

Aces in Dutch

Featuring Smoke Wade by Robert J. Hogan

SMOKE WADE, son of the Arizona plains, rode his pinto Spad like the wind. His keen eyes had a troubled, worried look. He was in Dutch for once. In bad. With a start he peered through the sights again at a Jerry crate as it flashed past his nose. His quick hand pressed the trips of his half-dead guns, and the one spoke.

But only for an instant. He pressed and squeezed frantically on the trips, but nothing more came.

Guns jammed! The terror of all air. And four Fokkers riding him like the hubs of hell, trying frantically to bash him down, to snuff out the life of this big Westerner with his bullet-riddled pinto Spad, who had come so daringly to get their most important observation balloon.

Smoke spun the pinto round and, with a sudden movement of the controls, darted out of the jumble of ships and dived for his own lines. Like a horde of pests, deadly and menacing, the Fokkers tore after him. He wriggled desperately to get out of their line of fire. His long, lanky body was moving like smooth machinery as he worked the controls to turn the ship back and forth in a twisting course for home.

“Stay with me, Jake, old fella,” he drawled to his pinto Spad, as though it were a living thing. “I ain’t treated you right well on this trip, I know, but we got to pull together now—pull together, boy, or we don’t get much chance to pull any other ways. I reckon—”

Crash! The shattering of the instruments caused him to stop short in his confidential talk with his pinto ship. The whole board moved away as though at the touch of a wand. Smoke’s face took on a look of serious concern.

“We got to do better than this here,” he drawled. “Mighty nigh ripped out some of your insides that time, Jake, hey? Hope you don’t hold it against me none, old fella.”

Deliberately, Smoke drew his old six-gun from its holster and twisted round in his seat. Cautiously he took aim and pulled. The old gun boomed.

Smoke grunted in dismay. It was mighty hard to hit something going at that speed with only one bullet to get it with.

He steadied the crate for a moment, took aim for the second time, and the old six-gun boomed twice. A slow twisting of the corners of his mouth showed his satisfaction. The prop on one of the Jerry crates stopped with a jerk, and the nose fell. The old steel-jacket slugs had found their mark in some vital spot of that Mercedes.

Now three Fokkers were left. One came slamming from high above. It dived like a wild meteor of vengeance. Smoke ducked a little as the *tac-tac-tac* sound of the raving Spandaus came to his ears.

In the next instant he jerked upright in the seat. The Hiss had skipped a beat. It had done that a few minutes before. He had been concerned. But now it seemed to be slowing rapidly. Now it was certainly revving down.

“Come on, Jake, old boy, don’t desert me now. Got to have a little more runnin’ out of you. It hurts, I know, but we got to keep goin’—you and me—or we won’t make it.”

And as though the engine could hear and understand, the motor seemed to pick up a little. At least, it took a new start, and quit revving down. Smoke had his hands full now, keeping out of the fire of those three Fokkers that remained. Again he had the old six-gun out. And as he waited to get a line on the nearest ship, he saw shadows coming in from overhead.

His quick glance took in the situation. At first he had thought they were Fokkers from up in the sun. Couldn’t tell very well in that light. But they were Spads. Spads, coming to help. He grinned for a moment, and the next instant the corners of his thin lips were smooth once more.

When Smoke stopped to figure the thing out, he was almost sorry to see those Spads. Funny chap, Smoke Wade. He took a delight, almost akin to worship, in being able to do things himself. Difficult things that took guts and skill. He liked to be able to do the things others thought impossible, and do them without the slightest aid from anyone else.

Smoke felt almost sorry to see those Fokkers run for home at the coming of the Spads. He was practically helpless himself now. Guns jammed. Motor half conked. And, worst of all, his objective not reached. He fell into a brooding frame of mind as he guided the crippled pinto Spad back toward the home field.

FROM Smoke's way of thinking, he was in a bad way. Recently made squadron commander, with the raise in rank to captain, he had several flights under him. And last night—he recalled it as though it had been ten minutes ago—standing there before the colonel, Colonel McGill had been very serious.

