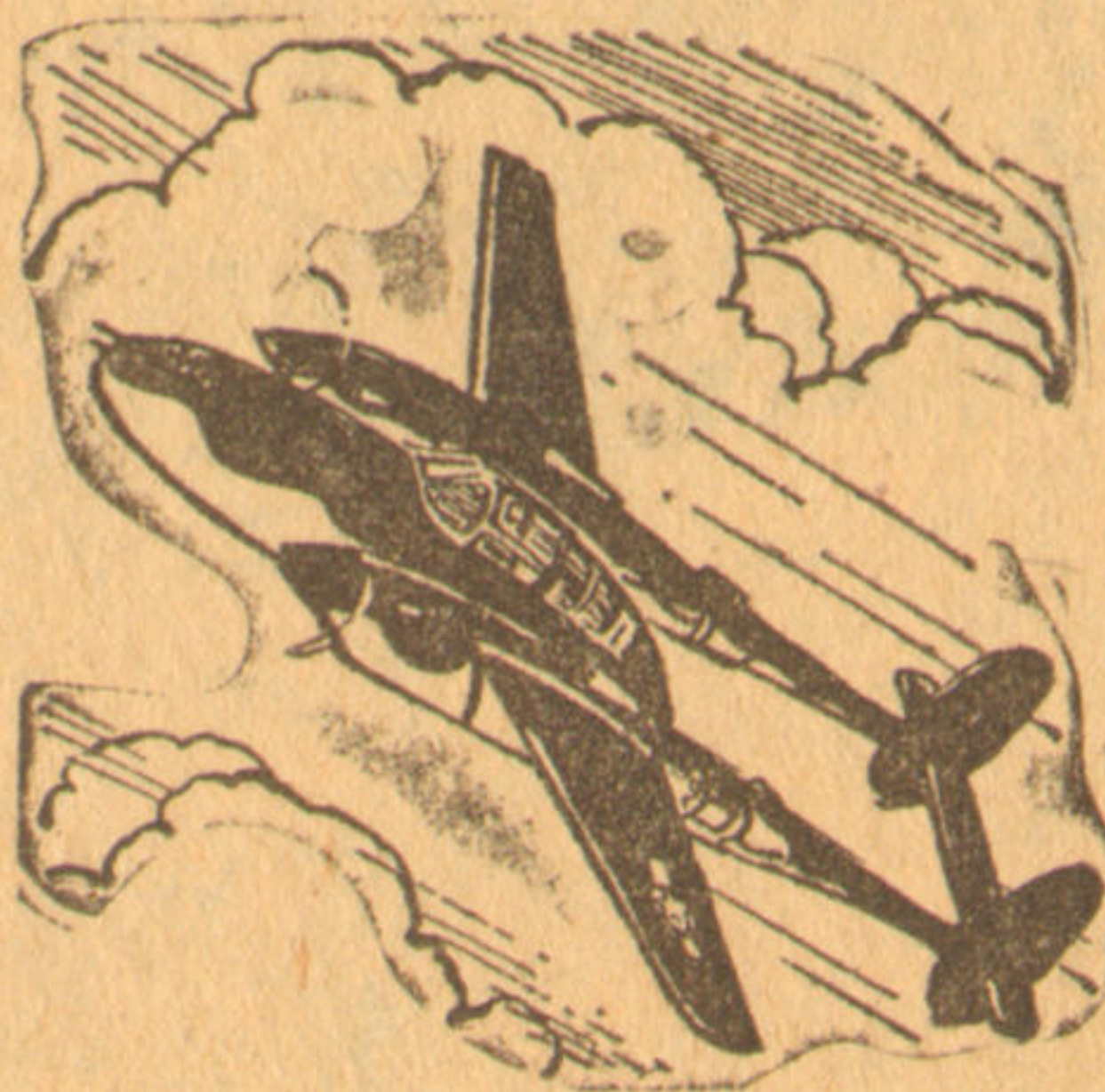
"Was worried about you. Went to see you, and had a talk with Hunchy. He said you had gone hunting. Well, old boy, there is only one thing a desperate Yank like you would hunt for. Money. Eh? I had thought you were buttering up a rajah, perhaps. And I was worried. I wanted in, old chap. But I like sure things. You'll come to admire that taste of mine, when we work together. Sure things, old fellow, what?"

"But how did you know the money was the lost cargo?"

"Simple. Hunchy let me know when you returned. I knew you hadn't time to go to the banks, before I saw you. Also, that money—the new Chiang notes. Some of them wrinkled and damp. Others spanking new. So . . . I relaxed and it came to me. 'By Jove,' I said to myself. 'The Yank has stumbled onto the eighteen millions! Or a handsome part of it.' Tell me, old boy—did you have a hard time of it?"

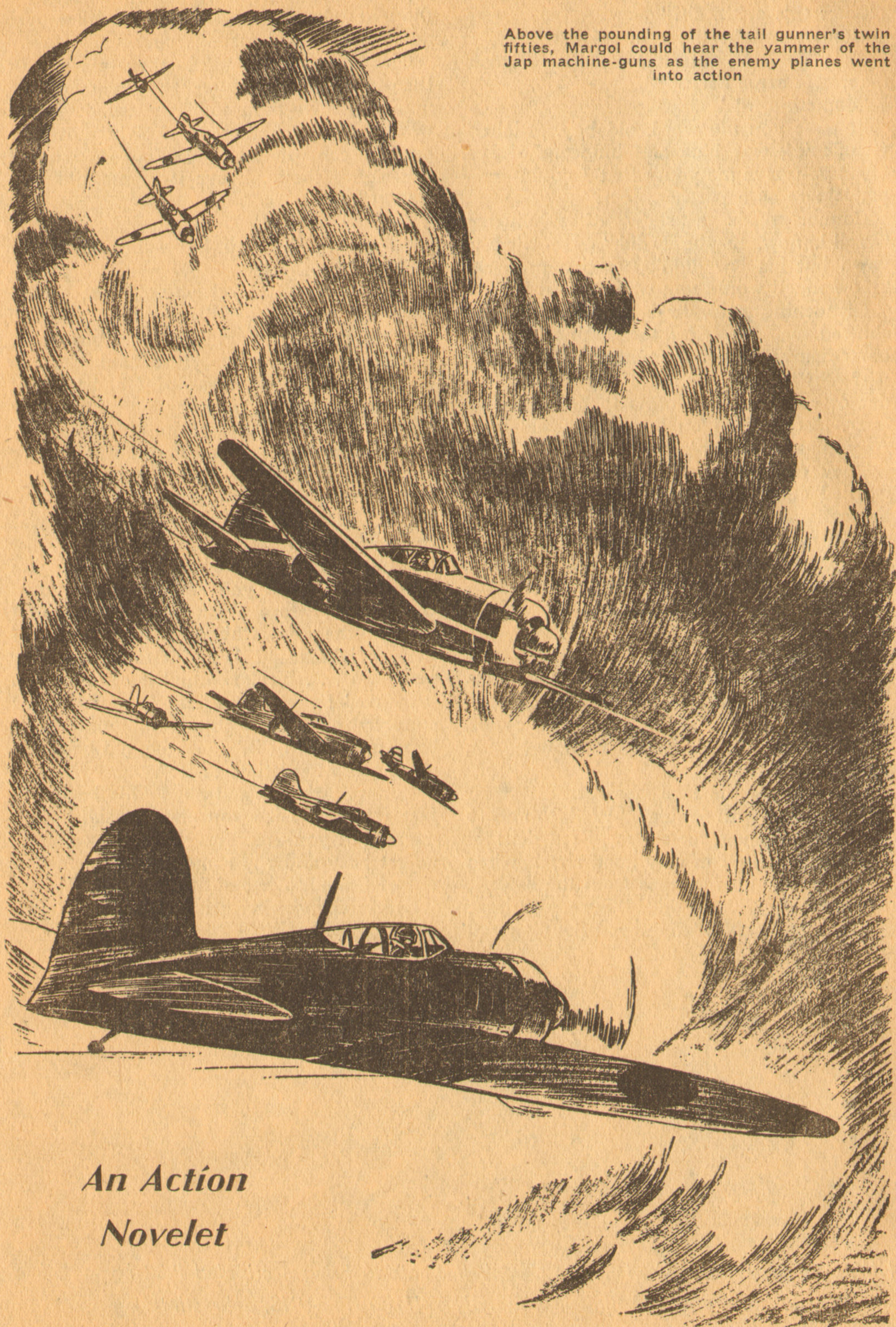
Connor grinned and shook his head. "I just relaxed. Like you always said. Well, partner, if you are through clipping me, let us get busy and clip some important money out of Connor Air and Mining. Eh?"

Cedric Glendening grinned back. "Relax, old boy. What?"



High over enemy lines, Captain Don Campbell fights to bring a crippled P-38 home with a precious cargo of films in MISSION WITHOUT GUNS, a breath-taking air adventure novelet by ROBERT J. HOGAN—Coming soon!

Above the pounding of the tail gunner's twin
fifties, Margol could hear the yammer of the
Jap machine-guns as the enemy planes went
into action



*An Action
Novelet*

LAST FLIGHT

By F. E. RECHNITZER

Fighting pilot Leo Margol was just about ready for his furlough, but instead he drew an atom bomb mission that hurled him into the middle of a roaring ruckus in Tokyo!

CHAPTER I

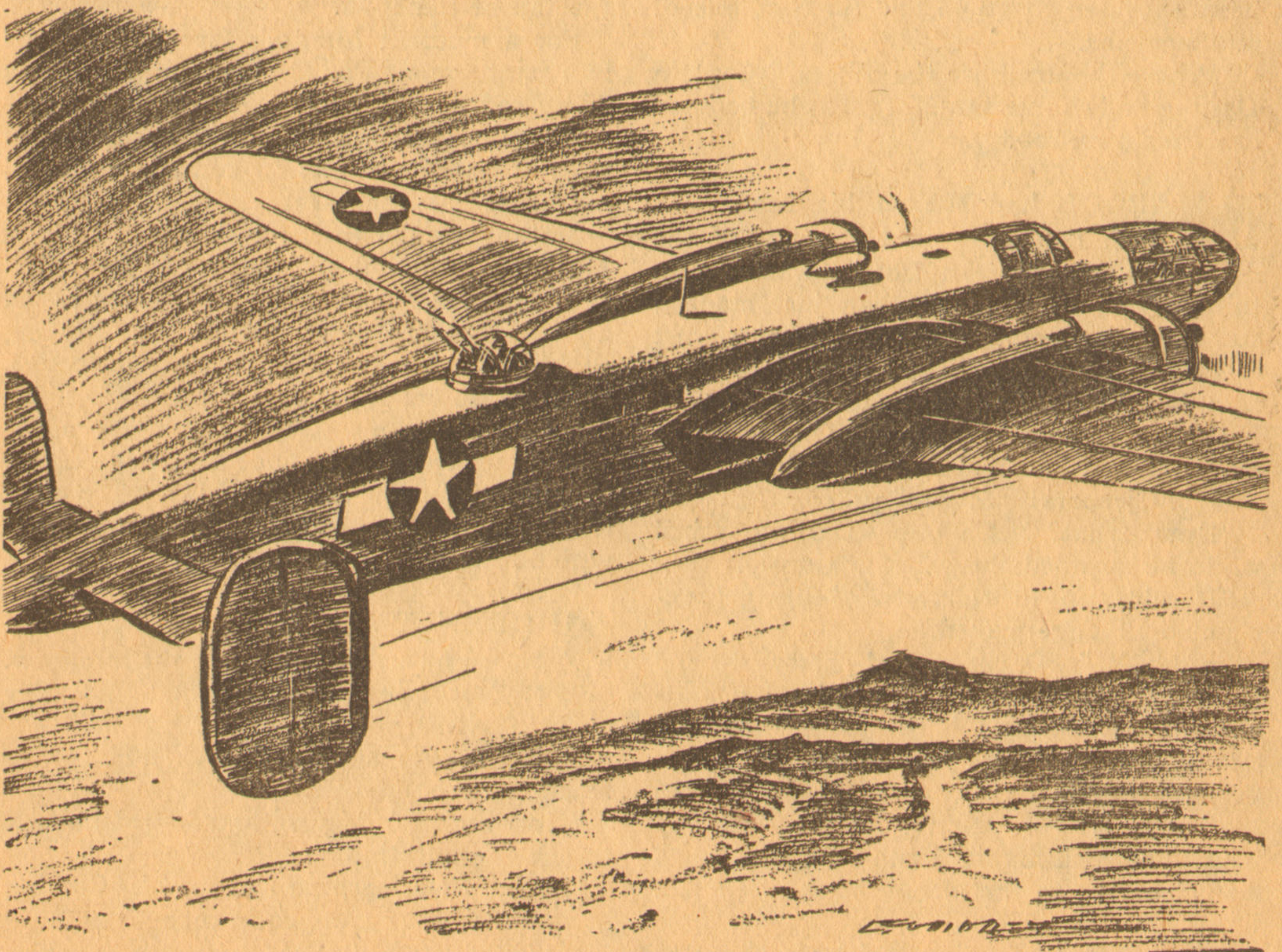
Fatal Numbers

LEO MARGOL'S hands were clammy on the wheel of the staggering B-25. His dark eyes narrowed to slits he watched the horizon, praying the headlands of Cape Heto on Okinawa would pop into view, even though he knew his E.T.A. was still an hour or more off. He brushed the back of his hand across his face and shook his head, admitting to himself that he was scared, so scared he wondered whether it wouldn't be a good thing if diapers weren't G.I.

Ever since that last burst of AA as they

left Osaka his brains had been clicking like an electric comptometer. The digits "2" and "3" kept whirling through his thoughts in a mathematical nightmare, and each answer increased the sweat clustering on his forehead.

For thirty-two missions he'd been sweating it out in the right hand seat, hoping and praying the C.O. would see fit to give him a ship of his own. The fact that Major Hilton had been killed on the twenty-third mission hadn't bothered him in the least. It was one of those things. A man goes out, gets a Nip slug through his heart and cashes in his checks. Margol never knew what the payoff would be. He might step up to the Chief



Cashier's window and collect a nice silver cross. On the other hand his payoff might call for a wooden cross as Major Hilton's had.

For a couple of days after Major Hilton's death, Margol had hoped he was due for a ship and crew of his own. But when he was assigned to the "Dopey Duke" flown by Captain Tex Darling, he shrugged his shoulders and figured maybe the professors in the Psychological Processing Unit, way back there in Classification, might have thought they'd discovered something in his emotional make up that made him unfit for a command. After that it seemed that whenever anything happened, the date or the number of the mission had either a 2 or a 3 in it somewhere.

Take that day of the thirty-second mission. Only that morning the C.O. had told him his furlough papers were coming through and it would probably be his last before a trip to his home back in Salina, Kansas. Right from the takeoff—even before Captain Darling had tucked the wheels up—Margol had felt certain something was going to happen with the two fatal digits in conjunction the way they were.

Then over Osaka the Japs had thrown everything but the Mikado's garbage can at them. After dropping their bombs they'd been expected to go in low for a couple of strafing runs.

"Where the devil are the others?" Captain Darling had shouted to Margol as he boomed low over a railroad yard

MARGOL had shaken his head. He hadn't even noticed the rest of the flight was missing. In fact he wasn't even thinking about it for he had just made a startling discovery. The date was August 5, 1945. His mind clicked into high. The fifth day the eighth month and the year 1945. Eight and five made thirteen. One and nine made ten and four and five made nine.

"Holy jeepers!" Margol yelled.

"Now what?" Captain Darling asked while he scanned the skies anxiously.

"It adds up to thirty-two," Margol exclaimed. "We're jinxed."

"Rubbish!" Darling had scowled and kicked rudder hard to throw the Jap anti-aircraft off. "Flak's been worse than this lots of times. You're just getting the jitters because you're due for a furlough. Maybe it's battle fatigue. Better let the M.O. tap your knee with his little rubber mallet when we get back. In the meantime don't let this jinx—"

What Captain Darling had been about to

say was smothered by a terrific roar just under the port wing. Startled, Margol looked over and saw that the jinx had reached out and touched the captain, leaving a red smear across the pilot's face. His eyes filled with horror. Margol watched red froth bubble from the skipper's lips.

"Tex!" he'd yelled. "Tex!"

But Captain Darling's lips had been stilled by the harsh caress of the jinx.

A frantic call had come through the intercom.

"Tail gunner to pilot—tail gunner to pilot! What did that one do?"

But at that moment Margol was grabbing at the wheel and pulling it over to him. When he had the ship back on level flight, he reached over and dragged Captain Darling's legs to one side to get his feet off the rudder pedals.

"Pilot to tail gunner," he then called into the intercom. "It's okay now. I think she'll make it back to the strip." He glanced speculatively at the jagged hole in the port wing between the engine and the fuselage. "Captain Darling's dead, Pete."

"Gosh!" he heard the tail gunner gasp. He heard it echoed by the others back there. "Well, good luck, Skipper," Pete Harmon had said from his little greenhouse back in the tail of the B-25.

For a moment Margol's face had relaxed in a faint smile. For the first time he'd been addressed as "Skipper." But then his face had again grown taut with the realization that, although he was in command, Death rode that left hand seat.

Settling grimly to the task ahead of him, Margol's grip had tightened on the wheel as his eyes swept over the instrument panel. Seeing that the port engine was heating slightly, the frown on his face had deepened. Then as he set his course for Okinawa, his mind had begun rearranging digits again coming up with all sorts of fantastic results. Time after time he'd shaken his head to clear his brain of the numerical maelstrom, but with no success.

SUDDENLY the numbers had been erased by a shrill yelp over the intercom.

"Tony's coming in at eleven and twelve o'clock."

There it was again. Eleven and twelve made twenty-three.

"How many?" Margol had forced himself to ask the question.

"Nine," Pete Harmon had yelled. "Coming in at three levels grouped in threes."

Margol's face had gone white. His knuckles

gleamed like ivory on the wheel as he threw the ship over. There they were nine Jap single-seaters coming down out of the afternoon skies, their orange insignia gleaming in the sun.

"Three—three," he had muttered. He'd glanced over at his dead skipper who had sneered at the jinx.

At that moment his tail gunner's twin fifties had started yapping. Above their challenge he'd heard the echoing yammer of the Jap guns.

Ahead of him and just a bit to the east he'd seen a flock of cumulus clouds being herded along by the wind. Hitting left rudder, he'd swung toward them with the Japs riding his tail. Slugs were already crashing through his wings leaving jagged scars wherever they struck.

"Tally one for me," he had heard Harmon yell.

"And one for me, Pete," Lewis had cried from the starboard waist gun. "See him going down over there about nine o'clock. Oops! There goes his wing."

Margol had hit the first cloud and gave a sigh of relief as it enveloped them. But when he'd come out, two of the Nips were under him and coming up while the remaining five lashed out at him from the rear. Banking steeply, he'd caught a spiraling Tony ahead of him and let him have it.

His .50 calibers had bored through the afternoon air and caught hold of the Jap before he could go into evasive action. They held for a moment. Then the Jap plane staggered and twisted in a spin. It fell and was dashed to the wave-washed reef of an atoll far below. Margol had tried to bring his guns on the other Jap but the Jap half rolled and disappeared somewhere behind him.

The steady pounding of the other Japs sounded nearer now as Margol hurled his B-25 into the fleecy folds of another cloud. When he had emerged on the other side, he tensed himself waiting for another onslaught from the Nips.

