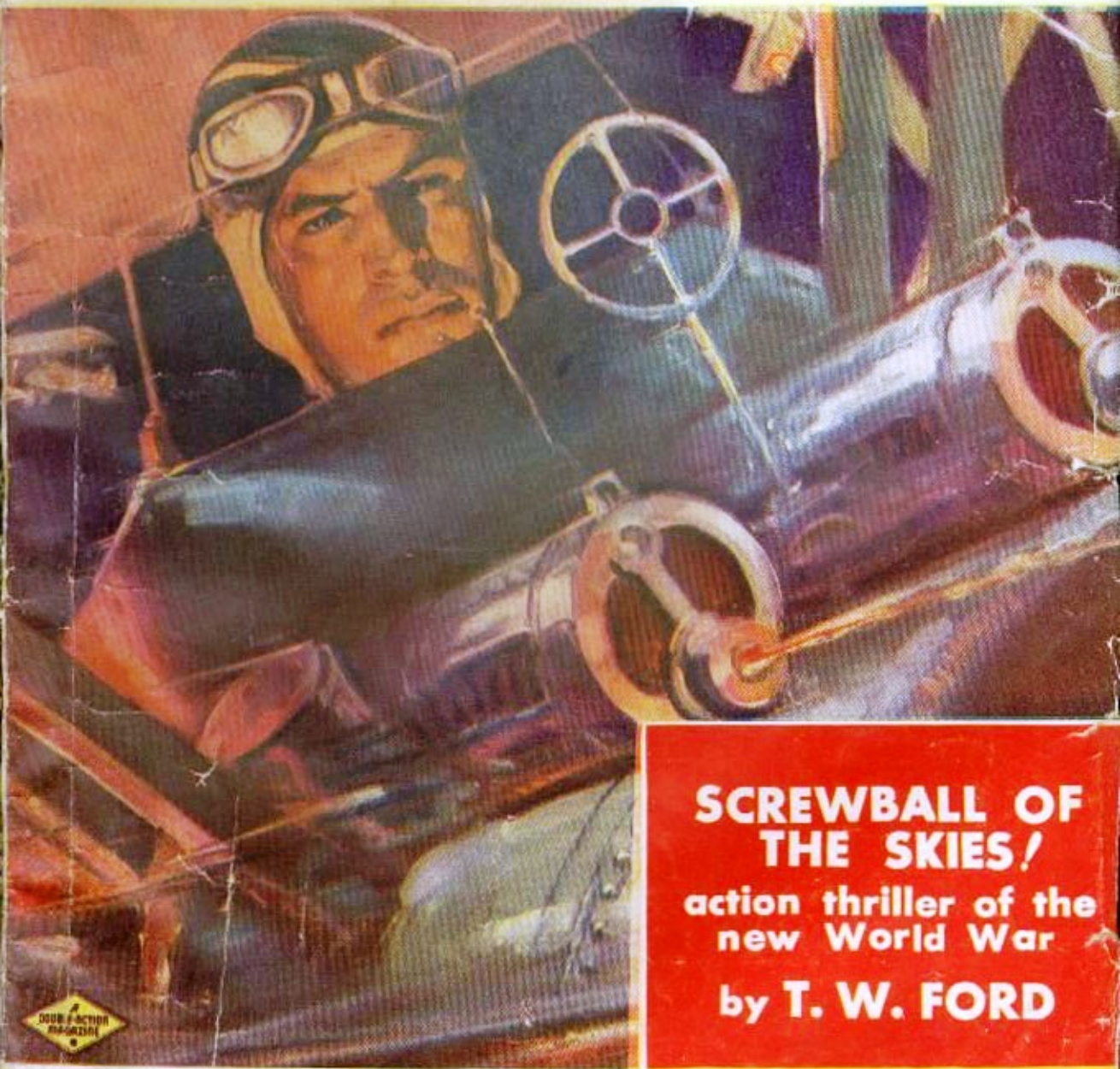


**10¢**

# **SKY RAIDERS**

APRIL



**SCREWBALL OF  
THE SKIES!**

action thriller of the  
new World War

by **T. W. FORD**

**SLAVE OF THE SKY KING**

smash novelet  
by **ERIC ROBER**

DOUBLE ACTION  
PAPERBACK

# GO TO WORK AT ONCE!

## Big Weekly Cash Earnings Waiting Right in Your Locality

Over 500 more men and women will be started at once in a fine paying occupation right in their own home localities. Right now there may be an opening waiting for you in your locality. If so, this old-established company will send everything you need to get started at once—give you all the help you require, and back you with its proven successful plan. This may be "the chance of your life" to be independent—to engage in a pleasant, steady occupation—and to make more than just a modest living for yourself and family.

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If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you; and if we have, you will receive full information about our Local Dealer Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. There will be no obligation on your part. You can decide after you read the Plan. But don't wait—send your Application at once.

### Your Home Will Be Your Headquarters

In this pleasant occupation you will have no outlay of money for store rent, light, fixtures or large stocks of goods. Your home will be your headquarters. You will handle a nationally known line of over 200 time and labor-saving home necessities—fast sellers and quick repeaters—things people must buy. Merely sup-

ply the needs of your regular customers in your locality, handle all the money, and pocket a generous share of every dollar you take in. Furthermore, under my liberal credit plan, you can operate on my capital.

### SEND NO MONEY—Just the Application

Just clip out and mail the Application. It does not obligate you in the slightest and merely tells us that if we have an opening, you will consider this wonderful opportunity to run a highly profitable, all year 'round business of your own. Full particulars will be mailed to you. Then you can decide whether you want to start earning good money at once. But don't delay. Unless you act now you may be missing the very money-making opportunity you have long been looking for. Rush the Application at once!

E. J. MILLS, President  
1637 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

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Clip Out and Mail Today!

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Name .....  
(State whether Mr., Mrs. or Miss)

Address .....

City and State .....

### 2. STATE YOUR AGE, AND PRESENT OR FORMER OCCUPATION:

Age ..... Occupation .....

### 3. HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE?

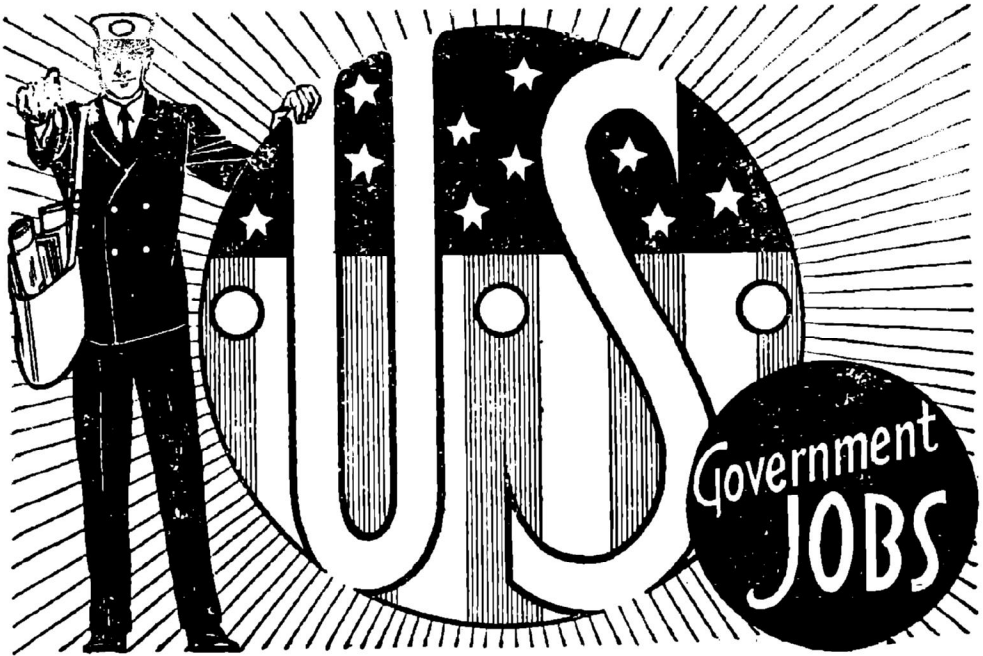
Mark with an "X"  FULL TIME  PART TIME

### 4. CAN YOU START AT ONCE? Mark with an "X" YES NO

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.....

**SEND NO MONEY!**

Just Fill Out and Mail at Once to  
E. J. MILLS, President  
1637 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio



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MEN - - WOMEN**

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MANY APPOINTMENTS EACH YEAR**

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Clerks and carriers now get \$1,700 the first year regular and automatically increase \$100 a year to \$2,100 and \$2,300. Open to men—women, 18 to 45.

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# SKY RAIDERS

Vol. I, No. 6



April, 1940

**SLAVE OF THE SKY KING.....Eric Rober 8**

Baron von Heiller and his staffel of Red Uhlans came hurtling down from the blue to lock wings with the squadron of the Three Horsemen . . . supremacy of the air was to be the victors, and a flaming coffin the losers!

**THE RAINBOW ACE.....William O'Sullivan 26**

A Hurricane almost had Kink Landry stymied, but when he let loose in a Blenheim his squadron mates sat up and took notice of this pilot who had been grounded for cowardice in the face of the enemy!

**SCREWBALL OF THE SKIES.....T. W. Ford 38**

El McCay took as a personal challenge the smashing of his violin and he forgot armies and nations when he threw his Spitfire into the flaming skies to fight a private war against that Nazi hell-hound who had caused the destruction of his beloved instrument!

**WINGS OF CLAY.....Metteau Miles 48**

Lt. Red Fortney flew with a prayer on his lips and fear in his heart, until he heard of the cruel death, or rather murder, of his brother at the guns of the Boche ace, von Krimmer!

**BULLETS FLY FASTER.....Jack Straley 58**

The Men of the 28th pursuit were being sent to die in ambush until Bart Travers sought out that spy-master and sent him to a smoking doom!

**MODERN PURSUITS—PHOOEY!.....The Editor 66**

You take the new ships and I'll take the old ships!

**QUIET ON THE MAGINOT.....Casey Sumter 69**

Hank Weatherby, American pilot with B. E. F., in his search for action starts a little one-man battle that soon involves every pilot and private on the western front!

**PAPER-MADE ACE.....David C. Cooke 78**

Lt. "Knick" Ryan has the monotony of his coastal patrol blasted by the flying fury of the Nazi mine layers, high above the turbulent waters of the English Channel!

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# A Money-Making Opportunity

## for Men of Character

### EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISE FOR

## AN INVENTION EXPECTED TO REPLACE

## A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY

### Costly Work Formerly "Sent Out" by Business Men Now Done by Themselves at a Fraction of the Expense

This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

Forty years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying urged these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—into which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

Not a "Gadget"—  
Nor a "Knick-Knack"—

but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings  
You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays our man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has expense of \$28.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. There are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of  
the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, \$5.83 can be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share can be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 87 cents—on ten dollars' worth \$8.70, on a hundred dollars' worth \$87.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has  
Nothing to Do With  
House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold up the smallest businesses by the thousands.

## EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made \$10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

No Money Need Be Risked

In trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are looking for a business that is not overworked—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—that is a money-maker but does not have any price coming to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get in touch with us at once for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, use the coupon below—but send it right away—no wire if you wish. But do it now. *Adapted*

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Depts. 4013-D, Mobile, Ala.

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**BUT JIM, I CAN'T SEE HOW WE DON'T AFFORD TO MARRY ON YOUR LOW PAY**



**MARY'S RIGHT. I HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK HER TO MARRY ME ON THE MONEY I'M MAKING**



**LOOK HERE, M.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I SWEET I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK**



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**YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER**

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**OH JIM, IT'S WONDERFUL. NOW YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS**

**YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN RADIO AND TELEVISION**

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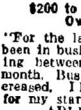
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"Before completing half the N. R. I. Course I was servicing sets and I made \$1,000 to \$1,200 before graduating. I am doing Radio service work for myself now."

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Radio is a young, growing field with a future, offering many good pay spare time and full time job opportunities. And you don't have to give up your present job to become a Radio Technician. I train you right at home in your spare time.

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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and service men. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

**Many Make \$5, \$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning**

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make \$200 to \$500 a year in spare time while learning. I send

special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.



**J. E. SMITH, Pres. National Radio Institute**  
Est. 25 years

**Find Out What Radio Offers You Act Today!** Mail the coupon for my 64-page Book "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my course in Radio and Television; shows many letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

**J. E. Smith, President**  
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Washington, D. C.

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**THIS BOOK has shown hundreds how to MAKE MORE MONEY**

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Maybe you're one of those ever hoping for "breaks" that will give you a higher standard of living. Yet that's precisely what most of 30,000,000 other employees in this country are doing.

Not all of them, of course. Here and there you find ambitious men who aren't depending on luck to carry them ahead. They're following a tested path to increased earnings—leaving nothing to mere chance. They're *training* themselves for better jobs—every week spending a few hours in serious but interesting study at home.

Some day, as expert bookkeepers and later as accountants, these determined men will have standing and a considerably larger income—in a profession that pays and pays well.

Why don't you do as they are doing—take advantage of LaSalle training? Even though you do not know the fundamentals of bookkeeping now—you nevertheless may have an excellent opportunity to master accountancy. Many others have done it.

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Ask rather, "If I do my part, won't I get results, too?"

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Later, when you're an accountant, it may be possible to go into business for yourself as a public accountant and be independent. Or, if you choose to work for someone else as an executive accountant, it well may be for a salary several times that which you draw now.

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If you're tired of pinching pennies, investigate accountancy and LaSalle training. There isn't a faster, less expensive or more convenient method to master accountancy. Fill in the coupon and mail. We'll send you our 64-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays."

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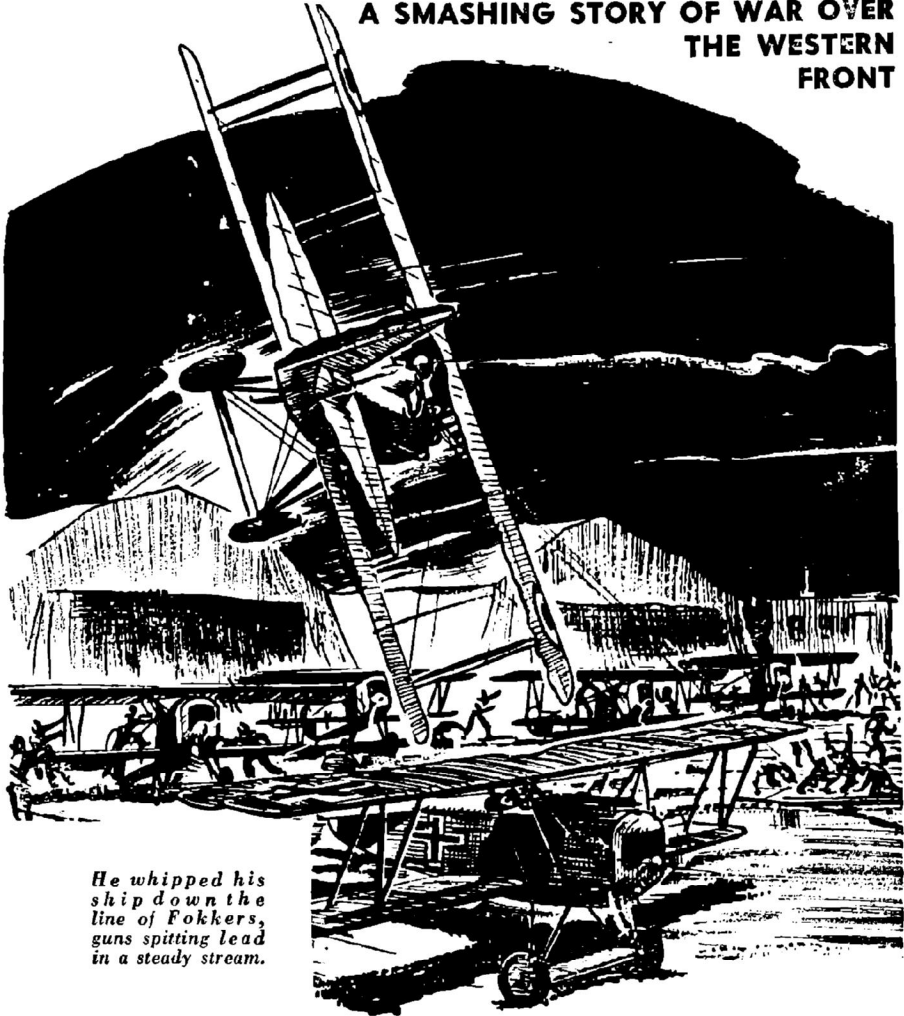
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Present Position . . . . . Age . . . . .

Address . . . . . City . . . . .

# SLAVE OF THE

A SMASHING STORY OF WAR OVER  
THE WESTERN  
FRONT



*He whipped his ship down the line of Fokkers, guns spitting lead in a steady stream.*

**I**T was a few minutes before the dawn patrol of the great Red Uhlans *jagd-staffel*, led by that sky-blasting devil, Captain the Baron von Heiller himself, would roar into the skies. A drab morning of early April with the jaundiced stripe of dawn cresting the horizon yet beautiful, too, somehow with the perfume of the lilacs of France on the air. Around the crumbling masonry of the ancient chateau that served as a barracks for the squadron,

the shades of the original viscount owner and his guests of yore seemed to stir in the ground mist. And through the file of poplars that bounded the tarmac below came the metallic snarl of these modern projectiles of destruction, the waiting Fokkers tuning up. But they'd have to wait a few minutes more. The Red Uhlans were escorting one of their comrades on his last flight.

A muffled drum beat slowly, hollowly.



# SKY KING

by  
ERIC ROBER

Baron von Heiller and his staffel of Red Uhlans came hurtling down from the blue, to lock wings with the squadron of the Three Horsemen . . . supremacy of the air was to be the victors, and a flaming coffin the loser!



Down the steps of the main entrance of the turreted chateau, a little cavalcade of uniformed men moved, bareheaded, hands clasped before them. Four of them supported a plain, flag-draped coffin on rigid shoulders. In that bier lay the body of *Unterleutnant* Hermann Adolph Sarbach, killed in action the day before. And in front of it walked heavily a spindling-legged man with a tremendous barrel of a chest and a shattered spar of a pro-

pellor clasped in his arms.

That man, with the shoulders of a Titan foisted on the frame of a dwarf, was Captain Baron von Heiller, christened the "Sky King" up and down the front, himself. He was also the father of boyish Hermann Sarbach, the dead flier, though nobody there suspected that.

Passing through a wan beam of light that filtered through the trees, it seemed as if the baron's thin legs trembled, as if his

hands clawed spasmodically into the splinter of that propeller that was from Hermann's ship. Then he was the iron man again that his command knew, could never imagine pulsing to any passion but sheer, blasting fury. He led the way through the formal gardens, now over-run, down a little road thick with damp leaf-mold, and across the flags to the tiny basin where the graystone mausoleum crouched. The heavy rusted iron door stood open, ready.

It was the burial crypt of the ancestral family of d' Olivier, the one-time owners of the chateau. French, of course. But Germans had seized possession of that part of France before. And now, laying him among the French dead already there, it was the baron's oath to himself never to retreat beyond that piece of earth, no matter what happened.

A hidden bugle wailed the Last Taps out among the trees. Moisture dripped from the leaves. The baron nodded stiffly, stepped aside. The casket was carried into the gloom of the interior. The pall-bearers emerged, came to rigid salute with the rest of the handful of hard-bitten pilots that remained of the great Red Uhlans. Captain the baron stepped inside with the propeller splinter.

A cock crowed long and lustily in the distance. Outside the chateau gates, a bicycle courier unknowingly blasphemed as he whistled the latest naughty song hit from Berlin in passing. When von Heiller came to the crypt portal, his high-shaven, ugly, bumpy head was bent. And what might have been a suspended tear clouded the lens of his monocle.

Then he moved back toward the chateau on those ridiculous splinters of legs. Valbein, flight-commander, swung beside him and asked him if he could take the dawn flight out for the baron. The baron always did that little chore.

"I will meet you on the field in a minute," von Heiller murmured.

ON the chateau steps, he paused, saluted the spot where the vault stood, listened to the rackety-rack of the Fokkers' Mercedes engines a long moment. It would be his last salute and the last time he heard the Fokkers chortle. He went in and down to his suite in the north wing of the great place, locking the door after him.

His movements were sure, unhesitant, decisive. He'd rehearsed them mentally too well. Before the full length mirror covering one end of the bedroom, he surveyed himself, jerked his *Jeld-grau* tunic smoother on the side, keeping his eyes off those pins of legs. He met his own gaze fearlessly, faced the round, splay-jawed, high-blooded face a full moment. Next, he moved to the dressing table and looked away as he turned down an old, brown-tinted portrait of a beautiful girl. She mustn't see. He took a full, unhurried breath that swelled the chest that belonged to a monster, then drew his Luger automatic. With sure fingers, he snapped off the safety catch.

There was a photograph of The Emperor on the wall. Von Heiller came to attention before it, fingered the black-and-white ribbon indicative of the Iron Cross in the buttonhole of his tunic. Then the Luger muzzle went firmly against his right temple, just above the monocle.

A rap on the door of the suite. It was Heinrich, his personal orderly. Heinrich who had been a servant on his father's bankrupt barony back in the Carpathians, who'd been there when the captain himself was born. Heinrich, withered, with the cast in one eye, and a face that seemed to have gone beyond a matter of life and death.

The baron's curt "*Was ist?*"

Heinrich's voice was like a gentle scratching. "*Nicht wahr . . . nicht wahr . . .* you do not die today, Baron . . . *nicht wahr* — not so!"

Von Heiller stood frozen until he heard the other's steps clicking away. His lips jerked in a bitter smile. He pulled the

trigger. It wouldn't snap under his finger. He crushed hard against it. His hands were strong. The gun would not go off. *Would—not—fire!*

Shaking now, great studs of sweat popping on his brow, he jerked the gun down and inspected it. It was loaded all right. Nobody had tampered with it, he could see. It was simply a case of the gun jamming as an automatic sometimes will. He was alive—had failed to die. . . . .

Then, he *was* shaken. His very intestines seemed to nose-dive from his body. He staggered to a chair built for a 17th Century bishop and rocked into it as one of his spindling legs gave away. Half sitting, half slumped to the carpet, he lay panting and thinking.

That *verdant* Heinrich had been right again. Heinrich with his second sight. Right as he always had been.

**G**REEN-JOWLED, jammed gun sagging from a limp hand, the baron's thoughts went back. Back. And it was always the same story. A lifehood of it. Thwarted. Frustrated. Time and again. And again. How his father had been struck penniless almost at the hour of his birth. And, then, in his youth that fall from a horse that had almost crippled his legs and shrivelled them so he had been near a monstrosity. And that had choked off his military career. For the legs had never become strong enough to give him a decent seat on a horse again. And they were so weak he could not march far nor well, impressively. What use, what respect could a regiment have for an officer who could barely walk.

Then—his sick eyes turned to the portrait of the girl he'd turned down. Sophie a girl. *The* girl. The first woman who had looked at him and forgotten those absurd underpinnings. Her family had tried to prevent their betrothal. There had been two cruel years. Then, just as her parents'

consent was being won, she had died in premature childbirth.

Von Heiller's broad chin shook at the memory and the monocle fell from his eye and shattered in tiny splinters on the floor.

Yes, that was the tale, a bitter one. And always in the background had been Heinrich, the family retainer, faithful and true, but always predicting. Predicting with the second sight the mountain folk said that cast gave him. Predicting each one of the disastrous events from his birth.

Then — the war. And — the airplane! *Ach, Gott*, the plane! What it had meant to Joachim Franz Maria von und zu Heiller only God himself could ever know. It had given him legs, legs to streak across the sky in for the legs he lacked on the ground. It is only a short distance to walk to get into a cockpit. Once there, it takes little pressure to guide the rudder bar. Yes, winged legs it had been for him! Legs to free him from the prison of life!

He'd risen swiftly. A crack *steigerkadet*. An ace in record time. A flight leader. They began to call him one of the greats, with Boelcke and Immelmann and even von Richthofen himself. Then — his own *jagdstaffel* with picked pilots and its own name. The Uhlans, Red Uhlans, who rode roughshod through war skies.

And had come what seemed the greatest stroke of fortune of it all in this new tide of his life. His unrevealed son, Hermann, had been sent to his command. The boy himself had never known. It would be wonderful.

**B**UT the boy's very coming seemed to have overbrimmed the cup. The "Sky King's" prowess had seemed to slip. Casualties in his squadron mounted, then leaped, as victories lessened.

Of course, it might have been put down to that new *Amerikaner* pursuit group that had taken over in the opposite sector. The 177th, the Green Hornets, as they dubbed themselves. And to three of them in par-

ticular, the trio who became known as the "Three Horsemen." The thought of them made the baron's teeth grind. Yes, the three who flew and struck as one man, almost inhumanly so. Something unearthly about it. *Gott, ja!*

He even knew one. The flight leader. The one who flew with the red stocking wrapped around his long neck. He'd had a glimpse of him up there hanging in a whipstall, a dark-faced one with a mouth that twisted up in a sort of mad smile at one end. Afterward, he'd learned his name, by chance. Tagger.

Yes, those *Amerikaner* pilots had something to do with it. Things had gotten worse. A week ago, the baron had walked his *jugdstaffel* right into a trap so intent had he been on keeping guard over his boy, Hermann. It had been bad. The squadron roster decimated. Many ships lost. Even now a new bunch from the flying pool were en route up as replacements.

Then had happened — yesterday — the thing that proved it was his old Fate overtaking him. There had been a dogfight. Not even with the cursed American Green Hornets. The French *Cicoignes*, it had been. And they'd been blasting those Frenchmen when the blow had fallen. Sledging down, the baron's landing gear had raked into the upper wing panel of one of his own ships slicing upward. Grabbed and caught a moment. And then the whole wing bank of the lower plane had torn off to send the ship spinning madly to its doom. That ship had been his son's, Hermann's.

*Gott*, what a curse! He had slain his own blood. And just before he had taken off that very day, handing him his snort of schnapps, Heinrich had said that "one must be careful of one's own today, *mein Herr*."

Yes, the curse that —

A gentle rap on the door. Heinrich's soft tone. "Your schnapps, Herr Baron!"

Von Heiller leaped up. That was it. He

would cheat that curse, prove Heinrich wrong. There were ways that could not fail in the sky there upstairs. And ways of seeing that one took a few of the enemy to Hell with one.

**B**UCKLING on his flying coat, he strode out. In one jolt, he put down the belt of schnapps Heinrich had ready, took his proffered gauntlets, jerked them on, then accepted helmet and goggles. On the flimsy legs he went down the steps and toward the tarmac.

Beware, you *Amerikaner* Green Hornets. And especially you Three Horsemen of them! The Sky King was donning his winged heels for a sky prowl the like of which would never be seen! No curse was going to stop him this time. There was a way of taking a man out of that sky, of taking him out to equal the score for Hermann. A way that couldn't fail.

And if it should be one of the Three Horsemen . . . especially that leader, Tagger — *Gott im Himmel!* The baron began to run clumsily toward his Fokker D-7. Let Hades get ready for the last of the von Heillers, with a guest!

The Baby was worried. Not that he was superstitious. But you got to believing in signs and luck charms up here near the Meuse. Slam-banging wings around the face of Heaven every day didn't make you want to become an angel. And if a guy had something that brought him good fortune — well, he needed it and plenty upstairs.

"The Baby" was apple-cheeked, soft-brown-eyed, little Lieutenant Dinsworth McCready Nobbs of the American 177th Pursuit, the Green Hornets, and more particularly, one of that trio known as the "Three Horsemen." He, Strutter Hastings and Jim Tagger himself. And The Baby was worried because somehow Tagger was taking off minus the red sock he always wore around his neck.

The Hissos of the Spads were blasting and snorting along the line of the landing-T. Flight Leader Jim Tagger's arm had already shot up to sign for the take-off, the jerking of chocks. The blue-gray ships with the green hornet insignia on the side were quivering and edging forward. And behind, back near one of the tent hangars, The Baby had just caught a glimpse of Tagger's stocking, somehow dropped.

The Baby screamed futilely, tried to catch Tagger's attention over to the right by waving, half-rising in the cramped cockpit. But the flight commander's streamers from Jim Tagger's helmet were already beginning to trail out as his crate horsed out into the van and down the field. It was too late. The Baby got that dank lump of fear in the bottom of his guts. But maybe he was getting old-womanish. He always got that feeling when they headed for upstairs. He was a little afraid but winged despite it. It was the dark-faced, soft-voiced Jim Tagger who gave him the courage to carry on always.

**T**HE first plane bucketed off. Then the second, climbing hard on the leader's tail, ready and eager to drop in at the number one spot on the right side of the echelon. That second was Strutter Hastings. A big, swaggering hunk of man-flesh, Hastings. Always ready to roar a laugh from under the handsome black mustache, bulging balls of eyes a-grin. He had the body of a tiger and was just as confident as one. A man who could slug down his cognac or engage in an *estaminet* brawl or sled into the skies with the best of them and bragging of it quite frankly as he strutted along. He was the picture of a true killer with big white teeth that could bare in a snarling line when he struck.

But as he kicked the gun-trips to test the air-lined Vickers before him and fell in at six thousand, there was a grimness about his face and a little envy as he eyed the

back of Jim Tagger just ahead. Strutter spat into the slipstream of his prop. Tagger had just one more in his victory bag now, twelve, than he did. A little luck today, and he'd get one and be even with Jim Tagger. Maybe that would still some of the everlasting chatter about what a great wing-rider Jim Tagger was, how he was responsible for the sensational success of the Hornets. Strutter Hastings was jealous.

A waggle of the wings and the flight leader had given the signal and they swung southeast on the first leg of their dawn patrol triangle. Six little Spads with the hornet in green on their fire walls in a V behind him, Jim Tagger thought. The cocky, powerful Strutter just off on his right. The nervous but desperate-daring Baby on the left. Tagger drew a last puff on his cigaret behind the isinglass windshield, spat it overside, then went to tighten the muffler at his neck. For the first time, he realized it wasn't there, that red stocking a girl had stripped off and thrown at him the day they landed, that he always wore a-wing.

It gave him a chill feeling of portent for a moment. He shrugged it off with that twist-up of the mouth end in the crazy little smile. Suppose it did mean ill-luck? What difference? He didn't fly to live. Not that he wanted to die. But when it was over, when the flying was done, there'd be no place back there for Jim Tagger to go.

**H**E settled a little deeper behind his stick, shrewd, crescent-shaped eyes roving the horizon, the skies, checking on landmarks beneath. His 220 Hisso began to stutter a little. He goosed it and it steadied just as his glance went to the instrument board. Jim Tagger wasn't a big man. He was a little bit on the thin side, as a matter of fact. But men didn't notice that, his body, when they met him.

It was that dark, guarded pall that seemed to hang over his face. When he smiled, it was from behind it. It was a

brooding something like a shadow out of his past, a shadow he would always walk under. For Jim Tagger was an escaped convict.

It had been a fight, back when he was barely more than a kid working on a farm. Over a girl, of course. Jim had been defending her. And using only his bare hands. He hadn't meant to kill the other man. But it had been a savage strife, no holds barred, in a chanting, jeering circle on a river bank by torchlight. The other had died afterward, hours after the bleeding, battered Jim had risen from beside him to stagger away, half dead himself. And then he'd been convicted and sent to that Western state prison farm.

Any prison does things to a man. But that farm prison had been a lot worse. And it had been even worse for a man like Jim. Because it had cornered him, put him behind bars, locked up something inside him that had to ride free. And the day a guard out in the fields got careless, that thing spoke and Jim was over a levee and thrashing like an animal in belly-deep water and rushes.

Somehow, he'd slipped over the Border. Joined the R.A.F. And in England, he'd managed to transfer to an American squadron, the Hornets. Now, this war, riding wings, was his road to freedom as long as it lasted.