"Captain," the colonel had said. "Front wants an observation balloon knocked down tomorrow morning. Ask for a volunteer. We've got to get it. It's a dangerous mission, but I think one man has a better chance of getting it than a whole flight. He can come down out of the sun without so much chance of being observed. Of course, the balloon will be heavily guarded. It's up to you, Wade. See that a good man goes,"

And Smoke had picked the one who, in his own estimation, could do the job best. He had picked himself. He had, in one sense of the word, disobeyed McGill's orders. The various flights that went to make up the squadron he commanded had heard nothing whatever of this trip to be made early the next morning.

Now Wade was coming back. His famous pinto Spad had been riddled with bullets. It looked like a sieve. The instrument board was gone. But two things loomed in his tortured mind that were vastly worse. He had been forced back before getting the balloon. Then he had got into such a jam that, only by the grace of Heaven and the help of a stray Spad flight, had he gotten out whole.

He knew what the colonel would be saying. Couldn't blame him. He was in for a lot of hell, and that very hot.

The Hisso was revving down once more. The pinto Spad was flying sluggishly, like a ship at half sail in a mill-pond breeze. Just swishing along. She staggered over the boundary of the field. He felt the landing gear rip through the topmost branches of a row of poplars.

"Good boy," Smoke groaned as he felt the ship free once more. He brought the crate down gingerly to the field—touched wheels—rolled.

Smoke searched the tarmac for signs of life. A few mechanics were rolling crates out of their hangars to be warmed. The pilots must be at mess. Suddenly he realized that he was hungry.

"Poor old Jake," he drawled as his great hand caressed the cowling of his beloved pinto Spad. It was riddled with Spandau steel. He turned to the mechanic sergeant of the hangar where Jake was stabled.

"Bet you fifty francs you can't have this moth-eaten critter lookin' like a new Spad in two hours," he ventured.

The sergeant beamed. "I'll take that bet," he grinned. "I could use that fifty good right now."

"It's yours if you make it," Smoke said, smiling back at him. "And keep out of sight while you're workin' on her. Don't want anyone to see her as she is. Reckon the poor critter's as ashamed as I am."

It would be worth more than the fifty francs if the sergeant did as he said. Smoke was proud. He didn't want anyone to see that bullet-riddled crate in its present condition. He was playing in luck that none of the pilots were in sight when he landed. A fine example for a squadron commander. Go out to get a balloon and come back with a failure to his credit and a ship almost as open as a plate-glass window.

AT mess no one suspected. No one knew of the sacrifice their commander had made for them. Smoke took a long breath and began to act natural again. Perhaps he'd get another crack at that bag later, before the colonel wanted to know too much.

Smoke grinned to himself in his coffee cup as he heard Lieutenant Stetson's voice several tables away. He recalled the ride he had taken Stetson for on a bet some time ago. He didn't seem satisfied with his licking.

“Well, maybe you can tell me how some guys around here get their advancements and other damn good pilots stay where they are,” Stetson was saying.

Smoke didn't have to look his way to tell who Stetson was talking about. And, for that matter, coming from Stetson, it didn't matter. But Smoke's brain began turning methodically. He'd like to take Stetson for another ride. The kid had worlds of money. His old man sent him plenty each month.

Smoke remembered with a start that until he had accomplished a certain success against a certain balloon, he himself didn't have much to crow about. He had purposely selected a seat close to the rear door of the mess. His eyes shifted quickly to the front door, and, as he did so, they took in the tense, young faces of the pilots under him. Good kids, they were. Brave lads with guts.

Even Stetson was good in the air and had guts. Doubtless Stetson wasn't a bad scout when one got to know him. It was for these lads, every one of them, that he had taken that dangerous mission himself that morning. Taken it and failed.

He bit savagely into a piece of dry toast. He'd have to make good. The meal was nearly over. He wondered how soon that sergeant would have his pinto ready to fly once more. He started the mission now. He must finish it. He couldn't very well, being Smoke Wade and the squadron commander, admit his failure before his men, and allow someone else to go out to finish the job he had thought he could do better than they. It wasn't exactly this, though, that had sent him out that morning. Rather, it was the fact that he liked the gang. Even Stetson. He would rather risk his own neck than send them on the mission.

