

Clue of the Breda Brood

A "Coffin" Kirk Adventure by Arch Whitehouse

Swiftly, silently, and unseen that weird, nameless scourge swept upon Sandakan, Britain's North Borneo outpost. Then lights failed, radios went dead, and planes became useless hulks of fabric, steel, and dural. That meant banishment from the air for "Coffin" Kirk. And now, as he faced the dread jungle which had spewed this strange sorcery, hate boiled in his heart. For "Tank"—faithful "Tank," his steel-muscled, simian bodyguard—had been swallowed by that green hell!

"IT'S TAKING A CHANCE," Brian "Coffin" Kirk muttered, "flying a stolen foreign bomber-fighter this way. And having no registration and no papers is asking for it. But when I tell them what happened up there at Dulit, the Governor ought to do something about it."

Behind Kirk, curled up in utterly exhausted animal sleep, lay Tank, his flying and fighting ape-pal. Tank had drawn the hatch cover shut and was reasonably comfortable, and Kirk knew he could rely on the gorilla if anything turned up.

Kirk's route followed the coastline up past Barham Point and across Kinabalu Peak to Sandakan, which lay on the other side of Lubuk Bay. The speedy Heinkel would eat up the distance in two hours or less.

Ahead lay safety, rest, and officialdom tinged with warm friendship for Kirk, who almost single-handed was fighting the diabolical ring of war mongers known as the Circle of Death. And Coffin was still congratulating himself on his amazing luck in escaping from his last adventure with the agents of the Circle who had trapped him in the grim lethal chamber of old Dulit.

"Old Cockosaert, their leader, got away in one of these Heinkels," Kirk thought. "I wonder what the devil they will be up to next?"

The feud between Kirk and the bloody Circle of Death had been raging since twenty years before when Kirk, then a mere child, had escaped,

with the aid of a trained ape, from the Berlin zoo where his father, an American espionage agent, had been cruelly betrayed and shot down in cold blood. It was that crimson-stained scene that forever flickered in the memory of Brian Kirk and prodded him on against bitter odds to win revenge for the man who had sired him.

Again that scene flashed before his eyes as he caught the outline of Lubuk Bay in the velvet half-light of the Borneo night. He drew his features into a mask of hatred. The Circle of Death had now swept its scimitar into the Far East.

"I wonder where that murderous Belgian will head for now?" Kirk pondered. "He said something about captured Dutch tankers. But it's dollars to dingbats they'll try something else—even though we managed to block off their fighters."

THE HEINKEL was approaching Sandakan now, and Kirk forgot the Dulit affair to consider his landing and the explanations to come. As he circled the city, with throttle back a notch or two, "Coffin" again thought of the description of Sandakan he had gleaned from his studies. He repeated to himself the information bearing on this tropical center.

"There are 13,000 people of various races, creeds, and color in Sandakan, and Sandakan is located more than 10,000 miles from the seething center of strife-ridden Shanghai. A small detachment of British and native constabulary maintain peace and defense for the territory of British North Borneo. And," added Kirk, "they are helped along with their Lee Enfield rifles and Lewis machine guns.

"There are nine wireless stations in the region," the reports had stated, "a state bank, and two British Residencies. The commerce amounts to less than ten million dollars a year, but Sandakan is important because of its geographical position

in relation to the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia. And several of the Democratic powers are interested in the safety of British North Borneo, although most of them would officially deny it”

With that much remembered. Kirk circled the north side of the city, and his eye followed the main line of lights which ran southwest toward the open country beyond. He had been advised in Singapore as to where the new R.A.F. field was located, and he was making a mental map on the end of the line of lights to figure out just where the airdrome lay.

But just then the faint thud of concussion caught the stolen Heinkel and made her wing-tips dance. Kirk was all ears and eyes. Then he glanced down again and discovered that all the lights below had been suddenly extinguished!

“Queer!” he muttered. “Some defense measure I suppose. Since I haven’t reported in they’re taking no chances.”

Kirk looked about the cockpit for a radio set, but he had not been aboard long enough to completely familiarize himself with the layout. He circled the city again, trying to figure the German lettering on the panels of the speedy fighter-bomber. And even though he was well versed in the language, he took several minutes in selecting the right switches to put the set in action.

Then he called the station ZGW—a temporary designation given to the R.A.F. headquarters station there—but got no answer.

Kirk frowned a little at that and started to call again,

“Something queer about this. Hello! What are those flashes down there?”

But concussion again caught up with him—and now he knew.

Bombs!

Sandakan was being bombed! Someone was dropping “eggs” on important points of the town! The Circle of Death, perhaps . . .

“Come on. Tank,” Kirk bellowed over his shoulder. “Get up, you lazy rascal, and keep your eyes open.”

It was well that the simian reflexes of Tank responded. Kirk had sensed that something was wrong, and during the few minutes in which he had been vainly attempting to get in touch with

the R.A.F. field somewhere below, Fate was bearing down on them out of the Borneo darkness.

The hunched figure in the back seat uncoiled, rubbed a hairy hand across his broad nose, and sniffed. He shot a preliminary glance at Kirk, and then instinctively moved toward the Krupp-Spandau movable gun grip.

INSTINCT, that blind mode of action, came to Coffin Kirk’s aid in the next split-second instant. He gave the control-column a nimble twist, flushed the rudder over, and pressed against his belt as if to urge the Heinkel to faster speed. As the fighter-bomber came around, two forked spurts of flickering tracer light flashed overhead and spanged against the upper wing-tip. Tank responded with a low jungle growl and yanked the gun out of its cradle.