He gloved an oil smear from his goggles, then shoved them up completely. Slipstream dug at his flat brown hair. Two ships were hovering low down to the left. He wagged his wings, then recognized them as a pair of lumbering British obs buses, Handley-Page two-seaters.

They came to the first corner of the patrol triangle, banked sharply, and cruised north above a silver-shimmering serpent of stream. Tagger twisted around for a look back, nodding at The Baby and Strutter, raising a gloved fist. Strange, how they'd come together, come to earn that title of the "Three Horsemen."

On their very first flight out as kiwis over the lines, the three had become lost from the main bunch. Practically strangers to each other, they'd clung together, floundered over Boche land, gotten entangled in a dogfight, run into a pea soup from the North Sea, and somehow flopped down after given up for lost on a Limey drome not ten kilos from their own. The chain of Fate had been forged then.

**E**ACH felt he was a piece of the pattern of the destiny of the others. It was like some psychic bond girding them, drawing them closer. In the air, it knit them with something akin to a mental telepathy. They came so they could fight almost as one, as if the same hands guided the controls of their three ships, as if each knew the moves the other two would make instantaneously. As a unit, they would pile into an enemy flight. And as a unit, swirling and zooming and plunging, they would scythe through it and come out together. Let one get trapped, and the other pair, virtually with eyes in the backs of their heads, were knifing to his rescue. It was uncanny—and damned tough on the Boche wingmen. The deadly-reckless Tagger. The swaggering slugger, Strutter Hastings. The frightened but gallantly-game Baby. Three — yet one.

And when it was over—when those wings were taken away from him—Jim Tagger went rigid against his crashpad. Tracers from one of the men behind on the left drew furry streaks past his wing panels. Warning. Then he saw them. Whipping from behind that cumulus formation to the northeast. A fleet of bloody red Fokkers, roaring toward them like the crimson hounds of hell! The Sky King, von Heiller, and his Red Uhlans!

The Spads weren't trapped. For it was strange; the usually cagy von Heiller was striking without the advantage of altitude. In fact, the Fokker flight was half a thousand lower.

Signalling, every inch of him icily cool with that dead calm of a man who knows his doom waits behind him anyway, Tagger swung his flight in a climbing bank. Sun flushing wanly through the leaden ceiling flickered on the fuselages of the Spads curling up like a wave coming to crest. Von Heiller's Uhlans came booming in a sharp, twisting chandelle, the Spandau machine guns already beginning to thread the skyways with tracer thread from some of the Fokkers. Above, one of the Spads signalled engine trouble and turned out.

Tagger, darkly sombre face somehow giving the lie to itself with that half smile, whipped his Spad over into the dive, Hisso blasting full-gunned. In a moment now. . . .

**C**APTAIN the Baron, the Sky King, was arrowing up. Just like an arrow—a weapon, his ship now. In a moment, his hands would squeeze the firing levers of those twin Spandaus. But they weren't too important this time. Because he was going to crash his red ship flush into the spearhead of that Green Hornet attack. Crash them and take that Tagger, and maybe one or both of the other Three Horsemen, with him. That was the way he would go out. He would out-curse the curse.

A break in that storming roar from the engine hoods before him smote his ears. It came again. Then his up-rearing ship staggered, broke in its rise. Fiercely the baron's hands slammed at the gun, goosed the Mercedes. But he could see the prop slow before his stricken eyes.

He couldn't, wouldn't believe it. Then his red crate began to sag over on its back. In a demonic fury, the baron ripped at his controls, blurted oaths, banged wildly at instrument dials. And he was falling. The curse had struck again. His engine had conked out, unhit, for no apparent reason, even as he sought to ride it to his escape from a worse destruction.

His legs of the sky — his wings — had collapsed under him. Mechanically, he

straightened the Fokker as it started a spin, banked slowly eastward, and guided it down in a long slant, great tears of bitterness clouding his goggles. Twice more, heavily, he attempted to kick the Mercedes into life. In vain. Von Heiller sledded earthward.

He didn't even bother looking back at the battle above him. A bullet in the back would be mercy now. He was powerless. The curse had him whipped. His great shoulders sagged as he noted the passing of the crawling line that was a trench below his wings. All fury was crushed from him. No man could battle a destiny that had him marked.

But his tortured mind worked. Twisted. Gnawed with the sly insanity of a cornered thing for escape. There were long, horrible minutes in which no man but the baron himself could know what went on inside him. And when he finally let his ship bump past the wreckage of a barn in a bush-grown field behind the German lines, he was not the same von Heiller any more.

In a quiet, locked-in, suspicious way, he was insane. . . . .

Above, the Three Horsemen were blasting into that Red Ulan flight. Tagger, on the dive, had had a bullet, caroming off the nacelle before him, pluck at his helmet. The queer, not quite human grin plucked at the corner of his dark face. Then he was screaming in a wicked bank out of that dive, furrowing Vickers spawn into the camel back of the Fokker that tried to twist away from his blast. The Boche arced in a tight loop.

Fast as the flick of a whip, Spad empenage quivering from the strain, Tagger had yanked his bus into a whipstall. Another Fokker, flashing past below, hammered at his tail assembly with desperate Spandaus. But the implacable Tagger paid no heed. His hand gave the pressure to the Bowden controls of the Vickers. And the Fokker trapped above in his ring sight was slashed with the lead whip of his slugs. The up-side-

down Boche pilot jerked in ugly agony in his pit as the lead probed him out.

Out of an Immelmann, another crimson D-7 slashed to his mate's relief, knifing straight at Tagger's vertical back. But The Baby, almost as if he'd heard a voice, yanked his ship from the vicious circle of tag he was playing with another of the Uhlans and lanced for the man attacking his leader.

A moment later, one Fokker was riding crazily southward, a slumped pilot's head wobbling on the crashpad, smoke pouring from the engine hoods. The forced dropping-out of their great leader had taken the heart from the Red Uhlans. A captain pulled out and gave the "withdraw" signal with a Very pistol. It was a little absurd. Morale badly strained, the famed Uhlans were already scattered and on the retreat.

Tagger jerked around in his pit, dodging away from a severed load wire, to size up the situation. A Fokker had a tail of flame down the way. Below and a little behind, Tex Murnoy had a shoulder wound but was waving that he could take himself home. The battle had carried them well behind the Boche lines. A.A. puffs were blooming around. But it was a chance hard to forego with the enemy on the run. The Hornets had a few scores to even with those Uhlans.

Jim Tagger waved his men on.

They piled in on those fleeing Fokkers' tails. Sledding from below after a short dive, Strutter Hastings was hammering hell out of the belly of a wobbling Boche job. Spandau slugs bored through Tagger's isinglass windshield from behind. He fish-tailed, rolled, and screamed in a bank to get on his man's tail. But the latter was already on the climb in retreat.

Then it happened. Out of a cloud rack they came, Albatrosses with the Maltese Crosses of the Germans on their wings like scars. Down from the north and swirling in from behind. A full dozen of them. Thickening soup rolling in from the North Sea

had screened their approach. The tables were turned.

Tagger spotted them and flipped over on his tail, rolling upside again to meet them. Miraculously, out of nowhere, The Baby and Strutter take form on his flanks. The crazy smile touched the convict's mouth corner. This was going to be a fight. Not for himself. But to get his flight back. And as he spearheaded in behind racketing Hisso, nacelle bucking to the recoil of his Vickers guns, his left wing tip hopped up, waggled a little. It was like a mocking salute, a gesture of bravado. It was a trick of Jim Tagger's whenever he went in to buck odds up there in the skyways. A well-known trick.

Then he was in the maelstrom of it, he and the other two Horsemen. The hounded Uhlan Fokkers turned. The vengeful Albatrosses danced in. The handful of Yanks, five, had to cut their way through.

Perhaps Jim Tagger should have had his red stocking scarf that day. Perhaps it might have been different. . . . .

Anyway, he got it. He'd rolled out of the top of a loop, evading the Albatross on his rudder, to go screaming down like an eagle at a banking Fokker. And a bullet, lead never meant for him, caromed off the cockpit coaming and furrowed through the side of his helmet, knifing his scalp, creasing him. Things went black as if an iron curtain had been dropped.

Even as his ship ripped with unconscious hands at the controls, that left wing tip lifted, waggled in the old gesture. Albatross slugs smashed along the fire-wall, nozzled into the engine hoods. The Hisso conked out. And the great Tagger, head of the Three Horsemen, was in a dead-engined ship, plunging wildly, wind like Death's whisper hissing past the struts, himself out cold. . . . .

**H**ARDLY was Joachim Franz Maria von Heiller, Captain the Baron, back at his home drome, when the next blow



fell. The curse seemed on everything touching him.

He'd made his dead-engined landing, bending his propeller and barely aware of it. For a long time, he'd simply sat in his plane. Later a camion had picked him up on the road and taken him down to his *staffel*. Afterward, the camion driver told it around among his mates how the great von Heiller had sat beside him with silent tears leaking down his face all the way. But the other drivers had pointed to their heads and said Otto's nerves must be cracking under the strain. The Sky King crying like a baby? Bah!

Von Heiller was in his quarters, toasting himself in schnapps in the mirror, laughing slyly the while, when the adjutant burst in with the bad news. A courier passing down the road had seen it occur. A few kilos up from the drome. It was the lorry bearing the replacement pilots coming up from the training pool. A shell had hit it squarely. Nobody left alive.

In a motorcycle sidecar, the baron raced to the scene. Neither grief nor fury tinged his face. He sat with little leer on his features like somebody amused by the whims of Fate. Because it had been Fate again. That sector hadn't been under barrage in days. The shell that had demolished the lorry had been the first and last to come over near the spot.

Around a bend of the wooded road, they came upon the scene of desolation, a nauseating shambles of mangled bodies, smashed machinery and strewn limbs. They might have been wooden dolls, those young boys destined for his command, for all the emotion the baron showed. He strode about slowly, prodding here and there with a boot, the first to reach the place.

He found himself around another bend in the road, moving through the fog that had settled like a live cloak on the land. There was a swishing sound above, a passing whisper. Von Heiller glanced up in time to see a ghostly fuselage and wings

glide just above the treetops, silent, eerie in the wreaths of mist. He saw the Allied cocarde on the wing panels too.

The next instant, there was a crashing, rending sound, the snap of tree limbs, then the whole thing swallowed in the blast of the engine of a diving Albatross trailing the doomed ship down.

The Albatross went away. The grimace of secret cupidity came to the baron's face. Quickly he scrambled into the woods, up a low hill, around a boulder. More branches crackled. Just ahead, shorn of its landing gear, the enemy plane, a Spad with the Hornet insignia of those *verdamer* Americans, was settling lower on its cradle of boughs. The unconscious pilot sagged over the cockpit side, goggles hanging from his neck.

A shattered wing bank gave completely and the ship skewered around and piled up slowly almost at the baron's boots. Hopping closer, the German sky king knelt beside the cockpit and lifted the pilot's head. He thought there was something vaguely familiar about the swarthy face with the semblance of a cockeyed smile. Tearing inside the tunic, von Heiller located the man's identification tag. It read:

*James B. Tagger, 177th Pursuit American*

VON HEILLER sucked his breath hard. The leader of the famed Three Horsemen of the Green Hornets himself! The veritable thorn in the sky-crown of the Red Uh!ans! Right there in his arms, breathing slowly. . . . Von Heiller's massive shoulders swelled as his hands started to vise on the unconscious man's throat.

Jim Tagger opened his eyes. He heard a voice addressing him in German. German, the language they'd spoke in the farm household where he'd been raised, that he'd learned to speak himself. Though he didn't remember that now. Couldn't remember anything much. There was a dull ache in the back of his head that made everything blur when he tried to think what had hap-

pened, when he tried to probe back into the past at all.

"How do you feel?" the red-faced man bending over had asked in German.

"Sort of dizzy," Tagger replied—in *German* too. It seemed natural enough though a little stiff on his tongue.

Von Heiller's eyebrows shot up at the German response. His deranged mind leaped at something a sane person would never have sensed. "You know who you are? How you got here? Your—your name, of course . . ." They were half questions, all in German. "*Nicht wahr?*"

Tagger's mouth crooked up in that devilish quirk. He blinked hard several times, eyeballs contracting with the pain of thinking. A look of blank terror twisted his face. He slumped back, unconscious again.

No man in his right mind would even have attempted it. Joachim von Heiller wasn't in his right mind. Half dragging the limp Yank, he headed across through the trees toward where the wrecked camion was. The going was heavy through the underbrush. The baron was a few yards from the road when he tripped over something. It was another body.

It was one of the *fliegerkadets* who'd been on the truck en route to joining the Red Uhlans. His body had been blown here by the explosion. The man was quite dead, his face completely obliterated. The baron peered around warily, sneakily. Then he was plucking at the body like a ghou, ripping off the identification tag, snatching the poor devil's orders from a pocket of his tunic. A quick glance showed his name to be "Wilhelm Braulich."

VON HEILLER'S teeth bared. The next moment, he had pulled a flat rock over the body, scabbled leaves and rubble over that. Nobody would have guessed a corpse was there. Breathing hard, a maniacal light in his eyes, the leader of the Red Uhlans ran back to the crashed Spad. A piece of oily waste he found in the cock-

pit, a match, and the fire was started.

He was barely back where he'd left the numb-minded Tagger sitting when the flames were crackling merrily up into the cloying mist. As he stepped onto the road, holding up the Yank pilot whose uniform was concealed by his cover-alls, there was a "boom-m" behind as the Spad's gas tanks went up. The motorcycle driver came running up.

"A *verdamt* enemy ship that crashed back there—serves him right," von Heiller explained curtly. "There wasn't a chance to get the pilot out. Here is one of the cadets I found in the woods. One from the truck."

He gave orders. The driver was to wait until an ambulance came. He would take the wounded man back to the drome for medical attention, in the sidecar. And a little while later, the baron guided the cycle up before the steps of the chateau headquarters, lifted out the still limp Tagger, and staggered up and in the door on his wobbly legs, unseen in the heavy fog that now obscured the earth.

In his room, the baron worked with the swiftness of the unbalanced. He stripped the Yank to the skin, threw his clothes into the great fireplace, and put a match to them. Then he regarbed him in clothes of his own: underwear, an old pair of boots that he had to jam on, straining on his knees with the sweat of desperation smarting his eyes. A pair of *feldgrau* undress trousers. His own *fliegerkadet* tunic that he'd so proudly saved. He broke the chain of the American identification tag, pocketed it, replaced it with the "dog tag" of "Wilhelm Braulich," placed the assignment papers in the tunic pocket even as Tagger groaned his eyelids fluttered.

Now came the test!

With shaking hands and bated breath, the mad baron forced a healthy slug of schnapps down Tagger's throat. The Yank straightened, hand fumbling to the crease in his head, staring around baffledly.

"*Ach, yah, unterleutnant, you feel better*

now, *nein?*" von Heiller panted. "Ya, Braulich?"

Tagger swallowed, tried to smile. "Braulich? Me—*ja?*" And he spoke in German again. "I do not remember much, *herr.*"

Eyes dancing fanatically, the baron refreshed his mind. He had been coming up in a truck with his mates to join the great Red Uhlans. And a *verdamt* shell had made a lucky hit. He was the only one left alive. Maybe it was Fate. Perhaps Fate had marked him to rise from the dead and become a great one of the Uhlans. The new ace of the Uhlans, Braulich perhaps. . . .

Jim Tagger stared hard at the fog-blanked window. Slowly he began to nod. "So I am Wilhelm Braulich, *heim?* I do not remember much. I guess when my head clears —" He shrugged.

**T**REMBLING with anticipation, the baron flung to the door. On the other side, Heinrich his orderly materialized from the shadows. He was sent for the *staffel* medical officer.

The latter arrived and made his inspection, a fussy little man with pince-nez, deathly afraid of captain the baron. He bandaged the Yank's head, began to stammer out high-sounding medical terms.

"Halt your maul, *dumbkoojl!*" the baron roared at him. "What is the matter with him? Nothing much, *nicht wahr?*"

The medical officer tried to explain. Something about a clouded mind and a head injury that could be more serious than it looked. It was difficult to say yet. He advised returning the man to—

Von Heiller cut him short, face apoplectic, eyes stealthy. "*Ach!*" A mere bump on the head! You would want to send every man to the hospital with a cut finger. The Vaterland needs its sons. You want to fly for the Vaterland, don't you, Braulich?"

Jim Tagger nodded heavily. "I—I want to fly." It was instinct in him speaking then.

Von Heiller's eyes bulged with triumph.

He sent the medical officer packing. So! A clouded mind that might be long in clearing. Perfect. He gave orders to his adjutant to report to Wing H.Q. that he personally had rescued one pilot from the truck wreckage and that the man was joining the squadron. Then he went out into the fog and picked his way down to the burial crypt where his son, Hermann, lay in death.

Inside the mausoleum, the dull hammer of the belch of the big guns echoed with a sepulchral-like tone. Stronger than they sounded outside, somehow. The baron stood beside the vault where his son lay. He drew Tagger's identification tag from his tunic pocket and tossed it into the dust beneath. Nobody would ever find it there until the bowels of the earth itself opened on Judgment Day.

"I have him now," von Heiller hissed in the darkness. "I have him, Hermann. One who will fly for you. My new son, my *mad son*, the one who I have adopted! He is a Horseman of the skies. And he will ride his wings beside me against those *verdamt Amerikaner*—and help me break the curse of the house of von Heiller! . . . . I will even give him an insignia of his own. . . . *Ja . . . Grosser Gott . . . The Horseman. . . .*"

**B** FLIGHT of the 177th American Pursuit came dipping down over the row of lilacs fringing one end of the tarmac, ran the length of it, then banked back to come into the wind and sat down. It was a subdued, gloomy-faced handful of pilots who climbed out. Nothing much was said. Just a couple of them gazed into the eastern skies with a faint hope that that Chuck Williams might miraculously come in. But they'd all seen him shot down out in the vicious dogfight with the Red Uhlans. Danforth they never hoped to see again, except in hell; he'd gone down a flamer, his blond hair rising once above the licking tongue of the torch his Spad had become.

And all eyes were averted once the medical staff got Irish Callahan out of his

cockpit. It was a wonder he came out in one piece, he was so badly shot up. One arm hung by little more than a tissue shred. It was bad. And it had been bad for a full week now. Just a week since they'd lost the great Tagger himself. It was as if his going had stamped them with a curse. The Uhlans had been smashing them out of the skies like so many clay pigeons.

Silently they walked off, some heading for the mess hall bar. Cursing under his breath but still swaggering, a blood cut over one heavy forearm, Strutter Hastings stomped in and said the next round was on him. Something had to be done to bolster the spirits of those men. They acted as if they were entering their own coffins every time they climb into a cockpit now. But his own hand shook badly as he hoisted his cognac.

The Baby, once rosy cheeks gray and sunken now, slid in beside him. "Notice anything today, Strutter?" he asked in that little-boy voice that had made them laugh when he first came up.

"Not a damn thing—except that those Uhlans had flying horseshoes plus winged rabbits-feet up there with them. Lucky as hell—again. They—" He cursed savagely as the barman splashed cognac when his own hand overturned the glass.

"It was the third time I've seen it," the Baby whispered hoarsely. "And speaking of horse —"

"Seen what?" Strutter blasted after he'd seized the bottle and sucked a hearty swallow from the neck. "Don't tell me ghosts!"

The Baby's mouth worked, nodded. "Something like that."

Strutter guffawed. "What you need is a good binge. The only ghosts up there are—"

"Tagger's dead—*Jim is—isn't he, Strutter?*" The Baby tore at Strutter's sleeve as he finished, voice shrilling.

Strutter slapped him lightly. "The Boche reported his plane crashed and burned to a crisp. And I noticed Jim had forgotten to

take his fireman's hat on that last trip. So?"

"He's flying, Strutter. He is. I know it."

Strutter grabbed him and backed him to one end of the bar. "Don't go crazy, Babe. You haven't seen him, have you? Then—"

But the Baby ignored the drink Strutter proffered. Clutched at him hard. Whispered hoarsely. "You've seen the plane that always flies right beside von Heiller's? That red Fokker! It's got a horse-and-rider insignia on the side beside the other stuff. It's the only Uhlan ship that's got that extra insignia. Even von Heiller's hasn't."

Strutter began to grin. "Yeah? Well, write a note to the Boche and complain. Write a letter to the papers and—"

"Strut! It's more than that. Y' remember that trick Jim had—of flipping up that left wing and wagging it when he went in against odds in a tough spot? Remember?"

Strutter's face drew and he nodded. He hadn't felt right himself with Jim gone. A man could never forget that cock-eyed sky salute of Tagger's.

"Well, I saw it the third time—today. Just when we thought we might rout those Uhlans," The Baby went on feverishly. "The Baron and that ship with the horse-man insignia came slapping up."

"Yeah," said Strutter, remembering.

"**T**HAT second ship tipped up its left wing and waved. . . . Just the way Jim did. And I saw it twice before when we tangled with the Uhlans. Only I didn't have a chance then to identify the ship. . . . And that pilot with the horse-man insignia—*only Jim could wing the way he does!*"

Strutter swallowed, went back for the cognac bottle, and dumped down a big slug. He recalled himself now how that ship had tipped up that left wingtip. Then his mouth hardened.

"You're cracking, Babe! Take this bottle and go down to your barracks and drink it—or I'll boot your pants off! *Savez?* And wear that red sock of Jim's around your

neck instead of carrying it in your pocket—if it'll make you feel any better! Now—get going!" . . . . .

The bottle stood between Baby's boots in his barracks cubicle, half empty, as the overcast afternoon wore away. And he couldn't get that picture of the up-tipping left wing of the red Fokker out of his mind. It was exactly the way Jim Tagger used to do it. Why—

Boots sounded in the corridor and an orderly swung open his door. He was slated to go out with a flight to accompany a pair of obs buses across the lines. The Baby stood up a little unsteadily. And as he drew on his flying coat, he slowly plucked the red stocking of Jim Tagger's from the pocket and reverently knotted it around his neck. Then he went out.

They took off without incident, picked up the two De Haviland observation crates, and headed over the lines. A Boche flight came out of the north but a French outfit intercepted them before they could strike at the obs buses. But, half a minute later, the Baby spotted a pair of Albatrosses herding a French Nieuport down just off his left wing.

He shouldn't have left his formation then. The Baby knew it. But some fatalistic instinct guided his hands. And in a split second, he was screaming down on a wing tip, wheeling into a power dive, braced against the crashpad at his neck. Below, the Nieuport was dodging frantically to escape, tried to chandelle to freedom. One of the Albatross hunters pulled into a whipstall to pick him off. And Baby's fingers slapped down on the Bowden controls of his twin Vickers.

The Boche pilot convulsed, whipped up rigid-bodied against the belt, then folded. And the Albatross miraculously tipped on its back, completed a hesitant loop, then levelled to glide under cut gun over the S.O.S. of the Allied lines. It might be a possum trick. The feverish-eyed Baby trailed him, dropping lower.

THE man ahead still slumped in his ship. But his Albatross slid on, missed a limbless spar of a tree, cleared a low ridge, then nosed down past a roofless, sagging farmhouse, past a stone wall and bounced in the rutted cart-track running along the other side of it. It rolled a bit, wobbling, then came to a halt, turning up slowly.

The Baby winged past then banked to come around. The Boche flyer lay back behind his stick, apparently motionless. A wild idea hit the keyed-up Baby. He couldn't get that feeling that Jim Tagger was—must be—still alive. And he had to know.

He almost clipped the stone wall himself as he settled. Then he was goosing his taxiing Spad up behind the grounded Albatross. Out, sidearm in his hand, he walked up beside the quivering Albatross, then drew back in horror. One of his bullets had gone right through the German's head, coming out smack in the center of the forehead, killing him so quickly he'd scarcely bled. It was nothing short of a miracle that the ship had come down intact with dead hands on the stick.

And it was a sign, an omen to the Baby, fighting down the hysteria that had been mounting inside him for days. He worked hesitantly, fumblingly, at first. Tugged out the dead body. Then his movements became faster, surer, as the resolve hardened in his heart. His mouth set grimly as he climbed into the German's Albatross, into the seat still warm from the dead man's form, brushed the tiny ragdoll luck-charm hung on the cockpit side. He gunned the Mercedes, taxied it down the path to a gap in the wall, managed to turn it into the field.

Then, bumping and rocking over the lumpy ground, he got the nose into the wind and bucketed for the takeoff. The Albatross lifted. A side puff caught it as the ship staggered, almost carried it into a wall of the wrecked farmhouse. The Baby's heart choked his gullet. The spreader bar of the landing gear actually brushed a scrub

tree. And he was up, throwing the Mercedes wide open as he headed straight for the Boche lines—and behind them.

For The Baby intended to land as close to the *staffel* drome of the Red Uhlans as possible and go in. He had to. He had to find out who the man was among them who winged so like Jim Tagger—or if Jim Tagger lived, *under false wings*. . . .

The time had come. Captain the baron knew it and accepted it. A man in his sane mind would have rebelled against it, fought it to the last breath. The deep-rooted instinct of self-preservation would have been his law. But Joachim Franz Maria von und zu Heiller had been a very quiet, self-contained maniac since the misty morning his engine failed as he tried to sky-crash himself to death.

They had come in from the victorious morning skirmish with those Green Hornets. Two of the *verdamer* down, one in flames. No losses for the Uhlans, the Uhlans who were great again. They had been hilarious at lunch. After dinner, there would be a big binge. *Gott*, what a blowout it would be!

AFTERWARD, the baron and that Braulich, the quiet one who seemed ever in a dream except when he was riding wings, sat in the baron's rooms and sipped *schnapps*. He seemed to be one of the baron's favorites, that Braulich. Always with him. It was strange. For one of the orderlies had told how they just sat there silently, drinking, the baron watching Braulich with gloating, doting eyes. As if he was his child, almost. Very strange.

They sat there now as the long shadows of evening began to creep in purple tides from the chateau's battlements. Heinrich, the baron's own servant from his Carpathian estate, brought in a fresh bottle.

"I will pour it myself!" the baron spat suddenly as if he didn't want the atmosphere of a seance broken.

But the dried-up Heinrich calmly filled

the two fresh glasses, gave the new Uhlan his, turned to the baron.

"*Herr Baron* will not—will be wise to fly not again today—or ever, perhaps," Heinrich said softly, the cast eye rolling.

Von Heiller sat as if a steel ramrod had been jabbed up his back. Then he picked up his drink, took a swallow, rolling it on his tongue as if never expecting to savor the taste again. Nodded.

"So, Heinrich. *Danker*," he said gently, for once.

That was all. It had happened too many times; Heinrich had called the turn. So, it had come to this at last. That was all there was to it. It was like coming to the head of a stairs. The baron prepared to go down it.

Finishing his drink, the last of the House of von Heiller rose, buttoned his tunic meticulously, straightened his *Pour le Merite*.

"*Mein lieber*," he told Braulich, "wait. We are going someplace—together."

Jim Tagger nodded dully. That ache in the back of his head, the ache that never left him, was worse today, throbbing, beating, trying to pound something in his brain.

Von Heiller went out, down the steps, across the grounds. A sergeant of the ground guard came around a bush and almost bowled him over.

The sergeant saluted. "*Herr Hauptmann!*" A man had been seen creeping in on the edge of the grounds. Challenged in German, he had failed to reply likewise, mouthing something in English. Then had run for it. They had him hemmed in on the chateau estate though. Soon they would corner him though he had vanished as if the earth had swallowed him.

The baron nodded. Such things were of little import now. He continued down the path toward the burial crypt. The end had come. There were but two things to do. He could not leave that mad American he had captured and adopted as a sky son—could not leave him behind and alive. It

was too dangerous for the Fatherland. He would die first. The second bullet of the Luger would be for himself. And the gun would not jam this time.

Von Heiller marched down the steps and into the mausoleum. Wearily he saluted beside the vault where his son lay.

"*Auf Weiderschn, Herman. Soon. I will be with you. Ja . . .*"

LIKE a sleep-walker he went out, unaware of the cold draft in the tomb that had seemed to emanate from below, unbuttoning his holster. And he forgot to turn the key in the outside of the door.

Inside it, The Baby rose to his feet. The door creaked open a few inches to let in some of the waning daylight. The Baby stared at the metal disc his hand had found on the floor of the crypt. And his eyes strained, then widened at the printing stamped thereon.

*James B. Tagger, 177th Pursuit American*

The Baby tore at the red silk stocking-scarf of Jim Tagger's that seemed to be strangling him now. It was like coming upon something from the dead. Jim Tagger had been here somewhere, perhaps still was.

The Baby's head was still reeling from what had happened. When he'd been flushed by that sentinel when creeping up on the drome, he'd run for it all right. But a high, wrought-iron fence had reared out of the shadows to block his progress in one direction. Frantic, he'd started along it only to spot a hod helmet of another guard breasting through the foliage toward him. Like a hunted rabbit, he'd darted at crossways, ducked into a rotting little summer-house in the old chateau gardens.

He'd huddled under one of the benches, hoping to escape notice in the fading light. To shoot it out would only bring the whole works down on his neck. And then a loose slab of stone had rattled as he shifted his weight. He had tapped it with the

butt of his automatic, gotten a hollow ring. It had been but the work of a moment to get his fingers in a crevice and yank. And he'd pulled it aside to peer down a little pit with an iron ladder built vertically into one side.

The only thing to do had been to clamber down into the burrow. And The Baby had found himself in a low tunnel, floored with paving blocks. Wonderingly, trembling right to his gizzard, he'd probed along it. Then it had ended at a blank wall. For a moment he had figured it was a cul de sac. Then his head had bumped something above, felt it shift. And the next moment, he had shoved aside a light, thin block of stone above and he'd been clambering into the crypt, the burial vault of the House of d'Olivier.

One of his straining hands had felt the metal tag in the inch-deep dust. And he'd just had time to roll under a raised vault as von Heiller himself entered.

Now, The Baby hesitated but a moment. Then he slipped out and glided after the vague shape of the baron ahead. To play his luck to the hilt. For it had been sheer luck that had led him to the tunnel built by the d'Oliviers in the troublous times of Napoleon and the First Empire.

VON HEILLER never even twitched his head as a twig snapped under The Baby's boot behind. The latter edged closer, safety off on his automatic, peering around through the dusk beneath the great trees. Mounting the chateau steps as a Fokker began to tune up down on the line, the baron went in and let another door ajar after himself. Men who are going to die don't worry about drafts.

The Baby edged his slender body through that door, in to the funereal gloom of the great hall. A pilot mounting to the second floor scarcely gave him a look. He saw the baron hesitate at the door to his own apartment, then draw his Luger slowly. He went in. And he did try to close that door.

But the desperate Baby was in the opening, ramming his gun into captain the baron's back.

"Get 'em up! Get 'em up, Heinie!" The Baby was giving through gritted teeth as he forced the baron ahead and shut the door.

Across the lighted room, Jim Tagger, Wilhelm Braulich of the Red Uhlans, touted as a coming ace, leaped up. His eyes only saw one thing, riveted on that thing. It was the red stocking scarf at The Baby's neck.

And then that beating in the back of Jim Tagger's head clicked, seemed to swell, exploded in a million skyrocketing inside his brain that blinded him for a moment.

"Jim! Jim!" The Baby husked for the third time.

And Jim Tagger nodded. It all came back now. He remembered who he was. Everything that had happened. He nodded again, white, but the crooked, crazy grin rising on his mouth.

Von Heiller stood like a rock, eyes shut. The last shreds of his own sanity were fast wavering. This was the final blow of the von Heiller curse!

"We g-got to get outa here quick!" The Baby quavered.

Jim Tagger nodded. In a stride, he was beside the baron, had snatched out his Luger. He spoke in German.

"We're going down to the line, baron, old pal! And you're going to see we get a couple of ships to get off in or—"

Von Heiller nodded. The words scarcely registered. Only the "ships" and "taking off".