The form of an orderly loomed in the doorway. That would be the one from Colonel McGill's office looking for him, to tell him the old man wanted to see him. And, of course, McGill would want to know about the balloon. Did the man he sent get it? Who did he send? He'd want to know a lot, if it was still in the air.

SMOKE ducked low beside the table, and the next instant his crouching form was sliding out of the rear door of the mess. He hated deception. Liked to obey orders. But he was in now. He must see it through. He'd be back in less than an hour,

or know why. If he didn't come back, it wouldn't matter. If he did, perhaps he'd have better news for the colonel. Then he could pass off his going in the place of another as a joke, and McGill would take it as such. McGill was a good scout. But he wouldn't be good enough to let him try it again, if he knew. He would insist on Smoke sending someone else this time, and that was exactly what Smoke didn't want.

By back paths, Smoke made his way quickly to the hangar. He stared anxiously at his ship as he slipped round the corner and inside.

“How is she?” he drawled as the sergeant eyed him.

The sergeant glanced at his watch, puzzled.

“Cripes, captain, I thought you said two hours. We just got the motor in condition, and the machine guns fixed. The wings are patched, but I was goin' to put some color dope on her, and make her look like new. That'll take another hour anyway.”

“Everything in flying condition right now?” demanded Smoke, and there was a crisp note in his voice.

“Yes, sir,” nodded the sergeant. “She's ready to fly right now. A Spandau bullet must have knocked the mags cockeyed. We put new ones in, and she's all set to go, but she don't look like new yet.”

“Never mind that,” boomed Smoke, “I'm in a hurry. A hell of a hurry. Got to see a fella about a horse. Fill her up, see that she's got plenty of slugs, and get her warm. There's an extra twenty francs in it, if you get me out of here in five minutes. I'll be in the prop room. Let me know when she's all set to step into, and have her right outside the hangar door. If anybody asks for me, tell 'em you never heard of me.”

The promise of the extra twenty francs worked magic.

“Yes, sir,” snapped the sergeant and flew to his work.

EXACTLY four and a half minutes later he reported to the prop room and advised Smoke that the ship waited without the hangar, and with everything. The sergeant pocketed the franc notes with a grin of satisfaction.

Smoke shot a furtive glance at the entrance of the hangar, then, with the bound of a panther, he

was out of the door, and the Hisso was snarling as the pinto, patched, but whole, gathered speed and thundered into the air.

He grinned as his keen eyes took in the weather ahead. Far to the north a light mist was forming. A heavy cloud bank was settling down over the front where it had been clear as crystal when he had made that unsuccessful flight an hour before. Now he could easily hide in the clouds that hovered low, and dive out at the right time.

He sat back and rested while the Hisso, now working perfectly, pulled the patched pinto after it at a hundred and twenty-five. The front was not far away. He could see it plainly.

Smoke whistled soundlessly the remnant of some old cowman's tune as he came nearer to his objective. He was directly over no man's land. He could see the barbed-wire entanglements. He pitied the poor devils who had to live and fight and die down in that hell. He thanked his lucky stars that he was up in the blue, away from that horror of war.

Not that he feared it, but Smoke liked as much comfort as he could get. He was human. If he was to die, with his boots on, and he doubtless would, let him die quickly in a flaming plane, rather than lying in a stinking hole while bottle flies and rodents watched like vultures for his last breath to come so that their breakfast would not be late.

Boom—puff! Boom—puff! Archies began grunting up at him from close range.

Smoke leaned over the side of his cockpit, raised his left hand to his face, and extended the thumb and fingers so that the tip of the thumb touched his nose, and the fingers remained rigid in the racing slip stream. Then he pulled up into the cloud bank.

The torn and blasted earth below looked like a ghost camp through the gray mist that swept under him. Now and then the earth was completely hidden from sight. Again, as though a flash of lightning had illuminated everything in sight, he would burst into the clear for a moment, only to be enveloped the next instant by thicker cloud.

He had his landmarks now. He was headed straight for the bag that he had designated as his own—the bag that he had failed so utterly to get

an hour before. He clenched his teeth in grim determination, and hurled on.

Suddenly he shot out into the open as the cloud broke for a space. He peered anxiously ahead. It was important. It was as though he had one more chance to redeem himself before he would have to admit failure. But it seemed nothing could stop him now. This time he would make it surely. He couldn't miss.

