

SPRING  
ISSUE

20c

# SKY FIGHTERS

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

AND

*Three Complete Novelets*

## ACE OF DIAMONDS

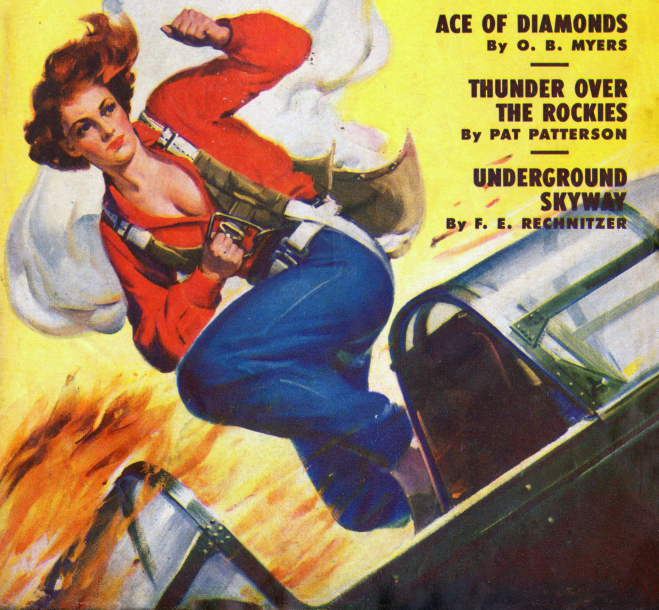
By O. B. MYERS

## THUNDER OVER THE ROCKIES

By PAT PATTERSON

## UNDERGROUND SKYWAY

By F. E. RECHNITZER





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# SKY FIGHTERS

XXXVIII, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Spring Issue

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# BE A SUCCESS AS A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

**TWO  
FREE BOOKS  
SHOW HOW  
MAIL COUPON**

**America's Fast Growing Industry**

## I TRAINED THESE MEN AT HOME

### OWNS SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS

"Today I am considered an expert Radio-Television Technician. I have four employees working in my shop. Repair business has doubled."—PAUL MILLER, Toledo, Ohio.

### RADIO ENGINEER ABC NETWORK

"4 years ago, I was a bookkeeper with a hand-to-mouth salary. Now I am a Radio Engineer with key station of the ABC network."—NORMAN H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.

### \$5 TO \$10 WEEK IN SPARE TIME

"While learning, made \$5. to \$10 a week in spare time. Now have a spare time shop in my home and earn as high as \$25 a week."—LEANDER ARNOLD, Pontiac, Michigan.

### SERVICING BUSINESS PROFITABLE

"For the past two years, I have been operating my own Servicing business. Net profit, \$6,850. N.R.I. training made it possible."—PHILIP G. BROGAN, Louisville, Kentucky.

### GETS FIRST JOB THROUGH N.R.I.

"My first job, with KDRL, was obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. Am now Chief Engineer, Police Radio Station WQOX."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.

### SEES PROFIT IN RADIO-TELEVISION

"I am operating my own Radio Sales and Service business. With FM and Television, we are looking forward to a very profitable future."—ALBERT PATRICK, Tampa, Florida.

### SPARE TIME SERVICE PAYS WELL

"Work only in spare time at Radio and average about \$40 a month. Knew nothing about Radio before enrolling with N.R.I."—SAMUEL T. DEWALD, St. Clair, Pennsylvania.

**Offers You All Three**

## 1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

As part of my servicing course, I send you SPECIAL BOOKLETS starting the day you enroll that show how you can make \$5, \$10 or more a week EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. Tester you build with parts I send helps.

## 2. GOOD PAY JOB

Your next step is a good job installing and servicing Radio-Television sets, or becoming boss of your own Radio-Television Sales and Service Shop, or getting a good job in a Broadcasting Station. In 1945, there were 948 Radio Stations. Today, about 2,700 are on the air! Result—thousands of qualified men stepped into good jobs. Then add developments in FM, Two-Way Radio, Police, Aviation, Marine, Micro-wave Relay Radio. Think what this means! New jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

## 3. BRIGHT FUTURE

And think of the opportunities in Television. Only 19 Stations were on the air in 1947. Today, more than fifty. And the experts say there will be over 1,000 within three years. Manufacturers are producing over 100,000 Television sets a month. Be a successful Radio-Television Operator or Technician... get in line for success and a bright future in America's fastest-growing industry!

# I Will Train You at Home You Practice Servicing or Communications with MANY KITS

I've trained hundreds of men with no previous experience to be successful TECHNICIANS. I will train you, too. Or now you can enroll for my NEW practical course in Radio-Television Communications. Train for your FCC operator's or technician's license. You learn Radio-Television theory from clear, illustrated lessons in my tested home study courses.

As part of both my Servicing and Communications course, I send you MANY KITS of modern equipment that "bring to life" theory you learn.

Building circuits, conducting experiments with them, introducing and repairing defects, gives you valuable, practical experience. (Some of the equipment you get is shown below.) Everything I send is yours to keep.

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### You Build This TRANSMITTER

As part of my New Communications course, I send parts to build this low-power broadcasting Transmitter that shows how to put a station "on the air." Perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, conduct many tests, experiments. It's yours to keep.

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National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH  
RECEIVER SERVICING

How to Be a  
Success  
in RADIO-  
TELEVISION





**H**OW far back can you remember? Most of us, including your Skipper, aren't nearly old enough to recall picking up the newspaper, one bright morning back in 1903, and reading an obscure item about a pair of characters named Wilbur and Orville Wright getting off the ground in a flying machine at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

But I'll bet there's not one kiwi among you who can't remember the day when all airplanes had props and when jets were still a pipe-dream of the future. Many of you, too, digging way back in your think tanks, can recall when planes customarily had two wings instead of one. But did you know it was a hotrock flier named Frank Hawks who was largely responsible for the changeover?

Let's refresh our memories a bit. Let's rev our props, give the throttle a shove, and take a quick hop back to the gold-fleeced 1920's—before prosperity made its well-known crash-landing. Now, unfastening our safety belts, let's step down and see what we can see. Ah, we're right in the middle of that wild-and-wooly stunt era, when scarcely a week passed without somebody dragging a plane out of a barn and taking off non-stop for Europe, India or—unfortunately, too often for oblivion.

### Blood, Sweat—and Jeers

Yes, cloud-busters, the price of air progress has not been cheap. Undoubtedly, many lives have been sacrificed needlessly, but that's the way it was. You see, since direct government encouragement was largely lacking, most pioneer flights had to be in the nature of stunts to get backing. Their purpose, primarily, was to advertise some product—not to add to the fund of flying lore.

Many of these pioneer fliers had the

best planes and devices the era afforded, but others did not and it was quite some time before Federal control finally cracked down on foolhardy flights made with inadequate equipment. But even the failures increased our knowledge—for they taught us what *not* to do.

When the *Tradewind*, back in 1931, attempted a trans-Atlantic flight via Bermuda and the Azores, the purpose was to demonstrate the feasibility and safety of a southern, all-year route for transport and freight flying. They failed. But by their failure they succeeded in proving something entirely different—the need for carburetor icing equipment on these trans-oceanic hops.

But let's consider some of the pioneer successes, shall we? Of course, the classic of them all, the Charles A. Lindbergh flight to Paris in the now historic *Spirit of St. Louis*, inaugurated the era of trans-Atlantic flying, though it was still to be three years before the first East to West crossing from Paris to New York was accomplished—by Coste and Bellonte in the *Question Mark*.

### A Record Maker

That *Question Mark*, incidentally, was quite a ship. In it, the year before the Atlantic flight, five men stayed aloft over 150 hours, not only to establish a world's endurance record, but to demonstrate the feasibility of mid-air refueling. And mid-air refueling, guys and gals—mark your Skipper's word—is something we are going to hear a lot of in the not too distant future.

Remember Wiley Post and his famous Wasp-engined Lockheed, *Winnie Mae*? That was another sweet ship. It not only hung up more records than you could shake a logbook at, but set a milestone

(Continued on page 8)



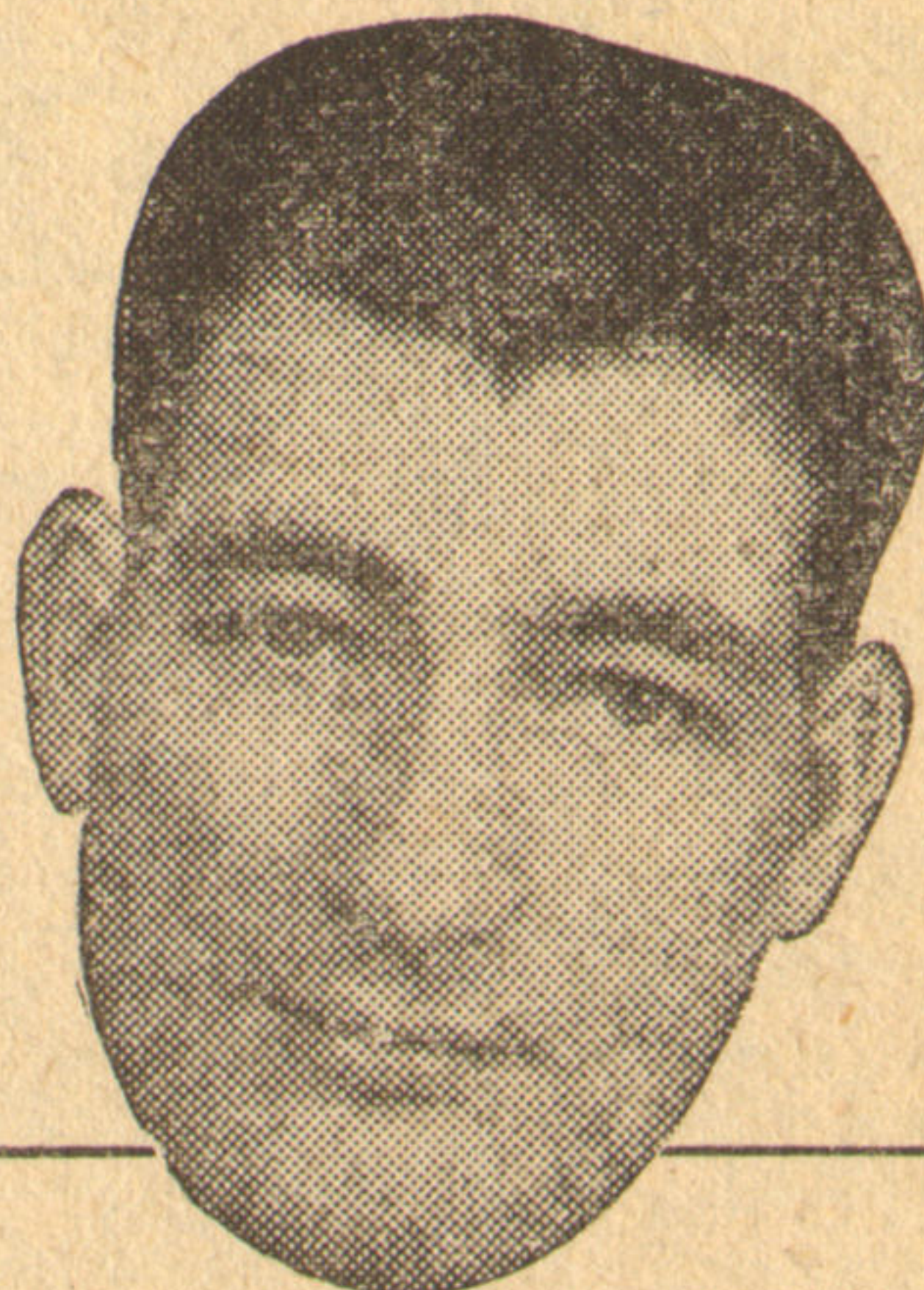
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Eng.<br><b>Stationary Eng'r's Courses</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaking<br><input type="checkbox"/> Combustion Engineering<br><input type="checkbox"/> Engine Running<br><input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineering<br><input type="checkbox"/> Power Plant Eng'r's | <b>Mech. Drafting</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Mech. Drafting<br><input type="checkbox"/> Ship Fitting<br><input type="checkbox"/> Toolmaking<br><input type="checkbox"/> Car Inspector<br><input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engr. | <b>Textile Courses</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing<br><input type="checkbox"/> Loom Fixing<br><input type="checkbox"/> Textile Designing<br><input type="checkbox"/> Woolen Manufacturing<br><b>Business and Academic Courses</b><br><input type="checkbox"/> Accounting<br><input type="checkbox"/> App. Psychology<br><input type="checkbox"/> Business Administration<br><input type="checkbox"/> Bus. Correspondence<br><input type="checkbox"/> Certified Public Accounting<br><input type="checkbox"/> Commercial<br><input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accounting<br><input type="checkbox"/> Federal Tax<br><input type="checkbox"/> Foremanship<br><input type="checkbox"/> Good English<br><input type="checkbox"/> Higher Mathematics<br><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Supervision<br><input type="checkbox"/> Motor Traffic<br><input type="checkbox"/> Retailing<br><input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship<br><input type="checkbox"/> Sign Lettering<br><input type="checkbox"/> Spanish<br><input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management<br><input type="checkbox"/> Advertising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping<br><input type="checkbox"/> Bus. 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## TARMAC TALK

(Continued from page 6)

in design. Its molded wood monocoque construction was the prototype of modern plastic-plywood planes.

And remember the U.S. Army's round-the-world flight in 1924? Yes, believe it or not, it took them nearly six months to do it! The ideas they gathered on structural changes and maintenance, however, contributed enormously toward the fast, foolproof flights we know today.

### Over the Ice Cap

A flight from Russia, which ended in California, back in 1937, was for the purpose of making a close-range study of operation under severe Arctic conditions. Experts say that data gathered then was an invaluable factor in the Reds' great winter air war successes against the Nazis.

Another pioneer Arctic flight was made by Captain George Hubert Wilkins, nine years before the Russian hop. Its purpose: to blaze a transpolar air path. You see, the boys in the know, have long said that the Arctic is the air trade route of the future. But as you are all well aware, it has yet to pan out.

Which brings your Skipper back to that fine gentleman, Frank Hawks, whom we mentioned at the beginning of this spiel. In his great ship, the *Texaco 13*, he set no less than thirteen speed records. But more important than that, he set the pattern for plane design as we know it today. For his ship was a low-wing monoplane, and its amazing speed and reliability started biplanes on the way out!

What do the days ahead hold for flying? You'll agree with your Skipper, I know, when he says that the young aviation enthusiasts of today will be the men who design, make and fly—the planes of tomorrow!

Will you be among them?

### LETTERS FROM THE READERS

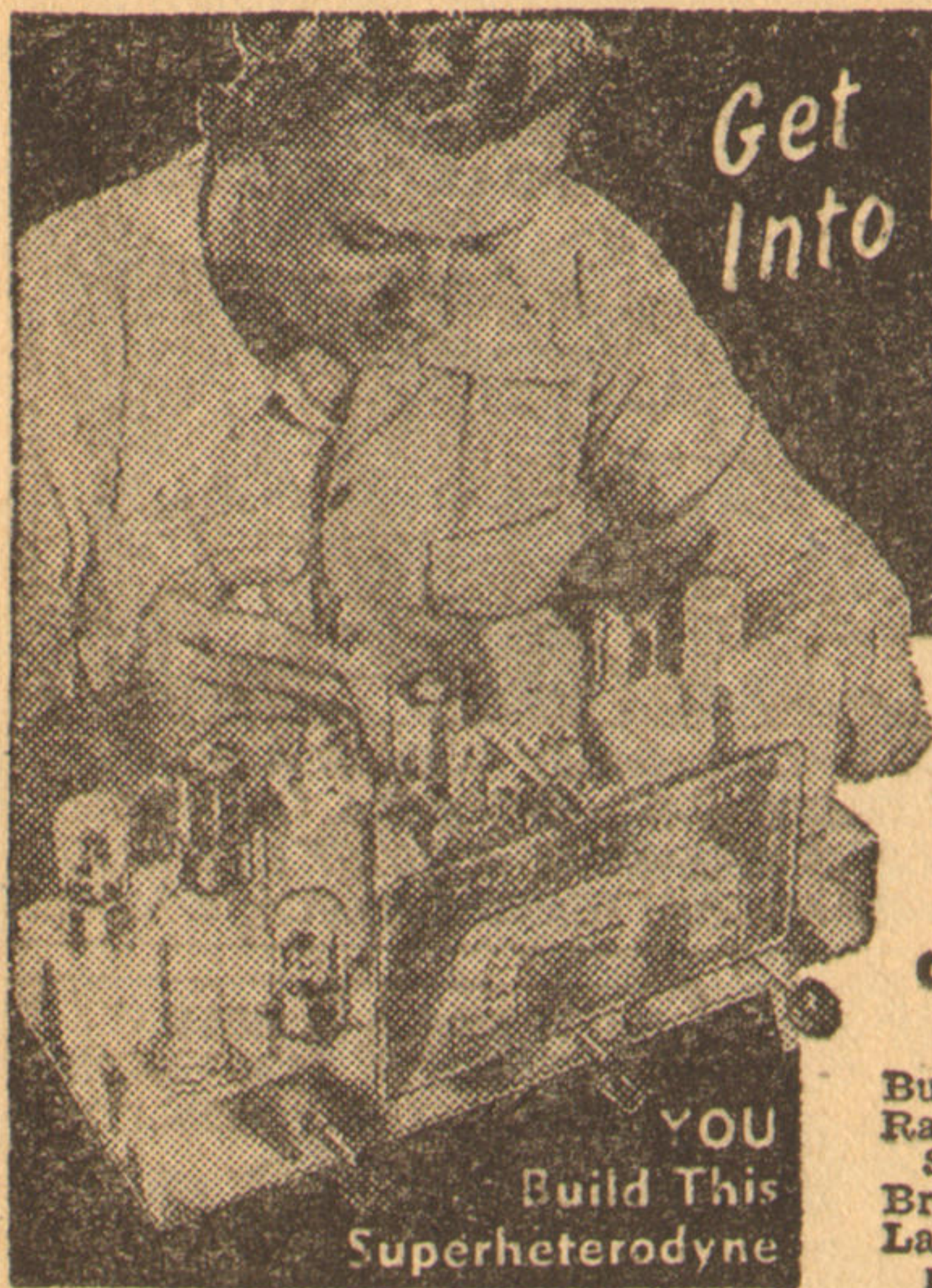
**N**OW is the time to buzz the old mail-bag and see what gives. A quick reconnaissance shows plenty of fine letters—a few compliments and a few  
(Continued on page 126)



Get  
Into

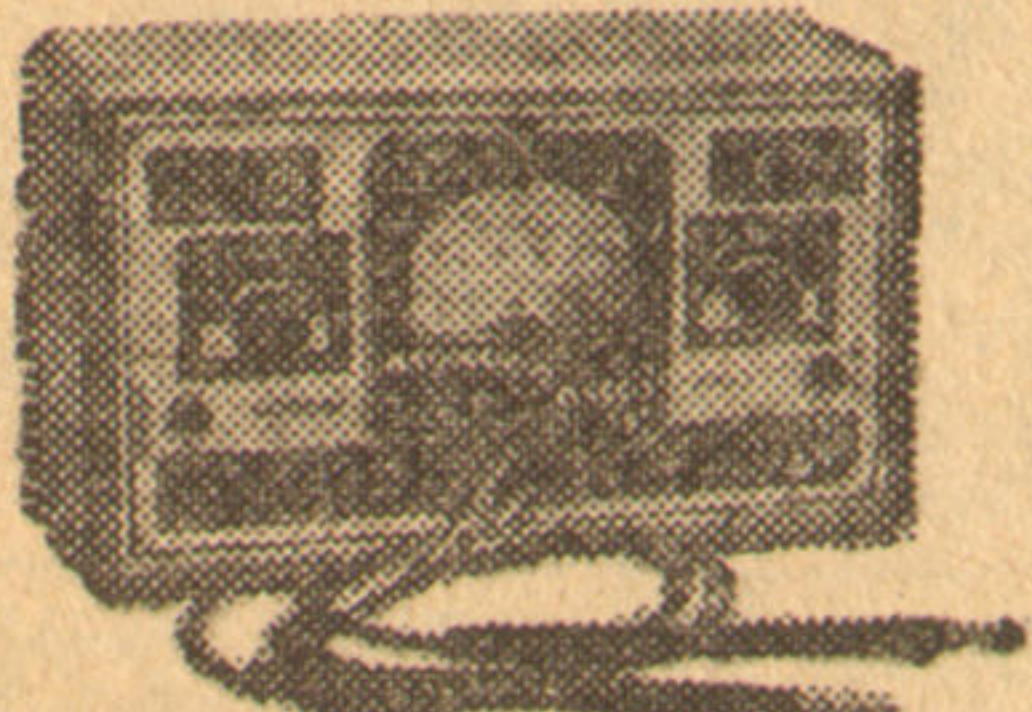
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PROFESSIONAL MULTITESTER!**

You will use this professional instrument to locate trouble or make delicate adjustments—at home—on service calls. You will be proud to own this valuable equipment. Complete with test leads.

### SIGNAL GENERATOR



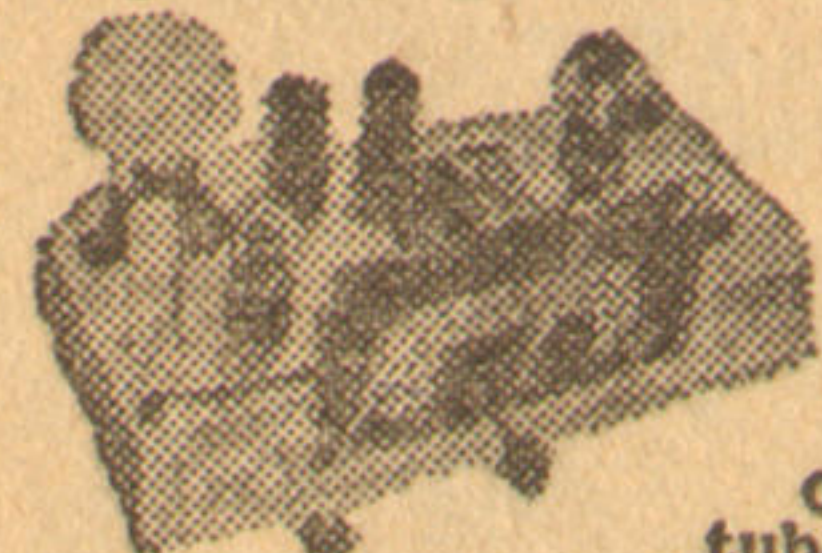
You construct the Transatron Signal Generator shown here, demonstrating Transatron principles in both R.F. and A.F. stages. You study negative type oscillators at first hand.

### AUDIO OSCILLATOR

An electronic device, which produces audio-frequency signals for modulating R.F. (radio frequency) carrier waves, testing A.F. (audio frequency) amplifiers, speakers, etc.



### T.R.F. RECEIVER



You build several T.R.F. Receivers, one of which, a 4-tube set, is shown here. You learn construction, alignment, make receiver tests, and do trouble shooting.

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Police Radio

And scores of other good jobs  
in many related fields

### YOU CONDUCT MANY EXPERIMENTS LIKE THESE!

Checking action of condensers  
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Experiments with resonance  
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Calibrating oscillators  
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Practical experience in receiver trouble shooting  
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Experiments with audio oscillators  
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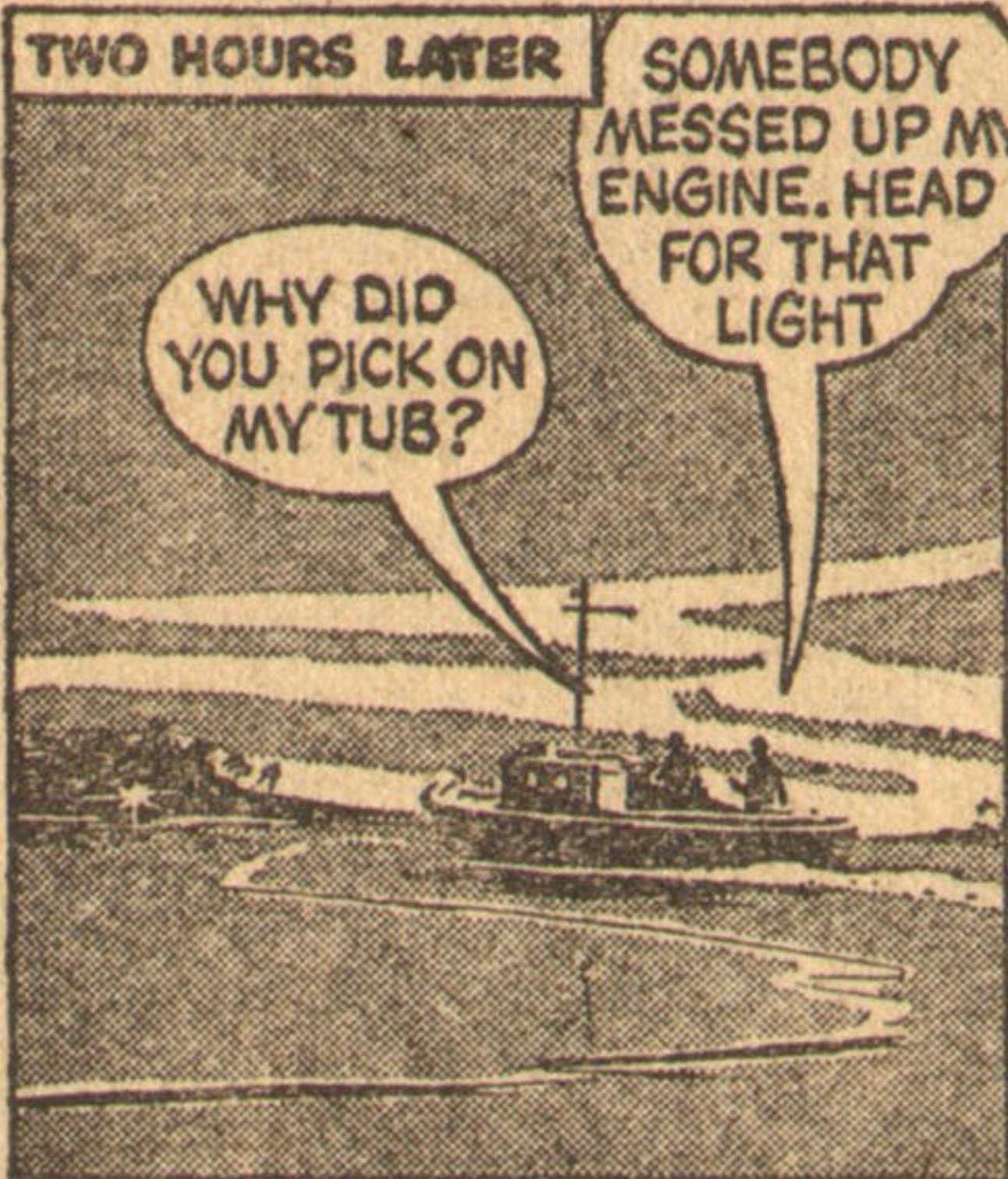




# AND THEN JEFF SPRUNG THE TRAP...



TIED UP TO A LONELY DOCK IN A SMALL SOUTHERN BAY, JEFF BELL, "TROPICAL TRAMP," IS SPENDING A QUIET EVENING ABOARD HIS BATTERED LAUNCH, WHEN...



TWO HOURS LATER

WHY DID YOU PICK ON MY TUB?

SOMEBODY MESSSED UP MY ENGINE. HEAD FOR THAT LIGHT



HURRY UP, YOU!

THESE THINGS ARE HEAVY

ONE MORE BOX, PETE



HEAVE TO!

SO! IT WAS A PLANT! DUMP THOSE PLATES!

HOLD IT! I'M TAKING OVER NOW!



LATER

TRAP WORKED. COUNTERFEITERS LED ME TO CACHE. BOTH CAPTURED, ALONG WITH PLATES. BELL

I'LL BE GLAD TO SHED THIS BEACHCOMBER RIG. CAN I CLEAN UP HERE?

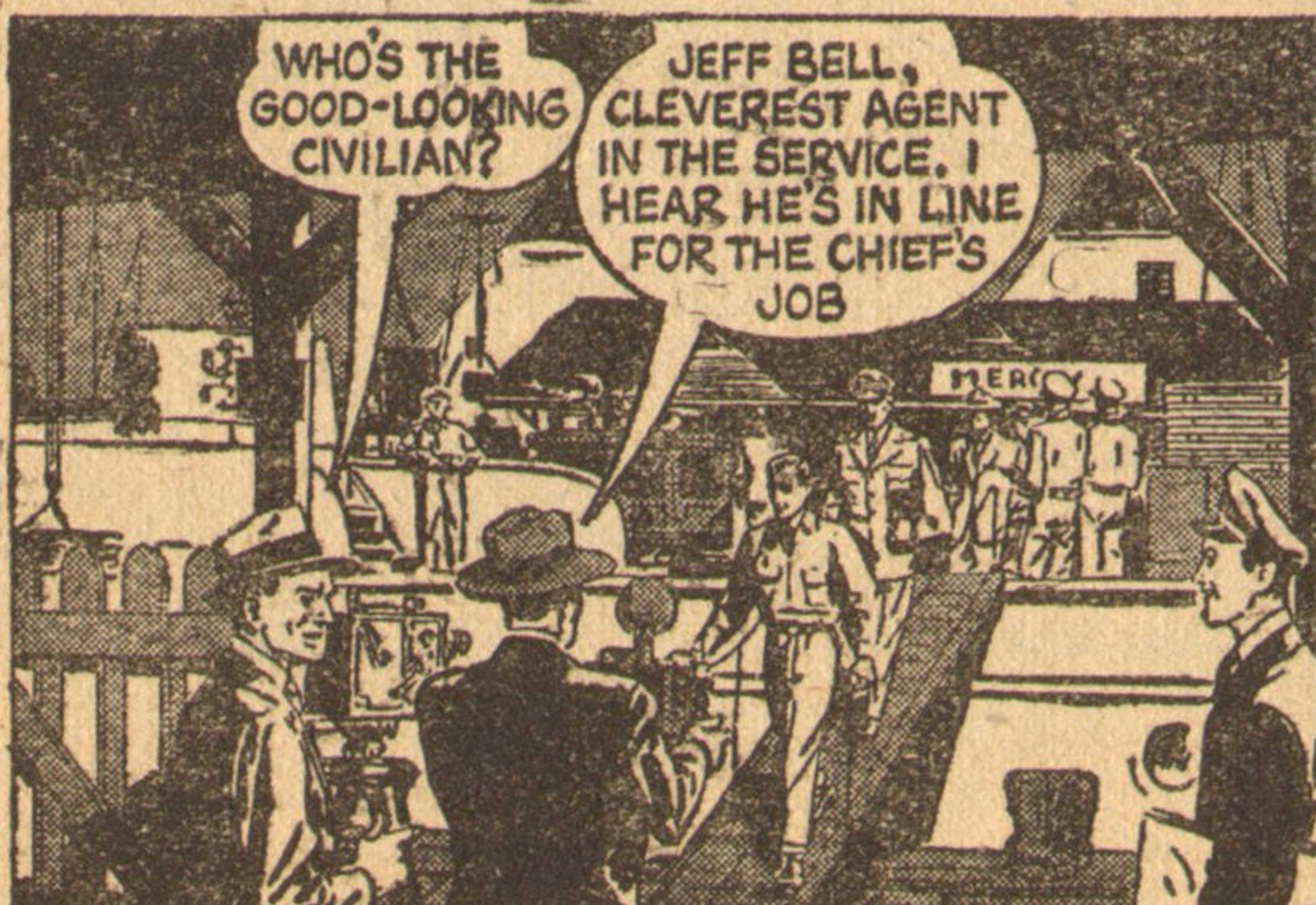


HERE'S MY RAZOR AND SOME SHORE CLOTHES



WONDERFUL BLADE YOU'VE GOT HERE! I CAN'T RECALL A SMOOTHER, EASIER SHAVE!

THIN GILLETTES GO OVER BIG ON THIS SHIP. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN



WHO'S THE GOOD-LOOKING CIVILIAN?

JEFF BELL, CLEVEREST AGENT IN THE SERVICE. I HEAR HE'S IN LINE FOR THE CHIEF'S JOB

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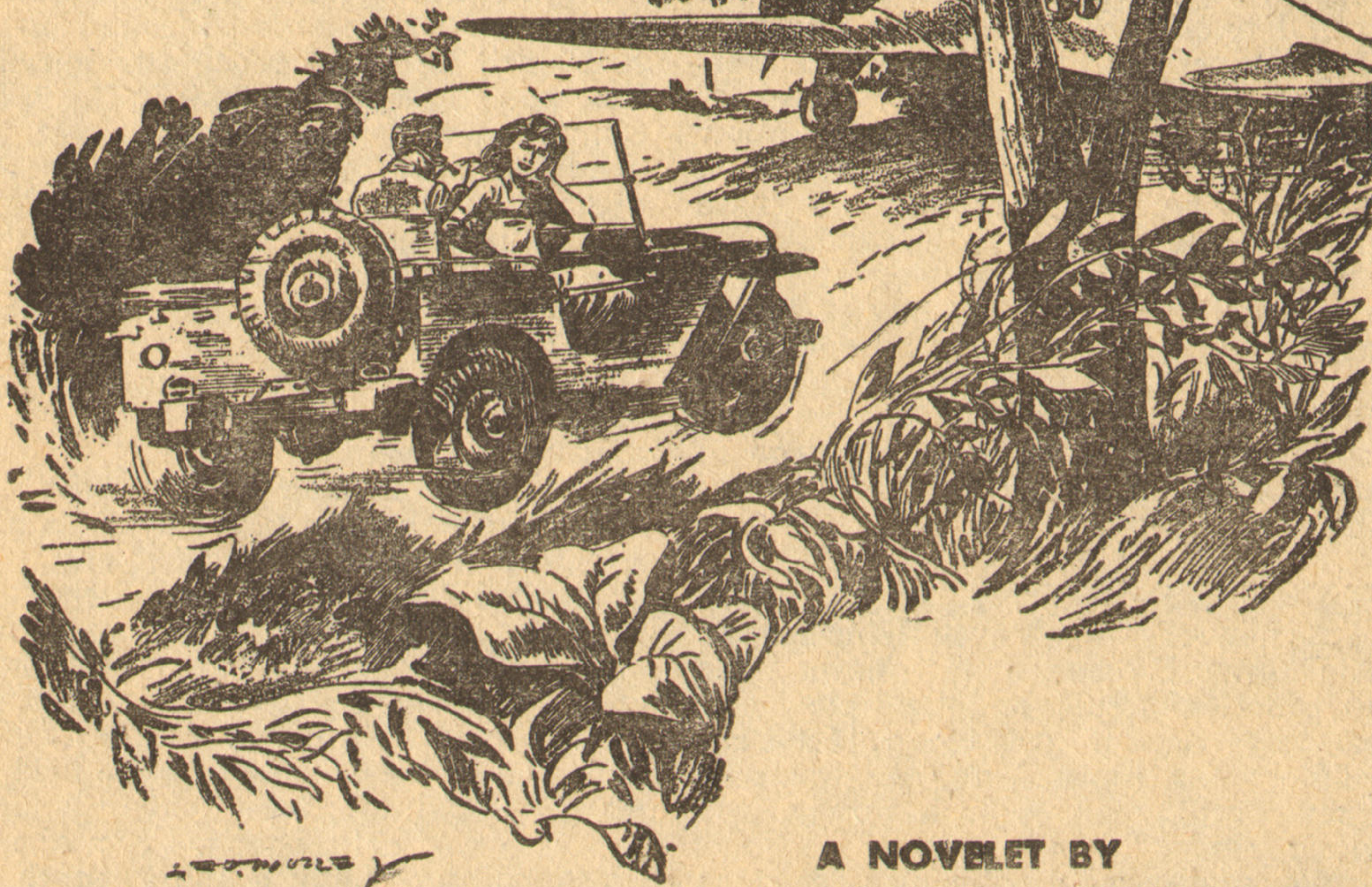


NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES



# ACE OF DIAMONDS

*Death is Torrey's co-pilot when  
he flies that battered  
C-47 into Brazil*



A NOVELET BY  
**O. B. MYERS**

## CHAPTER I

### *Unlucky Co-Pilot*

**T**ORREY SUDDEN, taking a last deep drag from the cigarette, slid back the window on the left side of the cockpit a couple of inches. He held the butt close to the opening. When his fingers relaxed their grip, what was left of the cigarette was sucked through and

instantly whisked away by the slipstream.

It fell, he observed, into Brazil.

He grinned his slow, crooked grin, thinking of all the various lands and seas into which his cigarette butts had fallen within the last few days. Florida, the



# *A Flying Fool Breaks All Records as He Takes*

Caribbean, Puerto Rico, the Windward Islands, Trinidad, and—only this morning—British, French, and Dutch Guiana. And now Brazil—and it would be a long time before his butts again fell outside these far-flung boundaries.

He left the window open, but it didn't do much good. It was hot, and getting hotter, even at four thousand feet. To double that altitude would take only a few minutes, and would of course lift him into a cooler stratum. But climbing meant extra gas consumption, and Belem was still many hundreds of miles ahead. He carefully checked his fuel tanks, and re-made the quick mental calculations which he had already made a half a dozen times.

Had he been flying for any commercial airline, even a cargo carrier, he would have turned back for Cayenne. The airlines operate on a generous margin of safety. No pilot would think of filing a flight plan which did not allow at least a couple of hours' extra fuel, enough to reach more than one alternate port in case the destination should for any reason be closed down. Alternate airports in the neighborhood of Belem are few, and—like everything else in Brazil—far between. He figured to reach Belem with actually less than an hour in his tanks. Yet he made no move to turn, although he did forego the climb to a cooler level.

**H**E WAS not flying for an airline now. He wasn't even flying for the Air Force. He was, at last, beyond the jurisdiction of rules and flight plans and safety factors. He was flying, if not absolutely for himself, for a boss who knew nothing about such things, and cared less.

Torrey was making his own decisions in these matters, and some of them, he could foresee, were going to be much tougher than this one. Before he got through, he was going to have to squeeze the last gasping mile out of this old surplus C-47 more than once, with his only alternate choice a belly landing in a river marsh deep in the fevered and trackless jungle of the Amazon.

There was one thing about Belem, as he remembered from the days of '43 when he had been flying C-54s for Amer-

ican on the lifeline to Dakar and Tunisia. You could pretty well rely on the weather, by the season. In the rainy season it was sure to be foul, so that a man had to feel his way in along the beam on instruments, through a sky so loaded with water that he practically had to shovel it out of the way with a long-handled spoon. In the dry season, however, it was equally sure to be fair, with a great brass ball of a sun blazing down from a cloudless sky and every pilot who warmed up his engines raising a billowing cloud of dust.

With a shrug, he quit worrying about reaching Belem.

He lifted his hand from the control column. The nose began very slowly to rise. He fiddled with the elevator trim tab until the C-47 flew itself, level and straight. Then he twisted 'round in his seat until he could reach the musette that was stored on the floor in the radio compartment behind the pilot's seat. He dragged it out by the strap and set it upright on the cushion of the co-pilot's seat, which was unoccupied.

His lean fingers loosened the bag's buckles, dove under the flap, and lifted out an object about the size of a small grapefruit, which he balanced on his knee.

It was a human head.

The hair was long and straight and black, and was gathered at the ends into a tight little knot by which it might be suspended from a nail, or a belt. The skin was hard and smooth, tanned to a dark, dirty yellow. The eyelids, held open by splinters, gave a grotesque leer to the painted wooden blocks which filled the sockets. The lips were held in place by splinters, too—held in a fixed expression of grim agony. From one of these splinters hung a short length of plaited fibre which splayed at the end into a rude sort of tassel. The loose skin at the base of the neck was sewed tight together.

Torrey was staring at this gruesome object searchingly when a voice came over his shoulder.

"Cap'n, is this all the luggage—Gosh A'mighty!"

Torrey turned his head. The crew chief, who had been asleep back in the cargo compartment, must have waked



## the Sky-Trail to the Trackless Jungle Lands!

up and guessed they were nearing Belem. He was a tall, lean lad from the Ozarks whom Torrey had picked up, with the plane, at Oklahoma City. Frank's chief virtue seemed to be an ability to sleep at any time, under any conditions.

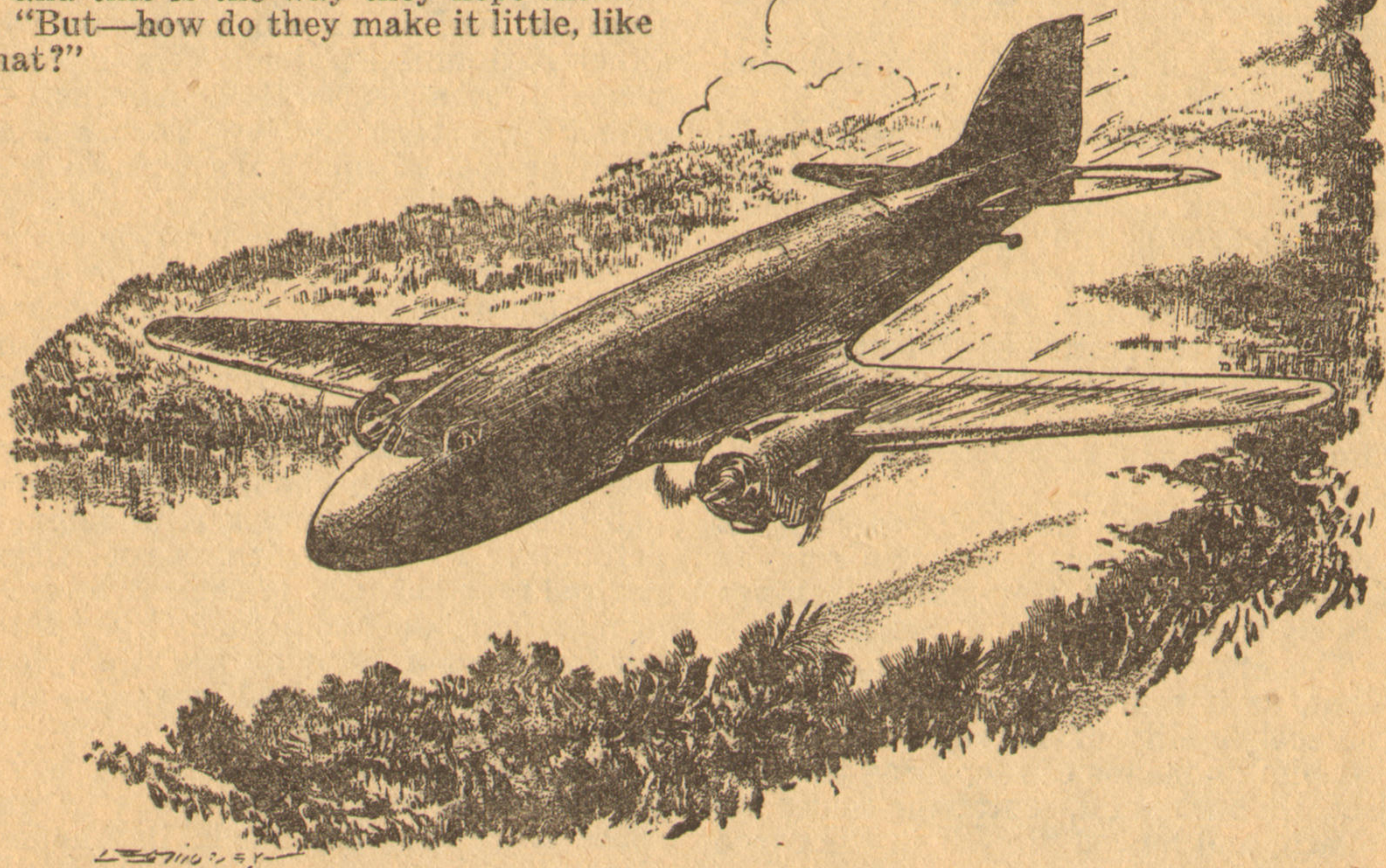
Torrey cocked an eye at him. "This is my co-pilot," he cracked, indicating the head.

Frank's eyes bugged. "That thing, Cap'n—it's *real*!"

Torrey's shoulders moved as he laughed silently. "Sure," he admitted, "it's real. It's an old Spanish custom down here. Or, rather, an Indian custom. The Jivaros were supposed to be the originators, though I suppose other native tribes did the same thing. When they licked their neighbors in a battle, they brought back heads for souvenirs—and this is the way they kept them."

"But—how do they make it little, like that?"

Torrey carried with him a human head, its hair long, straight and black



"It's supposed to be a secret process. They peel it off the skull, boil out the fat, fill it with hot sand, and shrink it and tan it in the smoke from a certain kind of wood that only grows deep in the Amazon jungles. Nice job, eh?"

Frank stretched out his hand toward the trophy, then drew it back abruptly.

"Ugh!" he said, and shuddered. Then

he began to shake his head slowly as the obvious question arose in his mind. "But, Cap'n, you said you'd never been back in the Amazon before?"

Torrey nodded. "I've been in Belem—sometimes called Para. Never in the up-river country, though."

"Then how come you've got this—this thing?"



"Carrying coals to Newcastle, eh?"

Torrey Sudden smiled, but his eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. He had no intention of explaining, at this stage of the game, just why he was lugging such a trophy into the Amazon country, rather than out. Certainly not to Frank Folsom, from whom he could expect no answer to the question uppermost in his mind.

"Oh, it belonged to a friend of mine," he said lightly. "He sent it out, and I—I'm carrying it for luck."

THE crew chief drew back a little farther. His voice barely carried over the steady din of the engines.

"Cap'n, that place we're goin', that port. Is it—" His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Porto Velho? Yes, it's way back in the Amazon country. On the Madeira River, near the border of Bolivia. Why?"

Frank's voice was suddenly clear and brittle. "Not me!"

Torrey looked at him. The crew chief's eyes were fixed on the ugly little object balanced on Torrey's knee. His jaws were clenched, and there was a pale, greenish tinge under his eyes.

That was enough for Torrey. Frank had been a temporary expedient as crew chief. Though, all other things being equal, Torrey would have liked to keep him. But he saw now that that was impossible.

"Okay, Frank," he shrugged. "I'll get you a return ticket on Fan-Am, in Belem. Make sure your cargo lashings are tight, before we land, heh?"

The crew chief hesitated for a moment, as if regretting his decision, but the cool finality of Torrey's acceptance left him no means of reopening the subject. He backed off, muttering under his breath, and busied himself in the cargo compartment.

Torrey did not immediately return the grisly trophy to his bag. Studying it intently, he thought of Paul Randover.

Paul had been his co-pilot, back in '42 and early '43, with American. They had been close as only two flyers can be close, when each is willing at any time, without word, to put his life into the safe-keeping of the other. Although they had both switched to commissions in Air Transport Command on the same day, the army had promptly parted them.

Paul went to the Caribbean, Torrey to England, and later into Europe with the Ninth Air Force, where he stayed to fly for EATS until early in 1947.

Neither was a prolific letter-writer. Their correspondence had been irregular and, filtered through a skein of changing A.P.O. numbers, uncertain of arrival. It was typical that Paul's last letter, after pursuing Torrey over some ten or twelve thousand miles, had finally caught him two months after his return to New York.

In it Paul explained, briefly and vaguely, that he had got his discharge in Belem. "To get into a business deal," as he put it. "Get out of the army and come down here, Torrey," he wrote. "There's a cold fortune to be picked up in the interior, when you know the ropes. See Millie as soon as you can get to New York. She knows where I am."

This letter had caught Torrey at La Guardia, just as he was taking off for Cincinnati and St. Louis. As it happened, it was nearly three months before he got back to New York again. Then he looked up Paul's wife in her tiny apartment in Jackson Heights. It was a shock to find Millie wearing black.

Millie was a tall, cool blonde with slanting, gray-green eyes who looked well in black, although her disposition was normally too gay for it. Paul had married her in '41 between South Atlantic crossings. "While I was laid up in Dakar for engine change," as Torrey had been wont to remark with feigned petulance when the three of them partied together. Out of their five years of marriage, she had actually lived with her husband a total of less than five weeks. She had waited bravely—and now her husband was dead.

She showed Torrey the letter, written in Portuguese on plain paper, from some minor Brazilian official in Manaus. *O Capitao Randover*, it said, had disappeared into the jungle in the region of Porto Velho, and was presumed dead. It hinted, without explaining in detail, that any man lost in the jungle for more than three days was presumed dead in a country where carnivorous beasts, insects, fish, and vultures were known to attack a toppling figure even before it stopped thrashing. His effects would be forwarded when practicable.

"His effects? Did you receive them?" asked Torrey.



"Only some rags of clothes—which I threw out—and *this*."

She opened a compartment in the desk, and stepped back.

"For goodness' sake, Torrey, please take it away, won't you?" she pleaded. "I can't look at it. It's horrible. I can't imagine why he ever got it, to send home to me. Ugh!"

And, staring at it now as it squatted on his knee, Torrey could not himself imagine why, either. Paul had never fallen very much for souvenirs, as such. If he picked up something on his travels, it was generally for a reason—usually for a gift to Millie. But in this case, that was out. Why, then?

Had it some connection with that mysterious "business deal" which was to make him rich, but which he had never more than hinted at, even to his wife?

## CHAPTER II

### *End of a Crew Chief*

**I**F THAT was the explanation, Torrey Sudden proposed to find out. That was why he was now here, chaperoning a C-47 into the dust and sweltering heat of Belem—to find out what had happened to Paul Randover. Otherwise, he would never have listened twice to the propositions of the seedy-looking Brazilian rubber merchant in Akron, even though the stranger's pockets were stuffed with letters of credit for thousands of *cruzeiros*.

So there was his own curiosity. And there was also—Millie.

Since Paul had received his discharge before plunging into the Amazon country, he had died a civilian. His widow, therefore, did not have the same rights to a pension as if he had been killed on active duty, and even her claims to his insurance were bogged in a mass of international red tape. She had no property, and was having a tough time making ends meet. If Paul had sunk any cash in Brazil in anything remotely resembling a legitimate enterprise, Torrey intended to get it out, for Millie's sake, or raise an awful cloud of dust trying.

He picked up the grimacing head and

thrust it back into the bulging musette bag. A wide expanse of brownish water lay flat along the horizon ahead—the northernmost of the many branches of the Amazon delta. Yet it was more than an hour before he could pick up the Belem control tower on his liaison set. At first he got only a flurry of Portuguese, but after he had repeated his name and all number twice, the same voice shifted into crisp English.

"Captain Sudden—eight, two, two—yes, Captain! Runway Fourteen, please—Fourteen! You are Number One to land. Transient service at Hangar Three, second past the tower northeast. Please park off the strip, on the grass. Over!"

"Captain Sudden—Roger!" replied Torrey, and made ready to lower his landing gear.

Coasting his down-wind leg, he studied the field to check his memory. During the war the Air Force had developed a huge port here, through which for more than a year had poured all the air traffic for the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Near East. The military had now given way to the civilian. The traffic, though still heavy, needed less than half the facilities, but was doubtless more cosmopolitan in complexion. He wondered how many languages the tower operators had to know to get the job.

He set his wheels down lightly, then instantly stiffened to alert attention. Before he started to use the brakes he knew what the trouble was, and cursed his lazy crew chief behind his teeth. That right tire was soft again. He had to fight his controls with a sure touch to keep from being pulled off the runway. Curse him! He had sworn he'd fixed that tire in Port o' Spain. His idea of "fixing" was doubtless to fill it up with air and then see if it lost pressure again, before taking out the tube and actually repairing the slow leak.

Once safely down to sixty miles an hour he had no trouble. It was simply a matter of extra pressure on the left brake and gunning the right engine to taxi. He followed the perimeter track in the direction of Hangar Three, then cut across hard-packed yellow dirt made bumpy by tufts of rank weeds. The C-47 rocked and rumbled noisily.

There were a dozen planes of all shapes and sizes parked in the neighborhood of the transient hangar, some



helter-skelter, a few lined up facing the strip in orderly fashion. Instinctively, Torrey began swinging to pull up at the end of that short line. The last plane on line was a sleek, high-winged monoplane painted a bright, vivid blue. It looked something like a four-passenger Nordhuyn-Norseman, known to the army as a C-68.

Torrey noticed it because its engine was idling, the prop glinting in the sun. That meant it might be preparing to move out. For a moment he watched it closely, alert to the possibility of collision.

But it did not move. When he had jockeyed the big C-47 up onto the line, leaving a good hundred feet clear at the wing-tip, he saw that the other prop had stopped turning.

For the time being he dismissed it from his mind.

**H**E STOPPED his own engines on idle cut-off, cut the ignition, and busied himself tidying his cockpit and making entries in his flight log. There was a thump and a clatter from the rear, as the crew chief threw open the cargo door and dropped the foot-ladder, and then went about putting the wind locks on the control surfaces.

Torrey unhurriedly stowed his log books, slung the musette over his shoulder, and strode down the sloping deck of the cargo compartment.

As he turned in the open door to back down the ladder, he noticed that a helmeted figure had descended from the little blue monoplane and was strolling over toward the C-47. Paying no attention, he dropped to the ground and ducked under the belly of the fat fuselage.

Frank Folsom was standing, hands in pockets, gazing at the right wheel with an expression of mournful disapproval, but no guilt.

Torrey opened his mouth, then closed it again. There was no point in tearing into Frank now. Frank was through. By tomorrow morning he would be on a Pan-Am clipper, en route back to the States.

"You have a softness of the tire, Captain Sudden?" a voice said.

Torrey shrugged without turning. "Don't I know it!"

"And your crew chief—he is hearing about it, *nao*?"

"No, I was just—" Torrey stopped, wheeling abruptly. The voice, which belonged to the pilot who had just climbed out of the blue craft, was the voice of a young girl.

A short jacket of military cut was draped loosely over her shoulders, but her pink gabardine slacks were expertly tailored to accent the smooth curves beneath. She wore a soft leather helmet with built-in ear-phones, under which she had crammed a mass of glossy black hair. Her skin was pale, the cream-and-ivory tint occasionally found among the aristocrats of the tropics, who do not have to spend their lives in the glare of the sun. Against that creamy complexion, a hint of purple eye-shadow emphasized the languorous depths of her sultry dark eyes, which regarded him appraisingly.

"May I listen, Captain?" The corners of her scarlet lips were twitching. "Perhaps I learn something new, for my English."

She had only the faintest tinge of accent, a mere blurring and softening of the consonants that gave her sentences personality.

"You do pretty well with your English already," grinned Torrey. "And you won't hear any lecture right now, anyway. I'm saving my breath for a new crew chief. This one happens to be quitting, anyway."

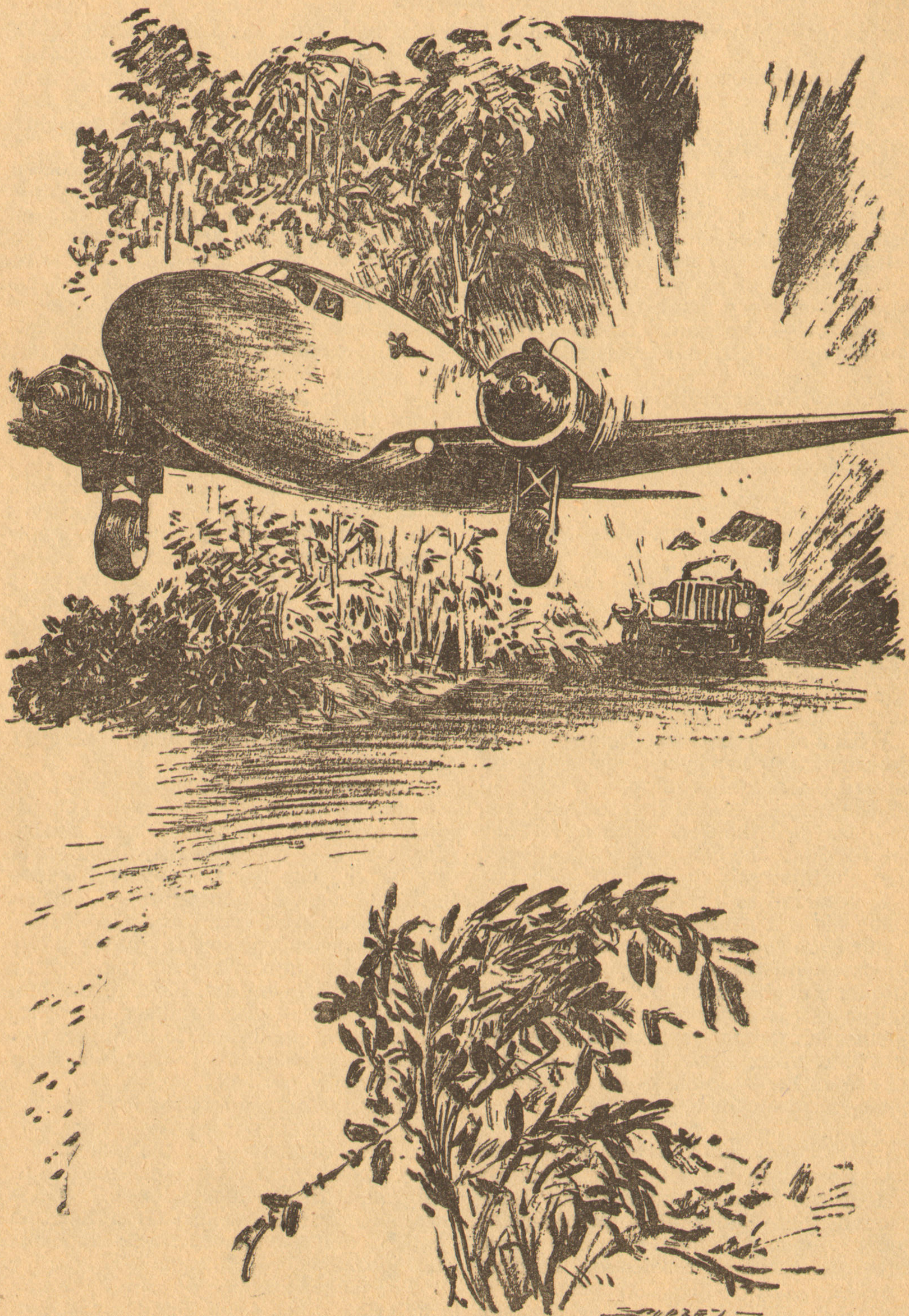
"Quitting?" She was instantly alert. "Then you will need a new crew chief, Captain Sudden, before you go on to Porto Velho, yes? *Bom*! I will make you excellent crew chief, Captain!"