“Wait a minute,” ordered Kirk. “Let’s first see who they are.”

Tank blinked, pawed at the gun again, and looked up toward the winged thing that spat death at them. Then he ripped the Krupp gun around, took his usual wide-eyed bead, and fingered the trigger.

“Wait a minute,” Kirk warned again. Then he ripped the Heinkel around so he could get a better view of their attacker. He fully expected it to be another Heinkel, but it turned out to be an Italian ship.

“Hello! A Roman this time. Looks like a new Breda 65.”

The jet-black ship was a two-place, low-wing with a folding undercart. In the nose—ringed in with a deep circular cowling—was an 850-h.p. Alfa-Romeo engine. Not a super-speedster this ship, but a neat piece of equipment for bombing, combined with excellent maneuverability and get-away. Kirk took all this in as another splatter of tracers fanned down at them from four 7.7-mm. guns set in the leading edge of the Italian plane’s full-cantilever wing.

“That baby can be flown like a single-seater,” Kirk yelled at Tank, who was still fingering his gun with sleepy anticipation. “Let him have it, fellow!”

The simian crouched over the spade grip, pulled the trigger, and held the gun steady. Kirk watched, treadled the rudder, and brought Tank’s fire dead into the nose of the black raider.

“That made him twist,” cried Kirk. “Hold it, Tank!”

The black Italian bomber swung away as if startled by the sudden opposition. Kirk took advantage of the opening, hoiked the Heinkel up, snapped her over hard, and came around at the Breda and opened fire. Tank’s great paws were on his shoulders as he drew the bead. There was only one heavy caliber Spandau-type gun under the Heinkel’s hood, and Kirk knew his aim had to be true.

Brat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat. . . !

The single streak of fire spat out like a javelin from hell. Vibration rattled along the metal framework of the Heinkel and Tank danced with animal glee in the rear pit.

“Got him! Smoking already!” Kirk called as Tank jabbered excitedly.

The Breda twisted in agony and tried to evade the torturing fire that engulfed the ship in a shroud of death. There seemed to be smoke coming from the Italian ship, but it was only faint in the glare of the flame from the Breda’s exhaust.

“That’s queer,” reflected Kirk, giving her a final burst. “I’ll play safe. He may be trying to gas us.”

The Breda was out of control now, slipping and sliding off on one wing. Instinct again seemed to warn Kirk, and he drew clear, but kept the Italian ship in sight.

“There’s something screwy about this,” Kirk muttered, as he kept distance from the floundering bomber. “He’s going down all right, but there’s something queer in Scandinavia.”

The Breda fell off and dropped into a slippery spiral. It was evident that she was definitely out of control, but they followed it down until it struck into a jungle copse near a great spraying waterfall.

“That should finish him,” Kirk reflected as he circled again, waiting to see if the wreckage would burn.

THEY swung around twice, but no answering signal of flame came up. And Kirk had to be satisfied with the realization that no plane could land safely in a dense growth like that and get out again. He made a quick check-up on his map and figured the Breda had gone down about ten miles southeast of Sandakan.

Tank now had the hatch open and was leaning out into the slip-stream. He looked down and made strange noises through his nose. Kirk leaned over, lugged the ape inside, and made him put the hardware away.

“Well, that was that,” Kirk said to himself, audibly. “Now we’ll find out why those lights went out and what all that bombing was about.”

Kirk put the Heinkel into a climb again and headed back for the Borneo city, wondering how he was going to find the field without the aid of ground lights. He decided to try the radio again, but the thing only spluttered and died cold.

“That’s queer. Everything is out now!”

He fumbled with the set for a minute or two, then realized that the motor was turning over unevenly. Kirk made a quick adjustment on the Daimler-Benz throttle, but the spluttering became more pronounced. Even Tank sensed the tension and peered over Kirk’s shoulder.

“He didn’t put a burst into us this close to Sandakan, did he?” asked Kirk, as if he expected Tank to answer.

The German engine did not respond to any mixture adjustment. Kirk switched over to another tank, tried again. The spitting and sputtering became worse. He stared about with a helpless grimace. He wished they had parachutes.

The spluttering now became still worse and she started backfiring through the carburetor. There was a final cold explosion, and the engine quit dead!

“Okay. Here we go, Tank. Bundle up and get ready for a crash.”

Kirk peered over the side and sought an open stretch of ground to pancake on. But the earth below was a dull gray patchwork of nothingness. Then without warning something blazed out below that appeared to be a landing signal.

“Looks fairly good down there,” he argued to himself. “Sure—it’s the field. I can see the hangars now. Damn camouflage almost fooled me. But they’ve got a flare out for us.”

He brought the Heinkel around in a wide circle and made his approach in the direction of the smoky blaze that appeared to be set up in the middle of the field. The controls were going lopy now and he had to wrench the ship about hard to get any action. He worked on the pneumatic undercarriage gear to get his wheels down, and he

let out a sigh of relief when the red light on the dash finally changed to green indicating the carriage was in order.

The field was clear to his vision now, and Kirk was satisfied that he could get in safely—engine or no engine. He banked into the wind and let her ride gently. Then for the first time he realized that the blaze was not a landing flare at all, but a burning plane!

“Whew!” gasped Kirk. “What a night!”