Then he saw his bag for the first time on this flight. He had seen it some distance away before that morning. But the fighting had grown too great. Smoke was capable of great feats of valor, but there were some things that no human could get through.

Smoke saw three Fokkers swarming over and around the bag like angry flies. Then the cloud hid the bag from him again. He droned on. Not much longer now. He began making his plan for attack. He had the clouds to hide in. Another break in the bank, and he saw that the Fokkers were lying up in the clouds, too. Waiting for him, they were. Waiting to pounce upon him as he came for the bag. They had seen him—were ready.

Again he shot into the bank. Again he shot out, and directly above the bag he kicked over into a spinning nose dive and howled in a power spin for the monster not far below.

CALMLY he watched his turn. He must come out just at the right time. As the pinto Spad whipped over into that first turn, Smoke saw the crews below on the ground struggling to pull the bag down out of the danger region. Then the earth spun like a platter. The form of the bag below, or rather ahead of him now, blurred.

Smoke pushed on the stick, kicked the rudder, and the pinto slammed out, at first reluctantly. Then he was diving dizzily while the whole battery of Archies and machine guns on the ground belched into action. The pinto rocked unsteadily with the bursting of the shells about him.

Back came the stick with a yank, and, the Spad shot upward and toward the underside of the great bag. He marked the cable so that he would not hit it. The target was easy. He pressed his trips. Then, for the first time on that flight, came the desperate feeling that all was not well.

Tracers fluffed out ahead. They slammed into the balloon, buried themselves like ghost crabs in the sand of a beach. He waited an instant for the inevitable flames to burst from the bag, while he yanked out of line and snorted for the protection of the clouds once more.

But no flames came. He grunted in dismay. Then his quick eyes took in the feed belt of his Vickers guns. Astonishment and chagrin filled him. Not one of those bullets in either belt had the red mark on them that identified them as incendiary bullets. Smoke cursed angrily. He wasn't taken to cursing as a rule, but this was an exception. And he'd paid that sergeant seventy francs to make such haste that he had forgotten he was getting the crate ready for a balloon- strafing hop. Perhaps there hadn't been any red slugs in the belts that other time either.

Smoke's brain worked like mad. He darted out of the fog and took a look below. The crews had the bag right down on the ground now. He could see, from the one side, the basket on the earth, with the observers climbing out. Doubtless they were pleased, thankful for those missing slugs.

He tried to figure out a plan. One of the Fokkers was tearing up at him. They had followed him down. The other two were waiting for him, should he dive on the bag there on the ground. And they were sure that he would. They had seen that pinto Spad in the skies before. They knew that a super-airman straddled the stick of that crate.

Like a flash, Smoke whirled his Spad and dived for the Fokker that groaned up at him. His Vickers snarled wild, creased the side of the fuselage of the climbing Fokker. And that Jerry pilot turned and dived in a frantic effort to get out of that deadly line of fire.

The elephantine balloon floated unsteadily below. It covered a large space of ground. Smoke had a plan. It was a desperate one. But, so long as he had that Jerry crate diving away from him, he was safe from fire from below.

The Fokker darted to the north. A mist of tracers slashed through the wing on that side. Desperately, the Jerry pilot turned and headed down again. Then to the left he veered. And again a rain of Vickers steel tore through his right side.

Desperately the Jerry pilot dived straight down, and his line of headlong flight took him directly

toward the bag. He hadn't the slightest idea he was being purposely hurdled for the observation balloon. But Smoke knew what he had planned. And he was desperate. His reputation was at stake. His command and respect from his squadron was on wobbling pins, although at the moment he was the only one who knew it. He had bitten into something. Now he had to chew it.

DOWN, down they hurtled. Then he hesitated, while he took careful aim. This time must count. The only chance he had left. A chance in a million at that. The other two Fokkers howled up to the rescue of their comrade. Their Spandaus belched flame and slugs.

Smoke pressed his trips. Tracers fluffed out in long ribbons of smoke. He saw them scurry into the cockpit of the Fokker as it dived straight for the landed bag. The pilot slumped forward, and then from sight. Smoke knew he wouldn't feel the pain of it. He was done.