He stared at her in astonishment. Then his eyes narrowed. "Say, how do you know my name, and where I'm going?"

**W**ITH a quizzical little smile she tapped her ear-phones, and glanced over her shoulder. "There is radio in my airplane, Captain. I hear your talk with the tower."

If she had been landing just ahead of him, that could be true, he thought. But he remembered the operator giving him the all clear—"You are Number One to land." The blue job must have been far enough ahead of him then to be clear. Or else she had simply been sitting in the cockpit, tuned to the tower frequency, listening to all the airborne conversations, and had merely started up the en-





Torrey saw the truck dissolve in flaming gasoline



gine to make him *think* that she had just landed.

"I said nothing to the tower about Porto Velho."

She was embarrassed for an instant, but quickly covered her confusion with a disarming smile. "You must not be surprised, Captain, if there are those in Belem who already know the affairs of Senhor Moranho—and hence your affairs, too. But, you see, you need a crew chief. I know airplanes, I promise you. And I wish very much to go to Porto Velho, for—er, personal reasons. What you say? Shall I repair the tire immediately?"

Torrey almost said yes, such was the persuasiveness of her appeal. But he caught himself.

The idea of flying into the jungles with a cover girl for co-pilot was too fantastic for a dream.

He grinned at her and said: "I'll think it over."

She sensed that it was not the moment for further argument.

"*Sempre amanha*," she smiled back at him. "You already know the customs of the country. I will see you soon, Captain!"

"I hope so!" he called after her.

With a single backward glance out of the corners of her eyes, she strolled off toward the small blue ship. She stripped off the helmet, tossed it into the cabin, and slammed the door carelessly. Then she followed the concrete track toward the administration center.

It occurred to Torrey that the monoplane did not necessarily belong to her—nor even the helmet, for that matter. Anyone with the know-how could climb into an unlocked cabin and plug into the liaison set, if obsessed with a curiosity about arrivals and departures. If he ran into that minx again, he'd better keep an eye on her—which, he mused, would not be hard on the eye.

**T**HE Hotel Saint Roque, if not the newest in the city, was certainly one of the largest and liveliest. Built around three sides of a palm-shaded court fringed with balconies, it hummed with conversation, music, and tinkling laughter all day long and most of the night—except, of course, for the two hours or more of early afternoon devoted to the siesta. On the ground level, the lobby, the dining rooms, the three

bars, and even the barber shop, gave access to the patio. Above street level, practically every room had long French windows opening on the balconies, giving the guests the benefit of the patio's sights, sounds—and smells.

Torrey Sudden had been instructed to register at the Saint Roque and wait to be contacted. He dozed for an hour or so on the big double bed, which was in a sort of alcove guarded by curtains. Then he rose, took a long, cold shower, and dressed leisurely. It was after seven, but being familiar with Latin-American habits, he knew that no one ate dinner before eight or nine, and that no business matter of any importance could possibly be discussed until after dinner.

**H**E paused at the desk. No, there had been no message for Captain Sudden. He strolled through into the expansive patio. Outside the open doors of the dining room, extra tables had been set under the trees, but were not yet occupied. Just beyond, under an arbor of vines, round iron tables with glazed tile tops were scattered near more wide-open doors. Over one a sign said, *Bar Americano*. Torrey drifted toward the sound of music which floated through the doors.

The room was large, paneled in a dark wood, and swam in a cool twilight most welcome after the outer glare. Booths faced in cool green leather lined three walls. The bar itself, small and loaded with bottles, was jammed into a corner, and presented no rail for the thirsty foot. In these latitudes the patrons had learned to do their drinking sitting down, and in comfort. Next to the bar, on a low dais, a piano and a guitar gave muted accompaniment to a singer who murmured a languorous Brazilian ditty in a throaty contralto.

Torrey stumbled into the first unoccupied booth and waited for his eyes to accustom themselves to the gloom. The song ended on a clear, sustained note, vibrant with passionate longing. There was a spatter of applause from the other booths, and a renewed tinkle of ice in tall glasses.

The singer stepped down off the dais and crossed the room. Suddenly Torrey jumped to his feet.

The singer was the girl from the airport.



## CHAPTER III

*Ambush*

THERE in the half light the flame-red evening gown and the spiked heels made her seem six inches taller, and had almost fooled him. The dress, cut to the limit of sophisticated daring, left little to the imagination. Her bare arms and shoulders repeated the ivory pallor of her face, against which her lips, in startling contrast, were rouged to the exact shade of the gown. They smiled at him impudently.

"Good evening, Captain! You have landed safely?"

He nodded, and caught his breath. "I'm just about to take on fuel. Won't you sit down and help me?"

"Of course—the first duty of a crew chief." She slid into the booth, facing him. "What do you drink? Whis-kee? Cocktail?"

"Now, now," Torrey reproved her. "You don't know me well enough yet—though perhaps we can improve that. I have traveled long enough to learn—when in Rome, drink as the Romans do. North of the Mason-Dixon line, I drink Scotch. South of it, I drink Bourbon. But abroad, I adjust my tastes to the product of the country I am in. Now in Brazil, I believe, you take a pride in your champagne—no?"

Her eyes sparkled with pleasure. "A tactful compliment, Captain. You will not regret your choice."

To the waiter who hovered near, she spoke briefly in Portuguese. Torrey did not recognize the name of the brand she ordered, but from the way the waiter's eyebrows lifted, he knew it must be one of the best, and most expensive, on the list.

Torrey lighted two cigarettes, gave her one. By leaning sideways a little, he could see the dais, and now noticed a small, discreet poster on an easel. It said, *A cantora—Mercedes Stellana*.

"Mercedes?" he repeated tentatively.

She shook her head. "Mercedes is busy elsewhere. I am taking her place, just for tonight."

Torrey's eyes crinkled at the corners. "By arrangement?"

She spread her hands, palms up, in a

gesture of frankness. "Why not? Where else would you come, but the Saint Rogue? And where would I see you, but in the bar?"

Torrey laughed. Her frankness was quite disarming. He disliked and distrusted people who concealed their motives and falsified their attitudes, but apparently this Brazilian bombshell made no bones about going after what she wanted. He could savvy someone like that.

"All right, all right. So you want to go to Port Velho. Now tell me why."

But, apparently, this was a little too fast. She leaned over to touch his hand with fingertips that were cool and smooth.

"After the first bottle of champagne—yes, I'll tell you all about me. And after the second bottle—la! You will tell me all about yourself, yes? In the meantime, that is a rhumba they are playing, Captain. Do you rhumba?"

"Long Island style, yes. Come on, let's go."

She danced with such effortless grace that Torrey had no trouble. His feet seemed to learn new steps by themselves. He also learned something about the rhumba that he had not realized before—that a girl could exhibit just as much provocative allure at arm's length as when crushed tightly against the coat lapels, an axiom with which she seemed to be perfectly familiar.

The champagne was icy cold. Her talk, her gestures, her eyes, everything about her was full of warmth. The combination was decidedly exhilarating. Her name, he discovered, was Bella. He remarked gallantly on how appropriate it was.

"Another Brazilian custom you have already learned—flattery!"

"I have learned that it is the custom in every country to tell a beautiful girl that she is beautiful—even when it's true!"

He knew perfectly well that she was exercising her wiles on him for a definite purpose, but he did not care. He had no intention of letting pleasure interfere with business, but business could wait until tomorrow morning. It might be a long time before he had another such opportunity to play. He ordered another bottle of champagne, and they moved out to a small table under the palms for dinner.



At the same time three men, who had been sitting in a booth at the other end of the bar, got up and left the room.

SHE was clever enough to reverse her promise. Before telling her own story, she got him to talking about himself. He told her that his real reason for coming to Brazil was to investigate the fate of one of his closest friends.

"Did you ever know an American named Paul Randover?"

She shook her head slowly. "During the war, there were many Americans, of course. But I was young then, living with my family. And after the war—no, I do not think I ever heard of that name."

He told her of Paul's disappearance, and of the ambiguous references in his last letters.

"A fortune?" Her brows crinkled in puzzled thought. "But there is no big business far up the Amazon, except rubber—and that is not what it used to be. During the war, of course, there was a boom. Senhor Moranho started then, and I believe that he still controls all the wild rubber from the Beni region. But since plantation rubber from the Far East is again in the world market, the prices are down, and there cannot be such a fortune in wild rubber."

"Then why is Senhor Moranho buying an airplane, and bringing me down here to fly it for him?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I do not know the rubber business, of course. I only know that Julio Cesar Moranho is very rich, and very powerful. But your friend—he told you nothing else?"

"Nothing definite. He gave us only one clue—" Torrey hesitated, then rose to his feet. "Excuse me a minute."

He strode into the lobby and went directly up to his room. When he came down again, a few moments later, he carried something wrapped in a hand towel. Back in his chair, he opened it on his lap, below the level of the table, where it would not be in direct sight of the other diners. She leaned sideways to look.

Her eyes widened. "*Uma cabeca!*" Then she began to laugh. "But that is a souvenir, Torrey. Nothing more!"

"Yes, but maybe it could tell us something about what he was doing, or how he happened to die."

She shook her head, and explained

rapidly. Originally, the only source of these grisly battle trophies had been the Jivaros, and other savage Indian tribes in the deepest interior. Most of these tribes, however, had by now become civilized, and put to work on the rubber *estradas*. Since they seldom lopped off each other's heads, the supply of genuine originals had dried up.

But during the war the country had been full of G.I.'s, hungry for souvenirs, their pockets full of Yanqui dollars. Native enterprise had risen to meet this demand, and imitations had become fairly common. The art of shrinking and tanning was not too difficult. To obtain their raw material, the ghouls had dug up fresh graves, robbed undertakers, and bribed morgue attendants. There had even been murders in the back country, it was rumored, with no other motive. But, eventually, most of the imitations had started as monkeys. They were plentiful, easy to kill, and an expert workman with razor, knife, and bleaching juices could turn out a creditable substitute.

"Do you think this one is—er, genuine?"

She stared at the head with mingled curiosity and repulsion. "Perhaps. I do not know. There are those who could—" Suddenly she stopped and leaned forward, her eyes on his. "Perhaps this is what your friend meant—a fortune in this business. *Nao?*"

Torrey returned her stare, but shook his head. "I don't think so. You didn't know Paul. He was crazy enough to try almost anything once—and anything to drink more than once. But I can't see him engaged in shrinking monkey heads for the souvenir trade. Besides, his wife would never have stood for it."

"His wife?"

He told her about Millie. About how the three of them had celebrated together Paul's infrequent days at home. How she had waited, patient and uncomplaining, for a husband who never returned from the war. About her present unhappy situation.

She stopped him in the middle of a sentence. "Torrey—you are in love with Millie?"

He gaped at her. It was a question that he had never asked himself, and he had no ready answer. The champagne was fizzing inside his head, and made it hard to think. He shook his head.



"She was married to my best friend!"

"Yes, yes, I know! But now—you love her?"

He could not have explained why he attempted to stall instead of saying no. "What's that got to do with the price of coffee in Brazil? She's four thousand miles away, isn't she?"

But Bella, for some reason which he could not fathom, was obsessed with getting an answer to her question. She had methods which to him were equally unfathomable.

**L**EANING sideways until her shoulder touched his, she peered intently into his face. Against the glossy sheen of her hair she wore a single small white orchid. Its exotic aroma tickled his nostrils. Suddenly, long lashes veiled her eyes.

"Kiss me, Torrey," she murmured.

Her warm lips surrendered willingly enough to his, giving him all that he could ask for. Torrey, who was feeling no pain at all, thought that he was doing a pretty good job of it, until she drew back with a short sigh.

"I understand, Torrey—you are in love with Millie."

"But how the devil—why do you say that?"

"Never mind." She shuddered faintly, and straightened up. "*O criado!*" To the waiter, her tone was gay, but brittle. "A whiskee for the *senhor!* Bring two whiskees! Bring four whiskees!" Her eyes were mocking. "He is drinking in Brazil, but his thirst is in New York! La, la!"

She was, after that, outwardly the same. She laughed, she flirted, she danced, she drank. But there was somehow a change, an inner difference that Torrey could not quite put his finger

on. It was as if she had shifted her sights to a different target, but still took delight in wounding him out of mere caprice.

When he reminded her that she had promised to tell him why she was so anxious to go to Porto Velho, her eyes darkened, but she shrugged off the explanation briefly.

"Like you," she said, "I wish to search for a friend, who went into that country some time ago."

She put the noun in Portuguese—a friend, *um amigo*—which told him that the friend was masculine, and nothing more. But she refused further information, except to admit that her "friend's" name was Joaquim. The name, by itself, meant nothing to Torrey. It was a common one in these countries. Had it struck a familiar chord in his memory, had he insisted on learning the last name as well, his whole course of action might have been altered. But she rebuffed him.

"What difference? You will not take me with you to Porto Velho anyway. Why bore you with all this nonsense? And, also, it is after eleven o'clock, Torrey. I must go."

"Go? Go where?"

"I sing in a night club, in another part of town. I must be there at midnight, to do my first turn."

Torrey sat up. "I'll go with you."

For a moment she appeared to hesitate. Then she smiled. "If you wish. Perhaps the show will amuse you. But I warn you. They do not have whiskee, there."

"I'll drink warm beer, if necessary."

When he had pocketed his change, he picked up from beneath the table the object wrapped in a towel.

[Turn page]

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"Can you wait a minute? I'll put this back in my room."

He cut across the corner of the patio and entered the lobby. There seemed to be more people about than late in the afternoon. Obviously, the important folk of Belem led their social life, and did a good deal of their business, at night when it was cool, and slept during the broiling hours of the day.

He mounted the broad, tiled steps two at a clip, and strode down the carpeted corridor of the third floor. The key was in his pocket—an ornate affair of bronze that must have weighed nearly a pound. It clattered metallically in the keyhole as he shoved it in, twisted it, and threw open the door.

Just as the door swung open he was aware that a light inside went out with a click.

He faced velvety blackness.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Three Strangers*

**H**ALTING just over the threshold, he fumbled on the wall for a switch. His reactions were a trifle sluggish. It took him a second or two to realize that it was not the overhead chandelier in the middle of the room which had been lighted, but the small bedside lamp in the alcove. This alcove formed an ell, with a window of its own, and, partially shielded by gauze curtains, was not entirely visible from the doorway.

Now, in the dark, he could see nothing in that direction.

He remembered, belatedly, that the switch was on the other side. He stepped across the open doorway, thus presenting a fine silhouette against the faint illumination from the corridor, outside. As he stretched out his hand to the wall, he was aware that something passed him in the angle made by his head and his hand.

He was not sure whether his ear heard a ghostly hiss, or whether a faint whisper of air fanned his cheek. It was followed immediately by a sharp crunching sound.

His fingers found the switch, flicked it. The chandelier burst into a glare.

showing him a room in which he was alone. After one quick glance, his eye was caught and held by an object in the wall a foot above the switch on which his hand still rested.

It was a knife, most of the blade buried in the plaster. The hilt, covered with braided rawhide, was dark and stained with sweat. Maybe it was actually still quivering, or maybe he imagined it, but he realized with a jolt what it was that had zipped past his cheek in the dark. The realization sobered him completely and instantly.

He dropped to one knee, to keep a large overstuffed chair between him and the opening of the alcove.

"Come out o' there, you—" he called.

There was no reply, no sound of movement.

Keeping head and shoulders low, he scuttled crab-fashion across to another chair. From here he could look into the alcove. It was unoccupied. When he was quite sure of that simple fact, he got up on his feet and pushed cautiously between the curtains.

The bed had been re-made since he had sprawled on it that afternoon. On the cover lay his musette bag, crumpled flat. Near it lay the contents, scattered as they had been dumped out. Obviously, someone had been going through his things.

He turned to the window. It was, like all other windows in Belem, wide open. He stepped through. The balcony was about three feet wide and had a simple wrought-iron railing. It ran right across the whole width of the patio, waist-high partitions separating the space in front of one room from the space in front of the next. Any boy could have vaulted those partitions. Any agile man, in fact, could have jackknifed over the railing and dropped to the balcony fronting the rooms on the floor below, thus giving himself a dozen chances of escape.

"I've had it," muttered Torrey.

He leaned out to peer down. Between the palm trunks he saw a figure hurrying across toward the lobby door, which were almost vertically beneath the point where he stood. From directly overhead he could not see the face, but the flame-colored dress was unmistakable. Before he could call out, she had disappeared.

He turned back into the room to peer at the stuff scattered on the bed. Like any experienced traveller, he travelled



light, carrying nothing but necessities, and nothing very valuable. As far as he could tell at a quick glance, nothing had been taken. Was that because there had been nothing worth taking, or because he had interrupted the sneak thief too soon? And did an ordinary sneak thief hurl a murderous knife when interrupted?

It occurred to him that Bella, in the patio, might have seen a figure dropping from one balcony to another. Perhaps that was why she had hurried to this side of the building.

He stepped to a huge armoire of mahogany against the inner wall. In it he deposited the head, which he was still carrying wrapped in its towel. He wondered, momentarily, if that gruesome souvenir had still been in his musette, would it by now have vanished?

Bella was not in the lobby. He circled the patio, re-entered through the bar, and looked in the east foyer. She was nowhere to be seen. He waited five minutes. Five more. She did not appear. He inquired at the desk. No, she had left no message for him.

Scowling, he went into the street, got hold of a taxi, and told the driver that he wanted to circulate through the night clubs of Belem.

THREE hours later he returned to the Saint Roque in a bad humor. He had paid the taxi driver half the value of his dilapidated Model A, had swallowed a prodigious quantity of vile brandy, and had seen plenty of sloe-eyed brunettes only too eager to dance, drink, and flirt with him. But he had not found Bella.

In the morning he had a woolly head, but it had cleared by the time he got out to the airport. The first thing he noticed as he walked up to the C-47 was that the right tire was no longer soft. The next thing that drew his attention was the cargo door, which stood wide open. Faint wisps of smoky dust floated out, as if the floor inside were being vigorously swept.

He stopped at the foot of the ladder and shouted. The sounds of activity from within ceased, and a square-cornered, stocky man wearing singlet and gray slacks appeared in the opening. At sight of Torrey this man stiffened like a ramrod and executed a military salute that was far from American in

origin. If he had been wearing shoes, his heels would have clicked smartly.

"*Zu Befehl, Herr Kapitan!*"

Torrey, astonished, grunted, "Eh! Who are you?"

"Your crew chief, sir-r-r-r! Karl Nieboll, *por favor*."

Torrey stared at him. His features were heavy, as if carved out of solid bone, his eyes small and bright blue, his stiff sandy hair cropped close. He had long arms that ended in the broad, efficient hands of a workman. That they were seamed and stained with dirt seemed to indicate that he was not afraid to work. He was sunburned to a deep, dusky red.

"Who says you're my new crew chief?" demanded Torrey.

"Senhor Delucco. He informed me last night."

"I see." Torrey was puzzled. He glanced at the right wheel, then back up at the man in the doorway. His eyes narrowed. "You have inflated the tire?"

"*Mas nao, Senhor!* I remove the tire and replace the tube with a new one. The old one is in the hangar, being repaired."

Torrey nodded in approval. Whatever else this fellow might be, he apparently knew something about aircraft maintenance. He was a little hard to figure out. He mingled three or four languages indiscriminately into his conversation. His English had a British accent, and his Portuguese something of an American twang. What his Spanish might sound like to a Spaniard, Torrey did not know, but his German sounded like nothing but German and was probably his native tongue.

"Now who, and where, is this Senhor Delucco you mentioned?"

"He is in the hangar, *Kapitan*, waiting for you."

As Torrey started for the hangar, three men emerged from the office in the end of the lean-to and came toward him. They walked in a triangle, one in the lead, the other two a respectful step or two to the rear. Torrey guessed that the leader was Senhor Delucco.

He was very dark complexioned, short, with a small head set on a thick neck. His eyes were narrow, black, and never still. His feet and hands were unusually small, but the latter looked tough and wiry. A scar began just be-



low the corner of his thin-lipped mouth and ran down diagonally across the side of his neck.

It looked as though it had been made by a machete which would have severed his head had it not unluckily—but for him, luckily—encountered the solid bone of his jaw.

"Ah—Captain Sudden! We have expected you, yes!"

## CHAPTER V

### *Over the Amazon*

HE gave a jerk from the waist that might have been meant for a bow, and made a genial gesture with a hand on which glittered two or three diamonds, but did not extend the hand to shake. He introduced his two companions carelessly, as if they were almost beneath notice. Torrey did not even catch their names.

"You have enjoyed yourself last night, Captain?"

From the three broad smiles on the faces before him, Torrey could surmise that his actions during the evening had been scouted. "Up until midnight—yes," he scowled.

Delucco's brows shot up in astonishment. "You mean, the *senhorita* did not remain with you?"

Torrey explained what had happened when he went up to his room. Delucco's expression hardened.

"It was doubtless just a petty thief," shrugged Torrey, "but it delayed me, and the young lady had gone about her business when I returned to the patio."

"Petty thief—bah!" Delucco spat angrily into the dust, and spoke to one of his companions in rapid Portuguese.

When he had received a hissed, "*Sim, Senhor,*" in reply, he turned to Torrey.

"It is a play by our friend Grauss, no doubt."

"Grauss? Who is he?"

"A former Nazi pilot. He flew many years for Condor, in Peru and Bolivia. He would like to fly this—" he indicated the C-47—"for Cesar. Perhaps he believes that a fortunate accident might make it possible. But do not worry. He will be taken care of." The tone of the last words was calm, but ominous.

"By the way, my crew chief—" began Torrey.

"Ah, yes! You will find Karl excellent, I think. I had intended to replace whoever came with you from the States, in any event. He, too, has worked many years with Condor."

"Hey, wait a minute! You think I want a crew chief from the same outfit as this Nazi who tried to murder me last night?"

The Brazilian smiled coolly. "Do not fret yourself. Karl is completely mechanic. He thinks of nothing but his engines, his tools, his switches. He is absolutely loyal, not to his pilot, but to his airplane, and he will serve that airplane well. Also, he knows the country—the fields, the rivers, the weather."

Torrey was to learn in time that Delucco was capable of lying without scruple, but that his present delineation of Karl Nieboll was the bald truth. The phrase "completely mechanic" described Karl to a T. He lived for nothing but his airplane. To him, the owner, or the pilot, was less important than the air that went into the tires.

Torrey also learned, in the next hour or so, something of the traffic in which he was to engage. The big boss, to whom Delucco referred as Cesar, was Julio Cesar Moranho, sometimes known as the Rubber Baron of the Beni. He was engaged in bringing back to the rubber jungles—and incidentally to himself—the fantastic prosperity of the good old days.

The good old days, Torrey discovered, always meant the first decade of the century, when with rubber at \$2.00 and even \$3.00 a pound, and Malayan competition unknown, incredible wealth had come to the Amazon valley. The stories were legend: The single-track railroad between Porto Velho and Guajara-Mirim which had cost a man's life for every tie laid. The ten-million dollar opera house in which but one performance was ever given. The streets of Manaus paved with cobblestones shipped from Portugal.

In those days, so they said, every snipper and trader in the river ports was a millionaire. Manaus bought more diamonds than any city in the world. A man who did not wear at least one diamond on his finger and drink imported champagne every night thereby marked himself as a failure, a lowly *mestizo*.



And then the bubble burst, with the development of plantation rubber from the Far East.

**D**URING the war, with the Japanese in Malaya, the boom had revived. The price of raw rubber had soared, the old *estradas* had been cleared, thousands of *seringueiros* had gone back to work. Cesar Moranho, with a lien on the old railroad, had quickly come into control of all the best quality para from the Beni region, and had made a fortune. He was now fighting to keep this fortune, and to increase it.

To Torrey it sounded interesting, as well as profitable—an opportunity for the airplane to prove itself as a cargo carrier. But he discovered at once that they intended to ship raw rubber out by air only in emergencies, or incidentally. He and his airplanes were there chiefly to fly freight and personnel ~~in~~ to Porto Velho, not out. And his first cargo filled him with astonishment, as he watched it being loaded under Delucco's directions.

Refrigerators, completely modern. Aluminum pressure cookers. Case after case of wines and liquors. A record player that must have cost a thousand dollars in New York, and three heavy cases of records for it. Electric power plant spare parts, with motors, wire, and switches. An armchair covered in needlepoint, so big that it had to be maneuvered through the cargo door. Norwegian sardines, *pâté de foie gras*, bags of sugar. An Oriental rug. Pistol ammunition . . .

"Say, it looks as if Porto Velho is quite a place!"

Delucco's smile was thin. "You will find it most interesting, I am sure."

When Torrey spoke of landing at Manaos, Delucco frowned.

"You cannot fly direct to Porto Velho?"

Torrey grunted. "Later, maybe—after I know the geography better. But it's over twelve hundred miles, and from what you tell me yourself, that field there is a postage stamp in the jungle, with no radio beacon, no landmarks, nothing. If I cut across the Mato Grosso and miss it, what then?" He shook his head. "Nix. I'll make it in two jumps, and follow the Madeira River up from Manaos. Then I'll be sure to hit it, and with some spare gas, too."

Seeing that Delucco was still scowling, he continued, "Now on the way back, that's a different matter. I can hardly miss the Amazon, and once over the river, Belem is a cinch."

Delucco's eyes were cold black marbles. "This first trip—*sim*," he growled. "But in future, you will stay out of Manaos."

The inflection of that word *will* made Torrey's gorge start to rise. On safety factors respecting flight, he was accustomed to making his own decisions, and intended to continue making them. But, after all, this man represented his boss. With a stubborn mental reservation, Torrey repressed a sharp retort.

"When you reach Porto Velho," the Brazilian told him, "circle the town three times, low. They will then know to send a vehicle to the field for you. It is over twenty miles. You may have two or three hours to wait."

"Two or three hours!" exclaimed Torrey. "What do they send—an ox-cart?"

The other man's thin smile returned. "The road is cut through the jungle. When you have ridden it once, you will understand."

It was hot, and growing hotter, by mid-morning, when the load was on board and Karl had unhurriedly run up the engines. Delucco handed Torrey a bulging envelope triply sealed with red wax.

"This you will give to Senhor Moranho instantly upon arrival."

Torrey nodded, and shoved it into his musette. He revised a few calculations of time and distance in his head.

"That'll be tomorrow. I'll probably stay overnight in Manaos."

The Brazilian cursed in Portuguese, under his breath. Torrey wondered why it was they wanted to keep him out of Manaos.

It was to be a considerable time before he found out.

**I**T was a heavy load for the old C-47 but the ancient work-horse lifted it off the runway in two thousand feet and climbed slowly but steadily into the west. Torrey took just enough altitude for elbow room, then levelled off and jockeyed mixture and prop pitch until he was at his most economical cruising speed. He had been told that an ample supply of 100-octane fuel had been



stocked at his destination. But he had been told things like that before, and found them inaccurate. In this country, gas was like lifeblood. And, anyway, he had a veteran pilot's instinct never to burn an unnecessary drop.

The air was clear, and it would have been impossible to lose his course. The Amazon, even in dry season, was in places a hundred miles wide. Even when he cut a map line across great loops, he did not lose sight of it. Huge islands sliced it into a dozen rivers. These islands, and the banks on either side as far as the eye could see, were covered with a solid blanket of jungle, dense green and motionless. The monotonous immensity of the land was terrifying.

The hours dragged by. Past Santarem, a pinpoint of humanity in the wilderness, Torrey corrected his trim tabs and turned the controls over to Karl, more from curiosity than any other reason. The German flew well enough. Not with the instinctive ease of the seat-of-the-pants flier, but with the mechanical precision of the robot. He fussed constantly with minor adjustments, and never stopped listening to the drone of the engines with the back of his mind.

That evening Torrey walked the streets of Manaus, ancient capital of the rubber empire of the Amazon. But he did not walk them far, for it was only necessary to get a few squares away from the wharves at the river's edge to find grass growing up between the paving stones and the vines of the encroaching jungle prying cracks in former mansions. More than half of the former city was a ghost town—the opera house falling into ruin, the houses deserted or serving as squalid lodging for idling natives.

In the musty hotel he struck up an acquaintance with the bartender, showed him the head, and asked for Paul Randover.

"But that is an excellent specimen you have, senhor—*sim!* A genuine Jivaro, I should say, from the tassel." He leaned across the bar. "You wish to sell it?"

Torrey said no, he did not wish to sell.

The bartender leaned closer. "You wish to buy others like it?"

Torrey explained that he was only trying to trace the friend who had once owned it. The bartender shrugged.

"A year ago, you say? I was here then, yes, but I do not remember your friend, senhor. There were many Yanquis seeking souvenirs after the war, you understand. The business is not now so good, but if you would care to accept, say—six hundred *cruzeiros*?"

Torrey shook his head, re-knotted the towel, and went up to spend a sleepless night battling the insects that marched in, four abreast, through the holes in the netting.

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## CHAPTER VI

### *Life Is Cheap*

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NEXT morning he had a tail wind that pushed him up the Madeira at a good rate, and at exactly eleven he was circling Porto Velho. The town, from above, was unimpressive—two or three concrete buildings surrounded by a clutter of grass-thatched shacks, fringing a couple of ramshackle piers that stood gauntly in the muddy flood. Amid excited waving from below, he straightened out to the southeast, and held a course on 130 until he saw the field.

He had seen more likely looking cow pastures, in the States. From the far distant mountains on the southern horizon a range of foothills ran down, tapering off at last in a rounded spur that was no more than a few hundred feet above the floor of the surrounding jungle. It made, however, this difference. The hump was clothed in grass and brush, rather than the impenetrable trees and vines of the bottoms, which made it possible, if not simple, to clear the ground.

The runway—a flattering name for it—was slightly hump-backed in the middle. It dog-legged about ten degrees around a thick clump of trees, and ended in an outcrop of rock at the southern extremity. Wind or no wind, it was a one-way proposition, but at least it was a full mile in length. Torrey buzzed it three times, studying its peculiarities, then landed tail-low, as slow as he dared.

The big ship bounced and lurched. The landing-gear rumbled and groaned in protest. A soft tire on this rough ground would have meant disaster swift and



sure. Thinking of that, Torrey had a quick flash of thankfulness for Karl.

Taxiing slowly, Torrey parked near the two shacks with corrugated iron walls and grass roofs, at one end of the open. His engines died with a sucking hiss, and he mopped perspiration from his neck.

He was met by a red-skinned *mame-luco* with a carbine slung over his shoulder and in his hand a three-thonged whip of twisted tapir-hide. Two score natives engaged in trimming brush, who had stopped work to watch the gigantic bird alight, started working again vigorously when the straw-boss cracked that vicious ten-foot lash.

Torrey spent an hour going over every inch of the runway on foot, impressing on his memory every bump, every soft spot, every potential danger. It was, he decided, bad, but not too bad. Karl, meanwhile, found the drums of gas and cans of oil in one of the shacks, and busied himself filling tanks and checking the airplane.

The jeep arrived about two, the driver also wearing a rifle over his shoulder. Torrey was to learn that practically everyone in Porto Velho walked about thus armed—everyone except the natives and the hapless *cholos*, who played the part of targets. When Torrey climbed in, he turned to see Karl shaking his head.

"I stay here," said the mechanic flatly.

"Here?" Torrey looked at the two shacks against the encroaching wilderness. "But where'll you sleep—and eat?"

Karl gestured toward the C-47. "In here. I have plenty K-rations. I do not leave the plane. *Auf Wiedersehen, Kapitän!*"

Torrey would have protested, but from the other's expression he saw that argument would be wasted. He drove off with new respect for the man who was a crew chief twenty-four hours a day.

The road was as bad as Delucco had led him to expect. It was a mere tunnel hacked through a wall of steaming vegetation, rough, twisting, half blocked by creeping vines that grew afresh every night, floored with ooze and rotten logs and snaky roots. After two hours they turned out to allow a wagon train to pass—half a dozen high-wheeled carts pulled by a strange assortment of horses, mules, and oxen.

This expedition, started from Porto Velho on the heels of the jeep, would require two or three days for the round trip to the field and back, to haul the plane's load of cargo into town.

AFTER another thirty minutes of back-wrenching torture in low gear, the jeep suddenly rolled out of the jungle onto the main street of Porto Velho. Beyond some crowded hovels of logs and thatch, two whitewashed concrete buildings faced each other across a misshapen square. One, built originally as a hotel, had now more the air of a barracks. The other had started life as a hospital, but the fever sufferers were now crowded into one wing so that the larger half of the fairly modern building could be occupied by the big shots—Cesar Moranho and his staff.

The driver turned Torrey over to a grinning, yellow-skinned brute who looked as if his blood was a mixture of all the Latin races, plus a generous percentage of Aztec Indian. Above high cheekbones he had narrow beady eyes that sloped upward at the corners, and evidently most of his teeth had at some time been knocked down his throat.

"You come with Pablo," he told Torrey, and led the way upstairs.

On every landing there was a man with a gun—sometimes with two. They nodded respectfully at Torrey's companion. On the top floor Pablo knocked on a high door, and then pushed it open.

The first thing Torrey saw of Cesar Moranho was his nose. It loomed across the top of the old-fashioned roll-top desk like the prow of a battleship, or the beak of a predatory bird. High-bridged, hooked, bony, it dwarfed his other features into insignificance, making his mouth seem a mere slit, his chin without strength, and his eyes two brown holes burned in his greasy complexion.

"Ah, my aviator!" he exclaimed, accenting the pronoun in a way that Torrey did not care for. "Come in, sit down! We are most glad to see you, I assure you. You had no trouble finding us?"

"No trouble this trip. I hope all the rest are as easy."

Torrey presented the sealed envelope Delucco had entrusted to his care. Before opening it, Moranho led him through into the next room and shouted to a servant to bring drinks. Torrey was



astonished when a white-coated Chinese boy handed him Scotch and soda in a tall glass, with ice cubes bobbing in the liquor.

Moranho smiled at his surprise. "We try to soften the rigors of adventure as far as we are able. Now that you and your airplane are available to us, we should do even better."

While the rubber baron examined the contents of the envelope, Torrey sipped his drink and looked about him. The front room was obviously an office, the suite behind it serving as Moranho's living quarters. To his amazement, they looked more like a Park Avenue apartment than an outpost of trade in the Amazon jungle.

The furnishings were not only comfortable, but expensive. Rugs were scattered on the floor. The windows were double-screened. Electric lamps with hand-painted shades stood on the mahogany tables. Oil paintings decorated the walls. Through an open door he looked into a bedroom at a huge, four-poster bed.

He was shortly to learn that this fantastic luxury was the exception and not the rule. While Moranho took care of himself, the natives and laborers lived in squalid hovels, lighted by hurricane lamps, slept on the ground and drank the muddy water of the Madeira when they could not afford to stupefy themselves on *chicha*. The benefits of the rubber boom never reached the lower levels. Enslaved and cheated by the credit system at the "company store," where they were forced to buy everything at extravagant prices, the *seringueiros* were never out of debt, and were kept in line only by the guns of the *muchachos*.

These last, strong-arm thugs of all nationalities, lived in the lower floors of this same wing in moderate comfort. Escapees from Devil's Island, half-breeds from the penitentiaries of Peru, Nazis from the Condor air-line system, Portuguese adventurers, they enforced the master's word by the rule of the bullet, and murdered and robbed, on the side, for the benefit of their own pockets.

**M**MORANHO discussed business, but in a suave, indirect manner that conveyed little concrete information. He seemed more interested in learning Torrey's background and motives than

in explaining his own affairs. They agreed on a rough schedule of two flights a week.

"You will have a room on the floor below this. The jeep will be at your disposal, of course, but I should not advise much sight-seeing. The roads are terrible, the jungle is very dangerous, and even the streets of Porto Velho—well, I should advise you to stay in your room."

This advice was accompanied by a leer which caused Torrey to make up his mind to see as much as possible of Porto Velho.

"By the way, you have a gun?"

Torrey opened his musette and produced his Colt .45. As he did so, his hand touched the knotted towel. He reached back for it, but then stopped himself.

A question is put with one of two objects. To get a frank reply from someone interested in helping the questioner, or to get a reply which, evading a direct answer, nevertheless betrays involuntarily some reflection of the truth. Torrey felt that Moranho qualified under neither heading. He did not yet know Torrey intimately enough to give an outright, helpful answer. At the same time, he appeared much too shrewd a dealer to be trapped into giving away any secrets.

Instinct told Torrey to leave the head where it was.

But the next day, while he explored the village and the docks and the old town of Santo Antonio across the river, he showed it to several people and asked questions about Paul. He showed it to the German engineer who ran the water-power plant. The *cacique*, or headman, of the old town. A Turkish peddler who had crossed the Mato Grosso on a mule.

The *cacique* showed interest. It was, he declared, a genuine Jivaro, both very old and very rare. The Turk offered him 500 *cruzeiros*, and came up to 750, then grimaced his toothless disappointment.

The German told him, "The big boss has a collection of those things, up in his rooms. Maybe he would know about it."

But none of them could, or would, tell him anything whatsoever about Paul Randover.

He flew a round trip to Belem the latter part of that week, and completed a second round trip on the following



Wednesday. In the city, he stayed overnight each time at the Hotel Saint Roque, but saw nothing of Bella, either there or on the streets. The hotel manager professed not to know her address.

He did, however, see a small paragraph on the second page of the local newspaper:

The body of a foreigner was found late yesterday floating under the pier of the Zorumba Line. It was tentatively identified as that of Erich Grauss, formerly an aviator in Bolivia. Death was due to drowning, apparently two or three days before the body was found.

Torrey shuddered. Delucco had evidently taken care of that little matter, though he had not mentioned it to Torrey.

Back in Porto Velho, Torrey spent Thursday morning watching sweating stevedores unload *batalones* at the warehouse on the pier. At one point, a red-skinned worker, swaying beneath a solid sphere of raw rubber, lost his footing on the single plank and fell into the river.

His fellow workers emitted a long, dry moan of dismay, but did nothing else. No one even tried to throw him a rope. Indeed, it would have been of no use.

Before the swirling current had carried him more than thirty feet, his body had been torn to a raw mass of flesh by the bloodthirsty pirhanas which inhabited the muddy waters in shoals.

Life was cheap on the rivers of the jungle.

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## CHAPTER VII

### *A Collection—of Heads*

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**R**ETURNING to the hospital building for the midday meal, Torrey reached the door of the semi-private dining rooms just as someone else was coming out. He stepped aside, looked up, and froze solid.

"For the love of—How did you get here?"

Bella wore the tight-fitting pink slacks and the casual jacket in which he had first seen her at the Belem airport. The jacket was somewhat soiled, the slacks wrinkled, and her rippling black hair, unconfined by a helmet, was in a

careless disarray, which made her seem younger and more attractive than ever.

She smiled proudly. "You are surprised, my Captain Torrey?"

"Surprised? Of course I'm surprised!" he blurted.

There were no railroads, or roads worth mentioning. By river steamer it was nearly two thousand miles, and required from four to six weeks. By air, of course—but he knew quite well that there were no airplanes on that tiny field except his own C-47.

"Do you not remember," she asked archly, "the big boxes, marked *Glassware—Handle With Care?* Did you notice, perhaps, that one was slightly heavier than the others?"

"Heavier? I didn't lift them, myself. But—"

"That I regret. Perhaps you would have handled with more care."

"You mean that you were in one of those crates?"

"You made it plain, you see, that you could not help me to get to Porto Velho. So I had to get assistance of someone else. It was difficult, and not too comfortable—but here I am!"

Torrey thought of a dozen questions to ask, about whose assistance she had received, and how she had wangled it. But for the moment, the implications of her last statement outweighed all else.

"Here, yes. But, good heavens, you can't stay here! This place is—why, it's terrible! There are no women, except natives. These men are all roughnecks, brutes. They haven't seen a girl like you in months. Why, they'll tear you to pieces!"

"Even with the protection of Senhor Moranho?"

"Moranho!" cried Torrey. "He's the worst of them all! The only reason he'd protect you from the others would be to keep you for himself. Why, when he lays eyes on you, he'll—he'll—"

"He will?" She seemed delighted by the prospect, rather than frightened. She cocked her head on one side and rolled her eyes into the corners as if she were flirting with some fascinated patron in the Saint Roque bar. "Then perhaps I will discover what I have come to find out. For he has already asked me to have dinner with him, tonight."

"But look. Wait a minute! You can't do that! You don't know him. He won't



give you any help. He's not that kind. He'll take everything you have to give, and then throw you out."

"Torrey." She stopped him with a hand against his chest. "In my country, when we wish to buy an expensive thing, we are willing to pay the price. Only we must deal with someone who has to sell the thing we wish to buy. *Ate a vista, Torrey!*"

He would have argued further, but she evaded his fingers and ran rapidly up the stairs.

Torrey spent the afternoon haunting the corridors of the building, but did not see her again. He learned that she had appeared shortly before noon, when the trucks pulled in from the field. She had gone direct to Moranho's suite, and a little later had been escorted by a lieutenant to a room of her own on the third floor.

Torrey learned the room number, but found the door closed. After waiting in indecision for several minutes, he knocked. There was no response. He could not tell whether she was inside or not, and he did not quite have the gall to walk in.

**B**ACK in his own room, he bit his nails, and cursed. He was gloomy and distraught. This whole affair had gone sour on him. He had learned nothing at all about Paul Randover, and he found himself working for a gang of savage slave drivers who were bleeding the natives white to line their own pockets. He was worried, too, about Bella. Whatever her errand, it was not worth the sacrifice she was about to make. She was too young in experience to realize her position. To play with fire was one thing. To leap into the flames was something else. She simply didn't know what she was doing.

But at seven o'clock, as she mounted the stairs and rapped on Moranho's door, Bella showed every indication of knowing precisely what she was doing. She was calm and collected, sustained by an inner strength that gave her utter confidence. She wore the flame-colored gown and the high-heeled golden slippers—almost the only baggage she had been able to bring with her—and her hair was brushed back from her temples in rippling profusion.

She had never been more beautiful, and she knew it.

**M**ORANHO himself opened the door. He had dressed in a tuxedo, the ribbon of a Brazilian order slanting across his shirt-front.

"Your dinner guest, senhor!" she announced coolly.

He executed a snap bow from the waist. "A delight which I have been anticipating with the greatest of eagerness, senhorita!"

His greedy eyes devoured her as she entered the room, and turned. His lips moved loosely as though his mouth were watering. It gave her the sensation of a flower being stripped of its petals, one by one. But she showed no sign of fear or distaste.

He took her by the hand and led her back into the suite, past the sumptuously furnished living room to a small private dining room. Here a broad couch stood under the windows, where a humming fan made a pleasing draft. In the middle of the room a table was set for two, and at the sideboard, the Chinese servant, his face as impassive as a carving, manipulated a large silver cocktail shaker.

She sat down on the couch. He sat at her side, half facing her, but not too close. He was too sophisticated to press his hand.

The servant poured cocktails so icy cold that they steamed in the sultry air. While Bella sipped at hers, Moranho downed his at a gulp. The servant immediately refilled his glass.

Moranho asked about several places in Belem with which he was acquainted. She answered lightly, flippantly. He seemed somewhat at a loss for small talk, as if embarrassed by the necessity of making conversation at all. After the second cocktail, he expressed some surprise at her temerity in making the trip to Porto Velho.

"I have heard a great deal about you, Senhor Moranho."

"Excuse me," he interrupted her. "If we are not yet old friends, let us hope that we soon shall be. To me, you shall be Bella, and you may as well start at once calling me Cesar."

Her lip twitched faintly. "It is the name of a strong man, Cesar. And that is what I have heard. I have been told that you are a man of iron, that you have made yourself a great fortune by your skill and determination, that you rule a vast business empire. That men



submit willingly to your demands—and women, too.”

Thus flattered into talking about himself, the magnate held forth at length. He described his early struggles, his burning ambition, his ruthless rise to power. It had been necessary, he confessed, to be brutal, without conscience. One did not acquire riches in these days without acquiring enemies, too. He had both.

Before he had exhausted the subject, the servant brought in the first course, and they moved to the table.

“Oysters!” she exclaimed.

“Oysters which have flown more miles than any oyster ever flew before, just to touch your dainty lips,” he smirked.

He ate with obvious gusto, breathing noisily through his great beaked nose. In fact, for a time he seemed almost to forget the girl opposite him in his engrossment with the food.

One course followed another, each one accompanied by a fresh bottle of wine. Bella sipped each glass, then set it aside. He drank lightly of the still wines, but swallowed copious draughts of the champagne which came later. His eyes grew faintly glassy, and his conversation louder, more bold.

AFTER black coffee, which Moranho did not touch, the Chinese servant brought a bottle of cognac and tiny, thimble-like glasses. Bella took hers over to the couch and set it on an end-table. The servant went into the living room, started the player on a long series of semi-classical records, and then, at a word from Moranho, vanished.

Moranho rose and stood in front of Bella, glass in hand, rocking slightly back and forth from heel to toe.

“I can hardly believe my good fortune—that you should have come way out here to seek my acquaintance.”

“You seldom come to Belem, and are always so busy. So I found it necessary to come to Porto Velho. Especially,” she added coyly, “as I may have a slight favor to ask of you.”

“A favor?” He tossed off his cognac, and leered over the rim of the glass. “I, too, may ask a favor of you, my Bella.”

She smiled, undisturbed. “No doubt you will. And be reassured, Cesar, I have a very generous nature.”

“You mean—you consent?”

“If first you satisfy my curiosity.”

“Ah, I see. We play a little game. This for that. Very well. Tell me. What is your request?”

“I would like to find out what happened to a man who came into this country from Belem, more than a year and a half ago.”

He raised his brows. “A long time! What is his name?”

Bella held her voice steady. “Joaquim Aradhez.”

His eyes hardened abruptly. He set the glass down carefully. “The name is not familiar to me.”

“Come, come, Cesar, my friend! He worked for you for a time. Then, I am told, he took a position with the government, in Manaos. Shortly after that he disappeared.”

He looked at the floor. “Many men vanish in the jungles.”

She said nothing, but just sat waiting.

“The name—perhaps I have heard it,” he muttered. “Yes, I remember now. It was reported that he had died.”

“He died?” Her voice was absolutely colorless.

“I do not recall the circumstances.” He picked up the bottle and refilled the thimbles. “Tell me. Why do you ask after this man?”

Bella called up all her histrionic ability. “Because I hate him! He took me from my family. He made love to me. He promised me everything! Then he ran off and left me, to scorn and disgrace! If he is dead, give me proof. If not, I wish to kill him myself, with my own hands! I am ready—look!”

She thrust her hand down the front of her dress and drew out a knife. As knives go, it was tiny, but as deadly as a three-foot sword, with a chased silver hilt and a burnished steel blade.

Moranho had shrunk back before the violence of her words. But now he began to laugh softly through clenched teeth.

“What a passionate vixen! But do not excite yourself, *Bella mia*! You will not have to kill him. He is already dead, and I can give you the proof you ask. Your favor is granted.”

He turned toward a cabinet against the wall. Taking a key from his pocket, he unlocked the double doors and swung them open. Inside was arranged his collection of trophies. Each of three shelves held more than a dozen shrunken human heads. Some were old and deeply tanned, the skin shriveled by time. Some ap-



peared not so old. Each wore its own distinctive grimace—lifelike, yet more horrible than anything in life.

He gestured with pride toward one on the lowest shelf. "You knew his face? What more proof do you ask?"

She came slowly to her feet, as if lifting with her a stupefying weight. Her hands were clenched, her eyes round and black.

"You killed him!" she cried in a strangling voice.

"I had him killed," corrected Moranho. "He flouted my orders, by writing letters about a Yanqui who had got in my path, and whom I had shot myself, personally. The head of the Yanqui, incidentally, is this one next to his. Side by side in death, as in life!"

He cackled in obscene mirth.

She stood motionless, trembling from head to foot. She hardly heard what he was saying; the blood was pounding in her ears.

Suddenly he turned toward her, his hands grasping her arms.

"So much for my little favor! Now for yours, *Bella mia* . . ."

"You killed him!" she repeated in a horrified whisper.

He seemed not to hear. He drew her closer, passed one hand over the velvet smoothness of her bare shoulder. She saw his eyes, slits of lust. His nostrils were quivering with eagerness. She smelled his hot breath, the foul stench of his perspiration.

She tried to wrench away. He seized her in his arms. Together they staggered sideways. His leg struck the table. A glass toppled to the floor with a brittle crash. The sound seemed to release all of her accumulated passion.

She got her right hand free and drove the knife into his back, again and again and again.

the door opened under his hand, he was surprised. He had thought it would be locked.

His musette, fully packed, was slung over his shoulder. He had come for a showdown with Moranho, prepared to quit and walk out, subject to arrangements for getting him a new pilot in Belem. He was washed up, sick of the whole business.

There was no one in the office, where only a single dim light burned. He halted, listening. At first he heard nothing. Then a faint sobbing moan reached his ears.

He started back across the living room, which was in darkness. His toe struck a chair, which grated on the floor. Thus Bella was up on her feet when he reached the doorway to the dining room.

One of her shoulder-straps had slipped, and her hair was in wild confusion. Her eyes were round and staring, and moist with tears.

"Torrey!" she gasped.

He saw first the knife, still gripped in her hand. Then his eyes dropped to the floor. Moranho lay face down in a welter of broken glass. His shirt, sliced to ribbons, was soaked with blood. He lay without moving, quite dead.

Torrey raised his eyes to Bella's face.

"He killed him!" she cried, in protest against the accusation in his look. "He killed my Joaquim, my dearest Joaquim, my lover, my sweetheart! He said so himself. He boasted! Look, look!"

She whirled him by the elbow to face toward the open cabinet. At first Torrey did not know which head she was pointing at. Then suddenly he gasped and recoiled.

"Paul!" he croaked. "That—that one there!"

"Yes, the American! This swine killed him, too. He told me that. That was why my darling Joaquim met death. Because he was helping the Yanqui, and writing letters to America."

Suddenly Torrey remembered the signature at the bottom of that letter Millie had showed him: Joaquim Aradhez. Things began to fall into a pattern.

He backed away from the horror that confronted him. To see the lifeless and embalmed face of a dear friend was a brutal shock under any circumstances. To see it reduced in scale to one-third size was unspeakably horrifying. He swallowed, and drew a deep breath.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### *C-47 Getaway*

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**W**HEN Torrey knocked at the door, he did not expect to be admitted. Whatever was going on in there, it doubtless was not going on in the front office. But when he turned the knob, and



"How—how long ago—" he began slowly.

"I don't know. I think I fainted, after. I heard a sound. I think the chimes at the door. Then you came."

Torrey clenched his teeth on an oath, and tried to think fast. A thing like this would be all over town in no time, and there would be the devil to pay. If either one of them hoped to leave alive, they would have to get started, leave at once.

He ran to the office door and locked it. As he turned away, he heard pounding footsteps on the stairs. When he came back he went straight through into the bedroom. Yes, his guess was right. That was the window that opened onto the fire escape. He lifted her through, followed on her heels.

As they started down, a rifle cracked somewhere in the dark streets of the town. The only law in this place was Moranho, and Moranho was dead. Hell was popping already.

He knew where the jeep stood, under a tree by the corner of the fence. As they reached it, he heard shouts from the top floor of the building behind him, and the sound of blows on wood.

THE jeep's engine seemed to roar deafeningly in the stillness. He tried driving without lights at first, but gave that up after fifty feet. The lights betrayed his path of escape, but they would soon guess that anyway. A bullet whined over his head, but then he entered the jungle road and all sight and sound was cut off except what they made themselves.

Torrey had driven jeeps before, but never over such a track. He tried to stay in high, but it was hopeless. Then he tried to stay in second, but every two minutes had to drop back to first. Twice, Bella was almost thrown out. A little later a trailing vine caught Torrey around the neck, and would have strangled him before he could stop had she not severed it with a swipe of the dagger.

If there had ever been a record for that journey, he broke it. The field, when he reached it, was merely open blackness instead of closed-in blackness. He found the C-47 with his headlights, roared up to it, and slammed his hand on the horn-button. Karl threw open the cargo door, gun in hand.

"We're taking off, Karl! Right now! Get her ready!"

The crew chief never asked a single question about why or what for. He moved about, turning on cabin lights, unchocking wheels, and removing control locks with swift, unerring efficiency. Only after he had started one engine did Torrey think of fuel.

"We loaded up with gas to make Belem?" he asked.

"No sir! I put in all that was left in those barrels. There is more expected from the river, tomorrow. Enough to make Manaos, but not half enough for Belem, sir!"

Torrey swore under his breath. Manaos, he thought—no. Moranho's influence was strong in Manaos. I might be safe there, but she won't. He pressed the right starter button.

"Cochabamba!" he shouted. "Get me that map from the—"

"Six hundred and eighty miles!" shouted Karl promptly in reply. "Course, one-eighty-six! Altitude of field—"

"Tell me the rest later!" cried Torrey, and warmed his engines.

Using his landing lights, he taxied to the end of the runway and turned. All about lay the fastness of the jungle, black, silent, ominous. Suddenly, his eye caught a splash of light through the foliage back where the road entered the open. He remembered the two trucks at Porto Velho.

They had been pursued!

"Hang on!" he cried. "We're goin', right now!"

He poured coal to the engines. The big plane lumbered forward. Through the roar he heard a cracking sound. Rifles were being fired. He kept his eye glued on the open stretch of runway calculating the moment to use right rudder on the dog-leg.

He heard a *snap* just above his head. A bullet had entered one side of the cabin and left through the other. Then he heard Karl's curse.

Had someone shot Torrey down in cold blood, the crew chief would never have turned a hair. But someone was shooting holes in the airplane—*his airplane!* Karl jerked out the rubber hand plug in a window, thrust his rifle through, and started shooting.

The plane gathered speed, roaring past the road entrance near the mid-



point of the runway. The truck stood there, its lights blazing. Torrey, busy with the take-off, gave it only a glance. Then, suddenly, from the tail of his eye, he saw a sheet of flame. One of Karl's bullets had hit the truck's gas tank.

The truck and all its occupants dissolved in flaming gasoline.

AFTER two hours, Torrey was sure he was going to make it. After three hours he was not quite so certain. After three hours and a half, his doubts became obsessions. He fiddled constantly with mixture controls, prop pitch, and throttles, trying desperately to suck the maximum mile out of every gallon. But these were the foothills of the Andes he was meeting. Whatever else he did, he had to climb, and climbing meant increased fuel consumption.

When his left engine coughed, he switched to the last reserve. Dawn was just breaking over the craggy peaks. Five minutes more, and he was finished. "Fasten your belt!" he told Bella.

Perhaps she didn't hear him, or didn't understand.

The five minutes passed. He was still flying. Another minute. He soared through a pass into a broad valley. Ahead, through mist, he saw a town. Beyond it, an airfield.

"Cochabamba!" barked Karl.

At that moment both engines sputtered, and died.

He saw at once that he could not possibly make the field in a glide. But the slopes of the valley were cultivated. A belly landing was a better bet than bailing out. He feathered props and cut switches while he swung in a short arc toward a field of grain.

There may have been smoother belly landings made. There have certainly been many worse. The floor beneath his feet buckled and groaned as it slid over coarse turf. The old C-47 rocked, and heaved up on her nose, then settled back with a last racking groan.

He was horrified to see blood running from Bella's nose.

"My belt!" she moaned. "I forgot—"

She had been pitched forward, and then dropped back. The nose was a minor matter, but they discovered immediately that her leg was broken as well. They laid her flat on the floor, and then Karl got busy on the liaison set, which was still working. He shouted in

Portuguese, Spanish, and English. At least one of them must have been effective, because he shortly turned to Torrey. "A crash truck comes from the field. An ambulance also."

"Good work," said Torrey briefly.

He had just picked up his musette, which he had earlier slung onto the floor of the cargo compartment. It had been flung violently against the partition in the crash landing, breaking the straps. And, as he found when he reached inside, breaking something else.

The towel was limp and lumpy in his hand. When he folded it back, he saw that the head had been crushed out of shape, and was split open on top. Something cascaded out into his fingers. He stared incredulously. Had one not been set in a ring, he might not have recognized them—*diamonds!*

His mind tried blankly to cope with the mystery. A lost fortune in diamonds, imported into Manaos in the old days of wealth and prosperity, bought, sold, pledged, and stolen doubtless many times since, and eventually tucked into this hiding place by some canny owner, probably now long dead.

Was this what Moranho had been seeking, when Paul Randover "got in his way"? Was this what Paul meant when he wrote, "a fortune to be picked up"? Had Paul known what was inside his gruesome trophy?

The answers to those questions Torrey would never learn now. All he knew was that he held a fortune in his fists. He took them back and showed them to Bella, where she lay.

"At least half of these ought to belong to you," he said.

"No, no! They are for Millie!"

"That's right," nodded Torrey. "They're hers, aren't they?"

"Torrey!" She tried to twist toward him, but her lip grimaced in pain, not all physical. "Be good to Millie—"

"Huh? Yeah, sure. I'll see that she gets along all right. Not that she'll need much help from me—with *this!*"

A siren wailed outside as the ambulance neared.

"Torrey?"

"Yes?"