The trio, two Yanks walking close on either side to captain the baron, moved out and turned down to the hangar line. Through the line of poplars. The Luger in Tagger's hand dug deeper into the baron's side as a sergeant-mec trotted up and saluted.

In a weary, sleepy-man's voice, von Heiller gave the order. Two planes on the

line at once! But at once! Imperative! He motioned toward the Fokker they were tuning up, then jerked a thumb toward another that had just been brought in from a patrol.

Jim Tagger did not dare object. He half sensed there was something wrong with the man between them. The warm ship was spun over. Von Heiller advanced, trance-like, monocle glittering in the last sun rays, marching on his thin legs to his rendezvous with Fate. To meet his Destiny. The other two had to move with him.

Then, before either suspected, he had calmly hoisted himself into the pit of the first plane. The Baby stood stunned. Tagger started to bark an order in German, then realized von Heiller heard nothing. Yelling to The Baby, he tore himself from the slipstream and dashed for the second ship that they were just turning around.

AS HE wriggled down behind the stick, thinking The Baby was at his heels, he saw von Heiller's arm slap up for them to jerk the chocks, saw the stricken Baby standing there. Von Heiller's ship started to forge ahead. And then The Baby whirled, lost his head, batted down a mec with his automatic barrel and flung himself onto the lower wing of the red Fokker, clutching a strut. The baron, as if unseeing, bucketed across the field.

Pandemonium broke out on the tarmac. A nearby pilot started for Tagger. There was only one thing to do. He gunned her away after batting a mec down from the cockpit side. Then he went hammering down the field and into the air after von Heiller himself. Von Heiller with The Baby clinging to his wing.

As automatically as if he were checking before going on patrol, the baron circled the field once to test his motor, loosed a burst from his Spandaus, then headed westward.

But those moments had been precious.



Pilots from the flight that had just returned were jumping into cockpits, slamming off. Jim Tagger wheeled off the baron's tail and went eagle-screaming over that field, his Spandaus licking a hellish noth below. One bucketing Fokker lurched midway across, then burst into flames. Another ploughed straight on into a tree as its man died at the controls. Tagger hurtled his D-7 past the hangar line, spraying his lead, herding them back. Then no more flame flash licked from the guns and empty belts jerked through their breeches. The Boche who'd brought it in had about exhausted him ammo on patrol.

Tagger whistled in an Immelmann and launched out after the climbing baron. Minutes passed as he crept up on the wings bat-like in the waning day's afterglow. Drew even with them and stared.

And a Spad, a Spad of the 177th with a Green Hornet on its fuselage side, came twisting from a cloud rack in the south and arrowed right at them. . . .

Strutter Hastings had a slight shoulder scratch when he returned from the observation patrol and learned the mystery of the missing Baby. His ship found intact and unarmed down the line a ways. And with a dead Boche pilot in front of it plus the tracks of another ship that had been landed and taken off. That—and no Baby.

**O**NE great slug of cognac and Strutter Hastings had swaggered out to climb into the skies again. He had to before he went mad. Nothing had gone right since Jim Tagger, head of the once-famed Three Horsemen, had gone.

Strutter climbed up and then proceeded to scour the front. Somewhere up there in the clouds perhaps, he might wash himself clean of his awful guilt. That mystic bond between the three had warned him. He'd whipped out of a dive to see Tagger trapped. And he'd hesitated just a moment, before swinging to his rescue. Then it had been too late.

Yes, he had as good as slain Jim Tagger himself in his jealousy over his leadership. Below, the earth was black-shrouded. He went into a cloud rack. And when he came out, there were those two Red Uhlan Fokkers to the north and a little below. Strutter Hastings gunned to the attack.

Tagger saw his ship flashing in and rolled to cut up and meet him, even though his Spandaus were spawnless. There was no other way to shield The Baby on the wing of the baron's ship. Lead fingered and ripped and flailed about Tagger's Fokker wings, hammered into his fuselage as he fishtailed in a bluff, then wing-slid and dived steeply. He had a fleeting glance of the Spad pilot's face, recognized Strutter. But there was no way of telling him he was gunning down friends.

There were breath-choking moments as the one Yank ship played out the game against the two Fokkers, one gunless. A slug bit into Tagger's shoulder. Half his horizontal rudder was hewn away. Lead rattled into his engine hoods. Strutter was fighting like a maniac, trying to bathe his soul clean of that smirch in blood.

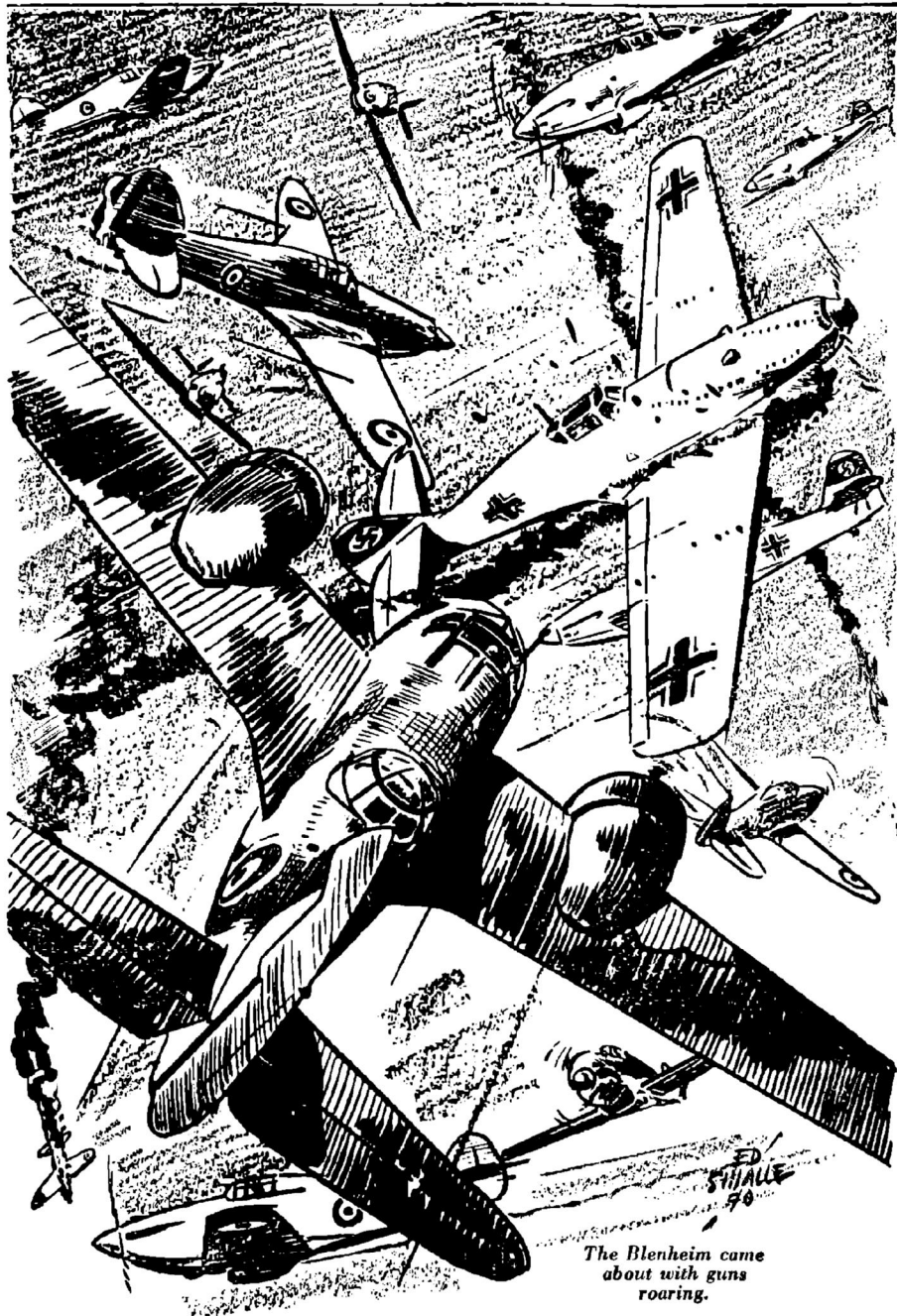
And then the baron, his ship overladen with the extra, helpless passenger, struck for the final time. He hammered head-on at Strutter's Green Hornet Spad. The m.g. fire of the two crates seemed to interlace as The Baby huddled on that wing surface.

And then Strutter was rearing back, a splinter of his shattered prop in his brain. his ship plunging in a cloud of oily smoke. And von Heiller was sinking, sinking behind his safety belt.

The Baby showed his nerve again. He worked his way over the nacelle and jammed himself in atop the dying baron to take over the controls. Then he waved to Tagger and they headed for the home drome. The last Two Horsemen.

Above, behind The Baby, the baron smiled in death. He'd beaten the Curse at last, saved his last son. . . .

Kink Landry had trouble flying a tiny Hurricane . . . but when he let loose in a huge Blenheim bomber his guns turned red with firing and the Nazi pilots faces white with fear at what this mad pilot was doing with that death dealing Bristol!



*The Blenheim came about with guns roaring.*

# THE RAINBOW ACE

by WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

**K**INK LANDRY hadn't been asleep when the batman knocked; but he was still in his sleepless cot when the first rumbling bark of the warming Hawker Hurricanes sounded on the dark tarmac outside.

"I could be sick," he argued to himself. "Even though the M. O. can't find me with a temperature, I could be sick."

But recollection of the British 104th Attack Squadron's medical officer and his cynical, sultry eyes told him it wouldn't get by. Any more than it would get by with Dave Llewellyn, Kink's dour, Welsh section-leader.

"Llewellyn suspects me already," Kink knew, with gnawing doubt. He swung his feet out of bed and sat straight, as anxious now as he had been loath through the night. He found a match and struck it, held the jittering flame of it to the wick of the table candle. In the half-light of the room, his widespaced blue eyes and tousled blond hair gave him the appearance of a frightened boy. "I've got to keep them fooled, until I can make good!"

Half-thoughts and half-memories produced him and tugged at him as he pulled long wool stockings up over his pyjama legs. "Ol' Bill never told me it was like this," he whispered, stopping to stare wild-eyed into the guttering light of the candle. "Ol' Bill—!"

He tried to remember now just what his father . . . the William Landry who had been . . . ever said about the last war. Sure; King knew Bill'd been an American "ace," had served with a British outfit for a time. He knew that his father had been decorated. But he couldn't remember anything concrete that Bill—they two had been "Kink" and "Bill" to one another, as far back as Kink could remember—had ever said. Now it was too late to ask. Nothing

about how Bill had felt in the air, could he remember. Only the name of Bill's old friend in the British service, a man who'd later gone to India and dropped from sight. Kink racked his brain and had the name.

"Tarcher. Toby Tarcher. That was Bill's old buddy!"

But for the rest of it, all he could remember was that fateful trip on the Continent, that Bill had promised him as a graduation present. The Continent. And Germany. For Bill Landry wasn't one to let a fellow down on a promise, just because there were war clouds looming. What was it Bill had said . . . ?

"Not a chance of war, kid. There are too many men still alive who remember the last one. Like Toby Tarcher and me. Anyway, I promised you Germany, didn't I? Well, come on, then!"

Paris. Rome. Vienna. Munich. Bill and Kink, having the time of their lives. Bill having the *last* time of their lives together, but they couldn't have known, then. Finally, Berlin. Berlin, and the sight of that crowd of Nazi hoodlums beating that poor old devil of a man, and Bill wading in to help. And then—

Then poor old Bill, broken and bleeding and lifeless, there on the pavement.

"Attempted robbery, by unknown thugs." the Nazis had lied smugly.

The United States official who had looked into the matter was helpless. "It's one of those things," he'd told Kink lamely.

"And how it's one of those things!" the raging Kink had agreed. "It's one of those things I'll even for ol' Bill, if I die in the attempt!"

"Go home to your folks and forget it." he was advised.

"Bill was all the folks I had," the broken youth had told them. "He was the swellest guy on earth. There he was, just laughing

and joking and friends with everybody. And the next minute—*dead!*"

A wise State Department had revoked Kink's passport, and there was an end to it, so far as they were concerned. But not Kink! With the war clouds opening to pel leaden death down on the Western Front, Kink had slipped into England and by judicious work had rigged papers to show he was a British subject.

Flying school. Advanced gunnery school. Tactical school. Fast. *Too fast*, Kink knew, when he'd set his pants down in a Hawker Hurricane two weeks before and slammed through the air at upwards of 350-miles an hour. But England needed pilots. . . .

**N**OT that Kink would have minded, so much . . . for just himself. But it was the tactics they were using now. Massed echelons. Close-flying bunches of ships sitting on one another's collar-buttons, so you could hardly maneuver! Eight machine guns nested in your wings, firing 1500 rounds a minute each; and you hardly even knew how to handle *one* of them. He was out for revenge, sure; but the way it was, he had to give more thought to his mates and to himself than to the Nazis!

That, coupled with memories of Bill, made flying a nightmare. And then Llewellyn had started looking at him, had started asking questions in that casual, yet deadly, voice of his. Flat, easy questions, like: "Home in Birmingham, now, old fellow . . . did you ever know the Watkins family? . . . *Oh!* Oh, I *see*," when you knew he didn't "see" at all. Or, "Jolly fellow, the last Lord Mayor of Birmingham, what? His name was —er— what *was* his name?"

Kink had prepared himself, to an extent. But he knew he couldn't go on kidding Llewellyn forever about being an Englishman. And he must get away with the pretense, if he were to avenge Bill. Further, another thing had come up that he knew he wasn't kidding Llewellyn about

at all. Kink was funking it, was laying down on the job, was hating this game of sky-killing with everything that was in him.

But there was his pledged word to Bill's mangled corpse; and there was another thing: Bill's honor and reputation!

"A swell way I picked to even up for Bill," he murmured, as he sat and stared unseeing at the candle. "Bill left me a fine name, a great name in sky fighting. And here I am, threatening to go phony on him any minute!"

How long he sat there, thinking about it all, he didn't know. He didn't even know that the door had opened soundlessly and a man stood there just inside his room, tall and dark and dour, and his eyes glinting and *knowing* through a curl of cigarette smoke.

"Well, Landry? You joining us?"

Kink came to his feet with a snarl, fists bunched, eyes savage. He took a step toward Llewellyn, then dropped his gaze to the captain's-pips on the man's uniform. He stood rock still, made his hands come open. "I'm—coming," he said, tearing his tongue from the roof of his mouth. "Didn't . . . sleep well last night. Just—bluffed it."

Llewellyn looked at him with penetrating eyes. "Oh. You're good at that sort of thing, what?"

Kink made his eyes stay steady, forced some resentment into his voice. "Good at bluffing?"

Llewellyn was mocking through the cigarette smoke. "Now, now, old chap! Good at not sleeping well, I meant. How you leap at conclusions, what? Without reason." The man took a long drag at his cigarette. "Or *is* it without reason?"

Kink held his section-leader's gaze for a long moment before he turned back to his dressing. "I'll be right along," he told Llewellyn gruffly. "All I want for breakfast is coffee."

**S**QUADRON 104 was scraping the sky at 5,000 meters . . . more than 15,000 feet . . . in the formation known as a

"right echelon." The thirteen fast Hurricanes were staggered up and to the right in a sort of twin parallel "stairways," six planes to the stairway, and with Major Cransford, the Squadron C. O., in Number One position below and ahead of his men.

For the time being, the four sections of three-planes-each were operating as two divisions, each division forming a unit of six planes. For the time being, the respective section leaders had lost identity in the massed formation. And for the time being, Kink Landry flew where his position as Number Two plane in the fourth section put him, and was at peace with the world: the very last plane in the very last line of the formation!

He'd heaved a sigh of relief when the inter-plane communication system gruffed Major Cransford's voiced order: "*Right echelon formation—!*" into his ear-phones. Promptly with the wing-wag of Cransford's plane, the gang broke for their positions . . . but none broke quicker than did Kink.

The cold sweat dried rapidly on his forehead and not until he felt himself relax did he realize the tension at which he had been flying.

"Oh, boy!" he murmured. "Now we're getting someplace."

He flew relaxed for many minutes, wondering at the strange reluctance that kept him pinned to his sheets each dawn. "It couldn't have been this way with Bill," he reasoned. "A guy who cracked off twelve Huns, officially, and had five decorations to show for it!"

Further, wouldn't Bill have said something about it, if he had felt Kink's squeamishness about it all?

There was a subtle stirring in the wings of the big formation as it swept across the West Wall and giant puffs of Archie fire mushroomed up in the air. They held it, tensely, until a *Ka-rumpf! Wham!* rocked the One and Three planes of the first section. Then Cransford crisped through the earphones:

*"Full throttle . . . ! Zoom up one thousand meters . . . ! Then break into a line of sections!"*

With the wag of the leader's wings, the gang spilled air out under their wings and climbed an invisible ladder higher into the blue. Kink felt the liquids in his body rush down under the impact of the steep zoom, and the instrument board seemed to know a shadow over it; but he kept his eyes steady, and the shadow passed as he reached the top of his climb. Then came the break for the new formation.

The sky about him seemed alive with flicking wings that tipped the sunlight in a thousand different directions. Sweat broke out on Kink's forehead again; but he forced his crate hard over to the right and jammed forward into position behind and to the left of Llewellyn. His eyes drifted forward and met with those of his section leader, locked in a long stare with Llewellyn's look. He tore his gaze from the big Welshman's and focused it off to the left. The squadron bobbed along in a line of four sections, with Cransford heading up the new alignment.

"Okay, so far," Kink muttered to himself. "Okay if we don't meet any—" He clamped his lips shut and shook his head in annoyance. "A hell of a way for ol' Bill Landry's son to think about flying: 'Okay if we don't meet up with any Nazis!'"

The *Ka-rumpf! Bang!* of the Nazi gunners was distant and harmless, now; and Cransford knew how to keep it that way. He barked into his mike: "*Left echelon of sections . . . ! In reverse order, with Section Four leading . . . !*"

"Swell!" Kink growled, as he watched for the wing-flapping that would put the command into operation. "Just ducky! Here we are over Naziland, and me with practically the whole dangd squadron sitting on my collar!"

But he swung over with the others, drifted his fleeting ship in a hard skid that

brought Section Four from its far position to a three-ship formation at the head of the others. Glibly, Kink twisted and hunched back at the gang of them, grimly he watched as the others behind crept closer and closer.

"Close . . . Infantry drill at three-fifty miles per hour!" he griped. "Squads East," by God, what we're going so damned fast that we slip work! work the whole damned crowd of us!"

**F**OR perhaps three minutes, they flew thus, and now it was Llewellyn himself who headed the entire flight, with Cransford's shouting along at the top and outside. As he looked, Kink saw the commander's ship pull out still farther, then start dropping back and down. A peculiar stutter came from someplace near, and Kink started up in his seat.

"Motor!" he knew. "My God, the motor—!" And then he got it . . . got it with the new tenseness that came over the mike when Cransford's voice broke in again, a hint of tragedy in it:

"*Captain Llewellyn . . . will take over,*" Cransford's voice was saying. "*My motor is conking off, gentlemen . . .!*" Wings stiffened through the flight as the pilots came taut. Then: "*Cheer-o!*" Cransford all but murmured, as he twisted his plane around and headed at a limp back for the Maginot Line. "*Happy landings, gentlemen!*"

"*Sainted Jo!*" Kink marveled. "Boy, are these Britishers cool. That was *his* motor I heard conking, over his own *mike*; and I broke into a lather of a sweat. But Cransford—" Kink shook his head and blinked. "Just, *Cheer-o!* And it's an odds-on bet the best he draws from it is a kicking around by the Nazis!"

Llewellyn had clicked in his sending set—each of the section leaders had them, for just such an emergency—and barked:

"*Section of sections! Section Four leading!*"

Kink cursed roundly. "You would! By

God, you just would!" But he moved with the others.

The pilots swung obediently, each section hanging close together, and lined up so that their planes now formed a "vee" composed of three planes to each unit.

"*. . . Close! Close!*" Llewellyn growled. "*Snap to it, you gentlemen!*"

Kink knew his suit was wet under the arms and around the back when he moved; but he swung his eyes and stared at the others. Slowly, slowly, the others crept close . . . nearer and nearer . . . until the entire gang of twelve ships could have been spanned by a couple of Bristol Blenheim bombers. Wings moved close over Kink and snatched his cockpit.

"Comfy!" Kink snarled. "Just as comfy as wearing three overcoats and a pair of snowshoes into a telephone booth!" He glowered his rage at the offending Llewellyn. "I wonder if this guy ever tried playing a slide-trombone in a Crosley Coupe?"

Then it was a rattle of signal-fire broke out that brought Kink up with a start. Llewellyn was rapping out some warming bursts from his wing guns. Kink squinted his eyes and stared. Ahead and above stormed a swarm of Heinkels and Messerschmitts, ranged in a protective ring about four giant Nazi bombers—the highly-touted Dornier Wahls!

Kink groaned, and his skin was clammy.

"Here we go!" he whispered, his hand tightening on the stick. "Here we go!"

But even as he said it, it flashed over him that the only way to break this enemy formation, bound on ominous duty Somewhere In France, was to ride into them in a tight-knit gang spitting lead with all the fury of a score of pom-pom guns.

"*Steady on!*" came Llewellyn's voice, faintly muffled. "*We attack as a unit! Hold your fire until you can see their prop hubs, gentlemen!*"

Then there came an ominous *br-r-t; br-r-t—brr-r-rr-t!*

"Motor missing!" Kink grated, as he

searched the instrument board with anxious eyes. "What the—!" But he checked it, ground out an oath when a wing seemed jammed squarely into his whirling propeller, and seemed to hang there like an integral part of Kink's own ship!

**T**HE Yank ripped back on his stick and zoomed hard, climbed above that offending wing; and tried to close down in again. But it was too late. He couldn't! The men behind had closed the gap that he left when he had zoomed up so hard, to avoid a collision.

And now Kink flew alone, at the very top of the flight, and in the face of the on-streaming Nazi horde! Racking gunfire broke out from ahead, in a hollow, metallic chatter. The Nazis were firing! From nearer came a louder, more insistent chatter of guns. And then the mike was screaming:

*"Down, Landry! Down, you ruddy fool! Can't you see you are right in the line of fire from your own planes? . . . Down—and run for the tarmac! Orders, man—and by God, carry them out!"*

Kink hesitated a moment, undecided. For one thing, his ears were peeled for another coughing gasp from his powerful Rolls-Royce motor. Or, he wondered, "Could it have been—?"

*"Down, Landry!"* came the renewed roar into his earphones. *"By God, man, you're not sitting on the edge of your cot now, moping! Get down or I'll see to it you're court-martialed from here to Glasgow . . . if you get home alive!"*

Kink flinched when he realized that the entire flight was hearing the man's words. But he saw a quartet of Nazi Messerschmitts edging loose from that mass, snouting their ugly sharks' noses at him, and he knew another thing, too:

"I've got to get down! Llewellyn is right . . . I've messed things up for fair, trying to dodge out of the way of that wing . . . back there in formation! That way, I'll have another chance to come out

and make good . . . for myself, and for ol' Bill! But a court-martial would fix me for fair, would show me up as a Yank and get my pants booted right out of the British Army, in disgrace!"

Reluctantly, he swung hard over in a left bank and raced for the far West Wall and safety. . . .

Kink had the news long before what was left of 104 came in . . . had it as he fled around the tarmac with the young replacements who were standing by, waiting their turn. Major Cransford came out of the Communications Room of the old villa where his squadron was quartered and said, heavily:

"Six of them are down. Report just came in from an observation post on the Maginot. Six of my men are gone!" His voice was calm, controlled, but his face limned the tragedy he felt. "Six of the crew done so; but, by God, the Nazis didn't get through. They turned the flight back with a loss of four interceptor ships, and one Dornier."

Kink shook his head and went out to the tarmac, to wait. The remnants of the bullet-riddled squadron limped in at a slow pace in another twenty minutes, slid carefully down the skyway, came in to easy landings and taxied to the hangar aprons. Five war-torn skybirds . . . where thirteen had gone out!

"Cransford and I did all right by ourselves," Kink told himself bitterly. "With the two of us, that leaves seven of the original flight still up. I wonder if Llewellyn—?"

**B**UT he broke it off, his eyes narrowing. A new thought had struck him: a thought that brought a chill to his heart. "What if the gang figures that I funk'd it for fair, that I broke from the formation and stood there like a scared fool—until Llewellyn did what he had to do and ordered me home?"

But he held his place in the crowd of them at the tarmac, held his place and

watched the wordless, hard-eyed pilots swing down and draw together in a tight-knit group. Llewellyn stood straight and tall among them, his eyes ranging the men who greeted them. They came to a standstill on Kink, and then Llewellyn was ambling over, mouth grim, eyes flatly inquiring.

"There you are," the big Welshman murmured. "So the old 'Rainbow' Ace got home safely, what?"

In the silence, the others stared at Kink. The Yank blinked his eyes slowly and twisted his head to look at Cransford. 104's C. O. scratched his chin and said, "Steady on, Landry. Llewellyn's —er— worked up a bit, naturally." But his eyes were frankly inquiring. Llewellyn obliged him with an explanation:

"Rainbow Ace!" he repeated, his eyes on Kink. "He's there, right enough, until you try to get your hands on him. And then he's popped from the formation and gone. Well, old man, how about it?"

Kink said hotly, "My motor missed. For just a minute, it missed, anyway. And then I found myself right on top of another plane and had to zoom out of formation. Before I could get back in, you'd called me off and the gang had closed in!"

"Ow." Llewellyn scratched his head and stared. "Look, now, Landry: if your motor missed, how *could* you have come up on another ship? Eh? How about it, fellow?"

Kink opened his hands and his eyes wide. "I — don't know," he admitted. "I just know that it did."

Cransford considered . . . was trying to be nice and yet do something. It gave him an awkward appearance, but he kept his gaze averted and said doggedly, "Got to hang you up, Landry. Off the flying list, you understand. Don't like it — but this popping out of formation, you know."

Kink's face was blanched. "How about your *own* motor, Major? It seems to me I remember someone else pulling out of formation! How about it?"

Cransford cleared his throat and silenced Llewellyn's attempt to talk with a quick motion. "I think," he said heavily, "that my motor was still giving trouble when I got here. I can prove that," he added, indicating where the ack-emmas were laboring over his Hurricane. "But so far as I know, you didn't even report a motor failure at all, Landry. Right?"

"It picked up again," Kink objected. "Why should I report it when the failure was only temporary?"

"Let's hope your suspension will be as temporary," Cransford said, drily. Then: "Suspended for further hearing."

Kink was starting toward his quarters when he came to a halt, his eyes on Llewellyn. The big Welshman was staring fixedly at the Yank, seemed about to say something. "Well?" Kink blared. "Got anything to add?"

**L**LEWELLYN shrugged when all eyes swung to him. "Er— nothing," he said quickly. "Carry on, Landry. Carry on!"

When he was in his room, Kink grated, "The big baloney was on the point of telling them all he thinks I'm funking it, running out on the game," he reasoned. "Well, nuts to him. Nuts to the whole gang of them. Just because I don't like to engage in this close-order fighting, this damned War-in-a-dark-closet stuff!"

But his heart was heavy when word came through later:

"Landry suspended until arrival of the new Wing commander, three days from now."

"I'm done," he conjectured. "They'll run me down, now, find out I'm not a Britisher, kick me right out of the service. *Blooy* go my chances to even up the score for Bill. And worse yet, the chances are better than even that I'll disgrace his name!"

After evening mess, he ordered a *cognac* and sipped it, thinking:



"I couldn't possibly be in a worse fix. When this new wing commander, whoever he is, arrives, the first thing he'll do will be to go over me with a fine-tooth comb! Then they'll have me. Enlisting under false pretenses; funking it; disgracing old Bill's name. . . ."

But it could have been worse. More, it was worse! Llewellyn came near and stalled around for a minute, then said, from the corner of his mouth: "Hear the news, man? The new Wing commander is one of those birds fresh back from retirement. You know the old adage: '*A new broom sweeps clean!*'"

"So what?" Kink growled. "There's nothing about me to sweep clean! What is this, anyway?"

Llewellyn looked at him intently, seemed about to say something; then the man's eyes were veiled again. "No sense going off half-cocked, what? Just thought I'd cheer you up a bit." He thought it over a moment, then added: "The new beggar's name, by the bye, is — Lieutenant-Colonel Toby Tarcher. Old timer, Tarcher."

Kink felt Llewellyn's eyes pressing into him, watching him with a peculiar intentness. And while the Yank's mind whirled with the force of it, he managed to keep a frozen face. He got to his feet and said, "Tarcher? Never heard of him!" and moved away.

But he felt his knees shaking as he turned and went out the door and to his room. "Tarcher!" he repeated. "My God! Toby Tarcher is bound to question me closely about just what Landry family I come from. And if he finds out, then I've cooked my goose and ol' Bill's chance for revenge, for fair!"

He considered, for a moment, making a clean breast of the whole thing to his father's old friend . . . and the new Wing commander. But he overruled that as quickly as he thought of it. "That's out. I'll seem to be trading on Bill's rep, and on his old friends . . . asking for sympathy.

That's out! I'll face the music and try to bluff it through."

But as he undressed and sat on the edge of his cot, another stunning fact hit him:

"By God, Llewellyn does know something! Otherwise, how would he know the name Tarcher would mean anything to me? Why would he mention it to me if he didn't know that, somehow, the fact that Tarcher is coming here would floor me!"

104 made two perfunctory duty flights in the next two days; and with the day for the new Wing commander to arrive, an *alerte* was flashed in to squadron headquarters:

*"Massing of enemy aircraft at Blaisie, one hundred miles north, is reported. Rush all possible interceptor planes at once! Entire Maginot Line in danger if this suspected assault is successful!"*

Cransford fumed and paced the floor of headquarters in uncertainty, with the entire flying personnel eyeing him questioningly. Llewellyn twisted his head and looked intently at Kink. Finally, the C. O. made his decision:

"You'll take charge, Llewellyn," he snapped. "Colonel Tarcher is on the way up, in a formation of Bristol Blenheim bombers. I'll — er — have to wait and greet him!"

Kink blinked and swallowed hard. "I'm to go too, sir?"

"Denied," Cransford snapped. "You'll face charges for popping out of formation with alleged motor trouble. Can't have that sort of thing going on in my command!"

**K**INK went out and watched the gang stream to the tarmac, watched the Hurricanes leap their stunning 12,000 feet upward in four minutes, saw the gang slam into the tight section-of-sections formation and drill for the front. He was making his way back to the mess shack when a thunder of motors sounded and four huge Bristol Blenheims roared over the horizon and dropped for the tarmac. One of the planes

was marked with a starred-chevron design that proclaimed a Wing commander.

"My God, here's Tarcher now!" Kink realized. He made his way to a place where he could watch without being seen.

Tarcher came along, followed by his staff. Cransford met them with all the ritual that he could muster in the deserted place, and then Tarcher was speaking:

"... glad to have your men meet me, at mess, Major. Want to see how you are running the show, up here. . . . Understand, of course, the difference in tactics since 'Eighteen, and all that. But just the same . . ."

Kink only half listened, as he eyed his father's old friend. Big, with the ruddy complexion of the English, and with dark hair that had greyed at the temples. He wore his uniform like a veteran; and his dark, mobile eyes didn't seem to miss a thing. And then Kink froze as he heard Major Cransford's reply. . . .

"My men are off on a flight, sir. Er—quite routine. Reported massing of enemy planes, but don't expect there is anything to it."

"My God!" Kink breathed. "Is he *balmy*? What the—!" He broke it off. Tarcher was speaking again.

"Well, right." The new commander thought it over a minute, then said, "Don't mind a bit if I go along and check over the area. Your own planes up, and all that, so no particular danger, what?"

Kink waited for Cransford to advise against it. A Blenheim would be a prize to make any Nazi's heart burst. And here, with the reported massing of ships over the West Wall, Cransford was letting Tarcher go out unwarned!