His tracers continued to pour into the diving Fokker. A puff of smoke, a spurt of fire and flames belched from the tank of the condemned Fokker. It screamed down the few feet that remained between it and the ground.

For a moment Smoke wavered in doubt. The Fokker had crashed in flames some distance from the great bag. He had meant it to crash right into the bag to make sure. But that was asking too much.

A gentle puff of wind moved the bag to the east, where lay the flaming death pyre of the crate. Crews worked frantically to get it away. But their labors were futile.

Suddenly, like a bursting oil well, the thing caught. It was over in a second or so, while Smoke, grinning, snarled upward out of that deadly fire that poured at him from the ground and the two Fokkers. The next instant he was lost again in those blessed clouds.

He leaned back against the seat and let the motor drone on. Smoke was satisfied. He wondered for a moment what any one of the others in his squadron would have done on finding they had no incendiary bullets. He grinned at the thought. It was not a sneering grin of ego, but one of thanks that he had been there in time of emergency. Without a doubt, he had saved the life of some member of the squadron.

Smoke lifted up his voice in weird song with little tune, and the sound was stifled at his lips. But he was happy.

“Way down on the Injun reservation, Forty miles from civilization, Lives the funniest tribe in creation.”

He sang it again as he roared in and out of the cloud bank to be sure of his direction. Front lines, with their crooked, wormy look, flashed dimly below. Down out of the fog he dived, and then was thundering over the field in a low drag to note the wind direction and land.

The same orderly awaited him as he climbed from the cockpit.

“Colonel wants to see you, sir,” announced the orderly. “And what I mean, captain, he wants to see you. He’s hot.”

“Sure nuff?” grinned Smoke. By now the colonel would be hot, but he’d change his mind when he learned the balloon was no more. Then he shouted to the sergeant:

“Hey, you skulkin’ coyote. What was the idea of leavin’ out the incendiary bullets? Wasn’t a one in the belt when I got to the bag.”

The sergeant’s face turned white.

“Gees, captain,” he was stammering. “I—I forgot. I was hurryin’ so I forgot. Gees, I’m sorry, sir.”

Smoke gave him a slap on the back that made his teeth rattle.

“I reckon you won’t do it again?” he queried and grinned. “Well, don’t worry about it, don’t forget it next time. Damn near messed me up, I reckon.”

AND, truly, Colonel McGill was hot when Smoke arrived at his office. He stared at Smoke with a red flush in his cheeks, as Smoke stood before him at attention.

“Damn it, man,” he snapped. “I sent for you fully an hour ago. Since giving you orders to get that balloon to the north, I haven’t heard a word from you. Give an account of yourself, captain.”

“I reckon you won’t be havin’ any more trouble with that bag,” drawled Smoke. “It got burned right good.”

“Who got it?” The question snapped at him, and he wasn’t quite ready. Smoke hesitated for a moment.

“Well, sir,” he answered, “fella didn’t want his name mentioned. He’s kind of a retirin’—”

“Damn it, man, answer my question.”

“You see,” Smoke explained reluctantly, “I looked over those pilots in my squadron, and I says to myself: ‘They’re a right fine bunch of boys. Can’t afford to lose none of ‘em.’ Well, so I went myself, sir.”

Colonel McGill nodded, but did not smile.

“Just as I suspected when I couldn’t find you, Wade. I’ve some things to say to you. In the first place, I put you in command of the squadron because I needed a commander. I didn’t put you in charge of them to do their work, and especially their dirty work. We have plenty of pilots, Wade, but damn few men fitted for command. There’s Stetson, for example. At least his flight looks up to him, and he knows enough to follow orders. That’s the kind of a man I hoped you’d be, Wade. A man who could follow orders. I don’t say I’m sorry you got the balloon, and I’m not saying you’re not an excellent pilot, Wade. In fact, you’re the best we have here at the field. But we can’t afford to take chances on commanding officers. Understand?”

Smoke winced as he heard the mention of Stetson’s name. It was evident that Colonel McGill didn’t know Stetson quite as well as he might. Not that Stetson was bad in any respect. But he was in for self-glory, and that was something.

Smoke grinned tantalizingly. He had a way of provoking his superiors as well as his subordinates with that grin. But it was not one to provoke anger.