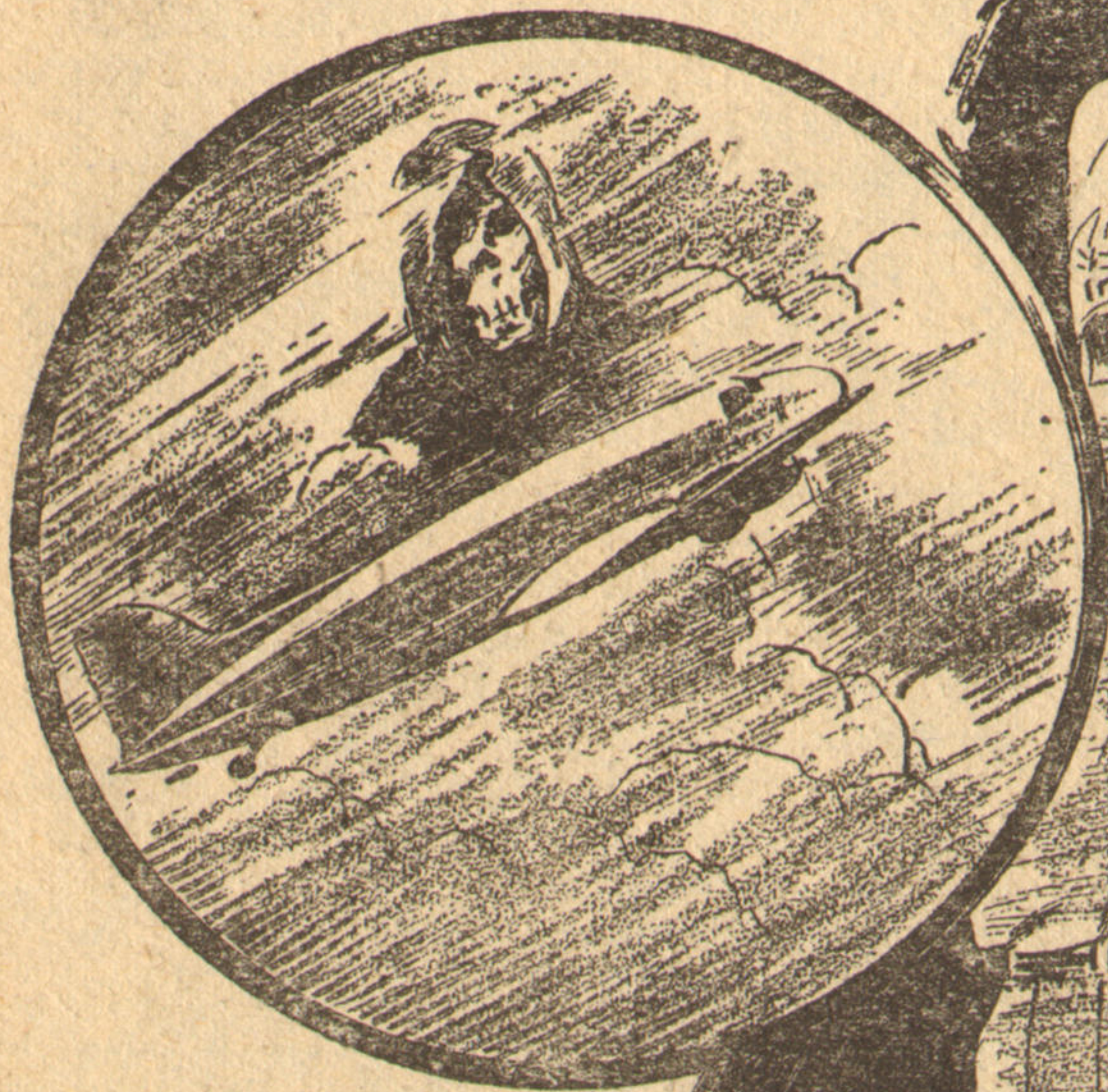
"Before they take me—kiss me once again, Torrey!"

He kissed her. The orderlies had to shove him aside to lift her onto the stretcher.



# Altitude Minus

It was a great relief to Carvey the way they took it



By  
**ARTHUR J.  
BURKS**



*When his DC-3 runs out of gas in a murderous fog over Brazil what can Russ Carvey do but wait, wait, wait—and then die?*

**R**USS CARVEY, chief pilot of the DC-3, *O Cruzeiro*, brushed his hand over the glass to his left, put his suntanned face against it and looked out. Sweat stood out on his cheeks like globules of oil. All he could see was the creeping mist. He turned back to Pedro Goncalvo, his Brazilian co-pilot, and shook his head. Pedro doffed his uniform cap, pushed the hair back from

his forehead. The hair glistened, as oily as Carvey's cheeks.

"There's nothing, Pete," said Carvey. "It's the same as it was. No ceiling, no horizon, no ground, no nothing!" He stared at his instrument panel on which nothing worked except the altimeter. He was really and truly flying blind. "And no instruments," he added. "And where are we, riddle me that? Last time I



knew we were somewhere between Belem and Santarem, with the Amazon practically under us. Now, we may have turned in any direction. How about radio?"

"Dead," said Pedro. "Dead. Dead like the instruments. Dead as we'll be if the fog doesn't lift. We had gasoline enough to travel twice from Belem to Santarem when this fog closed down. Now, we have enough to last us fifteen minutes, no more. Then what?"

Russ Carvey shrugged. "We can always get down," he said. "It's staying up that is the problem!"

Pedro grinned. "You can make a joke of it when we have twenty-one passengers in the back? Our passengers would not see it. Last time I was back they were all impatient. They have watches, know schedules. They know we should have reached Belem an hour ago and more."

"I am whistling in a graveyard," said Carvey. "I am not joking."

"Whistling in a graveyard?" repeated Pedro, shrugging himself down into his uniform coat like a turtle pulling back into his armor. "I am not sure I like that, either."

"Just what *can* I do to please you?" asked Carvey.

"Set us down in one piece," said Goncalvo, "preferably Belem airport."

"Show me where it is and I'll do my best," said Carvey. "Perhaps you'd like to give it a whirl?"

"I," said Pedro, "never having been an American, have never flown, as you put it, by the seat of my pants. Without instruments, I am helpless. But you, you are—"

"Helpless," said Carvey.

AT twenty-seven, Russ Carvey, American ex-war flier, had been loaned to this new Brazilian line by his own company in the States, as a gesture of courtesy, and because his heroic name would help fill the newly shellacked planes with passengers. He had helped open several new branches and extensions. Pedro Goncalvo had been his shadow through it all, in order to be able to take Carvey's place when Carvey returned to the United States.

"What shall we tell the passengers?" asked Pedro. "They have to know pretty soon. Before the gasoline is exhausted, I think."

"They're all Brazilians," said Carvey. "Your people. Suppose you tell them?"

Pedro shrugged. "But for you, my friend, half of them would not be here. There are four of them who speak English. One of them can interpret."

Carvey grinned. "That puts you behind the wheel after all. I may spend the rest of the fifteen minutes back yonder."

"I doubt it," said Pedro. "You couldn't stick it. You'd rather be at the controls."

Russ Carvey gave the wheel to Pedro, let himself out the door into the passenger section. All eyes were turned on him the instant he stood, tall and commanding, facing the twenty-one men—thank God there were no women and children!—whose lives depended on his judgment and his luck. Nobody said anything. All hands merely looked at him, waiting.

"I suppose you all know we're two hours overdue in Belem?" he said flatly.

Men looked at one another. Men who did not understand English looked at men who did.

"I had best interpret," said one of them, a brown-skinned prosperous looking man of sixty or so.

"Please, *Senhor* Mocambier, if you will be so good," said Carvey. "I can speak some Portuguese, but tonight all of it seems to have deserted me."

"As bad as that?" asked Mocambier softly.

"We have gasoline enough to last fifteen, no, twelve minutes now," said Carvey. "Our instrument panel is dead except for the altimeter. Neither Goncalvo nor myself has the slightest idea where we are. We may be heading for Peru. We may be over Belem this instant, but it doesn't seem likely. We'd be able to see the glow of the city's lights against the fog. We may be out over the Atlantic. We may be heading for Rio. There is no radio contact. That's the size of it. It's my fault, I guess. I must have missed some detail, the weather maybe. It doesn't matter now. In twelve, no, ten minutes we must start down." He paused. "There may be water under us or jungles. The chances that we will come through a blind landing in an area where the jungle is a sea of green reaching to the horizon in all directions are infinitesimal. A miracle has to happen in the next ten, no, eight minutes."

*Senhor* Mocambier interpreted rapidly while Carvey watched the swart faces of his passengers. Several of them



crossed themselves. One or two swung into the aisle and touched their knees to the deck. A lithograph of Our Lady of Grace hung above the door of the "office." When Mocambier had finished, several of the men spoke to him. Mocambier interpreted for Carvey, though Carvey had understood.

"None blames you, *Senhor* Carvey, my friends say. They also say that eventually all men must die. However, knowing the ability of the famous American flier, they are not expecting to die tonight! Go back to your task, *Senhor*, with such peace in your heart as you can find."

It was a great relief to Carvey, the way they all took it. Not that he himself had any desire to die. There was a girl at home in New York who had waited as long as a man had a right to ask a woman to wait. It was time to make a home, raise kids, settle down as much as an airman could. With that thought in mind, Russ Carvey went back through the door. If he ever saw those twenty-one passengers again, he knew, it would be when all were safe in some clearing or airport. He had little belief in miracles, yet he could not down the feeling that something was going to happen that would fill them all with complete satisfaction.

"How goes it, Pete?" said Carvey, slipping back into his place.

"No difference, Russ," said Goncalvo, "except that nine of the fifteen minutes have run out. I've looked out a few times, and kept her flying, if not level, at least at the same altitude—seven thousand feet. It's like flying some eerie dream. That fog we're going through, mist, whatever it is—looks like the flying cotton of the ripe *sumaumeira* tree. I've had dreams of walking through just such stuff, with my feet touching nothing. Ugghhh!"

Carvey also looked out, shook his head, looked back. Four minutes to go, if they had the right dope on gasoline.

"You don't ask how your countrymen took it," said Carvey.

"I know my countrymen," said Pedro. "Several crossed themselves. Several knelt in the aisle. None changed expression much. All told you, through one of the English-speaking passengers—Mocambier, at a guess—that it wasn't your fault and that they were sure you would get them through. Right? One even

made the verbal gesture of saying that every living person must some day die."

CARVEY nodded. The motor began to stutter and sputter. Carvey could feel Pedro go tense in the other bucket. He could feel the passengers tense. He could almost hear someone mention the altitude, and guess how long it would take to use it up, dead-stick.

He checked in every way he could with a dead panel, to make those last few drops of gasoline go on forever. It was no use. The motors conked out. The silence after that was somehow frightful, even to the pilot and co-pilot.

Carvey looked at Pedro. He jerked his head to indicate the passenger section.

"Now that the chips are down, Pete," he said, "are your countrymen likely to stampede?"

"No!" said Pedro Goncalvo.

"You underestimate us, *Senhor*," said a voice from behind them. Carvey whirled to see Mocambier just inside the door, watching. Beyond Mocambier he could see the aisle-side knees of the passengers. "If I may stand here, sir, you can tell me what to do and I'll pass it on."

"Return to your seat, please," said Carvey. "There is nothing to do but fasten your seat belts. The sign says that. Shut the door behind you. Sorry, but if we have a chance, it is because I can shut all of you out and concentrate."

"Don't apologize," said Mocambier. "We all understand perfectly."

Carvey swung back to the front. The altimeter was beginning to crawl down. He could not keep the great ship up forever with no power on her. Again he peered out the glass. Outside there were only the tendrils of the creeping mist. It was a tangible thing, almost audible, that mist. A chill in it, too. Carvey shivered in spite of himself.

"Afraid to die?" asked Pedro.

"Death has been a companion as close as you are," Carvey shrugged. "He has always understood me, whatever the language."

"I don't like it," said Pedro. "Maybe my faith is not strong. Maybe it would have helped if I had been in the war, too. I'd be living on borrowed time, as you are. Then it would not matter so much. For the first time in several years I am glad I have no wife, no children."

Pedro Goncalvo went silent. Carvey



looked at the altimeter. Five thousand feet. They were losing altitude fast. Soon it was four thousand. The landing lights showed nothing but the mist. The blinking of the lights was scarcely discernible, and wholly hopeless. The mist became momentarily thicker.

Carvey turned as Pedro touched his shoulder and pointed. Tendrils of the mist were penetrating the office, circling about the feet of the fliers as if examining them for some weird purpose. That was supposed to be impossible. Fog should not have come into the plane, even with the airvents on. The two fliers looked into each other's eyes, shrugged. The altimeter said four thousand feet. The DC-3 seemed to be floating, falling, then rising ever so little on the fleece which had such a dream quality.

"No mountains," said Carvey. "If there were, it would end quickly, and unexpectedly, before we could get down to Altitude Zero. As it is, the Amazon Valley—"

"Flatter than a pool table," said Pedro. "Altitude Zero is ten feet above the Atlantic. We have to watch that altimeter take us right into the trees, the stumps, the rocks, or the ocean. How fast do we fly like this?"

"We'll hit hard enough," said Carvey. He was trying hard to see down. His watch said eight o'clock at night. Total darkness, even without the mist, possessed the world. "The unlucky ones will be the survivors."

"I'd risk it, to be sure," said Pedro Goncalvo.

The altimeter said three thousand. Carvey held her up as high as she would go and refused to look at the altimeter until he had counted a hundred. Then he looked. They were down to two thousand.

"You rushed it, Russ," said Pedro. "I counted only to ninety-five."

"You didn't know when I started, Pete," said Carvey. "I don't rush this sort of thing much."

"That means you've been in a position like this before?"

"Exactly. Another country, that's all. Got out of it just above the ground. Saw a hole in the clouds. It was an airport."

"It happened once, then," said Pedro hopefully. "Then it could happen again!"

"To the same person, Pete?" asked Carvey. "Don't kid yourself."

The altimeter said fifteen hundred.

It could happen any time now.

"I'm sorry the altimeter works," said Pedro.

"It is not a time to be sorry about anything," said Carvey. "I've always lived the present moment to the utmost. I'm doing it now. If I get out, it will be a high few moments to recall with great satisfaction."

"I see you still think of getting out," said Pedro. "If you have hope, so do I!"

"I must be careful what I say," said Carvey grimly. He put a cigarette between his lips, offered one to Pedro, who hesitated, looked surprised, took it. "Yeah," said Carvey, "I know it's against the rules. Boss will probably fire me!"

The altimeter said one thousand as they lighted up.

"I'm going to nose down, use some precious altitude," said Carvey. "See if I can spot anything, even a cabin light. . . ."

PEDRO shrugged. The nose of the crate dropped. The needle spun as Carvey let her drop, then pulled her up again until she threatened to fall off. She lacked a hundred feet of restoring what she had lost in the dive—and Carvey had seen nothing, nothing but the mist, below, aloft, in all directions. Neither had Pedro seen anything. Both men had strained their eyes past the nose, hunting.

Seven hundred feet. Five hundred. Four hundred. Carvey tried to relax. Pedro seemed calmer. But there was sweat on his neck. Carvey no longer felt hot or even uncomfortable. As far as he was concerned, the crash had already happened. Two hundred feet. Unless a miracle set them down through opaque clouds on a field or a stumpless clearing, twenty-three men had seconds to live. Carvey dropped his cigarette on the deck, ground it out with his heel. Pedro aped him. Both men laughed shortly. As if, when they crashed, a fire could make any difference now. Anyway, they had no gasoline.

One hundred feet.

Carvey leaned forward, his eyes set, staring.

"Keep your eyes on the altimeter, Pete," he said. "That will make it easier. I won't have time to warn you even. I can't see a thing."

Somewhere under a hundred feet. Carvey shut out everything except the will



to see. He must at least see the ground, the trees, whatever it was that crashed them. He dared not even blink. Between one blink and the next they might all die. It would probably be as quickly as that.

Nothing. Nothing but the mist.

"*Santa Maria, Mae de Deus!*" said Pedro. "Russ!"

"Shut up, Pete. You never can tell!" said Carvey. "Don't talk to me. Go on praying. Say something nice for me while I handle this crate, will you."

"... *cheia de gracia*," said Pedro Goncalvo. "Russ! Blast your American eyes, Carvey, listen to me! It's impossible!"

"If it's a miracle, it has to be," said Carvey. "Talk!"

"The needle has been down to altitude zero for the last thirty seconds, forty-five seconds now, one minute! And all that time the ship's nose has been down!" Pedro's voice was filled with awe.

"Nothing strange about that, except that the altimeter, like the rest of the panel, is on the Fritz," said Carvey. "But just what good are a few hundred more feet?"

"We might need exactly what we have," said Pedro, "to reach a clearing, or an airport. If we were observers,

somewhere outside, and could see just where we are—"

"Still at zero," said Carvey, "still with the nose down. It can't last much longer."

But it did, a minute longer. Two minutes. Three. An impossible four minutes. For more than six minutes the needle had stood at zero, yet the DC-3 still flew, losing altitude. But of course Carvey had given the right answer. The altimeter was off.

FOUR more minutes passed. Pedro was crossing himself now, reciting the benediction so fast Carvey could not catch the words. A strange chill began to creep along Carvey's spine. The mist seemed thicker in the cabin now. He wondered just how the passengers were taking it.

"Pete," said Carvey, "it doesn't matter where you are when you get it. Open the door. Let the passengers come up one at a time and see what's going on. There is no explanation. They must see for themselves."

Pedro Goncalvo rose, vanished behind Carvey, returned with Mocambier. Carvey did not turn to look. The crash would [Turn page]



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come any second now. Carvey explained, just the same.

"The needle has stood at zero for ten minutes now, *Senhor* Mocambier," he said. "It only means that the altimeter is defective."

Mocambier smiled. Carvey did not look at him, but somehow he knew that Mocambier smiled.

"You could be wrong, my friend Carvey," said Mocambier. "May our friends not come up two at a time? Then we shall be sure all will see the mystery. Maybe, who knows, a layman will find an explanation?"

None did, however, not for some little time. Mocambier came back with each pair. One trip he brought two, and the plane still flew, nosed down, needle at zero. Would he have time for two more? When he had made the trip four times, the question remained—would there be time to bring two more? Two more came, heard the quick explanation. The plane continued to volplane.

A SENSE of unreality, of nightmare, of soothing nightmare, took possession of Carvey. It became a game with him, to make the plane stay up while each pair of passengers came forward, heard the story, saw the needle, returned to their seats to await the end.

"Ninth trip, *Senhor* Carvey!" said Mocambier. "I'll bring three next time—the last."

"The last three won't get back to their seats," said Carvey.

"They'll make it," said Mocambier with quiet conviction. "How long now has the needle been at zero?"

"Twenty minutes. We could have dropped five thousand feet. We were flying at seven when everything went wrong. We could not have nosed up without Pedro or I noticing it. Now, *Senhor* Mocambier, there seems to be no valid explanation. Have our friends offered any? How are they taking it?"

"No suggestions or explanations from any of them," said Mocambier. "They feel strange, of course. They exchange

wondering glances. How do you feel, *Senhor* Carvey?"

"Swell! Funny thing to say, isn't it?"

"One is likely to, as you say, say funny things at a time like this, *Senhor* Carvey," said Mocambier. "We could all have been smashed to bits, twenty minutes or more ago, yet here we are, flying on and on. You do not bid me return to my seat?"

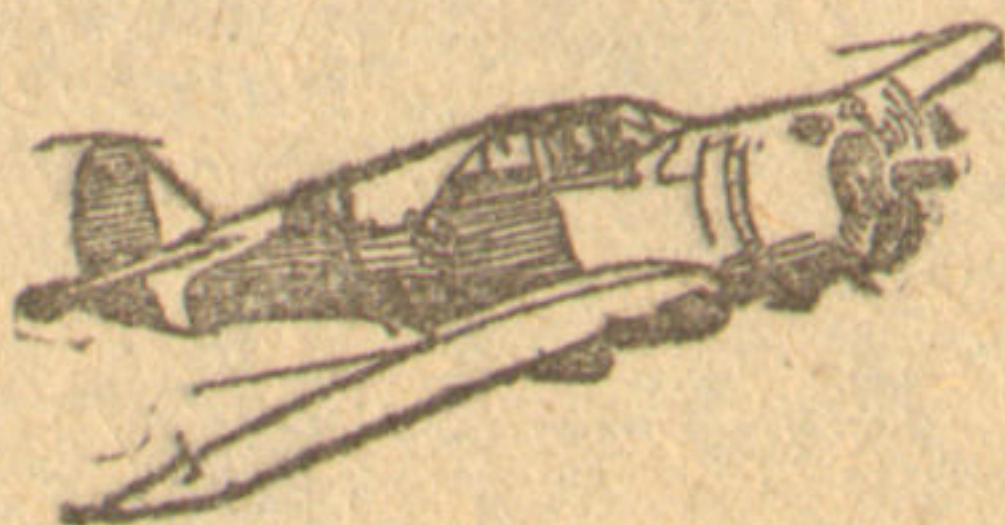
Carvey did not answer. He did not believe he had batted his eyes once since the needle had come to rest at zero. Of course he must have, but he didn't remember having done it. He took a chance, snatched his eyes off the mist ahead long enough to look at Goncalvo. Pedro had his hands in the side pockets of his light flying jacket. He was looking straight ahead. His lips were pursed in a soundless whistle. The mist whispered over the fuselage audibly now. Goncalvo turned and met Carvey's eyes, grinned at him, winked. Mocambier laughed softly.

The DC-3 flew on, the needle frozen at the bottom.

Five more minutes passed. Ten. Mocambier laughed again. Carvey suddenly took his hands off the wheel. The plane flew on as if she were on the automatic pilot. Both Pedro and Mocambier smiled at Carvey as he stood up.

"Where are you going, *Senhor*?" asked Mocambier, his smile seeming to say that he knew the answer before Carvey gave it.

"Back with the passengers. I want to see them all together before debarking time!" Carvey laughed softly himself. "Sometimes I know things," he said, as Mocambier followed him, and Pedro followed Mocambier, and the plane flew steadily onward and downward. "When I saw them last, back here, I knew I would not see them again alive! Let's all sit here quietly." Carvey took a seat in the passenger section near the door of the office, while Pedro and Mocambier took the first seats they came to. "Let's all sit here quietly," repeated Carvey, "until we're accustomed to being dead!"

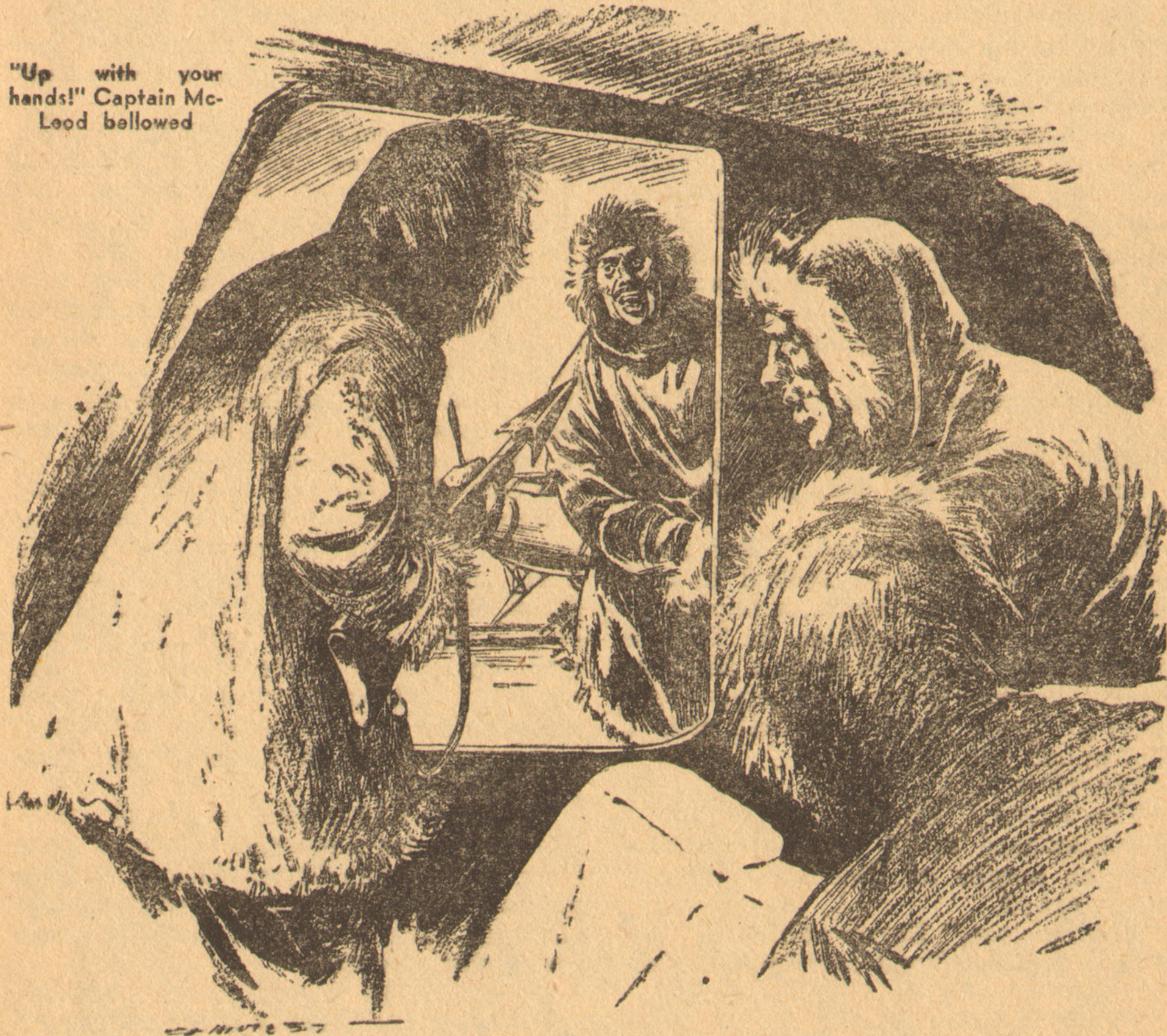


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# Fur-Lined Coffin

"Up with your hands!" Captain McLeod bellowed



*Barney Mullen braves swift death in the Arctic  
in order to fly out a batch of fabulous furs!*

**B**ARNEY MULLEN listened impassively to the nervous little man's proposition. But under the poker face his reckless, impulsive nature kept urging, "Five grand don't grow on bushes. Grab it before he changes his mind."

His common sense warned, "They don't pay bush pilots that kind of dough unless there's something crooked about it."

Then his impulsive nature would argue, "Listen, Barney. You've got nine thousand bucks. You earned it the hard way—charter flights, working for someone else. And it took time. Five thousand bucks plus nine adds up to fourteen. Fifteen grand will buy you a piece of that little pilot-owner airline operating in Alaska. And little lines, operated by the right kind of men, grow into big

**By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE**



lines. And those fellows are the right kind of men."

There were two of them, Al Morgan and Malemute Conroy, and they needed a third man who was cool and tough in an emergency and yet didn't throw his weight around. Particularly they wanted a boy who could keep his temper when all their nerves were raw from too much hard flying.

In turn, they would keep their tempers when the new pilot threatened to blow his top. And they hoped Barney Mullen would be that new pilot. But it was going to cost fifteen thousand dollars to buy an interest, because the money was needed for additional equipment.

Mullen turned to the nervous little man.

"How long did you say it would take to earn this dough, Mr. Enroy?" he asked.

"Depends on the weather," Enroy answered. "You could be socked in and lose a week or two. Again, a day there and a day back should do it. There's nothing about it that is against the law. I heard that you were a pilot who would tackle anything legal and that's why I telegraphed you."

"Where is it?"

"The Arctic," Enroy answered.

"Somewhere north of the Siberian coast, or maybe on Soviet territory?" Mullen asked.

"You're close," Enroy admitted.

"Is it that fur-lined coffin job?" Mullen asked bluntly.

"That's it," Enroy said.

Barney Mullen whistled softly. He knew the background and it was a suicidal deal unless a pilot had a barrel of luck. And there were many who said that in the war, and during his post-war flying, Mullen had used up more luck than any five men could hope to enjoy.

**T**HE deal was on the level . . . at the start, at least. A Siberian settlement had needed certain items readily available at Nome and which could not be landed by Soviet vessels before the freeze-up. In exchange was offered Russian sable. The Russians fixed a price of fifty thousand dollars. A fair enough price in the Arctic. But landed safely in a Hollywood or New York furrier's, two hundred and fifty or three hundred

thousand dollars wasn't at all out of line with what those furs would bring.

Enroy, operating in Seattle, had offered to fly the supplies to the Siberian port and bring the furs back on the return trip. The Russian government had rejected the proposition of an American, even a bush pilot, winging his way over their Arctic coastline.

Enroy had then chartered the trading schooner, *Osprey*, which cleared from Nome, anchored off the Siberian port and received Russian officials aboard. They came off in a skin boat, powered by an outboard motor which had been set down in a sort of well six feet from the stern. They found the schooner's papers in order, but permitted no one to land. The cargo had been discharged in skin boats which brought out the furs in small consignments on each trip.

When the last of the cargo went ashore, the last of the furs had come aboard. A day or two out of the Siberian port, the *Osprey's* motor had broken down. She had resorted to sail and had been caught in the ice pack. As she was well beyond the Three Mile Limit, Enroy felt that he could send a ski-equipped plane to fly the cargo to Nome without getting involved in international complications.

The pilot had landed on young (newly formed) ice a quarter of a mile from the plane. As the *Osprey* lacked aviation gasoline, the pilot had carried enough to see him back to one of the American arctic settlements.

Normally he would have communicated with the *Osprey* after taking off as plane and schooner were radio equipped. But nothing was heard by either schooner or shore stations. An hour after the take-off, the plane returned, engine gasping. The schooner's crew saw the pilot fight to clear a pressure ridge and fail. Ice, ski and wing fragments filled the air and fell on a fuselage skidding over young ice.

Only the bale of fur the pilot had dragged to his lap just before the crash had saved him from instant death. Even the bale hadn't saved him from fatal chest injuries. But it had given him a chance to gasp a partial story to the schooner's men who had torn apart the wreckage in the hope of saving him.

Pilots die hard and this one believed he would survive as he said, "I darn near ended up in a fur-lined coffin." His smile



was seconds ahead of death. "Switched to main . . . fuel tanks. Soon . . . trouble. Saw ski tracks where there shouldn't be . . . tracks. Then . . . plane . . . painted white. Vultures should be . . . black."

A puzzled expression laced with pain had flowed over his face. A moment later Eddie Sergeant was dead.

Several of the schooner's crew had heard the pilot's last words, and they were in accord when the Coast Guard, deputy United States marshal, and CAA officials had flown out to investigate. The plane had been fitted with an emergency tank in which high test gasoline was always carried in case the pilot couldn't get aviation gasoline at remote trading posts. In the opinion of Arctic pilots, Sergeant had warmed up on the emergency tank, had taken the fur-lined coffin up, then knowing his main tanks were filled with high test fuel hadn't bothered to switch to them immediately. When he finally did switch, trouble started.

Doubtless he had switched back again, but the supply was exhausted before he could return to the schooner, and the engine wouldn't keep the plane aloft on the fuel in the main tanks.

Pilots generally agreed someone had "doctored" the fuel. They logically asked, "Why didn't Sergeant communicate with the schooner as soon as he was in trouble?" The answer to that was, "Someone had tampered with his transmitter."

**N**OR had pilots stopped with Sergeant's plane. They began speculating on the cause of the *Osprey's* motor failure. The varied pieces began making a pattern—a well organized plan to take the fur and a willingness to take life to do it.

Enroy had asked for bids to fly the fur to Nome. No one bid, because it meant risking a plane and those who owned planes had their winter's work lined up. Wives and sweethearts had heard the fur-lined coffin story and raised hob when their men began talking of taking a whirl at the job.

The gals had pointed out that winter arctic flying was never a picnic and there were no CAA emergency landing strips in the floes. A pilot might become lost in thick weather and make a forced landing in Russian territory or be shot down. It meant prison, or at least deten-

tion in a Siberian village while the State Department arranged release — something not arranged in record time.

Gradually Enroy had upped his offer until now he was supplying the plane and offering five grand clear money. Mullen could understand and sympathize with the man's desperation. Unless the fur was flown out, fifty thousand dollars had gone down the rat hole, not to mention the potential value in the smart fur markets.

"Okay, Mr. Enroy," he said. "Let's get at this, cold turkey. Let's put the prize low, two hundred thousand to anyone who can get his claws on the fur and fly it out. And there'll be no flight plan filled when the job is done. Someone on board the schooner got to the plane and got in some dirty work. Another plane was waiting at the point where he would logically come down. The pilot saw it, realized motor trouble and a waiting plane on a bleak Arctic ice sheet was no coincidence. He gambled on getting back to the schooner and lost. The next man might not get even back to the schooner."

"I'll make it seven thousand five hundred," Enroy offered.

"I'm not trying to hold you up," Mullen said. "I'm just figuring the angles. This pilot's name was Eddie Sergeant, wasn't it? Do you know his wife's address by any chance?"

"Yes," Enroy answered, and gave it without reference to a note book.

"Thanks," Barney answered. "I want to think this over. I'll let you know in twenty-four hours."

"And if some other pilot wants the job?"

"Let him have it. When they put me away for good, I don't want my coffin fur-lined."

That night he got Mrs. Eddie Sergeant on the long distance telephone.

He identified himself, then said, "I hope you won't mind me asking a personal question. Did Enroy treat you right after your husband's death?"

"Yes," she answered. "He was more than fair. He chartered a plane to bring out the—body, which he didn't have to do. He paid all expenses. And he paid me the sum due if Eddie had succeeded in carrying out the contract."

"A right Joe, eh?"

"Very right," she answered. "Are you going after the furs?"



"I'm thinking of it," he admitted.

"Listen. I've thought of nothing but this, day and night," she said with feeling. "Something was done to Eddie's plane before he took off from the schooner. Watch your plane, day and night while you're there."

"I don't plan to stay overnight," Barney answered. "I plan to land shortly after daylight, load immediately, and return, landing after dark at some point where the weather is clear."

"But if the weather turns bad," she warned, "you may *have* to stay over night."

"That's right," he admitted. "Well, thanks for your trouble. I never met Eddie, but everybody tells me he was tops."

AS soon as he had hung up, he called Enroy. "I've talked to Mrs. Sergeant," he said. "I'll take the job. Make out your contract and I'll sign."

He flew to Nome and Enroy's agent met him at the airport. The man's name was Hawley. He had a hair-trigger laugh and a breezy manner. Barney didn't like him, but to make sure he wasn't jumping at conclusions and making a mistake, he told a couple of very aged and pointless jokes. The man doubled up with laughter.

"Nuts to you, Hawley," Mullen thought. He made a few guarded inquiries and learned that Hawley was unknown in the Bering Sea community, but since his arrival had been very active in promoting Enroy's interests.

"Is he a pilot?" Mullen asked a CAA man.

"No. Charters planes when necessary. He doesn't like flying," the CAA man answered.

Mullen left in a thoughtful mood. He tested the single-engined ski-equipped plane and found it just what he expected. Hawley was waiting when he landed, his face, framed in the fur of his parka hood, was all smile.

"Pile in, Mr. Hawley," Barney said, "and we'll take a short hop."

The smile left Hawley's face. There was momentary hesitation before he said, "Why not?"

"As Enroy's agent," Mullen said casually, "I want you to check my competence as a pilot."

"Oh there's no question of that," Hawley said quickly.

TEN minutes later and three thousand feet above the airport, Barney released the controls and began shedding his parka, saying something about the heated plane being too warm for a parka. Twice he saw Hawley instinctively reach out to control the plane as it entered turbulent air. Mullen was secretly elated when he landed. He had cleared up one point. Hawley was a pilot. But why was he keeping his knowledge under cover?

"You are a competent man," Hawley said genially. "When are you taking off?"

"W. P.," Mullen answered, "tomorrow morning."

"W. P.?"

"A good old Alaskan term applied to steamers and planes alike — Weather Permitting."

While Mullen was making a final check on his plane that evening, Malemute Conroy and his dog arrived. Conroy was a lean fellow with sandy hair and a humorous drawl. In no respect did he fulfill the popular idea of a pilot. There was nothing romantic about him. Once he had walked away from a wreck, and it was three weeks before he arrived at a trading post.

"If I had had a malemute dog along to pack my stuff, I'd've made better time," he had drawled. And thereafter a dog had accompanied him on all flights.

Tonight his mood was serious. "Al and I just heard you're taking a shot at this fur-lined coffin deal," he said. "If it's to get enough dough to join us, skip it. We'll limp along until you can raise it some other way."

"That was my main idea at the beginning," Mullen answered. "But I figured Sergeant was as good as murdered. He left a wife and a child. Okay, I'm unmarried, no responsibilities, and it's up to someone like me to clear up this mess. There're enough hazards in flying up here without some crook sabotaging planes too. Now give me one good reason for not seeing this through."

"Can't figure a reason," Malemute Conroy answered. He looked into the plane and noticed the extra tins of gasoline securely lashed. "You won't need all that gas," he said.

"A pilot doesn't fly empty if he can help it," Mullen answered. "I'll find use for that stuff."



"Want me to watch your plane tonight?"

"No. Nothing is going to be done to the plane until the furs are aboard," Mullen replied. "That's what they're after. Think I'll get in some sack time. The CAA is going to call me if the weather's good."

The CAA called him at five o'clock and when he went down for breakfast Hawley was there with his hair-trigger smile in working order.

"Sure the weather's good?" he asked, and it seemed to Mullen that there was lack of sincerity in the man's voice. "We don't want you ending up in a fur-lined coffin, Barney."

"That isn't the point," Mullen answered. "I'm out to get the son who was responsible for Sergeant's being in a satin-lined coffin." It was an outburst of sudden resentment, and he was sorry that he had tipped his hand.

"I've never felt murder was involved," Hawley said without smiling. "I know it makes a dramatic Arctic episode that will eventually become a legend. But I think Sergeant had engine trouble, period."

They ate in silence and went down to the CAA office where Mullen filed his flight plan. Hawley drove him to the airport, where, for the first time, he noted the extra fuel.

"Why all the gas?" he asked.

"May be a lot of low gear work ahead of me," Barney answered briefly. For the first time, Hawley flushed angrily.

"I'm trying to be helpful," the man said.

Malemute Conroy came over. "I checked, just for luck, Barney," he said. "I hope you don't mind? Everything's okay."

"Thanks," Mullen answered.

He took off, circled a couple of times over ice-bound Nome, then headed for the *Osprey*. The schooner was subject to the whim of the ice floes, but twice a day she communicated with the CAA stations, which got a fix on her by triangulation, and her exact position was always known.

In the vague light of a winter day Barney Mullen sighted her where they said she'd be found. Coal smoke trailed lazily from her galley and the living quarters aft.

He came in low. Two men, carrying flares, set them down on young ice. He

put his skis down between the flares, glided to a stop, turned and taxied up to within a hundred yards of the schooner.

CAPTAIN McLEOD, a veteran Arctic trader, was on hand to greet him.

"We worried about you lad," he said. "You were much longer than it was calculated."

Mullen felt like winking at the cheerful skipper and saying, "Lots of low gear work between here and Nome." But he said, "I loafed along, conserving fuel."

"Loading and pulling out immediately?"

"What do *you* think?"

"My bones tell me snow will be flying inside an hour," the captain replied. "And don't tell me the weather stations are predicting good weather. Until we get regular reports from over Siberia way, where much of our weather is made, we'll never know for sure."

"I'll stick around," Mullen answered. "I'll want a trustworthy man to watch the plane when I'm not on the job."

"You think there was dirty work done here?"

Mullen couldn't tell whether McLeod resented his attitude or not. "It could've happened here," he answered.

"So it could, but who?"

Mullen shrugged. "I thought the plane and schooner would be some distance apart?"

"They were, when Sergeant was here," McLeod said. "Pressure breaks up a good landing spot, then a new one freezes. You can lose a plane without half-trying. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," Barney admitted. "Just in case, suppose I refuel and stow the furs aboard before enjoying my royal ease?"

McLeod looked into the cabin. "You haven't any too much on hand, have you?"

"With luck, I can stretch it," Mullen answered.

The mate came over and looked in. He was a big, muscle-bound, bearded fellow named Paxton, probably in his late twenties, but the beard made him look older. He growled at the native boys who had gathered to look at the plane.

"Keep away, understand?" They backed off, exchanging glances.

Mullen had found them in the various Arctic villages, educated in native schools, very alert, and more familiar



with planes than any other means of transportation except their skin boats powered with outboard motors set in-board. Normally he wouldn't have worried about them. They had sense enough to not damage a plane. They did like to scribble messages on wing and tail surfaces which often were read by friends in other villages.

Paxton helped Barney with the refueling. He stowed the bales of fur expertly, lashing them against the possibility of their breaking away and piling up on the flier in case of a bad landing.

Mullen rigged a nose hangar over the motor and a fire pot to keep it warm in case he had to take off suddenly. The growl of the floes breaking against each other was a distant thing. But distance was not reassuring, for he knew pressures miles away extended through the pack until a weak point buckled into a pressure ridge.

Of course he cut toggles in the ice and drove lines through them to keep the plane secure should a sudden wind spring up. With covers on the wing and tail surfaces to protect them against frost and snow, the plane was snugged down for the night.

Mullen had brought projector, films and first class mail from Nome. The mail was immediately distributed. He was setting up the projector when McLeod came into the cabin, carrying a gun fitted with a harpoon with an explosive head.

To Mullen's surprised glance, McLeod said, "Now and then I kill a whale and tow it to a village. Makes everybody happy, and it's good business, too. This is a special design a strong, heavy man can fire from his shoulder." Barney shook his head, and McLeod added, "Sometimes I forget to brace myself and the recoil knocks me flat."

As Mullen threaded the first film into the projector he looked over the men crowded into the cabin. One had had a hand in Sergeant's death and might bring about his own. He wondered whether he could determine the guilty man by the process of elimination.

"Suppose," he thought, "I offered to fly out a man? The average white man, facing a winter frozen in, would jump at the chance. A man expecting the plane to crash would never board it."

When the show was finished and he

said he *might* have room for a man on the homeward flight their eagerness to go made him feel like a heel for even suggesting it in a noble cause. Paxton, the mate, seemed indifferent and Barney wondered if he had called a shot.

"What about you, Paxton?"

"Take the married men," Paxton answered with a generosity that didn't ring true in Mullen's ears. "I've no family. When I'm in the ice I save money." A sound enough reason, but Mullen was skeptical.

"Mighty generous of you, Paxton," he said. "Maybe I shouldn't risk a family man under present conditions. On reflection, I don't think I should."

He hadn't changed his decision the following morning, even though a light snowfall had turned the young ice into a perfect air strip for a ski-equipped job.

The take-off was good. The skis slapped briefly, then the pressure ridges were flowing under them.

"Two hundred grand-plus in fur," he thought. "When the gals stand before a mirror, arranging their furs, they never dream of the tragedy that may lie behind them."

**A**N hour passed, then the engine began missing. It grew worse and presently stopped, caught, gasped and finally died. He came down in great circles, cleared a pressure ridge rather neatly and glided to a stop a quarter-mile from the schooner.

He climbed out of the plane and made his way to the craft. As there had been no sound to warn of his approach, the schooner's crew was below deck.

"I'd hoped for this," Mullen said softly, "but I didn't think I'd be this lucky."

He walked up the gangplank, turned and opened the door leading to the officers' quarters. No one was in the passage. He knocked on the mate's door.

Paxton growled, "Come in. What do you want?" he asked without looking up from his transmitter. It was apparent he had expected a native boy on some errand.

"You," Barney answered. He severed the wires leading from the transmitter before Paxton recovered from his astonishment. The mate looked as if he had seen a ghost. "You rigged the same deal you put over on poor Sergeant—water in the fuel tanks."



Paxton's hand reached toward a drawer. Mullen lashed out and the mate's hand never reached the cached gun. The very fury of his defense was a confession of guilt.

They stood toe to toe, slugging it out, with little chance for footwork in the narrow quarters. Each, for reason of his own, was careful not to crash into the radio transmitter.

Captain McLeod, attracted by the sound, burst from his quarters and flung open the door.

"Avast! Avast!" he roared. Then as he saw that Mullen seemed to be getting the better of the brawl, he grew less forceful. Barney pounded away at the mate's stomach until the seaman's guard came down, and he let him have it, squarely on the button. The mate's head went back against the wall, then he slid slowly to the deck. He had enough.

"Put him in irons," the skipper ordered his men. "I don't understand a lot of this, Barney, but you're back and full of indignation. It's enough until I learn more."

"Thanks," Mullen said. "I wonder if a detail of men could tow my plane to the schooner. A good long rope should do it. I want to tinker with this radio."

He connected the severed wires then said, "Hello! Hello!" The dials had not been touched and presumably whoever the mate had been talking to was standing by.

"What's cooking?" a voice asked.

"He's back. Engine trouble. Just landed."

"Engine trouble, eh? Too bad." It was evident the other was at a loss as to procedure. He wasn't tipping any hands via the air, but was leaving it up to the supposed mate to instruct him. Mullen wished that he could get a fix on the station, but anyone playing for big stakes would be on guard against that.

"I'll let you know how things are going," Mullen said.

"Find out if any change in . . . flight plans." The last two words came out reluctantly.

"Roger and over," Mullen said.

McLeod was waiting for him on deck. "You didn't head for the mainland, but circled within gliding distance and waited to see what happened."

"That's right—high enough and far enough away so my engine wouldn't be

heard," Barney answered. "Then a long glide. I figured, as long as nothing had been uncovered in the Sergeant crash, the method would be tried again. Well, the boys have hauled the plane alongside. Let's drain the fuel tanks."

He drained the tanks into containers and allowed the fuel to settle, then drew some off the bottom, where the water, if any, would gather. He walked away a safe distance and lighted the contents of a water bucket. It burned fiercely, then fitfully and finally died. He tasted some of the remainder and spat it out, swearing forthrightly.

"Salt water in it, I think," he said. "I'll keep some for chemical analysis."

"And use it as evidence against Paxton," the skipper added. "What's next? You know the fuel you have in tins is okay, but is there enough of it?"

"I stopped on the way here and cached enough to refill the main tanks," Mullen answered. "There was a possibility the take-off here might be rugged, and I wanted as light a load as possible. But I didn't want to leave any fur behind."

"What's next?"

"I wish I had several good men," Mullen said.

"If you'll include me," the skipper said, "I'll pick your men. When do we take off?"

"As soon as I warm up the engine."

When he was ready for the take-off he returned to the mate's radio and reported briefly.

"Mullen got the water out of his fuel and refilled the tanks direct from tins. Take off in five minutes. Flight plan unchanged. Over."

"Roger," the other answered.

ONE hour later Barney heard the same voice.

"Mullen, I'm now flying above and behind you. You will land on the ice sheet dead ahead. You will come out of the plane with your hands up. "You'll then receive further orders."

"Greetings," Mullen answered. "And quit your kidding."

"We were never more serious," the other said. "Will you land or . . ."

Tracer bullets whistled past the left hand side of the plane, and he presumed good, deadly bullets were sandwiched in between.

"No, mister," Mullen said, "you aren't kidding."



He landed, stepped from his plane and closed the door behind him. A white plane circled above once, then landed. The pilot knew his business. The skis' touch was as light as a husband's kiss as he hurries to the train. The engine spluttered a little, then stopped. The long glide ended within a hundred yards of Mullen.

Three men, wearing parkas and mukluks came from the plane. Each held an automatic rifle in his heavily-mitted hands.

"Down on your face," the leader ordered.

"Hello, Hawley," Mullen said. "I had an idea you might have a hand in this deal."

"You'll never live to boast about it," Hawley answered. "Dead men tell no tales. That theory is still good when the stakes are worth it."

One man placed his weapon on the ice and tied Mullen hand and foot.

"You don't need to gag me," Barney said. "I'm not likely to yell for help. Hawley, I got to hand it to you. You played this smooth, but you made one mistake."

"Yes?" Hawley's voice was cold, but curious. And Barney Mullen had counted on the man's curiosity. A fellow playing for big stakes likes to know his errors.

"You should have forced Sergeant down," Mullen said. "A few bursts from an automatic rifle—like the treatment you gave me."

"I misjudged my man," Hawley said. "I thought he'd land as soon as his engine gave him trouble. There were numerous areas all the way to the mainland where he could set down the plane on young ice. We had arranged to put salt water in his fuel tanks. We had also arranged for his transmitter to go out. You see we couldn't afford to have him telling the world what was going on."

"Come on, Hawley, let's get the pelts," one said. "Finish this guy off and get out."

"Plenty of time," Hawley answered. "Mullen quit so suddenly I've concluded he's yellow. Sergeant was smart, now. And a gambler, too. He stayed over the floes where, if we forced him down, he'd likely crack up. And our heavier plane certainly would have cracked. He blame near made it to the schooner. Where else did we slip?"

"You appear to have covered every-

thing," Mullen said. "Had Sergeant landed on the young ice you'd have taken the fur, thrown his body into the plane, set it on fire, and the Sergeant case instead of being mentioned as a fur-lined coffin would have been just another arctic mystery."

Hawley smiled thinly. "Either you're getting brighter or you've been looking into a crystal ball," he said. "I'll take back what I said about you being yellow. You're about to become another arctic mystery and you're taking it calmly. Maybe you think the famous Mullen luck hasn't run out."

"Could be," Barney answered. "How about a cigarette, while you're shifting the fur from my ship to yours?"

Hawley started to light the cigarette, then hesitated.

"You pulled a logical trick, Mullen. According to our source of information you flew above the schooner until the gas gave you trouble, then landed."

"That's right. We nabbed the source, too," Mullen said. "Caught Paxton talking to you. He's in irons. I've an idea he'll give details later. He'd spilled enough when I left to pin the Sergeant deal on you."

**B**ARNEY saw the men exchange quick glances.

"It won't help you, Mullen," Hawley said. "And it'll mean wiping out the schooner's crew to the last man."

"I figured you were a cold blooded lot," Mullen said, "but not that ruthless."

"Once you start, mister," Hawley said, "you have to follow through to the finish. You slipped when you told me the mate had cracked." He nodded his head thoughtfully. "If you'd've kept your mouth shut, we might've been trapped through Paxton and the schooner's crew. He was our weak link and we knew it, but we had to use someone aboard."

He lit the cigarette and put it between Barney's lips. "Your last, mister," he said. He turned to the man nearest. "Bring up your ship, Cawston. We'll get the fur aboard. Lively. We've got to cache it on the mainland, then fly back and clean up the schooner's crew."

"What about fuel?"

"We'll drain the tanks of Mullen's fur-lined coffin," Hawley said. "That should do it."



"There's another thing . . ." Mullen began.

Hawley's companion cut in. "Shut him up, Hawley," he growled. "He's stalling for time. Maybe he got off a warning before we grounded him."

"No, he didn't," Hawley answered. "I heard every word that was said." The pair walked over to Mullen's plane. He heard the white plane's engine splutter, then turn over. The pilot gunned it to break the skis loose from the snow, but they held.

Hawley looked over his shoulder at the white plane, then jerked open the fur-carrier's door.

"Up with your hands!" Captain McLeod bellowed.

He held the harpoon gun ready. Behind were Galloway and Street, two of his rugged crew members. Each carried a shotgun loaded with buckshot.

Hawley had placed his weapon on the snow as he opened the door. He had expected a plane filled with fur, and he had found a plane empty except for three armed men. He dived suddenly, one purpose in mind—to let the first blast whistle over his back, then from a crouching position to cut the plane apart and the men in it with automatic rifle fire.

He heard the crash of shotguns, then his own weapon was in his hands. The initial burst was low, cutting a ski. Then the harpoon gun, with its explosive barbed head was against his chest and McLeod was talking.

"Sure, you can rip me apart, but my dying act will be to blast you with the harpoon gun!"

In a split second, Hawley realized that the blast which launched the harpoon was enough to kill. And the thought of a bomb exploding within his body

drained his courage and left him in a mental fog. He hardly remembered dropping his automatic rifle, before he was on his back and Galloway was trussing him up with sealskin thongs tied in good sailor knots.

He rolled over and looked at his companion, Ballou. He was dead and the fur of his parka was burned off where the charge had entered his body. The gun muzzle had been that close.

Cawston had broken the plane free and it was coming over the ice at increasing speed. The skis slapped aside the thin covering of snow in violent waves. The man was either crazy with desperation or out for revenge. He headed the plane straight for Barney Mullen sprawled on the ice. He must have known that impact with a man's body could easily wash out his landing gear and probably wreck the plane.

Mullen rolled desperately and flattened himself head on, hoping the skis would bracket him. They lifted thirty feet away and passed over him. He turned and sat up, relieved, but trying to free himself.

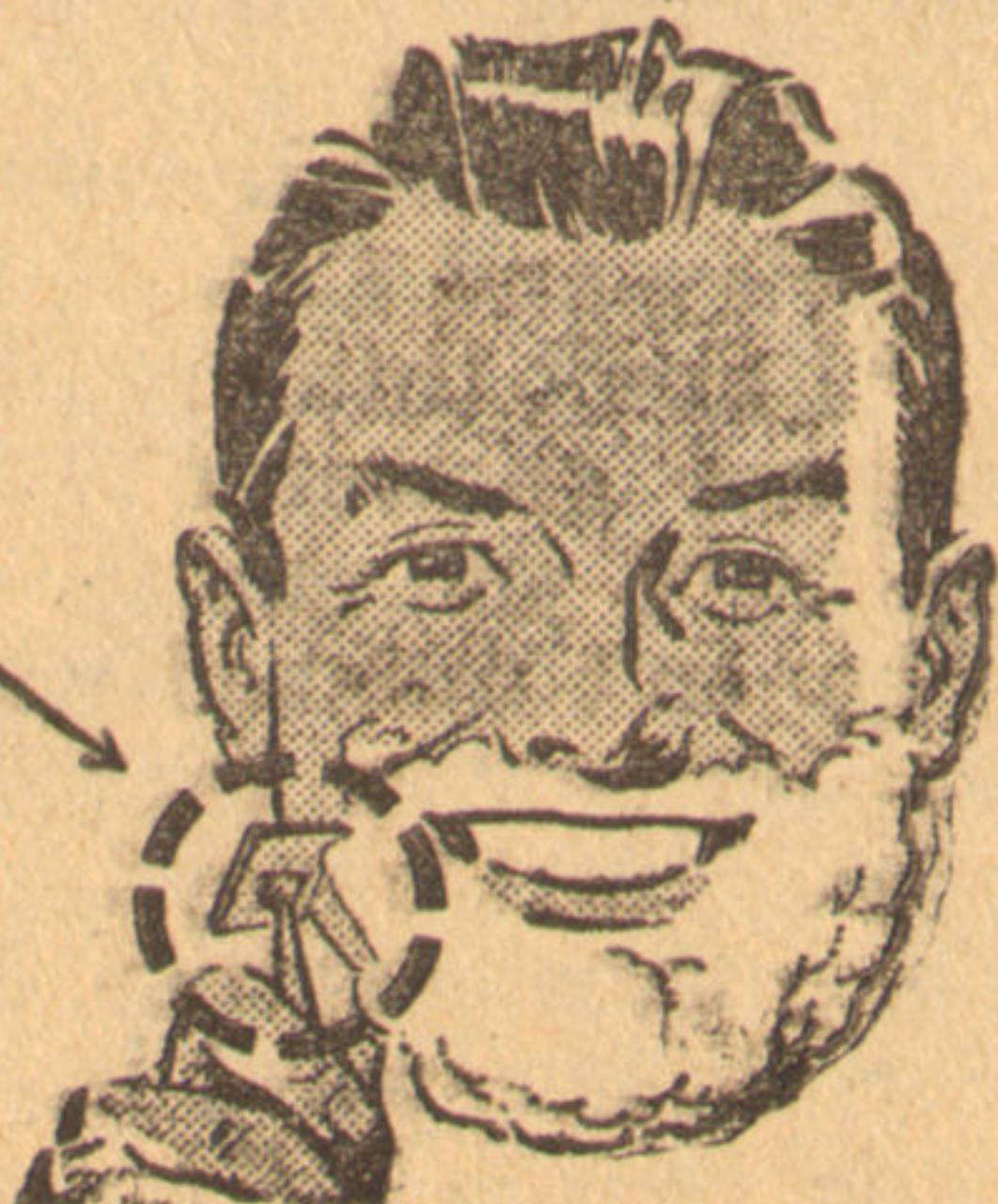
Captain McLeod stood like a duck hunter who was wondering how far to "lead" a fast-flying teal. The harpoon gun lifted, then roared. The skipper was knocked flat from the recoil, but the harpoon had been launched. There was no line attached, and its flight was faster. It struck the plane near the tail, and exploded.

The skis hit and crumpled, the nose went down and the plane turned completely over. Ice fragments and bits of plane fanned out and bounced over the surface. Mullen waited for the expected burst of flame, but it didn't come, even though he knew the tanks had ruptured.

[Turn page]

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THINGS had worked out about as planned. The critical moment had been when Hawley had opened the door. From the first he had been afraid that Hawley might be suspicious and have his men ready. That had been his only purpose in telling Hawley that the mate had confessed. He had caused him to worry about the future and to that extent Hawley and Ballou were slightly off guard.

Ballou was dead. Hawley was alive. That was the important thing to Mullen. He never liked to see the number one man go down in a sudden blast. That was too swift an ending. And to others of the ilk there was something heroic about it. It was better that the number one man stand trial and thus be stripped of glamor. When mistakes were aired, and stupidity analyzed in a trial, it was effective punishment. It was solid justice.

While Galloway and Street were running to the wreckage, McLeod was hurrying to Mullen, knife in hand. Several quick slashes released him, and he stood up, staggering drunkenly because the circulation in his legs had been impaired. He walked over to Hawley and looked down. "How about a cigarette?" the man asked.

"Why not?" Mullen answered. He lit a cigarette and put it between the man's lips. "I see Cawston walked away from his crack-up." The man was coming toward them, flanked by Galloway and Street. "He tried to run me down."

"He loses his head when he's mad," Hawley said. "But he's a good pilot."