"How many now, Pete?" he had called to his tail gunner. There was no time for formalities now.

"Bang, bang, bang!" Jap slugs tore into the B-25.

"Pete!" he called frantically. "Did you hear me?"

"I guess Pete got it on that last one," Lewis had said soberly from the waist of the plane. "Sounded like they chewed our tail assembly off. Look out! Here they come at three o'clock."

Margol had heard Lewis tear into the Japs. Over the still shoulder of Captain Darling he could see tracer criss-crossing between the planes. Then the Skipper's body began to jerk spasmodically.

"No!" Margol had cried. "You filthy monkeys, can't you see he's had enough already?"

As he hit the next cloud he had chopped his throttles, banked and come out lower on a reversed course. Below him he had seen five Tony's wheeling, watching for him to emerge from the cloud. But there should have been a sixth.

"Where's the other one, Lewis?" he had called over the intercom.

His answer was a crackling burst from the side. Bullets rattled against the side of the B-25 like hail on a tin roof.

"Lewis!" Margol had cried.

"I'm hit bad, Skipper," he had heard Lewis's voice come faintly through the phones. "Got Hanson, too—Blew his head nearly off—Guess you're on your own from here in—Good lu—" Margol's waist gunner's voice had died away in a gurgle.

A shudder had run through Margol's body then. He had prayed for a command. But now he had one only to find Death riding as skipper and crew.

Beyond caring how much strain he put on the battered B-25, Margol had hurled his ship at another of the clouds lying along his course like stepping stones. Behind him he had heard the steady tack-a-tack of the persistent Japs.

Suddenly the white stuff had closed around him like cotton. Automatically he went on instruments. It was the largest of the clouds. Yet he knew it would only afford him a few seconds respite from the cruel Jap guns.

"Guess the ole threes an twos have caught up with me at last," he half sobbed as he emerged from the shelter of the cloud. Bracing himself, he waited for the Japs to pour in for the coup de grâce. Ice had run through his veins for that awful second.

Then the sky had seemed to be filled with the chatter of guns. He'd closed his eyes tightly and waited for the bullets to find his body.

THE guns kept up their deadly conversation. But none reached out with blazing talons to tear at his body. Slowly he had opened his eyes. Then they had popped wide as he saw a Thunderbolt flash in front of him with guns blaze-tipped. He saw a Tony disintegrate in a thousand pieces and go down carrying the riddled Jap to the

cherry-blossom-scented land of his honorable ancestors.

"Thunderbolt to Mitchell— Thunderbolt to Mitchell. You all right, pal?"

"Mitchell to Thunderbolt," Margol had replied. "I'm the only one left— Rest are dead I guess."

"Tough," the Thunderbolt pilot murmured. "Think you can make it back to base?"

"I guess so," Margol had answered. "That is if I don't meet up with any more of these blasted Tony's."

"Don't fret about that, mister," the Thunderbolt pilot chuckled and eased up so they were flying wing tip to wing tip. "None of those babies will bother you any more. Or anybody else. Couple of us will stand by from here in, in case you have to ditch."

"Thanks," Margol had murmured. "Thanks a lot." Then his mind had been filled with numbers again. He tried to find a solution to why everybody else had been killed and he spared. Nothing made sense, as he tried to make the digits two and three prove that they were his lucky numbers.

Then for a while, as Okinawa loomed up out of the sea he had forgotten his problem. Firing a red flare he entered the traffic pattern without waiting for clearance from the tower and set the riddled ship down on the white strip as close as possible to the waiting ambulances.

There was no need to ask the M.O. about the others back there. Shaking his head slowly he had made his way toward the I.O.'s hut and pushed the screen door open.

"Don't let it get you, Margol," Major Stevens who had entered while he was reporting said. "You did a swell job bringing them back."

"My furlough come through yet?" Margol had asked dully.

"Not yet," the major had said. "But I checked. They'll be here tomorrow afternoon sure. I'll guarantee it, Leo."

"Thanks, Major," Margol had said with a forced smile. "After this afternoon I won't believe it until I'm on my way back to good ol' Salina, Kansas."

As he opened the door the major had walked over and laid his arm on his shoulder. "Hadn't you better drop in and let the M.O. give you a check?"

Margol had shaken his head slowly and forced a smile.

"I'm all right, Major. Good night's sleep an' I'll be fresh as a Kansas sunflower in the morning. Be seeing you."

He had gone back to his hut, picked up a pencil and held it out in front of him. He

had eyed it sharply a moment and then smiled when he saw it did not quiver.

"Ol' nerves are still okay."

Going over to his cot he had stopped in front of a series of tally marks on the wall. He was about to make another mark, the thirty-second, when he paused and shook his head. He hesitated, looking first at the pencil and then at the marks.

"I gotta lick it before it licks me," he had murmured.

Then instead of a tally mark he put down a big 32, each figure above five inches in height. Then turning, he had thrown the pencil away from him. It hit the wall at the far side of the hut, bounced, clattered to the floor and rolled under his cot.

Throwing himself on the cot, he had lain staring at the figure thirty-two he had scrawled on the wall. His face slowly relaxed. He put his hands behind his head and settled himself more comfortably.

"Brother!" he nodded toward the 32. If those ol' furlough orders come through tomorrow that's the last figurin' I'm doin' on that wall. Let somebody else take up from there." Then he'd closed his eyes and dropped off to sleep. But he had dreamed of the digits Two and Three which were dancing on the beach, mocking him as he kept attempting to escape Okinawa.

CHAPTER II

Enemy Territory

BRIGHT and early on the morning of August 6, Margol went down to Operations and found a spot where it would be shady for a long spell. Every time the phone rang in there he started, then waited for the door to open and for a smiling sergeant to give him the nod that meant he was going home.

While he waited he eyed the field. There was something special on for that day. He had asked about it but no one had seemed to know the answer. Yet they all seemed to be as tense as himself, although for a different reason. Grapevine communiques had everything happening, but none of them made sense.

The door to Operations screeched on its hinges and Margol looked up. The sergeant came around the corner and nodded.

"Old Man wants to see you, Lieutenant."

"Have they come through?" Margol

popped up from the bench with a wide grin.

The sergeant shrugged and went back into Operations.

"Yes, sir," Margol smiled as he hurried into Major Stevens' cubbyhole of an office. "They've come. When can I start?"

Major Stevens tapped his desk blotter with a pencil a moment. Then he shook his head.

"But I'm sure they'll be here today, though. Look, Leo. How'd you like to have a ship of your own?"

Margol's face fell. "I'd rather have a furlough first, Major."

"I know," the major said understandingly. "Don't blame you. But I've got orders to shove every ship I can in the air this morning. Something top secret is going on today. Our part doesn't appear important on the surface, but you know how diversionary tactics fit into a scheme. That's what most of the men are being briefed for, Margol. But there's one special little mission that's a piece of cake and I managed to wangle it for you. I hate to ask you to go, but as long as your furlough hasn't been authorized I've got to. Hope you understand."

Margol shrugged.

"Go ahead and slice this piece of cake for me, major," he said with a wry smile.

The major swung around and unlocked a file drawer. Reaching in he brought out a metal cylinder with yellow streamers attached to one end. He laid the message-container on the desk blotter in front of him and pulled a map over.

"I'm assigning the Vixen to you, Margol," the Major said. "Jimmy White'll go along as your co-pilot. Now all you've got to do is fly over a pinpoint here at A Seven B Four. That's about ten miles west of Fukuyama. Right here." He pointed a stubby finger at a blue circle of the map. "When you get there, drop this. There'll be a flight of P-Fifty-ones covering you upstairs. It's important, Margol. Most important. One of our O.S.S. agents has got to get these orders."

"Gosh, Major," Margol breathed. "Have we got O.S.S. men right in Japan?"

"A few," the major smiled grimly. "They're organizing a Jap Underground for the big day. I don't know what's doing right now, but the big boys are suddenly all excited about it. This is a must. You know what that means?"

"Yeah," Margol groaned. "There ain't no filling in my piece of cake."

"I'm sorry, Leo," the major said soberly. "But you've been over that terrain so often you ought to know it blindfolded. But all

you have to do is duck over, drop this in the right spot and scoot home. I'll have your papers by then or eat your starboard prop. Better go down to briefing because you're to follow the others as far as the coast. From there on, except for the P-Fifty-ones, you're on your own. Now just a word of caution. Whatever you do don't get near Hiroshima. That's where the big show's taking place."

"Don't worry," Margol smiled. "I'm just staying long enough to play Western Union boy and then I'm hightailing back. Be seeing you at lunch and you better have those papers. I'm homesick."

"Dem Burns is the word, just in case," the Major said.

"In case of what?" Margol demanded.

"In case some Nip drops you before you get there," the major replied steadily. "That message has got to be delivered, no matter what happens."

Margol nodded.

"Now I know there isn't even any icing on my cake. Think I ought to take a bicycle along?"

"You'll make it," the major chuckled. "You've been over there thirty-two times, haven't you? This'll make your thirty-third and last mission."

Margol clenched his fists. He wished the major hadn't reminded him of the digits. Already his mind was clicking like an abacus. It was August 6th and six divided by two was three, or divided by three was two. He just couldn't seem to escape the two fatal numbers. He bit his lip, nodded to the major and left for the briefing hut.

HOLDING the Vixen in position in the top echelon Margol sat in the right hand seat wondering what devilment two numbers would bring him that day. Around him the other B-25's rose and fell on the air currents as the formation bored steadily on toward Japan. High above him rode a flight of P-51's.

They were about fifty miles off the coast when the weather closed in. The meteorological officer had warned them of this, but had gone on to promise clearing skies beyond the storm.

After flying on instruments Margol brought his B-25 out of the heavy overcast. Below him was land, Japan. But whether they were crossing Kyushu or Shikoku he could not tell. Both he and his co-pilot, Lieutenant Jimmy White, tried to find a checking point from their map. But the terrain below was a solid mass of rolling green.

"We gotta pinpoint something right

away," Margol said with a worried frown.

"You mean because we had orders to stay away from Hiroshima?" White shouted.

Margol nodded. He watched for a familiar landmark through a break in the scud below. He had put in plenty of time over the Land of Nippon but now he had to admit he was thoroughly lost.

"What do you suppose all this top secret stuff about Hiroshima's about?" White asked.

Margol shrugged.

"They're always getting hot and bothered about something. Hey, doesn't that look like Kure over there?"

As White leaned toward him to look, the B-25 suddenly lifted as if some unseen hand underneath were pushing it straight up toward the heavens. For a moment the two men were blinded by a bluish green light that seemed to ignite the entire sky.

"Holy Jeepers!" Margol shouted. "Looks like the sky is cavin' in on us." He fought frantically against the terrific upsurge that still had the B-25 in its grip. "Look! My gosh! Did you ever see anything like that?"

Four more blasts seemed to strike the ship in quick succession.

As Margol fought for control, a gigantic ball of fire mushroomed through the overcast, belching enormous clouds of smoke in all directions. Then a column of purple fire writhed upward at terrific speed.

Awe-struck, the two men watched the holocaust as it climbed higher and higher twisting and writhing as if it were alive. Then another explosion ripped the air and out of the pillar of smoke and flame popped another which rolled to an altitude high above that upon which they flew. It hung there like a Gargantuan jinne, nodding and swaying in the sky.

The two men looked at each other, struck dumb by what they had seen. Then White shook his head slowly.

"Sometimes they give us a right steer, don't they? Boy, if we'd been any closer."

"Wonder what in Sam Hill they had in Hiroshima'd make an explosion like that," Margol said huskily. "Must've had all their ammunition there. Brother! Was that somethin'? Know where you are now?"

"Are you kidding" White scowled. "With a pinpoint like that how could we miss. Hey. Take a gander. There's a B-Twenty-nine loafing through the clouds down there."

Margol looked but did not see the big bomber. Then he checked the controls.

"Like to have ripped us to pieces," he muttered. "Man-o-man! Was that somethin'!"

White touched him on the shoulder.

"Let's get rid of our eggs an' high tail for home. Maybe we can find out what happened. I'm curious as my Aunt Betsy when new neighbors move in."

Margol nodded agreement and swung his ship on a course for Fukuyama. Like White, he was anxious to get home, but for another reason.

Following the coast and keeping just under the overcast he cut for his target, ducking into the thick stuff now and then to evade Jap AA.

Then out of nowhere a Jap Oscar MK11 loomed on their course. Hurtling through the skies it came right at them with guns blazing.

"Look out!" White yelled. "He's trying to ram us."

Margol kicked rudder in an effort to escape the single-seater. But the Jap changed course with him. Then there was a roar, a grinding crash as the Nip's propeller chewed into their starboard wing. Metal shrieked and groaned as the wing gave under the terrific impact.

"Hit the silk!" Margol yelled into the intercom. "Hit it fast!"

He shouted this as the two ships began to fall in a ghastly tangle.

How Margol got out he couldn't be sure. Dazed he felt himself turning over and over with the earth and sky revolving around him. Then he yanked the ring. The pack popped open. The shrouds unraveled above him and a second or two later his chute cracked.

Swaying between earth and sky, he gulped hard and looked for his ship. He saw it and the Oscar hurtling toward the wave-washed beach. A little to his left he saw another chute, just one, that was all. He wondered who was using it.

Still trying to collect his battered senses, he hit the ground close to a hedge and rolled. Finally he managed to spill his chute and stand up. For a moment he stood staring at a column of smoke rising a few miles to the east. He knew it rose from the twisted wreck of his first command.

"Holy Jeepers!" he murmured. "I must have had my fingers crossed."

Gathering his chute into a compact mass, he shoved it under the hedge and covered it with grass and branches. When he had it concealed he knelt there trying to figure out a course of action.

"It was then his hand encountered the lump in the breast pocket of his flying suit. His face went white as he recalled the major's instructions. That metal cylinder

with the message it contained had to be delivered at all costs."

"Ba-ruther!" he muttered. "Does that tie my piece of cake up in a nice package an' put a ribbon around it?"

"You can say that again," a voice startled him from the other side of the hedge. Whirling, he saw Jimmy White snaking his way toward him.

"Gosh, Jimmy," Margol exclaimed. "Am I glad to see you. How about the others?"

White shook his head and crawled over to where he knelt.

"We're the only ones who got out, I think. Where do we go from here?"

Margol pointed toward the northwest.

White shook his head emphatically. "We ought to go toward the coast. Stand a chance of getting picked up there."

Margol pulled the cylinder from his pocket and ripped off the yellow streamers.

"I'm delivering this," he said holding the container toward White. "Got a hunch it has to do with what we saw happen over Hiroshima way. Major said some O.S.S. bird had to get it no matter what happened."

"Okay," White said "I'm going with you. If anything happens to one the other man can carry on. Where's this guy waiting? At that pinpoint you were heading for?"

Margol hesitated.

"You'd better keep away from me, Jimmy. Somebody has put the three-two sign on me. I'm jinxed."

"Stow that stuff," White sneered. "I walk under ladders and pet black cats on Friday the thirteenth and everything. If you want to be superstitious that's your privilege. Me. Well I'm staying sane."

"Okay," Margol growled. He began to strip off his heavy flying togs. "But if you see anything that adds up to three or two from now on you better scram. And fast."

"Skip it, I tell you," White smiled grimly. "You aren't starting out cross-country in daylight are you?"

Margol shook his head.

"We'll lay low here until evening. I know this section pretty well and if we don't get too far off course we ought to hit the right spot by dawn."

"Supposing this guy has given up by then?" White demanded. "What cooks then?"

"We'll open the message," Margol said. "If it's anything we can do, we're gonna make a try at doing it. All we got before us now is sitting around and wondering how much of Hiroshima is up there on top of that pile of smoke."

THEY had traveled northwest all night. Toward dawn, as it began to rain, they reached what Margol estimated to be the spot the major had designated on the map. Cold and wet they sat crouched under a low bush watching a broad field come into view.

"That's where I was to have dropped it," Margol said feeling his pocket to see that the cylinder was safe. He nodded toward a group of low buildings at the far side of the field. "Maybe somebody was to come out of there when we buzzed the field."

"Want me to give with a noise like a B-Twenty-five buzzing a field " White said through chattering teeth.

"You pick a swell time to try to be funny," Margol growled. "Any other time you're glum as an undertaker's assistant."

"Yeah, and what I wouldn't give for a slug of embalming fluid right now," White stuttered.

"How's Dem Bums doing?" a voice broke in on them.

Margol looked at White.

"Trying to be funny again?"

"Honest, Leo," White shivered. "I heard it too. But I don't see anybody, do you?"

Margol reached over and gripped his co-pilot's arm.

"Who's managing Dem Bums?" he asked, raising his voice slightly.

"The Lip," the unseen voice replied.

"Okay," Margol said with relief. "Come on out."

Then what they had taken to be a small haycock rose slowly, turned and started toward them.

"It's a guy dressed in one of those grass raincoats Jap shepherds wear," White exclaimed. "I've seen pictures of them."

"Shut up," Margol snapped. "Something's screwy. The guy's a Jap."

CHAPTER III

Uncle Sam's Agent

CALMLY the stocky figure came over to them and squatted.

"You guys got something for me. I waited around here all day yesterday but the only crate I saw was a B-Twenty-nine and that didn't drop anything here. But boy what it didn't do to Hiroshima."

"Take it easy," Margol retorted. "That line isn't getting you anywhere. Just because you happen to be able to talk our

lingo doesn't prove a thing."

The Jap smiled. He took off his flat peaked hat and shook the raindrops off.

"I am Agent Kawabe of the United States Office of Strategic Services. My father and mother were Japanese but I was born in Brooklyn where Dem Bums play ball. At the moment I am acting as liaison between our Headquarters and the Japanese Underground. Didn't they tell you I was a Jap?"

Margol shook his head.

"Guess they figured I'd get back. How long you been over here?"

"I parachuted into Japan three weeks ago today," Kawabe replied. "Every week I come to this spot and receive orders dropped by one of our planes. Last week my orders informed me that an important message was to be dropped yesterday."

Margol glanced at White who winked and nodded.

"You say you've only been over here three weeks? Maybe you can tell us something. Who is Dick Tracy's playmate right now?"

Agent Kawabe's white teeth gleamed as a broad smile came to his face.

"One of Dem Bums. A guy named B. O. Plenty"

"Believe me, I could do with a Dagwood Special right now," Margol said as a further test.

"Hungry, eh," Kawabe grinned. "Well I can't get you one of those multiple deckers. But I can get you something to eat in that farmhouse over there. At the moment it's headquarters for the Underground. Believe me now?"

He held out his hand for the message container.

Margol shrugged and handed it over. The little Jap quickly opened it, read the contents of the thin sheet of paper. His face beamed as he put the paper in his mouth and began to chew it. He got up and motioned the two Americans to follow.

They had followed the hedge surrounding the field for about a hundred yards when Kawabe paused. He pointed back toward the thick column of smoke rising over the horizon.

"Perhaps you don't know it, but an atomic bomb did that," he said. "My headquarters wishes the Japanese Underground to spread the word that there are three hundred such bombs waiting to be dropped on Japan."

Margol scowled and wondered whether he'd made a mistake.

"You follow Buck Rogers too, don't you. I know something terrific went off over there yesterday. But an atomic bomb? There

isn't any such thing."

"Only an atomic bomb would cause the destruction that one did," Kawabe said. "Believe me, fellows. That smoke over there is the forerunner of peace. Won't be long now before we're going home again."