“Yes, sir,” he drawled, “Stetson’s a right good pilot. And I reckon his flight thinks he’s O.K., just like you say, colonel. But, just to make it interestin’ for you to watch, I’ll bet Stetson has a fool made of him before he’s been here a month. How about it, colonel?”

Colonel McGill studied Smoke intently for a moment.

“By George, I believe you’re in earnest,” he stormed. “I’ll take that bet, Wade. For—say five hundred francs?”

“You’d take a right better interest in watchin’ him if you made it a thousand,” ventured Smoke, still grinning.

“All right, then.” The colonel was smiling now himself. There was something about this big Westerner before him that made him irresistible when he smiled. “A thousand francs. But remember what I’ve said about obeying orders, Wade. Ten minutes ago I was mad enough to put Stetson in your place. And I might get angry again.”

“Yes, sir, colonel.” Smoke was serious once more. “I’m right sorry about it, sir. I’ll try right hard after this to let some of the other boys take the tough jobs.”

SMOKE turned toward the door. Opened it. A special messenger ducked past him hurriedly and handed Colonel McGill a message. “Wait, captain,” said the colonel, as he took the paper. “Perhaps there’s something in this you’ll need to know.”

Wade hesitated for a moment. Colonel McGill scanned the message quickly. He looked up with a troubled gaze.

“Yes, Wade, come back here.” The messenger had gone out, closing the door behind him. “G.H.Q. says there’s a balloon sighting our movements at map W—section 34—square F—cross points 23-41. We’ve got to get it, Wade. And this time I’m leaving it to you, so long as you take along the pick of the squadron. You can lead them. We must get that bag, do you understand? G.H.Q. wants it, man! It’s got to be done.”

Smoke was tracing the location on the map. His mouth curled at the corners in a slow grin that the colonel could not see. He found the location of the bag. He made a mental note of it.

“Yes, sir,” he grinned, “I reckon we’ll have it for you, sir.” That was Smoke. He turned and walked rapidly from the office.

Outside, he took a squint at the weather. The clouds were still hanging low as they had been when he had come down. Quickly he walked to the hangar, where the flights were waiting for the fog to lift before going out on their patrols.

“You, Stetson, and Brant and Griner and Reed,” snapped Smoke. “Got a hot job to do for G.H.Q. Colonel says at all costs. I’m pickin’ you all to go along with me and get it, O.K.?”

The rest were silent. Only Stetson spoke.

“Sure,” he smiled. “And maybe if I get it I get a raise in commission, too. Isn’t that the way it

works, Wade?” He could neither forget Wade’s raise from the others, nor could he forget at whose expense, financially, it had come.

“Well, maybe,” drawled Smoke tantalizingly. “Stetson, you seem to still hold that bet against me that you made about my being a captain. Well, just to show you I’m a square-shooter, I’ll give you a more than even chance to get it back. I’ll bet you five to one that you don’t get that balloon. Five thousand francs against one thousand of yours that you don’t get it, Stetson. That makes it an even break for you. There’s five of us goin’, and you’re as good as any of us. I’ll leave it up to you.”

Stetson beamed. “Bet your life I’ll take that one. And what’s more, I’m going to win it, too. It won’t even scores, but five thousand francs is probably about all you got.”

“Make it double the amount, then, if you insist,” drawled Smoke and Stetson nodded eagerly.

Smoke gave the location of the balloon to each man. They climbed into their Spads, and, at the point of a V of five skilled men of the air, Smoke hurled them northward, skirting the lower rim of the low-hanging clouds.

Now and then he twisted his lanky frame round in the seat and stared back at the perfect V in which they flew. It was a pleasure to lead such a flight. Every man a skilled pilot. Every pilot a veteran killer. And Smoke at the front, the best of them all.

Boom—puff! Boom—puff! Archies with their yellow puff balls greeted them venomously as they roared over enemy territory. Smoke led the flight higher into the clouds to get out of danger. Now and then, as on the flight before, the earth was blotted out completely by those clouds. But they roared on.

They were coming closer to the point where the orders from G.H.Q. said the balloon was located. It would not be hanging very high now because of the clouds. The bag ought to be almost in the clouds, with the basket down below, so that the observers could get the best view possible.