The Heinkel floundered over the billowing heat from the burning ship and Kirk nosed her down, felt for the wheel brakes with his heels, and then waited for her to touch.

The Heinkel stabbed at the earth once, dug in hard, floundered into a dull balloon bounce, then dropped back with a metallic thud. Before Kirk realized what was happening the bomber-fighter came to a sudden stop, dipped her nose—and went over on her back.

That was all Kirk remembered.

COFFIN KIRK awoke sometime later with a clatter in his skull like that of blacksmiths building rocker-arms. Some one seemed to be letting skyrockets off under his nose, and his eyes were peering into a crazy-quilt maze of light. Finally, it all cleared and he shook himself into some degree of sanity and stared about him. Heavy legs, greasy tropical shorts, red hands, and businesslike belt buckles made up the lower portion of the cyclorama before him. He raised his eyes a trifle and noticed a ring of broad chests and khaki shirts upon which were stitched murky decoration ribbons and R.A.F. wings. Farther up were tanned necks, sturdy chins, and faces that bore official frowns—and grease.

Kirk let out a sigh, drew a deep breath, and asked: “What the devil happened?”

One of the men came over and rammed Kirk’s chin high with a heavy thumb and forefinger. “That’s what we want to know. What’s the bloody-game?”

Disregarding the R.A.F. pilots for a moment, Kirk stared about, instinctively looked for Tank. But there was nothing that looked like the ape anywhere—just R.A.F. blokes in tropical kit.

“The Heinkel?” he asked. “I swiped it from a mob up at Dulit. It’s a long story and I want to tell it to your C.O.—someone official.”

“It must be a long story,” a chap with the rings of a Wing-Commander on his shirt snapped. “What sort of a game do you call that bombing? We spotted you dropping ‘eggs’ on the Sandakan power station. You can’t talk yourself out of that!”

“Power station? You’re mad! I had no bombs of any sort. I was at something like 6,000 feet over Lubuk when I saw all the lights go out. I was looking for this field when the lights went dead, and then an Italian Breda—I think it was a 65—attacked me and I had to pink it. It went down about ten miles from here in the jungle.”

The faces of the men in khaki changed immediately and there was a muffled conversation off in one corner of the room. The Wing-Commander finally came up and said: “You may be telling the truth, and we’re going to take you to the Governor. A lot of queer things have happened here tonight. How do you feel?”

“Wacky. What the deuce happened to me, anyway?”

One of the men poured a scotch and soda and handed it to Kirk. He took it and drained the glass in one gulp.

The Wing-Commander went on: “You were lucky. Your bus didn’t catch fire. Most of ours did.”

“But she went right over on her back—for no reason,” argued Kirk, getting to his feet. He was shaky, but alert, now.

“Of course. You can’t land a fast ship on wheels with no rubber on them,” the Wing-Commander explained, “We all suffered the same thing. The damn stuff did something to all the rubber around here. It’s a good thing you did crash. We’d have figured you sprayed or discharged the stuff. Now we don’t know who did it.”

Kirk tried to fathom just what they were saying. But none of it made sense. A chemical of some sort must have disintegrated all of the rubber—a solution that took the tires right off the wheels.

“Wait a minute,” he exclaimed, rubbing his eyes and steadying himself again. “My crate quit cold on me, too. Ignition went out. The radio wouldn’t work. Then I went over on my back. But Where’s Tank?”

“Who?”

“Tank—my man. He was in the back seat when I went over.”

A young Squadron Leader broke into the conversation with the explanation: “He cleared off the minute you hit. We saw him running like mad.”

“That’s queer,” muttered Kirk. “I wouldn’t figure he’d leave me like that.”

“That’s why we thought you had something to do with all this. He headed for the jungle, going toward the southeast.”

Kirk pondered for a moment and then said: “He probably took a thump on the noggin and is running wild. He’ll be back.”

The British pilots carried on a muffled conversation again in one corner of the room and Kirk lit a cigarette. Finally, the Wing-Commander came forward and said: “We can’t drive a car on the station. All ignitions gone. We’ll have to take a trap of some sort. There’s one outside now. Want to come along to the Residency?”

“Yes. I think I ought to. The Governor will be glad to hear what I’m going to tell him.”

“I’m sure he will,” the Wing-Commander muttered.

THE RESIDENCY was typical of British Government posts in the Far East. It lay in a tropical park, with its front steps throwing strange lights on a lotus pond that crept up to one side of the wide driveway. Native troops in gaudy costumes were on guard and there was an air of excitement, even at this early hour. The high-pitched chatter of Dusans and Bugis rattled in direct contrast to the low, crisp voices of the British.

“I don’t know whether they were able to get word through on the telephone,” Wing-Commander Evans said, as he threw the reins of the shaggy pony to a Dusan at the foot of the steps. “But I am sure the Governor will see us at once.”

“He should,” commented Kirk. “It seems as though you birds have a first class crisis on your hands.”

Evans ignored the comment and hurried up the wide, white steps and whispered to a Colonial guard who was on duty at the door. They were allowed inside the reception hall, which was garish with Malay decorations and teak furniture.

Sleepy-eyed Foreign Service officers in various stages of dress and undress were hurrying from room to room, indicative of the state of affairs.

The Governor would see Wing-Commander Evans and Mr. Kirk at once, an orderly informed them.

The British official, a keen-looking individual with slate gray eyes, a white mustache, and a grand military bearing, in ruffled whites, greeted Evans at once and threw a questioning glance toward Kirk,

Evans opened with: “This is the man who landed the German Heinkel at the station, Your Excellency. He has some interesting statements to make, I believe.”