"*Why?*" Kink asked himself. "Just why is he doing that?"

The group had started to move for the tarmac when Kink made up his mind to rush out and warn Tarcher. But it came to him, "I can't! I've got to stay low."

With his mind spinning, he watched

Tarcher climb back, not into his own plane, but into one of the other bombers. Kink saw that Tarcher's own ship was being gassed. The Yank waited, watching to see Cransford climb in; but to his surprise, the C. O. of 104 stood back after a salute, and the giant bomber wheeled slowly and went back into a takeoff position.

It hit Kink then, and hit him hard, what was wrong.

"It's Cransford himself who has the wind up!" he realized. "It's Cransford! He is funking it, and is letting Tarcher go out in face of that giant formation of Nazi planes, rather than admit that he stayed back and deliberately let Llewellyn lead the gang!"

Kink cast aside all thought of himself and raced across the intervening space. If he could get to Tarcher, stop him long enough to explain—

But the bomber was rumbling across the field in a fast take-off . . . a take-off for the West Wall, and destruction!

"Colonel!" Kink yelled, as he raced hard. "Colonel Tarcher! Hold it! Cransford has lied to you!"

**B**UT the ship had gathered headway, was lifting its wheels even as Kink rounded the hangar corner and came into the clear. The big ship was up and streaming for the horizon and danger; while Major Cransford and the others of Tarcher's party stood and stared at the Yank pilot.

"Your quarters, under arrest!" Cransford snapped, his eyes ugly. He said to Tarcher's staff: "This man funked it several days ago. A bit more funking, I believe—this screaming around as if he were crazy!"

Kink turned on him. "Why, you—!" But he held it. Time was precious. He turned to Tarcher's men, instead. "Cransford is the one who is funking it!" he blared. "Colonel Tarcher is going to his death, sure as we're talking, unless we go after him." Rapidly, he told his story.

But the Britishers met him with blank

stares. Kink recognized the looks. "It wasn't the thing." "A bit too thick, what?" "This chap is a ruddy ass, eh?"

He stood there, beaten, watching the Blenheim scud fast over the horizon. "Licked!" he muttered. "Licked by this damned coward who—" He jammed his jaws tight and stared at the big bomber with the chevron markings on it. The ghost of an idea formed in his mind, as he saw an ack-emma at the controls, rifling the motors and taxiing the big plane over to the cover of a camouflaged hangar. Kink looked around to make sure he wasn't seen by the others, then started quickly down the hangar line.

He cut in fast to where the Wing commander's plane had come to a stop. Without pausing in his stride, he jumped up and climbed rapidly for the control compartment. The mechanic looked at him, puzzled.

"Climb down!" Kink told him tightly. "Fast!" When the man showed a reluctance to move, Kink trotted out his best British Officer manner. "All right, my man, I said climb down! What? Move! Right? You hear? I'll jolly well have you broken if you don't—"

He stopped there and grinned, as he slid into his seat at the controls. The ack-emma was climbing down, was now on the ground, looking at him curiously. Kink tugged a gear and the hatches slammed shut. He clicked his eyes over the instrument board, grinned at the commander's mike on the communication set, inched the throttles forward and swung the big plane in a hard arc.

Cransford was standing in the center of the tarmac, his face distorted, his arms waving crazily. He ducked, flattened himself on the ground in time to let it skim over him, that big plane that boomed along in a mad take-off.

Kink got the feel of the air on the big wheel, then lifted gently. The Bristol Blenheim came off neat, climbed at a rate that brought Kink's eyebrows up in astonishment. But he leaned forward and geared

in the plane's retractable landing gear.

"I don't know where we get off," he said, as he tooled the bus for the Western Wall. "but I do know this much: there's a certain Yank pilot who has an appointment with a firing squad of the British Army—*if he misses!*"

**L**LEWELLYN was cautiously holding his men off from attacking the giant Nazi formation, to await reinforcements. But he was giving up hope, was edging nearer for the suicide try. When something showed on the far horizon, beyond the Maginot Line.

"What the ruddy hell *now?*" he murmured, squinting his eyes. In a few moments, he was able to make out two Bristol Blenheims, crashing along at top throttles. "What the ruddy hell!" he repeated. And then his communication-system earpieces broke into garbled talk, and the leader of 104's battle planes went slack in his seat in stunned amazement.

But not for long. He reached over, snapped his own mike into being, roared through it:

"Follow the orders of the —er— the Wing commander's plane, gentlemen!" Then he clicked off, his eyes round, and whipped his fast plane up and into position. His men ganged with him, and together they ringed in the plunging, crazy Bristol Blenheim bombers . . . the two great planes that had zoomed up and were racing to a single-handed attack on the Nazi ships in the near distance!

But Kink kept up his shouted information to the *real* Wing commander's plane.

"Sorry, sir!" he'd repeated again and again, over the long miles that he hurtled his solo bomber at full throttle; and over those same long miles that Tarcher, in the other bomber, roared futile protests and then listened to Kink's new explanations. "Sorry; but it's got to be this way!"

And then Tarcher saw the giant Nazi formation, and silenced. Kink silenced,

too . . . or thought he did. Forgotten to him was the fact that he once heard another man's motor miss—through this same sort of communication set. Forgotten that the whole of 104 was listening in, as he drilled the big plane on and let the others ring in behind him, then swept the entire Allied formation hard at the stunned Nazis.

*" . . . Just a dope of a Yank who can't fly formation in his own Hurricane and still fight! So what? So now I'm trying to fight formation stuff in a slip the size of the Golden Gate bridge!"*

The Nazis had retreated a mile or more, to size up the mad rush of the two big bombers and the swift Hurricanes. Kink leaned to his mike and snapped: "Line of sections! Close. And I mean *close!* Gang in there, Llewellyn. You like it so much! Come on! In! Closer yet. *CLOSER YET!*"

He sat back and said, "Well, maybe that big Welsh tramp won't go shooting off his mouth to *me* any more!"

He couldn't see Llewellyn whip erect in his own pit in amazement, as Kink's fancied-to-himself came into his earphones and into the earphones of them all. He was intent on the Nazis, who had smelled a plot of some sort in this brazen attack, and were beating a disorderly retreat, a retreat that left their formation full of holes. He squinted his eyes at the correct angle of attack, and ruddered for it.

"Here go the works!" he said, still forgetting the mike carried every word he was saying, carried it clear to those other ships. "Maybe I'm just a Yank fourflusher, trying to get along; but here goes Bill Landry's revenge, or I'm a Limejuicer's batman." He broke it off to lean over and say, seriously, into his mike:

*"You—ah—may attack when ready, gentlemen."* Then, a grin breaking on his face, he said: *"Happy landings, wot? Quite, quite! Pip-pip! Cheer-o!"*

He tripped his gun triggers when he could see the glint of the props, close up. He

sighed with deep content and felt the shock of the thudding Brownings course up his wrists and arms and into his chest.

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

Tracer smoke drew weird lines and bit hard in a nearby Messerschmitt. The pilot reared his crate up crazily; but no less crazily than the big Blenheim in the leading position zoomed after him. Carefully, and with all thought of the ganged ships behind him gone, Kink sighted.

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

The Messerschmitt grew a plume of black smoke and heeled on a wing. As it plunged, Kink sighed: "That's yours . . . ol' Bill! The next one is strictly mine!"

**H**ELL broke loose in the air over the Western Wall as the giant Nazi formation, hampered by its very size, tried to fight off this crazy English onslaught. And through it rode a berserk Yank pilot, shooting and zooming and diving and alternately roaring encouragement to his mates, and then lapsing into slang talk that under other circumstances would have had the entire flight of British rocking in their seats.

Kink Landry was getting even for ol' Bill . . . !

It was a tattered, disheveled set of ships that roared in over the line of trees to the south and ran their wheels on the dirt of 104's tarmac. But a squad of British infantry charged the Blenheim with the chevrons on it, even before it had rolled to a stop. At their head was none other than the once-again-courageous Major Cransford.

But Kink was too smart for them. He gunned his bus ahead and ran it back across the field in a swift taxi, coming to a stop only after Colonel Tarcher was down from his own plane and shouting orders to the soldiers.

The infantryman took one look at the superior pips on Tarcher's uniform, and carried out his orders. Cransford was ringed in by the group of them, and marched from the field. Kink grinned and climbed down

from his plane. But he sobered at sight of Tarcher. He came up and saluted, gravely.

"Lieutenant Landry, sir," he said, putting on a very good Oxford accent. "Sorry, and all that sort of thing. Most imperative, you know. No time to be lost, what?"

Tarcher stared, his eyes touching features familiar to him when he and Bill Landry had been buddies, back over the long years. Then he grinned. "Stow it, son," he smiled, and stuck out his hand. "You're still a . . . Yankee fourflusher, was it you called yourself?"

Kink's eyes popped; and then he remembered. "The communication system! My God! I—I forgot!"

"But I haven't forgotten!" another voice said. Llewellyn pushed to the fore. "I haven't forgotten you called me a big Welsh tramp!" But his eyes were glinting humor.

Kink swallowed. "I—I'm sorry. But—well, I was rattled."

"Right." Llewellyn twisted his head and looked at Tarcher. "You were right, of course, Uncle Toby. But, by God, the lad had me fooled. Knew no end of people in Birmingham, England. The Lord Mayor who is . . . and every one who had ever been, as well. You *said* it sounded like ol' Bill's son, but the beggar fooled me."

Kink stared some more. and then said, "Huh? *Uncle Toby*?"

Tarcher said, "Dave Llewellyn is my nephew. Of course, he heard me talk no end about your . . . father. I . . . I can't say much about that, you know, Kink. Only that—well, we both lost a pal."

Kink nodded, his eyes grave. "And I was letting down on him. Imagine! Bill Landry's own son not being able to fly and fight in formation. I mean, not liking it!"

**T**OBY TARCHER and Dave Llewellyn howled with laughter. The new Wing leader clapped Kink on the back and said, "Nobody likes it, old top. And nobody hated it worse than ol' Bill. Gad, how he used to get the wind up, whenever a big

dog-fight loomed in the offing. More than once, we felt like running!"

"Huh?" Kink was positively goggle-eyed. "Bill and you—were—were afraid?"

"Sensible, let's call it," Tarcher corrected him, with a wink.

Llewellyn said, "But we didn't choke our motors, did we, Kink—? Like Cransford did, to excuse himself from that flight. when he saw the fight coming?"

"Did he do that?" Kink echoed. "You're sure?"

"Right, I'm sure! I was trying the choke myself, on my own plane, to convince myself, when you—"

"—when I ran up on you!" Kink finished for him. "Then why didn't you admit it?"

"I couldn't, very well, in front of Cransford. And later, when I tried to cheer you by telling you Uncle Toby was coming, you jumped down my throat!"

"Gosh!" Kink remembered. "I thought you were threatening me. But—you had called me a Rainbow Ace. You'd said I was there one minute, and gone when you tried to get hold of me."

Dave grinned. "You're still a Rainbow Ace, Kink, old chap. What? Get it—? You're a bit *green*, eh? You came damned near pushing up the *violets*, as you say in the States! What?"

"Ouch!" Kink groaned. "You mean daisies, don't you? Well, green and violet don't make a rainbow, even so!"

"Well, old chap, add the Red, White and Blue. Hah!" the big fellow laughed at his own joke. "Good, what?"

"And a dash of yellow, maybe," Kink said seriously. "In formation fighting."

"Kink," Toby Tarcher said, his hand on the Yank's arm, "I think your father and I would have amended that color. *Gold*, we'd call it. Now, like three good Britishers—" he dug Kink in the ribs "we'll retire to a bit of whisky and soda, what?"

"Cheer-o!" the Rainbow Ace chuckled, as he linked arms with the two of them and went along.

# SCREWBALL OF THE SKIES

by T. W. FORD

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El McCay took as a personal challenge the smashing of his violin and he forgot armies and nations when he threw his Spitfire into flaming skies to fight a private war against that Nazi hell hound who had caused the destruction of his beloved instrument!

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**Y**OU can't make sense when the old "two and two" won't add up. When sometimes it makes "four" and sometimes it doesn't. Either you go nuts trying to figure it out, or the proposition's cock-eyed. Which was the case between the British 68th Pursuit, 18th Group, and straw-haired Second Lieutenant El McCay.

*There was McCay walking fast and calmly through a hail of lead to the Spitfire.*

Nobody could dope the guy out. He was sort of big, with gawky feet and hands that looked as if they belonged around a plough. The only time he seemed interested in anything was when he got that old fiddle under his chin and bent the round eyes out into space and played sort of strange music like a man had never heard before. Then he looked as if he'd walk right through a steel wall if anybody or anything stopped his bow.

On top of that, some of the Maple Leaf outfit that had crossed the Atlantic with him said he had either nerves of ice or no brains. While some of the others, especially Captain Check Thompson, the former hockey star, stared off in that way men, regardless of race, have when somebody is mentioned whom they think yellow. You simply couldn't figure the guy.

The Canadian bunch, going up to join the British 68th, had just debarked from the train at a tiny *village* behind the Maginot Line up near the Belgian border. Were straightening limbs beneath the camouflage screen of the platform. El—short for “Elwood”—McCay was puffing a cigaret and looking over the joint as if he might buy himself a chunk of real estate. Then a police whistle began to tweet, was taken up by other frantic, warning bleats up the road. A gendarme pedaled furiously past on his bicycle, waving them to cover, pointing upward.

They could see it as it dipped in a half circle out of the cloud bank up there, a big Junkers Ju. 87. Nazi symbols were plain on its wing panels in the filtering sunlight. Captain Thompson barked the command to get to cover. Men dived every which way, scrambling under baggage trucks, wishing the train with its telltale smoke stack was further away, swearing at the camions that hadn't arrived to rush them forward yet. Down in the public square, a tiny, civilian-manned light anti-aircraft battery began to pop-pop away,

then waited. The Junkers about had them at its mercy if it came lower.

And somebody saw Second Lieutenant El McCay, calmly unbuttoning his tunic, puffing on his smoke. He was standing out in plain view, leaning against a post at the end of the station shed, squinting upward. Somebody called. An old Frenchman babbled from an upper story of the station. No sign of life moving in the town. Just McCay's cigaret smoke dribbling upward from his slightly parted lips.

The Junkers bomber slanted southward leisurely, dropped, the fans of its props shining discs up there. And that Junkers was one of those special “dive” jobs, the kind that torpedo down at full power to jerk out of it at two thousand and spill their load.

Finally it began to climb and vanish swiftly eastward. Three French patrol ships came out of the west, far behind. The danger was past.

Captain Thompson, the old bearcat of the N.H.L. back-lines, came storming out to pin El McCay's chest with a finger like a spike. “See here, you cock-eyed idiot—were you waiting for him to give you a lift?”

McCay had come to attention. “Well, captain,” he said in that tired voice. “I didn't figure he'd come down here just to get *me*, either!”

Then the camions crawled around the turn of a walled street where they'd been waiting.

**T**HERE it was, right in your lap. Nobody could figure the bird. He seemed perfectly unconcerned as they rushed toward the Front at high speed along a twisting, heavily wooded road with the slug slug of lackadaisical artillery fire rumbling up and down the line.

His Canadian mates hadn't been able to figure him from the beginning. He was a Maple Leaver too, of Canadian parentage. But his family had moved south across the border to a Minnesota farm when he'd

been very young. That much they'd dragged out of him. Before the outbreak of this Second World War, he'd come into Toronto and joined the R.A.F. and gone into training. Which was strange, too. His reason for that, drily explained, had been very simple. Down in Minnesota, he'd run into a pro-Nazi agitator and hadn't liked the cuss. So he figured any system that guy liked couldn't be any good. So here he was to fight it. Very simple.

Then, there was that freak incident of the Atlantic crossing when a sub had slipped through the British convoy and sent a torpedo into the hulk of the plane carrier with its detachment of fliers. The alarm siren screaming. The order to take to the boats in the thinning dawn as the destroyers' searches ploughed across the sea. The heavy plump of the depth bombs being strewn frantically around.

They'd gotten away in the small boats. Then a couple of the convoy had run down the sub off to the southwest and sunk her. Officers had taken check in each of the lifeboats. Only one man was missing. Second Lieutenant El McCay—of course!

As the morning mists thinned, it showed the transport still afloat, listing slightly, that was all. The torpedo had merely grazed her, failing to explode after breaking a bulkhead. And when they reboarded her, there was McCay, precious fiddle in its battered case, standing around on the fo'castle deck, looking like a stray calf, but quite calm.

It was then that some began to hint he had a saffron streak in him somewhere. That he'd been too scared to go overside. Yet, now, there was that incident of the Junkers bomber. McCay hadn't seemed scared then.

"Too damn dumb to show the white feather," Thompson pronounced to a mate as they swung with the swaying camion. "I've seen 'em that way in hawkey from trying too many dives at the sideboards!"

"What they call a screwball in baseball, eh?" put in another. "Just does dizzy

things—like trying to steal a sack with a runner on it. There was a player with Brooklyn once—"

HE was cut off as they sighted a lazily cruising big fellow overhead. It was a Westland Lysander, an obs job back from some picture taking, peacefully wending its way homeward. It began to lower and the observer waved to the camion.

"Looks like a very dull war to me," came from McCay up front. Thompson's wide, firm mouth jerked.

"Time will tell," he growled under his breath. The rest of them felt he knew. Check Thompson had had a taste of the tip-end of the last one, slipping in underage as a cadet.

Time told—or seemed to—and a hell of a lot faster than they expected. Under lowering skies, they swung through a shelled town whose mortar craters and empty echoes made them feel like ghosts. A liason officer talked with the driver a moment. After that, with scudding gobs of soup drifting down from the North Sea, they moved behind a ridge, then were winding forward through a *foret*, a slow, endless trip. It was dim in there.

"Yeah, he'll find out how dull war *cannot* be," Thompson was saying. "He'll—"

Machine gun fire rattled up front—and overhead. It smote down like a leaden flail from the skies. But not at them. Then came the thunder of diving ships, engines hammering a hell-song as they plummeted behind their doses of lead. There was the slap of light cannon, then the racketing of A.A. batteries rushing into action.

"The drome's just ahead!" bawled the driver as he jammed the brakes.

They were piling out. Running ahead down the little more than cart-trail. Some slugs spattered into the foliage. Then men came scrambling back toward them. Up ahead, there was a big "woofth" accompanied by a stab of flaming fire skyward



as a plane on the ground went up with ignited tanks.

They were at the edge of the British 18th Groupe, the tarmac sector of the 68th Pursuit directly in front of them. And it was being strafed to holy hell by a bunch of German Messerschmitt 109's that sliced low over it like starved buzzards. A couple of mecs down to the right collapsed trying to wheel a Spitfire back to safety. Further down, a handful of crates, the prized Spitfires too, were afire from the returning plane that had crashed down into them.

**I**T was one of those surprise breaks of warfare against which there was no guarding. The single Spitfire, that had just smack down, had been limping homeward with engine trouble and some Nazi planes on its tail. And the enemy crates had been able to slip in unobserved behind the drifting clouds of mist and strike as if from the dark. And they were going to it lustily, taking advantage of the fired ships and the confusion, whipping about like so many sharks.

It couldn't last long. But it was an inferno while it did. The figures on the ground twisted and toiled and ran like bands of pigmies in the withering blast of some Satanic oven. Two Spitfires almost got off. But a Swastica-insigniad Messerschmitt, ground-hopping low over the roof of a bomb-proof, landed on their necks from behind and crippled them both. The machine guns of an A.A. emplacement chattered hotly, sent one Messerschmitt staggering to the north with an ominous black plume of engine smoke for a tail. But another of the strafers dived on that m.g. bunch, its machine guns and its 20 mm. propeller hub gun snapping. And the former were strewn flat under silenced weapons.

One of the newly-arrived Canadians jabbed an arm upward at the darting ships with the crazy crimson-daubed fuselages. "See 'em! See 'em! 'S the famous Deaths-

head *Jagdstaffel!* Von Salheim's bunch! See the deaths-head on that fuselage and—" he bellowed with his head between Thompson's and McCay's.

"We get back!" Thompson spat calmly. "Not a chance of getting a plane off! Those pilots down there—mecs too—are going for the bomb shelters! There isn't a chance! Come on!"

He ran up and down, rallying his men, rookies all, hypnotized by the awfulness of the picture.

"Come on—back—back!" he slammed his commands calmly through the din. "Back! Back—hey, you, McCay—"

A Messerschmitt whipped in a trigger-tight turn just above the trees to crack back at the field, half its blazing-hued wing buried in the drifting scud momentarily. And below, like a man on a simple errand. El McCay was striding out onto the tarmac. A wave of oily smoke blotted him for seconds. Thompson screeched. Others of the Maple Leaf contingent paused, turned to watch. It seemed as if McCay must have gone out of his mind.

The smoke passed. And there was McCay, not running, just walking fast and straight like a guy going to the corner post-box on a bad night. Bullets geysered the earth to one side. Off to his right, a dead-engined Spitfire wobbled on its trucks as one of those 20 mm. guns slugged shells into it. Then they saw what McCay was heading for.

**I**T was a Spitfire that had been rolled halfway out, standing there turning up slowly, abandoned. Unscathed except for a chunk bitten out of the rear right wing. A wounded mec crouched under its fuselage. And anybody but an idiot would give ten to one that to get into its cockpit, to take it off, would be as good as writing your own death warrant.

Then McCay was at it, vanishing inside it. The shadow of a Nazi ship flashed over it like the aura of some baleful bird. Back

in the woods, Thompson mopped sweat from his scarred face and cursed. For the lone Spitfire, suddenly gunned, was bucketting off. Its tail jerked up too soon as McCay forward-sticked. Then he back-sticked and tried to yank it ground-free. The crate lifted, then bounced drunkenly.

It busted around a half-crumpled wreck of another ship, then dragged a wing tip and went skidding around insanely. Bullets and shells from the propeller boss gun of a diving Nazi bus gashed earth where the Spitfire and McCay had been. Doing better than five miles per minute, the Messerschmitt was past in a split second. And then the zigzagging, jouncing Spitfire was taking off.

One of those German winged bullets of destruction came ripping over for it. But the badly controlled Spitfire with the Allied *cocardes* on its wings almost vertical was jerking around like a kite-tail. It heeled on a skidding wing-tip, came within a skinny whisker of piling up, then went bolting away, wings still vertical, fuselage parallel to the tarmac. Dived into the smoke pali of the burning ships. And an instant later, it tobogganed up over the trees, coming toward its 360 m.p.h. top speed, sledding for the high heavens. McCay the Idiot—or else McCay of the Cast-Iron Nerves—was off, up!

The Nazi ships were pulling out for home. Interceptors of a French reconnaissance flight had swung off from their observation ships and coming down the line fast. Further below, on another tarmac of the 18th Groupe, the British had already sneaked a handful of Hawker Hurricanes from sunken dromes. And from below, Captain Falder-Jones of the 68th Pursuit jumped off in a Spitfire that had been saved. Almost on his tail empennage hopped his brother.

The Messerschmitts started to run for it. It was time for *Les Fritzes* to call it a day. But those big hunks of mist in uneven layers prevented them from pulling

together into formation. It was every man for himself and *Der Fuehrer*.

McCAY saw his altimeter at ten thousand as he levelled off. A Nazi ducked out of one of those fog bunches. McCay's ploughman hand gave the pressure to the gunnery control button. From each wing, the four Browning machine guns seethed into action. Then the Nazi bus was in a sharp *chandelle*, next flipping onto its monoplane back and ducking into another fleecy blanket.

In vain, El McCay probed after him. He shrugged a little, tensed his rangy body without the usual fur-lined coverall against the chill, then methodically headed the Spitfire eastward. That was the way the Germans would go home.

Off to his right, a trio of Hawker Hurricanes with the British *cocardes* appeared, mounting as they took the sky spoor of the Messerschmitt raiders. McCay climbed too in the waning glow of the sun. Off below the wing end he made out the shiny smear of what seemed a snail's trail and was in reality a river. On one bank of it, the crazy framework of a shell-gutted church steeple spiked bravely upward. Then, beside it, almost like a hovering moth, something stirred, seemed to creep.

Putting a wing over, McCay put the Spitfire down with a cold, business-like savagery, grinned a little when he caught the swastika-symbol on the lower ship's wings. One of the Deaths-head *Jagstaffel*, of the *kampfflug* of von Salheim with the mighty reputation. The side of France reared upward at him, landscape wheeling. He edged his stick ahead, fingers hardening to clamp on the fire controls. Then his own crate vibrated and his eyes jerked in time to see an invisible finger punch bullet holes in the left wing. They were rattling into the camel-back behind him. A chunk of his instrument board was hacked away.

Rolling, he back-sticked hard. And two Messerschmitts, diving from a fog chunk

to the aid of their limping comrade below, shuttled past him. One started to whisk on its back to get the Spitfire in line of its guns, especially that 20 mm. cannon that spouted through the propeller boss. McCay pulled onto his own back and tried to go into a barrel roll. But he over-controlled in his greenness and the crate went dancing into a spin. Two Hawkers Hurricanes and Falder-Jones, the Englishmen from his own squadron, came dropping from above.

It was a running chase after that. One of the Hurricanes pulled out with engine trouble. Ground fire took care of the wobbling Messerschmitt below. McCay went scorching across the sky-trails above the Maginot Line with the others after the remaining pair of Nazi ships.

And it was his Spitfire, with just the edge on air speed over the Messerschmitt, that edged up, and up. His hands were on the control button, hosing lead from those eight Brownings, so arranged that at fairly close range their fire interlaced at a certain point on the target ahead.

**T**HE other Nazi broke to the southeast for it. McCay's target snapped into an abrupt dive, twisted in roll-over, and was somehow coming around from behind. Jerking his nose up, McCay gambled coldly, cutting the gun to freeze his ship in a momentary whipstall to get the German when he crossed over. If said German didn't burn his pants off from behind first.

But no lathering hail of those 20 mm. cannon shells came. Twisting around, McCay saw the Boche pilot banking sharply homeward. Wing-slipping, McCay headed across the tangent for him. And the German, grinning, held up his hands, palms forward as if surrendering. Then he gestured toward his guns and shook his head. Empty weapons.

El McCay took a deep breath. They were both down around five thousand. Then he went after the swastica-adorned wings. Flapping metal from a damaged wing

slowed the Messerschmitt some more. It dodged and fish-tailed, was forced still lower. And McCay, the rookie, finally closed and delivered the death burst with his octet of Brownings chanting their grim song.

The Nazi pilot jerked once. And his ship nosed over into the fatal, sickening dive he never would feel.

Ground fire whistled past McCay's cockpit. He started to screw upward and sighted the Spitfire of the 68th, Falder-Jones, who'd been following the duel. Banking, Falder-Jones motioned for home. Setting on his tail, the blood suddenly cold in his veins now, McCay followed him.

It was dusky, with a quartering moon dyeing the clouds, when they came down over the drome the ground crew was frantically cleaning up. McCay almost bounced the landing gear off it twice getting down. . . . .

They were crowded at the little bar in the 68th's own mess hall, those jubilant Canadian newcomers. Crowded around their fellow who'd taken off in a hell-storm and gotten a *descendu* in his first front-line flight.

Thompson set up another round and stuck out his big paw. "McCay, maybe I've been mighty wrong about you. But tell me one thing. Just what made you—" He was going to ask what had made him try that insane takeoff.

**T**HEN Captain Falder-Jones, small, neat, but with the cold eyes that could stare down a tiger, came in. It was he who'd reported McCay's victory. Falder-Jones had been one of the first to become an ace of the Allies in this Second World War. At his side walked his younger brother, a pink-cheeked lad, looking as if he'd skipped classes at Eton to get in the fight, trying hard to imitate the careless walk of his senior.

"Excellent work indeed, lieutenant," Falder-Jones the elder said in clipped tones.

"Getting off the field was little less than a miracle. By Jove, none the less!"

"Thanks, sir," McCay said with that ever-tired voice.

"But there's one thing, lieutenant. I imagine y'd no idea you got that German when his guns were empty. He was signing that. He—"

McCay held up a broad paw. "I got what he was signing. I knew."

The Englishman went rigid. So did McCay's Canadian mates. El McCay merely picked up his drink, shrugged, and asked:

"If I hadn't killed him—he'd only have gone home, got his guns loaded up, and gotten one of our men later, wouldn't he?"

There was talk around the squadron, undercover, speculative. Bets were laid on whether this quiet cuss who liked to play his fiddle in his barracks hut really had a heart or blood in his veins. Yet, there was awed admiration for his even attempting to get that ship off the ground under the merciless strafing.

"Damn it, the bloke started out for the plane just as if he *knew* he was going to get off," Thompson mused again and again.

McCay was called to the C. O.'s office and congratulated on his feat by the whimsical-eyed, gray-haired Englishman who led the 68th Pursuit. There were rumors of a D.S.C. McCay took all that as if it merely meant a drink on the house. But older pilots, comparative veterans of this new war, regarded him with something akin to pity and waited.

This Deathshead outfit were a wicked bunch to handle. Crack cadets picked from the flying pools of the *Vaterland*. Some of them even said to come from the *Schultz Staffel*, Hitler's own Elite Guard. The cream of the crop. And headed by von Salheim, a veteran of the last fracas who'd winged in the famed Red Circus of Manfred von Richtofen himself. *Der Schlager*, the Hammer, they'd already dubbed this von Salheim behind his own lines, a man of steel who often flew at the head of his

own echelons and had proven himself a veritable bat from Hell in the Polish affair.

Yes, better to wait when a man had to patrol the same sky sector as the Deathshead crew every day.

McCay was on a reconnaissance flight that made a cautious and dull patrol of the Maginot Line the next day. The only thing noticeable about him then was that he flew in formation raggedly and almost buried his Spitfire's nose into the brown tarmac sod on landing. He'd belled in, completely forgetting to release his retractable landing gear.

**T**HE English C.O. swore horasely. And Captain Falder-Jones, flight-leader of the A of the 68th, snapped his swagger stick in two, then went in for a quick drink. It was hard to watch a creature when you didn't know whether he was just a plain idiot or a prize hellion who'd bait the Devil himself.

The next day passed uneventfully with a light brush on a flight convoying some observation buses. No casualties reported. McCay wasn't in on that one, anyway. Pea soup came in heavy in the afternoon; the flying flag was hauled down and all planes grounded.

After mess, the imperturbable McCay was in their barracks hut, stuck back in the trees of the *foret*, fiddling slowly with that impenetrable look in his eyes. Magnon, a French-Canadian who'd come over in the contingent before McCay's bunch, came in. He held out a soiled envelope.

"This was dropped down at the other end of the Groupe right after the soup set in. A grease-monkey found it. They finally traced it down to McCay. The higher-ups aren't wise yet."

McCay put down his fiddle with reverent care and took the letter. Thompson shoved aside his glass and leaned over. It merely said:

*"To the Pilot Who Flew Ship S-F"*

29645 of the British 68th Pursuit Two Days Ago."

That much was typewritten. McCay continued looking.

"The chief sergeant-mec traced it," Magnon said. "That was the bus you took off the tarmac during the strafing, McCay."

McCay nodded. "Was it? Good ship." "Open it, stupid!" Thompson said. "Don't you see up there in the corner—under the grease—the Deathshead. It's from the Germans!"

McCay did, unhurriedly. A piece of expensive stationery slid out, half opened. At the top was a crest, "von S" beneath it. Somebody caught their breath with a sharp hiss. Then El McCay began to read the message, in English, written in a flourishing, impatient German square hand.

"Herr Officer of S-F 29645, two days ago you had the honor of downing a ship of the Deathshead Jagdstaffel in an engagement just behind our lines, killing the pilot. Ground observers have just reported to me that the German pilot had signalled that he was out of ammunition. Consequent investigation after the crash confirms this. The pilot of that plane, ruthlessly murdered by you, had the honor to be my cousin, Maximilian von Salheim. . . . I will be at approximately the same spot on the dawn patrol tomorrow morning—but alone, at fifteen thousand. I will expect you to do me the honor of affording me an opportunity to avenge my late cousin!" McCay finished. "Hmmm."