Higher and higher Smoke led them into the clouds. Then he reached the spot where the balloon would be. He twisted round in the fog, but could not see the nearest Spad to him. Doubtless

they had stretched out in their formation, so that they would not collide with one another.

He dropped the nose of his plane and flashed out into the clear air again. A short distance behind him three ships trailed. But the fourth, the Spad on the right tip, was missing. Doubtless it would be out in a moment.

SMOKE grinned as he searched the sky below for balloons. There wasn't one in sight. Just below lay the remains of a charred wench, and close to it men worked over a burned ship. He had been right. The orders from G.H.Q. had been to get the same balloon that he himself had gotten only an hour before. He was sure of those directions. There couldn't have been another balloon so close that he would have missed it.

Again he searched the sky below the clouds for Stetson. He wasn't there. Probably lost. He had been there a short time before. No use looking for him, if he was lost in the cloud bank. There wouldn't be any danger. The clouds were plenty high, so that he wouldn't run into anything.

Still grinning, Smoke signaled the remains of his perplexed flight and led them back toward the south. He laughed aloud to think what was going through the mind of each. They'd come out on a special, important mission. It had ended in a ride only. They hadn't seen an enemy plane in the sky. Nor a balloon.

He led them back by a great circle. No hurry. The work had been done before. Nothing to do now but fly around and enjoy the air. They bunched close behind him and followed, and each face looked blankly into his as he twisted round in his seat and grinned at them.

Then the home field came in sight, and they were landing. Three veterans of the air climbed from their ships, and all seemed to ask the same question at once. Smoke grinned broadly.

"Sure," he drawled, "I reckon for once G.H.Q. was wrong. Didn't see a sign of a balloon in the sky, did you? Not on the enemy side of the lines, anyways. Reckon they must have heard we was coming, and let the wind out of 'em."

The drone of another Spad came to their ears. They sighted it to the north, coming hell bent for the field. It was Stetson's Spad. He landed and hopped out.

"I got it," he cried excitedly, "I got it. Wade, for once you've lost a bet. Ten thousand francs. Boy, what a laugh. Pay me, fella."

Now Smoke was as much astonished as the rest had been. He almost lost his lower jaw as Stetson raced on.

"Easiest bet I ever won in my life," he continued. "I got lost up there in that thick cloud bank. I knew there wasn't much chance of finding you, so I started flying around, and, diving out of the cloud every few minutes. In one dive I came out smack on top of the bag. Damn near crashed it, it was so close to the cloud. I let go with both guns, and it burst into flame. I stayed just a second to see the observer jump and watch his 'chute open, then I beat it back into the clouds, until I was clear of them and came on home. Wade, what a laugh. Ha, ha."

Smoke was speechless. He knew there could have been no mistake. But what balloon was this that Stetson had knocked down? Perhaps another German bag, but certainly not the one they had bet on. He turned as the roar of a motor car came to his ears.

Colonel McGill was racing toward them down the tarmac, as fast as his car could bring him. His face was purple. He leaped from the tonneau before the screeching brakes had brought the car to a complete stop.

"Who in hell!" He puffed for breath before he could go on. "Who the devil shot down one of our balloons just now? Front wants to know. Said a Spad dived out of the clouds, shot it down, and dived back in again before they could get the number." There seemed to be something that drew all eyes to Stetson as he stood trembling. A second before he had been standing in the center of a group. Now, suddenly, he found himself alone, with every eye upon him.

"Speak up, man," Colonel McGill was shouting now, and at Stetson. "Was it you, Stetson?"

Stetson could only nod hopelessly. "It—was a mistake," he stammered at length. "I took it to be the enemy balloon. I came upon it so suddenly. And I had made a bet with Wade that I would get it. I—I guess I was too anxious."

The colonel shot a quick glance at Smoke, which said only too plainly: "How did you know?"

But Smoke could only look wise and grin that tantalizing grin of his. He had simply been guessing, from his keen judgment of human nature and men, when he made his bet with the colonel that Stetson would make a fool of himself. And, for once, Smoke pitied Stetson. That's why he couldn't look at him—for fear of bursting out laughing.