"Yeah," Margol muttered. "I expected to be starting home today. Now look." He turned to Jimmy White. "Maybe you'll believe me now when I say I'm jinxed."

"Come on," Kawabe ordered over his shoulder. "I've got to get you guys under cover and get to work. By evening we'll have the word spread all over Japan that more bombs like that one are on the way. They're about ready to quit now, but this will grease the skids plenty." . . .

For a week Margol and White remained concealed in a little Japanese farmhouse. During that time they only saw Kawabe once. That was two nights after they had been brought there by the loyal little Japanese agent.

"They dropped another one on Nagasaki today," he exclaimed excitedly. "Boy, from the reports coming in the people are hysterical. They are really ready for peace. Headquarters is already trying to get in touch with MacArthur in an attempt to start negotiations."

"Wish they'd hurry up," Margol muttered. "I got enough of diving for that hole in the cellar every time we hear footsteps outside."

"You gotta be patient," Kawabe cautioned. "It won't be long, I promise. I just stopped by to give you the good news. Now I've got to be off again."

Seconds became minutes from then on. Minutes became hours and hours days. Days seemed eternities as the two Yanks waited for word of what was transpiring outside their hiding place. From the excitement in Underground headquarters they felt certain their ordeal would soon be over. One little Jap, who spoke halting English had informed them that Japan had capitulated on the 14th and preparations were being made for the final surrender of the Mikado's empire to the Americans.

THEN one evening Kawabe slipped into headquarters. His face was drawn with worry.

"Now what's up?" Margol demanded anxiously. "Negotiations fall through?"

Kawabe shook his head slowly.

"Arrangements have been made for the signing of the surrender on an American battleship in Tokyo Bay."

"That's swell!" White exclaimed.

"When?"

Kawabe smiled grimly.

"But we have discovered something which might upset the applecart entirely. A fanatical group of the military have organized a suicide squadron whose purpose is to wait until the moment the stage is set for the surrender and then dive onto the decks of the battleship and blow it up. It will look like treachery and thousands of lives will be sacrificed because of these few who feel it more honorable to die than surrender. We must stop it. If they succeed it will be a terrible disaster."

"But Jap planes would be shot down before they got anywhere near the American fleet," Margol said quickly.

"They will use captured American planes," Kawabe said. "Each plane will be loaded with either bombs or torpedoes, all set to go off on contact. If only a few of them succeed in striking the ship it will likely mean that all the high brass in our Army and Navy will be killed."

"Got any idea where they're going to take off from?" Margol demanded.

Kawabe went to the wall of the room and from behind a loose brick he pulled out a map. He spread it on a small trestle table and pointed to a valley in the hills just west of Kofu.

"From reports coming in, this secret field of the Squadron of Glory is situated near there."

"Going to make an attempt to bust up this scheme?" Margol asked as he squinted at the map.

"Certainly," Kawabe replied. "I am starting for there this evening."

"Need all the help you can get won't you?" Margol remarked and glanced at White.

"Certainly," Kawabe answered. "There will be many of these fanatics. They stop at nothing." He grinned. "It's up to me to fix the fanatics."

"Wanna count us in?" Margol queried.

"Do you mean that?" Kawabe exclaimed eagerly. "We need all the help we can get. But let me caution you. The risk will be great."

"We're in this up to our necks now," Margol said eagerly. "Besides if peace should come I might get a permanent furlough. What do you say, Jimmy? Game?"

"Sure thing," White smiled. "After being holed up here like a hibernating groundhog I crave excitement. But can we go in these duds"

"I think it would be safer if you did," Kawabe said. "If you are captured you can

say you were shot down."

"But how about you?" White asked.

Agent Kawabe looked down at the tattered Jap peasant outfit he wore. "I will not be the first," he said sadly. "Others have been caught. We had a short wave outfit you know, but Corporal Yamasuki, he was from Los Angeles, was caught transmitting to our headquarters. I have heard that what they did to him was not very nice. They destroyed the shortwave too and we have no way of warning General MacArthur of their plan."

"Count us in, Kawabe," Margol said. "We'll either have a try at breaking this thing up or find a way of letting the big boss know. When are you starting?"

"Tonight," Kawabe said. "But let me warn you. It will not only be a trying journey but a dangerous one."

"We're with you," Margol asserted. "Let's go."

"Swell," Kawabe grinned. "We ought to make a pretty good team. Make a last inning rally like Dem Bums do."

Kawabe's assertion that it would not only be a trying journey but a dangerous one turned out to be true. For they traveled by cart, by bicycle, by automobile and, to complete the ordeal, spent the last twelve hours under a tarpaulin-covered load of Japanese military supplies being transported north on a flat car.

"We'll get off here," Kawabe called as the train slowed up and entered a tunnel. "Wait until we are inside. Then no one will see us."

BY THIS time the two Americans were ready to follow any order Kawabe gave. For it was his thorough training back there in that brick and limestone building in Washington which had stood them in good stead on three occasions.

Far back along the tortuous journey somewhere lay three Jap counter espionage agents who never knew what struck them down. Kawabe had a friendly smile, but when the moment arrived for him to be ruthless he was just that.

One by one they dropped from the train and stood pressed against the smoke-grimed walls of the tunnel while the train passed on. Then led by Kawabe they made their way toward the opening and began a slow tortuous climb up the mountain through which the tunnel was threaded.

"Go-s-shh, but am I tired," White gasped.

"Only a little way further," Kawabe said over his shoulder. "I will soon meet up with friends."

In a few minutes he stopped. He waited a second and then emitted three sharp yips.

"What in heck's that?" Margol said when he caught his breath.

"It's our call," Kawabe said out of the shadows. "It's the bark of a fox. Listen!"

Like an echo a fox barked somewhere in the woods cloaking the mountain.

"That's our man," Kawabe said and repeated the barks but double the number of times.

The wait in the dark for contact seemed an eternity. Then a shadowy figure loomed up in front of them. Kawabe spoke quickly in Japanese.

"We are late," he said turning to his two fellow Americans. "It is tomorrow that the surrender is to be signed on the battleship Missouri. Our fleet is already in Tokyo Bay."

"Jeepers," Margol exclaimed softly. "We can't quit now. We got to stop them. How much further do we have to go to find this field of the Squadron of Glory?"

"It is here," Kawabe replied. "Just below us in the valley. This man says the pilots are already assembling in the great cavern to get their last instructions from Admiral Hirotsuki their leader. They are taking their oath before the sword of Jimmu Tenno. The ceremonies take place at midnight."

"Couldn't we horn in on this show and maybe get a lead?" Margol demanded. "We can't just sit around and let them blow up the Missouri and get this war rolling all over again."

"It would be certain death to be caught," Kawabe said after speaking to the newcomer a moment. "But if you are willing to take the risk, I'll see what I can do. Wait here."

For a while the two Yanks were satisfied to rest. Then after an hour had dragged by White nudged his companion.

"Got any way of connecting your jinx to this, Leo?" he chuckled. "Never pictured myself sitting on a Jap mountainside waiting for the final fireworks of this war, did you?"

"No," Margol sighed. "You know. This Kawabe is a nervy little guy. If we'd started out on our own we'd have been duck soup by this time. Still gives me the willies when I remember how that Jap gurgled last night. General Donovan sure believes in teaching his men the rough and sure way of dealing with an enemy. Lucky thing for us too. Shhh! I hear somebody coming."

Kawabe chuckled over their shoulder when they started in surprise.

"I'm here. The silent approach is an-

other thing they taught us."

Embarrassed, Margol and White scrambled to their feet.

"I'll swear I heard somebody in front of us," Margol said.

"Because I wanted you to," Kawabe replied. "I heaved a stone in that direction to attract your attention—just in case some one else had taken your places. We must act quickly now. Here are ceremonial robes—one for each of you."

He pushed the crumpled bundles at them.

"How'd you manage to get these?" Margol asked as he took a robe and fingered the silk.

"Most of the Japs are full of saki and whisky," Kawabe laughed softly. "Tonight there are four of the Squadron of Glory who will not fly to their deaths tomorrow morning."

"Meaning they've already taken off," White spoke up. "How in thunder do you get into this thing?"

"I'll help you," Kawabe said and began to adjust the silken robe over White's figure. "Keep the cowl up over your head and pulled well over your face. I found a can of rice powder in the pocket of one of them to whiten your face with."

MARGOL slipped the robe over his head.

"Hey, we're not going to play geisha girls are we?" he said from beneath the hood.

Be a break for you if that was all you were going to play," Kawabe said. "These pilots who are chosen to be one of this suicide outfit join some sort of religious group, if you can call it that. They whiten their faces with powder and wear these black robes right up to the time they light up against the side of one of our ships. Darn little religion in it though. From what I've heard they go on a super binge with the Mikado paying the bill."

By the glow of a shielded flashlight Kawabe and the other Jap applied a thick coat of white powder to their faces.

"Say, these robes are black," Margol muttered. "Cheerful color."

"Black is for the men who are going to glory," Kawabe grunted and slipped into a robe. Remember, if anybody tries to speak to you pretend you are drunk. Stick close to me and don't lose me under any circumstances. When the guard at the entrance speaks to me I'll give the password and you follow suit as soon as he asks you. The password is sekinin. In English it means responsibility. I suppose they figure the responsibility for stopping the surrender of their country is theirs. We've got to take

that responsibility away from them. Now repeat sekinin after me."

For half an hour Kawabe drilled them in the pronunciation of the password. Then when he felt they had it well enough he was ready to lead them into the lair of the Squadron of Glory.

"Keep your guns ready," he cautioned as he led the way down the dark trail. "These deep sleeves are handy for that."

"Wait," Margol called. "How many of us are going in?"

"The four of us," Kawabe said. "Why?"

"Don't worry about him Kawabe," White hissed out of the shadows. "He's a nut on figures. He'll turn into a numerologist one of these days."

"Yeah," Margol muttered. "If you'd been kicked around by a couple of numbers the way I have you'd do some figuring too. Okay, Kawabe. Let's go."

In a little while they turned a corner of a towering rock and found themselves in front of a slit between two stones through which a soft blue light shone.

"Angoo?" a hooded figure asked thickly.

"Sekinin," Kawabe said and entered the opening.

Margol and White gave a muffled answer to the challenge and followed Kawabe.

After traveling a short distance through a dimly-lit and twisting corridor in the rock they finally emerged in a large well-lighted cavern. Margol shuddered as he glanced around him at the white faces gleaming from under the hoods. Following the man from the O.S.S. they moved through the crowd of chattering Japs and finally took a position where their backs were against the wall of the cavern.

"There is the sword of Jimmu Tenno," Kawabe hissed and nodded toward a gleaming weapon reposing on a white silk cushion directly beneath a spotlight. "Way back in Six-Sixty B.C. he invaded the islands and founded the first dynasty. He was the ace warrior of Japan. They will take the oath before that sword, no doubt pledging themselves to join Jimmu Tenno tomorrow!"

To Margol standing there taking in the scene the situation seemed hopeless. He began to regret his decision to mingle with the members of this fiendish squadron who, in their fanatical concept of loyalty to their Mikado, were about to hurl themselves in a suicidal attack on the American fleet.

They did not seem to consider that by smashing a giant battleship and bringing death to the American leaders who were waiting to witness the capitulation of their

country, they would bring a terrible revenge on their already war-weary countrymen.

CHAPTER IV

Good-by Jinx

SUDDENLY a brass gong clanged. The harsh sound reverberated through the cavern. As the voices quieted, Margol gripped his automatic tighter. He kept his eyes on the beam of light spearing the sword on its snow white cushion. All thoughts of the digits two and three and his dreams of a furlough were driven from his mind.

"Admiral Hirosuki," Kawabe whispered as a squat figure in a white robe stepped from the shadows and took his place by the sword. "Do as the others do."

Margol nudged White as the assembled pilots bowed low. Then the white-robed instigator of the plot began to speak in short clipped sentences.

"He is telling them that the stage is set." Kawabe had inched over to whisper. "Our fleet is assembled in Tokyo Bay."

Only the voice of the admiral rasped through the stillness for a moment or so.

"Now he is telling them how wonderful it is that they have been chosen to avenge the humiliation of their Mikado, and that he, in an American plane which is also painted white, the Japanese color of mourning, will lead them to the fleet. After they have destroyed MacArthur and the others he will return here and commit hara-kiri with the sword of Jimmu Tenno. He urges them to act as a reception committee for him as he enters the land of their ancestors. Each man is to step up and salute the sword while he vows to fulfill his pledge to destroy the American Naval and Military heads. We will have to do that too if we hope to get out of here alive."

"Yeah," Margol scowled. "Believe me I'll promise something else while I bow to that cold steel. What do we do—fall in line like they're doing?"

Kawabe nodded and stepped into the line of black-robed figures already forming and passing before the gleaming sword.

When every man in the cavern had bowed low to the sword and murmured his vow, the brass gong blared again and silently the men filed from the cavern.

"Phew!" Margol murmured as they emerged from the cave. "It's good to breath

good clean air again instead of the foul stuff in that rat nest. Jeepers. Look!"

The trail had led them past a yawning opening carved out of the mountainside. Within the underground hangar, taken over by the Squadron of Glory, was rank upon rank of American planes, all gleaming in fresh coats of black paint. Just beyond they saw another hangar and White nudged Margol.

"That must be the white crate he was talking about, Leo," he said and nodded toward an A-26. "Picked himself a nice fast job, didn't he?"

Margol glanced at the twin-engined job and then turned to Kawabe. "This outfit must have radio communication. Got any idea where the shack is?"

Kawabe spoke to the Jap Underground agent a moment. Then he said softly.

"He will lead us to it. Do you have a plan?"

Margol nodded grimly.

"If we can get to the transmitter without being seen we might be able to flash a warning to be on the lookout for this crazy squadron. All I ask is five minutes in there."

"And then?" White asked anxiously.

"And then all creation's apt to blow up right in our kissers," Margol replied steadily. "But if we can knife a warning through the air to them it'll be worth it. Come on."

Next to the Japs servicing the planes, the little radio shack half way up the mountainside seemed to be the busiest place on the secret drome. Jap officers wrapped in their black robes, were continually going in and out. Then toward dawn only one man was visible at the table in front of the transmitter. They could see him nodding sleepily after the hectic night's work.

"Now's our chance," Margol said quickly and started toward the shack. He glanced through the window and then entered. The Jap at the table look around and then started to his feet. But Margol was took quick for him.

Leaping forward he crashed the surprised man back across the table and clapped his hand across his mouth.

"Quick," he muttered over his shoulder. "Tie him up and slip a gag in between these buck teeth."

When they had the Jap bound, Margol dropped to the chair in front of the mike. He studied the board a moment and then dialed to the wave length used by the AAF and hoped some Navy sparks would be listening in. He began calling into the mike:

"U.S.S. Missouri, U.S.S. Missouri!— Ur-

gent!— Urgent! U.S.S. Missouri!— Urgent. Hey! Somebody wake up!"

"This is the Missouri," a voice came crisply from the speaker. "Who are you?"

"This is Lieutenant Margol. Listen. There is a plot to blow up the Missouri at dawn. Understand? They're going to blow up your ship. I'm on a secret field with a flock of crazy Kamikaze pilots who are coming over in captured American planes to crash on the Missouri—"

"Are you kidding?" the voice from the Missouri demanded incredulously.

KAWABE leaned over Margol's shoulder.

"Perhaps I can help make him believe," he murmured. "Tell him to inform General MacArthur that you are with B-Five Four Six of the O.S.S."

"You get that," Margol called. "Tell the General B-Five Four Six is in on this. We're trying to find some way to stop them but we'll need help."

"What's your location, Lieutenant?" another voice demanded.

"Don't know for sure," Margol replied. "Swing a loop on us. I'll try to keep this thing going. If we can, we'll start a fire to lead you to the target. You gotta work fast. The planes are all Army jobs painted black. Send carrier planes and blast every Army job you see out of the skies. We'll try to—"

The door crashing open behind him interrupted Margol.

As he glanced over his shoulder, a gun in the hand of a white-robed figure blazed. The bullet missed its mark due to Margol's shifting the position of his head and crashed into the dialed panel. The frying in the speaker stopped.

But before Admiral Hirosuki could fire again, Kawabe and the Japanese Underground man leaped on him from the shadow of the open door. As they struggled across the floor, White stepped forward to close the door to keep the sound of the rumpus from being heard outside. Above the sound of the struggle, they heard the coughing of cold motors as they were started.

Suddenly the admiral went limp. With a choking cry he slumped to the floor. His legs jerked once or twice and then stilled. Kawabe looked down at him and shook his head.

"I am sorry I had to do it," he said. "I would much rather have seen him stand trial as one of Japan's worst war criminals. Now what?"

He glanced toward Margol.

Margol stood staring at the white-robed

admiral as motor after motor broke into life down on the secret drome of the Squadron of Glory.

"Do you suppose that number of yours will carry any weight?" he asked Kawabe.

Kawabe nodded.

"I'm sure they'll check," he said.

Margol's face suddenly lighted as he looked from Kawabe to the still figure of the admiral.

"You two are about the same size. Slip on his robe and we'll make a stab at getting hold of that A-Twenty-six. It's ours anyway. If we can pull it off we'll be okay. If we can't—well, I guess it's curtains. Come on let's make a break for it."

Silently Kawabe slipped the dead admiral out of his white robe and put it on.

"For size you're a dead ringer for him," White nodded. "We might as well take his gun. If we miss, I'm gonna take as many of these sons o' glory with me as I can."

Leaving the radio shack they started down the path leading to the field as the new day changed from black to gray. Silent figures stepped aside as they approached and bowed low.

"There she is," White said. "Guess he was scheduled to be the first one off. Gosh! I can't keep my knees steady."

"Don't fumble the ball now," Margol said as he walked slowly toward the white A-26.

Jap mechanics stepped aside and made a low obeisance as the quartet approached the plane.

Margol prayed silently.

"Give me just sixty seconds more," he whispered. "Let me get behind that wheel and my left hand on the throttles."

His prayer was answered. For in less than sixty seconds he was at the controls of the big white twin-motored job.

"All set?" he yelled over his shoulder.

"Let her rip!" White yelled. "Here comes a couple of guys running toward us. Looks like they're hep."

That the Japs had discovered the ruse was evidenced by the hail of rifle and machine-gun slugs smashing against the sides of the A-26 like hail on a tin roof. The moment he'd picked up flying speed, Margol lifted the wheels of the A-26 and went into a right hand climbing turn.

"Pour it into those ships parked down there," he screamed over his shoulders. "Got to get some smoke going to show them the way."

"If they come," White yelled and began to pump at a trio of P-47's parked along the strip waiting to take off.

By the time he had buzzed the field twice, Kawabe and White had managed to set half a dozen planes on fire. Black smoke twisted up through the dawn forming perfect beacons, should the boys back there take his report seriously.

"A couple of them managed to get off," White yelled. "Keep throwing her around."

WITH guns pounding on all sides, Margol went into evasive action, twisting and turning to enable his companions to keep their .50 calibers on the Japs.

Over his shoulder he saw White's tracers reach out and claw at a Jap flying a Mustang. For an instant the two ships were connected by threads of gray. Then the Mustang staggered. A tongue of flame unraveled from its cowl and crept back along the fuselage. Pumping another quick burst, White gave the Jap everything he had.

"That's the kid," Margol laughed. "Give 'em the business."

"There are two left," White yelled in to him.