“All right. Sit down and never mind the ‘Excellency’ business. We can’t waste time. Now what do you know about this affair, Mr. Kirk?”

“It’ll take a little time to tell, but it will be worth it,” explained Kirk. Then for half an hour he outlined in general the workings of the Circle of Death, the recent events at Dulit, and his escape from the lethal chamber of the volcano.

Both the Governor and Wing-Commander Evans listened attentively—and with something akin to fear in their eyes at times.

“I’ve heard of both Cockosaert and von Audemars,” the Governor muttered reflectively. “But Tamuracho is a new one to me. They evidently planned some major move here in Borneo that would draw the British forces out of Singapore which would give them an opening—perhaps a Japanese opening to attack Singapore.”

“Or the Philippines,” prompted Kirk.

“Possibly,” agreed the Governor. “Then, with the British well occupied here in the Far East, the European Dictators would have a splendid chance of making their next major move—possibly in the Mediterranean. A clever and devilish plan, Mr. Kirk. You say you shot down the Italian—er—Breda plane?”

“Yes. We saw it hit near this waterfall I just mentioned.”

“That’s up near Salak,” explained Evans. “I know the spot well. But it will be hard to get to. As a matter of fact, I don’t know how we can get to it until all the damage has been repaired.”

“You know, of course, what happened tonight, Mr. Kirk?” the Governor asked.

“Only a sketchy explanation—something about rubber,” Kirk replied.

“Um! That’s all, eh? Well, I might tell you that nothing quite like this has ever faced me on any of my many posts throughout the Empire. What it is all about is beyond me. And how it was carried out is an even greater mystery. All we know so far is that a German Heinkel—carrying no markings—bombed the Sandakan power plant. And, as you can see, we are making the best of candles and oil lamps. There is no power anywhere about here.

“I saw that actually happen—from about 6,000 feet,” said Kirk.

“But you didn’t see what happened after that. For some strange reason everything composed of rubber has been mysteriously changed into—Well, into just a dried or flaked composition that immediately breaks down into an ashy substance.”

Kirk frowned and his keen mind immediately saw the possibilities of such a widespread chemical change. No wonder he went over on his back. No wonder his tires disintegrated. No wonder his ignition system went out and his motor conked.

His mind raced on as the Governor and Wing-Commander Evans continued the conversation. He reflected on the fight with the Breda and Tank’s effort to shoot the Italian ship down. He knew Evans and Governor Mayne were tracing the events of the night as they had experienced them, but he was now considering them from his own viewpoint.

Then he remembered Tank again. Tank, his guardian, his ever-loyal pal. Tank was somewhere out there in the jungle. Something only his animal instinct could tell had called him from the crash of the Heinkel back there to Salak. Tank alone, a civilized ape, trying to solve the mystery of the Breda!

“We’ve cleared off all the crashes as best we can, sir,” Evans said, “We won’t be able to get a ship off the ground until we get more ignition cable, coated wire, and all that sort of stuff. It will take some time to re-wire and re-tire even one plane,”

“There’s nothing nearby—such as a seaplane—that wouldn’t need tires?” inquired the Governor.

“There might be a small flying boat up at Kudat, but we can’t be sure they have any rubber left in their ignitions either.”

“Wait a minute,” snapped Kirk suddenly. “What about an armored car—something that doesn’t require rubber tires?”

“That’s right!” beamed Evans. “We have a Mark II.B light tank at the airdrome.”

“On metal treads?” queried Kirk hopefully.

“Yes. Of course.”

“But what about the engine—the rubber there?” the Governor asked.

“The Mark II.B tank is gasproof from front to rear. She’ll work,” Evans answered.

“Come on! Let’s take that tank and find Tank!” cried Kirk.

“WHAT THE DEUCE are you talking about?” the Governor asked, fingering the tips of his mustaches, “a tank to find Tank?”

“My mate—my gunner man,” grinned Kirk. “He’s a trained ape, this guy I’ve been telling you about all the while. He works with me all the time. I’ll bet he went back to that crash.”

Both Evans and Mayne exchanged glances of mystified astonishment. The idea of a British tank being sent out to find a trained ape was more than they could comprehend. It was ridiculous,

“But why?” asked Evans. “What would that get us?”

“Don’t you understand, Evans?” argued Kirk, snubbing a cigarette butt into a jade ash tray. “Tank, you see, went off on his own for some reason. He sensed something—that’s it, sensed something back there none of us would be able to figure—and so he went back. There’s no telling what he had in mind or what he will find. We’ve got to go back there after him and find out!”

Evans appealed to the Governor, whose face now looked like a disappointed walrus! The Governor steadied himself and swallowed a sturdy peg of brandy in one gulp. He drew in a deep breath, smoothed his hirsute handle-bars, and said: “Well, it can’t be any more mysterious than it is now. You can do it in a couple of hours, can’t you, Evans? After all, I suppose we should try to follow up on that crash and see if there’s anything there that will give us any idea as to what happened.”

The Governor then sat down, a tired old man who had given up to the mysteries of a modern age—airplanes, Wing-Commanders, tanks, rubber-consuming gas, and trained apes. He wished he were back in London parading the Birdcage Walk,

“Come on, Evans,” boomed Kirk, “Let’s get that armored snail and go after Tank. We can first make sure he isn’t back, and then try this Salak place you know about.”