"A man who loses his head is never a good pilot," Mullen replied.

"You lowered my guard by telling me about Paxton," Hawley said. "You see, when he reported you'd taken off, after refilling your tanks, and flight plan unchanged, I figured all was well there. I figured we'd suckered you fellows."

"It was my voice," Mullen said. "I practiced a little, and hoped you'd conclude any difference was due to distortion in transmission."

"Then you sprang the truth on me and lowered my guard." He couldn't seem to get his mind off it. He spoke of it several times while the others were wrapping Ballou's body in a tarpaulin.

Captain McLeod looked at the wreckage, then at his harpoon gun.

"Never dreamed there'd come a time

when I'd pick a sixty barrel whale out of the air," he said.

"Where do we go from here?" Hawley asked. "A few minutes ago I held the winning hand. Now Mullen holds it. The ice hasn't played its hand yet. In the arctic you have to figure the ice holding a good hand. Isn't that so, Captain?"

"Yeah. A pressure could crumble this whole business—planes and men—and there'd be no trace of what happened," McLeod said. "One plane wrecked. The other with a ski damaged beyond repair."

"Which puts us all in the same boat," Hawley said. "And no boat."

They made camp, broke out tinned goods and a gasoline stove and cooked a meal. It grew dark and presently Hawley said, "I hear a plane."

"Sure," Mullen answered. "Why do you suppose I turned on my plane's landing lights—because we're afraid of the dark?"

He went out as the plane came in under the overcast and touched off a pair of flares. The plane passed over twice, then landed. It was pretty well loaded with men. A Coast Guard officer was the first out, followed by a United States deputy marshal.

"We didn't know what kind of a jam you'd be in, so we took off immediately," the Coast Guard man said.

"Two prisoners and one dead man," Mullen said. "Enroy's going to be shocked when he learns his man Hawley was at the bottom of this deal."

"How'd you fellows get here so soon?" Hawley asked.

"When I was talking to you on the ice, Hawley," Mullen answered, "Captain McLeod wasn't in the plane shooting dice. He was giving our position to CAA stations, and they were confirming it by triangulation."

"What about you?" the Coast Guard man said. "Want to go back with us?" His inference was plain—the ice might break up, and it would be better to lose Hawley and Cawston than good men.

"I don't think my luck's run out yet," Barney answered. "I think it will hold up until you can fly in a ski. After all, I haven't finished what I started out to do—fly out a load of fur. If you see Malemute Conroy tell him to make room for a third partner. And, by the way, if there's a reward in this deal, pay it to Mrs. Sergeant."



# THRILLS IN THE AIR

BY *Jack Kofoed*

## THEY HAD TO PULL TOGETHER, OR ELSE—

**I**N view of all the current hullabaloo about cooperation between the armed services, it seems fitting to turn back the clock a matter of a mere eight years and look at a period when Army, Navy and the assorted air arms had to play ball with each other or else.

It is a generally-accepted fact that the battle of Midway in 1942 was the key engagement in our war against Japan. Had it not been won we should never have been able to make the landing on Guadalcanal two months later which spelled the beginning of our long march back from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay.

In that precarious summer the Japs were

a springboard for the capture of Oahu itself.

The move on Midway was a big-league operation. Virtually the entire Japanese Navy, plus an expeditionary force of fifty thousand men, was involved in the undertaking. The remnants of the United States Navy were scattered all over the immense vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Our main effort was not only unready but was being directed against the Nazis in Europe.

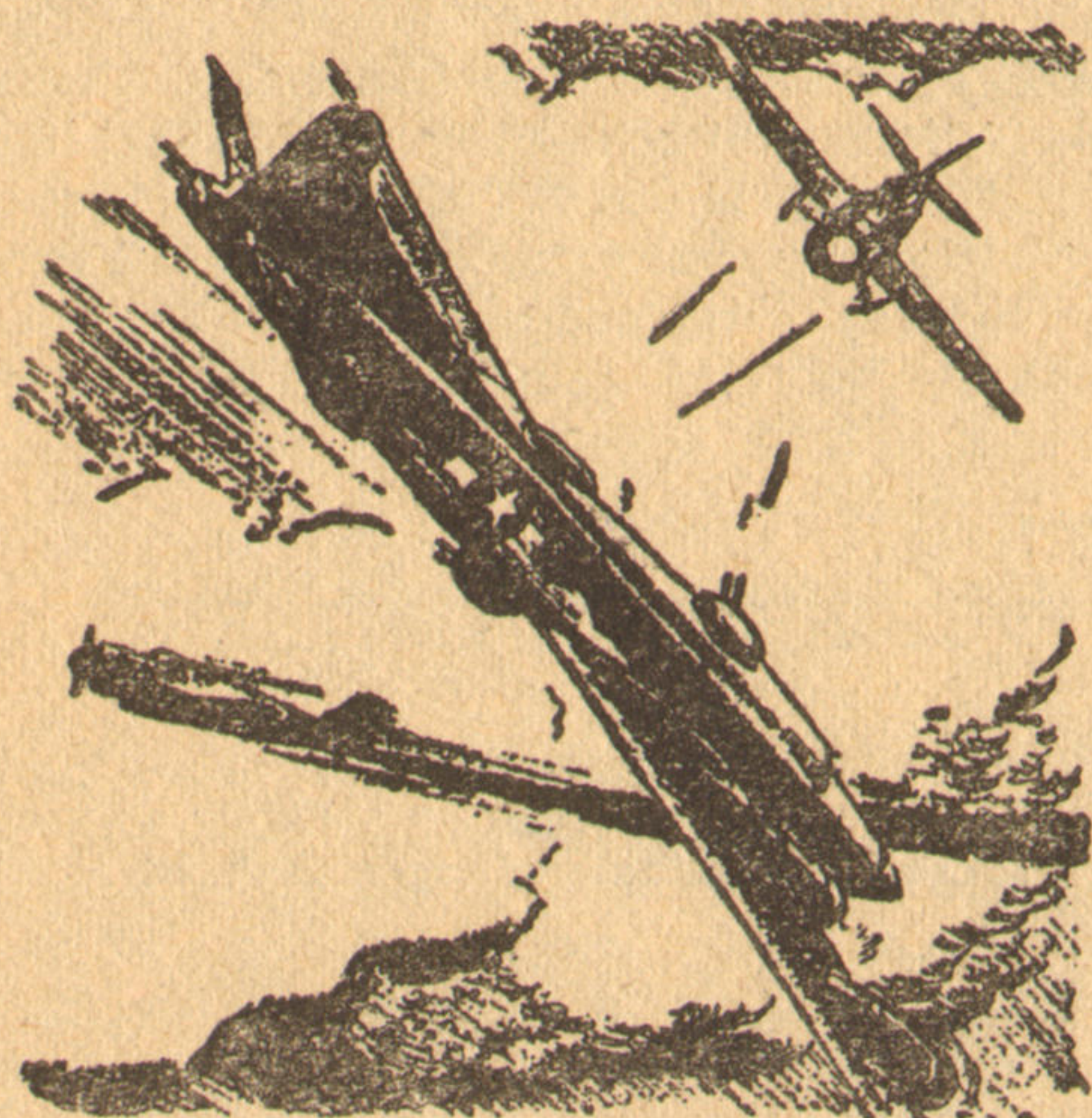
Therefore, such groups as we were able to muster had to pull together—or else. Take the word of Lieutenant Colonel Walter C. Sweeney, Jr., who commanded three flights of Flying Fortresses from a Navy base against the Japs on that occasion. Says Colonel Sweeney—

“At Midway the morning of June 3, Navy patrol planes reported that a strong enemy surface force was approaching the island. Positive information came in about noon and our flight of nine B-17s took off immediately. After flying about three and a half hours we found the Jap ships some 600 miles out, just where we had expected them.

“There were cruisers, transports, cargo vessels and other escort ships. We must have surprised them because they started maneuvering at once. The maneuvering was orderly but unquestionably violent.

“The attack was made at altitudes of 8,000, 10,000 and 12,000 feet respectively. My flight picked out a large vessel and bombed it. At the bomb release line heavy antiaircraft fire was encountered. It continued throughout the attack. We didn't claim any hits in my flight on this one. We hit all around the target but we didn't see any evidence of damage.

“Our second element attacked a cruiser or battleship—we weren't worried about identification at the time—and left it burning. The third element went after a cruiser



in full flower. They had swept over all of the south and southwest Pacific, were preparing to move on Australia and it did not appear that there was any force powerful enough to stop them. To protect their growing lines of communication the Japanese high command wished to capture Midway Island, not only to nullify the strategic power of our Hawaiian base but to prepare



and hit it at the stern. One pilot in the second flight, Captain Paul Payne, could not get his bombs away in the first trip so he returned through the ack-ack and got hits on a transport, setting it afire.

"We returned to Midway in the dark, got a little sleep and were up before daylight the next morning to continue the attack. This time we had more B-17s, seven having come in overnight. En route to the target we got word that another enemy task force, complete with carriers, was approaching Midway and was only about 145 miles away.

"We turned to intercept at 20,000 feet. All elements of the main body of the fleet could be observed except the carriers. Then, after a search, three carriers were seen to break cloud coverage by Captain Payne. We went in to attack.

"We divided our ships into three groups. Each group was instructed to take a carrier and we bombed away. We are fairly certain we hit the first carrier but we didn't claim it. The second group hit its carrier amidships. The last flight secured hits on the third carrier. We left, knowing they were badly crippled. A tail gunner in the second flight sustained the only casualty—a cut finger.

"That afternoon we went out again to attack a troopship convoy about 260 miles away from Midway. En route we got orders to attack a carrier about 180 miles from the island. We searched that vicinity but although we located a burning carrier and a burning capital ship no commissioned carrier was sighted. We learned later that the

others we had hit sank or were sunk by the Japanese.

"As sunset was approaching we decided to attack a heavy cruiser. All remaining units of the enemy fleet were now deploying and weaving. Visibility was perfect.

"We scored hits on the cruiser and left it burning. Numbers Two and Four planes were unable to release their bombs on the first run so they returned and attacked another ship. Twenty-five enemy fighters were sighted as we put out for Midway but none reached our altitude.

"That same afternoon Major George Blakey led another flight of B-17s in and attacked the burning carrier. They succeeded in scoring many hits. All told we were credited with scoring three hits on a damaged carrier—probably the *Agaki*—one hit on a large ship—one hit on a cruiser, which was left burning—and one destroyer believed sunk.

"Other B-17s carried on the attack the next day, contacting enemy battleships and cruisers west of Midway despite unfavorable weather. They scored three direct hits upon a heavy cruiser, which was later located and further damaged by Marine Corps aircraft."

Mind you, all of this was done from a U.S. Navy base. In view of the Jonathan Swift tragic absurdities of interdepartmental strike currently in progress in Washington, it is good to know that, when the pressure is really on, Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corpsmen can, have and almost certainly will get together in defense of their country!

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## LIEUTENANT MORTON SHER'S CHINESE ADVENTURE

**T**HE Reds may have dropped the Iron Curtain on China but somehow it seems unlikely that the quiet and charming folk of that great if sadly disorganized nation will ever show the ferocious anti-Americanism which seems to be part and parcel of Communist control.

During the recent war against the Axis, Lieutenant Morton Sher, a University of Alabama graduate flying with General Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force, came in close contact with the Chinese and found them wonderful folk.

Shot down on a return trip after flying fighter cover for a bombing raid on Hong

Kong, Lieutenant Sher made a forced landing in what looked like a level field only to come to grief when his P-40 groundlooped in a three-foot hole.

When he came to he was hanging head down from the cockpit. He managed to smash his way out with the butt of his automatic and found himself the focus of attention of a small group of natives. They were silent, not knowing who or what he was, until he showed them the American flag on his jacket, which bore a legend in Chinese telling them that he was an ally.

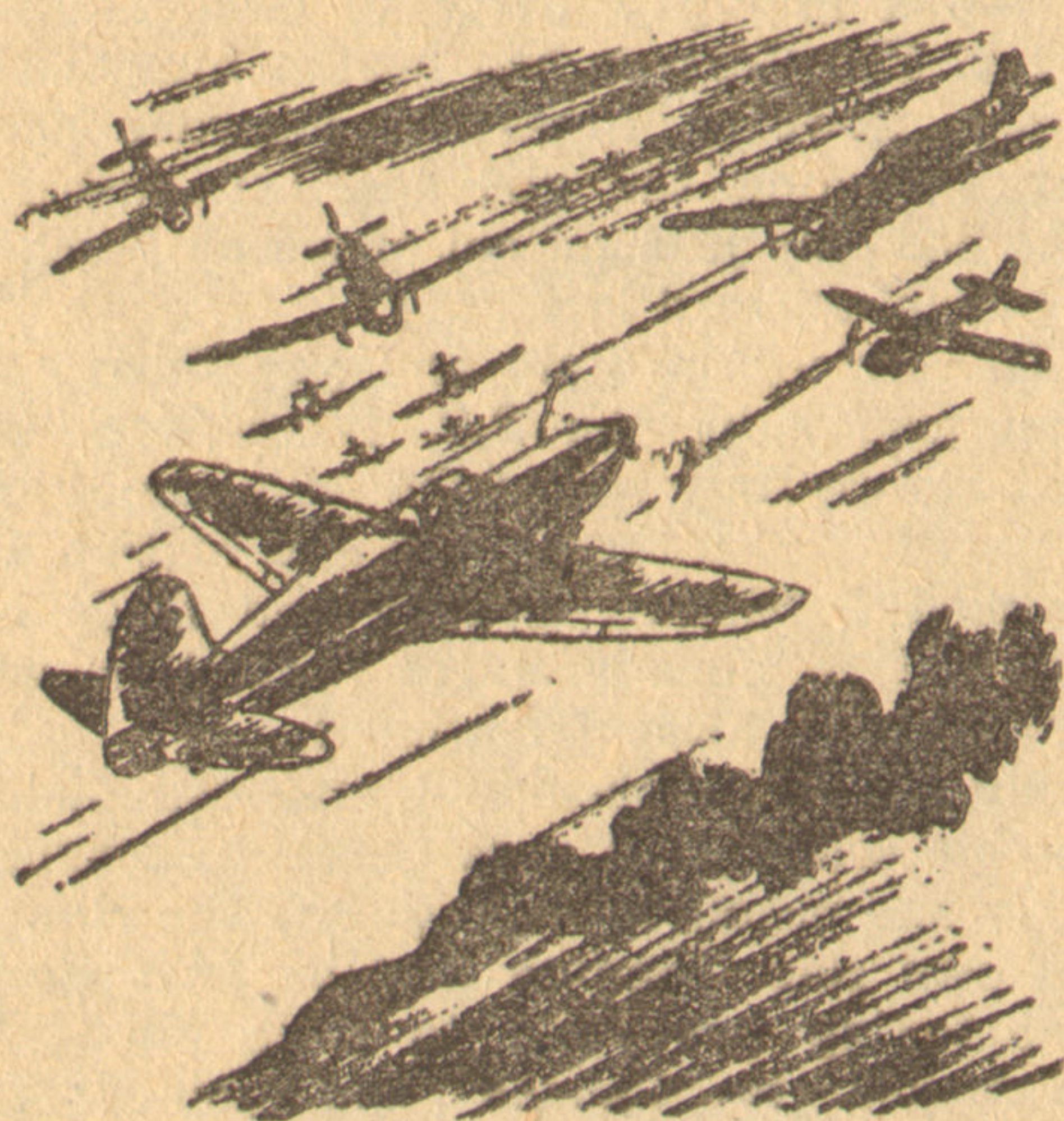
Once they understood they opened their hearts and homes to him. He was escorted



to the nearest town, the first white man ever to go there, and given the most comfortable bed in the place (it was a flat board, covered with a magnificent silk cloth). He was so tired he fell asleep regardless and awoke the next morning feeling as if he had just played sixty minutes of football against Tulane.

A local physician looked him over and pronounced him okay. Then arrived an "interpreter," who had been educated at the University of Shanghai and was instructor of English at the high school. Says Lieutenant Sher, "His accent was strictly weird but we managed. We just kept repeating things over and over until the other of us grasped the meaning."

He was feasted sumptuously and taken to an immense temple with solid gold Buddhas carved out of a mountain behind the city. "My own simple Jewish synagogue



in South Carolina," says Sher, "could not, I am afraid, compare with it."

He was given the full sightseeing treatment and was surprised at the many beautiful parks and gardens the city boasted. He made arrangements to return to his base as soon as possible and, on his final afternoon, was taken to the biggest of the parks to make a speech before at least 15,000 persons.

"As I stepped upon a small platform where the mayor was already seated," he tells us, "there was a series of sharp crackling explosions. Startled, I instinctively looked at the sky. The mayor smiled and gestured at the audience. I saw then that

they were setting off hundreds of firecrackers in my honor.

"When this was over everyone stood at attention and, at a signal, saluted me in unison. I was deeply impressed. I was then introduced by the mayor. At the conclusion of this introduction, which I am sure was flattering, the audience shouted in Chinese, 'Hurrah for our ally from across the sea!'

"By this time I was so moved that when I got up to talk I discarded the idea of just making American sounds for them and talked as logically and earnestly as I could about the American purpose in China. Mr. Weng, the interpreter, translated my talk to the audience. I think it was well received.

"With the speechmaking over I assumed that the audience would disperse. Instead they began to shout and point at me. My guide then informed me that they wished to hear some American songs and would I care to oblige?

"By that time I would have turned hand-springs if they wished it, so I opened my mouth and sang lustily. I don't remember lyrics and the best I could manage were some rowdy college ditties. I sang these and ended with the 'Star Spangled Banner.'

"Everyone seemed delighted and I was then asked to tell a story. This request did not seem particularly outlandish to me because, in a way, they all seemed a little like children. I proceeded to tell them the story of Little Red Ridinghood as if it were perfectly natural that I should do so. It was translated for them and they appeared to enjoy it immensely.

"After this there was a banquet at the home of a General Hoe. The town officials bestowed gifts upon me and before sitting down to eat we were entertained in the General's drawing room by a Chinese orchestra and other performers. The meal itself was served in the General's garden. I manipulated my chopsticks by candlelight.

"The next day, accompanied by Mr. Weng and the mayor, I set out on the first lap of my journey back to base. The streets of the city were lined with cheering crowds, who again shot off hundreds of firecrackers. Flanked by the mayor and Mr. Weng I boarded a Chinese junk for the short trip downstream to the point where I was to pick up the overland trail.

"When we arrived at the landing place, still another cheering crowd was waiting



for us. The mayor, it seemed, had notified every village along the way that I was coming through.

"At this point I received a new interpreter and a horse. The mayor still accompanied me. We traveled together for three days, passing through a number of towns, and in each I was welcomed by cheering natives. On two occasions I again sang the 'Star Spangled Banner' and told the story of Little Red Ridinghood. On the fourth day

we arrived at a town where a truck was waiting to drive me back to base."

And these Chinese are the people who are supposed to have fallen into an unfriendly camp. Somehow we think that the fourteen men in the Kremlin are going to have a time fitting these individualists into the Communist mold. They have been remaining themselves for a great many thousands of years, come Mongols, Japs or Muscovites.

## SOBANSKI WON MANY MEDALS—BUT DOWNED NO NAZIS!

**O**NE of the oddest among the many odd Odysseys created by World War Two was that of Lieutenant Winslow Michael Sobanski, who flew out of England for the Eighth Air Force in the early part of the European campaign.

Born in the United States, Sobanski was raised and educated in Poland and was attending college in 1939 when the war broke out. With fellow students who had done

to apply to the Gestapo for permission to leave the country. With the aid of a substantial bribe he finally got his "ticket" in April of 1940.

On his last night he went to the home of a girl he knew who had also got a visa and was giving a party to celebrate the event. The Gestapo had beaten him to the punch, however, arresting everyone present, including the girl and her husband, who had only just got out of prison. Luckily Sobanski arrived late.

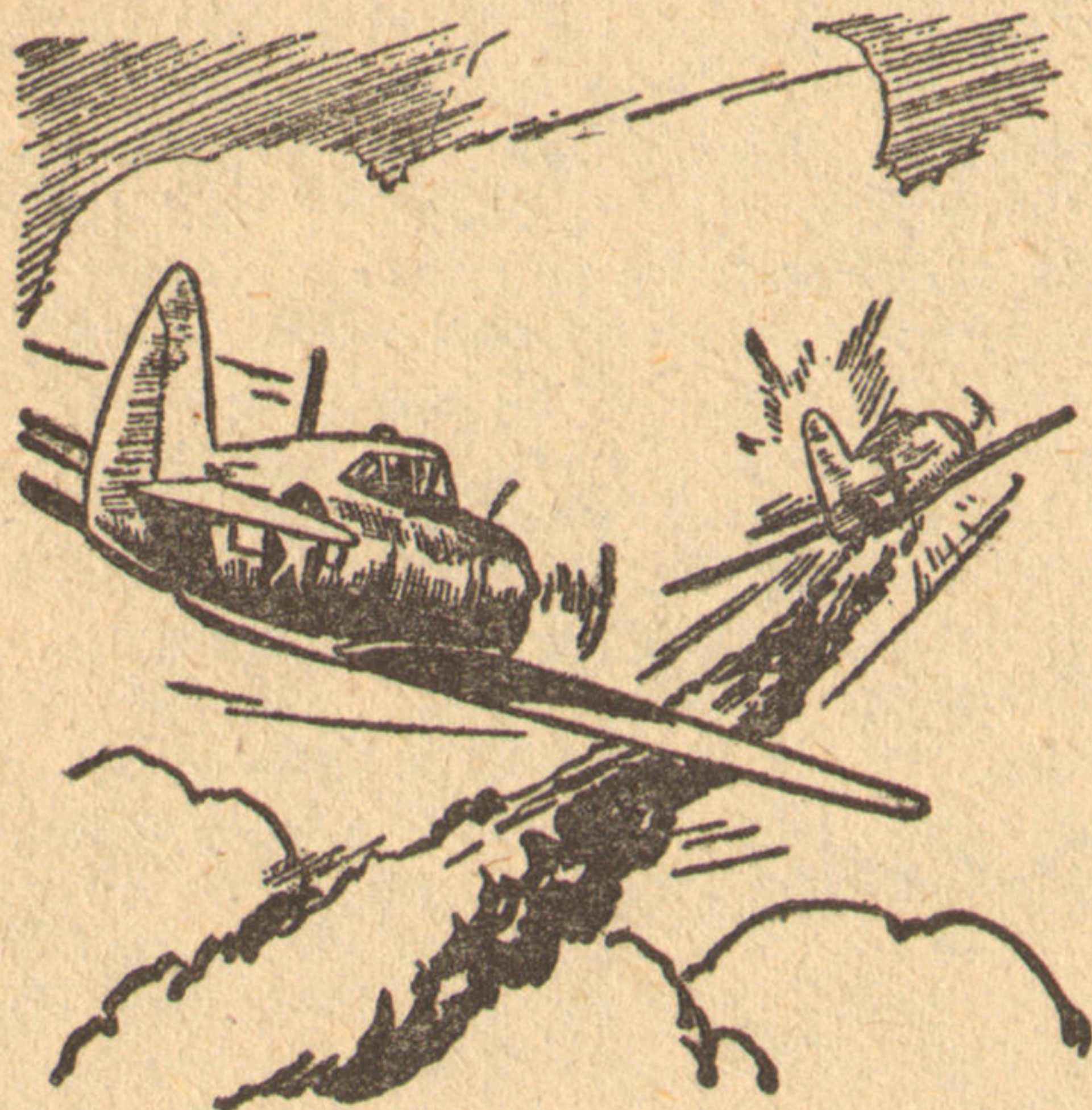
He arrived in Italy and got aboard an American ship, the *S.S. Winston Salem*, just before Italy joined the Axis forces and declared war on the French and British. He reached Baltimore in July and made his way to New York in search of relatives who proved to be away from home.

He waited for them and, once established in this country, at once began to consider ways and means of paying back the Hun in his own coin. Finding that our Air Force was taking two years to train pilots, he journeyed to Canada and joined the R.C.A.F., where the course ran from six to eight months.

He was slow in getting his wings because he couldn't understand the instructors at first but finally, in October, 1941, he won his wings as a pilot. He piled up more than a hundred missions in Hurricanes and Spitfires, ultimately transferring to the A.A.F. in September, 1942.

There he became one of the most decorated fighter pilots in the Eighth Air Force, winning the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters.

But despite all these decorations, his hundreds of combat missions and his burning desire for revenge on the Nazis, Sobanski never shot down a single enemy



some flying he sought to volunteer for the Polish Air Force, instead found himself assigned to the infantry and put aboard a troop train for the Vistula front.

His train was bombed by the Luftwaffe and Sobanski, with three ribs broken, was pinned under the wreckage. Finally hospitalized and put in a cast, he slipped into German-occupied Warsaw in civilian clothes and found his home also a total wreck.

Seeking a way out he appealed to the American embassy and was advised by them



plane. It was his job to fly aerial "interference" for his squadron and hence he seldom if ever got a decent crack at the foe.

During the disastrous Dieppe raid in the summer of 1942 he got one of his rare opportunities to bag a foeman aloft.

"What happened?" he asks himself ruefully. "Why, I get too excited. I miss him!"

But men to fly Sobanski's type of job were just as important in the air tactics picture as the Don Gentiles and others who ran up impressive totals of Axis planes shot down. Perhaps they failed to get in on the glory but they were the steady ones who were always there in the clutch no matter what the job was.

## THEY HAD SERGEANT JOHN GARDNER PEGGED!

**T**ECHNICAL SERGEANT JOHN GARDNER, member of a B-17 crew which was ditched in the Bay of Biscay, always understood that the Nazis had an efficient espionage service during World War Two. But when a German officer interrogated him in Air Force Prison in Frankfurt, Gardner discovered he didn't know the proverbial half of it.

When he refused to answer any questions the Nazi told him, "You can refuse to answer this if you want to but if you



don't you will be released from this cell and allowed to mix with your friends."

Gardner still kept mum and the Nazi shrewdly continued to ply him with questions as to his training and current group, its location, armament, et cetera. Finally he said, "The reason we need this information is because we have no proof that you were not trained in the United States as a saboteur and dropped in Germany for that purpose."

There was no mistaking the threat underlying those words—but still the American sergeant kept his mouth tightly closed. Casually then the officer said, "By the way,

how is Captain Martini getting along these days?"

This time Gardner jumped involuntarily. Martini, whose crew was known as the "cocktail kids," was a member of Sergeant Gardner's fortress group. The officer smiled at his reaction.

He said, "You see, Sergeant Gardner, we know all about you so you really don't have to worry about answering my questions. I know the answers anyway and am only doing this for confirmation. You don't believe me? Very well, let me tell you a story.

"You were in Captain Martini's squadron. Your squadron leader was named Smith. Colonel (later General) Le May commanded group." He then went on to name correctly both group and squadron numbers.

"You entered the Army in January, Nineteen forty-two. You got your basic training at Shephard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas. In mid-February you went to Radio School at Scott Field, Illinois. You completed your course in July and went from there to an aerial gunnery school at Panama City, Florida. Let's see now—what was the name of that field?"

The Nazi unfolded a map which had a complete list of every aerial gunnery school in the United States and its location. He said, "Of course, Tyndall Field. You completed your course there by the middle of August. Now where did you go from there, Sergeant?"

The utterly stunned American was able to realize that from the time of his leaving Tyndall Field there was a five-month gap in the records the Nazis had on him. Since the Germans wanted to know what had happened in that time he kept quiet.

The German brought out another folder, this one with a picture of five men who had been lost from Gardner's group before he entered it as a replacement. He went on with, "You arrived at Salina, Kansas, on



February first. Your crew was formed at that time and you were named radio operator. Tuttle was your pilot. At this time you received a promotion to Technical Sergeant.

"You left Salina about February twenty-seventh and went to Morrison Field, Florida. You left there March second and arrived in England on the twenty-fourth." He went on to name group and squadron

numbers again, made an effort to pump the captive American about their missions over Europe.

But Gardner refused to be pumped. And when, shortly afterward, he was invalided home with a lung condition, he was still shaking his head over the vast amount of information the Nazis had about his mates and himself.

## THE JOUBERTS RUN TO HIGH RANK

**ONE** of the least-publicized but most important men of the Royal Air Force during the last war was Air Marshal Sir Philip Bennet Joubert de la Ferté, K.C.B., C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. (1917), generally known as Marshal Joubert.

A descendant of the famed French Revolutionary General Joubert and of the clan which produced Petrus Jacobus Joubert, one of the leaders of the Transvaal, this Marshal Joubert had charge of the R.A.F. Coastal Command during much of the last conflict—a tough and thankless chore.

With a bare skeleton force of Ansons, Beauforts, Lockheed Hudsons, Catalinas and Short Sutherland Flying Boats, it was very much up to Marshal Joubert to keep the British High Command informed as to the movements of Nazi and Italian warships and raiders, to spot submarine wolfpacks, to protect convoys between St. Helena and Murmansk from Focke Wulf Kuriers and submarines alike and to carry out bombing missions against enemy shipping.

His almost invariably too-scant squadrons and individual planes had to patrol and fight, usually against tremendous odds, some 5,500,000 square miles of ocean territory, an area almost twice as large as the continental United States and not nearly as compact.

It was a plane under Joubert command that tracked down the great Nazi battleship *Bismarck* after she had sent the mighty *H.M.S. Hood* to the bottom and threatened to run amok amid Transatlantic shipping. It was Joubert's men and planes who, while the Murmansk run was necessary, gave enough protection to sorely harried convoys so that the bulk of the sorely-needed supplies got through—and this despite apparently insoluble problems of distance and climate. It was ships and men under his command that ran down the *Tirpitz* as she

skulked in a Norwegian fjord and ultimately bombed her to pieces.

Joubert was truly one of the big men behind the planes in World War Two. But in the earlier unpleasantness a younger Joubert was up where the action was thickest on all fronts, flying the wood-wire-and-fabric horrors they called airplanes then by the seat of his pants. And they had a time keeping him chained to his desk in the years from 1939 to 1945 inclusive.

A career man, Joubert was educated for the Army at Elstree, Harrow and Woolwich, the great English artillery school. From Woolwich he entered the Royal Field Artillery as a second lieutenant in 1907, was "seconded" (transferred) to the old Royal Flying Corps in 1913, about the time Hap Arnold was winning his wings.

He flew in France in 1914, when air fighting was just being born, served in Egypt in 1916-17, where he won the D.S.O. for gallantry in action. He finished up that war in Italy, where he won two Italian decorations and was six times mentioned in dispatches for bravery.

Remaining in the R.A.F. after the Armistice, Joubert was appointed R.A.F. instructor at the Imperial Defence College in 1927, became commander of the 23d Group of the Inland Area two years later. In 1930 he was made commander of the R.A.F. Staff College, there served four years.

In 1934 he became Air Officer Commanding the Fighting Area, was appointed Commander in Chief of the Coastal Command in 1936. Two years later he was put in command of the entire R.A.F. in India, returned shortly after the outbreak of World War Two to serve as Assistant Chief of the Air Staff and then as Commander in Chief of the Coastal Command.

Later in the war he was made Inspector



General of the R.A.F. and did a tremendously effective job of making sure that the big planes were in shape to fly and fight and were armed with bullets and bombs that would explode with all the force and

in the exact places where they were supposed to explode.

Joubert is a famous name in history and Air Marshal Sir Philip Joubert is one of the finest to have it.

## YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE A HEART!

**Y**ES, you've got to have heart and plenty of it if you're going to attempt to land on a carrier deck. Or so Lieutenant (jg) Charles Dickey discovered when he tried it. According to Dickey they told him during basic training that once he had landed on a



carrier he'd never want to land on ground again.

However, once up there over the ocean he found himself saying, "If I ever get back on ground again I'll fall down and eat a mouthful of it—I'll grovel in it. Look at

that water—cold and rough and deep. You never get more than seven miles from land on this job—seven miles straight down . . . I'm no fish and I hate salt water. I'm no bird either but I wish I were . . ."

Over-ocean flying has become a commonplace in the modern world but it is still occasionally dangerous—and the men who fly the Navy's planes and the transoceanic air liners know it all too well.

One of Dickey's favorite tales is that of the poised recruit at Pensacola who was assigned with two other green pilots to take out a trio of training planes on his first trip over water. Unknown to the pilots they had been given faulty fuel, which had water in it.

The poised rookie was giving his teachers back at the base a very blasé account of the flight. He didn't even raise his voice when he reported that the plane on his left had suddenly gone into a long glide with its engine missing and the pilot had been forced to ditch her.

Minutes later he gave a similar calm piece of reporting as the plane on his right got into trouble and hit the drink. He was still as unruffled as if he were dancing at a college prom.

Therefore, his listeners were startled when his voice rose suddenly to a scream and he shouted, "Holy mackerel, here I go!"

## JET HEADLINES

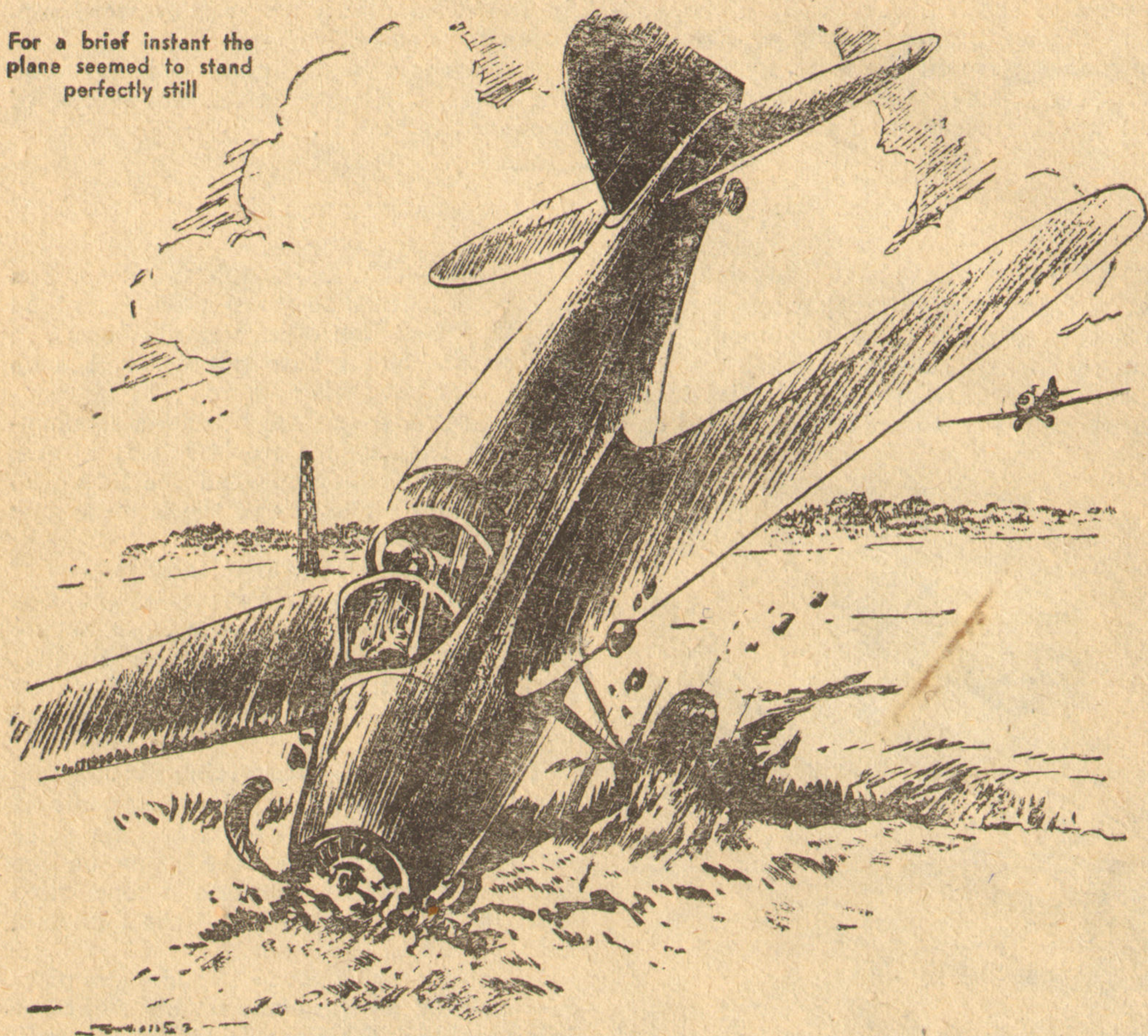
**J**UST completed at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, California, is a new wind tunnel where an air velocity of approximately 7,600 miles per hour is attained—the highest speed yet. A total of fifteen compressors supply the air needed for this man-made hurricane. The U.S., incidentally owns more of these high-speed tunnels than any other country.

**E**VERY conceivable shape that might be used in an airplane is tried out in these tunnel wind blasts. To offset drag, aeronautical engineers have built planes with elongated fuselage and pointed noses. To eliminate the tendency of the tail to whip about, they have elevated the tail surfaces. The best solution for preventing supersonic shock is to sweep back a plane's wings at a 45° angle.

**T**O POWER the new rocket and jet engines, fuels are now being developed which will ignite at extremely low temperatures and which will not blow out in speeding ram-jets. Operation at high altitudes where frigid temperatures are frequently encountered make it vital to have a fuel that will ignite spontaneously at any time yet never blow up. Present jet engines use a kerosene-type fuel.



For a brief instant the  
plane seemed to stand  
perfectly still



# Yesterday's Wings

*It took a trophy race over a municipal airport to teach Cole the truth of something that happened in a B-17 over Germany!*

**J**OHNNY COLE cut his Dickson B-G around the Number Three pylon of the three-sided sixty-mile course, leveled off, and went ripping along over the flat.

Just to his left, one edge of it under him, was the square, flat expanse of the Newton Municipal Airport. Each of its four borders was lined with planes,

parked almost wingtip to wingtip. There was everything from a Piper Cub to a B-29, and all of them were set and ready for the opening on the morrow of the three days of the International Air Races.

It was an impressive, picturesque sight from the air, but Johnny Cole did-

**By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN**



n't spend any amount of time admiring it. He took a look down at something he had taken a dozen good looks at since arriving in Newton two days ago. That something was a sleek, blue-and-gold center-wing racer, a Laird-Allison that was the mystery ship of the entire gathering. That is to say, a mystery as to who would pilot it in the six hundred mile Doolittle Trophy Race to be flown as the feature high-speed event of the meet on the final day.

That it was owned and entered by Fraser Farr, the multi-millionaire sportsman, was well known by one and all. But who Farr had hired to fly it was not known.

Rumor had it that Toni Wiltz, a very top-flight speed merchant, had originally been under contract. But rumor had it also that Farr and Wiltz had not seen eye to eye about a couple of things, and the contract had been bought back. Anyway, the blue-and-gold job had been trucked to Newton, and up to the present moment nobody had put in an appearance with the announcement that he was to fly it.

From Cole's standpoint, however, it was not a matter of who would fly it. It was how *well* the pilot would race it. In short, just what was that blue-and-gold ship able to do in the air? The many looks at it that Johnny had taken, had convinced him that the Farr-owned ship was the one entry in the race he'd have to beat to win. And win the Doolittle was something he wanted to do very much.

For two years Cole and Al Bernard, his mechanic, had spent a lot of time and money building, test-hopping, and getting the bugs out of their Dickson B-G. But everything was set, now. Only the race remained. Could he take it with his own design, he was wondering?

A couple of laps later, Cole eased off course, swung around and down to land, and then taxied over to where Al Bernard waited. A broad grin covered Al's face and the obvious question was in his eyes. The mechanic spoke it aloud as soon as Cole had legged out and pulled off his helmet and goggles.

"How's it go, Johnny?"

"Sweet," Cole told him. "All we can do now is wait. She's fit."

"That's what I like to hear," Bernard murmured, and ran a loving hand over a section of the wing. "By the way, a fella was around here looking for you."

"Yeah?" Cole echoed, and started to peel off his coveralls. "He have a name?"

"Sure," the mechanic grunted. "Joe Kelly. Said he was with you in the Eighth Air Force . . . Hey! What's eating you?"

Johnny Cole had suddenly stiffened, one leg in and the other leg out of his coveralls.

"You said Joe Kelly?" he demanded. "With me in the Eighth?"

"Right," Bernard nodded. "Anything wrong?"

Cole opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and gave a crazy little shake of his head.

"Let it go," he said. Then as though to himself, he added, "Maybe there were a couple by that name in the Eighth."

"Maybe," Al Bernard murmured. "But here comes the one who said *he* was."

For a brief instant Johnny Cole stood perfectly still, as though oblivious to Al Bernard pointing in back of him. Then slowly he turned, and stared at the well-built redhead striding toward him. There was a mile-wide grin on the redhead's face and his right hand was extended.

"Johnny!" he cried. "How long's it been, boy? Five years, six years?"

Cole ignored the extended hand. He tightened his lips and bored into the redhead's eyes.

"Six years!" he said in a flat voice. "Six years come the sixteenth of next month. And that's a long time to wait and save something for a louse. Here!"

**A**S COLE bit off the last word he whipped up his right fist and caught Kelly flush on the jaw. The redhead went down fast and hard, but he bounced right up, eyes blazing. By then, Al Bernard had leaped in between them.

"Hold it!" he shouted to Cole. "You crazy, Johnny? You want a mess of field cops?"

The pilot of the Dickson B-G was too choked up to speak. He could only stand glaring at the redhead, his lips moving silently. The redhead glared back, but there was mostly hurt amazement in his eyes.

"What in thunder, Johnny?" he suddenly popped the words. "You think I'm somebody else? Don't you remember me? Joe Kelly?"

Cole relaxed a bit, but the hard bitterness remained in his eyes.



"I remember plenty!" he snapped. "But maybe there's a little item *you've* forgotten, eh?"

Kelly glanced at Al Bernard, as though hoping for an explanation. But when none was forthcoming he looked back at Cole.

"What is this, anyway?" he demanded. "Let a guy in on it, will you?"

"Check!" Cole grated, with a curt nod. "The time, twenty-three hundred hours, September Sixteenth, Forty-three. The place, twenty-five thousand over Stuttgart. A Pathfinder B-Seventeen. Remember, *now*?"

For a moment it looked as if Kelly were going to shake his head. Instead, he stared at Cole with widening eyes.

"Hey!" he cried. "That was the mission you got shot down, wasn't it?"

"Check again!" Cole bit off. "With nine other members of my crew. Six of them were killed, and the other four of us sweated it out in a Nazi camp until Patton's boys released us! How'd you make out? Get promoted to Air Forces Staff?"

"Pacific assignment," the redhead said absently. Then, with a frown and another shake of his head, he added quickly, "But look, Johnny, I still don't get this!"

Cole grimaced and his eyes hardened all the more.

"You're also a poor actor, Kelly," he retorted. "There were two Pathfinders on that mission. Me in one and you in the other. West of Stuttgart they threw up a lot of stuff. A lot of it real close. Remember? Remember how *I* went on through to the target and dropped my flares? Remember how *you* quit when the heavy stuff came up? Quit and turned back. Wouldn't answer my signals. Just let me and my boys go on alone. Remember how—"

"Wait a minute!" the redhead cried, as the blood drained from his face. "Me quit on you? Good Grief, all these years you've—Johnny, boy, you don't understand!"

"Skip it!" Cole choked out. "You think I'd believe a thing you told me now? After six years? Beat it, Kelly! Beat it before I wipe up this field with you, you stinker!"

The redhead went back a step as though he had been smashed on the jaw again. Varied emotions crossed his face, and his lips moved as if he were trying to speak.

"Johnny, for Heaven's sake!" he finally gasped. "You're all wet! Let me explain!"

"Get going!" Cole blazed. "Get going now, or I swear I'll smash you to pulp!"

The redhead hesitated for a second, and then he turned on his heel and quickly walked away. Johnny Cole stared brittle-eyed after him for a moment. Then he swung around to Al Bernard, who stood watching him quietly, a faint frown knitting his brows.

"So?" Cole demanded.

"I'm not sure," the mechanic murmured. "But I think you might have listened to the lad, Johnny. Could be he had an answer."

"Sure he had an answer!" Cole snorted. "But it wouldn't have been the true one. He'd have told me his ship was hit, and that his radio went out, and similar junk. He wouldn't have told me that he went yellow, and crazy for the moment. Forgot all about me and turned back. And it wouldn't have helped any if he told the truth. You never forget or forgive something like that. Now, shut up about the guy!"

"Sure, okay, Johnny," Al Bernard shrugged. "But you might take a gander at who's climbing into the Laird-Al-lison."

COLE spun around, and then stiffened. Down the tarmac a ways a pilot in flight gear had crawled into the blue-and-gold racer, and was punching the motor into life. That pilot was red-headed Joe Kelly. A few moments later, he taxied the ship out and turned toward the far end of the take-off runway.

Johnny Cole watched, bleak-eyed, and then jerked his head.

"Think I'll practice a few pylons," he grunted, and pulled on his helmet and goggles.

Al Bernard started to nod absently, and then checked the movement. The blue-and-gold Laird-Allison had reached the far end and swung around into the wind. In a few seconds, blue-black smoke spewed backward and the sleek racer seemed to leap forward as though coiled springs had been released.

In nothing flat its tail was up and the plane skimming along the runway. It was airborne just as it came abreast of Cole and Al Bernard, and went cutting upward like so much blue-and-gold lightning in a hurry.



"Let's just watch the fella, Johnny," Bernard said, as the Allison's roar died away.

"But not from down here," Cole shook his head. "I've been waiting for somebody to take that baby into the air."

The mechanic put out a restraining hand, but instantly let it drop.

"The race is Saturday," he said quietly. "That's when it'll count."

"Sure, I know," Cole grinned thinly. "Relax, Al. It's the ship, not the guy flying it, I'm interested in."

"Then that's fine," Bernard murmured, but the look in his eyes contradicted his statement.

Not long afterward Johnny Cole took the Dickson B-G into the air at three-quarters throttle, and went all the way up to five thousand before he leveled off. Then throttling a shade more, he went coasting along, his eyes searching the skies for a glimpse of the Laird-Allison.

He finally spotted it cutting around Number Two pylon, an even twenty miles from the field. He nosed down a hair and kept his eyes on the blue-and-gold ship, studying it intently.

From the speed of the other ship, and from the way Kelly was cutting lazily along, it was obvious that he was concentrating on getting the feel of the sleek racer and familiarizing himself with the layout of the course. And with Cole riding herd on him at some five thousand feet, the redhead flew three full laps at reduced speed.

On the fourth lap, however, he began to let the horses cowl in the nose do their stuff. And by the time he had whipped around Number One pylon and went into the flat, the Laird-Allison was really traveling.

It was then that Cole nosed the Dickson B-G down sharply, and presently dropped in behind Kelly a few plane lengths back and slightly to the redhead's starboard. If Kelly knew that Johnny had dropped down behind him, he gave no visible sign.

Flying smooth and fast, the redhead took the next pylon clean as a whistle and went ripping along the flat at a slightly increased rate of speed. Right behind him Cole matched the increase in speed, but though he had still a lot left in the engine he made no effort to go rocketing on past the blue-and-gold job.

Continuing to stick close, Cole tagged the other ship around the course, watch-

ing closely the way Kelly swerved out slightly before he close hauled his racer around the pylon. And then when one lap was completed, Johnny fed high-test to his engine in earnest.

In practically nothing flat he caught and passed the Laird-Allison between Number One and Number Two pylons. And when he was far enough out in front, he swerved in to the pole and waited for Kelly to make his bid for a race of it.

The redhead did just that a couple of moments later, but only to extent of pulling up on even terms with the Dickson B-G. Wingtip to wingtip, the two ships sliced around the next pylon. But one pylon brush seemed to be enough for Kelly. At the next pylon he eased off his speed, and when Johnny Cole was in the flat the blue-and-gold racer was trailing him by more than fifty yards.

A tight, knowing grin parting Cole's lips, he completed the lap and then slid off course and down to land.

Al Bernard was waiting for him as usual, but there was no broad grin on the mechanic's face as Johnny got out of the cockpit.

"Well, satisfied?" Al grunted.

Johnny Cole gave him a sharp look, and then grinned.

"Very much so," he said. "That crate has lots of flat-out speed, but on the pylons we can take it."

"Yeah?" the mechanic murmured. "That's nice to know. You mean Kelly, I suppose?"

"I mean Kelly," Cole said evenly. "Didn't you see the way he fluffed off? He didn't want any part of it. I didn't think he would."

"Yellow, you mean?" Bernard murmured again.

Johnny Cole hesitated, and frowned.

"No," he finally said slowly. "Anyway, not the kind of yellow that showed in him once. Call it 'cautiousness'. He was always like that. A safety-first pilot. See what I mean?"

The mechanic shrugged, half nodded, and then pointed at a broad trail of oil splatterings that traced a path back along the left wing close to the fuselage.

"You sprung an oil leak, it looks like," he grunted. "We better check that right now."

Sudden annoyance showed in Cole's face, but when he took a look at the trail of oil splatterings, the look went away.



He shrugged and walked over to the Dickson B-G with Bernard.

**T**HE NEXT day, the International Air Races opened in a blaze of color and an ever-mounting roar of sound. A lot of dignitaries made speeches over the public-address system, but eventually they ran out of air and the first of many events got underway.

Taking life easy, Johnny Cole and Al Bernard watched things from the grandstand. Later in the day, though, Johnny took the Dickson B-G up for a test spin around the sixty-mile course, as did the other Doolittle Trophy entries. On the second day of the meet, it was pretty much the same thing. The only difference for Cole was that the Laird-Allison remained parked in its tarmac slot for the entire day. It was not taken into the air, nor did Johnny so much as catch a single glimpse of his former wartime friend.

Then, finally, the day of the big race. The weather was made to order, and long before the time for the start of the feature high-speed event every seat in the grandstands was taken, and many additional thousands were parked at various points of spectator advantage along the three-sided sixty-mile course.

Long before race time the pilots and mechanics of the twelve man-made bolts of lightning entered in the Doolittle were making last-minute checks, adjustments, test hops, and the many other items necessary before such a grueling grind for plane, engine, and pilot.

Johnny Cole went aloft three times to check his ship. When he landed the third time he turned the racer over to Al Bernard for the final ground check, and hopped a cab to their hotel for a shower and a quick period of relaxation.

When he returned to the field, a scant twenty minutes before race starting time, Al Bernard had news for him.

"That Joe Kelly's been around looking for you," he said. "Said he had something he wanted to show you. Kind of disappointed you weren't here."

"Tough," Cole grunted. "Anything that lad has to show me, he can show me in the race!"

"Yeah, sure," Bernard murmured. "But he seemed plenty anxious to see you. Said for you to drop down by his ship, if there was time when you got back."

"There isn't," Johnny Cole said, making a brushoff gesture with his hand. "Besides, I'm not interested. Is everything set?"

The mechanic nodded. Cole donned his flight gear, and then climbed into the pit of the Dickson B-G. When he was all settled and ready to jab the engine into life, Al Bernard came over to the side of the cockpit, rested both hands on the hood groove and stared earnestly up at him.

Cole grinned and winked.

"Stop worrying, Grandpa!" he said chuckling. "We got this all wrapped up! That's a promise, Al."

"Give me another promise?" the mechanic asked quietly.

"Shoot," Cole nodded.

Bernard let his eyes slide along the line of planes, then brought them back to Cole's face.

"Forget about the man flying the Laird-Allison, Johnny," he said. "You know what I mean. Don't waste time, or your neck, trying to show him a thing. Just get out in front and stay there. Okay?"

Johnny Cole chuckled again, and reached down and playfully rubbed the knuckles of one closed fist across the point of Bernard's chin.

"Relax, relax!" he chided. "Kelly isn't a thing in my life today. Not a thing!"

"Then everything's fine!" Bernard said, and smiled. "Good luck, kid!"

Some ten minutes later, Johnny Cole's Dickson B-G was number five in the line of twelve racing planes waiting with props ticking over. At the far side of the airport a starting bomb would soon boom sound and black smoke skyward. And ten miles beyond the placement of the starting bomb was the scattering pylon. Three planes away, on Johnny's right was Joe Kelly in the blue-and-gold Laird-Allison. Just once Cole looked that way, and then he fixed his eyes front, with every part of him on the alert for the boom and the thin column of black smoke shooting skyward.

A year it seemed or maybe it was two, and then black smoke shot upward and booming sound came rolling back across the airport. Then heaven and earth trembled violently as the thunderous roar of twelve high-speed airplane engines smote the air. And like twelve brightly colored beetles with stubby wings, the dozen entries in the Doolittle



classic started to move forward.

In practically nothing flat, they were streaking forward, leaving behind whirling, swirling exhaust trails.

Mouth and throat bone-dry, but his hands steady as rocks, Cole drilled the Dickson B-G along until he had gained the last ounce of take-off speed possible. Then he lifted the sleek racer clear, checked the climb at a couple of hundred feet, and went thundering all out for the scattering pylon.

**I**T WAS not until then that Johnny Cole realized two other pilots had beaten him to the take-off by a hair. One was Joe Kelly in the blue-and-gold, and the other was a pilot named Holland, who was flying a low-wing Carter-Wright. Of the two Kelly was out in front by a couple of plane lengths and going like the wind. Holland was in front of Cole by less than a plane length. But the Carter-Wright pilot had waited too long to haul up his wheels. As a result, Cole passed him a quarter of a mile this side of the scattering pylon, and chased Kelly around it no more than a length and a half behind.

After close-hauling the pylon, Cole leveled off quickly and gave the twelve-hundred horses in the nose everything they could take. Foot by foot he crawled up on the Laird-Allison, but Joe Kelly managed to whip around the Number Two pylon still out in front. And when presently the redhead cut around the Number Three pylon to complete the first lap, he was still leading the field.

As Johnny thundered into the second lap of the ten, he rammed the heel of his hand hard against the already wide-open throttle, as though in so doing he might feed an extra drop or two of highest to the engine and pick up a slight increase in speed. It did not work, of course.

Joe Kelly, in the Laird-Allison, seemed to have speed to burn. For three full laps he stayed out in front, in spite of Johnny Cole's every effort to pull him back and take over.

In the fourth lap, however, Cole's hair-raising flying of the pylons began to pay off. When the lap was completed he had his racer up on even terms with the Laird-Allison, but on the outside.

As Johnny ripped into the fifth lap, a faint smile slid across his lips for the first time in the race. And the dryness

went out of his mouth and throat. It was working out along the lines he had figured it would. The Laird-Allison had a carload of speed in the flat. But it was a whole lot different on the pylons. And it was the man in the cockpit who made the difference. Joe Kelly just didn't have that extra something to shoot the works on the pylons.

Feeling confident that the race was his for the taking, Johnny Cole was content to fly the next two laps wingtip to wingtip with the Laird-Allison. And whenever he went around a pylon he swerved over just a hair, to make Kelly take it extra close.

However, if he had expected to bother the redhead at all and force him to give air, he was strictly out of luck. Kelly just flew the pylons extra close and kept on going. And by the eighth lap a crazy anger began to build up in Cole.

And so halfway through the eighth lap, he slanted the Dickson B-G down slightly to pick up diving speed. It was a nerve-tingling maneuver because it put the belly of his ship less than fifty feet off the ground. But Johnny knew his plane every bit as well as he knew his own flying limitations. He held the roaring craft steady, picked up the extra speed needed and went streaking for the next pylon.

It was when he came up on it that he made his final bid to take over the lead. Keeping clear of the Laird-Allison's prop-wash, he kicked the Dickson B-G up over on wing, gave it a touch of top rudder, and went slicing clean around Kelly and on up to the hundred-foot altitude.

When he came out of the tight-climbing turn and leveled off, he was a couple of plane lengths out in front and in position to swerve over and take the pole. This he did, and kept the throttle all the way to the stop peg as he completed the eighth lap and went prop-howling into the ninth.

When the first leg of the ninth lap was history, Cole took a quick look back over his shoulder, and grinned broadly. The Laird-Allison was right behind him, and on the outside, but Kelly was unable to crawl up on him at all. And almost half a lap leg in back of the redhead was Holland in the Carter-Wright.

Even as Johnny took a look, the Carter-Wright lost even more air. The rest of the field was practically out of sight.



A whole flock of happy thoughts filling his brain, Johnny Cole tooled his Dickson B-G through the second and third legs of the ninth lap and went roaring into the tenth and final lap. Sixty miles more and the Doolittle Trophy, plus several thousand dollars in prize money, would be his.

Just sixty miles more—  
And then it happened!

AS Cole came rocketing up on Number Two pylon, a spattering of oily black suddenly sloshed against the windshield and spewed back over the plexiglass hood. One instant he had clear vision, and the next it was blurred over by the black liquid. Fear froze him stiff for a moment, and then his brain clicked over at lightninglike speed. Instinctively, he nosed the ship upward and went zooming for altitude. But even as he reached the top of the zoom the grinding howl in the nose told him the bitter news.

A main oil feedline had parted and the power plant was freezing up fast. A second later the prop became a dead stick across the nose of the plane.

Cutting ignition and throttle with one hand, Cole rammed open the plexiglass hood with the other and stuck his head out.

He had a thousand feet of altitude, but the safety of the Newton Airport was a good twenty miles behind him.

He had the choice of two things: He could flop the ship over on its back and drop out with his chute, or he could take a chance on a dead-stick landing. He made up his mind in nothing flat.

As luck would have it, there was a long, narrow, fairly flat field dead ahead of him. It would take some fancy flying to sit his sleek racer down in it, but being the kind of a pilot he was, Johnny elected to take that chance. If he hit the silk, his Dickson B-G would become a fire-scorched heap of junk.

Keeping his head out the left side of the opened hood, he nosed down toward the long, narrow strip of flat ground. It was dead ahead, the long way to him, and what ground wind there was was blowing toward his line of glide.

Years seemed to drag by as his sleek racer slid down lower and lower toward the near end of that narrow strip of ground. Strange thoughts flashed through his brain, and were gone. He

held the racer steady and slid down lower and lower.