"Leaping jeeppers!" Margol gasped. "Two. Get one of them. Quick! Want to see if my jinx is busted."

"Don't worry," White laughed. "Kawabe got him on a passing shot. Boy, can that kid shoot."

When he turned he saw them pouring into the valley, Navy crates strung along one after the other. Pouring on throttle, he lifted the A-26 toward the dawn skies as the Navy passed under him.

A moment later the floor of the valley was smothered in smoke and flame. Dull explosions reached him above the roar of his motors as White hurried forward and took his place in the co-pilot's seat. His tanned face was wreathed in smiles.

"Your jinx is gone, Leo," he grinned. "You left it back there in an awful mess. Boy, are they giving that strip a working over. Bet these glory boys are gonna be awful surprised when they find old Hirozuki waiting to welcome them."

A Corsair suddenly made a pass at them and curled up beside the A-26.

"Don't shoot, mister," Margol grabbed frantically at the hand mike and shouted. "We're the little boys who called you in on this fire. All we want to do is set this crate down somewhere and walk away. We'll promise never to annoy you Navy guys again. Say who's leading in the American league? I gotta buck riding on Detroit."

"Cut the comedy," a voice broke in. "We'll escort you to a field we've taken over and

let Intelligence look you over. But the first bad move we'll bump you, and hard."

As four Corsairs closed in around the A-26 Margol glanced toward the rising sun.

"That belongs to us now, exclusively." He was grinning. "Hey, take a look at that will you? Hey, Kawabe. Come up here."

Kawabe poked his smiling face into the office and nodded vigorously as Margol pointed toward Tokyo Bay. "Lookit 'em. Ain't that a grand sight? That's the fleet the Jap propaganda boys sunk so many times. Boy-oh-boy! What we went through was worth it to see a sight like that. Gosh, did I get a break when my furlough papers didn't come through on time. I'd a missed this last flight if they had."

Margol's face suddenly clouded.

"A-Twenty-six to Navy—A-Twenty-six to Navy," he called. "What's the date?"

"September second," the voice from the nearest Corsair said.

"September second!" Margol gasped. "Holy jeepers! It's my birthday."

"What's important about that," White demanded. "That's the important thing down there."

"But I'm twenty-three today," Margol yelled. "Twenty-three!"

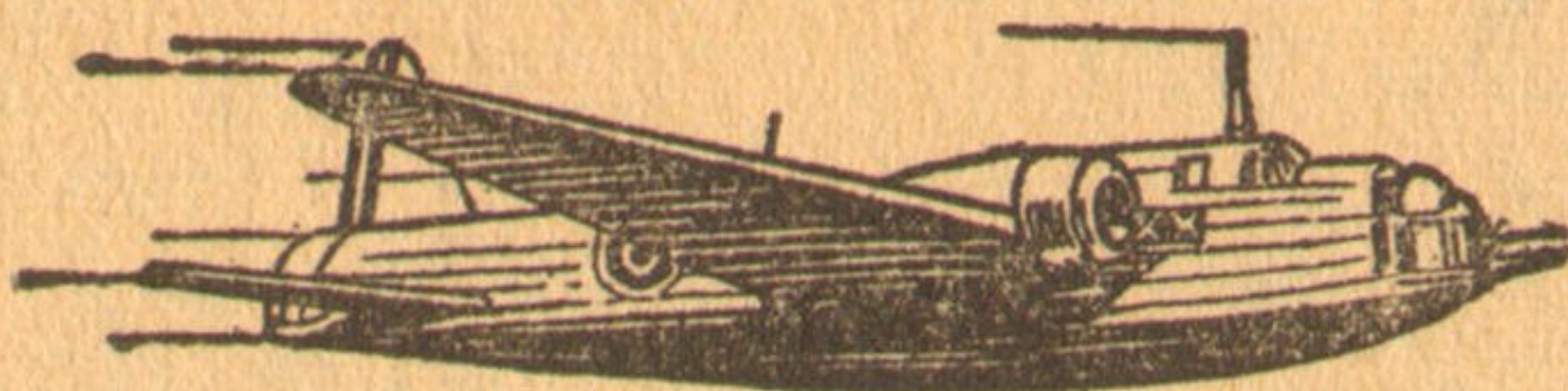
"I was twenty-three once myself." White smiled. "But they didn't celebrate by calling out the Navy."

"But twenty-three." Margol smiled. "A couple weeks ago I'd a been worried sick to find those two numbers in my age."

Then Margol threw back his head and began to sing. "Happy birthday to me—Happy birthday to me!"

"Say," the pilot in the Corsair interrupted. "What have you got over there, a screwball?"

"Yeah." White shook his head and laughed. "A screwball who got out from behind the eightball on his last flight."



IN THE SLIPSTREAM

THE day of aerial commuting is here! In a PT-19, Second Lieutenant E. R. Fajaro of Andrews Field, Washington, D. C., commutes between the field and his home near Anacostia, Md.

* * * * *

REVISED Army flight requirements will now establish a minimum of 100 hours annual flying time. Each rated pilot must have 20 hours of instrument flight (weather or hooded) and at least 15 hours night time. Not more than 50% of the requirements may be met by performing duties of co-pilot, except under specifically named circumstances.

* * * * *

WITH only 24 ATC planes remaining to carry out operations over India and Burma, the legions of air transports which conquered the "Hump" have returned to the United States en masse. Mission accomplished!

* * * * *

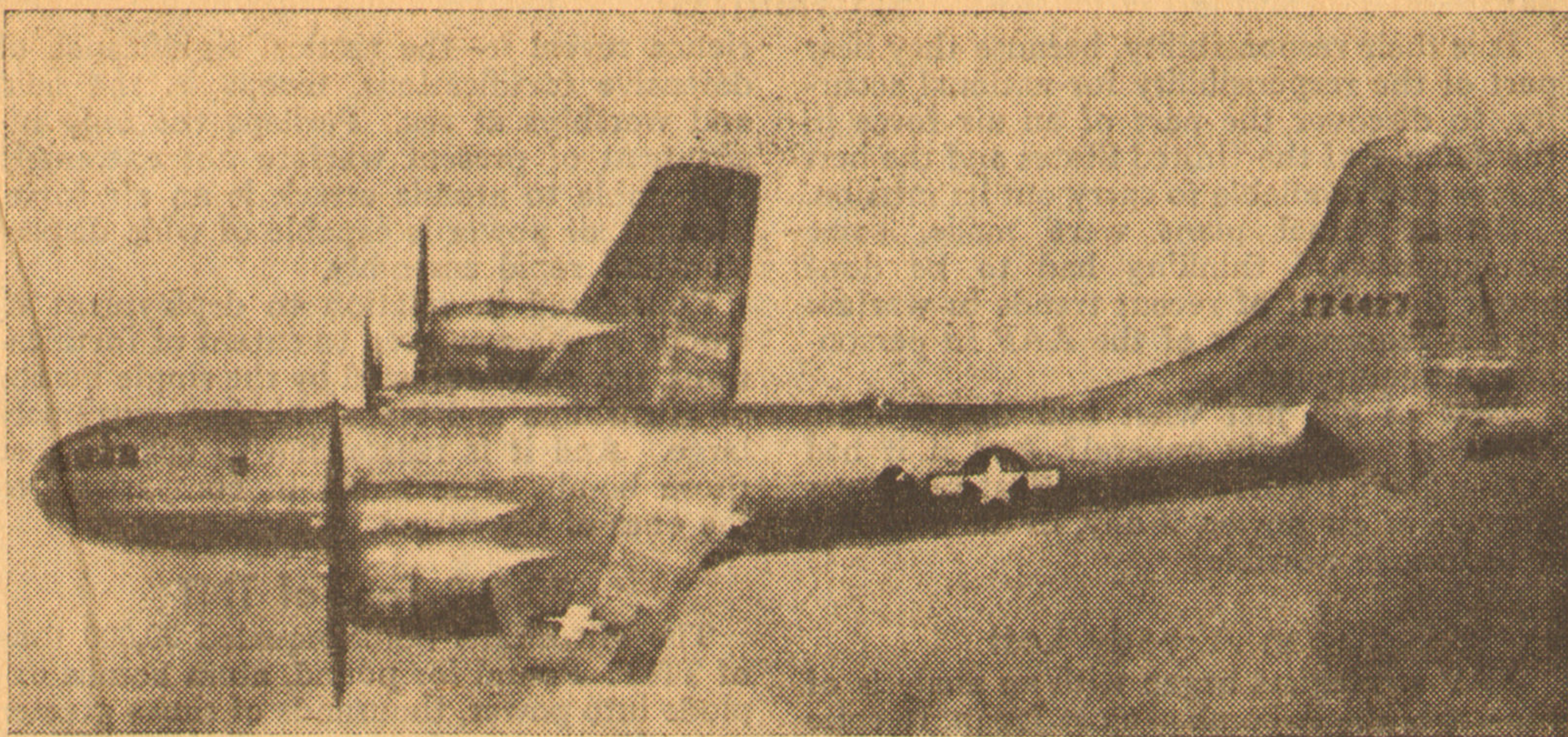
GENERAL JAMES H. DOOLITTLE heads the Air Force Association, an organization which will make this country more air-minded than ever. Plans are under way for the formation of "squadrons" in localities and "wings" in states. The AFA is being fostered as a means of keeping Air Force veterans together, and membership is open to all men and women who served in the Army Air Forces.

* * * * *

THE Army Air Forces are eliminating the Kitchen Police! A new system is going into effect, under which permanent mess attendants will be provided, making KP duty a thing of the past.

* * * * *

ON ALL the main British long-distance air services, the newest and largest airliner is the Avro Tudor II, which embodies many combat-tested features of construction and may be used as a passenger or cargo plane. It has four Rolls Royce Merlin engines rated at 1,770 h. p., and can achieve cruising speeds of 200 to 250 m. p. h. Gross weight is 34 tons, wing span 120 feet.



With the atomic bomb, every B-29 like this one is an air force by itself.

The **ATOMIC** *Present*

By MAJOR KENNETH GANTZ

Headquarters, Army Air Forces

*Our Army Air Force looks ahead to the unpredictable future,
but it keeps its plans for defense strictly in the present!*

AT 0145 on the fifth of August, 1945, aircraft 44-86292 rolled down the runway on Tinian Island, the B-29 base to the southwest of Saipan. It flew 700 miles through the darkness to Iwo Jima and turned northwest over 1500 miles of open water to the island of Shikoku. After rendezvous with two escort aircraft, it passed over Shikoku and the Inland Sea to the island of Honshu. At 0815 hours, it bore down on Hiroshima from the west and released its bomb. At 1358 hours it landed again on Tinian Island.

When it landed, it was no longer the B-29, slightly modified, which had taken off twelve hours earlier. It was an air force. It had just proved that it was capable of wiping out the principal cities of Japan on a few successive days.

The bomb it had delivered staggered public conceptions of warfare. With the news of its strike, public opinion ran wild overnight. And it is still running wild, between the hysterical clamor that there is no defense against atomic warfare and the absurd dismissal of the A-bomb as just another bomb.

With one breath the bomb is undersold, with the next it is oversold. Positive and vocal personages declare the need for vast armed forces of overwhelming power to insure that the bomb can never be used against the United States. Other positive and vocal

personages insistently deny that navies and armies and even air forces are useful for any purpose of defense or offense.

Atmosphere of Confusion

The atmosphere in which any question concerning the make-up and the size of the post-war armed forces of the United States must be proposed is, as a result, an atmosphere of confusion, alarms, uniformed speculations, assertions of the unimpaired worth of traditional instruments of warfare and vehement denials of any use for them at all. It is in the midst of such an uproar that the Army Air Forces is getting ready to go before the Congress with its considered proposals for its part in the post-war defense of America.

However absurd the extremists may be and however uproarious the confusion, it is clearly time for a review of the demands of national security and a new inventory of our capabilities for defense.

It is definitely the responsibility of the Air Forces to evaluate as closely as is humanly possible the effect of the A-bomb and other fantastic new weapons on aerial warfare and to make recommendations to the War Department and eventually to the Congress and the people to provide for a national defense compatible with the times.

It is their responsibility, because they bear part of the responsibility for national security, to discover the part of an air force in the defense of the United States and the best means now available to carry out its mission.

Before actual plans were made, some straightforward thinking had to be done about the effect of recent trends in warfare on the requirements of the AAF in personnel and equipment.

First of all, just what had the A-bomb done to warfare in general? And if it had changed the methods of war, just what was the role of air power, if any, in the new war it had made possible?

Japan Already Lost

AAF strategists began with an analysis of the use of the A-bomb against Japan. In spite of the awful power of the bomb, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did no more than underscore what had already been written into the fate of Japan by bombs of conventional types—that the destruction of every Japanese war installation and production facility was completely and certainly assured by American command of the air.

Japan had been lost from the time that its outmatched air force was powerless to stop us from setting up bases for the huge B-29 missions that ravaged her key industrial cities. Japan was lost when the tactical default of the Japanese Air Force in the final battle over Japan practically guaranteed the success of every strike made by our air forces. When the A-bomb was dropped, Japan had already been defeated by the cumulative weight of conventional bombs.

The spectacular conversion of one of our B-29s into an entire air force did demonstrate the tremendous lethal effect of the A-bomb, but its real significance in the Japanese war was to reemphasize the war-long lesson in what air power can do to a national unable to resist it. This lesson had been taught with increasing force throughout the war. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki merely closed the book.

The conclusion then, that our AAF strategists drew from the defeat of Japan was that, if a nation cannot resist the application of modern air power, it is doomed, whatever the type or the power of the explosives rained upon it.

AAF strategists are of the opinion that the greatest effect of the A-bomb is upon the nature of warfare itself and that this effect is the dominance of air power. The discovery of atomic explosives is the most revolutionary military discovery of all times undoubtedly exceeding in importance the discovery of gunpowder in its effect on military tactics.

The destructive power of the A-bomb has profoundly disturbed—no one knows exactly how much until suitable tests and expe-

rience reveal it—the tactical significance of defensive fortifications, troops in the field and warships at sea. Perhaps the only instrument of present warfare not extremely vulnerable to atomic attack is an air force, because air power is capable of wide dispersion and rapid assembly.

Considered in relation to deployment of troops or ships or even to extent of fortifications, the areas devastated by the single bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were extremely large. And it is reasonable to believe that those bombs were small in comparison to the ones of the future.

20,000 Tons of TNT

The Hiroshima bomb equaled 20,000 tons of TNT. Pound for pound, atom bombs explode into power, thousands of times greater than the power of other explosives. Their adaptability to delivery by air at great distances makes the airplane at present, and its descendants in the future, the greatest offensive weapon of all times.

For the present—and it is with the present that any present planning must deal—the defense of a nation resolves itself, as a result, into defense against aggressive air power armed with the seemingly all-potent new explosive.

Since it is possible that other nations will soon attain to the current achievements of the United States in aircraft and the production of atomic energy, we must assume that any attack on us will be an air atomic attack, coming in all likelihood by the great circle routes over the strategic polar areas which are the new no-man's land between nations in the age of air warfare.

Whatever air forces we possess at the moment of attack will be our main defense. This put the problem to AAF planners pretty directly—what composes the minimum air power upon which we can depend in an hour of national emergency?

To solve the problem, they have had to consider the warning of impending attack which can be anticipated, the range and character of predictable operations, the weapons and equipment available to conduct them, the developments and changes which are probable and the capabilities of possible enemies.

A-Bomb Detection

As to warnings, an alert intelligence service can discover the potential ability of a nation to wage atomic warfare. The degree of industrialization and exploitation of resources of raw materials which is at present required for the production of atomic energy cannot be completely concealed.

Just one of the three atom bomb plants on the 59,000-acre tract at Oak Ridge shows up rather large on the Tennessee landscape. The atom plants in isolated areas of the

United States were so compartmentalized that the workers themselves had no knowledge of the finished product of their plants, but that was before 5 August 1945.

Now that the clue has been revealed, intelligence operatives could hardly overlook the existence of mystery plants, which must make something. And if the plants could be concealed, our knowledge of the scientific data on nuclear fission which is generally available, and of the technological development of the various nations, makes it possible for us even at this time to estimate the date that atomic energy will be available to a nation.

Yet, intelligence cannot be depended upon to yield more than information about the ability of a nation to launch an aerial atom attack. For warning of an actual attack, we must rely upon an early-warning system adequately disposed to afford all-around coverage and worldwide range.

With present early-warning radar equipment, such coverage and range imposes a careful choice of outpost bases that guard all approaches to the United States. Attack control centers centralized for complete unity of worldwide command must continually and immediately evaluate all contacts for readiness of action.

All intercontinent flights will have to be cleared with the control centers. Until radar or some comparable system is developed to afford worldwide range, there is no choice but to maintain a far-flung periphery of warning posts reporting to a centralized control, or to depend upon inadequate coverage, which is no coverage—and no warning—even under present capabilities of attack.

Short Warning

Air attack demands immediate action. No more than a few hours and the release of enemy bombs. Whatever is available to ward them off must be committed to action when the warning is received.

But defense alone will not protect the United States—not even the best defense that can be theoretically expected. Only a few enemy bombs need to strike their targets to weaken seriously our war potential, and some will inevitably get through our defensive screen. Atomic attacks have such a potential of destruction that no nation can endure them for many days and wage war.

A defensive nation—and the United States by its peace-loving, peace-demanding nature is a defensive nation—faces a great disadvantage. Interceptor weapons require greater maneuverability and greater control and guidance than offensive weapons. There must be many more of them.

The probability of interception is, by reason of the size and number of possible targets, lower than the probability of at least some success for the attackers. The targets

available to the aggressor are relatively large land-mass urban areas of fixed and known location. Widely scattered choices of such targets exist in the United States.

But the targets for our defense will be speeding, maneuvering air weapons, for the time being aircraft, which will close the action at extreme speeds against predetermined targets. Some of every wave of the attack will get through.

A defensive-offensive—immediate retaliatory action against the aggressor's bases and cities and war potential—is the only hope of survival. The waves of attack must be reduced and choked off at their source. While it yet has the strength, the defensive nation must destroy the attacker's power to attack. The decisive raids of an atomic war may very well come off in the first days or even hours of an unannounced war. An overpowering counter-offensive is the only defense.

Attack the Only Defense

The only counter-action to air attack is successful all-out attack upon the aggressor. Counter-attack is clearly the prime mission of the modern air force. Purely defensive tactics of an interceptive character are secondary because they are incapable of complete success.

The tactic for the defense of the United States is to sweep the enemy from our air as cleanly as possible and to hit back at once so hard and so often that he cannot keep coming. Defense of the nation has become fundamentally an air defense.

Other forces cannot be brought into action in time for the first swift, decisive battles, nor can they engage the enemy miles above the land and sea or reach into his homeland and choke him in hours. First of all, the rival air powers must have it out if war comes again.

The AAF has determined the defensive-offensive air forces that present capabilities of warfare call for. A plan has been placed before the American people for a 70-group air force, built at present—as striking forces of the present must always be built—on the equipment available at present.

The fantastic weapons of the future, although beginning to be realized, have not yet been tactically realized. Today and in the future for which present plans can be made, the placing of the atom bomb on its target still requires a balanced air force of the current bomb carriers and fighting aircraft.