They left the presence of the Governor unceremoniously and hurried down the steps. They leaped back into the trap and laid a heavy reed across the flanks of the shaggy pony.

“You Americans!” muttered Evans, with an admiring grin spreading across his face. “You like to get things done in a hurry, don’t you? Poor old Mayne will be weeks getting over this.”

“I fear the whole Empire won’t ever get over it, Evans—unless this mess is cleared up pronto.”

They laid on the reed again, and the Pegasus in the shafts increased his pace down the cobbled road to a full eight miles an hour.

“I’m telling you,” confided Kirk, “the more I think about it, the more I am certain that Tank spotted something I missed. He wouldn’t barge off like that, leaving me in a heap under the Heinkel. Apes are queer birds, Evans.”

AND FROM THERE, all the way to the field, Kirk told the Wing-Commander of the strange adventures he had had with Tank since the hair-raising experience at the Berlin Zoo more than two decades before.

“I wouldn’t miss going with you on this junket for all the planes in the Air Force,” Evans finally said, as he tossed the reins over to an anxious eyed Aircraftsman. “Come on! The tank is over here in this shed,”

They made their way past the hangars where mechanics were feverishly working on the planes, ripping out the crippled ignition systems. Their faces were blank masks of apprehension, streaked here and there with dabs of grease. They turned on their raised work-stands and cast anxious eyes toward their Wing-Commander—hoping that he had something encouraging to say about the matter.

But Evans had only more orders, and he spat them out with machine-like precision.

“Come on,” he added to Kirk. “Let’s get going. I want to see this bloke Tank, for he must be a beauty.”

“Well, hardly,” smirked Kirk. “But he’ll do until some prettier gorilla comes along.”

They tore open the doors of the shed, and there stood a gleaming metal monster, trim in olive drab paint—with the muzzle of a three-pound pom-pom gun sticking out of its upper, rotating turret. The car ran on flexible metal treads and, as Evans had stated, was completely enclosed and obviously gasproof.

The Wing-Commander twisted the release lever that unlatched a small steel panel in the bow of the tank’s steel body. He lifted the panel and crawled in. Kirk followed. Inside, they found an amazing display of swinging saddle seats, instruments, a single gun turret and a gunner’s platform. Evans made a quick inspection of the cables and wire, and everything appeared to be in good order.

“You take that seat under the pompom,” ordered the Englishman. “Stick one of these helmets on or you’ll bash your brains out when we’re underway in the rough stuff.”

He adjusted several ignition and fuel levers, pressed the starter, and the Lanchester motor opened with a resounding roar. Evans let her run for a warm-up, meanwhile handing two small rubber plugs to Kirk, indicating with his fingers that they were to go in his ears to protect the delicate hearing drums.

Evans, sitting in the control seat, peered through a small oblong of shatter-proof glass, and drove the tank out into the open. The steering mechanism consisted of a wide-angled Y-handle, fitted with grips and carrying Bowden cable controls to the engine. There was a simple clutch device on the floor beneath the panel.

Once outside, he throttled the motor down, checked the fuel tank, ammunition magazines, and two-way radio set. He nodded to Kirk, reached forward, closed the entrance hatchway, and sealed it. He opened two vent plates below the oblong peep-hole and fastened a small map before him on a set of spring prongs.

“All set?” Evans bawled back over his shoulder to Kirk, who was trying out the breech of the pom-pom.

Kirk slapped him on the shoulder and nodded.

THE TRIP along the baked roads of Sandakan was reasonably comfortable. But once they left the palm lined highways and entered the jungle and bush, where they had to steer by compass. Kirk realized for the first time what tank crews have to put up with.

For what seemed like more than an hour, “Betsy,” as Evans had named the tank, bumped and lurched across brooks, decayed tree trunks, and rocks. She squealed as her treads slipped over the mud and slithered over the rank vegetation. And as they bounced and thudded. Kirk was glad Evans had given him the tank helmet. His shoulders were already bruised and his chest was marked with the blows from crashing into the ring of the turret.

Finally, they came out into a reasonably open sector that ran toward a low range of blue hills. Ahead they could see the thicket of mango palms, cassava, chincona, and wild sugar cane which hid from view the stream that was being whipped to a froth by the waterfall remembered by Kirk.

Evans halted, throttled down, and checked with “Coffin.”

“This is where the Breda came down,” said Kirk. “I remember that thicket over there. The waterfall must be just beyond it. Can you make it?”

“I’ll try. But it may be bad up ahead. Would you mind walking ahead to check the swamp? Take a gun with you. There’s one or two in a rack behind.”

Kirk was glad to get out of the leaping juggernaut and get a breath of clean air. He found a Webley revolver, stuck it in his breeches pocket, and crawled past Evans who had unlocked the hatchway.

“If I only had a bugle now I’d feel like a Boy Scout,” grinned Kirk through the ventilator.

“I’ll see that you get your merit badge,” soothed Evans. “But mind the hooded cobras!”

Kirk liked this guy Evans. He was one of his own kind, and the American was glad he was mixed up in this thing. They were in a mess and they both knew it. What it was all about they had no idea. But Kirk was certain that the Circle of Death was behind it all. They hadn’t gone to this extent—this rubber-consuming gag—for nothing. He wondered whether it could be another link in

the plan old Cockosaert had talked about in the gassy interior of Mount Dulit not many hours before.