"Look." Thompson shoved over a finger. "It's signed, August Johann von Salheim, Count."

**T**HEN there was silence. Moisture dripped from the leaves outside. The grind of a lorry coming through the woods. Magnon finally spoke.

"That was quite the thing in the last war, of course. . . . Personal combat. The challenge to the duel in the air. Now, the brass-hats might forbid—"

"If they knew about it!" Thompson slapped the table hard. "Look. I'm assigned to a reconnaissance patrol in the morning. I know the flight officer from back in Ottawa, McCay. I can get him to list you in that patrol. Then you can meet Von! You'll know him easy. He has a white plume, the crest of his house, on his fuselage side! And—"

"No, thanks," McCay said, picked up his violin.

The room shook with the stoppage of sound as if it had blasted. A silly grin froze on Thompson's big face. He coughed.

"Look, you got to! This is a personal challenge. Why you'd be—" He was going to say "yellow."

McCay frowned a little, big eyes thoughtful. Then he shook his head. "Nope. I'm not meeting him. This is war—so they say. Not a game. Sort of impersonal. I've nothing to do with von Salheim." He had his bow across the strings. A chord of that haunting music that didn't seem human came out. And the dead-set look came into El McCay's eyes.

Magnon turned curtly on his heel and Check Thompson jumped to his feet. "Damn it! Dam your bloody soul! I wouldn't want you, McCay, on the same patrol with me!"

**I**T was the next evening. McCay was playing his violin down in the squadron mess hall after dinner. The operations officer had heard him play and persuaded him to bring his fiddle over. Now, he stood, gawky figure half hunched before the ragged fireplace that had been part of the main French farm building, the dead-set stamp in his eyes. And that eerie, at times unearthly music, that made a man feel no human had ever written it, was coming from his bow.

The door slammed open and young Falder-Jones, brother of the ace captain, flung in, face sheet-white except where the cheek-bones threatened to stab through gaunt-drawn flesh. He stood swaying, a

little intoxicated, on the verge of hysteria, mud-spattered from a recent motorcycle trip.

Then he sent a chair spinning and bore down on McCay. The music didn't stop. Falder-Jones' jaw hinged, unhinged, and words came. Hot, torn, maniacal words as he pointed a trembling hand at the violinist.

"My brother—my brother went out on the dawn flight this morning. He was reported to have dropped out with engine trouble. You hear? Then word came in that they'd found him crashed in a woods, still alive. Forced, emergency landing, they thought, of course. He was unconscious. You hear, y' damned mucker, McCay?"

For answer, McCay's round eyes never swerved from the sightless point at which he stared. Music, something that sounded like wailing in the bills of the dead, sobbed from the instrument.

Young Falder-Jones leaped a step closer. "Listen, damn y'—listen! I just went down to the base hospital where they took him. Smashed up. Wounded! Wounded with German bullets. He'll live—but only by a miracle! My great brother, the—" Sobs throttled him.

There was a slow, sullen pulsing like drums speaking a deadly mumble, then a high, white whine from McCay's fiddle.

"Know how he got it?" Falder-Jones howled above the instrument. "He feigned engine trouble to drop out of the flight—and then go and meet von Salheim! *The man you were afraid to meet!* Y' see? Y' understand? He did it for the honor of the squadron. Did it—and got shot to bits—just got back behind our lines! Took your place, you rotten, dirty cad! You—"

The music stopped then like an expiring breath. McCay stared, speechless, forehead knitted in thought. Then, before anybody could close in, young Falder-Jones had ripped out his side-arm. He threw up the automatic and strained at the trigger. But in vain. In his passion, he'd forgotten to release the safety catch.

Baffled, thwarted, the youngster threw himself at McCay, clubbing with the weapon. One blow McCay caught on his arm. But the next smashed down into his beloved fiddle and reduced it to a mash of tinder-wood. Then other men were on the insane English kid and pulled him off.

El McCay stepped back. No sign of fury or remorse marked his face. He just stood looking down at his wrecked instrument. After a moment, he dropped the now worthless bow beside it. He walked out of the mess hall, sightless, silent. But at the door, he nodded once, as if to himself. . . .

IT was a little before the dawn patrol would have gone out, the black gray-ing, the atmosphere like a dank shroud, figures and shapes looming through it grotesquely. And the *alerte* began to siren madly. Officers sprang from nowhere, mouthing commands. A certain efficiency took form out of the apparent pell-mell. Spitfire engines began to crackle as hangar doors swung wide. The big guns frothed palely on the front.

Word had just been flashed. A German bomber flight had been flushed, anticipated by a tip. It had already been contacted to the north. All ships in the air!

Spitfires began to bucket down the field, climbed off, as the yellow glow in the east rose and folded away the dying night's black garment. At ten thousand, they levelled, falling into flight formation, group after group. McCay sat blank-faced behind his controls in C flight, banked a little to get into line, saw the plane just ahead signal engine trouble and drop out. Then they were arrowing into the northeast, winged projectiles flitting over the earth at better than five miles per minute.

Thompson was just behind McCay on that side of the echelon V when they picked up the bunch of big Junkers Ju. 87 bombers, headed backward into Germany now, hounded by French Potez 63's and British Hawker Hurricanes. And as sunlight punc-

tured the cloud wrack, the Deathshead insignia on the fuselages of the bomber convoy shone out. Von Salheim's *jagd-staffel!*

Then the Spitfires of the 68th were winding up to get at those Messerschmitts doing such an excellent job of escort defense. A flaming crate, wind tossed, dropped crazily and the flight had to break. They were in the swirling maze of the sky holocaust.

Check Thompson got on a Messerschmitt's tail, then had to crash-dive for dear life as both a Junkers gun crew and another of the Deathshead boys went to work on him. It was over almost then. The foiled bombers were over their own terrain. The strategy of the war was to play it safe. The signal came to draw off as one Junkers, smoking heavily, began to nurse itself earthward.

OVER it, shielding it, hovered one of those crazy-crimson Messerschmitts. The stark white insignia of a feathered plume, the crest of the House of von Salheim, shone on its fuselage side. Then, from the eastward, a poker-faced kid came lancing. It was El McCay, the screwball.

Von Salheim dove to meet him. The fire-streams of the Spitfire's eight m.g.'s and that prop cannon of the Nazi bus seemed to intermesh. It looked like a head-on. Then it was the great, new sky knight of the Nazis who gave ground, kicking his rudder bar to dodge the up-lunging Spitfire.

But El McCay was slumped over to one side of his tiny cockpit, a hot poker of pain searing his side. He arced in a short loop. But the swirling Deathshead ship was in the hands of a master. With an unbelievable Immelmann he was around on the Spitfire, thrashing it with his armament.

There was only one thing for McCay to do. He did it. Started down. Both buses rushed earthward, gunned wide open in a power dive.

McCay fishtailed desperately. But the Count was his master. It looked as if El

McCay's number was up as they hurtled down.

McCay had to flatten then—or crash. But the *Schlager* was camped on his tail. Then, the latter suddenly held his fire. It would be a great feather in his cap if he could force this *verdamer* enemy down alive behind the German lines. A field stretched ahead.

And McCay's Spitfire jerked down at it, just cleared the wall at one end, von Salheim close behind. The next moment—observers from above, a few British pilots too far away to help, saw it. McCay had cut his gun and struck earth. Schlager von Salheim backsticked to lift over the landed ship. And the implacably cool McCay had bounced, bounced deliberately, crazily as he gunned to line his octet of weapons on the Nazi ship.

Von Salheim's Messerschmitt flattened and he banked to escape the fire. But the wild McCay struck again, fishtailed to bring his nose around in a wide skid, then bounced her off again in an insane hope. And again those eight Brownings rained their steely hail. Less than a hundred feet from the ground, von Salheim's crate seemed to go to pieces in mid-air. Flames spurted from the engine hoods. Then it was rushing into the stone wall for a back-breaking, crumpling smash with a dead man's hands on the controls.

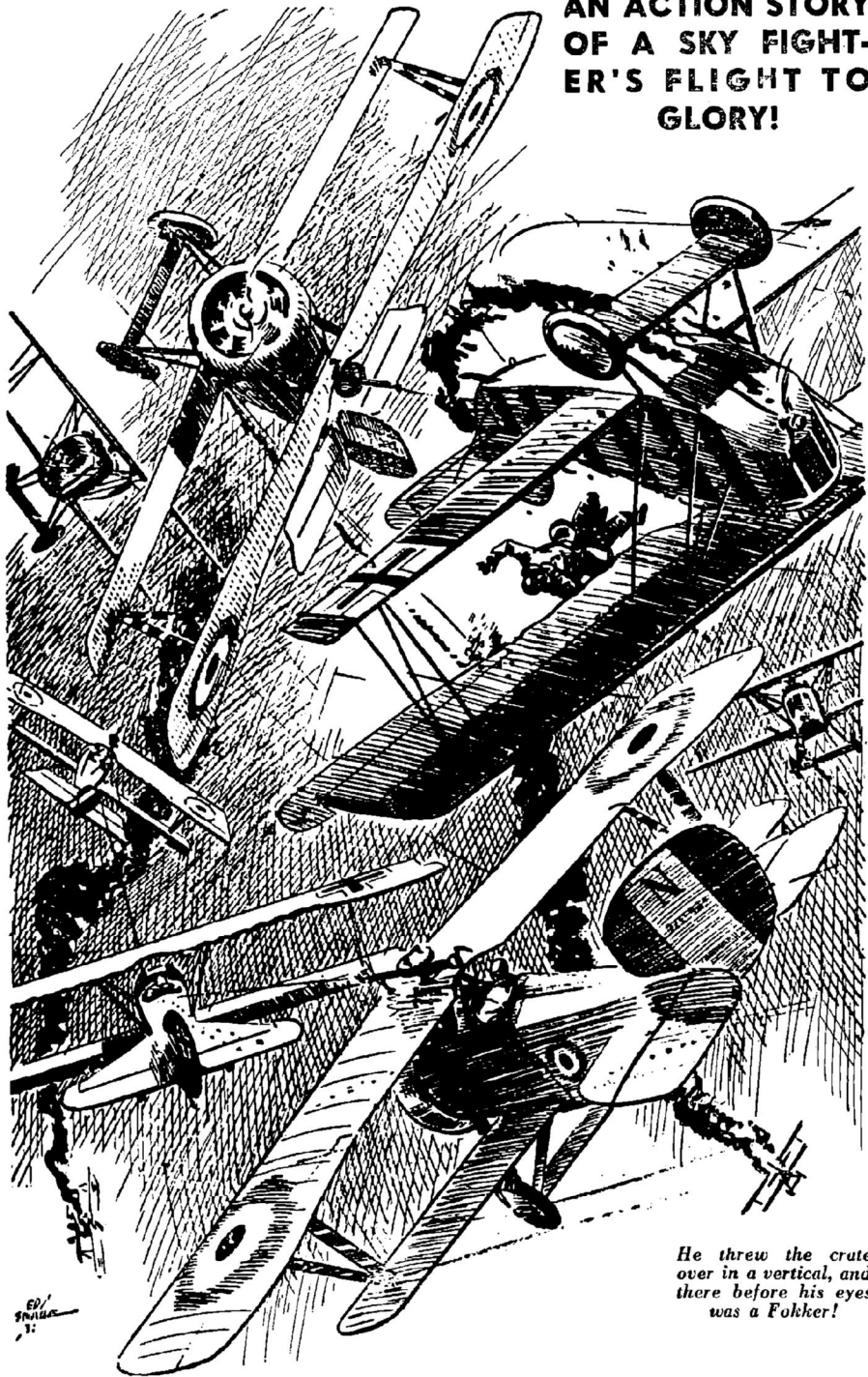
McCay's Spitfire was already climbing westward.

Thompson was waiting for the violin player when he got down on the home field. The ex-hockey star grabbed McCay by the shoulders.

"Look!" he spat. "Either you're nuts—or I am! The other day, you wouldn't fight von Salheim. Today, I saw you single him out and go for him. . . . Why, kid, why?"

McCay waited for a match for his cigaret, then spoke as if it were the most logical thing in the world. "You see, I figure it was his fault my fiddle got smashed. . . . And I was very fond of that fiddle. That's all."

**AN ACTION STORY  
OF A SKY FIGHT-  
ER'S FLIGHT TO  
GLORY!**



69/  
STILLER  
3:

*He threw the crate  
over in a vertical, and  
there before his eyes  
was a Fokker!*



# WINGS OF CLAY

by METTEAU MILES

LIEUTENANT RED FORTNEY'S hands trembled as he tripped the Vickers in a warming burst. They didn't tremble because he was excited and eager to battle the enemy. Nor did they tremble because he was cold. They trembled because Lieutenant Red Fortney was just plain ordinary scared.

For a man who was scared of height, scared of bullets, and scared of death, Red Fortney was certainly in one sweet place. His Camel was occupying the Number Five slot in a flight of five crates out on patrol from the 7th Pursuit tarmac, U. S. Army Air Service. They were flying at an altitude of eight thousand feet, and roaring down out of the sun was a staffel of Fokkers!

This was Lt. Fortney's third patrol across the lines since reporting as a replacement two days ago. He'd been half scared to death on the other patrols, but they hadn't tangled up with any Germans. Now, with the prospects of an immediate and unpleasant death staring him in the face, his only hope was that he could hide his cowardice and die like a man.

Fortunately his mates couldn't see across the air space that his mouth was working nervously, that his face was pale and drawn, that he was in a mortal funk. He was so scared that instead of tripping the Vickers in a short, warming burst, he forgot and continued to press the trips. With a start, he released the pressure of his thumb.

Why couldn't the Huns have smashed into them without warning? Knocked him down before he showed yellow? It was

ironic. Red Fortney wanted to die and get it over with, and yet he shook like a leaf for fear that very thing would happen.

The slashing, ripping Fokkers were upon them. The raging fire of Spandaus, the rivet-hammering of Vickers, the throaty roar of Bentley's, the thin whine of Mercedes motors, all combined in a confused bedlam of Hades. Fortney's crate slithered around like a drunk on roller skates.

At the first crashing burst of fire, he put the stick over. Then he remembered from somewhere that this was the wrong

thing to do. He came back up, rolled sloppily. It wasn't his maneuvers that dodged the smoking slugs. It was simply beginner's luck.

Terror-stricken, he peeped down over the coaming at the checker-boarded Fokkers which had swept past them and were now zooming back up for battle. He was still staring fascinated when Captain Lessman's hand went up in the dive-attack signal. The fluttering Camel was left all alone in the blue sky. With a dazed expression on his face, Red Fortney saw his mates' tails as they pounced down on the enemy.

He wavered there in midair, finally bolstered up enough courage to follow. He sucked in his breath sharply as the Camel's wires began to sing. The Bentley's roar hurt his eardrums. The prop flailed madly, sending back a terrific slipstream as its diving speed mounted. This might be great adventure to some souls, but for Red Fortney it was nothing but pure agony. He died a dozen deaths as the plane hurtled down to the dogfight.

**A terrified squeeze of the triggers got the first e. a. for Lt. Red Fortney, but his guns chanted a red hymn of hate and death and vengeance when he heard of the foul death of his brother at the guns of Rittmeister von Krimmer!**

The whirling Fokkers and Camels loomed before him. Red Fortney felt his heart rising in his throat. And at the last moment, instead of pulling up, he kept the nose of his crate straight down, swept on past the meele!

He didn't know what he was going to say later. His guns had jammed or something. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered to Red Fortney was getting away from there in the quickest possible time. At four thousand feet, he began leveling off. He became confused, pulled out in the direction of Germany. Hastily, he threw the Camel over in a vertical.

And there right before his eyes, blocking his path to escape, was a Fokker! Without sighting, without thinking, terrified, Fortney convulsively tripped the Vickers. He heard the angry snarling of his guns as if in a dream. He saw the line of tracer fire connecting him with the Checkerboard.

**T**HEN lo! the Fokker suddenly burst into a sheet of flame as his slugs ravaged the other's motor! Petrified, astonished, he saw the flame, the greasy smoke. He plunged wildly on, past the staggering German crate. He was a mile away from the spot before he dared look back over his shoulder.

The Fokker was far below, spinning crazily earthward! Behind, a black memorial of smoke plumed the skies. He had downed a German! The Jerry had accidentally blundered in front of him, he had jabbed the trips unconsciously, he was so scared his teeth chattered, but Lt. Red Fortney, brother of the famous American ace, Charley Fortney, had downed a Boche in his first aerial encounter!

Dark blurbs of Archie coughed up around him. The Camel rocked like a feather. Frantically, he ducked at each Woouf. And his zig-zagging spoiled Archie's aim for the next burst. At last No Man's Land appeared under his wings.

It was only then that he began to breathe normally. And as the comparative safety of the Allied side became his, Lt. Red Fortney's mind was finally capable of coherently reviewing what had happened.

He had downed a German!

He laughed hollowly. The victory was funny, in a ghastly sort of way, even to him. Red Fortney, the most useless, the most frightened Yank pilot who'd ever hit the Front, downing a Boche! So this was the stuff of which heroes were made!

He wondered if he'd ever muster enough courage to take the air again. He seriously doubted it.

He had told them back in the States that he was scared, that he didn't want to fight. But they had laughed. Even back in the States the fame and reknown and fighting prowess of his brother was legend. The kid brother of Charley Fortney not wanting to fight? Afraid to fight? Ha! Ha! The youngster was all right. He had a sense of humor.

Okay, if it couldn't be avoided, he'd fight. But not in the Air Service. He was scared of height. Of planes. Ha! Ha! Charley Fortney's brother was scared of planes!

And the more scared Red got, the more everyone laughed and patted the modest youth on the back. And after while, seeing that it was useless and that they thought he was just trying to be over-modest, Red did the only thing he could do. He shut up like a clam, and kept his fears to himself. And got more afraid by the minute.

Then word had come of his brother's death. A glorious hero's death. After downing eleven German planes and four balloons. A credit to his country. He'd done his bit to make the world safe for democracy.

The powers-that-be arranged for young Fortney to be assigned to his brother's squadron—the 7th Pursuits. Red could take up where his brother had left off—carry-on. Only they didn't know that

Red wasn't made of hero material. That he didn't want to die for democracy or whatever it was the war was about . . .

THE estaminet was a confused uproar. The 7th was doing a little plain and fancy celebrating. Things hadn't been going so well with them for the past month—since Baron von Krimmer had taken over the opposite sector. The Baron was hell on wings, and he had a staffel of seasoned pilots. His men averaged almost a year at the Front, it was said. The pilots of the 7th were lucky if they had half that much.

And the 7th had lost control of the air to the Baron.

The casualties had been heavy. Von Krimmer had knocked the slats out of the 7th. And as veteran after veteran was battered to heroland, it became worse. Fuzzy replacements had no business in the air with von Krimmer's circus.

There were a few oldtimers left. A few who could remember back three months ago when Charley Fortney had been the ranking ace of the outfit. Things had been different then. The 7th was somebody. They had prestige. Nobody kicked them around.

And tonight they were celebrating the exploits of Charley's kid brother. Why, the youngster was better than the master! He had clocked the Jerry with one single, sure burst of fire. The 7th perked up. They had a new champion, a new idol. Things would be different around here from now on. Bring on von Krimmer and his circus!

Immediately after landing, Red Fortney had gone straight to his hutment. Inside he pulled the curtains, swigged about half a bottle of cognac, then pitched out on his cot. It was only after the alcohol had quieted his nerves that he was able to turn out for mess.

Somebody had spread the word around that Red was inside his hutment and wasn't

to be disturbed. That he was reading a last letter from Charley. The fact that it wasn't true didn't keep it from being a good story. Or Red from becoming a hero—a symbol.

Now, tonight, in the estaminet, Red drank two drinks for their one. He said nothing. He had long since learned that it was useless to protest that he was afraid. So he listened and drank and worried about what he would do if his name appeared on the morning patrol list.

Someone started singing and the rest joined in:

*Oh, Mother put up your Golden Star,*

*Your son's gone up in a Sop!*

*The wings are weak, the ship's a freak*  
*She's got a rickety prop!*

*The motor's junk, your son is drunk,*  
*He's sure to take a flop.*

*Oh, Mother put up your Golden Star,*

*Your son's gone up in a Sop!*

Red shuddered and pushed his glass across to the mess orderly. How could they laugh and joke in the face of death? He drained his replenished drink in a gulp.

Major Con Edwards, C. O. for the 7th, and its oldest veteran in point of service, surveyed his wild, harem-scarem warbirds joyously. This was like old times. This was the kind of an outfit he liked to boss. He glanced over at the kid, Fortney. Major Edwards and Charley Fortney had been bunkmates, therefore the cause of tonight's celebration was a twofold source of pleasure to him.

He dropped an elbow on the bar.

"How's the hero?" he joshed.

Red Fortney's face twitched. His fist doubled around the glass in his hand until the knuckles showed white. "Hero, hero, hero!" he muttered. "Don't you guys ever think about anything but killing and butchering and heroes?"

Major Edwards' mouth dropped open. He stared as the "hero" stalked toward the door.

"Double-Scotch," he growled at the or-

derly. "And never mind going to the well."

**D**ESPITE Red Fortney's ardent and devout supplications to the contrary, the next morning dawned bright and clear. He'd drawn a blank for the Dawn Patrol, but was posted out on a routine reconnaissance patrol at ten o'clock. After a "cognac breakfast," he retired to his hutment, and somehow when the time came, he had drawn on some hidden well of courage, and was able to take his place in the cockpit of the Camel. Possibly it was the germ of an idea that had been planted in his mind by reading an article on Vickers machine-guns, and the proper care and feeding of the ammunition belts.

He saw Captain Lessman's signal, eased the stick forward and blasted the tail up. The other crates zoomed in a steep climbing turn, but Lt. Fortney wanted none of that. He'd seen a cadet spin in from a right climbing turn in one of these tricky Camels. Carefully nursing the stick, he caressed the rudder lovingly, correcting for the torque. The crate pulled into the air like a matronly lady stepping into an icy bath. Not until he had four hundred feet of elbow room, did Red Fortney come around and chase after the formation.

Just as the flight passed over the lines he slid into position at No. 5—the right tailback of the V. An early morning mist was entirely dissipated, and down below he could see the flash of guns as Allied batteries laid down a Zone Barrage. That meant Jerry would come nosing around pretty soon in an attempt to spot the guns for a little party of their own later on.

They were at five thousand now, and on the other side. Archie apparently had the area ranged, and even the fatalistic Lessman was forced to make a deferential bow.

The first burst coughed right under their noses. The shell exploded in Fortney's ears, a cross between a giant clap of thunder and a metallic click of lightning. He stared at the black blossom, watched the tendrils of

smoke suck out like an octopus as they were pulled after pieces of exploded shrapnel.

Lessman ignored the first couple of blurbs, but when the next series bashed a hole through his wing, he suddenly changed his mind and veered off in a zig-zag course. Fortney sighed with relief. The first bursts had startled him into a half-roll, and he nearly spun out of formation before he could calm the bucking Camel.

The other pilots might speak of Archie with contempt, but as far as Red Fortney was concerned, it was "Mr. Archibald, sir."

He hung onto the formation as they climbed higher and higher and finally slipped into the clouds. Lessman apparently was figuring on bushwhacking the Boche staffel he expected over to spot the artillery fire. Fortney glanced at his altimeter and shivered. According to his calculations nine thousand feet was a long way down.

For the next thirty minutes, the flight ghosted through cloudland in vain. It began to look like Lt. Red Fortney was to survive one more patrol over Hunland. But while everything looked safe, he still decided to carry out the little plan he had in mind.

Cautiously, with a this-thing-is-loaded manner, he proceeded to pull the cocking handles of his Vickers. The belt moved up a notch, slipping a clean cartridge into the breach. Then, running his fingers down the belts about twenty rounds, he extracted two clips and replaced them—*backwards!*

Now if they flushed a staffel of Boche, all he had to do was trip the guns in a warming burst, run the belts down to the reversed cartridges and he'd be the proud possessor of a third-position stoppage. A jam that couldn't be cleared in the air. And certainly a bona fide excuse for any pilot to shed his formation and return home.

A couple minutes later, the flight suddenly zoomed up over the first layer of clouds. They had been doing precisely the

same thing, off and on, for the last thirty minutes. But this time there was a slight change in the scenery. Less than three hundred yards away, almost in their faces, a staffel of Fokkers oozed out of the vapor at the same time!

**T**HERE was one moment of utter, pregnant silence as the warbirds stared at each other in surprise, then the air was rent by chattering Vickers and Spandaus and the calm tableau was transformed into a snarling, whirling ball of hell.

Red Fortney carried out his program without a hitch. He held the trips down until the Vickers suddenly halted with a hollow click. Then the 7th's "hero" stood up in the cockpit, made a great show of pounding his useless guns furiously, and finally, as a last resort, put the nose of his crate over, and went tumbling down through the ghoully vapor.

As he hurtled from the bottom layer of clouds, the earth spinning up madly, Red Fortney fought the stick, got the crate under control, and eased the steepness of his descent. He was just beginning to breathe easy when suddenly a hellish tattoo of Spandaus riveting exploded inside his cockpit. Half of his instruments seemed to hang suspended in mid-air for a moment, then tinkled and splintered over his legs.

A pantic-stricken glance backwards revealed wicked orange-green muzzle cups. A Fokker had seen the Yank's plight, had come down for a cripple! Fortney slapped the throttle to the end of the quadrant, held on while the Camel tore through space.

The ripping, slashing Jerry hung right on his tail, emptying his blazing death down the back of Fortney's neck. He squirmed and twisted in the cockpit as the leaden slugs smoked holes within inches of his body.

And then suddenly Red Fortney realized he'd pulled the same trick as yesterday. He had become confused, was roaring hell-

bent in the general direction of Berlin! If the Fokker had only let up, he would gladly have landed and surrendered. But the German apparently had no intention of letting this victory slip through his fingers. He continued to rake the defenseless craft from head to toe.

Red Fortney was forced to take drastic measures. He had to get out of this spot somehow or other. It didn't matter what he did, he couldn't be any worse off. He was slanting down the sky, the Jerry perched smack on his tail, blasting away. At this rate he had only seconds to live, and nobody knew it better than Red.

Abruptly he steepened his dive a moment, then he yanked back on the stick. He meant to come up in a half-loop, Immelmann, thus reversing his direction—and, he hoped, throw his relentless pursuer out of the saddle.

His nose came up. The German attempted too late to swerve out of the way. The flailing Camel prop chewed into the Fokker's empennage! Debris showered the slipstream. Fortney felt like he was in the wrong end of a sausage-grinder. He hadn't the remotest idea what had happened. He had no more intended crashing the Fokker than he had flying to the moon.

He struck and tore away in a split-second. The Camel's prop was knocked out of balance, but not completely. The controls of the Fokker were torn away with its tail. The crate was plummeted downward like a rock.

Lt. Red Fortney, brother of the famous Charley Fortney, had downed his second Boche in his second aerial encounter! And this time he had accomplished the trick without the aid of the customary weapons!

But "hero" Fortney was still in a pretty tough spot himself. The prop was threatening to come apart any moment. He throttled the motor down to almost stalling point, prayed it would stick together. The crate munched steadily downward, but fortunately the freak aerial fight had taken

place at a good altitude. The altimeter showed better than five thousand feet now.

**S**UDDENLY a plane dropped down beside him! It was Captain Lessman, he noted with relief. The Flight Leader was waving encouragement to him. And then other birds of the 7th fell in to escort their ailing member home. And so it was that the entourage guarded the staggering plane across the lines, and until it had smashed down on the 7th's tarmac.

Red Fortney was given credit for superman guts in deliberately ramming a Fokker rather than be taken prisoner. Think of it! Guns jammed hopelessly. Far over the lines. And deliberately turning his nose into a Jerry buzzsaw!

It had been a glorious day for the 7th. The flight had knocked down two of the Fokkers before the rest beat it. And Red had accounted for a third. All without a single casualty to the 7th! This was like old times. When Charley had been the big-shot of the Western Front.

The bewildered, confused, harassed "hero" was so worried and frightened he didn't know which way to turn. So he proceeded to forget weird plight in a determined and almost successful attempt to drink the estaminet dry.

**R**ED FORTNEY became conscious that some one was trying to wake him up. He mumbled drowsily, tried to keep on sleeping, but the arouser was persistent. Finally he opened one eye and perceived Major Edwards sitting beside his bunk.

"Wake up, Red," commanded the C. O. "It's after six. You haven't much time."

What the hell was the major doing, waking him up? And what was he talking about?

"Haven't much time for what?" he mumbled.

"To keep your rendezvous with von Krimmer."

To keep his—to keep his rendezvous with

von Krimmer? Red Fortney's heart zoomed madly, then keeled over in a sickening spin. "What—what—do—you—mean?" he managed.

Major Edwards looked at him queerly. "Don't you remember? Von Krimmer flew over last night and dropped a challenge for you to meet him in a personal duel this morning. Your first descendus was von Krimmer's younger brother. He wants revenge."

Lt. Fortney bolted upright in bed. "I'm not going," he said, flatly.

"You're not going!" repeated the astounded major.

Red Fortney nodded. "Listen to me!" he said savagely. "I'm no hero. I've been scared stiff ever since getting into this damn mess. Both of those German planes were pure accidents. Blind, fool luck. I'm scared of planes, scared of bullets, and I'm scared to die!" His chin quivered. "And now if you want to court-martial me out of the service for cowardice, go ahead and do it. Enough is enough, I can't stand any more!"

Very, very deliberately, Major Con Edwards, oldtime chum of this lad's brother, got up. He walked over to the battered dresser and took the cork from a bottle there. He poured two stiff drinks, handed one to the young pilot. Red Fortney took the glass in both of his hands, but still he spilled half the drink before getting it to his lips.

"Scared, eh?" the major mused aloud. "Hell, boy, we're all scared up here. Didn't you know that? Why do you think the squadron gets drunk every night? Why do you think they sing those callous songs? It's all a bluff. They're whistling—whistling in the dark. Why, I sleep with the covers over my head half the time!"

"You scared?" said Fortney in amazement. "*The others—scared?*"

"Sure, I'm scared! Sure, they're scared! But we carry-on. You're no coward. Cowards don't get this far. They crack-up some-

where along the wayside, they never get up here to the Front. You see what I mean? It takes a brave man to get far enough along where he can get really good and scared."

Red Fortney blinked. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "I'll be damned. Was Charley scared?" he asked suddenly.

"Sure," said Major Edwards. "And he made a hero out of himself to keep from showing it."

Major Edwards got up and moved toward the door. "Forget about that rendezvous with von Krimmer," he said. "To hell with it. You've got no business fighting a veteran like that. In fact I'm giving you orders right now: You're not to meet him." He scratched a match on the sill, lighted a cigarette. "Of course, in a way, I sort of hate to do that, but it's best." He sighed. "Yes, it's the best."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I hate to ground you, hate to keep you from meeting the man who murdered your brother. Didn't you know?"

"Murdered my brother? What are you talking about? I thought Charley was killed in action?"

"Well, he was—in a way. His guns jammed and von Krimmer shot him in the back."

**L**IEUTENANT RED FORTNEY took a last look at his ammo belts, nodded to the men to release the chocks. His face was set in grim, bleak lines. He slapped the throttle down, ripped the tail up, and shot across the tarmac. At the far end of the field, the Camel zoomed up in a screaming, climbing right turn.

The scarred, gouged terrain of No Man's Land crept up under his wings. Red Fortney kept the nose of the Camel straight ahead. Archie started messing up the fresh morning sky. The black blossoms rocked the Camel back and forth, but the crate roared disdainfully ahead, made no attempt to dodge or swerve.