Rockets to Come

The trend toward a warfare of rockets and guided missiles is clearly indicated, but until we can depend upon rockets and long range ground-to-ground and ground-to-air guided missiles as our offensive and defensive weap-

ons, we shall have to rely on our conventional aircraft for dropping both conventional bombs and launching guided missiles. For some time to come ground-to-ground guided missiles will be suited only for area bombardment over relatively short ranges over a fixed front. And the atomic warhead is not at present economically suitable for this type of missile.

Our B-29 is the most efficient carrier in the world today for the atom bomb, and the tactics that permitted the delivery of the bomb to its Japanese targets will vary little until new weapons of offense are developed or more advanced than they will be within the time being planned for now. The best weapons of defense still consist of our current interceptor aircraft, supported by anti-aircraft artillery and put into action by early warning systems.

AAF strategists have then to plan for a postwar air force in the light of a realization that air superiority, direct assault, diversionary attacks and escort missions will continue to be the tactics of the delivery of atomic or conventional bombs for some time to come.

The decisive action of warfare has become revolutionized in a few months to become predominantly waged in the air. Yet in aerial warfare itself and in air forces the experts of the AAF see no revolution or forecast no revolution.

Guided Missiles

Ultimately the improvement of guided missiles will permit a shift from pilot-guided and ground-aimed weapons to projectiles remotely controlled or self-guided ground-launched or air-launched. Change there will be. Constant change there is—a constant modification in equipment and tactics—but no sudden shift to pilotless missiles and remotely controlled projectiles is anticipated. Change will come not through revolution but through evolution.

Current trends in AAF research indicate a constant modification of the currently

planned air force in the direction of a maximum use of mechanized weapons and a minimum requirement of personnel for their operation. Yet it does not follow that technological advancement means inevitably a reduction in the armed forces of the United States.

The same advancements must be anticipated for other nations. The strength of our forces must ever be determined by the strength of existing forces which might conceivably be committed to aggressive action. Our air forces, as we know them today, will acquire weapons of increasing efficiency, but the increased efficiency of weapons is certainly not at present a sign portending the elimination of air forces.

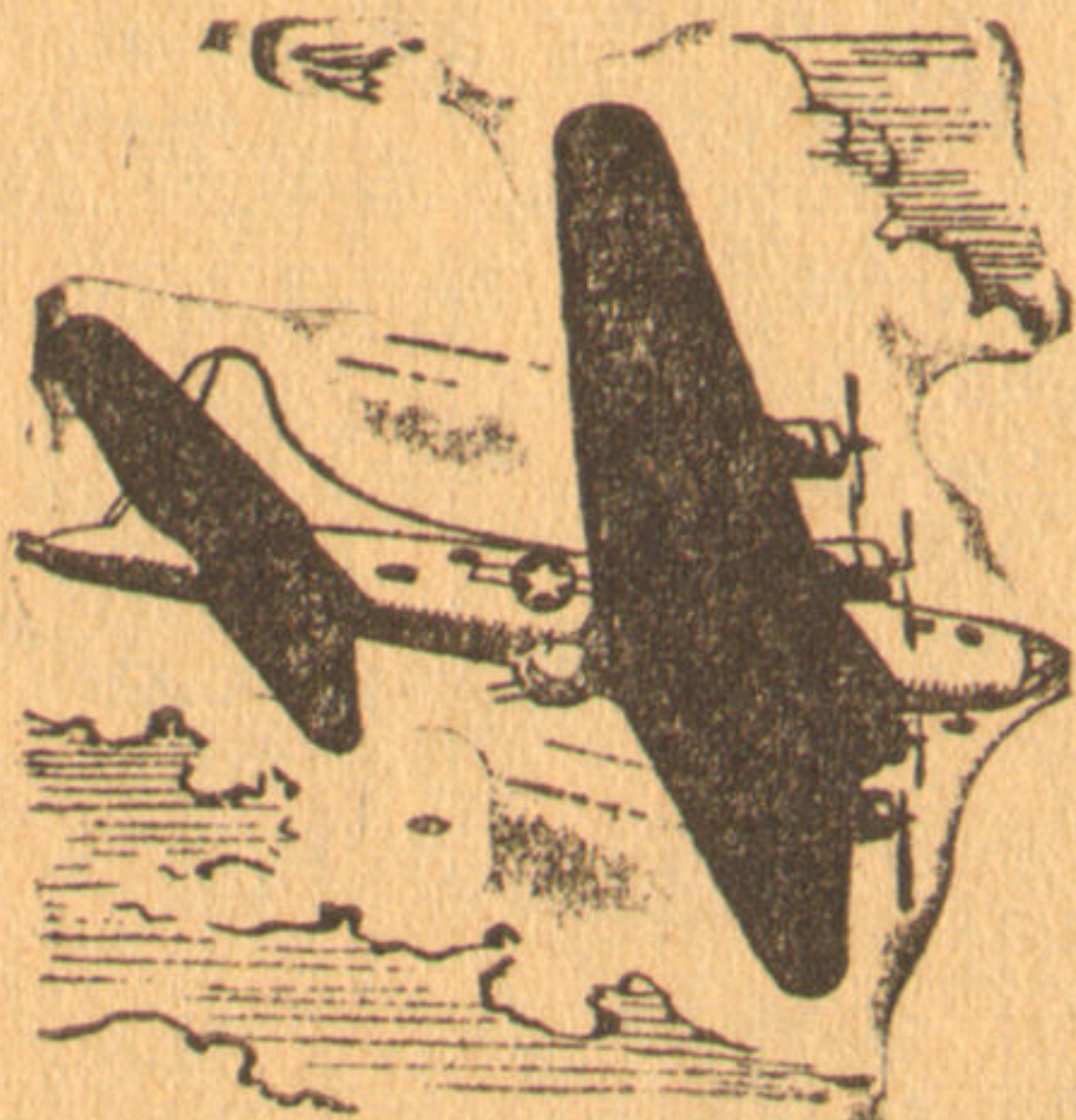
In making air power supreme, the atom bomb, for example, has had the opposite effect. Nor does it logically follow that because our current aircraft are ten times as efficient as the ones of five years ago, our air forces should now be reduced to one-tenth their size of five years ago.

The predictable effect on warfare of weapons of increased efficiency is the same as their effect in the past—not to reduce the forces employing them but to insure a more rapid conclusion to the conflict. The mass employment of the means of warfare for overwhelming power is a basic principle of modern war.

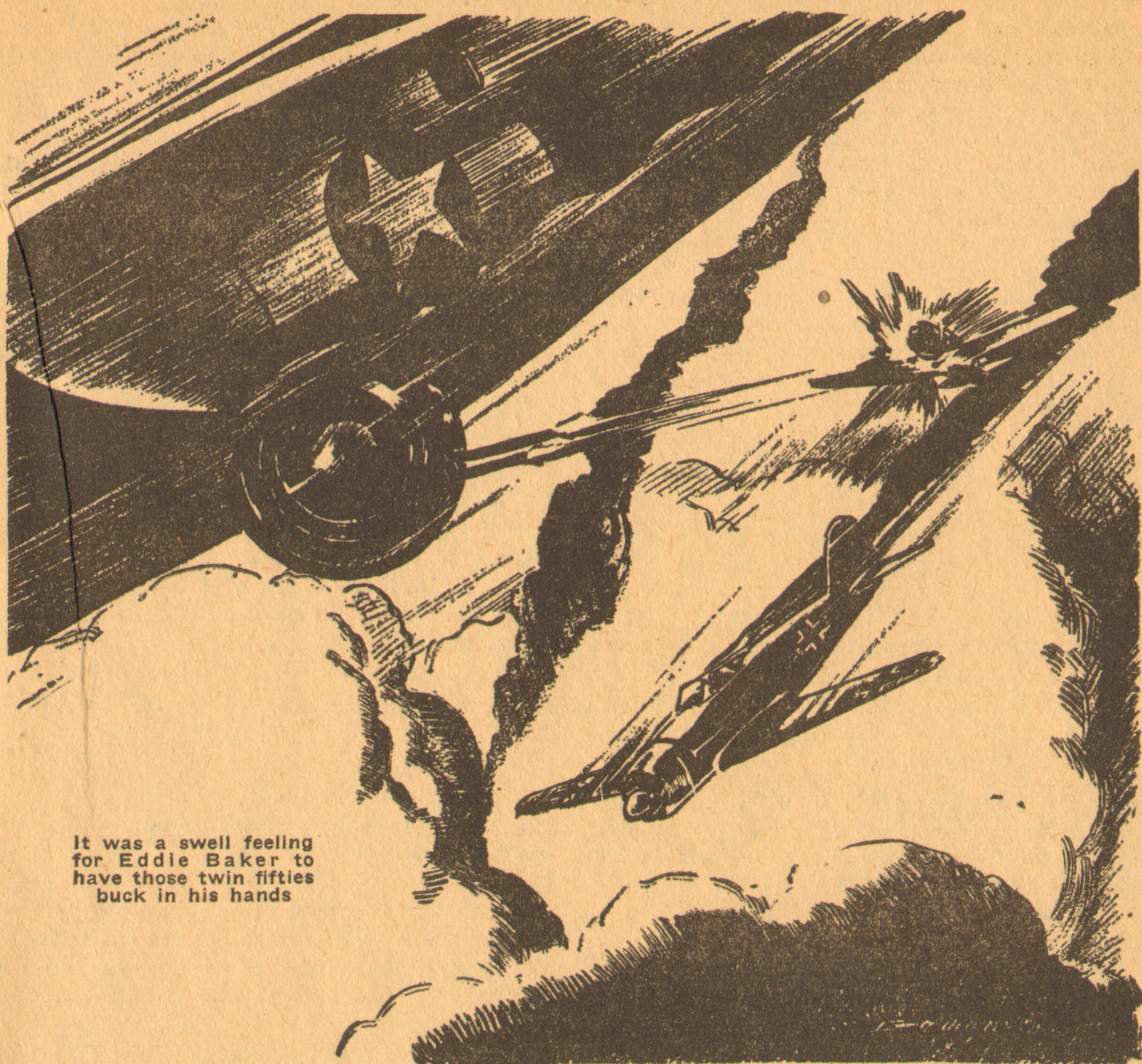
Our military leaders are charged with the military appreciation and application of the development of science and industry. Today the Staff and Command of the Army Air Forces believes that the fundamental necessity for the security of the United States is a nucleus air force trained in the latest techniques of aerial warfare and in a condition of war readiness at all times.

AAF leaders have their plans ready for the air-force-in-being of the present. They bear a large share of the responsibility for the defense of America, and they must plan and forge the weapon.

(Courtesy of AIR FORCE, official service journal of the USAAF.)



A Thrill on Every Page Next Issue—Headlining Complete Action Novelets by WILLIAM J. O'SULLIVAN and CHARLY CLAPP Plus Zooming Short Stories and Interesting Features by America's Favorite Aviation Writers!



It was a swell feeling
for Eddie Baker to
have those twin fifties
buck in his hands

ONE-BURST BAKER

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

*Flak-happy Eddie, ball-turret gunner of the Eager Eagle,
sets out on his fiftieth—and his final—sky mission!*

THE little ball-turret gunner of the Flying Fortress, Eager Eagle, was talking to himself again. Corporal Eddie Baker had been talking to himself a lot lately.

Thin wisps of fog blew across the bomber field of Forges 6 and shut out the end of the longest runway. But the fog was blowing. It meant they'd be flying again soon.

Baker walked alone. That wasn't unusual. He walked alone and he talked to himself.

"Why don't they tell me something more?" he muttered. "Why don't they let me know more about Buck?"

But his words, spoken softly, with a tone of pain, were only the incoherent mumblings of a flak-happy scared little fellow when they reached the two tech sergeants walking behind him.

The taller technical sergeant shook his head.

"Poor guy's nearly dotty," he said.

"Yeah," the shorter technical sergeant said. "Flak happy."

"His next mission is number fifty."

"So I hear. Fifty and out."

"He's heading for Operations right now to

see how soon he can get it over."

"In the last two days I've seen him heading down that way at least a dozen times."

The tech sergeants talked low so they wouldn't be heard by Baker. They walked on behind him toward Operations and the control tower and the headquarters building and the PX. All the buildings were grouped together just beyond the repair hangar. In the driving fog they looked like weirdly shaped mounds from some prehistoric age.

Baker turned in toward the group of buildings. The tech sergeants walked on toward their quarters.

"You'd never think they were brothers," the tall one said. "The little corporal and Major Buck Baker."

"Sure wouldn't. How many Zeros did Buck have when Mouse Baker got the cable he was missing in action?"

"Twenty. Or was it twenty-one?"

"Twenty-one, I think. Ever see Buck Baker play football?"

"Only in the movies. He was a wonder."

"You said it. Some difference between those two brothers."

"They call that fate. The enemy gets a man like Buck and Mouse stays on. Francisco, second engineer on the Eager Eagle, told me yesterday that out of forty-nine missions, Mouse Baker never fired a burst out of his ball-turret at an enemy plane."

"No kidding? Out of forty-nine missions?" the short technical sergeant cursed. "That's a record. You mean he got buck fever?"

"I don't know. Francisco didn't say."

MOUSE BAKER went past the Operations entrance and into the mail shed that was next. He went to the window and stood looking over the shelf at the sergeant who was coming to the window.

"Look, sergeant," he said. "I don't want to bother you again, but I thought maybe something might have come for me."

"Go away," the sergeant said. "I told you your detachment leader would give you the mail when it came in."

Baker grinned sheepishly.

"But I haven't had any mail for three weeks—from anybody," he said. "I got to find out something pretty soon."

"Look, chum," the big sergeant said. "I didn't get any mail all last month and I work in this joint. Go on—scram! Make like your girl doesn't love you any more. Then if it's true, you got nothing to lose."

"It isn't a girl," Baker said. "But I ought hear from Mr. Warner. He was my father's

business partner before my father died. He writes me regular every week. And then I thought I'd hear by now from the War Department. I cabled them for all information about my brother."

The sergeant put a tolerant expression on his rugged face.

"Take it easy, Baker," he said. "I'll let you know personally, if anything comes in."

Baker looked two percent more hopeful.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot."

He left and went out into the cold, driving Normandy fog.

The low hills off the north end of the field were beginning to clear some. He could see them through the mist. But he didn't see them very well. He just walked on up past the line of Flying Fortresses and he read the names instinctively as he passed the high noses. He read, "Hell Cat, Mary's Lamb, Beat Me Daddy, Susie, Louisville Lil, Moon Over Miami and Eager Eagle." He read the names mentally without his senses being conscious of what he was doing, for his brain was very busy with his missing brother Buck and Mission Fifty coming up.

It was cold and damp and the wind and fog went through his sheeplined jacket like a knife. His hands trembled from the cold and from the condition of his frayed nerves.

He turned in toward a building and aimed for the door. When two second lieutenants and a first lieutenant came out, he looked past them without saluting and pushed through the door.

Baker didn't realize he was in the Officers' Club of Forges 6 until he was half way to the counter and a captain intercepted him.

"What are you doing in here, corporal?" the captain asked.

He looked around, blinking.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "I—I thought this was the PX, sir."

He turned and started out.

"The man's flak happy," an officer said. "Isn't that Buck Baker's brother?" another one said.

"You'd never know it," a captain answered. "His crew call him 'Mouse.'"

Those words hurt Baker less than they used to. It had always been pretty much like that. Buck always got the glory, not that he ever begrudged Buck anything. Buck was the greatest fellow in the world. Buck was all Eddie had left in the world now. That is Buck was all he had left up to the arrival of the cable telling him that Buck was lost in action in the Pacific.

Eddie didn't mind the name Mouse so much after that. He'd grown up figuring

he'd never be very much. Not that he hadn't wanted to. He'd wanted to be a football star like Buck.

He'd gone to Northwestern—started as a freshman when Buck had been a senior and the greatest football player in the Midwest. And he'd gone out for football, too. Buck had tried to tell him all he knew, then Mouse had broken his ankle on the first day of scrimmage and after that football was not his game because his ankle had always been weak from then on.

Mouse walked aimlessly down to the PX. He stepped up to the counter and ordered a bottle of beer. He lighted a cigarette and stood smoking it and forgot to drink the beer.

When he finished his cigarette he put it out and walked away and the soldier behind the counter called out, "Hey, you forgot your beer." But Mouse didn't turn around or pay any attention to him.

The man behind the counter shook his head.

"The little guy is flak happy," he said, and the soldier next to where Mouse had been standing nodded.

"Combat crazy as a loon." Then he drank Mouse Baker's bottle of beer.

KIP KEPPLER was serious and his black eyes could look right through you. He was the sergeant radioman on the Eager Eagle and Mouse Baker helped him with radio, when necessary, if he didn't have to be in his ball-turret curled up around his tommy guns. Kip Keppler met him outside the PX.

"I been looking for you, Mouse," he said. "The Captain wants to see you at the office."

"What?" Baker said. "What did you say, Keppler?"

"What's the matter, you getting deaf?" Keppler calmed himself and looked with pity upon his assistant. "I said the chief wants to see you in the office. I been looking for you."

"Yes, sir," Mouse said and he saluted. Then he looked sick and sorry and he said, "Excuse me, sir—I mean—thanks, Keppler."

Captain Cramer was a very dependable looking officer. He could put on an easy smile like the one he was wearing now. He was tall and he always seemed easy going, without a nerve in his body.

"Ease, Baker," he said. "Sit down, will you?"

Mouse Baker sat down on a box at the end of the turned up parachute crate that served his chief as a desk.

The office was a section of an old stone

Normandy barn. Two walls were of stone, probably laid up three hundred years ago, and the other two walls were of canvas hung from a pole over the top of each section. The original roof of the barn had been blasted away in the early Normandy attack and there was a pole thrown up across the gable ends of stone and the pole held a big piece of tarpaulin that formed the roof.

Captain Cramer wore his flying suit. It was open at the neck. He had a muffler around his neck. It was cold in there. A queer, ornate little wood stove stood in the middle of the space. The stove had likely been in someone's parlor. It smoked a little out of the top because the draft was bad. The office was partly filled with smoke that leaked out of the spaces in the top where the roof didn't quite join the stone gables.

Baker could hear someone talking on the other side of the thin partition. Captain Cramer began to talk, too.

"Baker," he said. "You weren't in the original crew of the Eagle, were you?"

Cramer knew that. He and the rest of the men had been with the Eagle since the start. They'd flown her across from America.

"No, sir," Baker said. "I had twenty missions with a fort called The Snoozin' Susan before I was transferred."

"You've made a lot of missions over Europe," Cramer said. "You've made fifteen more missions than the rest of us."

"Yes, sir." Baker sat straighter with as much pride as he had ever had. "My next mission will be Number Fifty, sir."

As if Cramer didn't know that. As if everybody didn't know about it. As if he didn't know that they were all talking about how flak happy he was now that he was about to take off for his fiftieth mission.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Cramer said.

Baker's heart leaped up in his throat to choke him. His mouth went dry and his hands began to tremble and he doubled his fists and pressed them hard against his legs to stop the shakes.

"You know," Cramer said with as much kindness as he could inject into his voice, "many a brave man has had to give up his fiftieth mission because of combat fatigue. It isn't anything to be ashamed of."

That was a lie. It was something to be ashamed of. It would be something that Mouse Baker would be ashamed of all his life.

"I'm not afraid," Mouse said.

"I don't mean that you're afraid," Cramer said. "I'm thinking of the rest of the crew."

You've got to think of the others in the crew, also, Baker."

"Yes, sir." It was all that Captain Cramer left for him to say.

"Within another twenty-four hours, as soon as this fog moves out of the way, we'll be taking off for another mission."