The Circle of Death had planned to take Brunei, farther up the coast, and in all probability had managed it. There was no telling whether the strange gas had been discharged up there or not, but Cockosaert had spoken about a plan that included the capturing of this portion of Borneo and later on the Philippines, which lay only some 450 miles across the Sulu Sea.

Kirk pondered on all this as he strode carefully on, testing the ground for the tank.

He was now making his way across an area covered with wide-fronded foliage, not unlike skunk-cabbage. Beneath, the ground was black and fertile, but in spots it threatened to become soggy and ooze off into small areas of swamp land. Just ahead lay a light thicketed area shielded with light second-growth. That would be easy for “Betsy,” if the ground was anything like solid.

He managed to guide the tank safely into this area and was selecting the better section to traverse, when his ears suddenly caught a familiar sound. First there was a flutter of gaudy-plumaged birds cascading from nearby tree-tops with their challenging squeal of the tropics. And then came the ever familiar forest scream of an ape!

The cry came from an indistinct source, but it was welcome music to Kirk—for that cry could have come from no one but Tank!

Kirk turned back and waved an encouraging arm to Evans.

THEN, as if some strange instinct had touched hidden keys somewhere inside the ape, the cry changed to a warning wail. It was repeated in a tone that carried both authority and caution. Kirk dropped to one knee, peered ahead. He signaled for the tank to halt, went on ahead, then listened again for the call.

It was not repeated, and a new fear crept into Kirk. A length of twisted barbed wire seemed to be twisting around his middle, sending jolts of electricity through his body. He openly winced but hurried ahead cautiously until he found himself approaching the edge of the thicket.

Then, with unbelieving eyes, he saw two large elaborately camouflaged canvas hangars, their draped doors partly opened and the glint of

equipment inside! He waited and studied the scene. There was no one present—at least, no one in sight.

Kirk hurried back to where he had left the Mark II.B and signaled for Evans to open the hatch. He slipped inside and explained to the Englishman what had happened.

“We must make sure that hatch is gas-tight,” Evans said, “We can’t take a chance on that stuff now. How far ahead is this clearing?”

“About 150 yards. There’s two hangars in there—beautifully camouflaged—but I can’t see anyone around.”

“But your monk gave you a warning cry?”

“Absolutely. There’s something murky up there.”

“Come on then, let’s clean it up,” grinned Evans, his face abeam with anticipation.

“Carry on, Skipper,” replied Kirk, “But look out for that gunner of mine. He’s likely to be around somewhere.”

“You do the shooting, I’ll drive the ‘orses,” answered Evans, letting the clutch in.

The tank rumbled on, lurching and bouncing as it shoved the light trees aside, and nudged her shovel-nose through the underbrush. Kirk jerked the breech lever of the pom-pom and placed a six-shell clip into the loading block. He thumbed a knurled knob to single-shot action and peered through the glass-covered aperture set in line with the gun sight.

They were nearing the clearing now. Evans twisted in his seat and gave Kirk a final glance of assurance before he plunged on through.

They could hear no sound outside because of the rattle of the motor, and Kirk wondered whether his ape was issuing any further information. He waited until the tank lurched out into the open, then studied the layout while Evans steadied “Betsy” in the clear.

“I’ll hold her here a minute and see what happens,” said Evans. “You be ready in case they show up.”

The clearing, now they had time to study it, was perfect for a hideout spot. It was long, reasonably wide, and as level as a billiard table. The hangars were huddled deep into the foliage and could never be seen from above.

“What a plant!” said Kirk, admiring the real estate. “But what the devil is this all about?”

“Let’s skirmish it,” replied Evans, “I’ll run around the edge here and try to get to the hangars. If it gets hot we can dive back into the bushes.”

“Betsy” waddled around on her tread and started to crunch along the edge of the clearing while Kirk watched for action over near the hangars. So far there was not a move, or a sign of life.

But when they reached the end of the clearing and were just about to turn left to cross toward the hangars—bedlam broke loose!

FROM SOMEWHERE deep in the field near the hangar, an automatic weapon of high caliber opened up on them. Kirk saw the streaks of fire several seconds after the first burst biffed into the tank’s mid-section.

Evans slammed the slitted steel plates across the shatterproof glass and squinted through the peep-holes in them. Kirk managed to get set while “Betsy” eased into the thicket again. He squeezed the trigger and the gun slammed back and almost flattened him against the turret top. He moved to one side and continued to fire.

Evans was now out of his seat and was poking a Bren gun through a rubber-bound slot. He, too, opened fire on the mound ahead, and his shots sent up a fountain of stones and damp earth.

Cr-r-r-r-u-m-p!

The pom-pom spoke again and the little tank shook under a wave of blasting, ear shattering concussion,

“Got ‘em!” cried Evans excitedly. “You blew their blooming rampart away. Let’s go after them and tread on their whiskers!”

Kirk never heard a word the Englishman said, but he sensed that “Betsy” was moving forward again. He managed to get another shot into the mound again before he had to hang on to keep his teeth in their gums.

“Betsy” waddled on and they saw three heads appear. Kirk fired, but the shot went wide. The trio of men leaped out, ran like madmen toward the back of the hangars, and Kirk blazed another shot which went wide over their heads.

Evans halted “Betsy” near the depression and saw that three bodies were slumped over what appeared to be a heavy gun. Then Kirk yelled—for out of the tree tops above them a gaunt, long-

armed figure dropped and hurled itself at the racing men.

"That's Tank!" Kirk yelled. "Hey, Tank!"