Over to his right, a couple of thousand feet below, Red Fortney spotted a lone Fokker circling aimlessly. With a half-sob, half-curse, he pushed the stick down against the fire-wall.

When he was five hundred yards away, he jabbed the Vickers trips in one last warming burst, and then he blasted down on the waiting Hun.

Von Krimmer was nobody's fool when it came to flying an airplane. Timing his maneuver perfectly, he allowed the diving Camel to barely reach effective firing range, then he bobbed away like a cork in a whirlpool. He came around and up, in a tight loop, shot down the other side, inverted, his Spandaus raging.

Red Fortney shook his head, waded in. He scorned the niceties of feinting and dodging. He just kept coming right on in, taking two bursts of Spandaus lead to get in one of Vickers. The German must have been puzzled by the tactics of this madcap Yank. This was his party, he was doing the avenging. Yet this fool seemed intent on one thing only: downing the other at any cost. Twice von Krimmer swerved at the last moment to keep from being rammed.

The Fokker suddenly streaked up the sky. Fortney prop-clawed after it, raking the exposed belly mercilessly. The Fokker out-climbed the Camel, flipped over. Ugly orange and green flame spat from the muzzles of the Spandaus. Red Fortney cursed as the vicious bursts raked his stalling crate. He did the only thing he could do. He couldn't just hang there on a peg. He nosed over and dived for flying speed. The German was after him like an angry hornet, buzzing in a thin whine, sending stings of death sizzling around the Yank's ears.

The Bentley roared. He pulled back on the stick. The German followed suit, clinging like a leech to his tail. Fortney dime-turned, von Krimmer matched his maneuver. Fortney growled savagely. How the

hell could he get a man who wouldn't be shaken from his tail? His Vickers didn't shoot backwards.

He twisted and squirmed but the Hun seemed glued on. And von Krimmer wasn't just out-flying him. He was smashing the Camel with scorching, pointblank bursts.

But finally Fortney caught him. He feinted to swerve in the opposite direction, pushed on the stick, then immediately yanked back in a flattened loop that threatened to pull his wings out. They actually bowed, but the crate was still in one piece when the Yank suddenly found himself squatting on von Krimmer's tail. A smear of flame blinded him as he pressed the trips. Through the smoke and flame, he saw the German writhing.

Brrrrrrrrt . . . Brrrrrrrrt.

Von Krimmer's head suddenly ducked from sight. At first Fortney thought it was some kind of a ruse. That he would reappear. But then he saw a limp, blood-stained hand dangling over the cockpit coaming. The nose of the Fokker started over gently, eased off down the skies on its Last Flight.

The duel had taken place over German territory. But Fortney followed the now spinning Fokker right down to the ground to be sure of no monkey tricks. Pom poms, onions, fish-hooks flamed the air. Machine-gun fire came from a hundred different directions. But Red Fortney held grimly to his purpose.

He was less than a hundred feet behind when the Fokker crashed nose first. A jagged sheet of flame spewed up, then a blinding explosion as raw gas shot over the wreckage. Only then did the Camel swerve away toward its own lines.

Red took the carpet in. With utter rashness, recklessness, he strafed the front line German trenches. Not once, but three times. Turning and coming back, straight into the hail of lead that formed almost a solid wall. And miraculously, when Lieutenant Red Fortney slammed his sieved, battle-scarred

crate down on the 7th's tarmac, he was still unhit.

**I**T HARDLY seemed possible that the 7th Pursuit Squadron could stage a third successive binge—each bigger than the preceding one. But the impossible was happening. Half-a-dozen squadrons along the Front flew in a case of Scotch or Cognac as tributes to the man who had downed the famed von Krimmer.

At Wing, the brass-hats shook hands with each other on their stratagem in sending the hellbent young Fortney to the 7th. Allied supremacy in the sector was restored. They called up Major Edwards and told him that all patrols were canceled for the following day, and the major laughed back:

"You're telling me!"

Lt. Red Fortney, hero of the hour, had suddenly discovered a hidden musical talent. He was reclined indolently over the bar, bawling at the top of his lungs:

*Oh, Mother, put up your Golden Star,  
Your son's gone up in a Sop!*

At the end of the song, which for him was composed of only two lines, he would hold his glass out for Jimmie, the mess orderly, to refill. Then it began all over again.

Major Edwards held forth in one corner, arguing that likker was bad for the constitution and predicting that none of them would ever live to a ripe old age. Finally he gave up the argument, solemnly removed his necktie, and retired under the table for the night.

Jimmie, the orderly, refilled Lt. Fortney's glass once again. "Begging your pardon, sir," he said, timidly, "but I'd like to offer my congratulations on your splendid victory." He brushed at the top of the bar vigorously. "And—and if the Lieutenant will forgive me, sir, I'd like to warn him against strafing German trenches. It's the most dangerous thing a pilot can do. Captain Charley was downed that way, you know."



Red Fortney had begun to bawl: "Oh, Mother, put up—" He stopped. "What did you say?" he demanded sharply.

"I'm—I'm sorry, sir," stammered the orderly. "I hope I haven't offended the lieutenant. I—I said your brother was shot down by ground fire."

And Edwards had handed him that story about Charley being shot in the back by von Krimmer! And he had fallen for it!

"It's all right, Jimmie," he said. "And thanks."

He began remembering a few things now. Why, hell! Von Krimmer had only been opposite this sector a month! Charley had gone West more than three months ago!

Where was the major, anyway? He spotted him, stalked across the room and grim-

ly shoved the table away from his Commanding Officer.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, shaking him roughly.

"G'way! Leave me alone."

"Wake up, you—you—" he couldn't think of an appropriate word.

The major opened one eye, looked up owlshly.

"Von Krimmer didn't kill my brother," rasped Fortney accusingly; "I just found out. You tricked me!"

Major Con Edwards, C. O. for the 7th Yank Pursuits, pulled his shirt-tail up over his face. He squinted cautiously around one corner at the enraged "hero."

"Don't you say boo," he quavered, "or I'll scream!"

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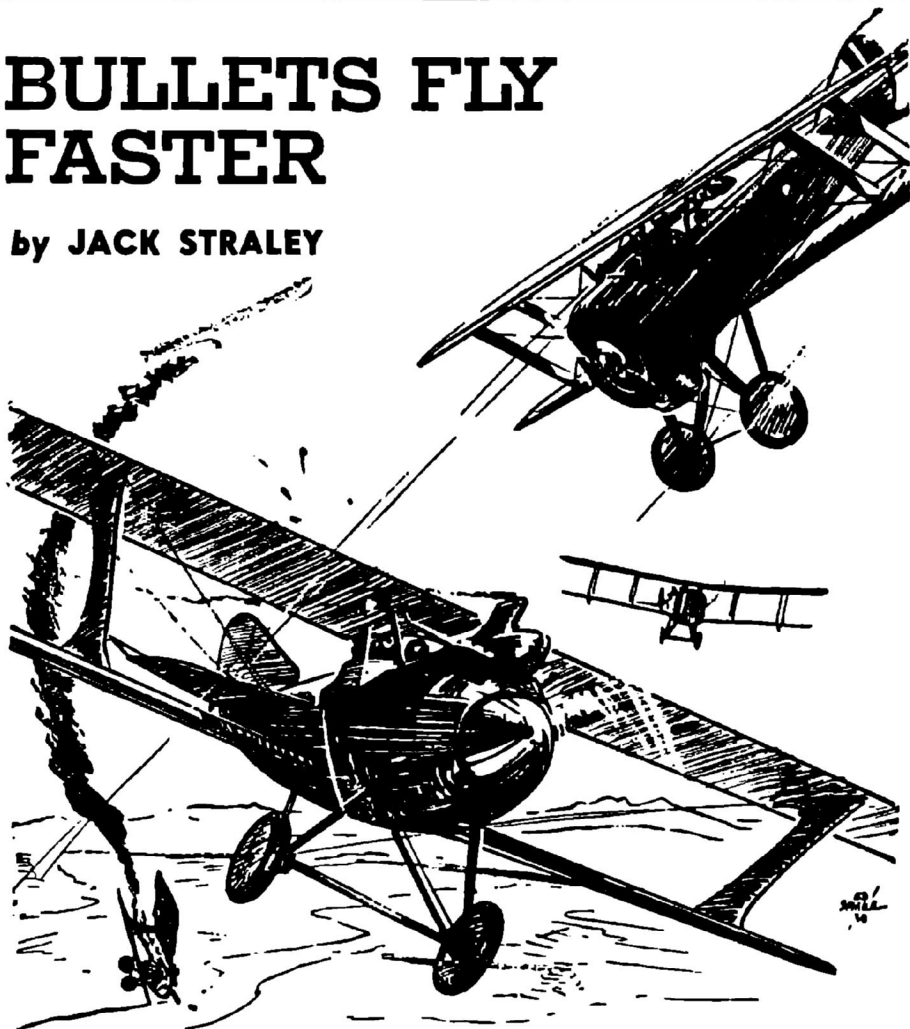
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Someone on the drome of the 28th pursuit was sending the men out to die in ambush, killing them as if with his own hands . . . until Bart Travers showed that escaping Hun spy-master that

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# BULLETS FLY FASTER

by JACK STRALEY



**D**USK had deepened into night as Bart Travers, up from the veteran pilots' pool at Issoudon and now assigned to the United States 28th Pursuit Squadron, dropped from the back of the motor lorry which had brought him up to the lines and strode toward the drome.

It would be good to see Major Harney again. The alert and efficient C. O. of the 28th had been his instructor back in the

States, and between the two there existed a firm friendship.

"Operations office? Over there, Sir," an ack emma told him, indicating a ridged khaki tent just off the tarmac.

Bart stepped across the wheat stubble of the field toward the tent, but as he did so the wailing of the *alerte* siren shattered the stillness of the night. Grease-balls came pouring from their quarters, while from

the squadron mess, a sheet-iron Nisson hut larger than those which supplied sleeping quarters, a group of pilots dashed toward the hangars.

From the operations tent came a figure which Travers recognized as Major Harney. Following the major's gaze, he studied the dark air above the drome.

Coasting down the blackness came a shadowy Fokker.

And from the Fokker came dim, distinct flashes of purple light. One-two-three. One-two-three.

Ack emmas had rushed to the Lewis guns which, mounted on heavy cartwheels mounted in cement pits furnished the drome protection against night or day raiders. But as Travers watched, he saw the major wave his open hand across his face.

"Cease firing," was the signal he was giving.

What was the idea, Bart wondered. A Fokker above an Allied drome was fair game, and Major Harney was not the fellow to do something contrary to the rules of war unless he had mighty good reason.

Now the purple lights had stopped flashing, and the Fokker banked high above the field. A message cylinder whipped from the cockpit, plunged downward until its 'chute broke open, then floated gradually to the earth near the small poplar trees which marked the limits of the 28th drome. As it fell, the Fokker completed a vertical and hightailed back into the darkness toward Hunland.

With the other pilots and ack emmas, Bart Travers started toward the spot where the message had fallen, the whole group running at top speed like a pack of hounds that finish the trail and give the view-hello. As he pounded forward he was conscious that one fellow, in the uniform of a ground officer, was outdistancing the rest by a wide margin. Arms down, chin in and his legs moving in a rhythm that showed the trained runner, this kiwi was leaving the rest of the 28th nowhere.

As Travers watched, the ground officer reached the message cylinder and picked it up. Standing for a moment as if examining it closely, he then turned and walked slowly back to where Major Harney was waiting. Here he saluted in a precise, formal manner and placed the message in the major's hands.

Something stirred in Bart Travers' memory. Who was this fellow who could outrun a whole group of fighting Yanks whose bodies were trained and hardened by the grim discipline of war?

Now the major was reading the message. With the other pilots Bart pressed forward and listened. "Concentration of *sturmpuppen* at F-Square; mark 4-D. Five A.M. tomorrow. No details."

There was no signature.

The major turned to his men. "A Flight will take the strafing job, with B in support," he ordered. "Ships on the line at four-thirty, ready to go. C Flight will take field duty till the ten o'clock show."

The pilots drifted away, some toward their sleeping quarters, others into the squadron mess. Bart Travers waited till most of them had left, then entered the operations tent, into which the C. O. had gone.

Harney returned his brisk salute, then rose from his chair and shook his hand warmly. "Tickled to death to have you with us, Travers," he said. "In the morning, I'll assign you to duty. Meanwhile, if there's anything I can do—"

Bart Travers leaned forward, a questioning look upon his face. "If it's any of my business," he said, smiling to take any possible sting out of the remark, "you can tell me why it is, when an enemy plane flies over an Allied drome, the Allied C. O. gives an order to cease firing."

THE major's eyes narrowed, and he studied the pilot's face as if weighing the effect of what he was about to say. Then: "I'll tell you, of course," he said

frankly. "We have an agent across the lines—a good man. Every so often he is able to get away on a fake solo patrol in one of the Fokkers from Rohrbach's staffel and drop information here. But our ground crew got to shooting too well, and rather than take a chance again on drilling a good G-2 man, I took a chance tonight on calling off the guns when I saw his signal."

Bart nodded. "I see the point, but suppose some wise Jerry bumps off your Mr. G-2 and takes his place. What would happen if—"

The major waved a hand as if to dismiss the idea. "Fortunes of war," he returned. "Besides, so far everything has worked all right. Now, come along and meet some of our fellows."

He rose and led the way to the squadron mess, Bart walking beside him and turning over in his mind the information the Fokker had brought, and the chances of some double cross by a smart agent of the Wilhelmstrasse. Major Harney would be in a tough spot, he knew, if anything happened to the G-2 man in whom he was putting so much trust. Could it be that the Yank C. O., either knowingly or not, was playing into the hands of the Krauts?

Bart shook his head almost angrily, thrusting the thought aside. Harney was ace high with the whole Allied wing, he knew. And who was a new pilot, to question the tactics of a veteran commander?

The door of the squadron mess swung open, and as the light streamed out he saw a square room, its corrugated iron walls decorated with bits of fabric from Boche planes and with pictures evidently cut from London Opinion, La Vie Parisienne and other magazines popular with the flyers. Two long tables ran parallel almost the length of the room, and in one corner was a small bar at which several of the pilots were standing. Benches along the tables, and a stand with a portable English phonograph which was grinding out "Mother,

Dixie and You," completed the furnishings.

Bart was surprised at the lack of formality. As the major entered there were no cries of "Shun." Every one of the flyers simply carried on with what he was doing, acting as if just another one of his wingmates had entered.

"Shake hands with Bart Travers," the C. O. said as he joined the group. Bart acknowledged a dozen introductions, then took a seat at one of the tables while the major told him something about the flyers of the 28th.

"That tall, red-headed chap is Frank Hall, a Flight skipper. The chunky little runt on his right is Max Bodwell—Shorty, we call him. Tom Weatherby, the lanky farmer over at the end, is A Flight's protection man. Cool as a cucumber, no matter how many Huns there are upstairs."

BART took in the details with interest. These would be the fellows he would be flying with, fighting with. "Why wait till later?" he asked. "Put me on this bat patrol. I've been out before, even if I don't know this sector." The C. O. smiled and patted him on the back. "Okay," he agreed. "You tag along with A Flight. Hall can use another good man."

He stepped over to the bar, whispered a few words to the tall red-head, then beckoned to Bart. "Glad to have you with us," Hall said as he came up. "Now, if we're going to knock off any of the Kaiser's nice fresh *sturmlruppen* in the morning, we'd better be getting our shuteye."

An orderly showed Travers his quarters in one of the smaller Nisson huts, and he threw his blankets upon the canvas cot. In spite of his interest in his new surroundings, he was soon catching up on sleep.

"Ships on the line, Sir."

One of the ack emmas was shaking Bart's shoulder. It was dark, with a cold grey mist that seeped through the metal walls of the hutment. The Yank pilot blinked himself awake, swung to a sitting position

upon the cot and downed the mug of steaming coffee the orderly had brought. Thick, sheep-lined flying boots and heavy leather coat, and he was heading for the tarmac, helmet and goggles in hand.

Already the monosoupape engines of the 28th Nieuports were sucking gas, their empty cylinders clanking and wheezing. Bart sniffed the raw petrol and castor oil like a fire horse scenting a blaze.

Around him, the other A Flight pilots were climbing into their cockpits, while before the B Flight hangar he saw five more Nieuports warming. He jazzed his spark and throttle manettes and listened with approval as the mono roared out sweet and strong. Then Red Hall was thrusting a fist forward. Greaseballs pulled the chocks and the flight was off.

**S**CUDDING across the wheat stubble, Bart lifted his wheels and followed the others in a long chandelle toward the front. Weatherby, the lanky protection man, was dropping back behind the Nieuport V, leaving his usual spot at number five for the new man. Between Skipper Hall and himself Bart could see Shorty Bodwell and another chap flying two and three. Number four was a dark haired, sharp featured chap he remembered the other pilots calling Peters. Number three must be Ralston he figured.

It was hard keeping formation in the dark. The Nieuports seemed like grim wraiths, sometimes looming large against a background of heavy clouds, then slipping away into the mist until he had to use all of his flying skill to keep position. Bart wondered how Hall was able to find his objective in the mist. Where was F-Square, mark D-5? And what was waiting?

The petrol in his tank was about a quarter down when it happened.

Suddenly, knifing through the dark, fiery fingers of death clutched at the cockpits of the Yank ships. Stabbing fingers that carried the brimstone of hell in their touch.

Swift, deadly fingers that pattered once upon the doped wings of a gallant ship and made it a flaming coffin.

A trap!

Before the Yanks could spread formation or warm their guns, it was over. Ships that came down out of the black morning on blacker wings. Ships that drew back snarling lips to offer the Spandau kiss of death. Ships that pounced mercilessly, ramming down the sky like steel-shod stallions from the stable of the damned.

And the Huns were smart.

Passing over the protection man, they had dived with Mercedes shut 'to a low whine not audible to the Yanks above the sound of their own engines. And, plummeting straight from above, the black crossed ships struck squarely in the center of the Nieuport V.

Bart Travers saw the death streams of two pair of Spandaus converge on the ship that Ralston flew. The black haired Yank never knew what struck, never knew that for him the war was over. Lead lashed through the nacelle of the Yank bus like a gigantic whip. The ship cracked in half, only the rudder and elevator wires holding the two sections together as it burned.

Shorty Bodwell took a burst that wiped every instrument from his board. From what Bart could see, it looked as if he made one last effort to zoom, to ram the destroyers which had ambushed him from above. But the Nieuport only fell off into a spin, the torque of the mono pulling faster and faster to the left as it vanished earthward through the gloom.

Now Red Hall had whipped over in a tight Immelmann, and was dodging the impact of a second Hun attack. Bart Travers could see that the Nieuports were outnumbered five to one. Then he saw a red Very flare rocket from the flight leader's cockpit, and the nose of Hall's bus went down in an angle for the lines.

Bart fell into place behind the skipper. At his right, he could see that Peters was

closing in, his bus streaming fabric along the right upper wing and aileron. Behind him, he saw Tom Weatherby hovering above the flight. But Ralston and Shorty were gone.

**F**UNNY the Huns didn't follow up, Bart thought. Then he noticed that the B Flight Nieuports were over them. The supporting ships had been too late, but it was evident the Jerries figured that more might follow.

With B Flight above, the surviving Yank ships made their way back to the drome of the 28th.

Four back, out of six.

Bart Travers' face was grave as he walked toward the squadron mess. Odd, that there should be a Hun formation just at the right spot to ambush the Yanks. And there was no earthly reason for a Boche patrol at that hour. Could the G-2 man have been replaced by some crafty Jerry, or was it just chance that had given the Huns two quick *descendus* almost without danger to themselves?

In the mess, breakfast was being served. Bart sat down at one of the long tables with Red Hall and Weatherby. Across from him were some of the C Flight pilots, and the kiwi adjutant. Introductions were in order, and Bart learned that the ground officer who had outdistanced the rest of the outfit in running was called Allerton.

As they ate, Bart studied the kiwi's face. In spite of the moustache the man wore, and in spite of his cultured, almost effeminately precise English, Bart had the feeling that he had known him somewhere before.

"By any chance," he asked him after the others had left, "are you any relation to Max Breitung, the Austrian fellow who came to the States back in 1912 and helped Midwest University give all the other conference teams such a trimming in football? He was a back and I played end against him."

The kiwi shook his head. Then he smiled, as if the idea amused him. "Never heard of him," he said. "What sort of a chap was he?"

"A very fast runner," Bart replied. "Did the hundred under ten seconds in full football togs. But if you never heard of him, that's that."

The ground officer shook his head. "Lots of people look alike," he returned. "As far as my being like this fellow goes, I come from Boston, not Austria, and I've never played football in my life."

Bart rose and left the mess. Funny, that he should be reminded of that other fellow so much. He crossed the tarmac and entered the operations tent, where he talked briefly to the C. O.

"Can't be any connection," Major Harney told him. "I know people who swear by Allerton, back in the States. Got a letter from some of my Back Bay friends just last week, asking me to make things comfortable for him."

Bart left the tent and made his way to the A Flight hangar. The heavy mist was still falling, and good weather or bad, the war must go on. For an hour he calibrated the ammo which would go into the belts beneath the Vickers on the cowlings of his Nieuport.

During the afternoon he made one routine patrol with the formation, then at dusk flying was washed out at the major's orders and the pilots gathered in the mess. After dinner, they heard once through the rain the beat of a Hun motor. Several looked up as if to start for the doorway, but the major shook his head. "Only a miracle, if anyone locates the drome tonight," he said.

It was late when they left to turn in. Covering the drome was a thick blanket of fog, and the ground was soggy under foot. Making his way across the field, Bart Travers stumbled over a metal object. Stooping to pick it up, he saw that it was a German message cylinder, similar to the one the

Fokker had dropped the previous evening. As he examined it, footsteps sounded near him in the mist and he heard the precise, cultured voice of Allerton bidding some of the pilots "Goodnight."

At once he went to the major's quarters, knocked and entered.

"Another troop concentration tomorrow morning," the C. O. said when he had read the message the cylinder contained. "Hope we have better luck this time."

Luck or not, Bart thought to himself, it would be well to double precautions. If the rain held, the Jerries would be all set to do the same thing again. Providing, of course, that his hunch was right and that there was some connection between the Boche liaison and the messages dropped at the 28th. Keeping the idea to himself he went back to his own quarters.

Next morning it was still raining, a scudding, misty fall that made visibility bad and kept the ceiling low. But the Nieuports of the 28th were ready, C Flight taking the lead this time, with what was left of A Flight behind to cover them.

Again the trim brown ships clove the morning mist, working toward the lines in mounting S-turns. Bart saw C Flight rise and fall below him, the sharp flashes of their exhausts cherry red and white in the darkness. His own flight kept well above, spread wide to ride herd on the khaki ships below and warn them of danger.

**B**ART climbed his own Nieuport faster, warming his guns as he did so. This time, he would be ready. Behind him, he could see Weatherby beckoning him down to his place behind Red Hall. But the new pilot had other ideas.

Sure enough, there they were.

As he climbed, he saw above him a few flashing sparks, then made out the red glow of exhaust pipes. Goosing the mono for all it had, he climbed nearer.

What he saw sent him plunging toward the other Yank ships, reckless of the weak

trailing edges of his wings. In the mist, he had counted at least a dozen of the black Fokkers.

Rocking his wings, he sent a burst of lead across the path of the C Flight leader, who turned sharply just in time to avoid the first attack of the Huns as they came down.

Tom Weatherby had zoomed out of their range of fire, Bart saw, while Red Hall was climbing away from the Jerries to a position where he could return to the attack. Peters, the A Flight number four man, was caught flat footed by the Boche dive and escaped the first Spandau bursts only by the thickness of a longeron.

Meanwhile the C Flight ships, thanks to the warning of the new pilot, had spread out, giving themselves more room to maneuver against the Hun attack. No need for signals now. Every man for himself.

Bart Travers' ship rolled across the grey sky. In the misty morning he had no sense of fighting as a team—as a Yank unit. It was as if some great God had fastened a pair of wings to his back and made him a bird—a bird sent out to meet other birds in mortal combat—black, swooping birds that spit fire and steel, birds which carried on wings and bodies a sinister marking which, for a thousand years, he and his were doomed to give up their very existence to wipe completely from the Heavens.

Lead ripped through his floor boards, came closer. He flung the Nieuport into a sharp vertical, missing a shot for his opponent by a hair. Falling in behind the Yank ship the Hun circled in a tight bank, the two chasing tails through the sky with neither able, for the moment, to gain advantage.

Bart noted that one of the Nieuports was down, but as he watched he saw Red Hall slap a *das ist alles* sign over one of the Krauts. The rest of the ships were too far off for him to determine their pilots. Forcing the stick back to his belt, he turned in his cockpit to see the Boche pilot behind

him holding position. Bart dropped the nose of the Nieuport, hoping that the other would overshoot and give him a crack at his blind spot of the Fokker. But the war-wise Jerry rolled into an opposite bank and tore up the sky to the aid of one of his fellows.

A flare shot from the cockpit of the Hun leader. One by one the black Fokkers swept away into the darkness of the grim morning. Bart saw the C Flight Nieuports form up and fell in behind them. One was missing, he saw.

Back above him were Weatherby and Hall. Peters was nowhere in sight. Evidently he had not weathered the brunt of the Hun attack. As if reading the question in his mind, Red Hall signalled with his hand—a spiral pointing downward.

Major Harney's look was grave when the ships landed. Four gone in two days. Silently he listened as the flight commanders made their reports, then entered the operations tent.

Bart Travers followed him.

"Looks almost as if the Jerries were reading our minds," he said. "Two days now, and they've been right on deck sitting over us when we got near the objectives named in the messages you've been getting."

For a moment the C. O. sat silently in his chair behind the pine table that served him as a desk, his fingers drumming on the flat surface. "There's no way I can check across the lines," he said at last. "I have every confidence in our man, and he was always right, before this."

**B**ART TRAVERS studied the major's face for a few seconds before he spoke. If his hunch was right, the Jerry ambush-cades would soon be over. If he was wrong— Well, it would mean back to the SOS for Lieutenant Travers, probably with a reputation for butting in where he had no business and making a damn fool of himself in general. But for the sake of the C. O. he was willing to take the chance.

"Do this," he suggested. "Next time you think your Fokker friend will be over with a message, have one of our ships ready on the line. I've got an idea."

The major nodded. "I'll do it."

During the day the sun broke through for a few hours, but by nightfall the rain and mist again shut in the drome of the 28th. By the order of the C. O. one of the khaki Nieuports was kept on the line, its engine warmed from time to time. In the squadron mess, the pilots did their best to forget the weather outside. With the others, Bart listened to the phonograph and joined in the talk and singing that went the rounds. By the time dinner was over the rain had stopped, but the darkness and mist dulled even the sullen rumble of the front.

"There it is."

It was Bart Travers who first heard the whrone-whrone of the Mercedes. As one man, the pilots in the mess leaped to their feet and hurried to the drome. High above the field the Hun motor sounded, then lower. Then it vanished into the distance.

"There's the 'chute," one of the ack em-mas cried.

Starting in the direction he pointed, the men of the 28th raced for the small white object which plopped into the mud before them. And again, like a greyhound pacing a group of manacled turtles, Adjutant Allerton was an easy first. Picking the message cylinder from the earth he slipped it into the pocket of his loose flying coat and approached the major.

Bart Travers felt in the pocket of his own coat to assure himself that his service Colt was ready.

"Now," he said as he saw the kiwi hand the cylinder to the C. O. "let's have the other one."

Allerton whirled. "What do you mean?"

"The other cylinder," Bart told him. "The one which really came from the Fokker and for which you substituted the message you gave the major."



THE adjutant's flying coat dropped from him and he turned. With a speed that far outdistanced the men of the 28th he made for the Nieuport on the line. Behind him, Bart headed the chase, the Colt barking in his hand. Allerton, apparently unhurt, vaulted the pit, gunned the mono and jumped the chocks. There was a roar from the motor, and the ship zigzagged along the ground.

But the Yank pilot's aim had been true.

The spy ship lifted its wheels in one frantic zoom, swung left and crashed, nose in. When Bart reached the spot, the ground crew were covering the remains of what had been the kiwi adjutant.

"How did you know Allerton was the one who was planting the messages?" Major Harney asked as the pilots gathered in the mess.

"I didn't know, for sure," Bart told him.

"I figured somebody must be putting false messages, known to the Jerries, into the tubes we were getting. As you were so sure your G-2 friend was okay, and Allerton was the only one who had a chance to handle the cylinders before you got them, my scheme looked worth trying."

"Right, Lieutenant! Here's the real message cylinder in his coat pocket," one of the ack emmas exclaimed.

"Seeing Allerton outrun the whole outfit," Bart added, "was what gave me the idea he might be Max Breitung, the Austrian, and the fact that he tried to make a break tonight proved my hunch was right."

"That boy sure could run fast, and he sure flew fast, too," grinned big Tom Weatherby.

"Yeah," chimed in Red Hall, "but bullets fly faster."

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Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Samuel Dinerman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of the Sky Raiders and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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# MODERN PURSUITS— PHOOEY!

by THE EDITOR

---

You take the new ships and I'll take the old ships and let's see what happens

---

THE pride a loyal Englishman holds for his Royal Air Force is second to none. And equally proud is the Briton of his potent Hawker *Hurricanes*, which he believes to be the fastest fighting planes in the world. For it was a *Hurricane* that flew 327 miles in 48 minutes at an average speed of 408.75 m.p.h. during a ferrying flight one night back in 1938. And the inhabitants of the Tight Little Isle consider the Rolls-Royce *Merlin* 1,050 powerplant and the heavy-caliber machine guns that this Hawker fighter carries makes it the most formidable military craft to be found. And that same guy doesn't think the ship is so bad when he remembers that it has a top speed of 335 m.p.h., a cruising speed of 300, a comparatively low landing speed of 60, and a service ceiling of 39,000 feet.

On the other hand, the First World War flyers wouldn't have traded their old Sopwith *Camels* for anything that they had seen or heard of. Yes, many of the pilots were afraid of that tricky job at first—until they got used to it. Then everything was different! True, the *Camel's* 150 h.p. *Clerget* rotary pulled the ship through the air at the low speed of 120 m.p.h. But what was the use of going any faster!

How do these two hook up, you ask? Well, Old Man Deterioration forgot to complete his destructive work, apparently, on one of those war-time *Camels*, and it eventually found its way to Hendon Airport, England.

Then one of the big shots in the R. A. F., who was an ex-war flyer and did not believe too strongly in the superiority of

high-speed ships, arranged for a mock dog-fight between the old biplane *Camel* and a new, super-sleek monoplane *Hurricane*.

In due time both ships had been fitted with camera guns. Of course, however, the *Camel* was given a thorough inspection beforehand and all faulty parts were replaced or strengthened. And then the two radically different machines were rolled out to the deadline side by side.

Together, the pilots gave their ships the gun and started to bolt down the flying field for take-offs. The *Hurricane* got away like a streak from the blue and went racing down the runway with its throttle cracked wide. And the *Camel*—its *Clerget* sounding like a low-powered electric fan in comparison with the Hawker's *Merlin*—gathered speed only slowly as the pilot cautiously pushed his throttle forward.

But it didn't take long for the Sop to build up flying speed, and it was in the air and climbing steeply long before the Hawker had nursed its trucks off the field.

For the next few minutes the most vicious peace-time dog-fight that had ever been witnessed in the vicinity of Hendon tore loose in the sky. The *Hurricane* came tearing in at the *Camel*, but the Sop pilot kicked his rudder and easily banked out of the way—only to throw a burst of film-slugs at the speedier ship as it hurtled past.

The fight went higher and the Hawker turned on a greater burst of speed—and blacked-out the pilot when he tried to bank too steeply. However, the R. A. F. man came to before his ship lost much altitude, and again slammed back into the fracas.

After the allotted time had elapsed, the flyers waved to each other and went in for landings. And when they were down, the pilots handed in their rolls of film for developing. The Hawker man was confident that he had won, however when the "rounds" had been run through their baths of developer and hypo, it was discovered that the *Camel* had scored a decisive victory!