Finally, the near end was just beneath the wheels he had let down during the last two hundred feet. He leveled off and slid straight forward, losing more and more flying speed with every extra foot traveled.

And then, like a slap in the face, Johnny saw it!

From the air it was completely invisible, but down low the grass-choked ditch that cut straight across the narrow strip stood out clear as could be. A wild yell got garbled up in his throat, and with a mighty effort he tried desperately to lift the plane across that narrow ditch.

An ounce more of gliding speed and he would have made it. But that last ounce was not to be had. It had been spent.

The whole plane dropped belly first, and then the wheels caught on the far lip of the ditch.

For a brief instant the plane seemed to stand perfectly still, and then its tail came sweeping up and over past the vertical. Instinctively, Johnny Cole buried his face in his arms, but even as he did something cracked him hard on the back of his head and everything became silent and pitch-black.

When he again opened his eyes, he found himself sitting on the ground. Some twenty yards away was his Dickson B-G. It was over on its back, but apart from a crumpled left wingtip and a pretzel-bent propeller and a couple of landing wheels slanted cockeyed, the plane didn't seem to be broken up too much.

And then he saw a second plane on the ground, some fifty yards in back of his crash and way over on the far side of the narrow strip. It was the blue-and-gold Laird-Allison, and its prop was idling lazily.

COLE blinked stupidly for an instant, and then impulsively turned his head and looked into the anxious eyes of Joe Kelly, squatted on the ground beside him.

"Hurt any place bad, Johnny?" the redhead asked.

"No, just sort of fuzzy in the head," Cole mumbled. Then, as memory came racing back, he gulped. "Hey! How come you're here?"



"Unnecessary mission, I guess," Kelly replied. "When I saw you zoom, and your engine freeze, I knew you'd try to get the ship down. You always were like that. So I tailed you down, just in case. These things do catch fire, you know. But, fortunately, yours didn't. No trouble at all to haul you out."

Johnny Cole blinked and shook his head like a punch-drunk boxer. He wasn't quite sure whether it was a crazy dream or not.

"You—" he gulped, and tried again. "You pulled out of the race and tailed me down?"

Joe Kelly shrugged.

He pulled a small flat book out from under his shirt.

"Yeah," he grunted. "You showed me where the hidden ditch was, so it wasn't hard. Look, I wanted to see you before the race, Johnny, but you didn't come over. This is my war diary. I flew home yesterday to dig it out of the trunk. Give a listen, Johnny."

As Cole stared, puzzle-eyed, Joe Kelly riffled the pages, and then came to one and stopped.

He read aloud from it:

"September Sixteen. On take-off circle for Stuttgart Pathfinder mission when orders arrived to report London. Rex Adams at mission briefing, so turned Betty Lou over to him. Plenty tough to leave crew boys so suddenly, but orders is orders! Arrived London at oh-one hundred hours."

The redhead stopped reading and looked at Johnny Cole. The cracked-up pilot could hardly find his tongue. Even then he had to try twice before he could make it.

"Then it wasn't you in the Betty Lou!" he blurted out. "It was Rex Adams, not you, Joe?"

"Check," Kelly nodded. "That's what I tried to tell you the other day, but you wouldn't give me the chance. The next day in London I heard you had been posted as missing. And a couple of years later a letter from one of my crewmen caught up with me in Burma. He told me how Adams had done a bunko on them and turned back. They went to the C.O. with it, and Adams was shipped back home. What became of him, I don't know."

JOHNNY COLE shook his head again to drive away the last of the cobwebs. He looked at his racer, over on its back, and then he looked at the Laird-Allison, right side up and its prop idling over. Then another truth hit him. He turned quickly to Kelly.

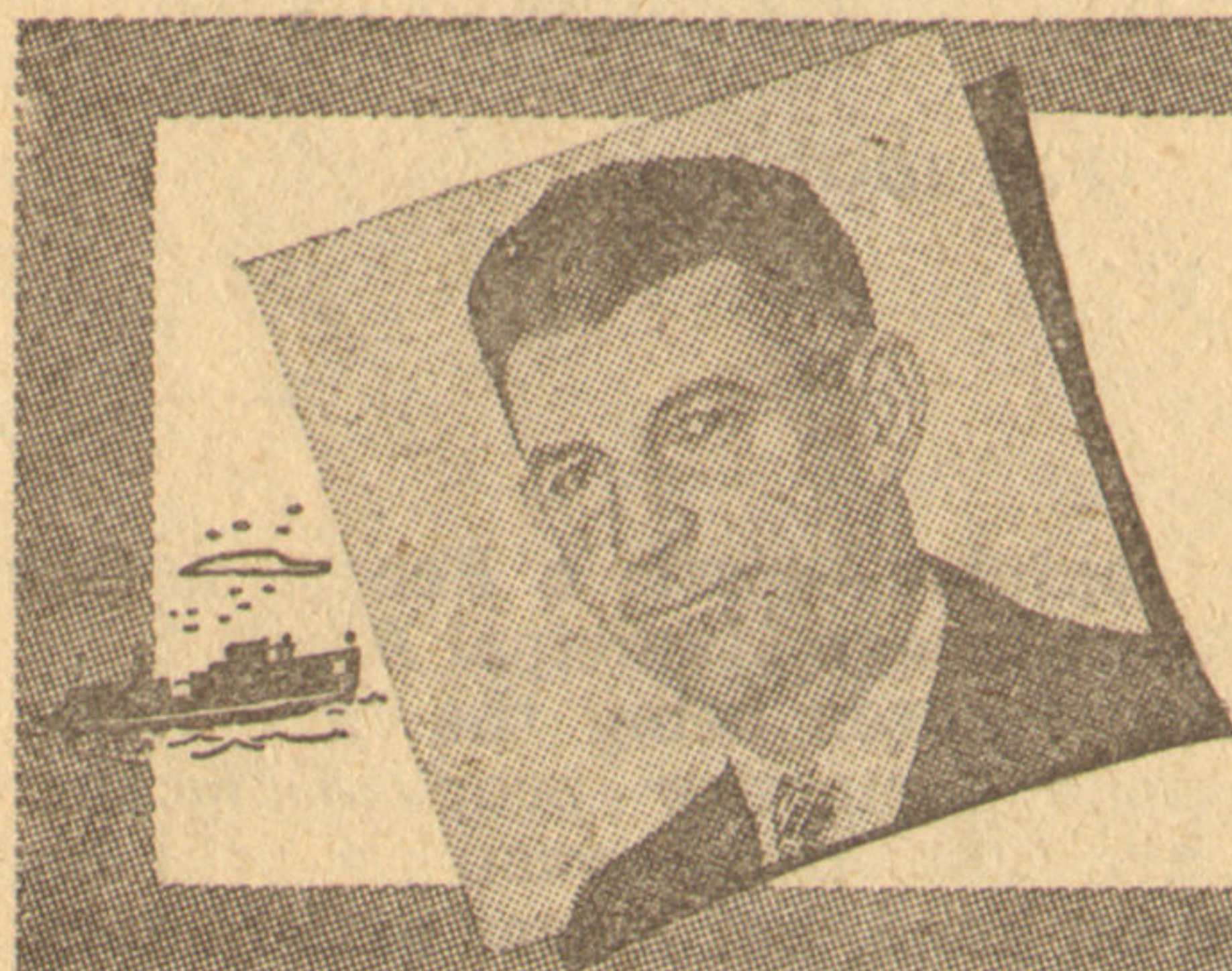
"Joe, you pulled out of the race just to give me a hand!" he cried. "The race was yours cold! Fraser Farr will skin you alive, that is, if he doesn't shoot you first!"

"No," Kelly said, and grinned. "Fraser Farr happens to be my uncle. When he ditched Toni Wiltz, I got him to let me take a crack at it. No, it'll be okay with Uncle Frazer when I explain things to him. And there's always next year, isn't there?"

Johnny Cole got slowly to his feet as a whole conglomeration of emotions swept through him. In the distance came the mounting wail of an ambulance siren. He looked at the redhead and smiled sheepishly.

"I could answer that, Joe, but it would take the rest of the day," he said huskily. "Let's just say that I've been thinking like a heel for a few years, but I'm not any more."

"Okay, let's!" Joe Kelly smiled, and stuck out his hand.

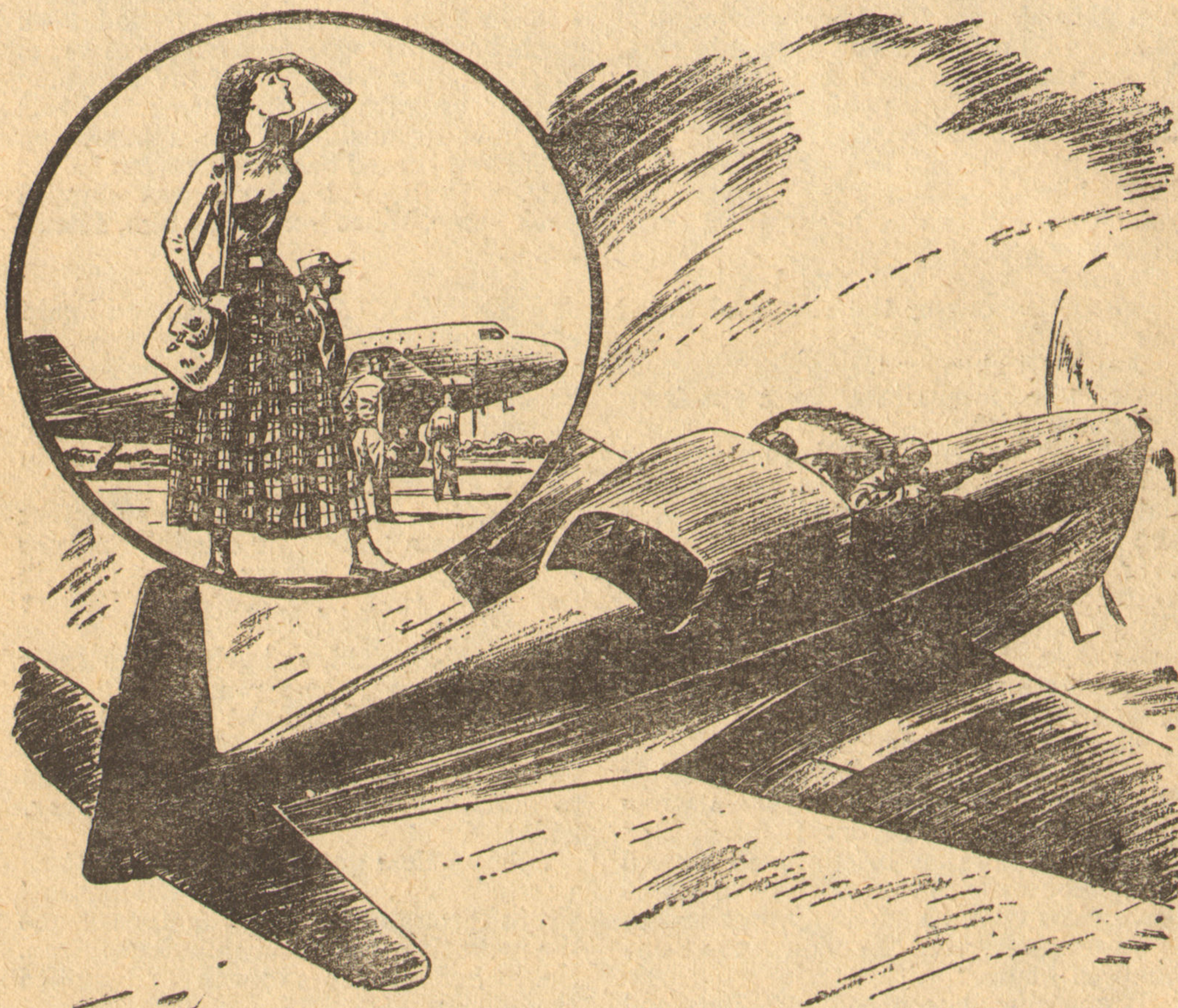


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# THUNDER *Over*

*When hotrocks Duke and Rusty hire on to fly a plush DC-3 out West, it's more than the prop-wash that turns dirty!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Crack-Up*

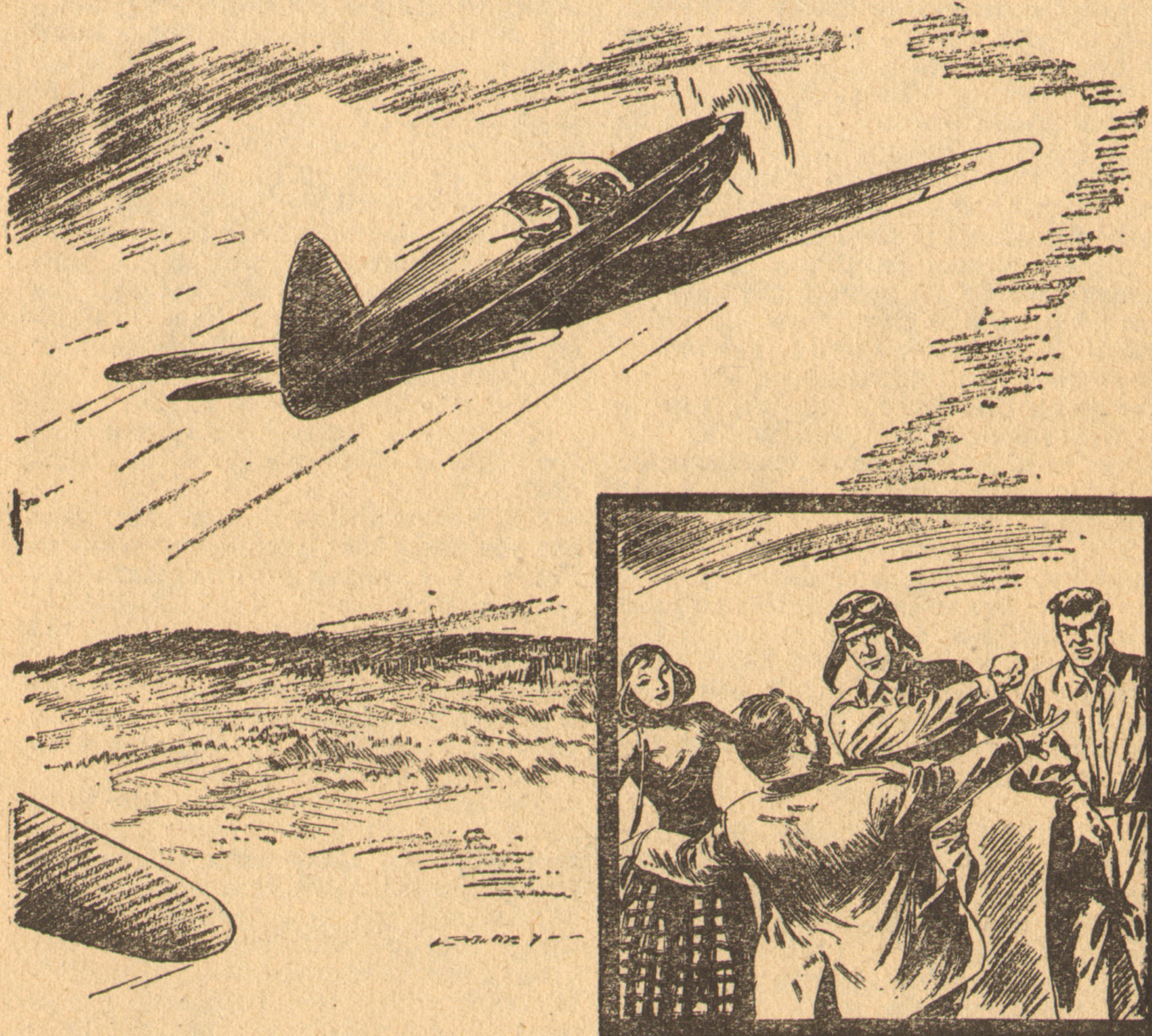
**I**T was a quarter past four when the friend I had in the control tower gave me a buzz that the "Duke" was in range. So I takes me a long drag on my fag, then step outside to watch the world's best throttle-and-stick man—

in my opinion—sizzle a Pee Five One onto the Chicago Municipal Airport.

Speed records being the here today and gone tomorrow proposition that they are now, there wasn't a real big crowd on hand, but it was satisfactory.



Duke proceeds to demonstrate that the Navion is a little brother of a P-51



# *the* ROCKIES

a novelet by PAT PATTERSON

The newsreel men were set up on top of their panel trucks so they could tear out for a close-up scene just in case anything nice and bloody happened.

The rubbernecks were packed solid on the long, narrow roof of the new ter-

minal building, at ten cents a shove through the turnstiles. Over on a platform, in front of a couple of microphones, "Miss 1948 Spirit of Aviation" was nervously fussing with her corn-yaller hair. Miss Spirit was to present



the Duke with a little loving—cup.

With the local smoke haze just a bit less on the dense side than usual, I was able to pick up the plane about four miles south. Half a minute later, the silver Mustang was swooshing across the northwest runway at five foot altitude. I almost got a crick in my neck keeping it in sight, and I knew Duke had jammed the throttle full forward as he rounded out his long dive.

Always a man to give a crowd its money's worth, he pointed the nose toward heaven and slow-rolled one and a half times while the speed buggy picked up an easy two thousand feet. When he was on his back the second time, I knew he was slapping the gear handle. The rollers were flopping down as Duke came out of it to dive, power off, into a short landing approach.

The Rolls-Royce power plant was coughing, spitting, and snorting, just like it always does when the go-juice is shut off. But all of a sudden I felt my innards go cold on me! There were a couple of pops that didn't belong in there. Then a blast of flame and heavy black smoke came pouring out of the long, sleek hood!

**W**HILE I shoved an airline ground man off his motor scooter and threw it in gear, I was cussing the Duke for all I was worth—and cussing myself at the same time. That engine was my baby—my job ever since we bought the plane from the army.

It was the Duke's own fool stubbornness that he never carried a parachute into a cockpit with him. This was one time the nylon umbrella would have been a mighty handy piece of luggage to have along.

By now he was just a few hundred feet above the southeast edge of the field, with the gear almost up again, and the Mustang being slipped sideways from that airborne hades in the nose section. Just when I thought he had waited too long, the Duke kicked the rudder full right and warped the right wing down to a level attitude.

A split second later he smacked into the dirt between the parallel runways with the four-bladed prop chewing up divots and the fuselage air-scoop plowing dust so thick that I couldn't see the plane any longer.

There was still a quarter of a mile

between me and the Mustang's stopping point when the tanks blew up. Fire buggies and a meat wagon were screaming toward the spot now, but I knew they were wasting their time unless the Duke had got rid of the cockpit before the gas went. As the newsreel trucks caught up alongside of me, I saw a tall shape hoist itself off the ground.

The Duke finished wiping his face, put his handkerchief back in his pocket real careful like, and just didn't seem to be paying any attention to all the screaming I was doing at him. He started knocking the dust off his tailored gabardine trousers.

"You'd better ease back on your manifold pressure, Rusty," he said finally, "or you'll be blowing a gasket any minute."

"Well what the samblasted tarnation did you do to that engine, and when in Pete's name are you going to start wearing a chute?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, old boy. She just started burning. The answer to your second question is the same it always was. If I start figuring on not walking away from an airplane, then I'll stop walking into them."

The crash crowd got hold of him then, and that was the last chance I had to talk with the Duke until things had finally quieted down that evening.

It wasn't the fact that the pile of scrap out by that runway had been given a couple hundred hours of my loving care which was bothering me so much. The trouble was that the little hot-rod on wings had represented just about every cent the Duke and I had to our names. The salvage value would probably no more than cover the cost of clearing it from the field.

When our bills were all cleared up, the three thousand paid in by sponsors and advertisers would be cut down to less than four hundred dollars. These days and times that doesn't pay hotel rent and buy steaks for two men very long. Me, I was mighty attached to this eating habit, and hated the thought of tapering off on it.

Not that the Duke and I hadn't known what it was to call a hamburger a meal in days past. We had been a team for a long time, even with the Big Shooting Match splitting us up for a few years. It was back in 1935 we got together—in the dusting business down in Texas.



Duke hadn't been using a razor for more than a couple of years then, and I was making payments on my first set of top quality socket wrenches. Robert P. Denton is the Duke's real name, but nobody ever sees it much except on his checks. He picked up that nickname when he was still in high school.

You see, the Duke is unusually particular about the way a hat sets on his head and matching up his socks and ties. Not a dandy, understand—just real careful and extra neat when it comes to the duds. A few characters I knew made the mistake of calling him *Fancy Pants* within hearing distance. After the first time, I always lit up a cigarette and looked forward to the show.

The Duke would unbutton his sleeve cuffs and loosen his coat so he wouldn't rip anything, and right after that the loose-mouthed one would find his face full of knuckles at regular and frequent intervals. This didn't have to happen many times before the word got around that it wasn't smart to make unkind comment on the Duke's manner of dress.

It was real simple for me to get the tag of "Rusty" since my roof is thatched with hair about the color of early spring carrots. I got engine fever. The Duke had throttle fever ever since he was sixteen years old. We hit it off together—so we teamed.

When the dusting business turned bad, we got in on the last days of barnstorming. In 1940 we had a Waco cabin job—making a living doing charter work in Florida. Summer of that year we began to see the handwriting on the wall. We sold out and offered our services to the Army Air Corps.

Duke came out of the war with twelve confirmed Nip planes to his credit and a pair of silver leaves on his shoulders. I wound up drawing Master Sergeant's pay for over three years, and learning a lot of useful items about airplanes as a line chief.

Each of us tried airline work for a year after discharge. Then we decided we'd rather root for ourselves. We pooled our capital—just like the old days—and went into the record breaking business. It had just started to be a paying proposition. Then our working equipment and capital investment got smeared across the face of the Chicago Airport.

SO I wasn't little Johnny Sunshine when the Duke and me headed for the hotel bar that evening. We were going to have just one or two shots to make our meal set right. About the time I was making the initial bend of the elbow, I see a sight that makes my stomach start turning in the wrong direction.

Aimed for the bar is a character named Ronald Carson. In close formation behind him are two other hunks with the appearance of considerable muscle—all of it below the neck. The Duke picks up this threesome a moment after I do, and I see the lines around his eyes and mouth change pattern.

Around the flying circles Carson is best known as "Fingers." He is a pilot of sorts, does most of his flying with his flappy mouth, and got his name from his habit of latching onto any loose money in any way possible.

We have known Fingers for some ten years—and regretted every minute of it. He seemed to pop up all over the country to haunt us and do us various kinds of dirt, but never laying himself open for a showdown. Even a war doesn't break this habit of his.

Carson had that mouth going while he was still fifteen feet away from us.

"Well, well, well—if it isn't the Rover Boys themselves! I thought you'd be out at the airport roasting marshmallows. Yak, yak, yak!"

That doesn't strike either the Duke or me as being very humorous, and we ignore the paw that Fingers has stuck out in our direction.

"Say, Duke, did you land with the wheels up just to please the crowd? Or did you forget it was your own airplane?"

The Duke clipped out his answer real careful and clear. "Fingers, if the time ever comes when I need your advice on flying, I'll start selling apples for a living. You could probably save yourself a lot of unhappiness if you were suddenly to lose your voice."

This doesn't sink in through Carson's cranium, or else he is feeling extra cocky because of the two cronies behind him.

"You're awfully touchy, Duke. I was just trying to tell you that us civilian pilots have to be careful with our airplanes. Old Uncle won't give us another



one every time we smear a crate. How many did you use up while you were becoming a hero?"

The Duke doesn't answer that, and Carson doesn't see the warning signal that I look for. What Duke is doing tells me what is going to happen very shortly. He is slowly unbuttoning the cuffs of each shirt sleeve.

Meanwhile, Fingers turns his horn on again. "Now maybe if you had stuck your D.F.C. up in the windshield, that airplane would have shown the proper respect for—"

Right here Fingers suddenly stops making noise because his lower jaw is slapped out of line by a right backhand. For approximately fifty seconds after that the Duke and I are very busy boys!

Immediately, I devote my full attention to one of the extra hunks who is closing in. He banks a right off my head and I'm on instruments for a few seconds. Then I waste a few punches to his midsection before I connect with a short jab upstairs and find out he has a glass jaw.

Fingers and the other muscle man are trying to swamp Duke, or crowd him into the corner of the bar. They are having about as much luck as they would have grabbing a B-29 prop at 1200 RPM!

Now I'm not worried about the Duke, but I figure he may be a little tired after such a full day. So I taps Hunk Number Two on the shoulder to attract his attention.

He spins around, swinging a fist that looks like a ten pound picnic ham. Being four or five inches shorter than he is, I do not have to duck very deep to miss it. I let the centrifugal force carry him around in a complete circle. On his way back, I tag him on the smelling organ with a right.

His eyes start looking in different directions, and a left to the solar plexus makes his knees sag enough so that I can conveniently crack three knuckles on his jaw. As I step back to give him falling room, I see Duke putting the final touches to Fingers. Carson is just about out on his feet, but surprises me by continuing to make wild swings. He has more spine than I had figured.

The Duke decides this business has gone on long enough. He brings his first up from somewhere way down in Indiana. Fingers sails past me, bounces

off a cocktail table, and winds up in a heap against the opposite wall!

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## CHAPTER II

### *Sabotage*

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**T**HE bartender, an old friend of ours, stands up full height behind the bar again. He breathes a sigh of relief as he sees that his bottled goods are still intact.

"Nice work, boys. I was afraid it was going to get messy, but you did a neat job!"

"Mighty sorry, Frank," Duke told him, "but sometimes I can't help losing my temper. We'll take care of the damages."

"Now don't worry about that. Nothing broken except one table, and the insurance will cover it."

Several of the larger bellboys and waiters are now on hand, and they start disposing of the three used bodies. Fingers Carson comes around enough to murmur something to the effect that Duke will not continue to enjoy good health if he has his way. All the fight is washed out of him for the time being, and he makes no resistance as he is led out.

The Duke has buttoned his shirt, straightened his tie and coat, but both of us need further repairs. We are bleeding a bit around the knuckles, and a comb is in order.

Just as we start through the lounge section of the bar a slick dish with blond hair steps up out of the dimness. It's Miss Spirit of Aviation again!

"Oh, Mr. Denton," she gurgles. "You certainly are quite an entertainer. All that excitement this afternoon, and we got here just in time for the fight!"

She is looking over the Duke's six feet and two inches with such admiration that for a second I almost hate the guy.

"Well, Miss Peters, so we meet again." The Duke's eyes have picked up that added sparkle they get in such company. He turns sideways to both of us and says, "Miss Vivian Peters, this is Rusty Dixon—the other half of Denton and Dixon."

She coos something appropriate while



I am hunting for my tongue. "And I have someone with me who wants to meet both of you." She turns to a table a few feet away, and we get a look at what she meant by that first *we*.

There sits a brunette who must have to turn away several movie offers every week. It turns out that her name is Nola Burns. It also turns out that she has quite a bit on her mind which is to involve us in some rather exciting events.

"Mr. Denton," she begins, "I asked Miss Peters to introduce me to you and Mr. Dixon because I believe you are the right men for a plan I have in mind."

The Duke is wrapping a monogrammed handkerchief around his bleeding knuckles, but he looks sharply at Miss Burns.

"From the tone of your voice you sound like a lady in distress," he says.

"Well, it's not exactly distress, but my father and I have been having quite a bit of trouble lately. Dad is Western Estates—perhaps you've heard of the company?"

When Duke shakes his head she continues. "The business is real estate. Large ranches in the northwest states are our specialty. Dad was just getting well established, and a decent profit was showing on the books, when his health failed. Since that time I have been trying to manage the work myself—with Miss Peters' help. Vivian has been Dad's secretary for three years."

Both Duke and me start to fidget just a little, so Nola comes to the point in a hurry.

"We have decided that a private airplane might be the answer to the largest part of our trouble. Rikker and Company is in strong competition with us, and the methods they have been using are certainly less than honorable in many ways.

"The worst part is the way they steal our best prospects right out from under our noses. We haven't learned how they know so quickly who these prospects are. But they do find out. Then they proceed to tell a pack of lies about Dad and Western Estates, make offers that sound better than our honest deals, and pay the prospect's way out West on the Super Chief. Usually they wind up this high pressure campaign by selling a worthless ranch for a high price. As soon as the buyer finds out that he has been taken, it is too late for us to

do any business with him. He winds up disgusted with the whole idea of ranches!"

Duke gets the idea a little quicker than I do. "So now you are going to offer your prospects a quick trip by private plane so they can look at your properties?"

"That's the plan, Mr. Denton. We want the best pilot and mechanic we can hire. From what I've heard of you and Mr. Dixon, I believe you could fill the positions."

A ONE-SIDED grin was on Duke's mouth. "The crash this afternoon didn't override your opinion?"

Nola smiled—and what a lovely smile. "I think I know enough about airplanes to see that was just bad luck. You did a beautiful job of bringing the plane down. Now what do you think of my offer? I believe a luxury-equipped DC-3 is the plane we want. If you and Mr. Dixon accept, I'd like you to supervise the purchase and modification of the plane. It's to be very plush and comfortable."

Duke looked a question at me, and I nodded slightly to let him know that any deal he wanted to make with this lovely creature was okay with me.

"Miss Burns, you have approached us at a very psychological time," Duke said then. "Your proposition sounds quite interesting—so far."

Nola caught the point in a hurry. "As to your salary, you can name your own figure. I know you will be reasonable in the matter. Of course I can't guarantee any definite length of time the job will last, but if we are successful, you will be suitably rewarded."

A minute later we were hired by Nola and Western Estates—to contribute our combined services for fifteen hundred skins, and expenses, per month. Our new employer was also informed that we were more accustomed to being called Duke and Rusty than something with Mister in front.

"Well, Duke, there's something I believe I should add before you actually go to work," Nola added as a final thought. "Rikker plays dirty, as I mentioned before. They may even decide to get rough as well as dirty. It would not surprise me if your work turned out to have more danger in it than the mere flying part. How about that?"



Duke grinned and looked at me for my reaction. "Don't worry your pretty head about us," I said. "We'll try to take care of ourselves." I was thinking that I wouldn't mind looking after Nola and Vivian right closely, also.

The next morning we swung into action, with full authority and purchasing power delegated to us by Nola.

One of the Duke's wartime buddies had been operating a charter business for a couple of years. Bad luck and competition had him on the rocks now. A long-distance call confirmed the fact that he was willing to sell one of his DC-3s for an honest price. Duke gave me the details after the call.

"I know Larry respects an airplane and treats it right," Duke told me. "We'll ride United over to St. Louis this afternoon. Tomorrow morning, you can make a thorough inspection. We'll come to terms with Larry if you and I think it's a good buy."

The Douglas was in nice shape. The army had put on only a few hundred hours before Larry had bought it as surplus. It looked as if the maintenance since that time had been top grade. The thousand horse Wrights were smooth as a dollar stogie. I pulled all the inspection panels, checked the radios, and satisfied myself that the rigging was as it should be.

That afternoon, Larry shot a few landings with us for the Duke and me to get the feel of the buggy. Duke had almost three hundred hours in C-47s before the Air Force let him into fighters. My total stick time in that type amounted to less than one hundred hours, but my Commercial license qualified me to fly as co-pilot.

An hour after dark we were checking in over the Chrysler plant, and the Chicago Tower gave us landing instructions. The trip had been smooth, and we were well pleased with our shopping. When we got to the hotel, Duke called Nola and told her she now owned an airplane. I noticed he looked a little surprised at her answer. They talked a few minutes, then Duke gave me the story.

"Nola now owns two airplanes. Seems she has her own private Navion that she keeps on their home ranch in Wyoming. Imagine a smooth number like that having four hundred hours time. What is the female sex coming to?"

In spite of the Duke acting a little resentful, I knew he didn't hold it against Nola for including flying among her talents.

"That's more time than I have logged," I cracked. "Maybe you will be using a co-pilot with skirts instead of this beat up old A. M."

"Well, you have to admit that she is a lot purtier than you are, Rusty." Then the Duke turned more serious. "Nola must be convinced that the Rikker crowd is really after her. She wants to keep this deal as quiet as possible."

"Tomorrow morning, we are to meet her at home and get her ideas on the way the plane should be fitted out. We make like clams if anyone wants to know the crate's owner—or else we let them think we are going into business for ourselves."

SO that's the way it was for the next two weeks—and they were busy weeks. The service company we hired got real interested in the job and did beautiful work. That DC-3 turned out as the smoothest sky wagon you ever laid your peepers on. I figured the prospects would probably be reaching for their checkbooks before we got them out of the traffic pattern.

Just about the time we were getting ready to tell Nola that she could start using her investment, we learned something. We learned that our glamorous boss wasn't just seeing spooks.

The plane came out of the shop tuned and polished. It was planned that we'd hop it to make sure our new interior hadn't changed the balance, and to test the new radio altimeter. Next morning, we'd swing the compass and be set for service.

While the gas was being put aboard, a young fellow with a big cap and a leather jacket wanders up to the landing gear. He pulls a pressure gauge out of his pocket, sticks it on the valve, then goes on the inside of the right wheel. It looks like he is making a very thorough inspection of the gear.

This irks me a little, for only two days ago I helped the other mechanics pull a complete gear check while the ship is on jacks. So I wander over to the shop foreman and query him.

"Jack, who is the super-service character with the tire gauge? I don't remember seeing him around before."



Jack studies the back of this fellow, who has now walked away and is passing behind the hangar.

"Beats me, Rusty," Jack said. "I don't recognize him from here. And we haven't done any hiring lately."

The Duke was standing with Jack, and he spoke up quietly. "If that gear is so interesting, Rusty, maybe you and I should have ourselves another look at it."

I was thinking the same thing—and the hunches were right. Just above the oleo piston of the right gear there was an attachment that was extra equipment. Equipment which had been added in the last five minutes.

It consisted of two small metal boxes, connected by an insulated wire, and fastened to the strut by a quick-action spring clip. This is very neat work, and almost exactly like the sabotage equipment used during the Big Fight.

We remove that stuff like we were handling eggs which were slightly cracked already. When the wiring is removed and the covers are off, we find just what we expected to find.

Inside the first little box is a corrugated pressure wafer. Two or three thousand feet up and this wafer would expand enough to make an electrical contact. Two flashlight batteries were hooked up to supply a punch to the contents of the second box—enough nitro to send that plane down in a number of unconnected pieces!

This incident keeps the Duke and me from enjoying the test hop as much as we would have otherwise. When we take our ship back to the hangar Duke makes arrangements for a constant guard to be maintained.

Jack is curious, but a right guy, and doesn't ask too many questions. We agree that it is just as well that Nola does not hear of the event.

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## CHAPTER III

### "Unreported"

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**D**URING the next two weeks we made several trips to various Western points. Nola appears to be mighty handy at this real estate selling, and is more than somewhat happy with the

results that private air transportation is bringing in. After the third trip, she tells us that the profit has already half paid for the plane.

Sometimes Vivian goes along to help out, and the four of us get to know each other considerably. I begin wondering just how thick Nola and the Duke are, but he doesn't offer any comment on that score. The bunch of us is always businesslike in the company of any prospects.

Then comes the trip that gives not only Western Estates, but also the team of Denton and Dixon many things they did not bargain for.

Nola called us early in the afternoon and asked that we come out to the house as soon as we could. She was waiting for us in the study when we arrived.

"Gentlemen, we have a very important trip coming up tomorrow," she said. "I want to give you all the details, so you'll know what our goal is." She dropped the business tone of voice then. "Both of you have certainly been helpful in so many ways, and I do appreciate it." She is looking at Duke most of the time she says this, but I do not mind. During the past two weeks I have become somewhat attached to her little blonde playmate—in spite of Vivian's slightly dizzy personality.

Our lady employer turns serious again. "Dad has decided to sell all the ranch property he owns or holds options on. All, that is, except the one where we have lived for several years. That's the Big B Ranch, thirty-two thousand acres, north of Cheyenne."

Duke whistled softly. "If my Quiz Kid quick figuring is correct," he said, "that amounts to fifty square miles of terra firma!"

Nola nodded. "It's correct, and it is *terra firma*. Much of it is rugged and rocky, but over half is good grazing land. Dad bought it for a dollar an acre in 1931. He also bought two adjoining pieces. One with about thirteen thousand acres—the other with a little over fifteen thousand acres."

She paused, then continued. "Dad wants especially to sell the two smaller ranches, and we have one prospect who really seems ready to buy. The hitch is that this prospect, Sidney Bowers is his name, also wants to take over the Big B. He must have done some investigating of his own, because I hadn't even told



him that we owned the large ranch."

This impressed me considerably. "Who is this Bowers? He really sounds like a big time operator."

"Rusty, I never heard of him until he came to see me two days ago. He says that he has spent the past five years ranching in Argentina. The bank that he gave me as a reference tells me he has a very sizeable amount on deposit there. Outside of that, I know nothing about him."

The Duke offered his cigarettes to us. "I hope this Sidney Bowers won't mind a few bumps on his trip West," he said. "When I looked at the weather map yesterday, there was a lot of frontal activity cooking up in that section of the Rockies."

Nola frowned slightly. "The best we can do is plan to leave tomorrow, check the latest weather, and let Mr. Bowers and the other passengers decide if they want to make the trip."

"Other passengers?"

"Oh, yes. I have two other prospects who have been thinking of the Wyoming property for some time. With three men all interested in the same land, we should get some action. Possibly might even get them to outbidding each other. Then, of course, Vivian will go along with us."

I grin and says, "Of course!"

Nola smiles back and asks, "Could it be, Rusty, that you are exposing your cherished bachelorhood to danger?"

"Madam, I have no comment to make at the present time."

She walks to the front door with us, going over the plans for next day. "Duke there is good landing area on the Big B, but not much gas. We should have time to gas at Cheyenne and still make the last fifty miles to the ranch before dark."

"Sounds okay to me. Let's plan on a nine A.M. take-off. A stop at Omaha will break the trip nicely into halves. Could eat lunch there instead of on the plane, if you like. We'll gain an hour's time and that much daylight between here and Cheyenne."

"That's fine, Duke. By the way, fellows, I meant to tell you some good news! It seems like quite a coincidence—Rikker and Company haven't tried to give me any trouble since the day I hired you!"

The Duke and I can't help flashing a

quick look at each other. We are not about to forget the gadget we almost took on a last, short flight two weeks ago!

Nola doesn't notice our surprise, and everybody says their "goodnights." At the hotel, Duke phones to have the plane ready early, and then we slip into the arms of that guy Morpheus. If we had had some extra fancy nightmares, we might have been warmed up for the days to follow.

AT 0800 I was pulling the pre-flight to make sure the mags were dry and the oil running a temperature. As I shoved the mixture controls into *idle cut-off*, the Duke came across the apron. He had been to the Administration Building to check weather and file a clearance. I met him in the cabin, and we rested ourselves on the plush upholstery of a six-foot built-in sofa.

"How do the winds blow and the precipitations precipitate, Captain?" I asked him.

"Matey, it is just like yesterday—only more so. We'll have to shove breezes that average thirty knots. The cold front has spilled well over the Rockies. We'll hit thunderstorms from this side of Omaha on. I talked with a couple of the airline boys just in from Frisco. They say the whole route is generally clabbered up, but ceilings are still two thousand or better except in heavy showers."

"Guess we'd better tell Vivian just to fill the glasses half full in case any of the customers call for a highball."

"The customers' stomachs will probably be too busy to crave anything except a return to solid ground, Rusty."

I am looking out the window over my shoulder. "Speaking of customers," I said, "there's the station wagon."

We go to meet the crowd and Duke gives them the story. He tells the straight facts, but sounds so calm and unworried that the three prospects immediately vote to proceed.

Sidney Bowers sounds off. "Go West, young man! That's good enough for me. I'm eager to get back to those mountains and plains. It's been almost six years since I've been in old Wyoming."

Normally, I'm a pretty sociable and open-minded person, but for some reason this Bowers goes against my grain as soon as I meet him. Maybe it was



just because he had such a determined air of heartiness and "hail fellow well met" attitude. It stuck out all over him that he meant to be the life of this party.

The other two customers seem like nice, quiet businessmen. The Duke and I double as baggage smashers for a few minutes, then we crank up and call for taxi instructions.

It takes two hours and twenty minutes flying to put us over Des Moines—so we have every bit of the wind that is advertised. At this point, we get clearance from Airways Control to start our descent for Omaha whenever we want to.

It's a little bumpy, but not real rough where we are, so Duke starts letting down a couple of hundred feet per minute. Three quarters of an hour later we sneak into Omaha on a very wet airport. I watch the servicing, Duke makes a trip to the weather office, then we join the others for lunch.

As we reach cruising altitude out of Omaha, Duke tunes down the props and lights a cigarette. "The crystal-gazers now predict that it's fifty-fifty whether or not Cheyenne will have minimums by our arrival time."

"Yeah?" I respond. "What happens if the ceiling refuses us entry there?"

"We have Denver and Colorado Springs as alternates, but my guess is that they won't be any better than Cheyenne. Right now you had better go back and ask everybody to tie themselves down. I've got a hunch we're going to have some activity very shortly."

**T**HE Duke was so right! Just as I come back to the cockpit, a down-draft wallops the plane, and I practically travel the rest of the distance to my seat via the roof.

Then it really starts to get rough. That old cumulo-nimbus starts shaking us just like a dog shaking a snake. Rain turns day into near darkness. Lightning seems to be trying for a direct hit on us. The glaring bolts leave you blinded for two or three seconds—which seems like hours.

"Lights!" yells the Duke.

After two shaky tries, I hit the dome light switch, and then turn all the instrument light rheostats up full. From then on, the lightning doesn't bother us so much, but we are being slapped so hard that the instrument panel is al-

most impossible to read. It vibrates in all directions to the full limits of the rubber mountings.

The radio is so full of static that it is useless, and both of us have brushed off the headsets to keep the nasty din out of our ears. Duke is doing a beautiful job and letting the plane take it as easy as possible. Most pilots make the mistake of over-controlling when in weather such as this. That makes the stress on the structure multiply.

Even the Duke is human, and thirty minutes of this has the sweat rolling down into his eyes. I have my hands clasped together to keep them from flopping around with the bumps, and I'm wishing that I could fly the gauges well enough to relieve the boss.

All of a sudden it smoothes out quite a bit, and we hit rain like I have seen only once or twice before. I can hold a course when it's no rougher than this, so I grabs hold of the wheel and let Duke light a cigarette and relax.

"I feel like I got caught in an automatic washing machine for a couple of hours," he says.

"Yeah, and it still couldn't be any wetter than this. If we had pontoons on this baby, we could shut off the fans and float! Look at those head temperatures. They're twenty degrees below lukewarm."

"Better ease some more power on," Duke said. "I had it cut way back to keep from hitting so hard. We should be coming up on Grand Island pretty quick now. I'll try to pick up their range and see if we got beat away from course."

Duke fiddles with the knobs for two or three minutes and then jerks his phones off. "Everything except the tower receiver is dead as Old Man Mose. We must have had a direct hit just like Ben Franklin did. I'll take over. See what you can do with the fuses."

For the next thirty minutes I check every fuse and circuit breaker, remove plates and push tubes down in their sockets—and cuss. None of it does any good. The radio compass, the range receiver, and the ILS just won't talk.

It does not make me happy to tell the Duke that I give up. When you can't see out your windshield or windows, it is considered necessary to have some clues as to location.

He takes it more calmly than I do.



"Well, if that's the way it is—then that's the way it is. Now we have to do something before we get into that country where the rocks stick up and make hard centers in these clouds."

With that I agree wholeheartedly.

"We can't be past North Platte yet, shoving into this wind." Duke runs a finger along the map spread over his knees, and continues, "Five thousand will clear everything nicely for the next hour. Let's have ourselves a look."

So we start easing down: seven thousand, six thousand, five thousand—and still nothing but sky juice in our faces. Duke holds it level for a few minutes then puts forward pressure on the wheel again.

Forty-five hundred. My palms start sweating. I do not like the idea of running out of altitude at the wrong time and place. I have decided that is the cause of a great many accidents. Four thousand. I am wondering if it will help any if I light a last cigarette.

Duke looks at me and grins. "Relax, Rusty—the fancy altimeter is working okay."

Relief spreads over me like a shot in the arm. I have forgotten our newest radio gadget—mounted on the far left side of the board. The needle is making comforting movements. At thirty-seven hundred feet on the pressure altimeter we get a look at the ground. It is only eight hundred feet below us, but I am more than happy to see it from any height.

After studying the map for a couple of minutes Duke changes course ten degrees to the left. "That's the North Platte River under us, and I think I see the South Platte over to the left. Which means we're past the town of North Platte."

"There's a nice field there, Duke. Want to turn back and get our radio worked over?"

"No, I think it's better to keep on heading for Cheyenne. We can spot a place called Ogalla further up the river. There we'll pick up Highway 30 and fly the concrete beam on in. If we start running out of ceiling, a climbing turn will let us backtrack safely."

"Suits me, but do you think the CAA will be happy about it?"

"I'll have to file an emergency report covering violations either way. We might as well get where we want to go."

Thereupon we proceed to hedgehop on to Cheyenne, and I manage to raise the tower operator from ten miles out. He is more than surprised to hear from us. We are almost an hour overdue—and listed as unreported.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Wing Trouble*

ON the ground we take care of arrival details and phone for hotel accommodations. Nola says she could phone the ranch for transportation to be sent for us, but she thinks everyone has had enough traveling for the day. Contact weather is supposed to be available in the morning.

Later that evening, the crowd is feeling much rested, and all decide to take a look at the Western night life. Cheyenne is an interesting place. While you don't see many six-guns on the hip, there's still no law against it. You'll see lots of high-heeled boots and Stetsons, workers from the railroad shops in denim pants and jackets, and characters from various walks of life.

Our crowd is making the round of night spots in the center of town and absorbing all this local color. At one lively place I wandered back to investigate a room at the rear. From certain familiar bits of evidence, I suspect that games of chance are available, and I may invest in a few hands of blackjack.

At the rear of the main room somebody says, "Howdy, Red. Doin' any blastin' lately?"

Sure enough, it's me that's being talked at. It comes from a gray-bearded old fellow who looks so much like a prospector should look that I figure he can't be a prospector.

I suspect this is maybe some kind of local gag, so I comes back with, "What kind of blasting did you have in mind, Pop?"

"Why, wasn't you with the big fella there a couple of weeks ago? Up north of the Big B?" He nods in the direction of our bunch, farther up the bar.

"Which one of the big fellows, Pop?"

"Why the bald-headed one with the leetle cockytail glass."



There's no doubt about it—he means our guest of honor, Sidney Bowers. Something is wrong if this old-timer is right. I remember how Bowers is saying it's been years since he was in this country.

"No, I wasn't in that neck of the woods lately," I said. "Are you sure that he is the man? And what about this blasting?" I motioned for the bartender to fill up Pop's beer glass.

"Son, I don't make no habit of forgetting faces. Don't see many of 'em when I'm out prospectin'." He nods his thanks as I pay for his beer.

"Yep, I was just comin' back from another dry haul. Took a short-cut through some of the Big B range. This big feller and two, three others was messin' around with a bunch of wires on the ground. Had some kind of peculiar lookin' autymobile with 'em.

"Reckon I warn't more'n a hundred yards from where they was 'fore they spied me. Then they start yellin' and wavin' their arms like they didn't want me to come no closer. So I cut off to the side and went on my way. Couple of minutes later I heered a couple of blasts like small charges of dineymite. I figgered maybe they had some new-fangled way of lookin' for gold, but I could of tole 'em they warn't goin' to have no luck in that spot. Done been over every bit of it myself fifteen year ago."

No one in Nola's crowd has noticed that I stopped farther down the bar. This is good. I slip the old-timer a five-spot.

"Pop," I say, "I'm goin' to play a joke on my friend, and I don't want him to see you here. That would spoil it. How about having yourself a few beers down the street?"

"Well thanks, Red. Don't mind if I do. Goin' to kid him about lookin' in the wrong place for that gold, eh? Heh, heh, heh!"

I let it go at that, and Pop wanders out the back door.

LATER that night, the Duke, Nola, and me have a powwow at the hotel. The news I'd picked up had considerable effect on both of them. It winds up with Duke making a long-distance call to Los Angeles, and Nola phones her dad plus a couple of other people.

We wake up to weather that is much

better than previously. By ten o'clock we are airborne for the short hop to the Big B Ranch. Sidney Bowers shows no indication that he has any idea of the information we have picked up. He keeps booming about what beautiful country it is, and how glad he is to be back.

There is a real good landing area—smoother than some of the old runways at Chicago. We stop near the little hangar that Nola keeps her Navion in, and the ranch foreman is waiting for us.

While the guests are being taken to their rooms in the ranchhouse, Slim Taylor, the foreman, comes over to Nola. He looks worried, although you can tell he's not much accustomed to showing any emotion.

"Miss Nola," he says, "I'd like to talk to you alone for a few minutes."

"We'll go into the den, Slim. If you have troubles, I'd like for Duke and Rusty to hear them. We have a few of our own that just might happen to tie in."

"We've got trouble, Miss Nola," Slim says. "Plenty of it."

We all settle down in the den, and Slim continues, "The last week or so, it looks like someone is trying to ruin this ranch, just for the devilment of it. First of all, we loose eighteen head on the south range when someone poisons the water hole down there."

Nola draws her breath in sharply. "Were they Herefords, Slim?"

"Yes'm, they sure were. And that ain't all. Up on Bear Slope we been losing more Herefords. They were shot—sixteen head lost all together. A couple of the boys found them. Some were dead, and some of the others were half-dead, so they had to be finished off. Here's the strange thing about it, Miss Nola. There wasn't a single track of any kind around either the water hole or the cattle that was shot. Those cattle was shot from above, with a Thompson gun. They got it from an airplane. Ain't no other way. Two of our haystacks on the range have been burned to add to the misery!"

Nola is looking so beat down that I really feel sorry for her. "This will just about kill Dad," she says. "Those prize Herefords were the joy of his life. Have you seen a plane, or found any leads on who is doing all this sabotage?"

"No ma'm. Everybody's been workin'



a sixteen-hour day, but we just don't have enough boys to cover the whole ranch. When the water hole was poisoned I sent most of the riders down to cover it and the other holes south. Then the cattle up north are shot next day. I figure a light plane could sneak around low in these hills pretty easy."

"What do you make of it, Duke," Nola asks.

"I've got a hunch that everything is going to fit together when we have the rest of the pieces," Duke said. "When Wally Whitman gets here from Los Angeles, we'll have some more of those pieces maybe. We might hear something from the calls that you made, too. Rusty and I can take your Navion to Cheyenne this afternoon and meet Whitman's plane from California. Meanwhile, Nola, I suggest that you play along with Bowers and get anything you can out of him."

That being agreed on, the Duke goes over some plans with Slim and me, then all of us go to wash up for lunch.

Early in the afternoon Nola starts off with her three prospects to take them on a jeep tour of the ranches. I think to myself that she is probably keeping her fingers crossed that they won't come across any freshly shot cattle. That would look mighty bad to a prospective rancher.

**S**OON after Nola leaves, the Duke phones Cheyenne to make sure the weather is okay there. They have broken clouds at four thousand feet, predicted to stay good.

When we ask Vivian if she would like to ride along with us, we get a different reaction than I expected. For a second she actually looks scared, and then very definitely refuses our invitation. Says she is not feeling too well, and would like to rest for a while. I figure that the rough trip from Omaha must have made her nervous about flying.

Two hours later, we greeted Wally Whitman at the airport. Wally is a top-flight geologist that we had known in Texas. He had been working for a large oil company there, and we had done some charter work for them.

While we walked across the field to the Navion, Duke gave Wally the high points of the situation at the Big B ranch. He added the information we

got from the old prospector, and Wally took fresh interest in our story.

"I get it, Duke," Wally said. "You figure that someone was setting off those blasts to make seismograph charts. Now you want me to look the land over and give you my opinion on the possibility of oil deposits?"

"You've hit the nail on the head, Wally. From what I remember of your work, you can smell out that black gold like a hound dog sniffs out a 'coon."

"Duke, we can get a quick start since we're flying to the ranch. How about giving me a look at the area from five or six thousand feet up?"

"Will do. You'll probably have to peep through the breaks in clouds, but you'll be able to see everything from one angle or another."

We threw Wally's bag into the luggage compartment, and let him climb in the Navion. He was just settling down in the rear seat when he let out a yell. Wally had sat down next to the small arsenal we had picked out from the gun room at the ranch. There were two .30-30 carbines and a pair of Colt .45s complete with cartridge belts.

Duke laughed. "Those are so we'll be ready in case the redskins go on the warpath," he explained.

The Duke held the Navion a steady five hundred feet per minute in the climb after take-off. At ten thousand feet indicated, which was a little over four thousand above the terrain, Wally leaned forward.

"This is high enough, Duke," he said. "Let me know when we are over the ranch."

Duke looked at his watch. "It will be just about fifteen minutes. I'll start on a wide circle when we cross the southern boundary."

Twenty minutes later, Wally turns quickly from his window. "Make a small circle to the left right here, Duke." There is pressure behind Wally's voice, and he looks excited.

By raising myself up in the right front seat I can see the ground he is staring at. It is a rather peculiar area some three miles in diameter. What makes it so noticeable is that there are several circles made by rocky ridges, with three definite circles inside the largest ring. Sort of reminds me of the pattern you get when you drop a pebble in a quiet pool. This is about four miles



north of the Big B ranchhouse.

We complete this circle, and Wally straightens up. "That's the prettiest rock dome formation I've ever seen! Odds are better than five to one that you could bring in a producer there before the well was four thousand feet down."

He is going to say more, but he is rudely interrupted. Out of the clear blue it feels and sounds like someone is pounding that little plane with a sledge hammer.

There are three holes the size of silver dollars in our left wing!

## CHAPTER V

### *Dogfight Finish*

**F**ROM then on, things happened a lot faster than I could tell about it.

"There's a plane on top of us!" Wally yells.

The Duke whips the Navion into a right vertical and shouts, "Fasten your safeties!"

I get a quick look at a red and silver Swift, turning and climbing to stay on our tail. The barrel of a Thompson is stuck out of the right hand window.

Wally hands me a carbine as I throw our hatch open with my other hand. Duke now has the situation sized up. He proceeds to demonstrate that the Navion is a little brother of a P-51.

Another burst of slugs come our way, and I feel a couple hit the plane. Duke sticks the nose down and builds up an airspeed of nearly two hundred. Then he hauls back so hard that we are shoved way down into the seat cushions. He feints a left turn, still climbing, then suddenly half-rolls to the right.

As we come out of it Duke chops the power and yells, "Make this good, Rusty!"

The Swift is just underneath us—probably still trying to decide what happened to the Navion it had by the tail. Duke slides to the left a little and then drops the right wing. We are not more than forty feet away as I brace the carbine against the slipstream and let go.

The shell hits the Swift just above the window. I pop the cocking lever

and get another quick shot as the pilot takes an awe-struck look at us.

It is Fingers Carson I am looking at over the Winchester barrel! He stands the Swift on its nose, and a few seconds later disappears in the broken clouds.

Duke wheels over to dive after the other plane, and I notice for the first time that blood is running down the left side of his face. "You hit bad?"

"No. Just creased me above the eye."

"Fingers is flying that plane."

Duke answers with something unprintable first, and adds, "He should make sure his clay pigeons are sitting ducks before he tries to be a fighter pilot!"

We break through the base of the clouds and see the Swift a thousand feet below. It looks as if Fingers is out of control, but he levels off a few hundred feet above the ground. Duke opens the throttle and we start eating up the distance between us.

When I'm lining up the carbine for another shot, Carson sticks his arm out of the cockpit and waves it wildly. There's no doubt that he means he's had enough. Duke pulls up tight on the left rear of the Swift, and I keep the Winchester lined up in case Fingers is trying to trick us.

We have wound up this dogfight almost on top of the ranch. A minute later, the Swift pancakes in right on the Big B landing area. Duke makes a slow circle until we see Carson step out with his hands up. Slim Taylor and two ranch hands, with their six-guns unlimbered, are heading toward the spot.

**D**UKE shuts the Navion off as we roll alongside of the plane that is resting on its belly. Carson is yelling for someone to get him a doctor. One of my shots went through his right shoulder.

There's a wicked looking grin on the Duke's face as he climbs out, wiping blood off his face.

"Well, Fingers," he says, "did you land with your wheels up just to please the crowd? I'm afraid these boys aren't going to like you anyhow. They might even invite a cattle-killer to a necktie party!"

Slim adds to Carson's terror, "You sure have the right idea, Duke. There ain't a jury in the West that would hold it against us."



Carson is now whimpering like a whipped pup. "Listen, Duke, I didn't do any of the shooting. I was only doing what I was paid to do. Don't let these cowboys do anything to me. I need a doctor quick, or I'll probably bleed to death!"

Duke turns away in disgust, and watches the other occupant of the Swift being removed. It does not surprise us too much to recognize the young character who tried to sabotage our plane back in Chicago. There's a hole in his chest and he is unconscious.

"Slim," Duke asks, "when do you expect Nola and the others back?"

"Not much before dark, Duke. They were going to look at all three ranches this afternoon. They're probably over on the Lazy N right now."

Duke thinks for a minute, then starts clipping his words out fast and sharp. "Let's get these two rats into the Douglas. Have one of your boys ride in the cabin with them. Phone Cheyenne for a doctor to meet us at the airport with an ambulance. We can avoid a lot of legal complications if they don't kick the bucket here."

"Pull that Swift into the hangar out of sight. Keep your eye on Sidney Bowers every minute if he and Nola are here before Rusty and I get back from Cheyenne. Don't say a word about what has happened—except you can mention we decided to take the Douglas instead of the Navion."

"Okay, Duke. I don't quite get all of this, but we'll do what you say. Petey here would like to make that trip. Want me to call the sheriff's office to have a man at the airport?"

"That's a good idea, Slim. Wally, I guess you've probably had enough flying for one day?"