Evans sat stupefied as he watched the strange creature grab two of the men in his long arms, jerk them toward him suddenly, and crush their lives out. Tank dropped the men and came back toward the tank, peering strangely as Evans kicked open the hatch. Kirk dived out first, ran up to the simian, and threw his arms around him,

Evans watched the affiliation of civilization and the jungle, with mixed emotions of amazement and awe. He saw Kirk grab the ape's shoulders, hold him off, and peer into the blank mug that simply stared back. The ape was still dressed in what was left of a pair of white slacks, a Navy blouse, and the canvas tops of a pair of sneakers which now had the grotesque appearance of spats, since the rubber soles were no more. They had gone with the Heinkel's tires, ignition insulation, and the rest of it,

Evans, satisfied now that all was reasonable well, crawled out and obeyed Kirk's silent command to come forward and get the okay from the ape. As he approached, Kirk, with his arms about each, conveyed the idea to Tank, who allowed his mug to relax somewhat while he rubbed his great hands up and down the Englishman's arm.

"You're in," explained Kirk. "I had to explain to him that you were on our side."

"I'm damn glad I am, too," muttered Evans, gently patting the ape on the shoulder, "Did you see what he did to those poor devils?"

"I'll bet he's been waiting up a tree for that for hours. He can be nasty if he decides he's facing an enemy. But he's a grand guy."

"I'll take your word for it," muttered Evans, as Tank swished away and dived into the trench. He tossed the bodies of the men away and snatched at the field gun. Then, before their eyes, he twisted it to junk—bending the steel barrel, breaking the cocking handle off, and shattering the walnut butt across a rock.

"Just like that," reflected Evans, "I hope he doesn't get playful with 'Betsy'."

"Don't worry. He won't, since he saw both you and me get out of it. He'll behave with me around."

"Righto! 'Stick around,' as you Yanks say," grinned Evans. "He might start pulling the armor off—just to keep in trim."

"Let's have a look around here while we've got the chance. We might not be here very long until someone pops in at us again," suggested Kirk.

"But we'll take 'Betsy.' We might need her again. This is too easy," said the Englishman.

Evans climbed back in and headed the tank for the hangar, while Kirk and Tank walked alongside, keeping a close watch on the hangar. Evans pulled up near the opening, then decided to run her nose inside a short distance. Kirk and Tank, working together now, crouched behind the tank until they were certain all was clear.

Evans came out from the hatchway, startled at what Kirk was pointing at.

"What the deuce do you make of this?" the Englishman exclaimed. "Look at them. New Breda 65's—about ten of them!"

"Yeah. And look at what they got painted on them," said Kirk, fingering his gun as he walked in. "The Rising Sun insignia of the Japs! Italian planes with Nipponese insignia!"

Kirk put his finger on the round, red disc on the side of one of the fighters. The finger came away scarlet. The paint was still wet!

"GET IT, EVANS?" he said quietly, still looking around cautiously. "Get it? They flew these things here and put the Jap markings on only a short time ago. Mean anything to you?"

"What does it mean to you?" asked the puzzled Wing-Commander.

"Part of this Circle of Death gag. They have provided these fighters for the Japs. They were brought here somehow—probably catapulted off a mother ship—and are now probably being fixed up for a Jap attack!"

Tank, Kirk, and Evans went over one of the ships carefully. There were two guns under the hatch of each for an observer—Breda-Safats of 7.7 mm.—two more under the hood, firing through the airscrew, and four guns in the wings.

"What a find!" beamed Kirk. "Have you noticed? The ignition cables and all wiring is carried in some sort of plastic material, I'll bet the tires are some sort of faked rubber, too,"

They inspected the wheels and discovered that they were the spring-leaf spoke type, and the tires were spring steel coils carefully fitted to the rims.

"We've got to get these babies out," snapped Kirk. "How soon can you get pilots here?"

"I can radio through from 'Betsy.' I think we have that range."

"Sure, but you can't get them if their sets, are still out of order back there. Try it, anyway."

Kirk still had an idea that there was no radio channel open to Sandakan, and that Evans would have to go back in "Betsy." Anything could happen in the meantime.

Then Kirk and Tank made a careful search of the place while Evans tried the radio set in the tank. They discovered that both hangars were full of planes of the same type, that there was a reasonable amount of supplies and spare parts, and that all of the Bredas had been fueled to the limit.

"Queer," reflected Kirk, trying to fathom the mystery. "Why were these ships brought here, hidden, and then left in charge of a handful of men? Where are the pilots who flew them and why are they being stored here all ready for action?"

He glanced at Tank, who had been following him about like a devoted retainer.

"And what have you been up to since you left me? Kirk suddenly exclaimed. "What the deuce have you been doing, Tank?"

The big ape stood still, twisted his pinkish-brown mug, scratched his whiskers, and padded up and down on his big bare feet. He had all the airs of a youngster who had been caught on the top step of a ladder in the pantry.

"You came back here somehow. But what did you come back for? You saw the other Breda crash, and you probably found it for some reason. What was that reason?"

The ape watched him, his brow even more wrinkled than usual—as if he were trying to fathom what his master was trying to get at. Kirk moved closer to him, stared deep into those hazel eyes, and put on a mental effort to pierce the mind of the ape.

"He came back to search for the wreck. He might have found it, but he never has revenge in his mind. He wouldn't outrage a corpse—but he might . . ."