"Yes, sir."

The barn grew very still. The officer on the other side of the canvas partition started talking again. His voice was a rumble.

"I thought perhaps that you—"

Somebody shouted outside the barn and Captain Cramer stopped. Somebody was shouting excitedly. He came bursting into the barn.

"The Russians are in Berlin!" he yelled. "The Russians are fighting in the outskirts of Berlin."

Officers and men left their offices. They swarmed about the second lieutenant who was doing the yelling.

WHEN most of the excitement had died down, Captain Cramer went back of his improvised desk and sat down on his crippled chair. Mouse Baker didn't sit down now. He stood before the desk. Cramer was trying to be kind.

"Now, you see, Baker, the war is practically over," he said. "Any minute now we'll get word. The Nazis can't hold out much longer."

Baker swallowed but the lump stuck in his throat.

"Naturally, you'll be glad to get out of this as soon as possible," Cramer said. "That is, I mean, you've seen more than your share of the war. You won't mind going to rest camp in England."

Mouse Baker stood like a slim little statue, rigid and hard as if he were made of granite.

"But I would mind, sir," he said. "I've got one more mission to finish up, sir. You say yourself the war may be over any minute."

"We're bombing an objective in lower Germany where the Nazis are still fighting fanatically, Baker. You may get killed."

"I'll take that chance, sir," Baker insisted.

"I'm sorry," Cramer said. "You've been showing grave signs of combat fatigue. I was hoping that you'd agree to go back without any urging but I see I'll have to be firm."

Baker came to the front of the desk. He gripped the edge of the old chute packing box and leaned a little over the desk in his zeal.

"Captain, you don't know what this means

to me, sir," he said. "All my life I've tried to amount to something, too. Buck, my brother, was always the one that got ahead. I never got anywhere. Why I'm still the lowest man in your crew. I'm only a corporal while everybody else in the crew is at least a sergeant. Can't you understand, sir? You ought, at least, to let me finish this mission."

"I sympathize with you," Cramer said. "I do, honestly. You've had a batch of hard luck all the way. And often I've wondered why."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Your record, Baker. I don't know whether you realize it, but do you know that in forty-nine missions you have never fired a single burst from your tommy guns at an enemy plane? I wondered about that when you came to us with twenty missions. I've wondered about it a great deal more since you've been with us."

"So help me, that hasn't been my fault," Baker said. "There never was one time when an enemy plane came under a bomber I was tommy gunner in, far enough so I could get a shot at him. That is—except on my twenty-fifth mission."

"I remember," Cramer said.

"And that time I couldn't get my turret around to fire because the hydraulic system had been shot up between the main feed and the ball. The ground crew verified that after we landed."

Captain Cramer nodded his head almost unwillingly.

"You're perfectly correct," he said.

"And I'm not flak happy, sir. I'm really not. It's just that I haven't had any mail for three weeks and I've been hoping for some word about Buck. He was reported missing in action four weeks ago, you know, sir."

"Yes, I know. We were all very sorry to hear it."

"Then can't I go, sir?" Mouse Baker was pleading harder than he'd ever begged for anything in his life.

Captain Cramer sat back and lighted a cigarette. He blew smoke at the little hole where the canvas tarpaulin didn't quite meet the stone gable. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, Baker, if it means so much to you."

"Thank you," Baker said. "Thank you very much, sir. I'll be all right, sir. You won't be sorry, Captain Cramer."

"Okay, okay," Cramer said.

Baker ran out of the barn. He felt good for the moment until he remembered Buck.

He'd forgotten about Buck for the moment while he'd fought for his last chance.

He walked down toward Operations. He went into the mail shack and advanced toward the window. He looked through the opening and the big sergeant saw him.

"No!" he yelled. "And get the devil out of here!"

* * * * *

The crews of the seven Flying Fortresses were gathering about the briefing room. Captain Cramer and Lieutenant Trinka and Lieutenant Longcor and Lieutenant Mitchell, the officers of the Eager Eagle, were in one little group. They looked at Mouse Baker as Cramer said something. They looked at him hard. Baker heard the remark of Mitchell, the slim, young navigator.

"If this is Mouse's fiftieth mission, we might as well fold up our tents like the A-rabs."

Engineer Catlow looked at Baker as the second engineer, Sid Francisco, said something to him. Pop Batlow shrugged.

"I'm too old to believe in superstitions," Eddie Baker heard him say. "Forget it."

Little Pat Rusby, the tail-gunner, gave Baker a cold look and moved away from him.

Keppler, the chief radioman looked through Baker with his black eyes and took a deep breath.

BAKER stood by himself and simmered a little. Okay. They could be afraid of what luck he might bring them. He wasn't afraid. He wasn't afraid of his last mission, he told himself. He'd done his best before. He'd do his best this time.

But something inside of him was choking the life out of him. Something like a hidden fist seemed to have hold of his vitals and his middle was tight as the windings around a baseball and he began to feel sick and he began to shake in his knees and his finger joints and it was unadulterated torture.

They filed into the briefing room and the Intelligence officer looked them all over as they came in and sat down. Some of the men wore their heavy flying suits and others carried them over their arms and Little Pat Rusby had on his flak vest. He was always forgetting to bring along his flak vest.

They listened to the talk and they watched the pointer move along a map, that was pulled down from its roll, against the front wall of the room and the voice of the Intelligence Captain was a monotone like the sentence of death.

The seven Forts would make their run on

Neustadt and they'd lay their eggs on the ball-bearing plant that the Germans had just gotten back into production again. They'd lay their eggs on the factory and then they'd make the run for home. It was very simple. There would be Thunderbolt cover for their mission. It was almost a milk run.

"But the enemy is ready for you," the captain said. "At Seidenheim airdrome One-nineties will be waiting. That One-ninety group is a desperate lot. They were moved back from the Bulge after we took it. They'll stop at nothing to put you out. Give 'em the works."

Pilots and crewmen snuffed out their cigarettes. Baker could hear the men around him breathing deeply, while they could still breathe. Sid Francisco was a quick tempered fellow. He glanced at Mouse Baker and he didn't speak. But Francisco's dark brown eyes said angrily:

"Why don't you go home, Bad Luck?"

Mouse Baker looked the other way. Everybody was getting up and moving about. He stood up and lost his balance. He grabbed the back of his chair for support and he and the chair went crashing to the floor.

"Fine thing," Rusby sneered. Baker heard Captain Cramer's answer.

"Give him his chance. It's his fiftieth mission."

Why couldn't he have said Baker was on edge because of his brother Buck? That was the truth. Well, it was partly the truth, anyway.

They all filed out and started for their ships. A man was running up the field yelling.

"Baker—Mouse Baker!" he was yelling. It was the mail clerk, the big sergeant. He was carrying a bunch of letters in his hand. He stuffed them into Baker's outstretched hand.

"They just came," he said. "Thought you'd want them to read on the way. One's a cable."

Baker stood rooted to the black strip of runway.

"Well come on, if you're coming," Francisco yapped. "Not that I give a hang."

Sudden fear took hold of Mouse Baker. Of course the cable would be from the War Department in answer to his cable for more news about Buck. He shoved the pack of letters and the cable into the pocket of his flying suit and ran to catch up with the rest.

The Eager Eagle rose large and blurred in his sight. He was getting in with the rest. Captain Cramer was the only one kind

enough to ask if he'd heard from Buck.

"I don't know yet, sir," Baker said.

"Hope there's some good news," Cramer said. He even smiled. Cramer was a good fellow. You could have trust in Cramer. He always brought back the ship and the crew. He had, that is, up to now. And of course, what Cramer said, would give Baker permission to look through his mail, after they took off, and see if there was any good news. But Eddie was growing more and more certain that there wouldn't be any good news.

Even as they roared for altitude and headed for their objective, Baker held back on his mail and the cable. There would be time later on. Now he had his jobs to do. He would help Keppler with radio, if he was needed. He'd hang around in the radio shack for a few minutes and see.

"I can handle the radio, Baker," Keppler said, and that was that.

THEY weren't making such a very long run. Across France and over lower Germany and then the target. The guns must be in perfect condition. As ball-turret gunner, Mouse Baker was an armorer, too. He must inspect the guns and make sure they were all ready to go when trouble started.

He crawled up into the nose and checked the chin-turret guns. They seemed all right. His hands were shaking so that he couldn't hold on to anything. He dropped a locking screw and had to fumble around to find it.

He went back under the cockpit where the pilots sat and he climbed up to the step and started checking the top-turret guns.

Francisco yelled at him.

"Get away from my guns, Baker," he said.

"Okay," Baker said. "I'm just checking."

"Go ahead and check," Pop Catlow said. Pop was chief engineer. "Sid, don't be so blamed jumpy."

Eddie went back and checked the right waist-gun. He turned to the left waist.

"I checked my gun, Baker," Decker who handled the left waist said. "Don't touch it."

"Okay," Baker said. He felt very sick. He felt the bunch of mail in his pocket. It was quite a batch. He hated to start wading through it. There wouldn't be anything good. He'd been hoping, but now that he had mail, he was afraid to touch it.

He sat down in the radio shack and plugged into the intercom. He called Pat Rusby in the tail. "Pat, you want your guns checked?" he asked.

"No thanks, Baker," Pat Rusby said. "They're all right as they are."

Baker sat back and tried to swallow. His mouth was full of cotton. His hand crept to the pack of letters. He slipped his hand slowly into his pocket and pulled out the pack.

He passed up the cablegram on the top and took the thick letter underneath. The letter was from Mr. Warner.

It told all about what was going on back in Newton. He mentioned some of the youngsters that Mouse knew. Young Jack Hadley had married the Smith girl and Charlie Mills had lost an arm on D-Day. They'd just got word. Sol Kaplan had won the Distinguished Service Cross at Anzio. He'd turned out to be a fighting fool. He might even get the Congressional Medal. Mr. Warner didn't say anything about Buck. He must have written before they heard about Buck being lost in action.

He heard a voice in the intercom. It sounded like Longcor, the Bombardier.

"What's Baker doing, Keppler?" he asked.

"Reading his mail, sir."

"Good job for him. Keep him at it."

So they wanted to keep him out of the way.

"Lay off Baker, Longcor," Captain Cramer said.

Mouse Baker laid the opened letter back on the pile. He picked up the cable from the War Department. From the markings it had been kicking around some. It had been missent to his old base in England. He shrugged and tore it open and his heart almost stopped beating as he unfolded the sheet.

It was as he'd feared. The War Department didn't have any further information on Major Baker than they had sent him already.

He ripped open a V-mail letter.

It was from Mrs. Vreeland who used to be his Sunday School teacher. She wanted to tell him how sorry everybody in Newton was that Buck had been lost in action. He had their sympathy. Seemed like he'd always had everybody's back in Newton. Everybody always used to be sorry for him because he was the runt of the family and couldn't do the things that his famous brother could do.

"Buck," Eddie said softly. "You got to be alive."

It must have gone out over the intercom through his throat mike but he didn't think or care. And nobody made any cracks.

He opened another V-mail letter. This

was also from Mr. Warner. They were all so sorry about Buck.

Captain Cramer's voice came steadily over the intercom.

"Check in from your gun stations."

Mouse Baker stuffed the letters into his pocket and scrambled down into his ball-turret. There'd be action soon. A good thing. He almost hoped they'd get him. And then he suddenly wanted to live. From his ball-turret, he couldn't shoot Japs, but he could shoot Nazis if any came within his sights. He could shoot Nazis down for Buck, anyway, if he got the chance.

He heard the others checking in in order. He'd come last next to Pat Rusby in the tail. He checked in on his turn. They droned on.

From his cramped position, curled up around his tommy guns he could look out of the egg and see the other forts. They were flying in a flight, wingtip to wingtip. They looked close enough so you could step from the wingtip of one to the wingtip of another. That was the way they always flew. Close and tight so gunners could get a good chance to protect the whole flight.

HE OPENED another letter. That was from old Mr. Ellington who used to live across the street from them when they were kids and when they lived in the nice house on Bank Street when his mother had still been alive.

Mr. Ellington was very religious. He preached a sermon about being good in the face of temptation. The old man meant well.

He went on through the pack. They were all like that. Neighbors and friends had written. They had done their duty by writing their service boys of the town. They were very kind. There wasn't anything about Buck in the whole batch.

He lay there, curled in his ball-turret and the cold hand of despair clawed at his heart. He swallowed a sob for Buck that rose in his throat. And then, suddenly, for almost the first time since they'd taken off, he remembered that this was his fiftieth mission. He'd be all done after this mission. He could go home. He could go home to what?

Sweat poured out over him in spite of the coldness of the ball-turret. His last mission if he lived. His hands began shaking and he gripped his guns to help keep his nerves from flying apart. The cotton in his mouth got thick and was choking him. He was sucking on his oxygen mask and that made the whole situation all the more unbearable.

A call came through the intercom.

"Focke-Wulfs at two o'clock!"

Suddenly, he was wide awake and tense and the sweat stopped pouring out all over him.

"Where are they?" he barked into the throat mike. "High or low?"

That shouldn't have been necessary. Pat Rusby had given the warning, but maybe he wasn't too much to blame. Maybe he was tense, too.

"High," Pat said.

Mouse Baker groaned. They weren't his meat. Not unless they dived under the noses of the racing forts and came up under.

Keppler's voice barked into his phones.

"Focke-Wulfs at eleven o'clock. High."

Baker sat back and then the guns began chattering above him. He could hear the guns of all the Forts going crazy. They were being attacked from two sides and up ahead. They were being attacked and Mouse Baker didn't have a chance to fire at any of the planes.

He sat back and fingered his controls. He sat and the firing went on and the Eager Eagle shuddered from the impact of the slugs from the Nazi crates and the intercom rang with the curses of the gunners as they missed. Then Francisco cursed loud and long.

"Every one of the soandsos got away," he said.

Come on, Baker thought. Come on, you soandsos. Give me one chance for Buck. One chance. That's all I ask.

"Coming on target," Captain Cramer said, in his steady voice and now flak was bursting all around the squadron, making the big ships jump and buck like untamed things.

"Come on," Baker said. "One chance. Oh, Lord. Give me one chance for Buck."

But there wasn't anything with them in the sky but flak and Longcor spoke from his station in the nose.

"Bombardier to Pilot," he said. "Taking over."

"Take over," Cramer said.

"Roger," Longcor said. His voice was slow and steady and they could tell he was already sighting.

The Eagle was flying very steady, straight and true and suddenly she seemed to grow light and then Longcor barked:

"Bombs away!"

Mouse Baker watched the bombs go down in a full salvo. He could watch them from his ball-turret in the belly. He watched them arc gracefully from the bomb bay and then straighten out and go hurtling down for the target. He watched them as the

big ships made their turns beyond the target and started for home.

"Shucks!" Baker said. It suddenly had become a terrible thing to him that his last mission was half over. It meant that he hadn't gotten a crack at an enemy plane for Buck. It meant that the whole war, so far as he was concerned, was a flat failure and he was the biggest failure in the Air Corps.

Tears came into his eyes, not because he was sad, but because he was so mad. His eyes blurred and he couldn't see but that didn't make any difference because what was there to see.

THEY rumbled on for home and it would be just a milk run from now on. This would be his last flight and that was that. He felt like curling up in a dark corner somewhere and peacefully dying.

His brain felt numb and his whole body grew cramped and full of pain. He glanced at his wrist watch. They must be almost out of Germany now. They must be back over their own territory once more and from here on, it was just a ride home.

Suddenly, he was up as straight as he could sit in the little ball. A voice had come crashing to his ears. A voice that said:

"F.W.s at one o'clock low. Two coming up."

Captain Cramer's voice spoke gently in the phones.

"Baker. This is yours. Coming at you."

Mouse Baker was already turning his turret. It moved at record speed.

"Got 'em," he said, and his lips were tight. "I see them, sir."

The two F.W.s were coming up fast. They were coming from almost straight ahead.

"For Buck," Baker kept saying. "For Buck."

The 190s were coming up almost like climbing helicopters. They were coming up too steeply for the chin turret guns. Those guns wouldn't drop that low. But the ball-turret guns would do. Eddie Baker had them trained on the ships already and he was waiting. He was taking the one on the right first. It was the way he'd dreamed this, night after night, in his agony.

They came closer and he waited, then when they were about to open fire, he gave his guns a short squirt.

It was swell to feel those twin fifties buck in his hands. It was good to see the tracers lashing down and slamming home into that Focke-Wulf on the right. It was wonderful to see the thing leak smoke and then burst

into flame.

Baker swung his turret just slightly. It was a tricky move. He swung and he kept his guns firing until the line of his slugs slammed into the other ship. The second Focke-Wulf 190 seemed to quiver for an instant. Then it turned lazily and started plunging for the earth as his line of fire cut through the cockpit.

"He got them both!" Catlow yelled from the chin turret. "Baker, was that you? Baker got them both."

Everybody was talking on the intercom at once. Captain Cramer was almost shouting at Baker. It wasn't often that Cramer shouted.

"You hear that, you guys?" Cramer was shouting. "Baker got two at once. One burst apiece."

"I don't believe it," Pat Rusby said.

But Mouse Baker wasn't hearing much. He'd closed his eyes and he was saying softly, "Thanks. Thanks an awful lot." But he didn't seem to be talking to any of the crew.

* * * * *

Keppler and Francisco and Decker did a little dance around Baker in the waist of the Eager Eagle when he came up out of the ball. They slapped him on the back and they said things like, "You got two of the soandsos. You knocked them down. You got two in two bursts. One burst Baker. How the devil did you do it?"

"They were for Buck," Mouse Baker said. "They were for my brother, Buck."

And back at the field, after they'd landed, they gave him a little party. The enlisted men gathered around him at the bar of the PX and they drank beer and had Spam sandwiches and they told everybody else in the packed place about how Baker had knocked down two F.W.s with the first two bursts he'd ever fired at enemy planes.

"And that finished up your fifty missions, Bake," Francisco said. "You're a lucky guy."

Somebody came in with a handful of dirt. It was a gunner from the Moon over Miami.

"Hey, you forgot to eat dirt," he said. "It's a ritual, you know. You got to eat a little dirt after the fiftieth mission."

"Oh, yeah," Baker said. "I forgot. Darned if I didn't forget."

Pat Rusby laughed his head off.

"Get that mug," he said. "He finished his fifty missions and he forgets to eat dirt."

"The boy's a riot," Decker said. "He forgot." They all laughed like a flock of merry fools.

"I wish you were going to stay with us, Bake, but I don't blame you," Pop Catlow said. "You're lucky to be able to go home."

"I don't know that I won't stay," Baker said

"No kidding," Francisco said. "Stick with us until we finish our missions. How about it, Bake?"

"Yeah, stick with us," Decker said.

"I think I will," Baker said. "I like it here."

That was when some fellow came in screaming his head off.

"The war's over," he yelled. "Germany has just surrendered."

ALL the men in the place went wild. They laughed and they cried and they drank all the beer in the PX and Eddie Baker nearly got his back pounded off. It was almost as if he'd won the war single-handed. But of course he knew better than that. He was plenty satisfied with what he'd done.

He lay on his cot that night, while the rest of the fellows went dotty celebrating. Eddie Baker didn't feel like celebrating. He just lay there thinking about Buck. He hardly heard the door to his quarters open softly.

The big sergeant from the mail shack came in.

"They said you were maybe here, Baker," he said. "A cable came in a while ago. It got kind of delayed with the celebrating. I hope it ain't bad news."