"That's a beautiful example of understatement, old man. I think I'll just find me a haystack and collapse for a few days. Who the devil ever said that a geologist leads a tame life?"

**I**N five minutes, we are airborne again. Duke turns the DC-3 over to me and goes to the cabin. He gets back to the cockpit just in time to put the wheels down for me.

The reception party is on hand as requested. A young doctor looks at our prisoners quickly.

"They'll live," he says. Then he

makes Duke sit down and get a neat bandage around his forehead.

A deputy sent out by the sheriff thinks this is one of the queerest cases he has ever seen, and is doubtful about letting us take off again. We fast talk him for a few minutes, leave Petey with him, and he says he'll trust us since we work for the Big B.

As we level off and pull the power back to cruising I says, "This Cheyenne run is getting frequent—but not boring. What did you get out of Carson on the way in?"

"He was working for Rikker and Company," Duke answers. "Says he was hired to drive Nola and her father into selling the ranch by ruining as much of it as he could. Rikker called him this morning and offered him five thousand dollars to shoot us down after we picked up our passenger at Cheyenne. Claims that he doesn't know anything about Bowers or the other details."

"We should hear from Chicago soon. Nola had a sample of Bowers' writing at home, and her father is having him investigated. We can't nail him until we're sure. He could sue Western Estates for the works if we turned him in and he happened to be clean."

"That all makes good sense, Duke. What I can't figure out is how Rikker knew our plan to bring Wally out here."

Duke looked at me and started to say something, but must have changed his mind. He just nodded his head. Then we were setting down once more at the Big B. The jeep wasn't in sight, so we had arrived before Nola's return.

Three minutes after we walked into the ranchhouse, the call from Chicago came through. Duke made a few notes, then gave Nola's father news of the busy day we had had. He put the phone in its cradle and turned to me.

"That just about winds it up, Rusty," the Duke said. "Bowers has been a confidence man for over fifteen years. Right now there's a warrant for him in New Jersey, where he called himself by a different name. Mr. Burns has private detectives tailing Rikker and his henchmen in Chicago. They'll take them in to the D. A. as soon as we get everything pinned down out here."

Slim came to the door at that moment. "The jeep is coming in, Duke," he announced.

The booming of Bowers' voice could



be heard as he and Nola came down the hall toward the den.

"Little lady," Bowers was saying, "I've offered you a handsome price for these three ranches. Why not sell to me and get the responsibility off your pretty shoulders?"

His chins dropped about a foot when he entered the room and saw the Duke and me standing there. Then he recovered and put a big grin on his fat face.

Duke wasted no time.

"You can come off of it now, Bowers," Duke said. "The party is over. If we can't tie you in with a charge of attempted murder, then we'll toss you back to the State of New Jersey."

Bowers' expression, as he absorbed the Duke's words, changed from surprise to fear—and then to rage. With his left hand he pulled Nola toward him while his right hand made a surprisingly quick draw from a shoulder holster.

But Duke was in action as Bowers made his first move. Two long steps ended as the Duke drove his fist about six inches deep into Bowers' soft midriff. The gun dropped from his hand as he sagged down, and Duke put him to sleep with a smashing right.

Nola more or less collapses into Duke's arms then, and I am about to leave on this touching scene, but Duke stops me.

"Rusty," he says, "we have one more unpleasant job to do. Please bring Vivian in here—and let me do all of the talking."

This confuses as well as worries me, but I do what the man says. Vivian goes white as the proverbial sheet when she sees the condition Bowers is in.

"Vivian," says the Duke, "it's all over. Bowers squealed on you!"

Every bit of starch goes out of the blonde, and she sinks into a chair, crying hysterically. "Oh, I wish I never had listened to that Rikker. I didn't know he

was going to try to kill people."

Nola has a dumbfounded look on her face as the Duke turns to her. "That's where Rikker got all his information about your business, Nola," the Duke says. "Vivian just couldn't resist the big money he offered her. When I called Wally from your hotel suite last night, Vivian listened in on the phone in the connecting room. I heard the click when she picked up her receiver." Then he added, "Rusty and I got jumped this afternoon, and your Navion is messed up a little bit. Your cattle-killers and water hole poisoners are in the sheriff's hands. From what Wally says, I guess your nice ranch land is going to be cluttered up by a bunch of dirty old oil wells, and you will probably stop selling real estate."

Then I do leave the room, taking Vivian with me. I am very, very low—and am telling myself what should happen to me if I ever look twice at another blonde.

THE next night we are back in the same old hotel in Chicago. The Douglas is resting in the service company's hangar. Main difference is that Denton and Dixon are now the owners of this DC-3 luxury job. Nola insisted that we take it as the bonus she promised us.

Duke is unpacking his suitcase, and I am flopped in a big chair with a tall, cold one on the table beside me.

"You know, Duke," I says, "I sure thought that I was about to lose a partner and you were going to take on a better half. That Nola is sure yours for the asking."

"Too rich for my blood, Rusty." He takes a tailored shirt out of the bag and shakes his head as he looks at it. "Speaking of blood—it's all over my favorite shirt. Never can get the stain out completely. I'll have to throw it away. Curse that Carson!"

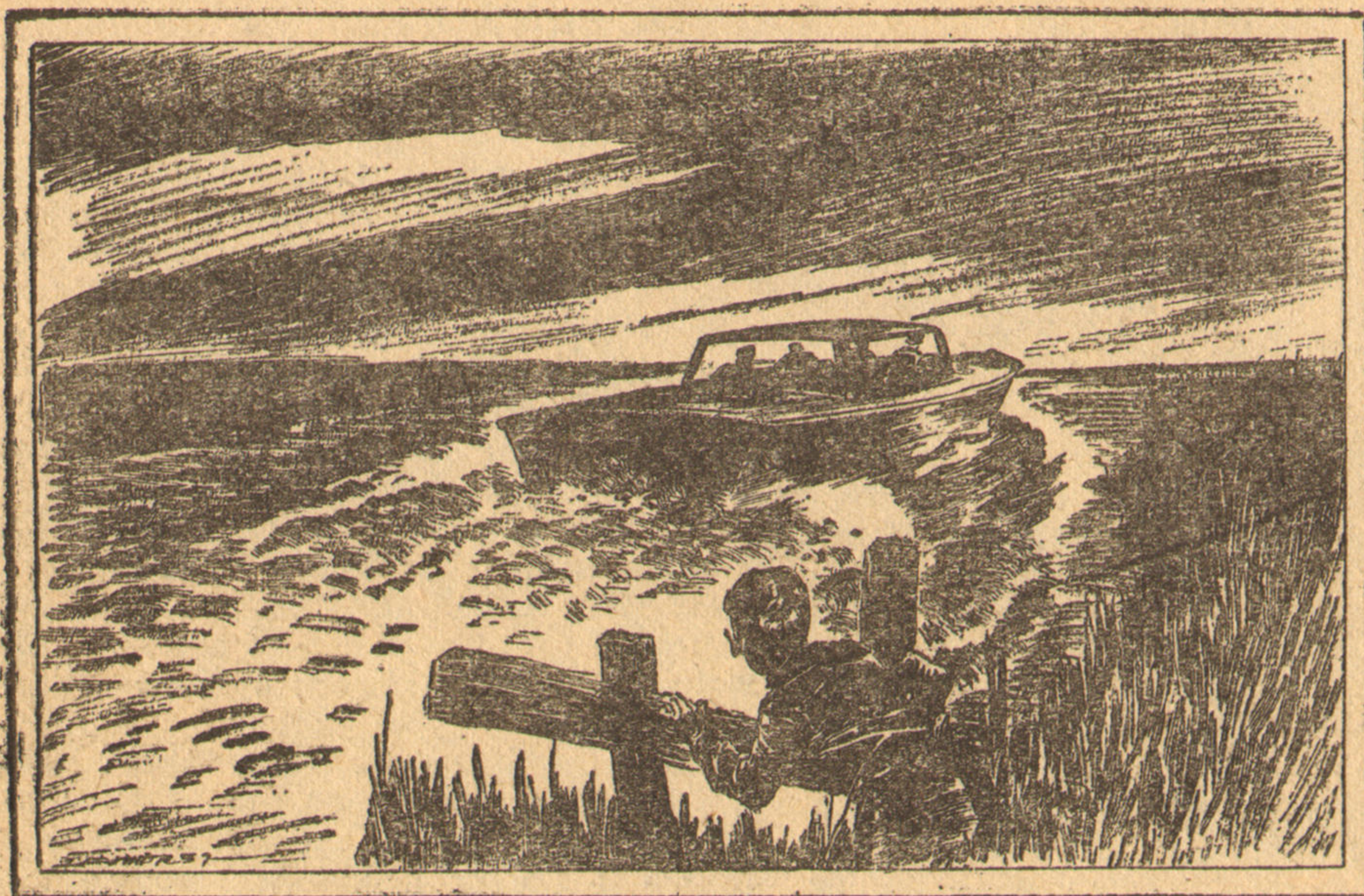
## CHUTE CONTROL POINTERS

**P**PULLING a parachute's right shroud lines causes a 'chute to drift to the left. Pulling the left-hand lines will make the 'chute swing right.

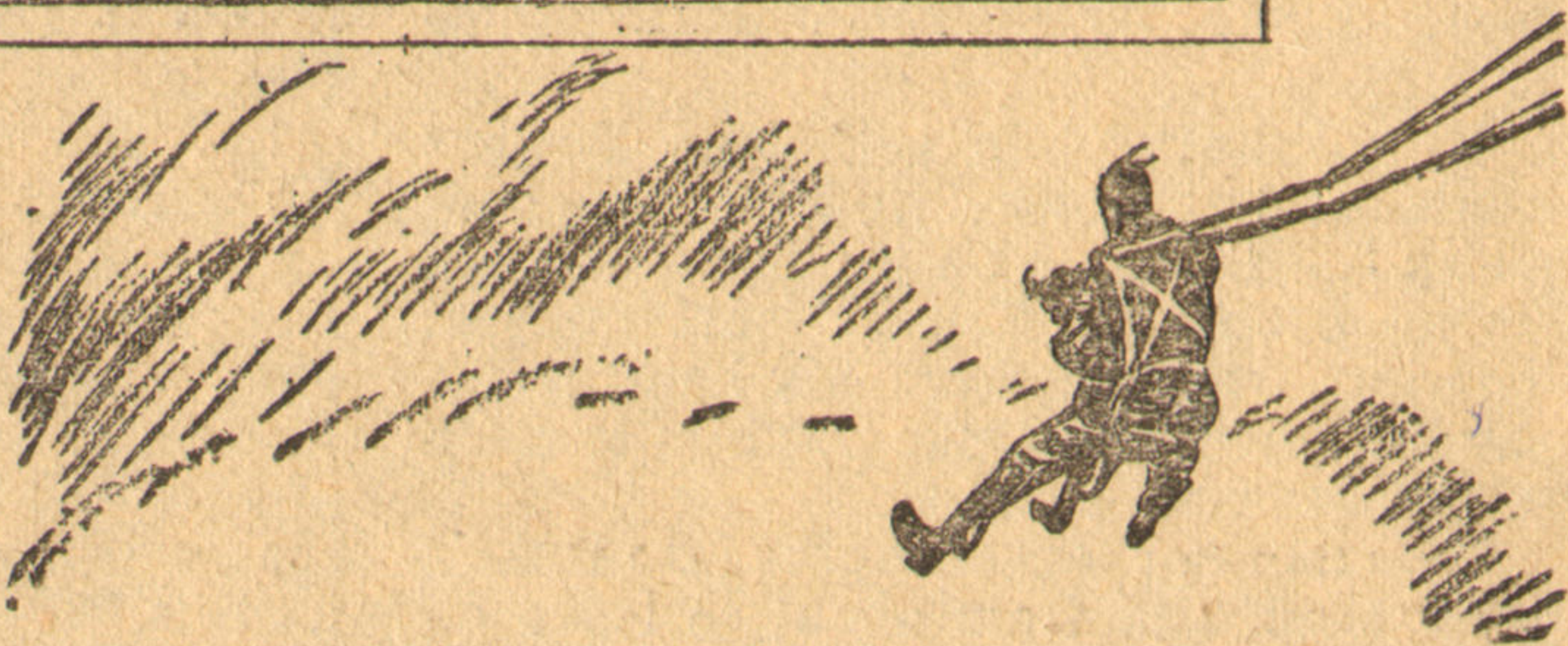
To turn to the right, the front right lines and the left rear lines are pulled. Similarly, pulling the rear right lines and the left front lines will effect a turn to the left. To turn around, the shroud lines are pulled crosswise behind.

In landing, the front lines are grabbed. This spills the air from the 'chute and collapses it.





Babe held on to Deke  
and dropped with his  
eyes closed



## CHAPTER I

### *Hot Pilot*

**D**ESPITE the metal claw which served as his right hand, and the thump of his artificial leg as he moved around the pool table, the first thing you noticed about Babe Maxon was his face.

Blond, crew cut hair, wide blue eyes and smooth cheeks made him look more like a high school junior playing hookey than a veteran of the AAF who had brought down eight Nazis and twenty-two Japanese. Much of the time he had that innocent look which had caused his real name to be forgotten. But when

he was crossed, the baby-face look disappeared. His eyes became hard as early spring ice and a cynical smile twisted the corners of his mouth.

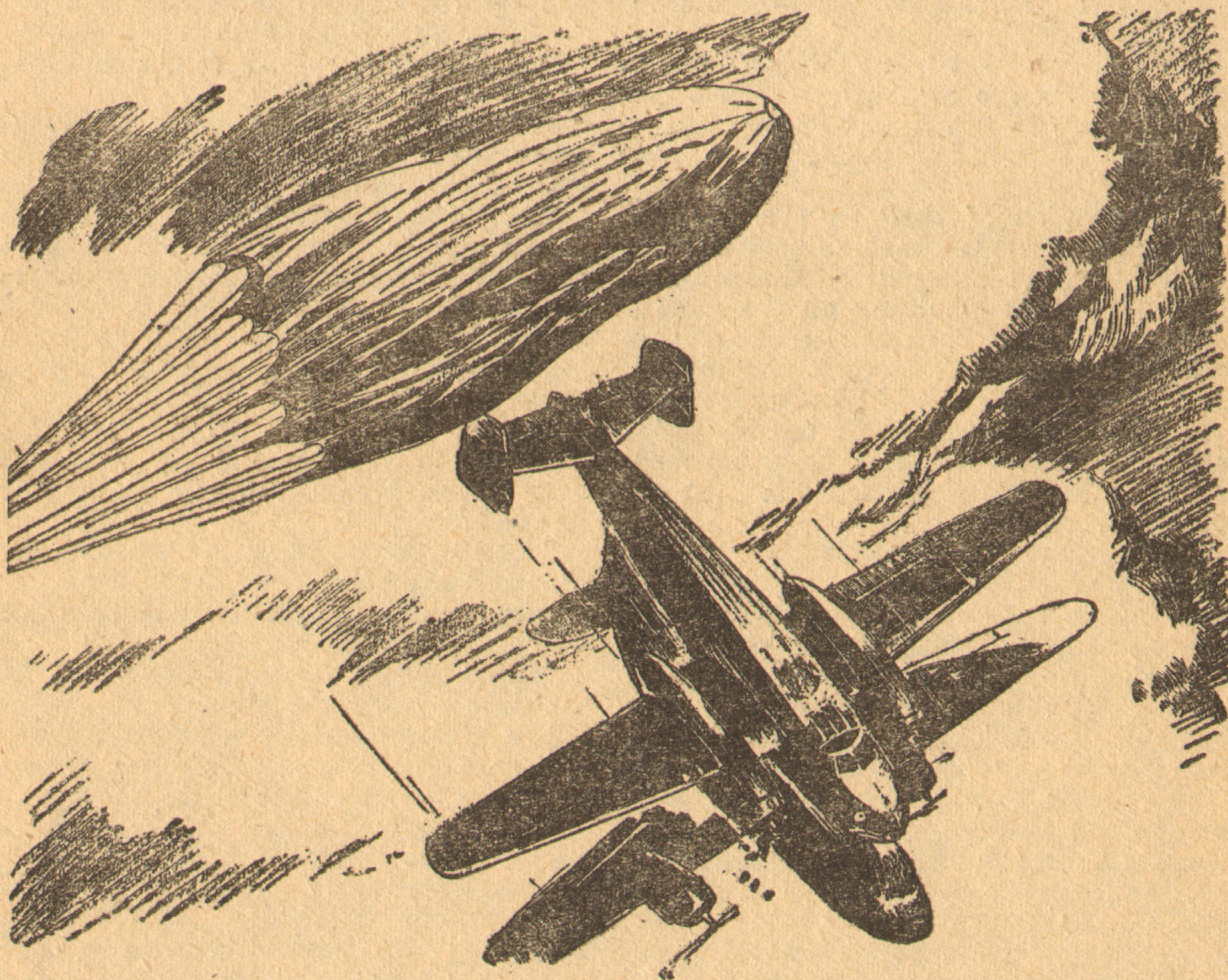
A psychiatrist, studying him, would undoubtedly file Babe Maxon as a very frustrated young man who carried scars deeper rooted than those caused by the leg and arm he had left to rot in a Pacific island jungle.

Stooping a bit awkwardly, Babe Maxon lined up the four ball with the side pocket, as he played his solo game in the Elite Cafe.

# UNDERGROUND



*In the War, Babe bagged thirty planes and gave an arm and leg, and now he'll risk his neck—to make it thirty-one!*



"A coke you don't make it, Babe," Slim Jordan said from behind the quick lunch counter, where he was building a barbecued sandwich for a stranger who had come in a few minutes before and taken a seat in one of the battered oak chairs ranged along the wall.

"I got it," Maxon said.

He had the width of half a hair to get the four ball past the fourteen ball. He aimed carefully, and then drove his cue ball toward the four. It angled up the table, kissed the four ball gently, and

sent it cleanly into the side pocket.

"That's another coke you owe me," he smiled. "Want to make it double or nothing on the five?"

SLIM glanced at the position of the five ball and shook his head with a smile. He delivered the sandwich and a bottle of 7 Up to the stranger. When he stopped by with a coke for Maxon, he nudged him, and nodded toward the man who was working on the sandwich.

"I think he's with the gang that's

# SKYWAY

a complete novelet

By F. E. RECHNITZER



bought the airfield," he muttered. "Why don't you hit him up for a job, Babe?"

"Rats!" Maxon grumbled, and placed the bottle carefully on the rail. "I'm through begging for a job."

"But you want a job where you'll be around planes, don't you?"

"I did. But jobs like that don't want a man with one arm an' one leg—except maybe to run a soft drink concession or sell picture postcards to the tourists."

Maxon glanced through the window at the hot Florida sunshine bathing the main street of Dalesport. "Kinda looks like I'm gonna be living on the dough the government is handing out every month to pay for this gam and flipper that Jap shot off me. If I hadn't been so busy trying to protect my buddy, Tony Carter, the Nip wouldn't have been so lucky. What burns me most is that he got Tony anyway."

Slim shook his head as he stepped back to give Maxon room to make the five ball, which was sitting directly in front of the pocket at the far corner of the table. Confident of the setup, Maxon took quick aim and shot. The cue ball smacked the five ball and sent it banging into the pocket. The smile on his face quickly faded when the cue ball struck the cushion, caromed off across the table and finally came to rest directly behind the eight ball. And to make matters worse the ball forestalled any chance of a shot at the six ball.

"I'll take double or nothing on that one," Slim grinned after he had sighted on the balls. Then he walked back to the counter.

Neither of them noticed the stranger had left his chair until he stood beside the table.

"Kinda looks like you're behind the eight ball, doesn't it?" the stranger said in a low voice that had a trace of gravel in it.

"Nothing new," Maxon scowled. He tapped his right leg with the shiny substitute for a hand. "Been behind the eight ball ever since I got these. Getting used to it now, Mister. You aren't looking for a sucker bet too, are you?"

The stranger shook his head. "I'm looking for a bird named Maxon," he said as he watched Slim put another envelope of coffee into the glass bowl of the percolator. "Got any idea where I can find him?"

"What do you want him for?" Maxon asked suspiciously. He gave the man a quick glance of appraisal. "If you're trying to sell him some course, I don't think he'd be interested."

"You know him?" the stranger asked casually, and when Maxon nodded, "I gotta proposition that might interest him."

"Flower arranging, rhumba or chicken sexing?"

"Chicken sexing? What's that?"

"About the only course he hasn't been offered under the G.I. Bill," Maxon scowled. "Why a man should want to waste his time and the taxpayers' money learning how to tell whether a baby chick is going to grow into a papa or momma, I don't know."

The stranger smiled wryly. "This ain't nothin' like that, Buddy. Got any idea where I can meet up with this Maxon?"

"All you've got to do is look straight ahead, Mister."

"Say, that's sure a coincidence, ain't it?"

"Could be. Then maybe again it couldn't. What's the gimmick?"

The stranger shrugged. "The boss'll give you the angles. He's got rooms down the street at the Palm Shores. If we hurry, we can see him before he goes down to the flyin' field."

Maxon struggled against the excitement welling within him. He lifted the bottle of coke, gulped nervously, and then brushed the back of his hand across his mouth. "Is your boss the fellow who bought the field down by the creek?"

The stranger grinned and nodded. "He's gonna fly cargo north. Fruit, vegetables and stuff like that. Interested?"

"Maybe," Maxon said as he walked over and set the empty bottle on the counter in front of Slim. "Here I go again, Slim. Maybe this time I'll be offered a job crating carrots."

Slim shook his head sadly. "I think you're on the wrong track, Kid. Instead of hoppin' around lookin' for somebody to give you a job, you oughta go in business for yourself."

Maxon scowled. "Name one. I went into the Air Corps the minute I got out of high school. All I know is how to fly." He glanced at his metal claw. "They tell me I can learn to do anything with this that I could before—that is, any-



thing but fly. All I'm asking for is a chance to prove I can still fly a ship." He turned to the stranger. "Okay, Mister. Let's take off an' see what your boss has on his mind."

"Good luck, Babe," Slim called when they reached the door. "I've got my fingers crossed so hard for you they're achin' already."

When they arrived at the seventh floor of the Palm Shores, the stranger asked Maxon to wait in the small ante-room and disappeared through a door.

A dark complexioned, ferret-eyed man looked up from a racing form spread on the desk at which he was sitting, when the stranger entered.

"How'd you make out, Rocky?" he asked.

"Swell, Boss," Rocky grinned. "Youda laughed to see how I played it. He never caught onto that I didn't know who he was all the time. Sometimes I think I oughta be in the movies."

"Yeah," the man behind the desk sneered, "as a stand-in for a gorilla. Send him in an' then fade."

He took a framed photograph of a young flying officer from a desk drawer, dusted it carefully and placed it on the desk so it was partly visible from the comfortable chair in front of the desk. Then he sat back and waited for Maxon to enter.

**W**HEN Babe Maxon walked in he jumped up and with a wide grin of welcome reached his left hand across the desk.

"I've been waiting a long time to meet you again, Babe. Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

Puzzling over the greeting, Maxon sat down. "How come you're so glad to see me, Mister. We've never met before, have we?"

The man offered a pack of cigarettes and then presented a flaming lighter. "I've known you ever since you got on that train and started for Texas to become a cadet. Remember the ham sandwich you tried to eat before you discovered it was a piece of blotting paper covered with mustard?"

Maxon grinned at the recollection. "Tony did that. That's how we got acquainted."

"And it was through Tony that I got to know you, Babe." The man's eyes softened as they traveled to the pic-

ture. "He was sure a grand little kid."

Amazement crossed Maxon's face as he noticed the photograph for the first time. "Where in the jumpin' jeepers did you get that?" He picked up the photograph and stared at it intently. Then his lips moved as he read, *To Dan, the best brother a guy ever had. Tony.*

Maxon smiled as he placed the picture back on the desk. "So you're Dan. Tony thought a lot of you."

"He thought a lot of you, too, Babe," the man said quietly. "You were practically a member of the Carter family. Tony used to write about how you two were making plans to go into aviation when you got back."

"Used to beat our gums a lot on that subject," Maxon said. "But only one of us made it."

Carter nodded. "Sure was a shame that Tony had to get it. His enthusiasm finally sold me on going into the business. So a couple of months ago I dropped around at one of these army surplus depots and before I knew it I'd picked up three DC-4s, a beat up B-25, and a couple of BT-14s. Then when I'd decided to go in for cargo carrying, I scouted around for a field and finally bought the one outside of town here. I've rented space on a field up north."

Maxon nodded slowly. "That's just the sort of setup Tony and I had planned. No passengers. Just air express. Sure wish Tony was here to go in with you on the deal."

"That's what I want to see you about, Maxon," Carter said with a quick glance at the photograph. "Even if he is dead, I want Tony to be a part of this. I want a name for the field that will sort of—well sort of tie Tony in with the air line I'm starting."

"That's easy," Maxon smiled. "Why don't you name the field and the new air line for Tony?"

Carter shook his head. "I thought of that. But then I got an even better idea. How about calling it Maxton Field? A combination of your name and Tony's? Maxton Air Express. That's got class."

"It's okay with me," Babe said with a forced smile. He pushed himself out of the chair. "I know you're busy, so I won't take any more of your time. I'll be seeing you around town I suppose."

"What's the rush?" Carter pushed Maxon back into the chair. "That name's only part of it. I need the help of a man



who savvys this flying racket. How'd you like to complete the tie up by managing the field, Babe? You'll be sort of carrying on for Tony."

"Jumpin' jeepers!" Babe gasped. "You really mean that?"

Carter rubbed his palms together and grinned. "I'll start you at five grand a year. Business picks up, you'll get more. All you got to do is nod your head and I'll have my lawyer draw up a contract. Got any questions or suggestions?"

It took Maxon a moment or two before he could either nod or shake his head. "Any chance of my doing a little flying?" he finally asked. "I don't mean dead heading to New York either."

Carter nodded. "I know what you mean. You've got it in your blood, haven't you? How would one of those BT-14s do for a starter? Afterwards, maybe you can fool around with the B-25 I picked up for nickels. Only you've got to be careful there isn't a CAB inspector around." Carter hesitated. "I've heard how you used to be a hot pilot, Babe. You wouldn't do anything crazy enough to bring the law snooping around, would you?"

"Don't worry," Maxon smiled. "I'll take it plenty easy. All I want is a chance to prove I can still fly well enough to rate a ticket. Gosh, Mr. Carter, I don't know how to thank you for giving me a break."

"It's Dan to you, Babe," Carter smiled. "Say, do you realize that with yours and Tony's name hooked up, we've got a swell publicity angle? Papers will eat it up. Should be a million bucks worth of free advertising in it."

"It's okay by me," Maxon shrugged. "Only don't make it too mushy. An' lay off that hero stuff."

Carter nodded understandingly. "I'll let the reporters talk to you, Babe. Then on the day we commence operations, we'll have a little blowout. Maybe get one of these cracker politicians to make a speech."

"You've already got ships flying out of the field, haven't you?" Maxon asked.

"Sure. I'm playing safe and making the pilots learn the route ahead of time. They've been flying empty."

"Good idea," Maxon said thoughtfully. "Build up a reputation for putting cargo through on schedule, you'll be set."

"You mean we'll be all set," Carter said.

"Okay," Maxon nodded. "Got any idea when we'll be ready?"

"Around the first of the week," Carter said. "How about coming down to the field with me now. I want you to meet the pilots and the ground crew. Then, soon's you've had the men arrange your office the way you want it, I suppose you'll want to check the logbooks and make recommendations. You'll be boss from now on—of operations," Carter added hastily. "I'll handle the business end."

## CHAPTER II

### *In the Air*

**F**OR the first few days, Maxon was too busy to do more than walk past the BT-14 he had chosen as the one in which he would soon start flying again. He went over the ship and engine logs, ordered necessary checks where he thought them needed, and supervised the sprucing up of the field and buildings.

Although occupied through every hour of the day and sometimes well into the night, he found time to brood over a strange aloofness which had crept in between himself and the men on the field. He had tried to figure out the reason, but as each day passed, he sensed that the feeling was increasing. He had the impression that they considered him an outsider and only followed his orders because Dan Carter had told them to do so.

"It's like being back at Pre-flight," he said one evening while he watched Slim build a double-decker barbecue sandwich. "Maybe they don't rack me back, but they sure give me the business every chance they get."

Slim placed the sandwich and a cup of coffee before Maxon. "Maybe they got the idea the fellow who gives them orders should be a flier himself."

"In other words they think I'm a has-been."

"Didn't you tell me there was a ship on the field you could fly?" Slim said, pushing the sugar within Maxon's reach.

Maxon wiped a smear of thick brown gravy from his chin. "There sure is.



Just had it painted and cleaned up. Sharp looking crate now."

"Fly it yet?"

"Haven't had time."

"Take time. Maybe when they see you're still a pilot, they'll pull a switch. By the way, Babe. When are you starting to haul stuff north?"

"Day after tomorrow." Maxon chuckled. "I'm thinking of an item we're scheduled to carry on our so-called inaugural flight."

"You mean them coffins?" Slim asked.

Maxon lowered his cup to the chipped saucer. "How'd you know about that? When the boss told me that new casket factory near the field had asked him to take three sample coffins to their show rooms in New York, I advised him to keep mum on the deal. Some of the other shippers might start worrying about being jinxed."

"Minnie told me last night when I went callin' on her," Slim said. "When they converted the little furniture factory into a coffin works, she got a job as secretary, bookkeeper an' window washer. She told me somebody over at your place put in an order for three coffins. Gave the same spiel as you about jinxes." A worried look came to Slim's face. "You won't say anything that'll get Minnie in wrong, will you, Babe?"

Maxon shook his head. "She say how long this coffin deal's been on?"

"Minnie said they was ordered last week. Why?"

"Nothing, Slim," Maxon scowled. "Carrots, celery an' coffins! That's a hot cargo, isn't it?"

Slim shrugged. "What do you care what they carry long's you get a nice fat check every Saturday?"

"I don't," Maxon said. "I'm just wondering why the boss didn't level with me on those coffins. Tony used to brag about how his brother was a square-shooter."

"He got you a nice spread in the papers, didn't he?" Slim broke in. "Had the picture of you an' your pal Tony on the front page."

"I'd rather be trusted," Maxon growled.

Slim suddenly leaned forward and pointed to a piece of pie crust on Maxon's plate. "Make out like you're checking your watch with the clock over the cash register. Then sort of glance outside."

Maxon did as directed. He was just in

time to see two faces disappear at the window.

"Wasn't they a couple of your pilots?" Slim inquired.

Maxon nodded. "Yeah. Bull Shaner and a friend. Guess they were coming in—until they spotted me."

"Kinda remind me of a couple of toughs me an' Minnie saw in a gangster picture the other night." Slim frowned. "How come you picked six-minute eggs like them?"

"The boss had already picked them," Maxon said. "But don't judge them by their looks. They've been around planes plenty." Maxon got off the stool. "As for me, if you hear a crash tomorrow afternoon, you'll know there was something I'd forgotten about flying. Be seeing you, Slim."

**B**ABE MAXON, in the BT-14, waited on the line while one of the DCs landed. He gave a nod of approval as the transport's wheels caressed the landing strip without a bounce and gradually braked to a stop. While he watched the twin-engined ship taxi toward the hangar, he reached up to make certain the canopy over his head was securely latched.

When the DCs motors had gurgled into silence, he saw a tall, stoop-shoulder figure appear at the hatch and leap to the ground. Maxon felt a twinge of envy as Bull Shaner and Tippy Davis rushed up to the new arrival and welcomed him effusively.

"Must be the fellow they want in my place," Maxon thought as he reached for the throttle. He saw Bull Shaner jerk his thumb toward the BT. They were all grinning when they glanced his way.

Then the BT commenced to quiver, as if in anticipation, when Maxon eased the throttle forward. The ship was moving past the little group that stood watching him. Suddenly, they turned and walked toward the office.

Maxon scowled over the sneering brush-off while he taxied out to the long runway. Then, after a deep breath, he hit the throttle.

He smiled with relief when he was airborne. The roar of the 450-h.p. Pratt & Whitney sent a thrill surging through his body as it lifted the basic trainer higher and higher into the air. He leveled off at two thousand feet.

At first, he contented himself with a



few medium turns to see how much he had forgotten since the day a Japanese flier had blasted him out of the sky. Then, satisfied, he went into a steep turn or two and finally into elementary eights. Flying up there, with the Glades stretching to the northwest and the shimmering blue Gulf to the southwest, was like being born again. A sense of well-being flooded over him. Suddenly, feeling that he was once again master of the air, he permitted his exhilaration to get the better of him.

He threw the plane into a chandelle and followed up with a couple of lazy eights.

After a slow roll and a snap roll, he pulled up and headed back toward the field.

It was then, for the first time, that he got a good look at the arched roof of Number 1 Hangar.

"Maxton Field," he murmured, as he read the big block letters. "Boy, I sure wish you were in on this deal, Tony. Outside of those pilots, it's a setup just like we used to beat our gums about back in the old days. Maybe between the two of us we could straighten those guys out. And you could talk to your brother just about the way I'd like to, but can't."

AS he banked, he caught a movement in the brush bordering the narrow road that led from somewhere in the Everglades and on past the field. When he looked again, the movement had ceased. Curious, he held in the bank until he caught a flash of blue.

Quickly pushing the canopy back, he stuck his head out to see better what the furtive figure below was up to. His eyes narrowed while he watched it slipping from bush to clump of sawgrass, to tree and jutting stump. Tensed now, he saw that the person below carried what looked to be a rifle.

Certain that the man's objective was the field, and that someone's life was likely in jeopardy, Maxon hit the throttle with the intention of landing and cutting off the man if he could.

After taxiing up to the line, Maxon shucked his parachute harness and started for the road. He turned toward town, and then quickly doubled back. Crouching in the shelter of a vine-smothered sapling, he waited. For a moment he heard nothing. Then the

snap of a twig and the rustle of leaves informed him that his quarry was drawing near.

Tensed, Maxon dug his good foot into the ground, ready to leap when the mysterious figure was close enough. Just then the door to Operations opened and he saw Dan Carter appear. He heard Carter call him and was about to answer when he saw a long thin rifle barrel poke through a vine and begin to level on Carter.

He could only estimate the position of the gunner as he propelled himself forward.

He felt a body squirm under him and raised his metal right hand to strike. Then his arm relaxed as a thin voice cried out.

"Please, Mister. I wasn't doin' nothin'. I was only gonna say, 'Bang!' when I had my sights between his eyes."

"Holy jeepers!" Maxon exclaimed as he sat back and stared at the frightened face looking up at him. "You're only a kid."

HE reached for the rifle only to have the boy scramble to his knees and draw it away.

"Please, Mister. It's Granpappy's deer rifle. He'd tear the hide offen me if I let anything happen to it. Look, it ain't loaded. It ain't even got a cap on."

Maxon glanced at the old muzzle loader and saw that the boy was telling the truth.

"How come you were sighting on that fellow?" he asked him quietly, and pointed to Carter who was walking out to one of the DCs.

"Cause I hate him," the boy said. "He kicked Lena an' busted three of her ribs. Wasn't for my Granpappy bein' a yarb doctor, she'd liked to have died. But he says she'll git well again."

"Who's Lena?" Maxon asked.

"My little ole houn' dog," the boy replied. "She weren't doin' nothin' harmful, Mister. Happened last week when I was fishin' for catfish in Black Eddy up the creek apiece. This man an' a fella he called Rocky come along an' told me to git out fast. Claimed I was trespassin'. When Lena tried to show him how friendly she was, he hauled off an' kicked her clean into the water. She was hurt so bad I had to go in after her. An' while I was doin' that, they broke my best cane pole an' threw it in."



"An' you came down here with the idea of pretending that you'd shot the man who had kicked your dog?" Maxon said.

"Yes, sir," the boy answered slowly. "I was hopin' it would make me dream tonight that I'd had a real load of powder an' a ball in. It would have pleased me a heap if I coulda dreamed I'd killed him. Today was the first time I had a chancet to sneak Granpappy's rifle out of our cabin. Me an him live in the cabin in the clearin' just across the creek."

"Got any idea why they didn't want you to fish in this Black Eddy?" Maxon asked.

THE lad shrugged and shook his head. "All I know is there is strange doin's around here, Mister."

"Such as?" Maxon prodded.

"Well, for one thing, they're tryin' to run us out," the boy said. "First, they tried to make Granpappy sell the clearing. But he won't do it. They talked terrible mean to him the last time they was around. Said they'd find other ways of gettin' us out then."

"Anything else?" Maxon asked.

"There's Black Eddy," the boy said. "You got any idea how a boat can go without makin' any noise, Mister? It's real spooky the way it comes up the creek in the dead of night without makin' a sound. Granpappy says he don't understand the ways of a craft like that. Oncet in a while boats come in this far from the Gulf, but they make quite a ruckus with their engines."

"Could be electrically driven," Maxon said. "Like to get a look at it."

"I only seen it oncet. That was last night."

"Know where it's kept?"

"In Black Eddy. They built a sort of framework out of saplings stuck in the mud and covered it with vines. Never see it, if you didn't know where to look." The boy suddenly leaned close to Maxon. "An' know what, Mister? I heerd them talkin' about a coffin. Do you think they could be figurin' on killin' Grapap if he don't clear out like they want him to? I'd miss him somethin' awful. He's the only kinfolk I ever had."

Maxon glanced across the field at the three DCs and then turned to the boy. "Tell me about this coffin talk. Don't leave anything out."

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## CHAPTER III

### *Coffin Cargo*

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THE boy brushed a withered leaf from his faded blue denims. He puckered his face in deep thought a moment and then looked up at Maxon.

"Well, last night, Granpap come in after lookin' to see if the heifer an' our two shoats were all right, an' tole me he'd seen this black boat a-sneakin' down the creek. He had me right curious about it, so when I heered him snorin' I snuck out and lay down on the bridge over the creek to wait fer it. Must have bin way past midnight when it come along. Didn't make no more noise than a big 'gator swimmin' across a pool. Soon's it slid under the bridge I lit out along the trail toward Black Eddy where Grandpap claimed they holed up with the boat. When I got there, I could hear men arguin' in the dark about puttin' somebody named Frank in a coffin. One of them didn't appear to want no truck with coffins. Then I heerd the one who kicked Lena say he'd use the coffin or else. Then they struck off through the dark toward the flyin' field and I snuck home again. I bin fretting for fear somethin's about to happen to my Granpappy." The boy grew silent. His eyes narrowed as he studied Maxon. "Say, Mister, how come you was waitin' fer me?"

"I saw you sneaking along and thought you might be up to some mischief."

"You saw me from where?" the boy demanded. His face suddenly went white. His jaw dropped slack. "Was you in that blue an' yellow airplane?"

"Sure was," Maxon smiled.

The boy's eyes filled. His lower lip quivered. "Then yo're one of them," he gasped. "You sat there an' pretended like you was a friend an' let me tell about Granpap an' me findin' out about the black boat. An' while I was blabbin', I was thinkin' as to how you had honest eyes and how I'd like you for a friend."

"I'd like you for a friend too, son," Maxon said, and reached over and laid his hand on the boy's knee. "I've got an idea I'm going to need a lot of friends shortly."



"But—but ain't you one of them?" the boy asked, jerking his head toward the field.

Maxon shrugged. "I thought I was," he said quietly. "But everything seems to point to my being on the outside. Looks as if my managing the field is a bit of camouflage. What's your name, son?"

"Deke—Deke Conklin," the boy said as the color came back to his face. "An' I'll bet yo're Mr. Maxon. Granpap read the stories about you in the papers to me. I'd sure like to see yore medals some time. Like to see how that works too," he said, nodding toward the curved metal clamps fastened to Maxon's right arm. That is, if you don't mind. Know what else, Mister Maxon? I'd sure like to git close to one of them airplanes once."

"How about coming with me now, Deke?" Maxon said. "I'd like you to point out the man who kicked your dog. I've got something buzzing in my mind, but I want to make sure."

The boy's eyes opened in amazement a short time later as they walked around a DC-3. "Why it's a heap bigger'n our cabin."

"Let's have a look inside, Deke." Maxon indicated the portable ramp leading to the open hatch.

As Deke galloped up the steps and turned to wait for Maxon, a hand reached out and clamped roughly on his shoulder.

"Scram, kid, an' fast!" the voice of Dan Carter growled. He gave the lad a push. Maxon steadied himself just in time to prevent their both falling down.

"Take it easy," Dan," Maxon said quietly. "He's with me."

"Him an' that wacky grandfather of his aren't welcome around here," Carter glared.

Deke plucked at Maxon's sleeve and whispered. "That's him."

**M**AXON took the boy's hand and calmly led him through the hatch. He paused there and confronted Carter. His smile belied the steely glint in his eyes.

"The kid tells me somebody kicked his hound dog last week," he said. "Claimed it was somebody from the field. Now he says it was you."

"Sure I kicked it," Carter said. "They were trespassing."

Maxon shook his head slowly. "I didn't think you were the kind who would kick a dog, Dan. Weren't doing any harm, were they?"

Carter hesitated. "Well, I don't like strangers wandering around the field. Might get hurt. It's like I told you. I'm just starting in this business and I don't want any black marks against me in the CAB books."

"Still leaves me a bit disappointed in you, Dan," Maxon said soberly. "I didn't think Tony's brother would haul off and kick a hound."

Carter scowled at the boy and then looked at Maxon. "Didn't Tony tell you about how I got bit by a mad dog when I was a kid? When I was about his size," he said, nodding to the boy who stood clinging to Maxon's left hand. "I've been scared of dogs ever since." He reached into his pocket and took out a roll of bills. Peeling off a tenspot, he held it out to Deke. "Here, kid. I'm sorry I was rough with your dog."

Deke shook his head. "Lena's going to be all right again, thanks to Granpap. An' if she'd died, ten dollars wouldn't make it up to me. But I know Granpap would be pleased if you would leave us alone."

Carter shoved the bill back into his pocket. "Go ahead and show him around, Babe. Maybe he'll be more interested in the B-25. Start the engines for him if you like. How'd you like to crawl around a plane like the one Jimmy Doolittle used to give Tokyo it's first taste of bombs?" he asked turning to Deke. "They'll be loading this one soon and you might be in the way."

"How come?" Maxon asked. "We're not starting operations until tomorrow."

"Got a rush delivery while you were up, Babe," Carter said. "Figured it would make a swell publicity tieup if we had a cargo landing at our northern terminal the day we opened down here." He glanced at his wristwatch. "Got a lot to attend to. See you later, Babe." Then, trotting down the ramp, he hurried toward the office.

"He tried to be nice," Deke murmured. "But his eyes told you he was only pretending."

"You can say that again, Deke," Maxon commented while he watched Carter disappear into the office. "He sure mis-cued an' put himself behind the eight-



ball when he kicked Lena."

"Lookit the sun!" Deke suddenly exclaimed. "I got to git home with Granpap's gun before he gits there. But kin I come back some other time an' see a plane like the one that bombed the Japs?"

"Sure, Deke," Maxon smiled. "We're pals now. You can have anything you want."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew me better," Deke grinned. "Granpap claims I got a queer streak that always has me hankerin' for somethin' I can't have."

"Hankering for anything special, Deke?"

"Sure am. A ride in a airplane! Don't know anything that would pleasure me more than to circle over our cabin like a bird an' wave down to Granpap."

"Okay, Deke," Maxon said. "I promise you the next time I fly, I'll take you along. After we're through, I'll bet your Granpap'll have to reshingle the cabin. In the meantime, will you do something for me, Deke?"

"Anything," Deke said casting an anxious eye at the lowering sun.

"Keep an eye open for that black boat, will you?"

"Sure will. I'll coax Granpap to let me help with the trot lines. He fishes for market, you know. For the next two nights there'll always be one of us along the creek."

"Good. Then let me know if you see anything. If you can't find me at the field, go into town and ask for Slim at the Elite Cafe. If you've got any important information, tell him, and he'll see that I get it as soon as possible."

Bright-eyed, the boy nodded.

**T**HE next evening, Babe Maxon slipped wearily onto a stool in the Elite. "Give me the usual, Slim, an' heavy on the sauce."

Only when he repeated the order more loudly did Slim look up from the evening paper in which he had been engrossed when Maxon entered.

"Oh, it's you, Babe," he said. "What'll you have?"

"I told you to give me the usual, an' don't be stingy with the gravy." Maxon frowned. "What were you doing, trying to figure out what was funny about the funnies?"

"I was readin' the travel ads," Slim

said as he reached for the bread box.

"Travel ads!" Maxon exclaimed. "You and Minnie planning your honeymoon already? Come on, Slim, haven't you forgotten that bad habit you learned during meat rationing? I'm hungry."

"Sure had a busy day, didn't you," Slim said, adding another slice of meat and reaching for the gravy ladle.

"Never had a minute to myself all day. Were you there?"

"Yeah. But I gave up before the third windbag got warmed up. The way he dished it out, you'd a thought that senator expected to be reelected on the strength of that three-ship airline of yours. Everybody was patting everybody on the back and then trying to steal all the credit for themselves. How'd you stand it, Babe?"

"What else could I do?" Maxon shrugged. "Don't forget, I was supposed to be the window dressing. Matter of fact I was too busy thinking to hear much of what was being said."

"If you was worryin' about them coffins, I'm sorry I said anything," Slim said as he put the sandwich down on the counter." He paused and studied Maxon's tired eyes. "Maybe I hadn't oughta tell you, but them three coffins wasn't the first ones that went north in your ships. Minnie told me last night how she found out two other caskets had been delivered to your field."

Maxon's eyes popped wide. "That means our pilots weren't flying light when they were supposed to be acquainting themselves with the route. First thing I know I'll be dreaming about coffins. It wasn't those things that were eating me so much, Slim. It's this guy Carter. I'm positive he isn't Tony's brother."

"How come?"

"He doesn't like dogs. He kicked one the other day. Tony used to tell me how practically all the fights his brother got into were on account of somebody abusing a dog. He was nuts about them. According to Tony, he was always bringing home strays."

"Maybe he changed when he grew up," Slim argued.

"But I know he didn't," Maxon said deliberately. "I remember four or five letters Tony got from Dan telling about some new dog he'd picked up. Had a regular kennel in the backyard. When I called this guy for kicking the kid's



dog, he claimed he was afraid of them because he had been bitten by a mad dog when he was a kid. Makes me positive he isn't Tony's brother and still more positive that I've been sucked in on a phony deal of some sort."

"Because he hates dogs isn't enough to go on," Slim said while he gave Maxon a refill on the coffee. "It would be his word against yours about his claimin' to be Tony's brother. You gotta get a different angle."

"Which I have," Maxon said quietly. "All day I've been wondering why a New York outfit should make coffins here in Florida and ship them back north."

"Cheaper labor maybe."

"Cheap labor, my aunt's elbow! The cost of transporting them to New York by air would hike the price beyond anything they'd gain by paying low wages down here."

Slim raised his hands in a gesture of exasperation. "Look, Babe," he said softly. "Don't go gettin' mad at me now. I've been wantin' to get this off my chest for a long time. So here goes. Me an' Minnie have been talkin' about you an' your troubles. Sure, we both agree you got a bad break in the war, but so did lots of other men. But every day I read in the papers about how some fellow who ain't got as much of his original self left as you have makin' a success of things, got himself a good little business, a wife, kids and a home. An' know how he did it, Babe?"

"How?" Maxon frowned.

"By stowin' away his big gripe and makin' up his mind nothin' can stop him." Slim poured himself a cup of coffee, sipped it black, and then leaned across the counter. "That field this fellow bought has been up for sale for the last six months. But did you try to promote it? No! You'd got yourself in a frame of mind where you thought nobody would give you a break on account of that arm an' leg. Then this fellow buys up the field, gives you the chance you been lookin' for, and right away you get a bigger chip than ever on your shoulder. Instead of sittin' here moanin' about how you think there's an extra ace in the deck, why don't you do something about diggin' it out? If you need help, you know you can count on me, Babe."

Maxon stirred his coffee silently and then took a few gulps.

"You mad at me?" Slim asked anxiously.

Maxon set the cup down. He shook his head slowly and then smiled. "That was like a dose of sulphur and molasses, Slim. Kinda hard to swallow, but maybe it'll do some good. Bumped into a kid by the name of Deke Conklin yesterday, an' he gave me a lead that might tie this whole deal up."

Slim snapped his fingers. "Smokin' catfish. I clean forgot about the lottery ticket he slipped me today. Claimed he couldn't get near you and asked me to give it to you first chance I got."

"Lottery ticket?" Maxon demanded as Slim went to the cash register.

"Yeah, that's a lottery ticket ain't it?" Slim said handing Maxon a colorfully engraved piece of crisp paper. "Do them figures mean you get twenty-five thousand bucks if you win?"

Maxon looked up from the paper in his hand. "You dope, this is a twenty-five thousand franc note."

"A real frogskin!" Slim declared. "How much is it worth in real money?"

Maxon shrugged. "Haven't bothered looking at the exchange rate for a long time. Maybe fifty or sixty bucks . . . Maybe less if you were buying dollars with it on the black market. Wonder where the kid got hold of this. Hey, look here. He's written something in this empty space. Listen to this."

Slowly Maxon deciphered the boyish scrawl and read aloud to Slim.

Granpap saw the black boat las nite. I snuck up to Black Eddy this mornin an found this.  
Deke.

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## CHAPTER IV

### *Spin the Props*

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WHEN Maxon had related the story Deke had told him the day before, Slim stood staring at the 25,000 franc note and scratching his head.

"Maybe this is a souvenir somebody dropped," he said. "Far's I can see, there ain't no connection between this franc bill and the other things that's been goin' on. Can you see any, Babe?"

Maxon started to shake his head. Then his eyes suddenly bugged. "Slim!"



he cried. "I think I've got it. The kid said something about their arguing about putting somebody named Frank in a coffin. This is what they meant, Slim." Maxon tapped the franc note with his forefinger.

Slim shrugged. "Why wouldn't they just use an envelope for a bill like that?"

"Maybe they weren't talking about just one bill," Maxon exclaimed. "Let's see that newspaper you were reading . . . Sure. Lookit here, Slim. It's full of ads about trips to Europe. Now take a look at these ads about trips to France."

"I don't follow it," Slim scowled. "Maybe you can spend these fancy looking francs over there, but you couldn't buy a hotdog with one over here. Should a guy come in an' offer me this for a bottle of coke, I'd heave him out on his ear. You got an answer for that one I suppose."

"Not right off," Maxon said, taking a dollar bill out of his pocket. "Give me change for that, Slim. I want to call Miami."

"The F.B.I.?" Slim asked as he made the change.

Maxon picked up the money with his left hand. "I'm not calling any F.B.I., Slim. If I'm anywhere near right, I'm going to work this deal out on my own. Doing it might help me get rid of the chip I've been carrying on my shoulder."

Slim stood fingering the franc note, while the telephone in the pay booth gonged as Maxon dropped the coins in. When Maxon returned, he smoothed the note out and pushed it across the counter.

"You look like you hit pay dirt, Babe," he said when he saw a light in Maxon's eyes that had not been there before.

"I'll say I have," Maxon scowled. "I just called a friend of mine in Miami who runs a travel agency. He told me that French francs are blocked and you can't take any out of the country."

"This one got out," Slim said, touching the franc note.

"Yeah," Maxon nodded, "and according to Pete, a lot more have too. With francs blocked, a lot of people in this country have got money tied up in France that they can't get out. Most of them are willing to take a twenty-five per cent cut to get their hands on the money—businessmen, writers and people like that."

"How can they do that?" Slim asked.

"Well," Maxon said. "The way Pete explained it, say a man has got some money held up in France. He contacts someone who is going over and makes a proposition to give the party a letter to his agents in France, ordering them to pay the bearer one hundred dollars worth of francs. In return, he takes seventy-five dollars in U.S. money on the deal. The traveler gets, say, a hundred dollars worth of francs at a twenty-five per cent discount, and the man over here gets his hands on some dough he didn't expect to see for a long time. Get the idea?"

"Sort of," Slim frowned. "But I don't see how that ties up with this franc note. French francs over here aren't going to be much help to a man who has got money owing to him over there."

"I asked about that," Maxon said. "Pete told me that somebody is smuggling francs over here and selling them to travel agencies all over the country at a fifty per cent discount. He thinks it's a gang of Americans who have been running a black market over there and who are now trying to get their money out. He couldn't figure anything else. He's heard rumors that these francs are coming by way of Cuba. Does the picture begin to focus?"

"You think these francs are shipped to Cuba," Slim said earnestly. "Then a fishing schooner contacts this black boat that doesn't make any noise, and it brings them up the creek to the flying field."

"And from there they're flown up to the gang's headquarters in New York," Maxon broke in. "And in coffins. I haven't seen the bill of lading, but I'll bet there's supposed to be a corpse in each of those coffins."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Slim asked.

Maxon held up the curved metal tongs he had come to regard as his right hand. He smiled as the light glinted on the gleaming surface.

"You know, Slim," he said with a slow smile. "Ever since they first fastened this thing on me, I've been wondering what it would do to somebody's mug. Tonight, I've got a real hankering to try it out."

"Got anybody in particular in mind?" Slim inquired.

"Yeah," Maxon said. "The man who sucked me into this so I could front for



his underhand business. I'd like to take an extra poke at him for passing himself off as the brother of the best little fellow that ever lived. Want to come along and watch me resign from my job?"

**M**AXON doused his car's lights when he came to the slight grade leading to the entrance of the field. Then he cut the switch and coasted through the gate. Slim nodded in approval when they had braked to a stop.

"Sure did a neat job fixin' these cars up for you fellows, didn't they?"

"Handle a car as well as I ever could," Maxon said. He suddenly tensed. "Hear that? Somebody's warming up the motors on a DC. There wasn't a flight scheduled when I left the office tonight."

"Got any idea where they stack these coffins?" Slim asked.

"I suspect they're in a little shed at the far end of the line," Maxon said as he got out. "Let's head down that way and have a look."

They were passing the darkened office when a figure slipped out of the shadows. "Gee, Mr. Maxon, I'm glad you come. I've been waiting for you. Did you get that funny piece of paper?"

"I sure did, Deke," Maxon said, leaning toward the boy. "What's up?"

"The boat went down the creek right after sundown," the boy said. "So I snuck up to Black Eddy an' waited for it to come back. Took a powerful long time, but they finally came back to Black Eddy an' unloaded a lot of big bags. There was this man who kicked Lena, an' another man he kept calling Rocky. Some men came and loaded the bags on a little truck and carted them off toward the flyin' field. I followed them and saw them head toward that little shed down there."

"Now maybe I'll get an answer to all this," Maxon said. "Come on."

When they reached the shack, which had once served as a storeroom, they found that boards had been securely nailed over the two windows. Slim touched Maxon's shoulder.

"They're in there," he said. "Hear 'em? I'll scout around an' see if I can find a crack or a knothole."

Slim returned in a moment and gasped, "Smokin' catfish! They got bales of them francs in there. Come on." He led Maxon and Deke to a spot where a warped board permitted a sliver of light

to escape. "Take a peek, Babe."

Maxon stooped and put his eye to the crack. Inside the lighted shed he saw Carter and Rocky busily taking bundles of franc notes out of the waterproof canvas bags and stacking them in an open coffin. They not only filled the coffin, but they packed the bundles of notes in every corner of the pine box in which the coffin rested.

"So this is the first of the real payloads, eh, Boss?" Rocky grinned. "Them others was just to sugar the deal."

"We didn't do bad with that other stuff," Carter said as he opened another sack and began piling bundles of francs on the floor. "Got more than I expected back out of our little black market investment over there. A few more loads of this, and I'll clear over three hundred grand above the downpayment I had to make on this field and those crummy planes. If things go right, I might even hang onto this place and extend our operations. Now that we've got an organization, there'll be plenty of other stuff we can smuggle in. Come on and help me screw the lid on this box."

Maxon watched the two men close one box and then open another. He pressed his ear close to the side of the flimsy shack and held his breath to hear what was being said inside.

"Better not stretch our luck, Boss," Rocky cautioned, "Supposin' some dope finds out these are phony before he leaves for France?"

"Don't worry, Rocky," Carter answered. "I've primed these travel agents to warn their customers that these are smuggled notes and not to peep about how or where they got them. Being's they have to smuggle them back into France, they'll keep mum, anyway until they reach French customs and get searched. There'll be plenty of squawking then. I figure we've got at least two weeks to get unloaded and into the clear before they start backtracking. I'm covering my tracks and nobody'll be able to prove we had anything to do with supplying a flock of dimwit tourists with phony francs. Wonder what's keeping Shaner. He knows he's takin' an important load north tonight."

"Wanta know something, Boss?" Rocky said, tossing Carter a bundle of the counterfeit notes. "You're a pretty good picker, but I'd like the setup better if we were rid of this guy Maxon. Some-



times I don't think you were so smart when you thought up the idea of gettin' him to front for us."

"Why do you keep harping on him?" Carter flared. "Because he thinks I'm Tony's brother, I got him eating outa my hand. An' with someone like Maxon supposed to be running the field, who'd ever get the idea of snooping around here? Havin' him around is cheap insurance!"

"Yeah," Rocky growled. "But supposin' he should find out you're only Tony's cousin, and that you found out all about him an' Tony from the letters you borrowed from Tony's sister? I bet he wouldn't take it layin' down. That kid's hard inside. It sort of boils over in his eyes."

"Forget Maxon," Carter sneered. "He's so tickled to get a job around planes he won't go looking for trouble. That picture I borrowed from Elaine sort of softened him up. Anyway, how could he learn that I wasn't Tony's brother? Only by you shooting off your mouth sometime."

"Or if you made a mistake," Rocky retorted.

"Did I ever make a mistake, Rocky?" Carter demanded hotly.

"There's always a first time," Rocky grumbled. "But whenever I catch that guy lookin' at me, I get the willies. I get a feelin' like he knows everything an' is only waitin' for the chance to jump."