The R. A. F. officials, the story continues, thought that perhaps the man in the pit of the *Camel* had been the superior fighter. So the pilots exchanged planes and went up again.

But for the second time, the same thing happened. The *Camel* literally blasted the loved low-winger from the air, and turned inside of the other ship so tightly that, even from the English standpoint, it wasn't a bit humorous.

THE foregoing tale was told to the writer by a well-known soldier-of-fortune—who was at Hendon at the time of the experiment—as we sat in a local beanery hangar flying over a couple of bowls of chowder. And this s-of-f's story was substantiated by a frayed old newspaper clipping that read something like this:

"HENDON AIRPORT, (Apr. 3—Yesterday, under the order of Colonel—, a World War Sopwith Camel and one of the R. A. F.'s new Hawker 400 mile-per-hour Hurricanes were sent aloft for a sham air battle. No results of this unique combat were released, and the aircraftsmen at the field seemed reluctant to communicate any information whatsoever.")

Of course, that's not the full content of the clipping, but, to the best of my memory, it covers the situation amply. And even though the English citizens themselves were unable to obtain an account of this novel dog-fight, we are luckily able to pass this info on to you for what it is worth, and to further our arguments against the high-speed low on maneuverability super-ships that are being turned out for air services throughout the world at present.

In the Smithsonian Institution, Aviation Section, Washington, the little

Martin K-111 rests, dust covered and forgotten, right in the shadow of the replica-hull of the Navy's famous NC-4. And of the thousands of people who visit the Museum every year, it is probably safe to say that less than one per cent pay more than normal tribute to the genius that prompted the construction of this utterly different ship. But most of all, certainly no one would ever dream that it was originally designed as a fighter!

However, if we check up on this job more carefully, we find out that it was built in 1917 by Captain James V. Martin as an altitude fighter for the U. S. Air Service. The fuselage is almost entirely constructed of 3-ply wood, and a single "K" strut is placed between the 20 foot 4 inch-span wings. Power is supplied by a *Gnat* ABC, which develops a total of 45 h.p. at 1,915 r.p.m. And a top speed of 100 m.p.h. may be obtained at maximum revs.

Chalked up against our Severskys—which carry 350 gallons of 87-octane gas—the 9-gallon tank of the Martin seems pitiful. But when we consider that the Seversky ships cost approximately \$29,000 each, minus engine, and "eat" 50 gallons of gas an hour, we can't help—if we have any imagination whatsoever—to realize that planes of the Martin type, which could be built at a top price of \$1,000, would be very useful in warfare.

Granted, machines of the K-111 type would not have the get-there-in-a-hurry and rush-back-before-the-field-lights-are-turned-off ability, but they *would* be able to do to the *Camel* what the Sopwith did to the *Hurricane*. And when we get down to brass tachometers, we realize that that's what is important!

To boil this argument down to its bare essentials, it is necessary to state that the main requisite of a military ship—whether modern or pre Second World War—is to shoot down aircraft of the enemy. And to do this a machine must have two qualities—maneuverability and a stable firing plat-

form. But do the modern high-speed pursuits have these qualities? Well, just consider the following and then draw your own conclusions.

Do they have maneuverability? It is not necessary to dicker on this point, because the Hawker *versus* Sopwith case that we brought out earlier clearly proves that they do not. Do they have a stable firing platform? Modern low-wing pursuits are made as unstable as possible, and therefore this is an impossibility. So, you might ask, what the devil are they built for? And we might answer—they look nice at national air races!

**I**T IS generally admitted that the U. S. Navy airplanes—although greatly less in number than Army equipment—are much better fighting craft than the land-branch pursuits. The sea-arm jobs are usually biplanes which have fairly low speeds in comparison with the Air Corps planes. And, in most cases, they are powered with engines of not over 650 h.p.—whereas the Army usually uses anything from 850 up.

\* To date, the Navy has ordered only one batch—less than 60—monoplane-fighters. These were from the Brewster Company. And from hangar gossip that has circulated around Roosevelt Field, it is believed that *not one of the ships has been accepted by the Navy at this writing!* However, they will finally be taken into service, of course, but it will still be interesting to note how these F2A-2's chalk up against the staid Grumman biplane types that have been standard equipment for the past several years. And it will be interesting to follow the procurement orders of the future to determine whether the Navy finds a monoplane as maneuverable and as stable for a gun platform as the bipes. Although

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\* Since this article was written, the Navy has accepted the Brewsters, and although they are not for general export they let a batch of 44 of them go to Finland.

we have all the respect in the world for the sleek Brewster ships, we think that that company is barking up the wrong tree when they pick the Navy.

And while on the subject of Army *versus* Navy-type craft, here's one point that should be brought out:

Al Williams, who probably could have any model or type ship built if he wished, picked a Grumman of the F3F-2 design for his aerobatic work. So unless we think Williams is old fashioned, it must be admitted that he didn't make the choice without a definite, concrete reason. On the other hand, Frank Fuller, of Bendix Race fame, chose a Seversky of the P-35 model for his work—which is purely racing. But does Fuller try to cop any additional purses for stunting? He does not!

**S**O TO wind up this argument, let's ask just what the gunner in the rear pit of a 400 m.p.h. ship would be able to do under actual fighting conditions when the slipstream is blasting him in the face with the force of a hurricane? Let's ask what kind of a hydraulic grip he'll have to hold on those twin guns of his when the forces of Nature are doing their best to tear them from his hands? And let's ask how he'll be able to sight those death dealers of his when the centrifugal force of a tight bank causes him to black-out?

Want the answer? He won't be able to do a damn thing!

And how will the single-placers be able to go out in flight formations when they actually need the whole sky to themselves when in combat? How will the pilots be able to fire a telling salvo when they'll have only a split second in which to sight their guns? Yes, and how will the fighters be able to strafe ground troops when the ships will be upon the infantry and away before the flyers will have time enough to squeeze the trips?

It's too deep for us. Suppose *you* figure it out!

# QUIET on the MAGINOT

by CASEY SUMTER

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Hank Weatherby, American pilot with the B. E. F., loosed, in his search for action, all the blistering fury of war on earth and in the heavens, that in one hellish battle almost wrote finis to the war!

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**H**ANK WEATHERBY pulled his fast Hawker Hurricane around in a tight bank and forgot the two-way radio in front of him. He growled:

"Sweet Cow! Here I am, looking for action against the Huns, and I got to get bedded down with these sleep-loving Britishers. For two thin dimes, I'd take a



punch at this stiff-necked Limey leader of mine, just to see what he's got in him!"

But he nearly zoomed through the cowl-ing hatch of his speedy single-seater when a cold voice said right back at him, "*Mind repeating that, Mister Weatherby? What did you say, old chap?*"

Hank's surge against his safety brought him back to reality and to the recollection that a two-way radio had its disadvantages. Especially when this ice-eyed commander of the British Eighty-ninth—Major Raoul Siddon—didn't like any part of the American-born Hank Weatherby to start with. The voice came again: "*I'm waiting, sir!*"

"Er—I was just singing a song, sir," Hank said, lamely. He twisted his head and looked around and in back and above him. Five sets of hard British eyes stared down from an echelon-of-echelons formation. Hank faced forward and carefully avoided the weathery gaze of Major Siddon, there at the head of the formation. "Just a song I learned down South, sir, home in the States."

"Careful where you sing it," Siddon told him stiffly, "or you may be twanging an accompaniment to it on the bars of a cell! Just keep your tongue still, Weatherby— and follow my orders!"

"Yes, sir," Hank said mildly.

He twisted his neck to the left and let his blue eyes rest regretfully on the fast-scud-ding formation of Messerschmitts that had been the trouble. At the Front—the Maginot Front—two days now, the most action Hank Weatherby, of the fire-eating, Mississippi Weatherbys, had seen was at the squadron Mess.

And Hank due to send a report to his pappy—to "Cunnel" Persimmon Weatherby, back home in Yazoo City, in old Mississippi—on that very evening. For the good colonel'd had to take it easy, since his leg had been shot away in that last duel, and Hank wasn't one to lie to his father. The cunnel wanted to hear about action, if he couldn't have it.

And here was Major Siddon, with action in sight, ducking away from a formation of Nazis!

Hank sighed and clicked the transmitting instrument dead, and dutifully tooled his fast crate at her top speed of 335 miles per hour. For Siddon had instantly called for "*Right bank, full throttle!*" the moment he had sighted the formation.

Fast along the Line, they sped, and Hank's eyes went more and more sorrowful as they looked down on a telltale here and there that marked a hidden battery of Nazi artillery . . . a secret tarmac of a Nazi *staffel* . . . an all-but-innocent entry into one or more important pockets that led to the Nazi West Wall. When the flight turned back and nosed out its own hidden tarmac, Hank sighed and shook his head; but he came in with the rest of them. He feathered the swift fighting plane to an easy landing and braked it expertly under the camouflaged tunnel.

He climbed down and glared at the *ack emmas* as those worthies swarmed up to take over. He said, "What a lousy war this is! Hell, instead of fighting, all we are doing is an Alphonse-Gaston act! '*You first, my dear Squarehead! Ach, nein! After you, my good Limey!*'" He set his chin skyward and roared, "Phooey to this kind of fighting! Boy, I got to have action!"

"Would a court martial be action enough?" a voice cut in on him.

Hank reddened and turned his head and frosted under Siddon's hard stare. But he followed fast enough when the British commander motioned him to come away from the grease monkeys, where he could talk to him in private.

"You know, Weatherby," Siddon said, after a moment of thought, "I am trying to be as kindly to you as possible. But you are making it extremely difficult for me. Extremely!"

"Shucks, I only want some action, sir," Hank said, with a shrug.

"Quite, quite," Siddon said. "But this is a peculiar war—"

"You're telling me!"

"—and I'm fighting it according to orders. I am not to do any sort of attacking, you see? Merely to hold my lines, make my patrols, and wait for things to bust, as you Yanks say."

"And when they bust," Hank told him, "the Huns will have the upper hand. They will hit when they are ready, and then it'll be goom-by to us Allies."

"Unfortunately you aren't War Minister," Siddon told him acidly.

"IT SURE is!" Hank agreed warmly. "Because then I could make up some action, and I'd know what to write the Cunnel, to-night. My God, but he's going to be sore when I admit we ain't doing a thing!"

Siddon frowned. "Colonel? What colonel, man?"

"My pappy, back home in Mississipp'," Hank said sadly.

"You'll have to write him that everything is Quiet On The Maginot," Siddon said. "I don't want to hear any more about it, Weatherby!"

"No, sir," Hank said sorrowfully, "an' I'm afraid you're goin' to get your wish. Well—" He saluted lazily and turned away. "I'm sure in wrong with that peace-loving Limey commander of mine," he sighed. BUT there was a surprise in store for him.

After he'd got outside of his third *cognac*, an orderly sought him and gave him the office to report to Headquarters. There, Siddon looked at him with only mildly disapproving eyes. "Look, Weatherby—I have been thinking about you. I have decided that perhaps a little—er—activity might—er—release your animal spirits. There is a request for a solitary patrol, over *Courcy*, twenty-five miles down the Line. I am going to send you on it."

Hank's eyes lighted up; and then he

held it. "Huh? Solitary patrol? Listen, I thought that wasn't being done in this war!"

"An artillery battery down that way is a bit nervous," Siddon told him, not quite meeting his eye. "They could use a spotter to let them in on any business."

Hank nodded; but the humor was gone from him entirely. He blinked a moment, then asked Siddon, "Listen, I get it—you are going to rub me out, huh? Afraid I'll cause trouble, so I'm being sent up like a pigeon in a clay-target gallery. Right?"

Siddon ignored him. "You will provoke no attack," he said.

"If I'm attacked, do I get out on the wing to make a better target?" Hank shook his head. "Of all the lousy, murdering tactics—"

"Silence!" Siddon roared. "You have your orders, man! On patrol. Now, get—and come back only for petrol!"

Hank nodded again, but this time there was a gleam in his eyes. He said, "Orders are not to fire unless attacked. Right?"

"The Nazis won't attack," Siddon said. "They will stay quiet."

"Until they are ready. And then it'll be too late!" Hank said hotly. "They'll hit us when they are ready, and then it will be goom-by!"

"To your post, man!" Siddon snapped.

"Aw, heck!" growled Colonel Persimmon Weatherby's boy Hank, as he turned his disgusted gray eyes away and went out.

... And he was still growling "Aw, heck!" when he roared over the small village of *Courcy* and lined up to keep an eye on the imaginary menace of the West Wall.

Up and down, he trundled, his eyes first on the spot where the hidden British battery crouched; and then he turned his attention to the valley of artificial and real shell holes and pill boxes and upended-rails that were the anti-tank defenses, and farther back to the twin obs balloons that swung lazily in the noonday air on spindly cables.

A flight of Nazi Messerschmitts tooled

up and circled warily in the near distance, as if suspecting some trap in this apparently harmless bite of cold meat that was Hank Weatherby. After a while, the Hun ships wheeled and strode off into the cloud-flecked skies.

**H**ANK ganged around alone, the roar of his motor loud and the weight of his heart heavy as the detonation bombs he lugged in the belly of the plane. He tripped his gun lever and loosed a warming burst from his eight guns nested in the wings, just to *hear* some action.

And then came that annoying *whuff-caroomp!* as a Nazi Archie battery tuned up its sights on his unoffending silhouette.

"Hey!" Hank snarled. He eyed the mushrooming puff of smoke with hard gaze. And then grinned. Maybe . . . *just maybe* . . .! "Maybe this Nazi battery is manned by gents who come from Germany's equivalent to good old Mississipp'," he mused. "If they do, they ain't gonna take any backwash." But he held it a moment.

He shook his head. "Nope. I can't sure-nuff call that attacking me. It wasn't close enough. Now, if they was to sure-nuff fire on me, I got to defend myself, don't I?"

He grinned when he thought of the real duel that he was fighting: Siddon fighting him, rather, to still the menace that the overcautious Britisher saw in the Yank from the South.

"Maybe," he murmured, "ol' Limey crossed himself up, when he sent me out as cold meat. Yessuh, just maybe he—"

*Whuff-karoomp!* *Caroomp!* *Bang-bang!* *Crash!*

The left wing of the plane jittered madly and jumped for the sky, and Hank cursed as he saw the holes that the invisible metal moth down there below him had bitten through the plane. "Why, dang your eyeballs!"

He wheeled back, his eyes on a suspi-

cious movement down there at the ugly edge of the West Wall. Fast, he whipped his crate, slammed it into a shallow dive, tripped the detonation bombs. "I can be a pest, too!" he growled.

He grinned when the bombs hit and spewed dirt and dust and leaves, and the camouflage collapsed to reveal the offending battery. "A bull's-eye!" he chortled. Some figures crawled out and ran, like small bugs, over the carpet of earth. Hank nosed down and around and sprayed at the running artillerymen with his machine gun.

*Wham-bang!* *Wham-wham-wham-wham!*

The plane rocked madly, and Hank slapped the throttle wide and whipped clear of the danger. "Dang me for a weasel-eyed polecat!" he roared. "Hell, they ain't gonna get by with that!"

He twisted until he had located the offending battery . . . a neighbor of the one that had fired on him. Quickly, he snapped his signals to his battery back at *Courcy*. "We'll show 'em they can't fire on us Yanks, I mean British," he yelled.

He was pleased when he cut his gun and listened, and could hear clearly the open-mouthed roar of the British guns and the gleeful *whew-e-e* of the deadly h.e. A volcano of dirt and flame and smoke came when the third broadside of the British battery found its mark. Men came out from the camouflage and sprawled grotesquely and quietly there. Others came out and, not so quiet, set up a machine gun and opened fire on the lone plane that cruised overhead.

*Rack-rack-rack-rack-rack-rack-rack.*

Hank nosed down and tripped his gun lever. *Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.* He whipped in a hard bank, the motor roaring a pleasant chorus of aroused cylinders. He struck his threnody of machine guns into the racket again. *Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

"Who'n'hell you gettin' fresh with?" he growled at the figures that were clustered near the machine gun emplacement.

Things quieted suddenly, then. . . .



**B**UT it was only the quiet of an aroused giant getting his bearings before he roared. And roar the giant hidden behind the West Wall did . . . roared with a string of artillery a half-mile wide, and deep to where the observation balloons were tethered.

The English batteries for an equivalent space came to life, and tons of h.e. whistled and screamed and roared through the air and found the marks on the German bank of defenses.

Then, below, two tanks trundled awkwardly from where camouflage had been ripped and lumbered, like great beetles, for another hiding place. One of them sprayed half-heartedly with his guns at the lone plane that cruised so low overhead. Hank said, "Oh, yeah?"

He stood on his rudder bar and slanted down hard at them, his guns hammering. Carefully, he gauged the distance, then released two bombs; and two more. He roared triumph when he saw one of the tanks heel hard and come to a stop. He grinned and wheeled over the other tank, calmly dug at it with his metallic stingers nested in the wings. Four more tanks were suddenly in view, and Hank's heart leaped when he realized he had uncovered a hidden park of them. He snapped his transmitter on and roared, to the defenders lodged hard by *Courcy*, "Looks like a tank attack coming! A whole mess of 'em are stringing out there in the open!"

He had trouble hearing himself for the roar of his motor, of his guns, and of the h.e. that was pouring now in a steady stream from both sides. So he repeated. Then, as he twisted to run back over his own lines, he saw a bevy of British tanks crawling determinedly along and headed for the valley of rails between the two lines.

He turned his head and saw the path that the British artillery was clearing through the Nazi anti-tank rails . . . and he saw, too, the swift patrol of Nazis who swarmed out from cover and made for pill

boxes and wire emplacements. He watched as the men stopped, paused bent over for a moment, then raced onward again.

"Uh hunh!" he nodded. "Laying a mine field for the tanks, huh? Got to get them babies out of there!" He snapped his transmitter on and told the Brass Hats back at *Courcy*: "Infantry prowling around out under me. Looks like they're layin' mines and gettin' set! Better—"

"Got you, old chap!" a voice snapped back at him. "This is right down our alley! What?"

**W**HEN he stick-and-ruddered around in a fast turn to watch, the British infantry was pouring out from concealment, was advancing behind that grim wall of high explosive, bayonets fixed, gas masks adjusted, rifles and grenades already drawing a bead on the opposed Nazis.

Then a frantic voice cut in on him with, "I say, up there. You! The Nazis are getting to us with their artillery! Can you see how they are getting our range?" What?"

The artillery was blazing along two miles of front now, and tanks were lumbering up from both sides, were wheeling and curvetting and letting go with their guns. At their side and behind them came the infantry in unrelenting masses, grenades and rifles and machine guns adding to the din of the uproar.

But Hank had a job to do. On those obs balloons. He wheeled the fast plane and smashed down in a dive, low and behind a stand of trees that protected him from view of the Hun observation outfit. When he came tree-hopping through and into the clearing, all hell broke loose.

Pompoms ripped and tore at him, machine guns and close-range archies smashed and ripped and roared, and it all blended with the undulating sea of high explosive and tanks and infantry and sappers and machine-gunners who streamed from the

West Wall and from the Maginot, to come to grips in the hell-torn earth below.

ANK tripped his gun lever and **H** watched his bullets tear through the near bag. He flicked his stick and leapt over the rent silk and chuckled when a blast of flaming gas shot him high up and tilted his tail for a perfect slam at the other bag.

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

The second bag let go . . . but there was a strange path of lead eating its way through his close-knit instrument board. The Yank slammed clear and let out a roar of surprise when he saw a Nazi plane hammering at him from a perfect perch behind him.

"Where did you come from?" he yelled his amazement; but at the same time, he flipped over in a fast barrel-roll, let her go half again, and shoved his stick forward to come out of it.

He came out of his climb, twisted slowly into position as the baffled German, searching for his late prey, was looking around for him. He jammed the gun trips open and held it hard, for the space of five seconds: *Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.*

He watched the Nazi plane fold up and go into a dive, and swung back to race near his own lines. He blinked his eyes at the hell that was loose below—an inferno of shells, of attacks and counter-attacks, of tanks that lumbered and curvetted and belched smoke and flame and shell and then heeled over to lie still.

The artillery laid a heavy roar over the whole of it, and Hank had to bellow his information into the transmitter and to the gang down under him, in the British dug-out: "Two balloons had you spotted. I got them! Everything okay?"

"For us, yes, old top!" came the answer. "But—what are you going to do about those Nazis bearing down on you?"

Hank whirled; and gasped. Thundering

down the skylanes and making hard for him came a formation of fifteen Messerschmitts . . . guns open and throttles wide.

**T**HE Yank paused only a moment; then, he shouted into the transmitter:

"Get in touch with Squadron Eighty-nine, will you? *Now!* Tell them for God's sake to get some ships out! I can't stand off the whole German Air!"

"Done, already, old chap!" came the information back. "*Did it when you went after those obs balloons! But—think you can hold out?*"

"Watch me!" Hank answered grimly.

He turned as if to streak for it, then flipped his stick back and did a half-loop. He straightened into the teeth of the Nazi attack, and held it there. Screaming along in this surprise maneuver, his belly upturned and his guns yammering their full 1500-rounds-per-gun-per-minute, he broke through the surprised Huns and flipped belly down again and climbed for the sky and his life. He covered his maximum climb of nearly fourteen thousand feet for a four minute clip, then came around again and stared at the havoc below.

Artillery, infantry, tanks, machine-gun squads and companies and divisions, trench mortars, grenades, rifles, were burning their way in a terrific combat. The Nazi planes had left off the chase after Hank and were touring up and down the Maginot, spraying lead and detonation bombs on the advancing Limeys.

Anti-aircraft joined the roar of battle, and farther and farther along the entrenched armies the contagion spread . . . far as the eye could see fountains of flame and lead spewed out, tanks attacked and counter-attacked, wave after wave of men poured out from hidden dug-outs and come to grips in the center of it all.

And down the line hammered a great attacking force of British and French planes!

HANK sighed his relief and dropped down fast from the skies, came in and lined up with his own gang, and met the quick scrutiny of Major Siddon with a straight gaze. Siddon frowned, stared up into the sky whence he had seen Hank dropping, and shrugged.

"We attack," the Limey commander said tersely.

And they attacked!

Hank blinked his surprise at the cold fury with which Siddon led his men in a tearing smash at the Nazi planes. The British outfit hit with a smash that sent the Messerschmitts blasting, like water spraying from a burst paper bag.

Up and down and around, the dogfight waged its mad battle, the planes threading in and out like the pattern of some mad weaver's nightmare. Two British planes burst into flames and smoked down to smash in the hell that had broken out below. Their pilots fluttered limply in the chutes that held them, for all the world like laundry on Hell's own clothes-line. The German planes were like snow melting in the sun. . . .

And then the second wave of Nazi planes hit . . . Messerschmitts and Heinkels and Henschels, with lumbering bombers breaking away from them to lay ton-sized eggs on the devil's carpet below.

More British and French planes blasted up, and converted Douglas bombers joined with Potez bombers and Fairey-Hendons and Lockheed-Hudsons to sow havoc on the attacking forces below. Huge Hun bombers combed lead through the massed forces below, and British and French planes hopped them; while the Lockheeds and Potezes and Douglasses made a compromise between laying their deadly cargoes and slamming up into the dogfight.

Siddon's snapped order came clear above the uproar: "*Squadron Eighty-nine attention! . . . We are pulling out to lend a hand forty miles up the line! Steady on, gentlemen. . . . And follow me!*"

Hank fought off two Messerschmitts, paused long enough to dispatch a Henschel to the Nazi Happy Hunting Ground, and joined his outfit for the move up the line.

BUT it was more a running fight than a move, with the planes weaving in and out and pouring lead whenever anything showed in the sights. Now, friend and enemy were a fine distinction. Too fine a distinction to stand on ceremony about. You saw a target, you tripped your gun lever, you fought your way a few hundred yards along, and then did it all over again.

The miles crawled slowly back from under his wings . . . miles of men and tanks and guns and grenades and bayonet-tipped rifles. . . .

And then Squadron Eighty-nine, complete with a horde of Nazi planes that swooped and smashed and thrust to beat them off, came to the spot where help was needed! And how it was needed!

It was an angle near the Belgian border, and here massed hundreds of thousands of Nazi troops attacked in wave after wave of gray that came steadily on, broke in a spray of blood on the British defenses, and flowed back under the next wave of gray to hurtle forward. Hank looked down and gulped.

"Lord Jehova!" he breathed. "Look what we got us here!"

Behind the British-held lines, reserves were pouring up in a steady stream. Guns, supplies, infantry, machine gun divisions, cavalry even whipping along in a smashing gallop for the threatened spot. Along a railway great British naval guns screamed their freight of death.

The roar of battle blended as one with the hammering cylinders and guns of Hank's plane. In a volume of noise that was so loud that it came to almost a silence, so steady and oppressive was it, the Southerner slammed his ship up and down and around and beat off the Nazi

mobs, then swooper for the attacking hordes and unloaded his guns into the close-knit mass of troops.

And then, suddenly, those Nazi troops weren't coming any more. Then, suddenly, the Nazi tanks and grenades and shells and rifles were stilling, and acrid smoke rose in undisturbed columns from the earth and then these, too, simmered off and were lost to the naked eye.

And with this cessation of attack the Nazi planes melted into the far reaches of the blue sky behind their vaunted West Wall.

Major Siddon's voice was weary and tense when he husked into his "mike":

*"Cease firing, gentlemen! Form up for the flight to the tarmac."*

The tattered remnants of Squadron Eighty-nine fell into a line-of-vees and limped at half-throttle for the home tarmac, down the miles of smoking and ruined No Man's Land that gaped between the two lines. . . .

**S**IDDON was out of his plane and coming for Hank's ship — or for the design of holes and nude framework that was all Hank had left to show for the clean and spotless ship he had lifted so swiftly from the ground such a short time before.

"Weatherby!" the British commander snarled. "I say you —"

"Major Siddon!" a calm voice broke in on him. And Siddon took one look, then whirled, came to attention, snapped his hand up in stiff salute. It was the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Forces in France! Complete with staff!

"Sir!" Siddon croaked.

"Congratulations, Siddon," the commander said crisply, extending his hand and smiling. "I think, sir, I can almost call you 'Colonel,' though that will be a few days going through, of course."

Siddon gulped and tried to control his

bulging eyes. "Sir," he managed to croak, again.

"Which of your men was it discovered the attack, as it came?" the Brass Hat asked then, his eyes worried. "He — he lived, I trust? A brave lad, if ever there was one!"

Siddon had enough tonsil control to gargle, "Er, what, sir? I mean, what are you saying, sir? I—I don't quite—er—?"

"Over *Courcy*," the Brass Hat explained patiently. "We have the full report, Major. You had a plane on lone duty there—? Though I must confess I can't see why you did that! Not that it didn't turn out to be a splendid idea. Enemy caught unawares, and all that—lulled them into a false sense of security, what? They never suspected that you had come onto their plans to attack, in some way!"

One of the general's staff added, "The Nazis will be a long time in building up supplies, reserves and ammunition to do a stunt like this one again. In fact, I can safely say that we can be sure of a quiet front for some time to come. Unless, of course, the bounders have another trump up their sleeves. What? It is—"

A hollow groan interrupted; and all eyes focused on Hanky Weatherby, son of Colonel Persimmon Weatherby, of Mississippi, suh. Siddon's eyes narrowed.

"There is the man, sir! Lieutenant Weatherby! I want to report him for—"

"*Cite*!" the general's voice cut in on him. "*Cite* him, I think you meant? Yes, yes, of course. No honor the Empire can bestow on him is too great. What?"

Siddon bit down on his tongue when the great man shook Hank's hand warmly and spoke long and earnestly for all to hear . . . including the newspaper correspondents, who had come up.

Hank tried his best to look innocent, and the flush of embarrassment on his face was genuine enough. He cleared his throat and said, "No trouble at all, General. No suh, not a bit. Glad to help out, in my own way, if you know what I mean?"

There was a lot more of the same, with Siddon looking hard at Hank, and the general talking big to the newspaper men about them both. "Yes, yes, capital, quite, what? Yes, yes, of course! Quite!"

Hank made his escape while his suspicious-eyed commander was still engrossed with the general. And he kept clear that night, after mess. When he saw Siddon come into the mess shack and make for him, Hank sat closer to the empty writing paper that stretched under his hand, and started to write on it. Siddon came up and stood there.

"I'm writing to the Cunnel," Hank said, after a minute. "I gotta write him to-night. Can't stall it off a minute longer . . . suh!"

Siddon's eyes gleamed, but he turned away quickly. He made his way to the Adjutant's office and told that worthy: "Er—something I want to know about. Important, you understand? It—er—quite conceivably might lead to—er—charges being lodged against —er— someone."

"And, sir?" the Adjutant asked.

"I shall do the censoring of the mail, to-night. All of it!" He looked at his subordinate. "Or, especially, I should say Weatherby's. You —er— understand? I make myself clear?"

"Quite, sir!"

"But you will say nothing of this. To anyone."

"Especially to —er— Weatherby, sir?" the Adjutant asked knowingly.

"Right."

HANK was standing morosely at the bar, his fifth *cognac* in process of being transferred from glass to stomach. His eyes were heavy, and he shook his head sadly as he downed the drink and poured another.

While down the line, Major Siddon opened the envelope that was addressed, in a strong, bold hand:

*Colonel Persimmon Weatherby,  
Persimmon Plantation,  
Yazoo City, Mississippi, U. S. A.*

"Harumph!" Major—soon-to-be-Colonel—Siddon blared, as he drew out the pencil-written sheet that was inside the envelope. He spread it out flat, pulled the candle closer on the table, and rubbed his hands gleefully. And then he fainted, with a gasp and a crash of the chair.

The Adjutant came on the run, and shook his head when he saw Major Siddon stretched as if in deep slumber. "He must be fair worn out, poor chap!" the Adjutant murmured. He picked up the sheet of paper to thrust it back into the envelope, and chanced to look at it.

The Adjutant fainted.