Baker sat on the edge of his cot. He took hold of the cable slowly. He had a scared feeling. He tore open the envelope and the sergeant watched him for a minute. Then the sergeant looked scared and jumped back because little Eddie Baker had suddenly become a wild man.

Baker jumped off his cot and danced around, yelling.

"He's okay! He's okay! Buck's okay. He landed on an island. He's okay. He force landed on an island. He's okay."

The fellows outside tossed Eddie Baker all over the sky in a blanket, when they found out.

* * * * *

It was nice of the folks of Newton to have him up on the platform with his famous brother, Major Buck Baker, Eddie felt, months later, when they were back. It was darn nice of them. But of course they just did it because he was Buck's brother.

(Concluded on page 97)



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TARMAC TALK

(Continued from page 6)

Bills as a squeeze play would accomplish only one, that of autonomy for air.

General Arnold concurred in the recommendation that of the two courses of action—**THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SINGLE DEPARTMENT** was infinitely better for national security than the three department system. A single department for all three co-equal arms of our military forces is the logical, workable answer. This is unification, but it is also autonomy for air—**A SEPARATE AIR FORCE**.

This General Arnold did agree to—the single department, but there is much more to it than was allowed to meet the eye in the news item. He is most certainly unequivocally for a separate air force now as he has been through all of his service to this country. But he is just as certain that the future of this nation's security depends on the teamwork of **ALL** the services functioning under a single command. Our future as a nation cannot depend alone upon either land thinking, sea thinking or air thinking, but it must be united American thinking.

Future security makes it imperative that we have autonomy for air. It is obvious that the air arm should work in perfect coordination with the forces of land and sea as co-equals under one commander: an overall commander who is not bound by any overzealous concept as a mere landsman, seaman or an airman, but as an American.

It is interesting to see the present AAF commander rally to the defense of his predecessor so hotly—and to recall that both of them were among the little group of devoted disciples to the late General Mitchel who fought so bravely to keep the old Army Air Corps alive at all when the between-wars blight fell. Those fellows were and are fighters all.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WELL, the war is over for most of us, as it is for Buck Maynard, rugged-individualist ex-AAF pilot, who is the chief protagonist in the lead novelet of our next issue, **COLUMBUS WAS A SCREWBALL**, by William J. O'Sullivan. But when Buck lives up to his name and tries to buck Trans-American Airways with a little air-freight line of his own, he finds himself fighting what feels to him like World War Three.

Buck, you see, is not only the kind of a fellow who has trouble—he has as well an uncanny and unhappy knack of creating it. And this time out he gets it and makes it at once. How he fights his way through to usefulness and success makes a saga that suffers no let-down because it deals with a war not fought with bullets.

In **THE AFRICAN MISSION**, an air-

adventure novelet by Major Charley Clapp, co-featured with **COLUMBUS WAS A SCREWBALL**, the problems of Steve Benson, its Texas-born hero, are not those of business. He is asked to fly to Africa to rescue an American airman who is supposed to have crashed and been taken prisoner by a native tribe.

But it turns out to be a mission as dangerous as any thought up by airplot during the late unpleasantness II. Instead of merely seeking a crashed airman, Benson finds himself battling far-reaching and murderous antagonists whose success menaces what little peace the world has managed to achieve. This is a yarn for your memory book.

As fighter escort for these two big fellows, a full squadron of swift-moving high-flying short stories will be on the beam, accompanied by Jack Kofoed's **THRILLS IN THE AIR**.

As a matter of passing interest, it seems worthy of note that both Major Clapp and Lieutenant Colonel Kofoed served with the Eighth Air Force in England, while Captain O'Sullivan, a flying veteran of both World Wars, flew men and supplies from Natal to the Burma Hump and back again some half a hundred times in almost four years of active service. So you should get accuracy as well as drama on your next flight with **SKY FIGHTERS**!

LETTERS FROM READERS

NOW it's Kidneyfoot and Rabbitnose time again as his two personal gremlins haul in the mail sacks and strew letters in an ever-rising pile on your Skipper's desk. Sweet propeller shafts, what's this!

After all these years, Ole' Skip seems to be developing sex appeal—or something worse. A full forty percent of his letters are coming in from them things in skirts. So, a forty percent of the letter space they shall get. That's how the Skipper's heart is.

But first on the list that space allows us is an interesting note from Fred Davies—address 31 Woodlawn Road, Trentvale, Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire, England. Some of those British addresses read like a sub-sub-sub-real estate zoning development, what? Says Fred:

Dear Skipper: Well, I just received the latest issue of **SKY FIGHTERS** and I see my mention of the Curtiss Cleveland and Tarpon had you in a fog. To clear it up, the Cleveland is the equivalent of the Curtiss SB2C-4, called in America, I believe, the Helldiver. I was told while giving these kites a once over that there are only two flying in England now. The

Grumman Tarpon is the TBF-2 to you, otherwise your Avenger. Hope this puts you on the beam again.

I have seen several Junkers 52/3Hs just recently. These three-motor troop carriers are being used by the RAF for general duty. I have seen also our latest jets, the Gloster Meteor and the DH Vampire and another kite which you may not have heard about, the Hawker Fury. This single seat fighter has a 2000 horsepower radial engine.

Then I got a look at a Windsor, which is very much like the Wellington, but has a four-wheel undercart and also has four engines. And I saw my first Douglas Skymaster, the Lancasterian, take off from Shawbury, about 25 miles from here, on its recent polar flight.

We don't see many U. S. military types now, save for Dakotas and Skytrains, which are used quite a lot around here still. Well, it's time to sign off. Keep up the good stories and keep 'em flying.

Well, Fred, you certainly give us a picture of England aloft these days. When do you sleep? Or do you? Seriously, the new British types sound mighty interesting to one who loves planes. Wish we had some of our newest over there so that you could make comparisons. Keep us up to date, will you?

We warned you pee-lots about the Amazon invasion. Well, it seems to have spread overseas as well, for here's another from the tight little isle. This one was penned by Joan Griffiths, she-lot, of 112 James Street, Masbro, Ratherham, England, on RAF 45th Group Transport Command stationery as follows:

Dear Skipper: Recently I was lucky enough (perhaps that's a matter of opinion) to get hold of one of your SKY FIGHTER magazines, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Your stories were really smooth. Please keep them that way.

I also enjoyed TARMAC TALK (please, please, don't file me as one of your oddities!).

From my experience, I think that the plane mostly used by your AAF over here was the Mustang, a lovely fighter which was nearly—not quite—equal to our own advanced Spitfire.

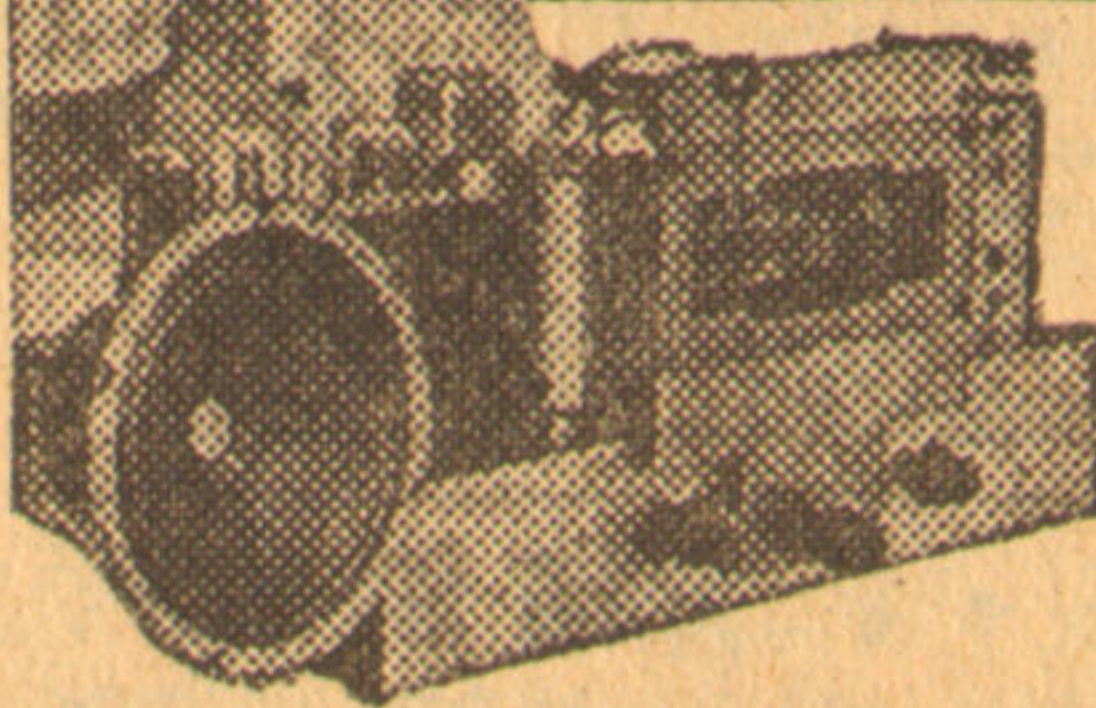
I don't know much about your Air Forces aces, but couldn't you have them in the stories too, or might there be objections? I'm sorry to take up your time with this epistle, but I thought I'd like to let you know how I enjoy and appreciate your stories. Good-by and thanks again,

A pleasure, and we really are sure of it. But, Joan, don't compare the Spitfire with the Mustang. They were designed for different purposes from the drawing board on, and each was close to supreme in its own specialties as well as able to do a pretty good job of doubling in brass when necessary.

The Spitfire, as you and all England know, was primarily an interceptor, capable of tremendously fast rate of climb to fantastic

[Turn page]

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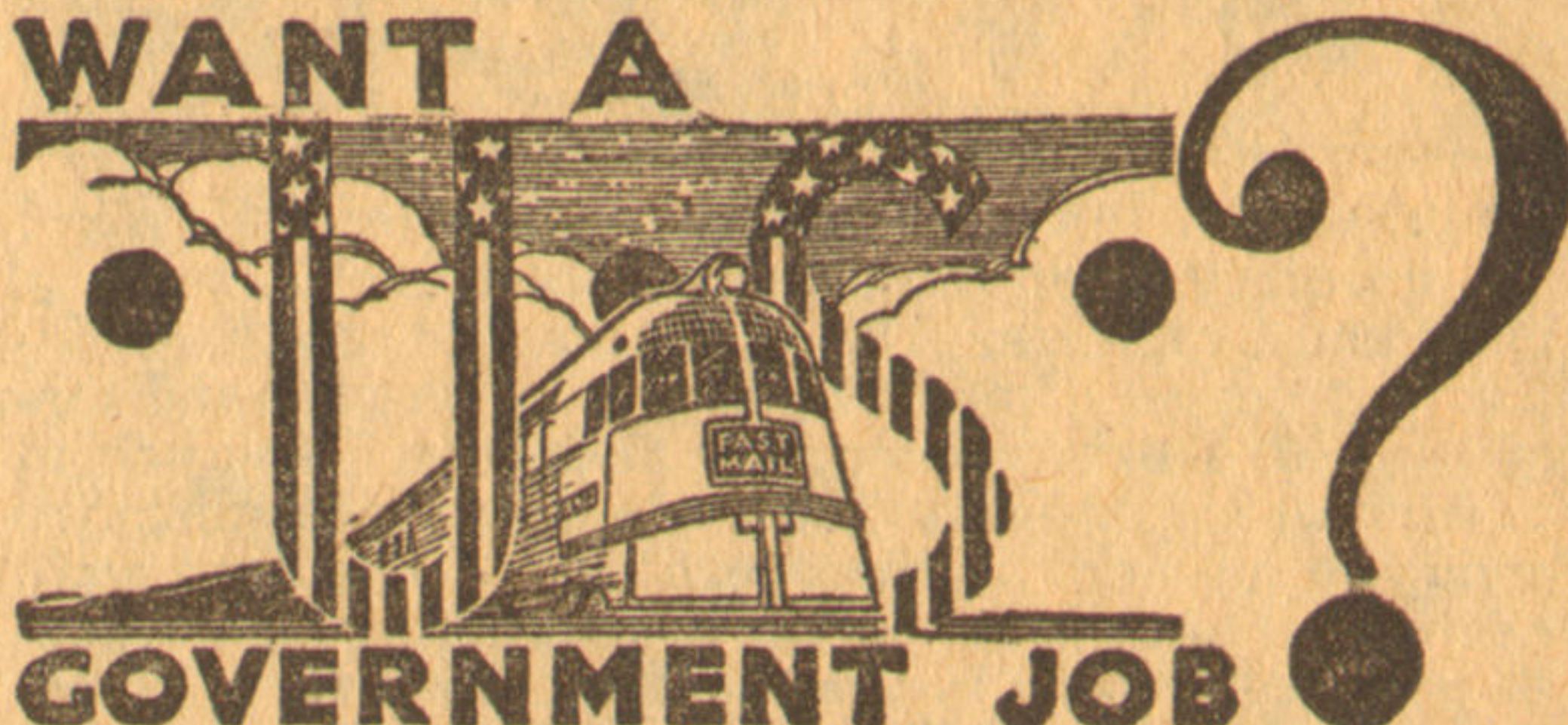
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altitudes and of great maneuverability once it got upstairs. It proved in the Battle of Britain and in a thousand battles afterward how well it could do the job.

The Mustang, on the other hand, was designed as a long range bomber escort. Slower of climb, it could reach similar altitudes and fight in them, and its range was from two to three times that of the Spitter. It was, during the latter stages of the war, the only fighter escort plane that could fly cover for the Forts and Liberators from Britain to Berlin and back.

It is undoubtedly a fortunate thing for both our countries that never the twain DID meet. Write us again, Joan.

Crossing the Atlantic in a jet-propelled hurry, we come to a missive from Pfc. Ralph Meinke, AAF ORD, Br. 4, Sqd. V, Greensboro, North Carolina, who had a piece to say, namely:

Hi, Skipper: Everyone else has had his say, so I guess I'll throw in my two cents' worth. I have been reading **SKY FIGHTERS** for quite a spell now. For my money, you're on the beam. I like nothing better than to hop in my sack with your mag after a rough day of detail in the area such as "dive bombing" cigarette butts.

Throw in my note for World War One stories, especially some of Joe Archibald's stuff if he is back. I've read his stories for many years and he rates tops on my list. I too would like some pen pals, male, female or anything else that cares to write. I'm 20, six feet tall, have brown hair and green eyes.

You sound as if Helen O'Connell should sing you, Ralph. But maybe Joan Griffiths will drop you a line. After all, an ocean is some protection, even in this rocket-shot age. Seriously, thanks for the kind sentiments, and why don't they put ash trays around in your area—or Grecian urns filled with sand. Nothing improves morals like them personal touches, or so the Skipper hears.

And now—well, well, Brooklyn's own, Shirley Rosenstock, is back, still writing from 1587 Carroll Street, You-Know-Where, and respectfully as always. Get this:

Dear Beetlebrain: I haven't written in to Tarmac Talk for quite a while. It's been a long, long time (unquote—Ed.). Just read "Top Turret Hellion" in your Spring issue and would like to know why the star of the story had to have an accent. From what I understand the men in the AAF are *supposed* to have finished high school, and I have yet to see a high school graduate with an accent like his.

I may be wrong, but doesn't it seem queer to you? In the first half of the story he had the accent, and in the remainder, he seemed to have forgotten where he left it. Explain, please.

I'll be 18 in February and as yet can't seem to convince my mother and father that I should

take flying lessons. I wish my brother would get back from Okinawa. Then the odds would be even.

Keep up the good work in SKY FIGHTERS.

Taking things in order, beetlebrain to you too, Shirley. As for high school accents, your Skipper has heard some mighty strange sounds issuing from the educated throats of numerous college graduates. Furthermore, he has never seen an accent, although his optic nerves have been distorted by some eerie stresses and strains on the language.

As for Gunner Corporal Tony Vacaro's change of speech in "Top Turret Hellion," the Skipper considers it highly probable that the cultural influence of his colleagues effected a rapid betterment of his speech. If you can think of a better one, for Pete's sake keep mum about it. Good luck on the flying lessons if the income tax bureau left your father the wherewithal.

From the lush forests and clipped emerald lawns of the heart of America's sheep country—Texas, to be exact—Corporal G. I. Hudson writes us. His exact address is Cpl. G. I. Hudson, 38715308, Mess Section, Hq. Det. WDPC, Fort Bliss, Texas. Writes Corporal Hudson (where did you dig those initials, boy?):

Hi, Skipper: Just read the Spring issue of
[Turn page]

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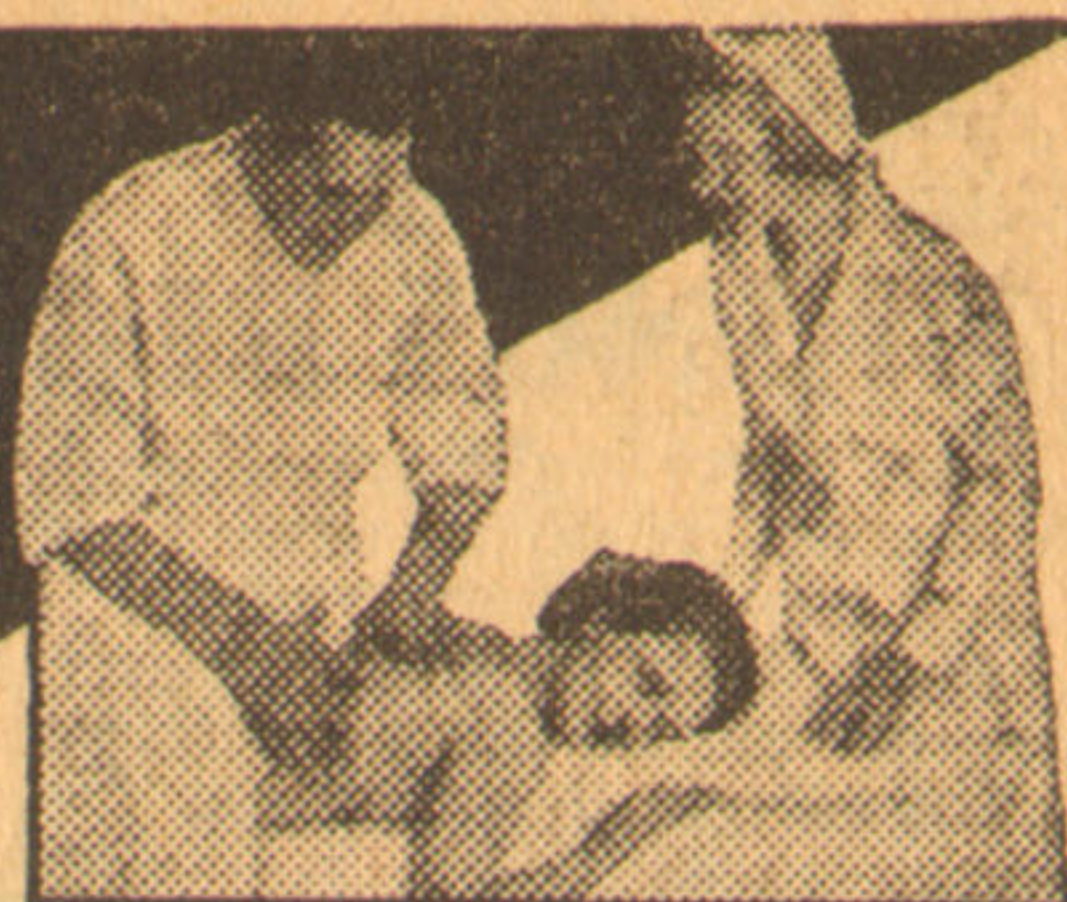
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yo all's mag, SKY FIGHTERS. TARMAC TALK was my first target. I see yo all had a coupla bombs dropped on the tarmac and sure hope Rabbitnose's false teeth ain't damaged.