Carter shrugged. "We've had wise boys try jumpin' us before. We always knew how to take care of them, didn't we, Rocky? When the time comes, we'll lam out with the wad we've made an' leave them yellin' for their cut. That goes for Maxon too. Teach 'em a lesson not to get greedy for easy money. You gotta have brains to get money the easy way . . . Like us, eh, Rocky?"

"Yeah," Rocky grinned weakly. "An' one of these days I suppose I'll wake up an' find out you've given me the old double-cross. Maybe this time you'll figure my cut's gonna be too big. So you'll up and leave me holding the bag."

"Aw, you know me better'n that Rocky," Carter said.

"Yeah, that's the trouble. I know you're never satisfied unless you're slip-pin' a fast one over—even on a pal."

**S**LIM and Babe and Deke heard it all, outside.

"Listen to them," Slim whispered. "I'll bet both of them are figuring how they can best pull a double-cross on the other. Wouldn't passing phony francs be something the F.B.I. would be interested in, Babe?"

"You bet they would," Maxon straightened. "You and Deke wait here while I go down to the office and call the F.B.I. in Miami."

A stick snapped behind the spot where they knelt.

"Stand right where you are," Shaner's voice sounded out of the darkness. "Come on, you two. Get those hands up high."

At the sound of the pilot's voice, Maxon's left hand clamped over Deke's mouth. He pushed the boy to the ground and nudged him to be silent with his foot. Then, lifting his arms, he got up and turned slowly to face the shadowy figure.

"Okay," Shaner ordered. "You guys walk around to the front of the shack. Make one wrong move, and I'll shoot." When they reached the door, Shaner ordered Slim to knock. "It's me—Bull Shaner," he called when Carter replied to the knock. "I've got company. Open up."

Carter failed to mask his surprise when Bull Shaner prodded his two prisoners into the shack and closed the door behind him.

"Our little pal, the Babe, was thinking of calling the F.B.I. in Miami, Boss," Shaner said. "I figured you wouldn't like that. Would you?"

Carter moved forward and pushed his face close to Maxon's.

"I don't like guys who let their noses get too long, Babe."

"Yeah," Maxon retorted. "An' I don't like a rat who would try to palm himself off as my best friend's brother."

"What'd I tell you, Boss?" Rocky chimed in.

"Shut up, Rocky!" Carter snarled. "How'd you get wise that I wasn't Tony's brother?" he asked Maxon.

"When you kicked the kid's dog," Maxon replied steadily. "Tony's brother was nuts about dogs. What happened? Did you knock him off so you could do this?"

"He got killed in an automobile accident." He turned to Bull Shaner. "What were they doing when you found them?"

"Listening," Shaner said. "I've got a hunch they heard things, Boss."



"Did you?" Carter demanded of Maxon.

"I heard plenty," Maxon said quietly. "I know what your racket is. Want to know what I think about it?"

Carter shrugged. "Who cares what you think?"

"I'll tell you anyway," Maxon said quickly. "I think anyone who would set out to rob a lot of people—folks who have saved for a trip to Europe—of their savings and perhaps leave them stranded over there is a slimy rat."

"So what?" Carter glared. "They won't have any squawk. Every one of them will consider himself as pretty smart when he buys these smuggled francs. Don't expect me to weep when they get caught. Know any more funny stories?"

"Yeah," Maxon said. "I know you're going to double-cross Shaner and the other pilots, and the men on the field."

CARTER winked at Shaner. "That's an old gag, Babe. Shaner knows one good reason why I couldn't run out on him, or the others. Maybe I can run the business end of this racket, but airplanes I don't know from nothin'. If you had an idea you might needle us into an argument, forget it. We haven't got time for that. Shaner and I are shoving off in a little while."

"You going to let them go?" Shaner demanded.

"Think I'm nuts," Carter growled and turned to the pilot. "You're always bragging about what a swell bomber pilot you were. I got a grand that says you can't land either of them in that pool we spotted in the Everglades the other day. The one covered with that yellowish scum. Maybe Rocky would like to get in on that bet. All he has to do is guard these two snoopers till we get back tomorrow afternoon. How about it, Rocky?"

"Sure, Boss," Rocky grinned. "I often wondered what a fellow thought about while he was fallin' a couple thousand feet."

"I've got five grand that says they'll never tell you," Carter smirked. "Call Squinty and Joe, Rocky." He took an automatic from his coat pocket. "Shaner, you get the engines started. Then, soon's we've got these boxes on board, we'll shove off. I'll watch these two till Rocky comes back. Get going."

## CHAPTER V

### *Gas Runs Low*

WHEN Rocky returned with two tough-looking overalled mechanics, he covered Maxon and Slim with his automatic.

"Step around to the back," he ordered, "so these men have got room to get those boxes outa here."

When the two coffins and their pine cases had been maneuvered onto a hand truck and wheeled through the door, Rocky leered at his two prisoners.

"Quite a little surprise party, isn't it? I always did like surprises. Soon's they take off, I'll call Squinty and Joe in to help tie you up."

Maxon stood figuring some angle by which Slim and he could get out of the predicament in which they found themselves. What he wanted most was to reach a phone.

Then, suddenly, as if he had been reading Maxon's mind, Rocky said. "I took care of the phone while I was up to the office. Just so there won't be any slip-ups on this deal. Got to be smart when you're playin' for big dough."

Maxon listened as the engines on the DC woke up. He heard Shaner rev them up and then start to taxi out onto the strip. Then he jerked alert. His eyes widened as he stared over Rocky's shoulder.

"Rocky," he smiled. "Did you say you liked surprises?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Well you've got a big one coming. There's a man standing right behind you with a muzzle loader pointed at your backbone. Did you ever see a man who had been hit at close range by a muzzle loader?"

Rocky grinned confidently and shook his head. "That's a corny gag, Babe. Now it's your turn to be surprised—because I ain't fallin' for it."

"Mind if I step aside so I don't get splattered?" Slim asked.

"It ain't no use—" Rocky's lips suddenly went slack. The blood drained from his face as he felt something prod him in the back.

"Steady," a high pitched voice said from the doorway. "This gun's got a hair trigger. Now raise your hands real



fast. That's good. Now turn that little popgun of yours so's you're holdin' it by the barrel. That's right. Now lower your arm so my young friend over there kin take the gun an' at the same time have it pointin' right at yore ornery heart. Now step over in the corner," came the order as Maxon took the gun from Rocky's trembling hand. "Reminds me of the time I caught a spy in the Spanish American War. He was sneak-in' up to Teddy's tent when I nailed him just like I did you. Funny, but he seemed to understand everything I said, even though he didn't know a single word of English."

"You must be Deke's grandfather," Maxon exclaimed when the old man came in and laid the long deer rifle on a box.

"That's me," the old man grinned. "You got powder an' shot in that thing you're holdin' on him? That's a good thing. Have to hide mine all the time so Deke won't find it. Clean forgot where I put it last time an' didn't have time to hunt fer it before I took out after Deke. He said you might be needin' help an' I come a-hustlin'. Where's Deke at?"

"I was hoping he'd duck home when we left him outside," Maxon said. "Better pick up your gun, Granpa. We'll gag this gent here so he can't tell any secrets, and what the others don't know won't hurt them."

Maxon listened while the engines of the DC out on the strip died down. Then they roared as Shaner gave them a final test before taking off.

"If there were only some way of stopping them," he murmured.

"Telephoning is out now," Slim said.

"Yeah, I know," Maxon scowled. Then his face brightened. Quickly he pushed the automatic into Slim's hand. "You an' Granpa take over, Slim. Tie Rocky up and corner those other two birds. If the kid comes around, get him to contact the local police."

"An' what'll you be doing in the meantime?" Slim demanded as he swung the automatic on Rocky.

"I'm going to try and stop them," Maxon said, starting for the door. "If I can't do anything else, I may be able to be a pallbearer when those coffins arrive at their destination."

that night. After a quick limping dash he had yanked the chocks away from the wheels of the B-25, scrambled through the hatch, closed the hatch, shrugged into the harness of the parachute he had left there that morning and, panting for breath, was finally grinding the starters.

Off to his left, he could see the exhaust flares as the DC-3 took off. He did not wait to warm up his own motors when they took hold. He only hoped they would be warm enough by the time he had taxied out to the runway.

When he reached the strip, he wheeled the ship into position and then with a quick breath hit the throttles. After a momentary protest, the motors decided to play along and finally lifted the B-25 into the night. Maxon whistled softly and brushed the back of his left hand across his damp forehead.

"Brother!" he murmured. "All I could do was pretend I was flying an AT-10 back at Ellington."

Maxton Field was behind him. To the west lay the sinister expanse of the Everglades. To the northwest lightning flickered to warn of an approaching thunderstorm. Somewhere to the north was the DC-3 and the man he had learned to hate.

The lightning on Maxon's left flashed more frequently as he peered ahead, hoping against hope Shaner had switched on his wing lights. Concentrating on the task ahead of him, and throwing an occasional glance at the instrument board, Maxon almost jumped out of his parachute harness when he felt a hand laid on his shoulder.

"The plane is right ahead of us, Mister Maxon," the voice said.

Maxon glanced over his shoulder and saw a flash of lightning gleam on Deke's taut features.

"Deke!" he cried. "How'd you get here?"

"A man on the field chased me," Deke said. "I found the door, or whatever you call it, of this plane open. So I crawled in an' hid. I was hopin' Grandpap would show up."

"He did," Maxon said. "An' believe me, he's some guy."

"I know," the boy said. "He captured a spy oncet. That's why I wanted him to come tonight. You know, I wasn't sure iffen it was you or one of them others at first. So I snuck up here an' waited

**B**ABE Maxon set some sort of world's record for quick moving amputees



for the lightning to show me yore face. I sure was pleased when I found it was you. I knowed you wouldn't mind because you promised to take me along the next time you flew one of the airplanes."

"I wish you were back in your cabin, Deke," Maxon said earnestly.

"But yo're chasin' them fellows, ain't you?"

"Trying to, Deke."

"Then I'm glad I'm along. I hope you chase 'em so far they can't never find their way back."

"Can you still see the other plane?"

"Of course," Deke replied. "You just watch the next time there's lightning. You'll see it against a white cloud that's dead ahead of us."

"Darned if I can see it," Maxon muttered.

"Well if you traveled around the swamps at night as much as Granpap an' me have, you'd be able to see right well in the dark too. There. Did you see it?"

Maxon nodded. He eased the throttles forward a bit. "I'll close up on them a little and depend on you to keep your eyes peeled. Slide into that other seat over there and keep me posted."

After a while, Deke leaned over to Maxon. "Bet this is as much fun as the time Granpap caught the spy that was tryin' to kidnap Teddy Roosevelt. I'll have somethin' to brag on when I'm a granpap, won't I?"

"I hope so," Maxon said with a tense smile.

An hour later, Maxon asked, "Still see them, Deke?"

"Sure. They're right ahead. I'll tell you if they speed up or veer off. Say, what does that little red light mean?"

"Empty tank," Maxon explained as he switched over to the other wing tank. "We've been on the way longer than I thought." He glanced at the fuel gauge and started when he discovered that the needle indicated the tank to be less than half full.

"Deke!" he called to the boy who was staring into the night. "Take these matches and go back there and see if can find a parachute like I'm wearing. Make it snappy." He pushed a folder of matches into the boy's hand.

"Nothin' like yo're wearin' back there," the boy said when he returned a moment or so later. "Parachutes is what

they use for jumpin', ain't they?"

Maxon nodded grimly and began to pray that dawn would soon come creeping over the horizon.

**H**OWEVER, when the gray light of new day began to push the curtain of night aside, Maxon was immediately sorry. For the DC-3 had suddenly turned at right angles to its course, and a split second later slugs were tearing at the right wing of the B-25.

"Duck!" Maxon warned as he began to weave. "Somebody on board that crate's got a gun!"

"Kinda sounded like hail on our cabin roof," Deke grinned when Maxon climbed to a position above and behind the DC-3. "Do you reckon somebody was really a-shootin' at us?"

"They sure were, kid," Maxon said, trying to hide his feelings from the boy. "Come here." He studied the boy's face as the lad stood at his side with one hand resting on his shoulder. "Look, Deke. You want to help me stop them, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," the boy nodded soberly.

"Well, they're going to be free to carry on their dirty work, each in his own way, if we don't do something about it very shortly," Maxon nodded toward the fuel gauge. "I figure we've got ten minutes more at the most, Deke. If our motors stop, they escape. So what would you do?"

Deke hesitated as he stared at the other plane which was attempting to maneuver into a position which would permit another blast from the gun they could see poked through a window.

"Wanta know what I'd do? Well, I'd run this airplane smack dab into theirs. That's what I'd do."

"If we did that, and didn't get all tangled up, we'd have to jump for it," Maxon said. "One chute between the two of us might be risky."

The boy stood on tiptoe and glanced at the ground far below. "I don't reckon as to how it'll be any more risky for us than for them. I'm game to do it if you are."

Maxon had already decided on a method of procedure. If the scheme he had in mind was to work, everything would have to be in readiness beforehand. Setting the automatic pilot, he loosened the buckles of his parachute harness. That done, he ordered the boy to sit on his



lap facing him and slip his legs under the web straps. Then, between the two of them, they managed to pull the straps tight again.

"Now, Deke, put your arms under the straps by the shoulder and twist them so the straps are wrapped around them twice. Then clasp your hands at the back of my neck. The minute I've yanked the ring, I'll wrap my arms around you. Understand."

"Yes, sir," the boy said calmly. "Listen. They're shootin' at us again."

Taking over control, Maxon S-turned out of the line of fire and curled in behind the big DC-3.

"Here we go!" he yelled. "Hang on!" Holding a position directly behind the DC, Maxon eased the throttles forward still farther. He held his breath as they gained on the ship ahead. Then, as the prop of the right engine ate into the control surfaces, he was already scrambling toward the hatch.

He saw the wing buckle as he fell through.

Waiting until he was certain they were clear, he yanked the ring, wrapped his arms around the boy and closed his eyes. With his arms tensed, he held his breath and waited. The silk cracked above them. The jerk on the harness and his arms wasn't as bad as he had feared. Then they were floating toward the dew-sodden ground.

"We made it kid, we made it!" Maxon laughed.

Deke joined in the laughter. "You were holding me so hard you'd like to have busted my ribs," he said then. "It was kinda scary at first, but it was fun. Wait'll I tell Granpap about this. Gits more excitin' all the time, don't it?"

"Did you see where the other plane landed?" Maxon asked when they had untangled themselves from each other and the collapsed parachute.

"I saw it go into that gully over there," the boy said, pointing to a fringe of trees. "Sort of splashed in like a turtle fallin' off a log."

"Let's have a look."

Reaching the top of the rise, they found themselves looking down at the wrecked DC-3. Its rudder and elevators were well chewed, but despite that, Shaner had managed to pancake in without doing more than cracking the DC's fuselage open and buckling the left wing.

THEY had almost reached the wreck when Bull Shaner and Dan Carter came stumbling out of the cabin. Maxon pulled the boy down beside a rock and watched the two men as they each turned to look at the wrecked ship.

"We'd better set fire to it," Shaner said. "If those phony francs aren't burned up before somebody comes, we're gonna be in trouble. Come on, let's get those coffins open."

"I'll tend to that," Carter snarled. His hand came up with an automatic pointed at the surprised pilot.

"Now listen, Boss," Bull Shaner pleaded. "You can't do that. You're only kidding, aren't you?"

"They'll find your dead body in the burned plane, Shaner," Carter retorted. "That'll give me time to get in the clear. You weren't going to get a cut on this anyway. So this'll keep you from being disappointed."

"Then Babe Maxon was right. You an' Rocky were figuring on double-crossing me."

"Sure. Just like I'm gonna give Rocky the works first chance I get. Think I'd be satisfied with even a two-way split? Don't come any closer, Shaner. I'm warning you. I'll let you have it."

"Go ahead," Shaner snarled. "But I'll bet your slugs won't stop me before I get my hands around that dirty neck of yours. You think I'm yellow, but I'll show you I'm not."

As Shaner advanced Carter retreated. "Stop," he quavered. "I'll shoot."

"Go ahead," Shaner laughed. "It won't do you any good. I see a couple of state troopers pulling up on the road down there. They'll hear you. You've got nobody to blame this time. It was your idea to get Maxon to front for you. Go ahead, shoot. You haven't got the nerve. Rocky always did your killing for you." Maxon watched as Carter stepped back each time Shaner stepped forward. He touched Deke's arm and motioned him to silence. It seemed an eternity before Carter stood within a yard of the rock behind which they crouched.

Suddenly, Maxon stood up. A look of amazement flashed across Shaner's face as Maxon calmly reached out and touched Carter's shoulder.

"Dan," he said softly.

Dan Carter whirled with a cry of fear. But the cry was cut short as Maxon's right arm shot forward. The rising sun



glinted on the curved metal hand as it crashed on Carter's jaw. Deke was out from behind the rock as the man fell. He beat Shaner to the automatic and handed it to Maxon.

Maxon smiled and ordered Shaner to stop where he was. Shaner stopped and stood glaring at Maxon and the boy as two state troopers came toward them.

"He's the important one," Maxon said, nodding toward Carter when he had explained the situation to the two officers. "Looks like he's coming around again."

"Yeah," one of the troopers said. "An' it looks like he's got a well-busted jaw. Say, what did you say his name was?"

"Carter is all I know," Maxon said. "Why?"

The trooper grinned. "Carter's only one of his names. The one we know him best by is Jack the Knife. He's wanted for about everything on the books including a few murders. Where's his side-kick, Rocky Moran? There's a nice chunk of reward for him too."

"I guess the authorities in Florida have got him salted away by this time," Maxon grinned as one of the troopers yanked the man he had known as Carter to his feet.

Maxon stepped over to the man as he stood touching his shattered jaw with gentle fingers. "Look," he said. "I'm thinking of going into business for myself. Would you mind if I carried on with the payments you were supposed to make on Maxton Field and the planes that are left?"

Jack the Knife glared at Maxon a moment and then winced when he tried to shake his head.

"Why ask him?" a trooper scowled. "He's going to be cut out of circulation from now on. Some night, a couple of months from now, he'll smell smoke and find out the seat of his pants have been scorched."

"Because he started with a crooked setup," Maxon said. "When I take over,

I want it to be on the level. You know, legal."

"An' you want us to be witnesses that he said it was okay." The state trooper grinned. "Well, come on. Let's haul these two birds in to the barracks. Chances are, the lieutenant'll be able to tell you what the reward is you've got coming."

**H**OURS later, the reporters and photographers had finally left the headquarters of the State Troopers. Weary after the long ordeal of answering questions, Babe Maxon sat slumped in a chair beside the desk.

The telephone suddenly interrupted. "It's that long distance call you put through to Maxton Field," an officer said. "Want to take it here?"

"Couldn't move if you said you'd hand me the reward at the other side of the office," Maxon smiled as he reached for the phone.

"Yeah, this is Babe Maxon. Hear you got the others in the pen. That's swell, Slim. Yeah, I'm listening. You want us to bring back a load of eightballs. Sure. Won't worry us none because we'll be sitting in front of them . . . Listen, you. I'm taking over the field when I get back. I'll show you an' Minnie whether I can do something besides gripe. This time I'll be fronting for Tony . . . Yeah. Yeah, Deke's right here . . . Okay, I'll tell him about his grandpap . . . An' listen, Slim. I took a poke at that rat. First time I ever hit a guy that hard without skinning my knuckles . . . Yeah, maybe we'll be back tonight if we can make plane connections. No, I won't forget to tell Deke. Good-by."

Maxon hung up and turned to Deke. "According to Slim, your grandpa's kinda peeved at you, Deke."

"For not comin' home last night, I'll bet," the boy said with a worried frown.

"Nope," Maxon chuckled. "Don't you realize you've ruined that Teddy Roosevelt yarn of his?"

## A LESSON FROM BIRDS

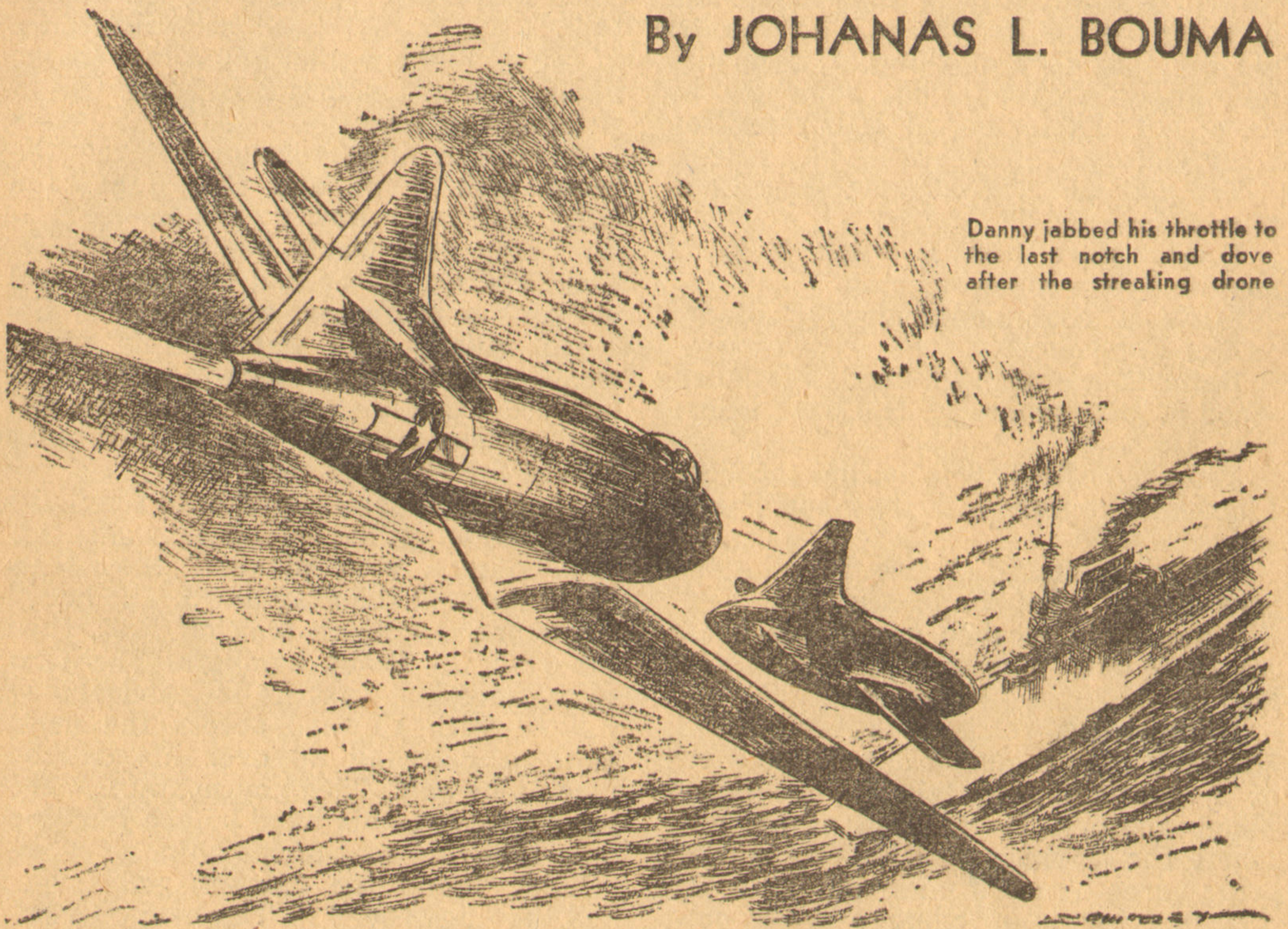
**M**ANY vital points in streamlining have been learned from the observation of birds, their anatomy and their flight. The latest lesson our feathered friends have taught us is that greater streamlining can be achieved by having a plane's pilot in a prone rather than in upright, sitting position.

Birds fly prone, of course, and it has been ascertained that the drag of a body is at a minimum when the body's greatest dimension is along the line of flight.

A particular and important advantage of this position is that the tendency toward physical blackouts under the stress of high speeds is greatly reduced.



By JOHANAS L. BOUMA



Danny jabbed his throttle to the last notch and dove after the streaking drone

# FURY IN THE SKY

**D**ANNY EMERSON lifted the FJ-1 from the North Island runway with the feeling that the past was closing in on him. The sudden rise, as the jet cleared, and the high thin whine from the exhaust, failed to give him the usual thrill. He hit the gear toggle and raised the flaps, slanting in a quick climb and cutting a half circle across Mission Bay before leveling and heading out to sea.

He glanced at the bulky envelope containing his transfer orders to the carrier *Valorous*. His mouth went tight shut at the thought that had he known Howard was stationed on the carrier,

he would have asked for another berth. But he hadn't known until Captain Temple's words reminded him of that day in '44, bringing it back with startling reality.

An hour ago, Danny had stopped by headquarters to spend a few minutes with his former Squadron Commander.

"I envy you, Lieutenant," Temple had said. "You were the youngest pilot in my squadron, and you're still not too old for the jets."

Temple's shoulders were square and his jaw was blunt. Iron-gray hair marked his age, had marked it when the Japanese had dropped death on Pearl

*Sometimes when a flier saves his ship, as Danny did, they call him a hero, but at other times they tag him—coward!*



Harbor. But a need for pilots had kept him in the air, hitting the enemy and dodging the medics who said he was too old for that sort of thing. The medics had finally won out, but somehow he gave you the feeling of still resenting their victory.

Temple said, "You remember Lieutenant Howard?"

Danny gave him a quick look. "I should. I was his wing man."

"He's a commander now, stationed on the *Valorous*."

Danny's mouth tightened. "I understood he was grounded. His back injury that time—"

Temple nodded. "He's Flight Officer. I thought it only fair that you should know."

Danny hesitated. "How does he feel now about what happened?"

Temple had pushed out of his chair, his hand out. "The best of luck in your new assignment, Lieutenant. . . ."

Danny cut throttle to cruising speed, thinking that the captain was too much of a gentleman to talk to one officer about another. He glanced at his map where the carrier's position was marked some three hundred miles off the coast. She had been out there a week now, readying to hold a last rendezvous with a battlewagon that had survived two wars and an atom bomb test.

Danny had been full up with keen excitement when he had first learned that the jets would participate in sinking the old tub. The FJ-1s were new to the Navy, and a man could take pride in the knowledge that he was flying them and making history. Instead of a windmill powered by a Pratt and Whitney Wasp, you had a TG-190 Allison turbo that was good for 600 m.p.h., and maybe more. You had a cruising speed that equaled the old Corsair's top performance, and a mile-a-minute rate of climb.

But now Danny's thoughts refused to stay with the jets. For a second he was tempted to turn back. Then was suddenly sick with shame and hate for himself. His lean young face tightened until the muscles bunched across his jaw line. He looked at the blue sparkle of the Pacific, remembering that day along the coast of New Guinea, and the decision he had had to make. . . .

the misty cloud cover. The pilots' ready room was crowded, and astir with small talk. Mess boys passed steaming cups of coffee, and the men had a last smoke before Temple and the Briefing Officer entered the room.

A sudden alert tension entered the room with them, and they faced the large wall map showing the enemy supply dump they would bomb and strafe. The Briefing Officer had the impersonal voice of a professor, and the men listened quietly and listed stuff about weather and the carrier's position. Afterward, Temple's voice lashed them, and you remembered he had a particular hatred for the Japanese.

They filed upstairs and onto the flight deck, and when the loudspeaker shouted, "Pilots, man your planes!" they scattered through the gray dawn. The heavy Grumman Avengers took off first, then the Douglas Scout bombers. The Corsairs were last to take off, and Danny walked with Howard across the deck, Howard grinning all over his chubby face as he said, "See you upstairs," and gave a wave of his hand before jumping onto the wing root of his ship.

They found the camouflaged target and they destroyed it. The heavy Grumman and the Douglas bombers turned back to the carrier, but the Corsairs took a last run across the blazing confusion down there. They were turning back when the word spread through the formation: Zeros coming down to intercept.

They angled up to meet the attack, to stab the Rising Sun. Howard and Danny flew their Corsairs as one ship. But the enemy was strong, and they were many. The battle staggered across the sky, marked here and there by the bright plumes of flaming planes.

A Zero darted in and out, raked Danny's Corsair with a burst that pierced the fuselage and splattered with machine gun rapidity against his armor-plated backrest. He stayed clamped to Howard's wing as they angled across the Zero's flight path. Howard caught the Japanese with a clean burst, and Danny raked it once again as they hoiked to the blue. Two more of the enemy were upstairs and Howard gave chase, cutting an abrupt curve of the coast to intercept.

They were within firing range when Danny saw the enemy task force slip-

**I**T was a gray morning in '44, and the early sun was a faded orange behind



ping out of a natural bay. The next moment it was hidden behind a rise in the terrain. He tried to call Howard, knowing instantly that the Zero's fire had smashed his radio. He angled his fire in front of Howard's nose, but the enemy planes were closing in and Howard paid no attention.

And then Danny saw a dozen more of the enemy slide out of the cloud cover. He was very frightened and very much aware that they had to leave this particular hell. He looked around for help, but they were all alone up there, outnumbered six to one.

Afterwards, a gnawing conscience told him it was the fear of death, rather than the immediate necessity of warning the carrier about that enemy task force, that had torn him from Howard's side. He had a last picture of his wing man going in to meet the enemy alone, and then it was all swept away in his effort to coax speed out of the Corsair.

The rest of the flight had landed when he sighted the carrier. He landed and made his quick report. Twenty minutes later the planes were armed and clearing the deck to search out the task force. Danny led them back. They found the enemy and went in for the big kill. But they found no sign of Howard.

They searched all that next day, only coming back to refuel. At sundown they were ready to give up, but Danny took one more run and sighted the life raft miles from the previous day's battle. An hour later the carrier had a boat out, and Danny was on deck when they carried a raving Howard up the ladder.

There was blood on Howard and agony in his eyes. He caught sight of Danny, and in his madness shrieked his accusations. Danny Emerson was yellow. Danny Emerson had run out and left him to die. He was still raving when they took him below deck, Danny standing there, white-lipped, feeling the silence, the quick dropping of eyes and then the shuffle of feet as the men turned away and went about their business.

It was one long hell before they returned to base. The men knew he had done the only thing possible, and yet . . . He understood what it was. His secret fear was there and the men sensed it. They were embarrassed by it, even if under the circumstances they would not hold it against him. Once he had gone down to sick bay, but Howard re-

fused to see him. By the time they reached port, most of the men had forgotten, but Danny had the feeling that Howard would never forget.

HE had gone over it a thousand times, and now he went over it again. Would he have turned tail if he had not sighted the task force? A sudden twinge of doubt told him he had yet to find the answer. How could a man know until he faced the prospect of certain death? Men died in combat, but at least they had a fighting chance. *But suppose everything is stacked against you, and there is no chance? How would you react then, Danny?*

He glanced around, trembling, seeing the long sweep of the *Valorous* off his left wing. A mile off her port bow the battered hulk of the old battlewagon wallowed in the heave of the sea, and the thought was in him that she had never given up the battle. She was more than a structure of steel. She was alive with the memory of the thousands who had crowded her decks and who had died there. And, dying, they had become part of her.

She would remember her men for what they had been. She would know the brave and the weak, the foolhardy and the dangerous, the timid and the strong, and she would know those who were about to sink her. Yet she waited with quiet serenity, content in the knowledge that she would soon join those who had gone from her deck, sewn in canvas, with the heavy weight at their feet.

He wrestled the impression from his brain and called the carrier for landing instructions. He circled once while lowering the tricycle gear and the flaps. The Signal Officer's flags were raised as he settled into the groove. The deck loomed and a flag whipped across the man's throat for a "cut." The gear struck and the hook snagged out and caught the first arresting wire. Line dragged out and the jet lunged to a stop. Danny palmed back the hatch as the crewmen ran forward.

"Nice landing, Lieutenant," one of them said.

"Thanks. Where will I find the Flight Officer?"

"Either in the ready room or his cabin," the man said, pointing. "You go down that hatch and—"



"I'll find it," Danny grinned. "Thanks, sailor."

He walked across the deck, a tall slim man with a loose, easy stride. His fur-lined boots made little noise on the steel steps, and he was conscious of the old life crowding him. The clean smell of the carrier. The elusive traits of a ship at sea. The rush of men and the roar of guns. The loudspeaker warning, "Now hear this . . ." and the sudden silence and the quick looks of the men as they strained to listen. . . .

He found the door to the ready room open. The chairs were lined up, as if awaiting the men for briefing. The great wall maps were still up, and below the maps two men sat at a table. Danny stood stark still for a moment before stepping across.

"Lieutenant Emerson reporting for duty, sir."

They looked up, one a young blond lieutenant, the other Commander Howard. Danny met his eyes and recoiled inside himself. Howard's face was drawn and harsh with an inner bitterness. His dark eyes gleamed their surprise until nothing else showed. Danny placed his orders on the table and stepped back. Howard continued looking at him, but now the surprise was gone. His thin nostrils flared slightly, and a bloodless circle formed around his mouth.

"You—" he said, and the word held the whip of a strung wire.

Danny said nothing, aware of a quick scrutiny from the young lieutenant.

Howard stirred as the past gripped him. "That's all for now, Evarts," he said to the lieutenant, still looking at Danny. "We'll go over this later."

No introductions, Danny thought. How long could a man carry his hate when it had no foundation? He heard the long sigh of the door closing as the lieutenant left, and found Howard searching his face.

"What were you doing before being assigned to this carrier?" Howard asked in a rasping voice.

"Instructor on FJ-1s. We—"

"Never mind." Howard rose and stood stiff-legged behind the table, his hands palm down as he leaned forward. "You're here. I can't change that. But stay out of my way and make no mistakes. One wrong move and you're grounded."

Danny stared at him. "So that's it," he said softly. "You're blaming me be-

cause you won't ever fly again."

Howard slapped the table with enough force to make it jump. "Do you have any idea what it means for a pilot to be grounded the rest of his life? Sure, I understand that the carrier had to be warned. But you didn't give me a chance. They told me your radio was out, but you can't make me believe that you couldn't have warned me some way."

"I fired my guns," Danny said angrily, "but you were going hell-bent upstairs and didn't notice. There was too much at stake—"

"Including your life. One run on those Japs and both of us would have had a chance. But you didn't have the sand to stick with it. By the time I saw you running away, they were all over me." Sweat popped out on his forehead, and his voice lowered as the words jerked from his lips. "You're not true Navy, Emerson, because you're yellow. From now on, you'll take orders from Lieutenant Evarts, your flight leader. Now get out!"

Danny's hands clenched and unclenched at his side. He had a sudden impulse to throw himself across the desk, then turned and marched to the door. Before going out he looked back. Howard was sitting, his face in his cupped hands.

**T**HE briefing for the first day of operation against the battlewagon was held at six hundred hours the next morning. Danny sat on Evarts' left. The young flight leader had introduced him around the evening before, but Danny knew by the men's attitude that Evarts had not started the ball of gossip rolling.

Commander Howard had charge of the briefing. "We're running this show under near combat conditions. The carrier will send up flak and machine gun fire to give you a feeling of what it's like when the chips are down. Some of you are ex-combat men who understand the feeling of being shot at—" His glance fastened on Danny before moving away. "The rest of you men who haven't had it will find out soon enough. Don't worry about getting hit. You'll be allowed enough clearance to make your runs in safety. I'll be watching every minute, so don't be surprised if you're called down for making errors. That's all. Man your planes."



The pilots crowded up the ladder to the flight deck. The dawn was a gray haze as a crewman guided Danny to his ship. Two five-hundred-pound bombs snuggled beneath the wing, and the old tension formed in Danny with the memory of yesterday's thought that the old battlewagon was aware of him.

The jet turbos turned over with their unholy shrieks. Evarts' ship leaped down the deck into the wind. Heat waves from her exhaust danced along the steel plates as she cleared and went into a climb. The next jet took off, and then it was Danny's turn. He opened the throttle to three quarters and released the brakes. The jet moved sluggishly at first, and he dropped the flaps halfway as the whine increased to the sound of ripping canvas. He felt the lift, then. The jet cleared the deck with room to spare.

He upped the gear and raised the flaps, climbing swiftly and taking his position on Evarts' left wing. Minutes later the entire formation had formed. Evarts took them upstairs in a stiff climb before leveling at ten thousand.

The orders were to head twenty miles east of the battlewagon before turning and dispersing for the bomb run. The orders were to drop one bomb each, reform and come in again.

Danny checked the flight as they went into their turn. Most of the pilots were "jet babies" who had flown no more than a few hours in windmill jobs. Growing boys, he thought, but they handled their ships with the ease of veterans.

They completed the turn, and when they sighted the battlewagon in the distance Evarts dipped his wings and peeled off. They came down on the target in a single swift-dropping line, blasting down like darts shot from the mouth of a cannon. A scatter of flak puffs broke wide of the target, and you could see the red flames jump from the carrier's guns, then plumes of smoke that swept along with the down wind.

They came down at deck level. Burning tracers completed their curves and died before reaching the jets. Danny kept his eye on the leader, and his mind flashed back to other days, when moments like this might be a man's last.

Evarts was unloading. Danny's eyes followed the bomb and saw it hit dead center. The next man was short, and Danny went down until the bridge of the

ship filled his sight. He jabbed the bomb release and felt the explosion catch the jet and hurl it up in a turmoil of ragged air. He drew back on the stick, his feet working the rudders, and he went upstairs and on Evarts' wing before looking around.

The fourth man was coming down for the run as Danny saw that the bridge was a shambles.

ALL the other jets made their runs. They reformed before swinging wide and coming in again. A heavy gray-black pall of smoke hung over the battlewagon now. Gushers of water flew up as some of the bombs missed their target. A great jagged hole was torn in the side of the ship, but she refused to go under. Evarts took the flight back to the carrier.

"You men did a good job," Howard said in the ready room, "but not good enough. Your job is to hit the target, and too many of you missed. That means you have to get down lower. This afternoon you'll carry bombs and your guns will be loaded. Come in the full length of the ship, strafing. And make believe you're going to land on her deck before you unload your bombs."

They pounded the battlewagon throughout the afternoon. The deck became a twisted mass of wreckage. The carrier sent up its flak and machine gun fire. Another hole was torn in the battlewagon's bow, and she was heeling dangerously now.

"We'll get her tomorrow," Evarts said with high enthusiasm that evening.

They were having cigarettes after mess, and the men were yelling across the room, recalling individual bomb runs. Danny smiled grimly. Most of these youngsters had never known war, and he noticed that the few veterans held their silence.

"Some of those old ships are pretty tough," he told Evarts. "Remember the old *New York*? They hit her with everything they had and didn't sink her for three days."

"We've got to finish her by tomorrow," Evarts said. "If we don't—" He raised his voice. "Say, Commander, is that deal about trying a radio-controlled bomb still going through if we don't sink the old tub tomorrow?"

"That's the plan," Howard said from across the room.



"How do those things work?" a pilot asked.

Howard rose and looked at Danny. "Why don't you ask an experienced combat man?" he said with heavy sarcasm.

Danny flushed in the sudden silence that followed. He was aware that every eye was turned on him now, and he struggled to regain his calm.

"It depends on what they expect to use," he said. "There's the 'drone' which is controlled by radio from a mother ship. During the war some of the '29s carried a radar-controlled Bat bomb under their wings. Pretty successful against enemy shipping." He looked around and found Howard watching him closely, and he continued talking to check the anger rising in him. "There are new missiles with hypersensitive electronic ears that are drawn to unusual sounds in enemy territory. Some are set up to be attracted by light, and others are so sensitive to heat that they can be used against factories or any other heat-giving source. But Evarts mentioned a radio-controlled bomb, so I suppose it'll be something on the order of the Bat."

Howard gave a short laugh. "What did I tell you, men? Emerson is not only ex-combat, but also a recent instructor. I wouldn't be surprised but what he can tell us exactly how a radio-controlled bomb works."

Danny rose. "It just so happens that I can, Commander. The drone is controlled from a mother plane which carries a 'stick box.' The radio impulses sent out by the operator are received by the drone and transmitted to the automatic pilot. The pilot on the mother plane can tell the drone is receiving the signals by a row of lights on his transmitter and by musical notes that come through his headset as each move is made." Danny smiled, looking straight at Howard. "Anything else, sir?"

"Nothing else, Lieutenant," Howard snapped. He turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

Danny shivered suddenly with the heavy feeling inside him that a reckoning was due in the days to come. After a moment he got up and went to his cabin, but sleep did not come for a long time.

**T**HEY were up at dawn, making their bomb runs on the battered hulk,

and to Danny it seemed that the ship still waited to judge him. What is it between sailors and a ship? Why is it they can think of her as a woman, that lumps can contract the throat and eyes can weep when she slides beneath the green heave of the sea? An instinct of belonging, perhaps, a knowledge that at one time they were safe within the warmth of her bosom.

That day died quickly, but the ship was still a living presence on the sea. Her stern rode deep and she listed badly with the agony of her wounds, but she refused to give up the fight.

"You men of the jet squadron will intercept the bomber and escort her to the target," Howard told them the next morning. "Put on a good show. She'll have some high brass aboard, including Captain Temple, my old commander."

They sighted the bomber as it pulled away from the coast, and they herded her toward the old battlewagon. She was a B-29, and her bomb bay doors were open, the drone shackled against her belly. The drone was painted a brilliant red. It had a long, cigar-shaped body. The wings were stubby, square at the tips. The tail was set high and well back of the body, every foot of which was filled with high explosives.

Danny had the thought that it was a flying torpedo. He heard the bomber pilot call the carrier for instructions, and then the following orders: "The bomber will circle to ten thousand feet before releasing her drone. The jets will disperse and fly a wide circle around the target."

Danny kept his eyes on the bomber. The carrier was sending a thick wedge of flak dead over the target, giving him the sudden impression that this was the real thing. The B-29 circled in a slow climb, and when she reached her altitude Danny saw the brilliant drone fall from her belly.

The crimson streak continued the circle. Danny had a picture of the operator in the bomber manipulating the miniature controls on the stick box, sending impulses to the drone's receiver.

Suddenly the bomb lowered swiftly. It was down to five thousand when it angled over the target. A flak puff broke off the wing. The bomb went into a dive.

Before he heard the bomber pilot's frantic voice, Danny knew what had



happened, that it had happened once before when a drone lost radio contact with the mother plane.

"The drone isn't receiving us," the pilot cried. "A shell fragment must have done it! She's running wild!"

The carrier had ceased firing. Danny's heart pounded against his chest wall as he watched the bomb go down like a stone. It flipped over once, changing its course, and in that moment Danny jabbed his throttle to the last notch and drove after the red streak.

It was pointing straight for the carrier!

**H**E dared not look at his instrument panel, although he realized his speed was terrific. He seemed to be flying in a vacuum—there was that little sound from the jet. He saw the carrier moving down there, but it appeared to crawl. The crimson bomb was less than a thousand feet off her port now.

Danny cut his speed as he flew the jet alongside. He was scarcely conscious of his movements as he cut his right wing below the bomb's left. For one terrible second they flew side by side, then Danny knew he could wait no longer.

The carrier was ahead and a hundred feet below. There was only this one chance, and Danny worked the rudders, flipping over, his wing catching that of the bomb, turning it from its course.

He felt his own wing strain and crack at the roots. Somehow it held, but he found himself spinning in the bucket. He had a glimpse of steel plates looming in front of him, and then a terrific smash darkened his brain.

When he opened his eyes he saw the white walls of the sick bay. He blinked his eyes and saw that a dozen pilots were in the room. They were grinning, as if eager to help him out of the fog.

"What happened?" he asked weakly.

"Oh, nothing much, Danny," a pilot

said. "You only managed to knock that bomb out of the way so it missed the carrier by a dozen feet. You, on the other hand, managed to smack the carrier at the waterline."

"Got me out, eh?"

The pilots looked at one another, uncomfortable. Then the same pilot said, "Commander Howard went overboard. He got you out before the plane went down."

Danny closed his eyes for a moment. "And the old—the old tub? We've still got a job to do, eh?"

"That's the funny part," the pilot said. "Just about the time that bomb took a nose dive, the old battlewagon gave a big sigh, turned over and showed her bottom and down. I swear she made with a human sigh. All the guys on deck heard it."

"Baloney!" another pilot said. "That was air coming out of her."

A voice growled, "That B-29 just sent in a radio message for Lieutenant Emerson from Captain Temple." Danny looked up as Howard crowded through the men. "He said to tell you nice going," Howard said. "He's proud you were one of his boys."

**D**ANNY swallowed and looked at Howard's beet-red face, at the somewhat embarrassed eyes that had lost their bitterness.

"Imagine that guy," he heard a pilot say. "He had everything to lose and nothing to gain. I don't know how—"

Howard whirled around. "Why not?" he said thickly. "He's Navy, isn't he? Now you guys get the devil out and let him get some rest."

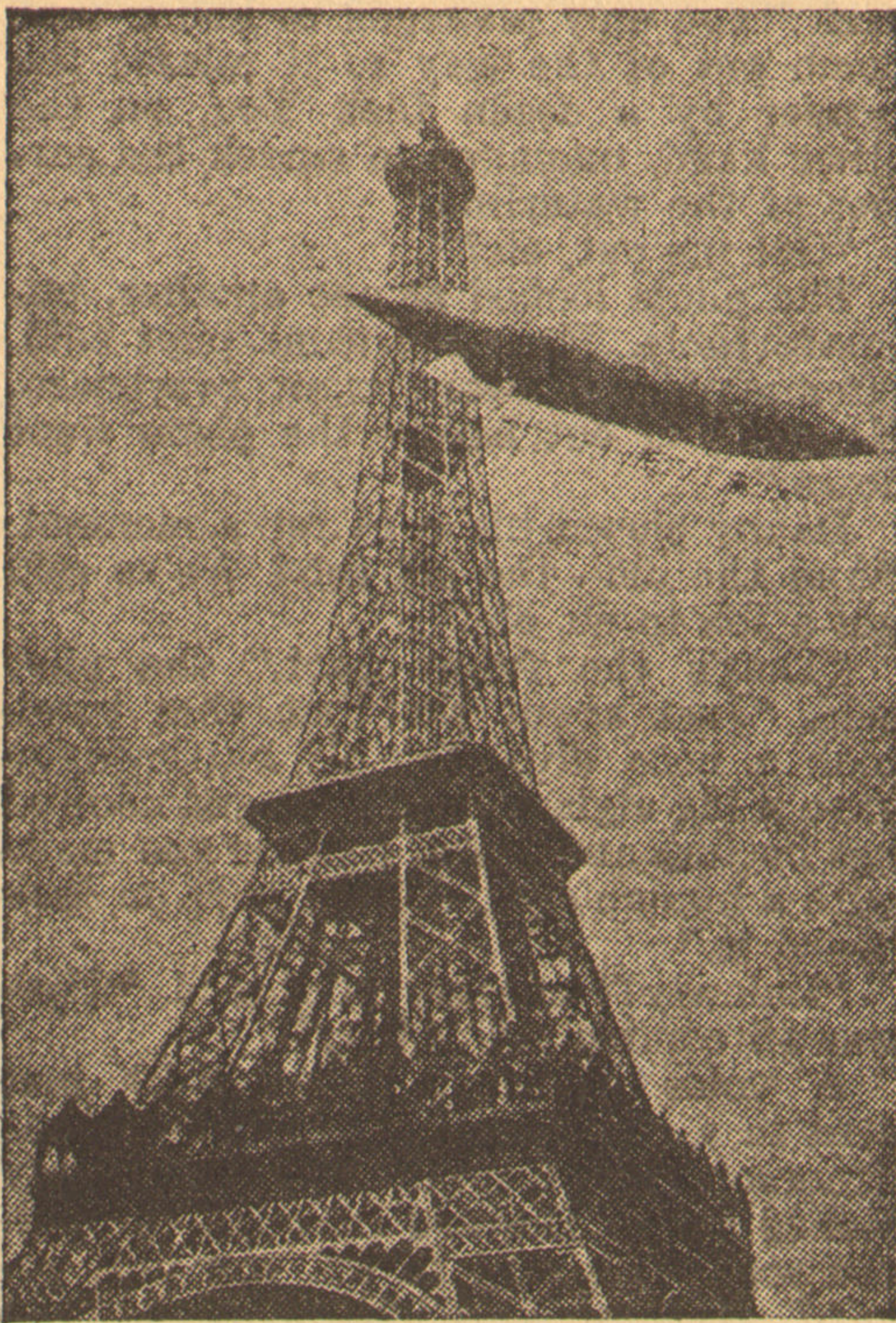
Howard turned as the door closed, and in the look that passed between them there was no need for speech. Two hands jumped out and met, and the solid grip washed away the long bitter years.

## WRONG-WAY HERO

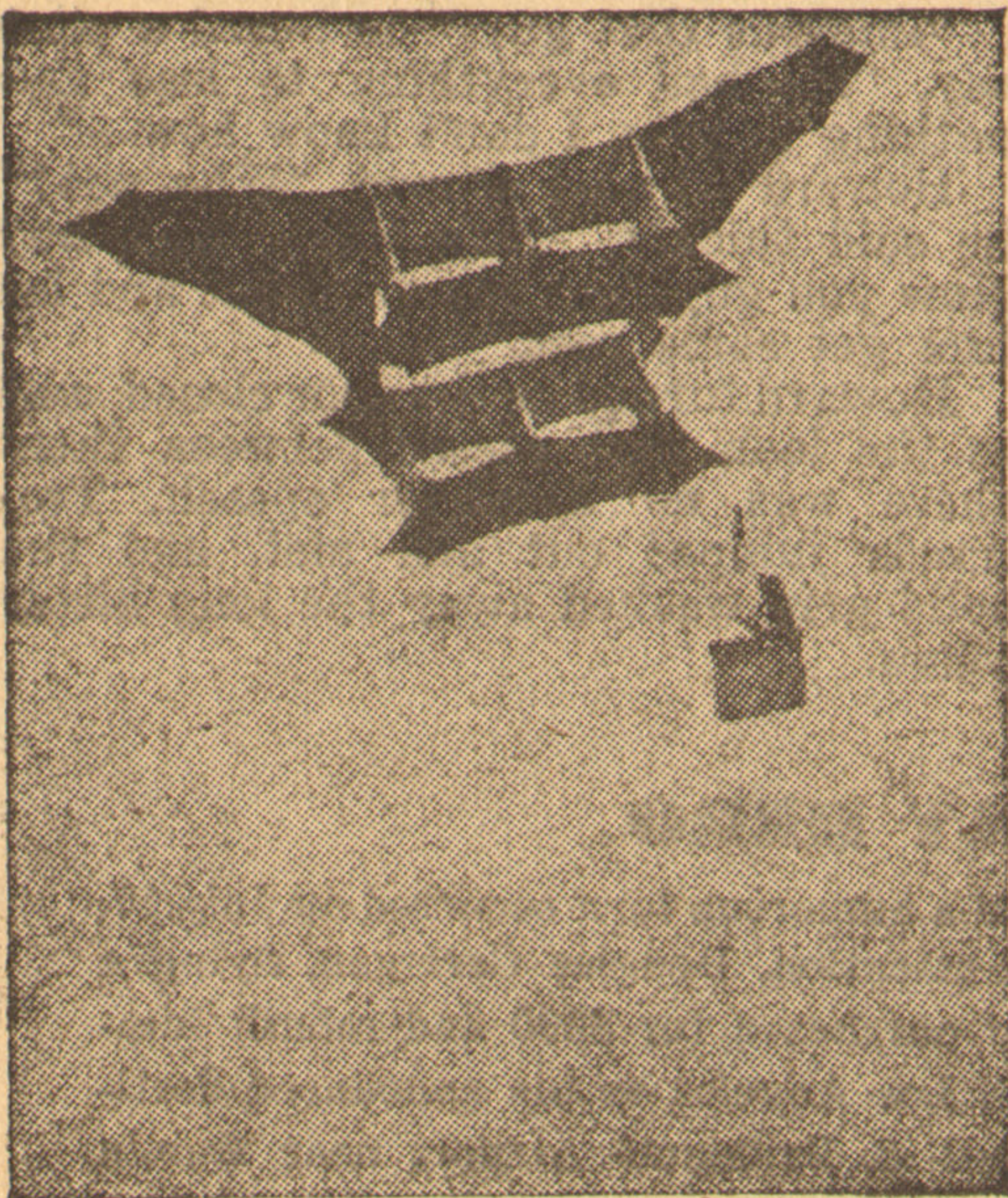
**A** FAMOUS long-distance flight that had a humorous turn occurred on July 17, 1938. This incident drew world-wide attention. Douglas Corrigan, flying a ten-year-old Curtiss "Robin" which he had purchased for \$900 and rebuilt himself, took off from Floyd Bennett Field with Los Angeles as his announced destination. Twenty-eight hours later, he landed at Baldonnell Airport near Dublin Ireland. His sole navigational instrument was a compass which he declared "got stuck" after his take-off.



# Fifty



Alberto Santos-Dumont accomplishing one of his most spectacular feats—circling the Eiffel Tower in a small one-man airship



Ascent of Cody's man-lifting kite

**P**ROFESSOR LANGLEY'S little model steamplane had just flown half-a-mile above the Potomac River. In England, the big Maxim machine, and, in France Ader's *Avion*, had been shown capable of lifting themselves off the ground.

Lilienthal, in Germany, had just completed more than two thousand motorless glides. At Dayton, Ohio, two young cycle-makers, Wilbur and Orville Wright, had just begun that great air quest which was to lead to eventual triumph.

There, fifty years ago, you have the fascinating set-up in which I, myself, in my own workshop, was building man-lifting kites and gliders, and making adventurous balloon trips with pioneer aeronauts.

What a wonderful world it seemed to us, half-a-century ago!

Anything and everything appeared possible. We were at the dawn of that amazing era which was to bring us, among other things, aeroplanes, radio, motion pictures, television. To say nothing of two World Wars and the atom bomb!

Away back there we stood on the threshold of a changing world.

We air pioneers used to tell each other, with a laugh, that what we had been bitten by was a queer microbe we called the "airitis germ". And anybody with this elusive germ once in his system found he just simply could not do any-

Here is the amazing eyewitness story of unforgettable moments in aviation history—told by a man who saw pioneer aces fly!



# Years in Flying

thing but design and build odd contraptions with flapping wings or revolving vanes—machines which almost invariably finished up by crashing and breaking into small pieces.

## A Perilous Pastime

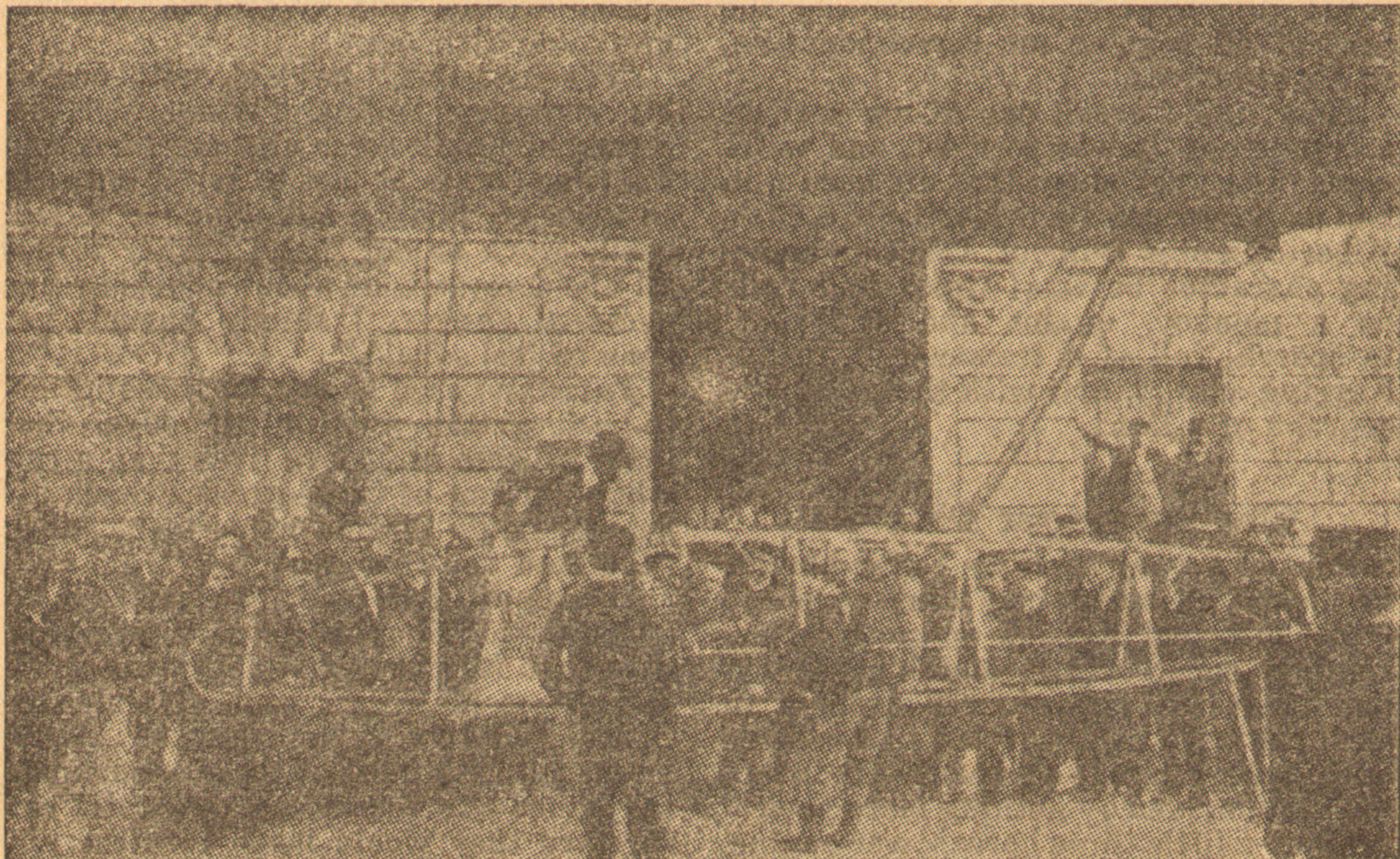
Dangerous that "airitis" germ was apt to prove at times. In my case, it nearly proved my undoing on at least two occasions.