Lying there in the dim candlelight was the sheet of paper, and on it was scrawled in that bold, strong hand of Hank Weatherby:

*I can't lie to you, Cunnel, sir . . . an' I'm afraid I won't be able to oblige you with what you want to hear . . . not for a long, long time.*

*Everything is very quiet, up here on the Maginot Line, sir. . . .*

# FURY OVER FINLAND

A THRILLING NOVELET OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by T. W. FORD in

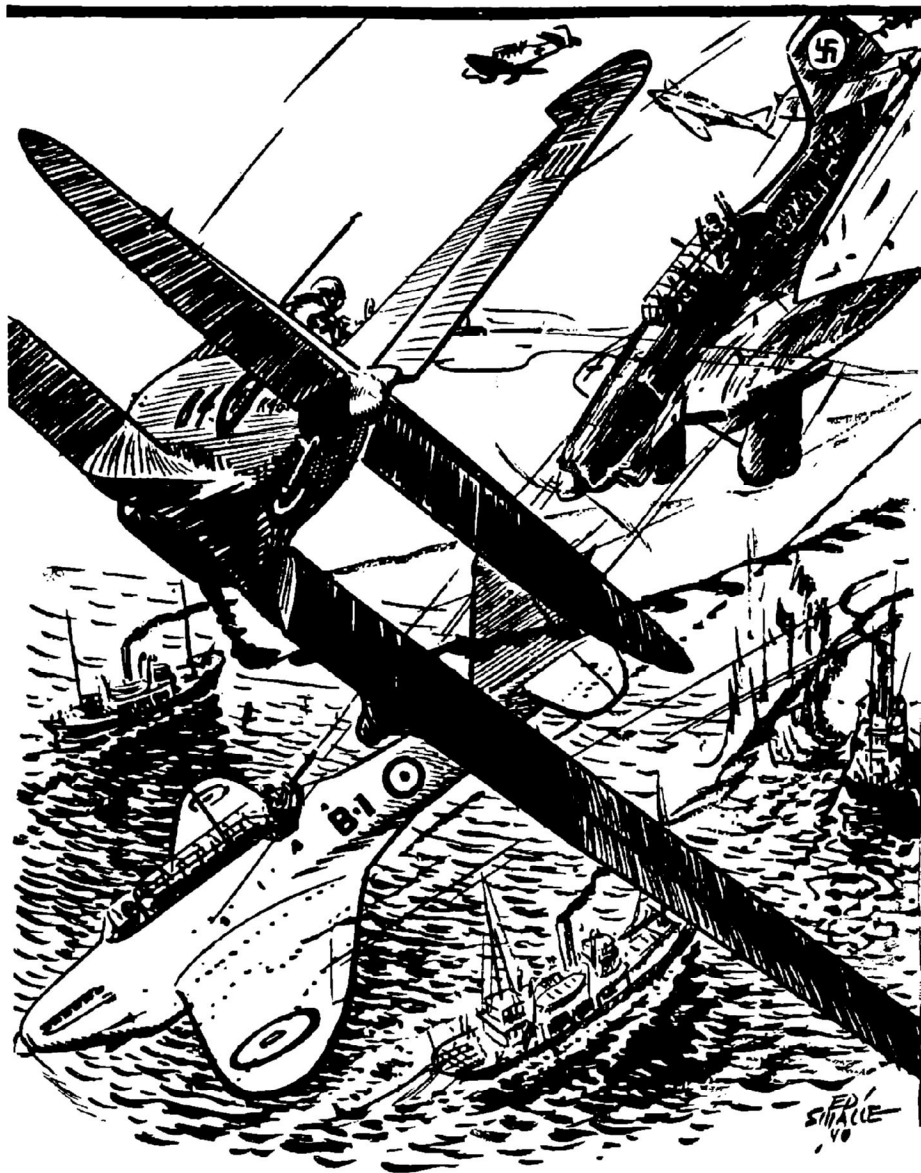
# AIR ACTION

APRIL ISSUE NOW ON SALE

# PAPER-MADE ACE

by DAVID C. COOKE

Lt. "Knick" Ryan cursed the orders that made him leave the action of the western front for the monotony of Coastal Patrol . . . but high above the waters of the English Channel he met the flying fury of the Nazi mine layers, and he sang his hymn of joy to the little gods of battle who ride with all warbirds!



“**B**UT I tell you, General,” argued Harvey Sterling, “the reason enlistment has fallen down is that this war is so much different. There are no Aces for the young fellows to set up as idols, and they just don’t give a damn about the R.A.F. There’s no romance in war anymore.”

“Yes, I guess you’re right,” agreed General Fletcher, Commander of the British Air Force in France. “There’s been such a change in the methods of fighting that Aces are now next to impossible. Some day, though, I hope that one will develop.”

“Some day!” said the newspaper man with sarcasm. “If you wait until that time comes, the British public will be so fed up with this war that they won’t even care if there is an air arm, let alone enlist. The kind of men that you need can’t be got through conscription, and the only way to get the others is to build a veil of sensationalism around the whole mess.”

The General leaned back in his chair, lifted a glass of cognac to his lips. After he had taken a deep drink, he went on. “That’s all well and good, man,” he said slowly. “But how can such an Ace be built up? His squadron mates would never stand for giving him protection, you know. And that sort of thing would make the whole scheme drop through, anyway.”

It was Sterling’s turn to ease back. He did. He put a huge, foul smelling stogie to his lips, struck a lucifer, and applied the flame to the tapered end of the cigar. He inhaled deeply, let a long ribbon of blue smoke drift toward the ceiling of the improvised headquarters shack “somewhere in France.”

“True enough,” he said. “Not only would they kick, but the fellow who was picked would get a low opinion of himself. None of the British flyers like to be babied; they want to stand on their own feet or not at all. However, here’s a way that it would be worked:

“Germany is sending the *Luftwaffe’s* oldest and most obsolete planes over to lay

mines around England. And even at that, as you know, the Coastal Defence boys are having a hard job taking them on. In fact, the majority of them are so inexperienced that they can’t even fire straight. Well, my idea is to take a man from France—one who has had actual combat experience—and ship him back to England. A fellow of that sort would be able to lick hell out of those antiquated crates. What’s more, he’d be an Ace in no time.”

The slow thinking but methodical General pondered seriously on the proposition for a few moments. He took another stiff draught from his half-emptied glass. “That sounds quite logical,” he grudgingly agreed. “But how the devil can we do a thing like that? It would be just like cashiering a man to send him home.”

Sterling looked at his cigar, made a wiry face, and threw the weed away in disgust. “General,” he said slowly and distinctly, “let me worry about that. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m a newspaper man—one of the best publicity blokes, I’m told. Just leave everything in my hands and I assure you that everything will come out all right, that we’ll get our Ace, and that enlistment will begin on such a scale that you’ll have to detach half your flunkies from France to take care of the new applicants.”

The General finished his glass, looked at it longingly. “Right, Sterling,” he said after a pause. “I don’t know what it’s all about or what you can possibly do, but go ahead. It’s for King and country, so I suppose it’ll be quite all right.”

Sterling mopped his brow with a none-too-clean handkerchief. “At last!” he exclaimed, sighing deeply. “It was a tough fight, Mom, but I won! . . . Now, let’s get moving. Where’s the nearest drome—fighter outfit?”

“At St. Avold,” came the answer. “I’ll phone ahead that you’re coming and that your wishes will be orders.”

The newspaper man pulled his coat collar up around his neck, jammed his hat farther down on his head. “Well, I’ll see you later,

General," he called over his shoulder as he headed for the door. But Fletcher didn't hear. He was busy filling his empty glass with a dose of mule-kick.

LONG rows of smartly-uniformed men were lined up in the Maginot Line base. They didn't know Sterling was just a newspaper man, but that didn't matter. General Fletcher had telephoned that a certain Mr. Sterling was coming and that his every wish was to be an order.

Harvey looked over the lines with a keen eye, turned to Lieut.-Commander Newell. "Commander," he said, "I'd like to look them over. Do you mind if I pass among them? I'd like you to come along, too."

"By all means," answered the wiry S.C. "Let's start down at this end," he led Sterling to the left.

They passed slowly down the line, Sterling looking each flyer over carefully. As he came to likely-looking prospects, he asked Newell how many victories they had, how many hours, how long they had been at the front, and what they did before the war. With each satisfactory answer, he jotted down something on a pad, muttered to himself.

After inspecting the entire personnel, Newell and the news hawk went back to their former positions directly in front of the men and behind a group of battle-scarred, powerful Hawker Spitfires.

Sterling pondered over his listings, crossing out names as he calculated their worth for the undertaking. Finally he had only one name left. He showed it to Newell, said: "That's the one I want. Have him come up here."

Newell nodded his consent, turned to the men. "Lieutenant Ryan," he intoned in a deep voice, "you will report to me immediately. The rest of you men are dismissed!"

The pilots immediately broke ranks, muttering softly and asking each other what it was all about. One flyer, tall, well built,

and looking like an Olympic star, walked to the fore. "Lieutenant Ryan, sir," he addressed Newell in a pleasant, well modulated voice."

"Ryan," said Newell, "this is Mr. Sterling. "You are to pack up and go with him immediately on special duty in England."

Ryan started. "But my work here," he protested. "I've got a patrol to lead in an hour. And besides—"

"That's an order, Lieutenant," the Commander bit off. "Your flight will be given to someone else. You're under special orders from General Fletcher!"

"Knick" Ryan stared hard at Sterling, hate showing in his steel-blue eyes. "Yes, sir," he said, without shifting his gaze "I'll pack my kit immediately."

"That won't be necessary, Ryan," broke in Sterling. "We'll have your stuff sent back. I've got a motorcycle waiting outside. Let's be off."

Ryan looked pleadingly at Newell. He received no satisfaction, saluted the Commander, and started to walk slowly and silently toward the huge steel doors at the opposite end of the underground hangar.

"That's the spirit, Ryan," Sterling chattered as they passed scores of heavily-camouflaged Spitfire fighters. "We've got something planned that'll make you darn glad you're not back in this stink hole. Just wait—you'll have no regrets."

The lieutenant didn't answer. He was leaving everything behind that he wanted—friends, a sweet little ship, and all his chances to crack hard and often at Hitler's Hunland bohunks.

"It's a lucky thing for you," Sterling continued as they approached the door, "that you were a cricket star at Oxford. I spotted you right away. Boy, that'll make even a better tie-up!"

Knick stopped at the steel panels. He opened a side door for Sterling, and when the news hawk had gone out he looked back longingly for a split second. Then he sighed deeply, walked through the door.



"I don't know what this is all about," he told Harvey as he climbed into the cycle's bathtub. "But I smell a rat somewhere. Just what the hell am I going back to England for?"

"To fight the mine layers," came the evasive answer.

"To fight the mine layers!" he exploded as Sterling blasted the machine into action and opened the throttle. "Hell, can't those Coastal Defence guys take care of that? I'm needed here at the front, man, to fight a real battle."

"Those three victories you've got now will have to last for a while," Sterling answered, shouting to make himself heard over the roar of the motor. "Don't worry, though," he added, "you'll have enough to keep you busy for a long time."

Ryan shut up like a clam. He knew there was something somewhere that was assailing the tissues of his nostrils, but he couldn't place the woodpile gentleman yet. He relaxed in the bucket-seat of the bouncing buggy and tried to pick out the reason for all this.

The cycle sped along a camouflaged highway toward Thionville, near the Luxemburg border. An endless string of camions and supply trucks were creeping along the road, heading for the front line positions of the Maginot defence fortifications. But their side of the highway was practically deserted. The supply train had just started to come up and none of the empty trucks were yet returning.

The cycle sped through deserted and shell pocked Thionville, turned left, and pointed for Verdun. This sector was torn up much more than the forward section, for the Nazi long range guns had been concentrating on the rear lines, trying to wreck supply trains and communications with their heavier stuff.

The dust-covered duo eventually ground to a stop in Verdun. Sterling jumped off his saddle, stretched, and then said: "Come on, Knick. We're going to hit the old boy here for a Battle to take us home."

General Fletcher had informed the commanding officer that Sterling would be there, so he gave the news hawk a ship without question. It was warmed up in short order, and Ryan took off, pointing his nose toward England.

**R**YAN was riding at 10,000 when it happened. A Nazi Heinkel suddenly popped out of the clouds over the Channel and started to pepper away at the crate. As the first slugs struck home, Ryan flipped over into a reversement, warmed his guns with a short burst, and sought out the swastika-ship.

The Fritz flyer rocketed over in a neat Immelmann and bored in with his Madsens grinding out a song of death. The cupronickel snaked through the Battle's empenage and started to crawl toward the rear pit.

"For God's sake do something!" Sterling expostulated, hunching forward in the pit. "Hell, he'll have us in a minute!"

"Use those rear guns!" Knick blasted back as he screwed into a chandelle. "They're not there just to look pretty!" He then laughed heartily, sending cold shivers racing up and down Sterling's spine.

Ryan flipped over at the top of his chandelle, curled around into a wing-over. The Nazi was suddenly under his guns, caught unprepared for this move. Knick grimly peered down his sights, poised a nimble finger above his trips.

*Br-t-t-t-t!* His Brownings spat lethal hate as the Nazi ringed the cross-wires. The burst sped true for its course, slammed full into the Heinkel's right wing. Then the Fritz screwed around, hauled himself out of range. As the ship banked steeply, Sterling threw off his fright for the nonce and set the rear swivel gun to chattering.

The slugs went wild. Ryan reversed to follow the retreating Nazi. He rapidly closed the distance between the two ships, and then clamped down on his trips again as he hove within range.

Possessed with fear, the Fritz slammed around and bored straight for the Battle. At a combined speed of well over 600 m.p.h., the space rapidly closed. Each ship was firing madly and neither would waver an inch from its path.

When Ryan saw that the Heinkel was intent upon crashing into them, he dived at the last moment and pulled over into a screaming half-loop. He pounced down on the Nazi before the speedier craft could slow down enough to bank, and once more his guns chattered violently.

A line of jagged slug holes appeared in the wing, slowly started to weave a crazy path toward the fuselage.

All hell suddenly broke loose. A scarlet flame shot up from the Heinkel and a deafening roar followed. The gas tank had been hit! Ryan mauled his stick frantically, fighting against the turbulent air. He finally gained control of the Battle, zooming steeply for altitude, and the Fritz crate weaved toward the cold blue-green waters of the Channel, flipping over crazily in wild gyrations.

"Phew! That was too damned close for comfort!" expostulated Sterling, wiping a hand across his clammy forehead. "Thought we were gone, sure."

Ryan didn't answer. He stared ahead grimly, again setting the nose of the Battle on the path to Burghead, near the Moray Firth at the upper tip of Scotland.

Less than an hour later Ryan lowered his trucks and swooped around the Burghead field. He circled the drome once, headed into the wind, and came in for a landing. His wheels and skid hit at the same instant; then he taxied the Battle slowly toward the lone hangar.

**A**FTER cutting the gun, Ryan vaulted from the pit. "What in hell's the idea of ferrying me to this worn out dump?" he demanded of the news hawk. "Hell, there's nothing to do here except sit around and bask in the sun!"

"That's right," grinned Sterling. "That is, there's nothing to do but bask until something happens." He pulled off his helmet, tossed it into the ship. "Boy have I got a story!" he said jubilantly. "Just wait'll this hits the papers tomorrow!"

Ryan was about to interrupt, to ask what the hell it was all about. But Sterling started running toward the operations shack, moving his stubby legs just as fast as possible.

"Get this," he panted into the telephone in operations. "Lieutenant Knickerbocker Ryan today destroyed a bomber over the English Channel. The ship was loaded with huge bombs, and it is supposed that it was heading toward London with its cargo of death. . . ."

After he had put through the call to his paper, the news hawk hung up his receiver, a smile of satisfaction spreading across his homely features. "That's to start the ball rolling," he mumbled to himself. "Tomorrow there'll be more."

"Where the devil is everybody?" came Ryan's voice from the door of operations.

Sterling spun around, saw that the pilot had not heard his conversation. "Oh, they're probably out on patrol," he answered. "They've only got two ships here, and the observers act as mechanics when they're down. Be back soon, I guess."

Knick walked in. "What did you rush up here for?" he asked. "There's something damn funny going on. First you take me away from a good job, and then you bring me up to this worn-out drome. All that on special orders from General Fletcher. And you a civilian! I don't get it; and what's more, I don't like you, Sterling. I think you're pulling something dirty."

Sterling tactfully evaded Knick's cutting remarks, and said: "I've got to beat it back to London, Ryan. Here—" he held out a sealed letter "—give this to Major Thompson when he returns with his patrol. This contains full orders about you and presents your credentials."

Leaving Ryan with the letter, Sterling left the office, took the drome's motorcycle, and sped off toward Inverness.

**W**HILE Ryan carried on his routine and monotonous patrols against the night-flying mine layers and the trawler-raiders that were slowly depleting England's fleet of fishing ships, a spectacular legend was being built up around him in London and other key cities in England and Scotland. Sterling was spreading Ryan's name on the front page of every newspaper, telling how he was piling up victories against Hitler's Huns and keeping the waters around England safe.

"Well, I guess that'll hold them for a while," the news hawk said as he ripped a sheet of paper from his machine and called for a copy boy. "He got one yesterday, but we'll just double the score to make it sound better. Hell," he told himself, "there's no way to prove that there wasn't two."

The copy hit the evening editions of the London *Age-Herald* and affiliated newspapers, bearing blaring headlines which read—

**RYAN'S SCORE MOUNTS STEADILY  
R.A.F. PILOT VICTOR AGAIN IN  
DRAMATIC AIR BATTLE!**

And all the time that he was being lauded as a hero and ballyhooed over the front page of every paper, Knick Ryan was cursing himself for a fool. He had mentally kicked himself a thousand times for ever letting Sterling talk him into leaving his post in France. If he had only protested and put up a fight—!

"**W**E CHANGE our flight plan today, men," Major Thompson told Ryan and Hock Lewis, his other pilot. "Instead of going out singly, we'll stick together. I know," he hastily added before they could interrupt. "We can't cover as much territory that way. But news leaked through

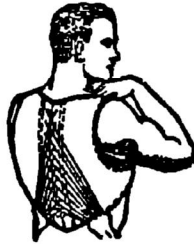
*(Continued on page 84)*

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(Continued from page 83)

that Germany is going to pull a mass raid on the trawlers today, and we'll need all the concentrated power that we can get. That's all. Into your ships now."

"All we can get, huh?" Knick said with disgust as he walked toward his Battle. "Why the hell don't those Brass Hats send more ships up here if something big's planned."

Ryan's observer was waiting in front of his ship. "Sorry, sor," he said hesitantly, "but I heard what ye said. I know that they can't send us no more help—they's too busy theyselves. They bin waitin' for an air raid. 'Fraid the Nazis'll strike any moment."

"Well, that's one explanation," grumbled Knick as he climbed up the catwalk. "There's no excuse, though, of only having three ships here."

"There war only two until ye came, sor," put in the observer.

"Okay, buckle up." Knick spun his inertia starter. The starter-spring started to whine as it built up tension. Knick blipped his boosters and fed her gas. The Battle's Merlin caught with a splutter, faltered, and then roared in a burst of power.

When the temperature gauges climbed around the dials to the blue marks, Knick stood on his right brake, raced the engine, and spun around in a ground loop. He headed into the wind when the other ships were ready, and gave the Merlin full gun for a roaring take-off.

Out over the North Sea they went, flying close to the waves to escape possible detection. A fleet of convoyed merchant ships was passed, and then the sea was vacant in all directions.

Ryan's earphones started to buzz and he twisted the rheostats of his radio. "Lewis and Ryan," came Thompson's voice, "watch carefully and follow every move I make when we come near the Shetland Islands. The attack is expected at any moment. . . . That's all, but keep your sets tuned in."

After that there was clear sailing. The flight passed over several fishing smacks and once they saw the smooth, slimming form of a U-boat passing beneath the waves. But since none of the ships carried bombs, they didn't bother to attack. Thompson flashed word back to the Firth of Forth and notified the Naval base there of the sub's position. They would soon contact a destroyer to take care of it.

The Shetland Islands soon became visible on the horizon. At first they appeared as several irregular purple splotches on the green water, but then they slowly materialized and took on shape. The flight skirted the islands, looking for the Nazi ships, and then curled around to circle wider.

Half-way around in their bank, Ryan spotted several dots diving from the clouds on the far side of their path. He frantically spun his dial to the Major's wavelength, and chanted into his mike: Major Thompson . . . Major Thompson. . . . Flight of ships hard left. . . . I suggest we investigate."

In a moment Thompson's answer flashed back. He saw the specks, and warned the men to get ready for action.

With engines wide open, the three-ship flight hurtled toward those swastika-bearing ships. There were five Fritz flyers, and they were coming in low to strafe the concentration of trawlers that was based at the island. Suddenly a cloud of white blossomed up from beneath the Nazis. They were using bombs!

The Battles clawed for altitude. When they had a thousand feet under their wings, Major Thompson signaled for attack. The Faireys broke formation and dived at the Fritz jobs. Ryan spotted one that was flying low and machine-gunning the trawlers. He blasted hell bent for it.

The Nazi never knew what struck him. Ryan's Brownings rained a hail of death into the Junkers' pit, blasting the pilot to tattered bits. Then he turned to follow up his advantage, flung his Battle at an-

(Continued on page 86)

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(Continued from page 85)

other low-flying Junkers.

Knick opened up with his four forward guns then zoomed to come around for another attack. His gunner spun his Vickers and fired effectively as the ship stood on her prop. But the Nazi, though hit badly, hiked out of range and zoomed for the clouds. Knick decided not to follow, raced to give aid to Lewis and Thompson, who were battling the other two Junkers Ju 87's.

**MAJOR THOMPSON'S** Battle suddenly floundered. It had been hit! A Nazi camped on the Major's tail and poured burst after burst of slugs at the stricken Battle. Knick slammed the throttle to the last notch, and howled at the Junkers.

He flashed between the two ships, his gunner snapping a hurried burst as they flashed past, then reversed. The Battle bored straight for the Junkers, fire flashing from its loaded nostrils. Then a hail of slugs spewed out from the Junkers' rear pit.

The bullets hit the Battle's right panel and the ship shook convulsively under the pounding. Knick smashed his stick to the left, stood the Fairey on its right wing, and slashed past. The Nazi hurriedly left the Major's blind spot as Knick's gunner poured a withering hail at the crate's rudder.

The Junkers clawed for altitude to join its fleeing mate. One of the remaining two zoomed up to meet him, but the other went down a flamer under Lewis' guns.

Ryan pointed his nose down to follow Thompson, but the Major called back that he was all right and that Lewis and Ryan should return to the Burghhead base. Knick pulled out of gliding dive, banked, and pointed back to Scotland.

As the two Battles approached the Scotch shore, Knick flipped his radio switch and chanted into his mike:

"Go ahead on in, Lewis. . . . I'm going to run down to Aberdeen for a spell. . . . Be back soon, I think." Then he changed his course and left the other Fairey job.

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Knick set down at Aberdeen and hailed a car for town. He and Frank Fahrley, his observer, made their way to the nearest pub and sat over two huge glasses of ale. "This is the first time I've been away from the field," Ryan said. "Been too busy up until now."

"Yer lucky yer away now," returned Fahrley. "We're shore kept plenty busy up there it's a truth."

That was about all that passed between them for several minutes. Knick was about to speak again when several men entered the pub, laughing and talking loudly.

"Yes, sir," one of them proclaimed. "If I were twenty years younger, I'd join the Air Force meself."

"Ye would, hey?" put in another. "I'm tellin' ye, Jimmy me bye, ye'd sure have to stand in line behind me! Me little Henry hopped orf today to jine up, he did."

"Well, congratulations, Duffy," spoke up another as they approached the bar. "An' maybe he'll soon be as famous as that there Ryan lad. Sure he's a brave one! Why only here in today's paper—"

Knick slowly lowered his glass of foam as he heard his name mentioned, set it on the table, and slowly walked over to the men. "What was that you said about Ryan?" he demanded, his face assuming a beet-red shade. "Who is he and what's he done?"

Duffy started laughing uproariously. "Lissen to th' lad, byes," he said when he had gained control of himself. "He ain't even heered of th' great 'un!" He started laughing again.

Finally one held his newspaper out to Knick. "Read this, lad," he directed. "Sure, an' it'll give ye the news."

Knick took the paper, his lips tense with anger. He opened the sheet, and headlines in large type blared at him—

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(Continued on page 89)**

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(Continued from page 87)

**T**HERE was more; in fact, the news was spread over the entire front page of the paper. A wall of crimson flared up before Knick's eyes, and we was able to see only the byline—By Harvey Sterling.

Thin, white lines of suppressed anger stood out in bold relief around Ryan's mouth, and his eyes gleamed molten flame. "Where is this paper published?" he asked in even, cold tones."

The men stopped laughing. "In London," Duffy answered almost hesitantly. "That is, the home offices are there."

Ryan clenched the paper in his hand, turned toward the door, still carrying the paper, and walked out with deliberation.

"Funny bloke, ain't he?" asked one of the men after he had gone. "Thought for a moment he was gonner blow his topper. Wonder who he is, anyway?"

Fahley ordered another glass of beer. He knew that he would be in Knick's way if he went along. When he got back to his table, he said, "His name's Ryan—Knick-erbocker Ryan."

Knick blasted his Battle to London, keeping the Merlin wide open during the entire trip. He flashed in to a landing at a Civil Air Guard station, legged out of his ship without checking in, and grabbed a taxi. The hack took him to the offices of the *Age-Herald* in short order, and he made his way up to the editorial room.

Ryan, his rage ever increasing, passed by the call-desk, ignoring the protests of the receptionist, and stalked into the copy room. He flashed his eyes over the room, seeking Sterling. He at last saw the news hawk and walked slowly and deliberately toward him.

Sterling glanced up from his typewriter and saw Ryan. A frightened look came over his face. He knew that the flyer had found out, and was prepared for the worst.

"Howdy, Ryan," he said. "Didn't expect to see you around these parts. What

(Continued on page 91)

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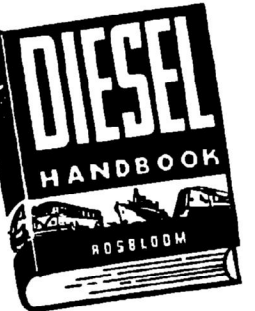
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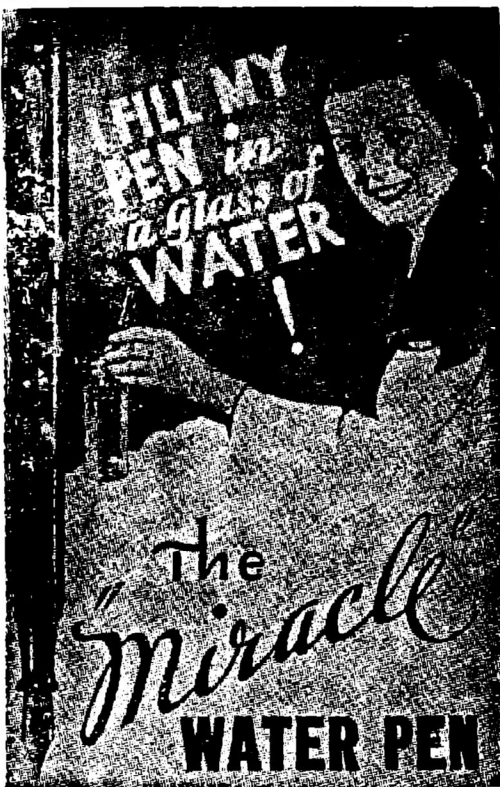
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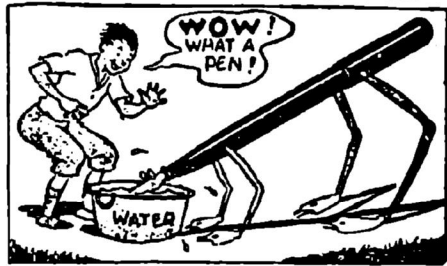
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(Continued from page 89)

can I do you for?"

"You damn swine!" Knick spat, grabbing Sterling's coat front in an iron grip. "What the hell's the meaning of this?" He held the paper in front of the reporter, shaking it with rage. "Talk fast!"

The reporter spluttered and became nervous. "Take it easy, Ryan," he pleaded. "I can explain everything. Anyhow, the whole idea was okayed by General Fletcher."

"To hell with Fletcher! I'm going to break your damn neck, Sterling!" He drew back his fist, started to thrash it forward to the reporter's button.

A group of men suddenly sprang on Ryan, pinned his arms to his side. He lashed out with his fists, sending two of them sprawling. Another caught one on the lullaby button and went out like a light. But others ran up and grabbed at the flyer, stopping him from causing further damage.

"Now," said Sterling, adjusting his tie and smoothing down his hair. "You're going to get the whole story, Ryan. And you might as well take it easy, for the men won't let you go until I tell them to."

Knick struggled and squirmed, but the men held tight. "All right, Sterling," he said after a moment. "Tell them to let me go. I'll listen to your story—but it'd better be good!"

Sterling instructed the men to release Ryan, and then they went into a conference room. Inside, the reporter began, "Ryan, you might not like this story, but you've forced my hand. Here's the whole set-up.

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(Continued from page 91)

athletics. From there on you know the story. You were put at a base where you'd be able to knock off some easy meat and build up your record. Of course, we may have played it up more than necessary, but that all added to the scheme.

"All this," he continued, "might sound like a dirty trick to you, but it was for the good of the Empire and our cause. Hell, already enlistment has jumped to hundreds a day. In fact, we've got more than can be taken care of. And it's all because of you, Ryan.

"Even though we might have stretched a point here and there, what we gave them was fundamentally the truth. Hell, you can't kick at the truth, can you?"

"But it's not right," the flyer protested. "Here you gave me a soft job and I get credit for being a hero. Yeah, that newspaper even said that I was going to be decorated by the King himself. You made it all sound like fascinating and thrilling work, when it's really nothing but legal murder."

"Be that as it may," Sterling went on, "it's a confirmed fact that the plan worked and that you're Britain's only Ace. That's bigger than any of us, you know."

"Big, hell!" exploded Knick. "It's the smallest thing I ever heard of, giving the people all of that rot. Sterling, I'm going to blast this down and tell the truth. I'm going to give the newspaper something that'll split the whole thing wide open."

"NO YOU won't," answered Sterling, smiling. "The evening edition is about to go to press, and we'll cover that up by saying 'you were wounded and are temporarily out of your head.' Then no newspaper in the Empire would dare to burst the bubble that's been built around you—even though that bubble is absolutely true, in the broad sense."

"Okay, you win," Ryan sighed. "But only on one condition—and I want your  
(Continued on page 95)

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(Continued from page 93)

promise, Sterling. Have I got it?"

"Shoot."

"Well, I want to be wounded the next time up," the flyer continued. "I spend some time in the hospital and the whole thing dies down. Then, after the people have forgotten about me, I go back to my old squadron and take up where I left off. But no more publicity after that; I'm just forgotten. Is it a go?"

Sterling pondered for a moment. "We've got what we set out for," he said slowly, "and new enlistments are coming in fast as hell." He paused, then continued, "Okay, Ryan, it's a go."

"Not quite," continued Knick. "You've got me listed with eighteen victories. Well, the real score is only fourteen, including the ones at the front. You publish another article, saying that eighteen was wrong and giving my real score. You know, I've got a conscience to think of."

"Jake. Eighteen or fourteen, what's the difference. At any rate, you're our Ace of Aces—and that much is on the level." He stuck a stogie between his lips, lighted it. "Ryan, you're a sucker," he continued. "Here you're the best damn flyer we've had since the last war, and what do you do but kick because we give you a little publicity. You know, you won't be able to stay away from it. The public's going to demand more news about you. Reporters will hound you throughout the war."

"And it's all your fault. Why the hell couldn't you have picked some one who would have enjoyed all this?"

"That's where you're wrong," came the answer. Sterling sat down on the table, puffed on his cigar. "You had been at the front only a short time, and you already had one of the best records in your outfit. If you had stayed there all this time, your score would probably be more than fourteen now, because there's more to shoot at in France. And regardless of whether you

(Concluded on page 97)

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(Continued from page 95)

had been picked or not, you would be in the same boots now. Don't you see it, Ryan, you're a natural."

**K**NICK'S rage had completely subsided, and he was smiling. "Harvey," he said, using the reporter's given name for the first time, "why don't you let your hair down more often? I think you'd be a pretty good egg if you'd just be natural once in a while. What's more, you're not a bad fighter. You sure gave that Heinkel something to think about over the Channel."

Sterling returned the smile. "I've got a little secret to let you in on, Knick," he said. "I fought in the last war on Spads. You're one of the few people who know this, so don't let it out. I was a high-ranking Ace then, and I detested it. I thought those newspaper guys were just a bunch of mugs."

Ryan laughed heartily. He pointed at the reporter, broke into a more boisterous spasm. "You were a— Boy, that's hot! And you didn't like it!"

Sterling joined him, laughing until his stomach hurt and tears ran down his face. When he could laugh no longer, he said, "But I was really scared over the Channel. That was the first time I had ever ridden as a back seat flunky. I was itching to get my hands on that stick."

"Now I've got something else on you," Ryan added. "Try to fall back on that promise of yours and you'll end up behind the eight-ball. By the way, if you're ever up around my sector drop in and we'll have a glass of ale together. Okay?"

"Right. It's a date."

Knick walked out of the office a few minutes later. He hailed a hack and headed back toward the Civil Air Guard drome. "Maybe this Ace thing won't be too bad," he muttered, chuckling, as the cab weaved through the London traffic. "But if any wise guy calls me a hero he's going to get his head handed to him in short order!"

THE END.

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