Well, I reckon I got the gripes again. How about some more yarns featuring the Merchant Marine in convoys? I was a salt water slug for 15 years, till I took a change in the Army. So you yo all know why I like those yarns.

Right now the mag is swell. I don't mind paying my dime. I'm anxious to get some pen pals, any age, so do you think yo all could spare a little space for this humble letter?

Okay, Corporal G. I., it's all yo's—or should I say yo all's? Keep your flaps trimmed. We'll run Merchant Marine stories when as and if we get some good ones. Right now, they're few and far between.

Now for a letter from John A. Campbell, Uniontown, Pennsylvania, who writes in from Wenatchee, Washington. Rather far afield, aren't you, Jawn? Well, here goes:

Dear Skipper: I just finished reading your Spring issue of SKY FIGHTERS and found most of the stories fairly interesting, but I really believe that a good story about the glider pilots and combat crews that participated in practically every invasion should be printed.

Also, very little is mentioned about the C-47's that towed our gliders and carried supplies and everything else you can think of over enemy-occupied territory without even a machine-gun on their planes. They were and still are to my mind TOPS. What do you think about it, SKY FIGHTERS fans?

The Skipper thinks you have come up with a good one—but once again operating under the conditions quoted to Corporal Hudson, the G.I. menace. But we'll try to stir the authors up on this as the chaps you mention certainly do deserve more of a break than they have received to date.

Next comes a brief shee-lot note from Alaska, way up no'th. Thence, Miss Norma Ann Peterson, of False Pass, speaks as follows:

Dear Skipper: For three or four years I've enjoyed reading SKY FIGHTERS, and TARMAC TALK has been and still is my favorite department. Who is this Mr. Berne? In my opinion, he's just a wrinkled prune!

People are always complaining about the stories, by all I've got to say about them is they're simply super duper! Let's have more like "Mission to Hell." By the way, I'm on the lookout for pen pals, so anyone who would care to write will be more than welcome. Keep up the good work!

Thanks for the valiant defense, Norma Ann. Personally, the Skipper feels rather grateful to Mr. Slow Berne. If he hadn't written as he did, you wouldn't have rallied around so nobly.

Methinks we should get up a fund to buy

him a trophy of appreciation—perhaps a silver cigarette lighter in the shape of a DC-4 with a small dash of plutonium in its fuselage. Okay? Oh, and Norma Ann—please, not everybody always complains about the stories. Our sensitive empennage is aching.

Now we hear from Ex-Bombardier A. G. Geils, Sergeant, R.A.A.F., who writes from 561 East Hastings Street, Vancouver, British Columbia. Says the sergeant:

The Spring issue of your magazine, SKY FIGHTERS, was the first one of its kind I have read, and I must say that I liked it very much. Let's have more stories in the style of "The Kamikaze Kid."

We'll do the best we can, Sergeant Geils, so keep your props feathered. And now here's one from the junior distaff side, namely Evangeline "Lefty" Bernal, 427 East 30th Street, Los Angeles 11, California. She tells us:

All my girl friends think I'm crazy because I'm always talking about planes and reading anything that concerns them. I read SKY FIGHTERS whenever I can get it. There hasn't been one story that I haven't liked. I'm very interested in planes and my favorites are the P-51, the P-38, the P-39 and the P-61. I'm

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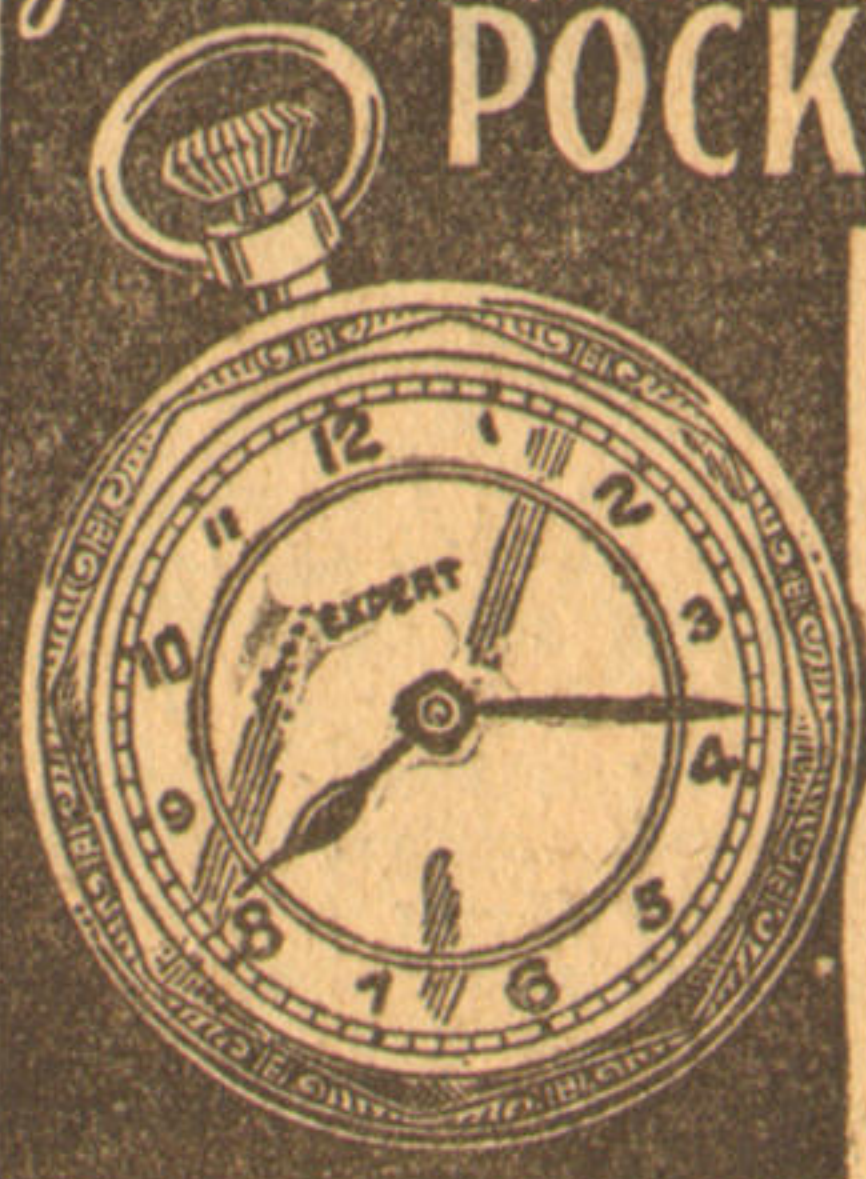
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to securely hold a rupture up and in where it belongs and yet
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five feet tall, 16½ years old and hope to be a
pilot some day.

Keep after it, Lefty. Amelia Earhardt
didn't get that way by playing with dolls or
swooning at Sinatra. Nor did Jacqueline
Cochrane.

Final spot on the tarmac goes to another
Canadian, Ken Appleby, of 1079 Dufferin
Street, Toronto, Ontario—say, what's hap-
pened to all you U.S.A. pee-lots? Ken gives
our magazine a rating as follows:

Dear Skipper: I have just finished the
Spring issue of SKY FIGHTERS and have
decided to give you the following opinions con-
cerning it—

- (1) The Kamikaze Kid—perfect
- (2) Flight for the Dead—perfect
- (3) Mister Rodger's Wingman—fair
- (4) Mission No. 50—good
- (5) Top Turret Hellion—good
- (6) China Cyclone—not bad
- (7) Air-Cooled—good
- (8) Sky Route to Hell—poor

Although I hate to say it, the Lightnings on
page 62 at the front of "China Cyclone" are
lousy. How about some stories on the less-
known planes, such as the Lancaster, Halifax,
Typhoon, Marauder, Seafire, etc. Also World
War One stories wanted. I agree with Rich-
and Morris and the others about the Vought
Corsair being one of the best planes now in the
air.

On the whole, you done noble by us, Ken,
so thanks. Stories about the "little known"
planes you mention have appeared in SKY
FIGHTERS during the war years and there
will be more in the future.

Well, that's that for this trip. But before
signing off, the Skipper would like to remind
all of you again about our nationwide club
for readers, **AIRMEN OF AMERICA**,
which is still open for membership. There
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Remember, please, to address all letters
and postcards to The Editor, SKY FIGHT-
ERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16,
N. Y. Thanks, everybody, and stay on the
beam!

—THE EDITOR.

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ONE-BURST BAKER (Concluded from page 89)

He was mighty proud of Buck. He'd always been proud of Buck. He sat straight and happy when Buck got up to speak. But what was that brother of his saying?

"I know that what I'm about to tell you is going to come as a surprise to my brother, Eddie," Buck was saying. "It so happens that the ways of the War Department are long and tedious. They never make an announcement of this kind without being certain. However, after all figures have been checked, it has been decided that my brother was the man who fired the last shot—in fact, the last few shots to be fired in the operations of E.T.O. And he got two enemy planes with those last bursts."

The folks of Newton went crazy down around the platform. And when they had quieted down, Buck said further:

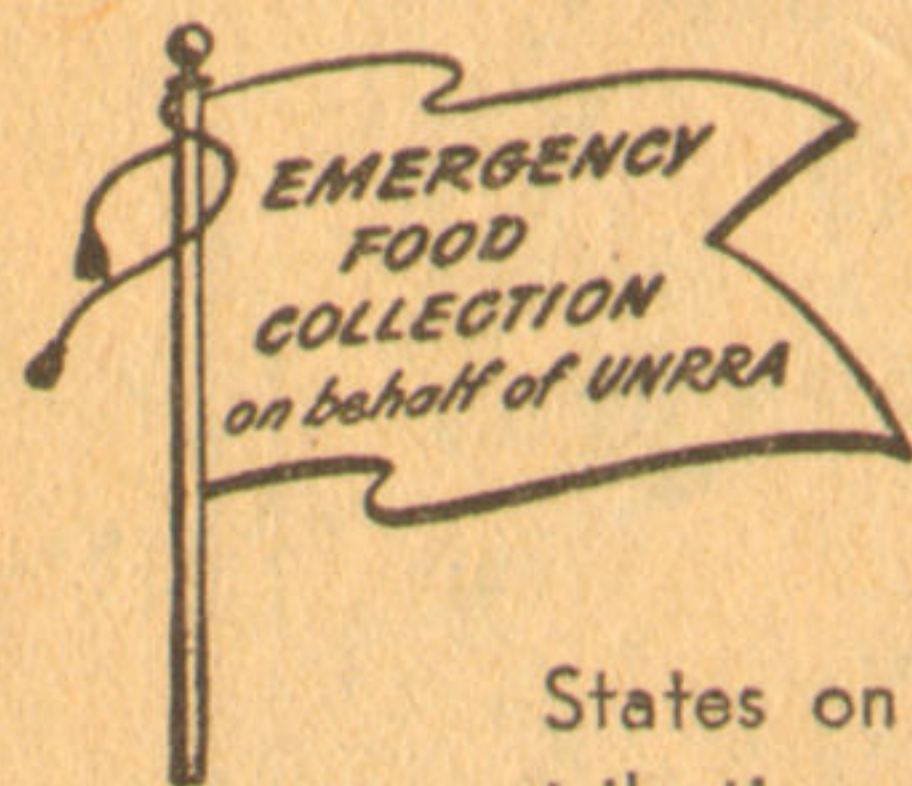
"I've been granted the added honor of pinning the Distinguished Flying Cross on Sergeant Eddie Baker for exceptional service in the line of duty."

They cheered and yelled for Eddie to make a speech. His knees wobbled and his throat was dry as he got up before those people he'd known all his life.

"Well, I haven't anything to say folks, really," he said. "My brother, here, is the hero of the family."

But it was all very strange. They rushed up over the platform and they shook Eddie's hand and slapped him on the back.

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AT THIS moment a quarter of the world's population is facing death from sheer starvation. The Emergency Food Collection, now under way throughout the United

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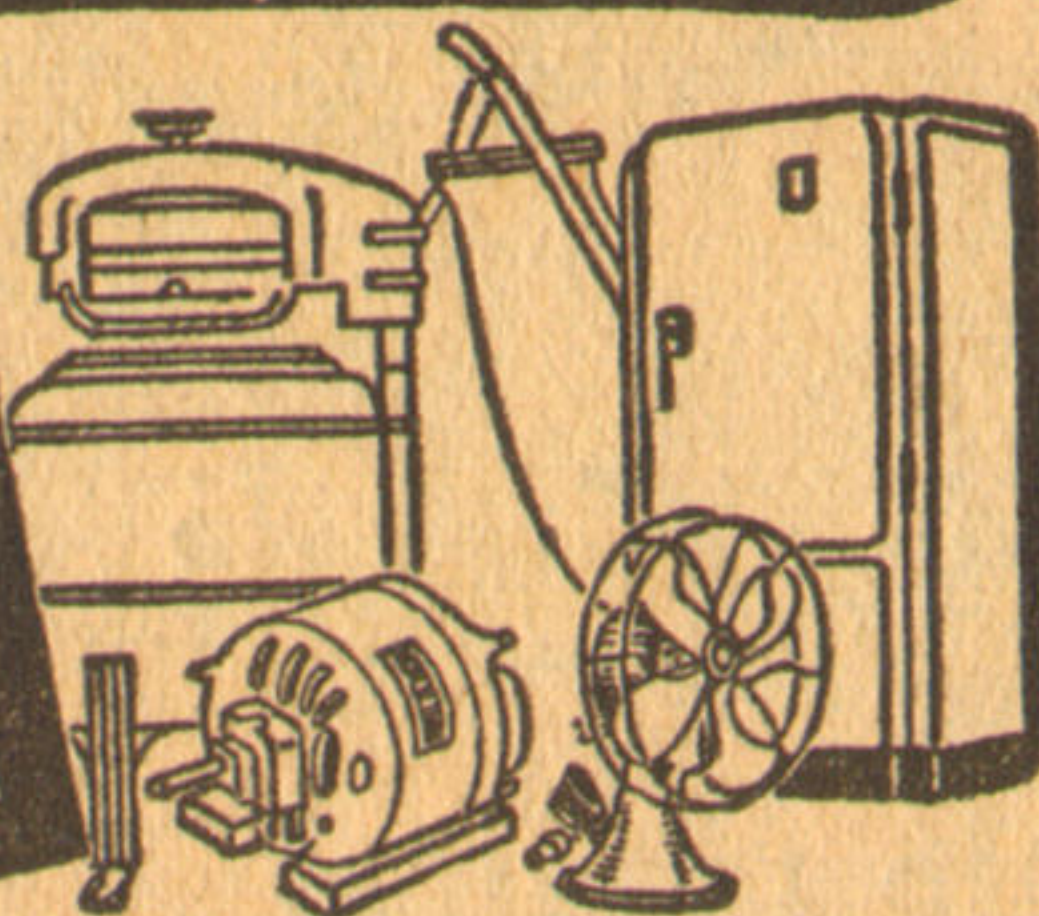
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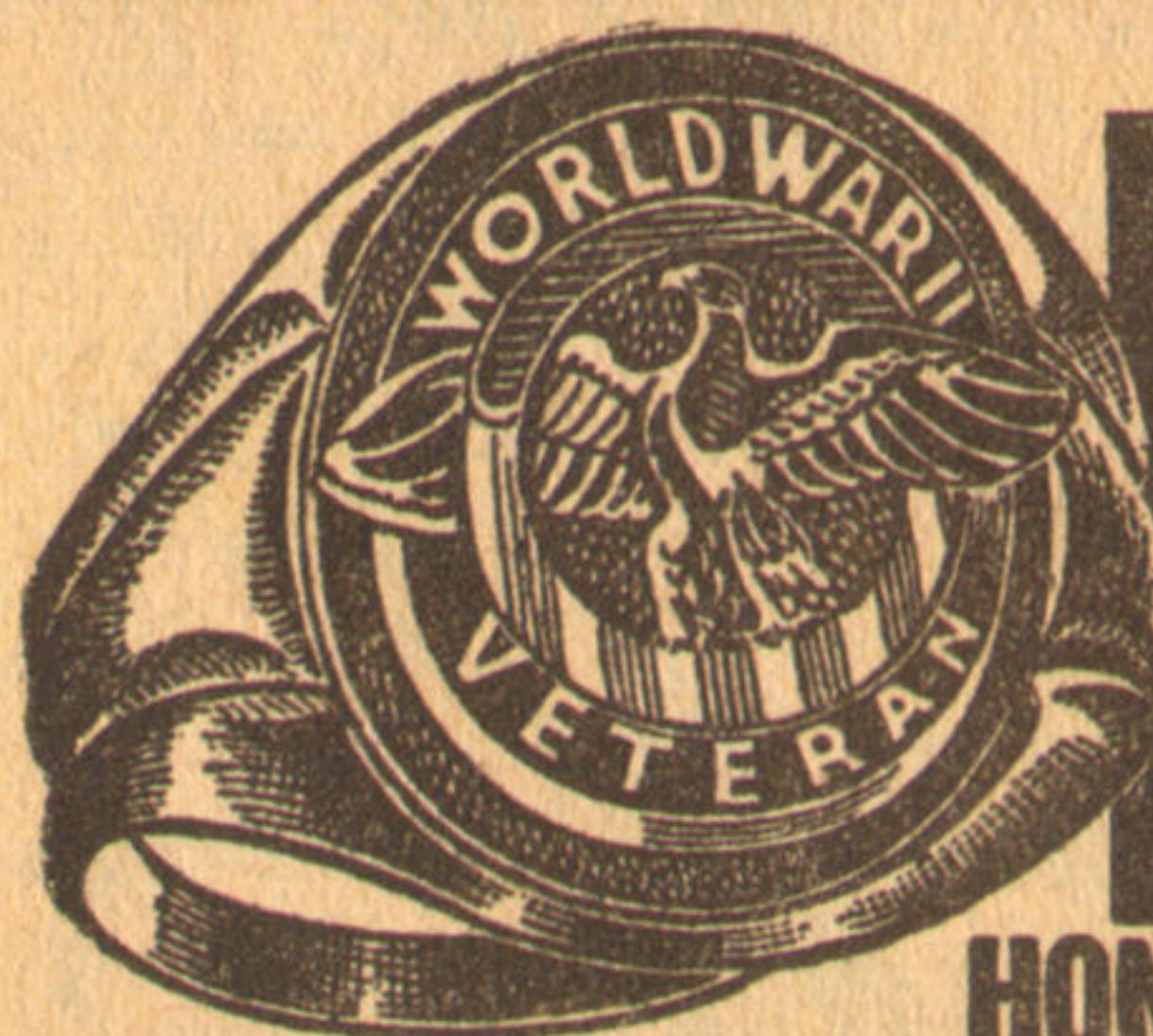
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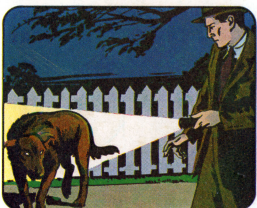
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