Once, after building a giant man-lifting kite, and launching it from a hill-top in a high and gusty wind, my assistant and I were dragged across the ground by this formidable apparatus, and then I was just whisked right up into the air.

I found myself dangling at the end of a rope with the ground receding at an alarming rate below. Luckily for me, at that very critical moment, I was just above a big clump of thick bushes. These, as I let go and came tumbling down, broke the force of my fall, and I was fortunate to escape with nothing worse than cuts and bruises.

On another occasion, ascending from London in a big balloon with two aeronauts, Bucknall and Pollock, in an attempt to set up a new long-distance record, we came down pell-mell in a gale of wind, tearing our way through hedges and rolling and bumping across fields. In the end, we finished up with the edge of the balloon-basket pinning me down

by **HARRY HARPER**  
THE FIRST AIR REPORTER



Santos-Dumont lands right outside his own door after flying over Paris in a miniature 3 h.p. airship



by the neck, and if my friends had not rushed to my rescue that would have been the end of me then and there.

### Flying's Great Patron

It was adventures like these—not forgetting a perilous trip in one of the first small engine-driven airships, during which I was nearly flung off a flimsy control platform as this little dirigible rolled and pitched in half a gale—which brought me into personal touch with one of the greatest patrons flying has ever had, the famous Lord Northcliffe.

When I first went to see him in his big room in *The Daily Mail* office in London, he had just come back from Paris. Here he had been talking to one of the greatest of all air pioneers, Santos-Dumont, who had so fired Northcliffe with his own enthusiasm that His Lordship had decided, then and there, to encourage aerial progress by offering large prizes for flights across the English Channel and over the Atlantic.

What was even more important to me, His Lordship said he wanted some young enthusiast to do nothing else, from then on, but study the great air pioneers and describe them and their feats in *The Daily Mail*. And—yes, you have guessed—it was I myself who secured this appointment, becoming the first of all regular air correspondents, or air reporters.

How well I recall one of my earliest assignments. It was to meet, and write some "specials" about that air hero who had so impressed Lord Northcliffe, little Alberto Santos-Dumont. What an amazing character he was! Quick and agile as a monkey, quaint and whimsical in speech, full of a tremendous, never-flagging energy, and with the heart and courage of a lion!

### One-Passenger Dirigible

Son of a very wealthy coffee-planter in Brazil, Alberto had come over to Paris to spend £20,000 or more on designing, constructing, and himself flying, a series of tiny pioneer airships. In one of these baby dirigibles, just capable of carrying a single occupant—its inventor—and driven by nothing more powerful than a little three horsepower engine, Santos-Dumont amazed everyone by coming chugging in over the French

capital one morning, only just above the roof-tops, and then dipping down and making a perfect landing in the street right outside the front door of his own house in the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. Here, while mechanics held down his little airship for him, he ran upstairs and had a cup of coffee before ascending again and flying up out of the street on his way back to his shed at Neuilly St. James.

Another day, while he was right over the heart of Paris, something suddenly went wrong with one of these miniature airships, and he came down pellmell on the roof of a big hotel. The gas in the envelope of his airship exploded with a tremendous report. Everybody feared the worst. But in a moment or so, little Alberto could be seen scrambling down the steep roof of the hotel. Then he managed to wriggle in through an open window and, running downstairs, apologized profusely to the hotel manager for such an unceremonious entry.

When I was chatting with him one day I asked little Alberto whether he had ever felt afraid when ascending, and so often crashing, in one after another of his experimental air machines.

### More Lives Than a Cat

His answer was typical of this remarkable little man.

"It's just this," he said, with one of his engaging smiles. "When I've designed and built some new machine, and the time comes at last to try it out, I'm so keen on finding out whether it will really work or not that I simply forget all about myself, or about anything like personal danger. I simply haven't got time to feel afraid."

Parisians used to say, in those never-to-be-forgotten pioneer air days, that little Alberto had more lives than a cat, while another of those great French air heroes, Louis Bleriot, came to be called "the man you just can't kill."

It was after he had made quite a lot of money building head-lamps for motor cars that Bleriot began designing small monoplane machines, each of which he insisted on trying out himself. What happened with most of these experimental planes was that after an erratic run forward they would lurch into the air, making a zigzag flight for a few seconds, and then crashing in a cloud of dust.



Mechanics would rush across to the spot, reckoning that Bleriot must be lying either dead or badly injured beneath the wreckage. But to their amazement they would see him come crawling out from under a shattered wing or fuselage, having escaped miraculously with nothing worse than cuts and bruises. And hardly had he pulled himself together than he would call for pencil and paper, and begin roughing out an idea for yet another new machine.

### "Crash Technique"

I always remember this great pioneer's explanation to me of how he had evolved an ingenious sort of crash technique. When, as was often the case, he found soon after taking off that he was due for another of his catastrophic descents, he would tilt his machine over sideways, just at the last moment, so that one wing took the first shock of the fall. And it was this wing, as it crumpled, which acted as a form of shock-absorber.

Talk about taking one's life in one's hands! Those first bird-men used to do it almost every time they left the ground.

It was said of Hubert Latham, another pioneer I met in those famous days in France, that he was so utterly daring that he flew more often than not "with death at his elbow." I remember him telling me how, in one of his early tests with a big monoplane he was then developing, his fifty h.p. motor had acted up suddenly and torn itself right out of the front of the fuselage, leaving him at some height above the ground with no engine at all.

But those pioneers were not dismayed even by things like that. In those days, wings had a habit of coming off. Tail-assemblies might collapse in mid-air. Once, when this happened, by sheer coolness and dexterity, Latham managed to get his machine back to the ground without any injury to himself.

### The Wright Brothers

One memorable evening, at a meeting of our Aeronautical Society in London, a prominent member, Mr. Patrick Alexander, rose and read us a letter he had just received from Wilbur and Orville Wright in America. And it was this let-

ter which brought us the news—which we could hardly believe at that time—that the two brothers had not only designed, built, and flown the world's first practical engine-driven aeroplane, but that they had already succeeded in covering distances of twenty miles and more in free, fully-controlled flight.

Never am I likely to forget my meeting with Wilbur Wright, first real maestro of the air.

After he and Orville had made their first flights in their small one-man plane, they built a couple of larger biplanes, each capable of carrying a passenger as well as pilot, and engined by a motor developing about thirty horsepower. While Orville remained in America with one of these machines, Wilbur brought the other over to Europe, establishing himself in France on an artillery range known as the Camp d'Auvours, not far from Le Mans. And I myself hurried across to France in order to make, as soon as possible, my first personal contact with this famous pioneer.

It was after a weary journey in a slow train from Paris, and a motor drive from the nearest railway station, that I arrived one evening at the airman's camp.

Wilbur's appearance and personality made an immediate and profound impression on me.

### A Great Airman

Slim and somewhat gaunt-looking in figure, he had a lean, weather-beaten face that wore an habitual expression of keen, watchful attention, this being enhanced by a pair of extraordinary piercing hawklike eyes. If I had endeavored to picture to myself beforehand what a great pioneer airman ought to look like, here in Wilbur Wright I should have seen, actually in the flesh, precisely what I might have expected. And not only did he look the part, he was equally quiet and unhurried in everything he did.

His shed, at one side of the artillery range, was partitioned off at one end, and here in this recess I saw that there was a simple truckle-bed, with a couple of chairs and a rough deal table. Wilbur, I learned, had refused all the hospitality offered him at neighboring hotels. When he was not actually flying that pioneer plane of his, he could be found working



on it with his mechanics, and even when night came he liked to sleep right there in his shed, so as to be always near it.

Soon after I arrived that evening, the famous biplane was brought out of its shed and mounted on its starting-rail. There was no haste or excitement about any of these preparations. Wilbur himself walked slowly round that machine, inspecting it with silent, absorbed attention, before he took his place in a leisurely fashion in the pilot's seat.

Even then I heard him call to a mechanic who was standing behind the machine, asking him whether he was quite sure some small adjustment had been made on the engine.

### Check and Double-Check

The man replied with a brief, emphatic "yes." Wilbur sat for a moment without saying anything further. But then he got down slowly from his pilot's seat and himself walked round to the rear of the machine, just to make certain with his own eyes that this particular adjustment had, without any shadow of a doubt, been well and truly made.

It was an object-lesson to me, this, of how great air pioneers like Wilbur, and others, managed to survive all the perils of their early experimental flying. They did so because they avoided taking any unnecessary risks, because they attended personally to every small detail, and because they refused always to be rushed or hurried in any of their precautions before ascending.

The flight Wilbur made that evening was the first I had ever seen in which a man in an engined flying machine really demonstrated, completely and without question, that he was an absolute master of the air.

After the machine had glided away from its starting-rail, Wilbur proceeded to give an aerial display which held us breathless as we stood there beside his shed, gazing up into the tranquil evening sky. Climbing, diving, banking, circling this way and that, the maestro handled his machine with a smooth certainty and precision which had to be seen to be believed.

Twilight was beginning to steal over the range as that big "bird" passed to and fro. Presently, in a swift, steady climb, Wilbur took his machine up to about three hundred feet. Then, coming

round in a wide, smooth turn, he glided down gently through the gathering dusk, landing within a few yards of us in a perfectly-judged descent.

### Air Conqueror

For a moment we stood there silent. There did not seem anything to say. Here, right before our eyes, was man's conquest of the air at last—complete, triumphant! Then cheers suddenly broke out, and Wilbur was greeted with wild enthusiasm as he stepped down slowly from his pilot's seat.

Still quiet and composed, with no tinge of emotion on his immobile face, he responded gravely to our excited congratulations, and then turned to supervise the return of his machine to its shed.

Whenever I think again of the first great air conquerors, and of my meetings with them, there is one figure which always seems to join that of Wilbur Wright as having impressed itself most vividly on my memory. It is that of the great Samuel Franklin Cody—cowboy, hunter, balloonist, kite-inventor, designer of airships and aeroplanes, and perhaps the most picturesque personality flying has ever known.

Today, out on Laffan's Plain, not far from that Royal Aircraft Establishment in which much of British aeronautical research is now done, you can see a dead, withered tree bearing an inscription to the effect that it is "Cody's tree." It was to this very tree, some forty years ago now, that Cody himself tethered that big experimental biplane which had been given the nickname of "Cody's cathedral."

To me, that gaunt, shrunken tree is something far more than just an echo of the past. For away back in our history-making years of 1908 and 1909 I used to spend quite a lot of my time with Cody in his shed and workshop out on the Plain, and with one or the other of his first power-driven planes actually tethered by a length of rope to that very tree.

### An Adventurous Life

Cody was, I think, the most romantic and colorful character I have ever met in my whole life's study of the air.

Sitting with him one summer afternoon near that now famous tree, I can



remember him recalling how, as a youth, the North American settlement where he was then living had been attacked suddenly by marauding Indians. Young Cody had managed to escape by swimming a river. Then he had joined a hunting party, the Chinese cook of which happened to be an adept in building and flying kites.

This had attracted young Cody himself to kite-flying. Soon he was building bigger and better kites than his Chinese mentor—giant box-kites with winged extensions on either side. These kites could exercise such a lift that a string of them, sent up one after another, would raise a man in a small basket-car to a height of one thousand feet or more.

Coming over to England, Cody interested the British War Office in the idea of using his kites to carry up observers for military reconnaissance. And he brought a picturesque "Wild West" atmosphere to the official kite-flying tests on Laffan's Plain by galloping about on a big white horse, wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy's hat.

Cody himself attached immense importance to his big man-lifting kites.

"Remember this, my boy," he said to me one day. "The kite is the father of the aeroplane. Replace the string that pulls the kite by an engine and propeller that will pull a big man-lifting kite into the air, and you have the beginnings of power-driven flight."

### Kite—With a Motor

It was not long before Cody realized his ambition of the big power-kite which was his first motor-driven plane. Based on his kite designs, it was a large biplane with front elevators and a rear rudder, and with ailerons fitted between the wings.

In this machine, one morning in February, 1909, he made what was the first sustained controlled flight in an aeroplane in England. After taxiing away from that famous tree, out across the Plain, he got into the air and flew without touching the ground for a distance of about four hundred yards.

That same afternoon, having had a phone call from him, I went down from London to the Plain and examined the wheel-marks left by his big machine. One could trace just where the biplane had left the ground, and for what dis-

tance it had actually been air-borne. Unfortunately for my friend Cody, that first aeroplane flight was not watched by any official observers, although unofficial watchers testified to the smoothness with which the machine had passed through the air. Being unobserved officially, it could not go down in the Aero Club records. But the honor was Cody's, none the less.

It was only a month or so after this that I found myself perched on the roof of a building on the French coast, a few miles from Calais. In my hand I held a portable telephone, communicating with a room below in which an operator of the Marconi Company was in wireless touch with another colleague across on the British side of the English Channel at Dover.

That twenty-one mile overseas wireless circuit was one of the first ever installed. While I flashed verbal messages via the phone to the operator below, he wirelessly transmitted them immediately across to Dover, where they were then relayed again by phone to newspaper offices in London. Thus the first of anything in the nature of a wireless commentary was accomplished.

### Over the Channel

Below, me on a stretch of open land near the sea, I could see a little 25 h.p. monoplane machine, and as I watched and described what was in progress, I saw that redoubtable pioneer, Louis Bleriot—whom I have already mentioned—walk across from the tent which had housed his machine, and climb up into the pilot's seat, having made up his mind—no matter what the risks might be—to write his name on world history by being the first of all flyers to pilot an aeroplane on an oversea flight from France to England.

Just as he sat down, he peered out across the Channel. Then, turning to his friend Leblanc, who was standing beside the plane, he asked:

"Where is Dover?"

Leblanc waved an arm somewhat vaguely in approximately the right direction, and in a moment or so Bleriot was air-borne, steering out seaward across some sand-dunes on that perilous flight which was to win him fame everlasting.

He had no map, no compass. He just



set off in what he reckoned was the right direction. The little three cylinder air-cooled engine in his plane had never run before for more than about twenty minutes before overheating and losing power. But on this adventure of a first cross-Channel flight, he knew he would have to fly for at least half-an-hour before reaching the English coast. If ever a man took his life in his hands it was Bleriot who did so on that summer's morning in 1909.

But then wasn't he "the man you just can't kill?"

### The Air-Age Dawns

At any rate, Fate was with him that day. Halfway across Channel his little motor began to get hot and bothered, and to lose power quickly. And he himself found that his monoplane was losing height, with the Channel waves rising ominously just beneath. But it was at precisely this moment of crisis that his proverbial luck came to his aid.

A Channel rainstorm blew up suddenly, and the rain cooled the overheated cylinders of that little engine. It picked up power again, and carried him on till he reached the English coast and flew in to a landing near Dover Castle—the first man in the world to pilot a power-driven plane across that famous Channel between France and England. And it was the news of this historic flight, when it flashed round the world, which did more than anything had done before to convince people, everywhere, that the age of the air had dawned at last.

Fifty years of flying! And what may not another half-century bring us—remembering, of course, that even now aeronautical science, and that other science of astronautics, or space-flight, are still in their infancy!

### Here Come the Rockets

When I stood there in France, all those years ago, watching that little pioneer Wright biplane fly, it was ambling along through the air at about

thirty miles an hour. But already a rocket-plane, launched high in the air from a big "mother" craft, had hurtled through the air for a short distance at 1,100 miles an hour.

Among designs already taking shape is one which appeals to me particularly, in view of my interest in both aeroplane and rocket flight. It is for a huge long-range "ship of the air" which, in one and the same monster craft, will provide an ingenious combination of winged flight, as we see it in the aeroplane, and of that wingless rush through the air as illustrated by giant rockets.

Climbing swiftly skyward under the power of its jet-plant until it reaches the fringe of the Earth's atmosphere, this giant machine will then retract or reef its telescopic metal wings and, switching over to a rocket plant needing no intake of air, will ascend still higher until—now wingless like some enormous projectile—it is devouring distance at thousands of miles an hour through outer space itself.

### Next Stop—the Moon!

Then when it has completed, in an hour or so, some globe-girdling flight, it will gradually extend its wings again as it begins to descend, reverting to its jet engines and making a normal aeroplane landing.

It is in further technical developments in rocket design and construction, and more particularly in fuels and power-plants, that we of the British Interplanetary Society foresee the evolution of a huge man-carrying space vessel which will carry its occupants on that great adventure of a first voyage from Earth to Moon.

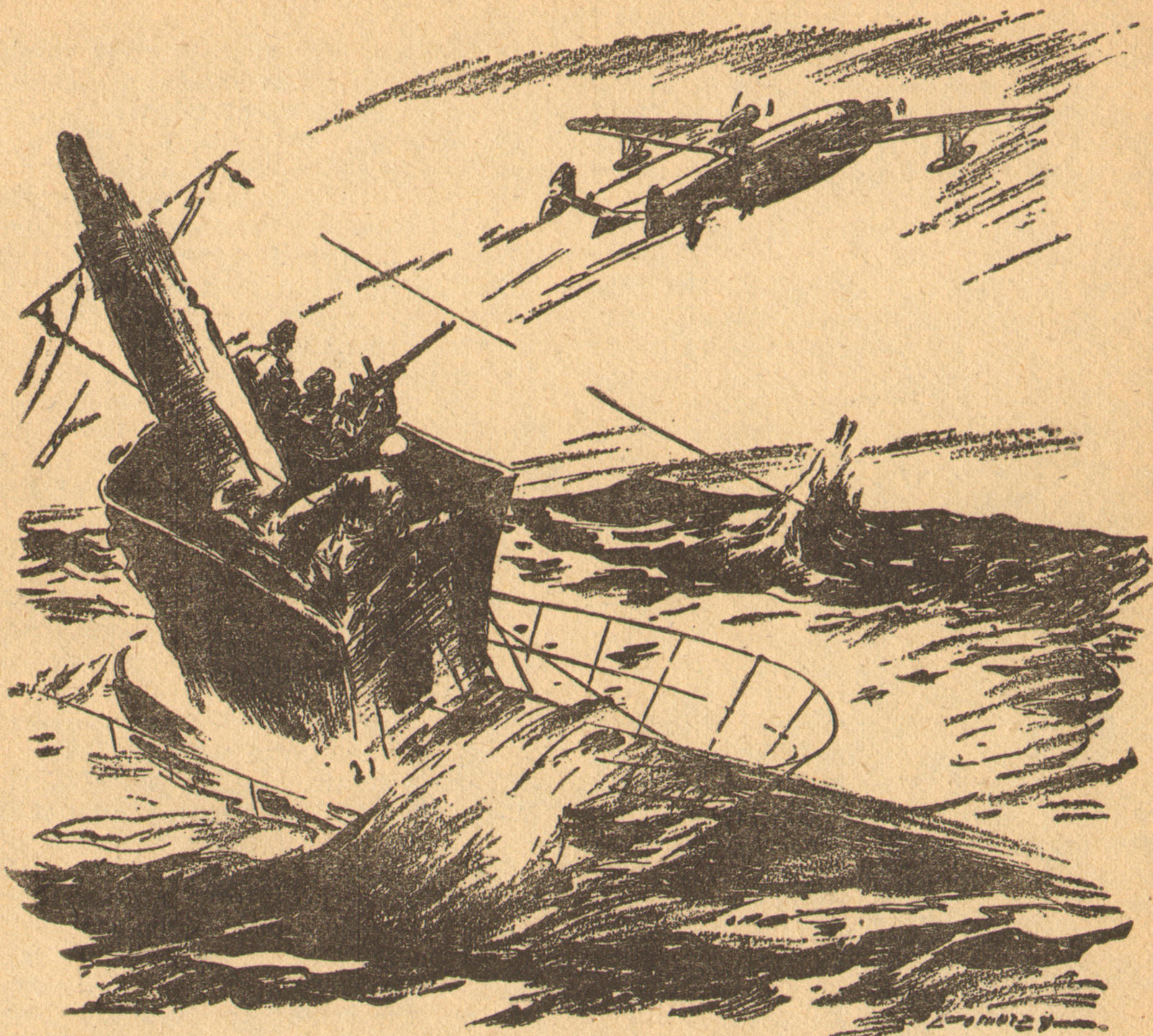
Nor is that all. Far from it. Because the eventual harnessing of atomic energy to super-giant spaceships will make it possible to design vessels of such a size and fuel capacity that their crews can fly out across space on voyages lasting not merely days but weeks—and even taking them for millions of miles to the nearer of the planets, Venus and Mars!

COMING SOON!

## FLAMING BOMBER

An Action-Packed Air Story by JOHANAS L. BOUMA





The gunners were determined to shoot the plane out of the air

# COOK'S TOUR

By DAVID ROBIN

*Boiler maker or baker, Casey Roberts was a cook as far as the Navy was concerned—and that put him in a stew!*

**I**T was a dark, starless night and the weather was foul. At the United States Naval Air Station, King's Point, Bermuda, all was in darkness. Rain dripped steadily from the eaves of the huddled buildings and splashed with a sigh into the virgin mud. It was three o'clock in the morning of January 1, 1943. There was no hilarious happy new year here.

Across the narrow expanse of the Great Sound, the sudden throb of en-

gines drowned the noise of steadily dripping rain as a PBM-3S, Martin Mariner, surged forward through the choppy water and rose uncertainly into the damp, foggy air of the early morning.

In the enlisted men's barracks, Casey Roberts, Cook First Class, turned restlessly in his bunk. The staccato popping of the big boat's engines brought him to full wakefulness as the Mariner passed overhead on departure from the island. Glancing at the luminous hands of his



wristwatch Casey noted the time. In fifteen minutes he was due to be awakened by the barracks watch. Fifteen minutes of precious sleep lost! Why the devil, he thought as he pulled on his socks, couldn't they schedule that flight fifteen minutes later so that Casey could get some sleep?

As he laced his shoes and the Mariner's engines died out in the distance, a faint recollection of a piece of prose he'd learned in high school ran through his mind. . . . "Sleep—the innocent sleep; sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care, balm of hurt minds, sore labor's bath . . ." Aw, phooey!

Casey wasn't particularly literate; the only reason those lines from the Bard stuck in his mind was that Casey adored sleep. As far as he was concerned, the only sense Shakespeare ever made was when he wrote those few words about the beauty of sleep.

He donned his oilskin jacket and slammed his locker door. He could hear another plane being given a pre-flight warmup on the ramp. Stepping out into the darkness he felt the mud ooze up over his shoe tops. Cursing the weather, the United States Navy, and the day he joined the latter, Casey plodded across the sloppy asphalt towards the mess hall.

AS he opened the door and pushed aside the blackout curtain he was greeted by a glare of light, invisible from outside. Row upon row of baking pans were neatly stacked with dough awaiting the ovens which would turn them into bread.

"Join the Navy and see the world," he mimicked the recruiting posters. "Yeah, through an oven door!"

The Mariner on the ramp was now winding up at full throttle. Even inside the mess hall Casey had to shout at his mess cook to be heard.

"Them ovens is cold," he bellowed at the seaman deuce who had caught two weeks of mess cooking because he had mistaken the captain's gig for the liberty boat. "Why don't they gimme somebody with a little brains instead of a bunch of refugees from a captain's mast? How do they expect me to feed five hundred men with nothing but numbskulls to help me? Turn on the oil, Mac, the oil! Them stoves don't run on air y'know!"

In half an hour another crew would be pouring into the mess hall, bound for seventeen hours of adventure, and they would all scream and yell at Casey because the coffee was too hot or too cold, or too weak or too strong, or because the bread was stale. Casey prided himself on his bread. Much as he envied, almost hated, the flight crews for their adventuresome life, he felt a glow of responsibility at keeping them well supplied with fresh bread, the staff of life.

The mess cook had fifty loaves baking, enough to take care of the early flights. Casey peered into the oven door like a mother observing the progress of her flatulent offspring.

"Stale bread, huh?" he mumbled. He'd show those airedales!

Thirty minutes later Casey was drawing the last pan from the oven when he heard the murmur of voices in the mess hall. Then came the inevitable cry.

"Hey, Casey! How about some chow? We fightin' men gotta eat."

"Take a strain, Mac, take a strain!" Casey bellowed. "If you guys thought as much about winnin' this war as you do about feedin' your faces there wouldn't be a sub within a hundred miles of this rock!"

Casey watched longingly as the last aircrewman gulped down his coffee and followed the others through the door. Outside he heard the weapons carrier backfire as the engine started up. Wiping his hands on a towel Casey surveyed the dirty dishes left behind.

In one hour from now the men who had sat here gulping coffee and chewing his freshly-baked bread would be a hundred or more miles away, silent at their stations as the mighty engines bore them steadily through the night toward their rendezvous with some convoy or an unknown "Point Xray" where a Nazi sub had been sighted. He envied these men, more than he would admit, even to himself.

When Casey had walked up to the recruiting office in Dallas a year ago, December 8, 1941, to be exact, he had visions of drama on the high seas. He was a boiler-maker by trade, and he could see himself below decks on some battlewagon, watching the gauges and calmly smoking a cigarette as the mighty leviathan swung about to face the enemy under power Casey Roberts had given her.



But the recruiting office was busy that day and some mistakes were made in the haste of signing on the volunteers who came in droves. The greatest mistake of all, Casey figured, was made by a yeoman who thought Casey had said "baker" instead of "boiler-maker" when asked his civilian profession.

Casey hadn't noticed the error until he arrived at the assignment center in boot camp. But his record was already stamped, approved and mimeographed a hundred times by then. No matter what his profession, he was now a baker as far as the Navy was concerned. Protests were of no avail. Not even when Casey made it known that he couldn't even boil water. He was a cook, baker and general scullery-maid.

Casey took heart when he learned there were cooks on battleships. But, no. An aircraft squadron! Casey hadn't even known the Navy had airplanes. But when he found out, his desire for battleship duty faded. The long-jawed, lanky, sunburned Texan set his heart on becoming an aircrewman.

But time after time he stood before personnel officers, commanding officers and even—once—a chaplain. His lazy blue eyes filled with tears when he heard the same words over and over.

"I'm sorry, Roberts, but your classification is 'cook' and it would take an act of Congress to change it!"

So Casey made coffee and baked bread and learned to give some semblance of life to dehydrated potatoes—and ached his heart out as he saw the gay-hearted "airedales" eat his food and soar away on another rendezvous with adventure in that mysterious three-dimensional battle-ground.

He was smoking a cigarette and watching his bake-ovens when through the cubbyhole opening between the galley and the mess-hall he saw a rain-soaked figure burst through the door.

"Hey, Casey!" the newcomer shouted. "Gimme some chow. I'm late for my hop."

"Shorty" Williams, Aviation Ordnanceman Second-Class, pounded on the table. "Got any chow, Casey?"

Casey shook his head.

"What's that I can smell?" Shorty demanded.

Shorty was so-called because he was six feet in height. He and Casey could easily have passed for brothers. They

had the same lanky build, the same sandy hair and the same blue eyes.

"That's bread," Casey intoned. "Fresh bread."

"Well gimme some of that and a cup of java. I'm late now, Mac, and I'm gonna catch it if Lieutenant Adams catches me comin' aboard as we go over the ramp once more."

CASEY was enjoying his superior position for a change. He actually had an aircrewman—one of the untouchables—begging for a favor.

"Wouldn't advise it, Shorty," said Casey, examining the ash of his cigarette. "Hot bread ain't no good on an empty stummick."

"But I gotta eat, man. Look, we're due over the side in ten minutes. Just let me have a hunk of bread and a cup of joe. That's all I ask."

Casey relented. The seaman deuce was pulling a hot pan from the oven. Casey grabbed a hot loaf in a towel to keep from burning his fingers and tossed it on the table. Shorty pulled out his sheath knife and cut off a third. While Casey poured the air-gunner some coffee, Shorty was gulping down the doughy warmth, copiously laden with butter.

The sound of engines on the ramp suddenly took on a different note. There was a surge of throttles and then a popping noise as the pilot hauled them back. The plane was taxiing to the head of the ramp, ready to be launched. Shorty stopped chewing and listened.

"Holy Smoe!" he ejaculated. "That's Peter Five—that's my hop! I gotta get goin'."

Shorty threw both legs over the bench and grabbed his stomach as he tried to stand up. His face blanched white. Casey leaned down to look at the gunner's paling features. In a flash, he knew what it was. Hot bread! Shorty had acute indigestion from gulping the hot bread.

Casey whirled and yelled at the seaman deuce.

"Hey, you! Call the sick bay and get this guy taken up there right away."

Then a thought struck him. He was Shorty's build—looked a lot like him. Casey hesitated no longer. The Mariner was idling at the head of the ramp.

Turning to the mess cook Casey added, "I'm gonna be gone for a while."



If anybody asks where I am, tell 'em I'm on a cook's tour."

Casey laughed to himself as he ducked into the rain. That was sharp. "Cook's tour!" Not bad. Hang the consequences.

Buckling on Shorty's knife as he ran Casey felt a sense of exhilaration. He was leaving the peas and potatoes and bread behind him. The bread! He blessed the hot bread. He would probably get at least a deck court out of this, but by Jupiter, he had signed in this man's Navy to fight—not to feed!

He would have seventeen hours or so of living—then he'd face his court martial. But Casey Roberts was going to live once. After this he could tell his grandchildren how he flew the Atlantic in World War II—not how he fed the flying Navy.

Peter Five was discernible only by the blue flames flickering from her exhausts as Casey clambered aboard. Unused to boarding an aircraft, Casey fell heavily into the waist hatch. But Jimmie Condo, First Class Ordnanceman, was busy making ready the port sea-anchor and didn't notice that the man who tumbled aboard wasn't Shorty. Without looking up he laid Shorty out, verbally.

"Williams, for criminee sakes, Lieutenant Adams is gonna skin you alive! You shoulda heard what he had to say about you when you didn't show up at briefing!" Condo went on and on, snubbing the sea-anchor line, and giving the absent Williams a dressing down. Casey thoroughly enjoyed it.

Pulling his hair down over his eyes, Casey donned a pair of earphones hanging by the starboard waist hatch to add to his disguise, hoping no one would notice that he wasn't Shorty Williams—at least until the Mariner was airborne. Gazing out the starboard hatch at the faint glow from the beachmaster's flashlight, Casey tried to imagine what he was supposed to do. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Condo, and grabbing a sea-anchor he emulated the gunner. Condo watched him critically.

"We've got a north wind, Shorty, the skipper'll want to turn to port as soon as we leave the ramp to get back far enough for take-off. Don't think you'll need the starboard sea-anchor."

Casey's heart was in his mouth. He hadn't the faintest idea what a sea-anchor was for, anyway. He just thought it looked business-like to fol-

low Condo's example. Now he'd made a mistake and would be found out. But Condo added:

"Don't know, though, never can tell. Might not be a bad idea to stand by with both sea-anchors."

A voice on the earphones drew Condo's attention away from the stowaway cook. It was Adams, the patrol plane commander.

"Flight engineer, stand by to go over the side. After-station, stand by to go over the side."

The interphone crackled again as the flight engineer answered.

"Flight engineer, aye-aye."

Condo, still fussing with the canvas sea-anchor, nodded to Casey. Casey hadn't the faintest idea what he meant; he just stared sideways at Jimmie.

"Acknowledge, you knucklehead! Do you want to sit on the ramp all night?"

Casey's eyes caught sight of a round, dark object hanging on the bulkhead. That must be the microphone. Picking it up, he said. "After-station, aye-aye."

But his voice sounded hollow—empty. Then the p.p.c. spoke again.

"After station, are you ready to go over the side?"

**T**HEN Casey noticed the button on top of the mike. He pressed it and repeated the acknowledgement. This time he could hear his own voice coming back through the earphones.

The plane began to shudder as the pilot applied throttle. The "cat" hooked to the tail roared to life and strained to keep the big flying boat from descending the sloping ramp too fast.

Casey felt another surge of exhilaration as he felt the plane ease into the water and stop. Then came a series of commands from the pilot, which, fortunately, did not concern him, but which gave him an important feeling of being part of an air combat team.

"Cast off aft! Cast off in the bow!"

The beaching gear, held by rubber-suited figures, slid past and the order came to "secure the after station." Casey watched Condo close the hatch and followed suit—though he had a little trouble making the dogs fit securely into position.

"After station secured, sir," Condo barked over the interphone. "Sure you won't want these sea-anchors, Mr. Adams?"



"No sea-anchors, we've got a light wind, Condo. Roger, you're secured. Roger, the bow's secured. Flight engineer, station the men for take-off. We've got gas in the forward hull tank, so give me four men on the flight deck, two in the after bunk room and seven in the waist."

Then followed a flurry of movement which thoroughly bewildered Casey. Five others joined him and Condo in the waist. After what seemed like an endless age, during which time Casey was careful to keep his face hidden, the engines roared and he felt the flying boat surge through the water.

The forward portion of the deck rose, then settled back as the Mariner rode over "on the step." Then, with a few final slaps from wave-tops, the engines took on a hollow echoing sound and Casey knew they were airborne. Let them bring on a deck court! Casey Roberts was flying.

It wasn't till dawn broke, far out over the convoy lanes, that Condo noticed that Shorty Williams was Casey Roberts, the cook. Casey told Jimmie what had happened to Shorty and added:

"I figured he'd get in a jam if he missed his hop so I decided to take his place."

Condo was a good egg, and appreciated Casey's concern for Shorty. As a matter of fact he was glad to have a full complement. Not that Casey would be any great help, but if the skipper should count noses he'd probably think Williams was aboard. And Williams was in hot water for being too late on too many hops and was in danger of being taken out of the crew. And because Jimmie Condo liked Williams a lot he didn't want that to happen. But to make sure, he cautioned Casey to keep pretty well out of sight for the next fourteen hours.

The word got around to the rest of the crew that the cook was aboard and Casey soon found himself standing over the electric stove, brewing coffee. But he was enjoying it, for out of the port-hole he could see the deep blue expanse of the Atlantic, half a mile below. He began to whistle.

It was noon and Casey was beginning to see what the airedales meant about

[Turn page]



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routine patrols being boring. The steady drone of the engines, the endless ocean stretching out far below—it added up to monotony. But he kept hoping.

Casey donned the earphones once more. Nothing but silence. But he left them on—just in case.

Then he heard the radarman's voice, very matter-of-fact.

"Blip at Zero, Five, Zero, seventy miles."

The pilot's calm "Roger" sounded like nothing on earth to Casey. Here was the mysterious radar in action, picking up an object seventy miles away. He looked around, half expecting to see the crew manning their guns and crawling into the bomb bays to check the fuses on the depth charges Condo told him were nestling there.

But Condo, wearing the phones at the opposite hatch, went on calmly smoking a cigarette and reading a dog-eared copy of "Superman." Two others were stretched out on sleeping bags and showed no inclination to move, even if aroused. Casey sat, tensely awaiting a dramatic announcement over the earphones to the effect that they had the Von Tirpitz cornered, but there was no sound other than the steady drone of the two mighty engines and the swish of air over the plane's hull.

Then came another announcement.

"Target now bears Zero, Six, Five, thirty miles."

Then more unendurable silence.

Casey squirmed. He looked out the starboard porthole. Nothing but a glimpse of whitecaps through the broken stratocumulus below them.

"Target now bearing Zero, Seven, Zero, twenty-five miles."

The word "target" set Casey's nerves to jumping. If it was a *target*, why didn't somebody do something? He had no way of knowing that such radar contacts were frequent and might be a whale, an abandoned life raft, or some flotsam from a torpedoed ship. To him a target was a "target."

Then he felt the big ship turning slowly to starboard. The pilot's voice calmly announced, "All hands, man your battle stations!"

Casey fairly jumped with excitement. "Battle stations!" They must *really* have

something now. But Casey had no way of knowing that this, too, was routine procedure, a customary precaution taken each time a patrol bomber sighted an unidentified radar target. To Casey—this was it!

He was disillusioned when Condo stretched out a leg and kicked the nearest of the sleeping crewmen.

"Hey you guys! Man your battle stations!"

THE figures arose, rubbing sleep from their eyes. One, yawning lazily, went aft through the tunnel and took up his station at the tail gun. Condo opened the port waist hatch and folded it inside the plane. Then he began checking the fifty caliber mounted there. A lean little gunner took Casey's headphones and went through the same procedure at the starboard station.

Casey looked on in fascination as the little fellow fed the huge cartridges into the breech and nonchalantly jerked the bolt back twice to throw a live round into the chamber.

Casey's back was to Condo so he couldn't see Jimmie crouching behind the fifty to fire a few test rounds. The unexpected yammering of the big gun and the clinking rattle of empty brass and links hitting the aluminum deck made him jump.

Then he heard the tail gun cut loose as the little man at starboard opened up at the same time. When the roaring stopped in his ears he could hear, as though far away, the twin bow guns yammering also.

The pungent odor of gunsmoke was sweet to his nostrils. The tall Texan hadn't smelled burnt powder since he last hunted jackrabbits while in high school. It smelled even sweeter than hot bread.

Without his earphones Casey couldn't hear whatever it was that made the two men in the waist clamp their headphones tight against their ears and grab their mikes. But their laconic air was gone. Something had happened. Casey saw a vacant headset hanging against a forward bulkhead and he ran to put them on. He was just in time to hear Lieutenant Adams finishing his instructions.

". . . looks like a seven hundred and



fifty tonner. Radio, hit the key—initial contact—get position from navigator. Bow gunner, concentrate on the conning tower. Unless I'm mistaken those are twenty millimeter quads up there—and for all that's holy don't let those Nasties get near that five-inch deck gun! Stand by! Here we go. Bombardier, set the intervalometer to drop in train, thirty feet spacing, one hundred and eighty knots!"

The Mariner went into a diving turn and Casey felt the pull of several times gravity as the big-boat levelled into a steep glide. The rush of air past the open waist hatches was deafening. The waist gunners braced their feet and crouched in their safety belts, guns trained as far aft as possible.

Casey was torn between listening on the interphone and running to the porthole to watch the battle. He decided to do the latter. As he was taking off the earphones he heard Lieutenant Adams again.

"Waist gunners, strafe the livin' daylight out of 'em as we go over!"

As Casey reached the porthole he saw an orange ball flash past streaming smoke—a twenty millimeter tracer. It was not alone.

Then they were into it. He could hear the bow guns open up. No practice bursts, these. Long bursts, short spaces, and longer bursts. Deadly precision. The bow gunner was responsible for clearing the Germans from the gun mounts so the big plane could deliver its load of explosives alongside the fat hull.

A twenty millimeter explosive caught the open starboard bomb bay door. Shrapnel splinters rained like hail on the Mariner's hull. The door flew past, barely missing the twin rudders.

Then a tracer seared its way up through the hull at Casey's feet and the little gunner on the starboard side was a mass of bleeding humanity plastered against the after bulkhead.

Casey grabbed the swivelling machine-gun and took the little fellow's place. No need for a second glance to tell that he was dead. The plane surged upward as the ugly, blunt shapes dropped rapidly in turn from the starboard bomb bay.

[Turn page]

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Though the big plane was making a good one-eighty knots it seemed to Casey that the submarine floated slowly by beneath them. He felt as though he could reach out and touch the figures on the deck below. He did—with fifty caliber slugs. He saw two of Hitler's henchmen jerk spasmodically as their quad-mounted twenties swung wildly away from them. Then they were gone and the sub passed out of sight behind the tail.

Before Casey could catch his breath the pilot had swung the Mariner around and was coming in to unload the port bomb bay. In the turn Casey glanced over his shoulder and through Condo's hatch he could see four patches of dirty-white foam straddling the U-boat. The sub was bow-down—hurt badly.

But her guns were still in commission and her gunners were determined to knock the PBM out of the air before it got close enough to drop again. The twenties arched up slowly, seemingly gathering speed as they came. Four explosive shells hit the big plane at the same instant. The ship shuddered from stem to stern. Shrapnel sprayed the interior. Jimmie Condo went to a sailor's grave as a piece of steel severed his safety belt and he was catapulted out the open waist-hatch, falling, screaming in terror, into the sea.

A HOLE the size of an oil drum had been torn in the plane's hull near the waist. One rudder was stripped of its fabric and the tail gunner was not to fire on this run. Casey heard an explosion up forward. Fear gripped him for the first time since the battle began. Supposing the pilots . . . !

They had—both of them. Peter Five and its crew had mortally wounded a seven hundred and fifty ton German submarine—but not without paying for it.

Casey rushed forward, trying to stand upright as the plane skidded violently. Clambering up on the flight deck he was met by a rush of wind. An explosive shell had ripped through the windshield and exploded in the radio compartment, just aft of the pilots. Both pilots seemed to be asleep. They were—forever.



The navigator, Ensign Starkey, himself bleeding from a shrapnel wound in his right shoulder, was trying to drag Lieutenant Adams' body out of the seat. Casey helped him. The navigator heaved on the yoke and the Mariner levelled off, scant feet above the crests of the waves.

Without a backward look at the submarine, Starkey set course for the setting sun. Compass and gyros and most of the instruments were out. But they were due east of Bermuda and the navigator pointed the ship's nose toward the spot where the downward arching sun would meet the horizon. Then he turned to look at Casey and started to speak.

"We..." He stopped. "Who are you?" he asked Casey.

"I'm a cook, sir," Casey gulped.

"Well I'll be...! Can you fly?"

"A cook? Fly?"

Starkey glanced out at the sea. "Neither can I, brother—but here's where we both learn."

Without mentioning it to one another, they were both fully aware that of the thirteen men who had boarded the PBM that morning, they were the only two alive.

Starkey had washed out of flight training and had been sent to navigator's school. He had never reached the solo stage. That made one of the two who knew something about flying. Besides, Starkey had had plenty of opportunity to observe the pilots handle their ships and he had some idea of what to do. Casey knew absolutely nothing about airplanes except that they flew and it was a miracle that one in particular was still flying.

Fortunately, neither engine had been damaged in the fight with the sub. But with one rudder gone and a big hole in the hull creating terrific drag, no two novices ever had a more unpleasant indoctrination into the art of flying. These things, plus the fact that wind rushing through the shattered windshield carried bits of safety glass with it from time to time, made the return trip to Bermuda dubious as to outcome and—to say the least—extremely unpleasant.

Starkey managed to maintain a few hundred feet of altitude, even with the

[Turn page]

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added drag, but he did not attempt to climb. He had no idea how much fuel they had left, nor whether any had leaked out through shrapnel holes.

Casey sat in the co-pilot's seat and wondered whether he should thank his lucky stars that he was still alive or kick himself for ever coming along on this jaunt. He decided to do both—if they ever got back to Bermuda.

Starkey's wound was not painful, but it was deep and in spite of Casey's attempt at a tourniquet he lost considerable blood. So much so, in fact, that when five dreary hours later the island hove into view on the horizon, Casey found himself contemplating an unconscious navigator.

His first reaction was to try to revive the ensign. But this proved futile and Casey began to give serious thought as to how one went about landing fifty-three thousand pounds of flying boat. The ship had been well trimmed by Starkey before he lapsed into unconsciousness. Casey did not experiment with the controls, but he held the yoke gingerly in his hands ready to jerk back if the ship started in the one direction Casey feared most—down.

As they neared the island Casey broke into a profuse sweat. Staring into the sinking sun and contemplating his unhappy lot, he wished Starkey would regain consciousness. He prodded the navigator once more without result. Then, with his face grimly set, Casey Roberts prepared to do what yesterday he would have given a hundred dollars to try—land an airplane. Unfortunately the longing was no longer with him.

Suddenly, he had an idea. It might work—it was much better than trying to land amid the ships anchored in the narrow confines of Great Sound. But he didn't have much time left. The island was coming up fast and Casey was deathly afraid that once he passed over it he would not be able to turn the plane around without dire consequences.

Beside the navigator's table lay a parachute and harness. He hauled the unconscious Starkey from his seat and began to fasten the 'chute on the limp form. Then he wondered what would happen if he failed to do the right thing after pushing the navigator overboard



in the parachute. He couldn't risk it. He fumbled with the heavy webbing, trying to visualize how a parachute should look fastened to one's chest.

Then another thought struck him. Supposing there were others aboard who were not dead, but, like Starkey, merely unconscious? His quick tour of the plane made him retch, but it convinced him that he and Starkey were the only two who would parachute from the ship.

When he came back on the flight deck he found the plane porpoising slightly. By walking around he had upset the trim. Not wise to the stability of aircraft, this added one more reason to the many why he should make a hasty exit. Most convincing was the sight of the South Shore passing underneath.

Dragging the parachute, he carried the navigator to the waist hatch. Fastening the cumbersome chest-pack to the harness, he gathered Starkey in his arms as well as he could—and jumped. The jerk of the opening 'chute nearly tore the navigator from his grasp. Almost before he could recover his breath from the pain of the too-large leg straps cutting into his groin, Casey in his overburdened parachute went crashing into a clump of cedar trees and into blissful oblivion. . . .

It was two months later. Casey's broken leg, souvenir of his parachute jump, had healed. Ensign Starkey had fully recovered from his wound. They stood side by side on the ramp, crisp in their whites, as the admiral pinned the Distinguished Flying Cross on their tunics. Then Casey was presented with a citation, read before the entire squadron and the assembled company of the Naval Air Station, including all cooks and bakers and mess cooks—a citation for valor in saving Ensign Starkey's life. Then came a final surprise.

The admiral stepped forward and handed Casey a sheet of paper.

"I've been told," said the admiral, "that you feel that being a cook is not suited to your personality. In view of your recent exhibition of bravery, I quite agree. Here, then, are your orders to report to Jacksonville for flight training and subsequent commission as an Ensign."

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Casey smiled sheepishly at the praise, but returned the paper to the admiral.

"I sure appreciate that a lot, admiral," the lanky Texan drawled, "but—but I kinda think I'll stick to makin' bread. From now on all my 'cook's tours' are going to be made in the galley."

## TARMAC TALK

*(Continued from page 8)*

brickbats. But are we happy to get them all? You bet! You know, guys and gals, it's your swell comments and criticism that help us keep the bugs out of SKY FIGHTERS—and make it the fine magazine it is!

Dear Skipper: Well, this is the second time I've written you and once again I have to say that all the stories in the fall issue were great—especially Arch Whitehouse's THE FINAL TEST. But how can any story by Arch Whitehouse be anything but great? I agree 100% with reader Jerry Taylor. How about some World War I stories? And do away with the feature THRILLS IN THE AIR and substitute biographies of famous pilots. And here's a suggestion about your cover paintings. Why not have paintings of famous pilots, planes, historical events in aviation, pre-war racing planes, or—as you used to—World War I dog-fights. I think that these would be much more interesting than having scenes illustrated from your stories. I am open to any letter writers. I am 18 years old.—Art Ronnie, 4639 Maubert Ave., Hollywood 27, Calif.

Some good ideas there, Art!

Dear Skipper: I've been reading your publication for several years, but this is the first time you've heard from me—and then it has to be a gripe. The novelet, THE FINAL TEST, is the peeve promoter. In it the author describes a trainer in the story as being a two place job designed for high-speed acrobatic training. Later he speaks of it being powered with an "unsupercharged Packard Rolls."

A scrutiny of the drawing accompanying the story shows an aircraft of pre-1941 design, with open cockpits (in an advanced trainer?), fixed landing gear (ditto) and a radial engine. And my experience working on Rolls-Royce engines taught me that it is a liquid cooled engine. So much for the griping. Your magazines are invariably very good. The stories of the early war years especially catch my fancy. As for the PLANE PERSONALITY, I'll vote for the Douglas B-26 (formerly A-26) Invader. It was developed late in the war and hence seldom heard of. It was used by the Air National Guard of which I am a member. I have flown these jobs and worked on them many



times. I've had some stick time in the rear pit of T-6s.

I am eighteen and would like to correspond with some other aircraft lovers. Muchas gracias.—*Jack Kresbach, 718 Broadway, Fargo, No. Dakota.*

And the artist who drew that picture you complain of, Jack, is a well known flier. Tsk! Tsk! What he drew, of course, was a Warner-powered primary trainer. A can of low-test gas to the artist! We promise, Jack, to keep our Rolls engines in line in the future.

Dear Skipper: Not too long ago I picked the latest SKY FIGHTERS off the newsstand and tossed two dimes in the general direction of the proprietor. I towed it home and flipped pages. Gaah! No World War I fiction.

Now look here, Skipper, the readers are shoe-lacing upstairs in the old Nieuports, Fokkers, Flying Razors, Dolphins, Camels, Hippos, Schuckerts, and a whole zoo of crates, too numerous to mention, trying to squeeze stories of the first scrap into the pulp, but what do you do? You flick a toothpick into the airstream, waggle your wings, and peel off in your P-51-D's, P-47-N's and Tomahawks, caress the trigger buttons and smile.

[Turn page]

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But, never fear, we in the cloth-covered sticks will soon tap bowden stick triggers and by force of numbers will blast our way into SKY FIGHTERS, wait and see!

Why not put Arch Whitehouse over on some De Havilland zero dash four dash zero zeroes and get him to rip out a few "Casket Crew" stories? Also kick over Joe Archibald's Hispano Suiza and get his Spad a-rollin'. What's the matter with Dave Goodis' and Art Burks' World War I stories? Get those offset props to rockin'. We, the readers, desire World War I stories and that, bad.

As for PLANE PERSONALITY, I cast a vote for the Sopwith Dolphin. In the Dolphin, one sat with a two hundred h.p. Hispano in his lap and twenty gallons of 80 octane at his back. They could fly hands off at 140 m.p.h. and clip grass. Second choice is a Le Rhone powered Sopwith Camel, a good pursuit, but as you probably know, it has a very nasty tendency to flick into a tight right-hand spin without the least warning.

I am fifteen years of age, five foot, ten inches tall and smash the scales at 168. I have brown hair and am a World War I aircraft addict. If anyone should wish any information about any airplane of any series at any time from 1914-18, just dash off a letter and ask, as I have done on 'most any plane from the 1914 BE-2 to the 1918 Sopwith Snipe.—Donald J. Lanoue, 5028 Walnut, Spokane, 12, Wash.

Prop-wash, Donald, about those WW I stories. Prop-wash! No readers— That is—er—ah— Say, maybe you readers really do want World War I stories. Here's another who says so!

Dear Skipper: I think DRAGON IN THE SKY and THE FINAL TEST were swell stories. Keep up the good work. Here's a vote for WW I stories and more about P-38s. How about some pen pals?—Jack Vought, 533 West Second St., Berwick, Penna.

Thanks for your note, Jack. We'll see what we can do.

Dear Skipper: I would like to compliment you on your excellent magazine. There is only one thing wrong with it—you don't feature enough stories about aviatrixes. After all, girls do fly, you know. And I think you should put in an occasional story about one of them.

I'd also like to make a few suggestions, if I may. First, publish SKY FIGHTERS more often. Second, set a page aside and print the names of the new members in your AIRMEN OF AMERICA CLUB. Speaking of that, are girls permitted to join the AIRMEN club? If so—may I join?—Estellie Smith, 448 Seneca St., Buffalo 4, N. Y.

You certainly may, Estellie.

Dear Skipper: How about more World War I stories in SKY FIGHTERS? Let's not forget



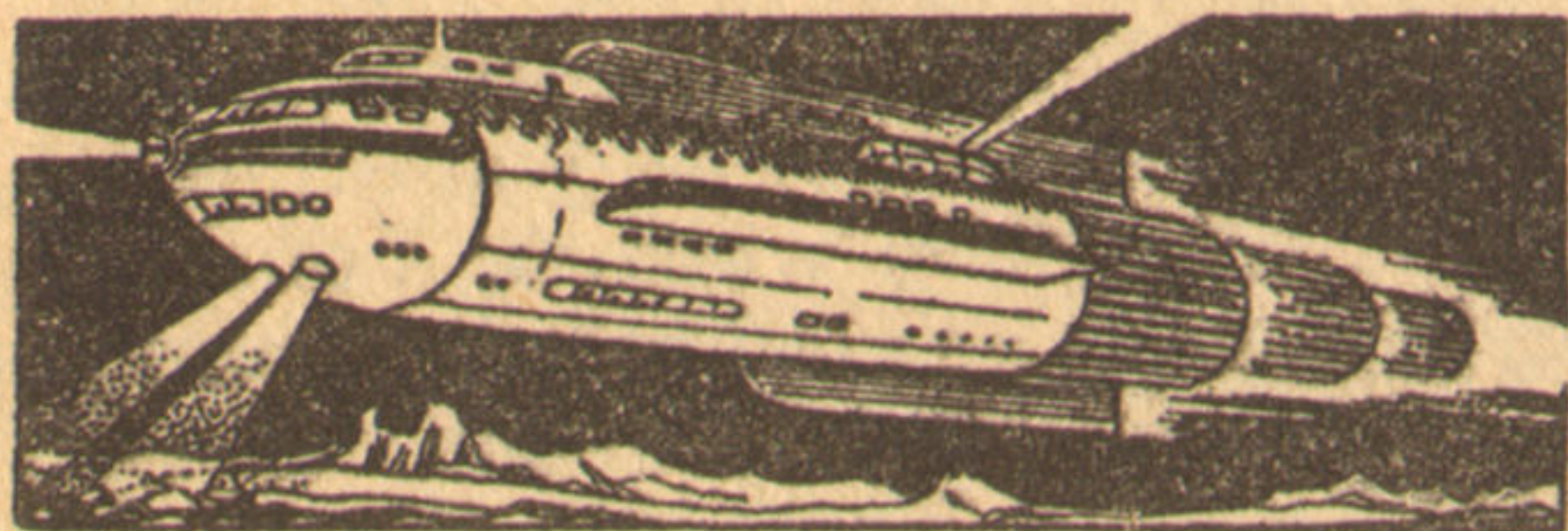
the days when men had to fly by the seat of their pants. When they opened the ship up to a wild speed of 120 to 130. Today a flier has more of a chance to come back from a mission due to the firepower and protecting armor of well-made ships. I wonder what it was like to go up in a ship that had no firepower such as six fifty-caliber and a twenty m.m. When they went up it was with a prayer and two guns firing through the prop. So how about some more of those action-filled World War I stories? —Albert C. Clark, 3583 Nearing St., Toledo 8, Ohio.

You're snowing us under, boys.

Dear Skipper: I just got my first SKY FIGHTERS and I think it is tops among all air magazines. I liked your story THE FINAL TEST best, and wish you would publish more yarns about test pilots. That is what I want to be.—Robert Allen, 10816 Hawthorne Blvd., Lennox, Calif.

Dear Skipper: This is that Hoosier calling in again to report on your fall issue of the great mag, SKY FIGHTERS. Here is how I list your stories in it: 1—THE FINAL TEST. 2—THE LAUNDRY PILOT. 3—FINAL MISSION. 4—THE ICE CURTAIN. 5—GUNNER'S GRIPE. 6—DRAGON IN THE SKY. [Turn page]

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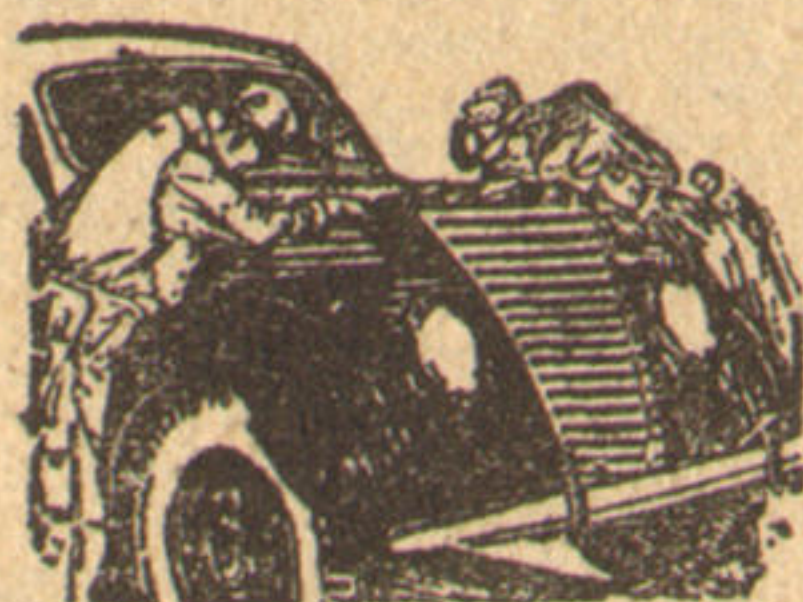
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7—A toss-up between FLIGHT FROM DARKNESS and COPPER WINGS.—Everett L. Stedman, 2042 Central Avenue, Terre Haute, Ind.

Dear Skipper: I am a nineteen year old airman, taking a course in photography in the RCAF. I have been reading SKY FIGHTERS for some time, enjoying every issue. I would like to join AIRMEN OF AMERICA, and will try to answer all the letters I receive from pen pals.—AC Frank H. Watt, 14087, RCAF Station, Rockcliffe, Ottawa, Canada.

And for our last letter this trip, we touch the West Coast.

Dear Skipper: Have read your magazine off and on with a few others mixed in, but there's no denying SKY FIGHTERS comes out on top. I started a scrapbook collection of airplane pictures 'way before the war. Have never really counted the different number, type and variety of craft, but have most of the old type crates, jennys and boxes up to and including the newest foreign and domestic. Have a few pictures of supposedly rare and unusual planes. My vote goes to the workhorse of the Pacific, Mediterranean, the Far East, and Russia—the C-54. The old and faithful B-17 comes in there too.

I was a Sea-Bee in the last engagement, saw action in the Pacific, mainly Okinawa, but also was on Saipan and the Hawaiian Islands. You have a fine bunch of authors—especially Whitehouse and Archibald. I'm certainly not going to even try to name the best story I've read. I'll just call SKY FIGHTERS the best magazine of its kind and let it go at that.—Ted Stanton, 1764 Market St., Salem, Oregon.

Many thanks for your kind words, Ted. We really appreciate them. And our sincere thanks, too, to all you other guys and gals who have written. Your Skipper will always be glad to hear from you. The address? Write me at—SKY FIGHTERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Happy landings!

—THE SKIPPER

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