That was it! Tank would come back—just as he would have done under ordinary conditions—and searched the wreck and the clothing of the pilot!

"Come here. Tank," the American said. "Let's look through your pockets."

A strange light lit up the ape's face and he began fingering awkwardly with his long talons through the pockets of the Navy blouse. He worked furiously, then came away with a wad of soiled papers and a thin leather wallet.

"Now we're getting somewhere," smiled Kirk. "Let's see what you discovered, old boy."

The wad had been rudely twisted into a lump and roughly stuffed into the small blouse pocket. The leather wallet was a *Ministero dell Aeronautica* pilot's license, issued to one Aldo Ravenna, of Turin. There was a badly bent compass variation card, a nondescript business letter, a bill for a revolver bought in Palermo, and a crisp quarto size sheet of note-paper.

"This looks like the business, Tank. You're getting good," grinned Kirk, slapping the ape on the shoulder. "You're learning, boy!"

The sheet was a set of cryptic orders involving the name of a Japanese aircraft carrier, the new Akudo—recently completed from a British liner that had been sold several years before for scrap. There were names like Sandakan, Borneo, Philippines, and Lubuk. There was a date and a time specification that made Kirk twist sharply.

"Come on, Tank. Let's see what Evans has to say about this."

They hurried over to "Betsy" just as Evans was crawling out.

"Nothing doing," the Englishman muttered. "Can't raise a spark of any sort. What's up!"

"Plenty! Look here. Can you figure out any of this?"

"Let's have a look. Where'd you get it?"

Kirk explained while Tank danced about like a trained bear.

"Damned lucky for us," Evans said, after a quick but careful glance at the paper. "They're going to attack Sandakan and Lubuk—that's the other R.A.F. base up the coast—tonight! We'd better set fire to all these ships."

"What for?" Kirk demanded, somewhat amazed.

"Why not? We can't get them out, can we?"

"If you can get pilots up here in time we can."

"You mean I should take a chance getting back and bringing them here?"

"That's right. We'll stay here and hold the fort."

"It's an idea," agreed Evans, beaming. "This paper says they are going to try for a landing—using the Akudo loaded with Jap planes and Jap marines—so that they will have a jumping-off point to attack the Philippines."

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

"Let's figure this out. I could go back in a couple of hours. You could stay here with one Breda ready to take off. If anyone came along, you could hold them off while I tried to get pilots back here."

"That's one idea," agreed Kirk. "Or we could take two out. You see, I'd like to practice on one. Anyhow, you fly a Breda to Sandakan and bring a couple of pilots back with you. Then start the others on their way. How do you like that?"

"That's good, too. It's quids to quinces they'll be back—probably with bigger bombers, bringing extra pilots to fly these Bredas for the big show which is slated for 11 o'clock tonight."

They left "Betsy" in the shadow of the hangar and ran two Bredas out. Tank was a big help at this task and in no time they had the engines running and were climbing aboard.

"You go ahead," ordered Kirk. "Go back and bring as many of your guys back as you can get aboard. Hang 'em on meat hooks if you have to."

"Righto. And the best of luck." The Englishman fumbled with the controls for some time, and then whipped the Breda around, and, with a wave, gave her the throttle and thundered down the landing field. Kirk watched him get into the clear, turn northwest, and hurry back to Sandakan. Then he gave Tank a signal. The big ape climbed aboard and fumbled with the butts of the Breda-Safat guns.

"That's right, mug, take 'em out. And if you have to use 'em, don't waste any slugs," ordered Kirk over his shoulder.

KIRK FUMBLED with the controls. He worked out the statements printed on metal plates in various parts of the cockpit until he found the details of the flap gear, the gun loading sequence and the throttle adjustment. Then he took off,

hammering down the green turf runway, and hoiked carefully over the trees.

The Breda flew well. She was a little heavy laterally but responded well to the throttle and showed plenty of speed when Kirk turned on the juice. He tried one or two maneuvers, whip-stalled her twice, and satisfied himself that he could handle her. As she came out of a snap roll, Kirk glanced over his shoulders at Tank—and then immediately whipped the Breda around and set himself for action!

A brace of B.R.20's came out of nowhere and peppered the Breda with some heavy caliber stuff. Kirk whipped over hard and saw that two Italian Fiat heavy bombers were evidently on their way to the long green strip below.

Tank had spotted them first while Kirk was trying out the Breda, and before Coffin could whang her around to get in a full shot from his front guns the ape was spraying the two Fiats with a heavy dosing of Safat lead.

"Hold it!" screamed Kirk. "Wait a minute!"

Tank obeyed, purring contentedly through his massive nostrils as Kirk brought the Breda around. The two Fiats slammed more lead at them, and Kirk had to slip her clear before he could come around to set his guns on the big bombers.

"They must have been given the tip-off," he muttered, waiting for his opening. "Probably returning with pilots to get those planes out of here. Well, we'll see if they can take it."

The Breda screamed through the skies and vomited leaden hate in long gleaming streams. The lead Fiat B.R.20 took the tracers full force in its starboard wing root and Kirk drew the stick back gently and hoiked his line of fire so that the leaden stream continued to saw through the airfoil supports of the Italian ship. He knew he had scored. Its wing buckled, the Fiat was falling.

But before Kirk could whang around again, something caught the Breda full in the quarter-deck!

Tank let out a soul piercing scream.

A plume of flame and smoke, fluttering back over the sealed hatchway, told Kirk that his fuel line had been hit—their ship was in flames!

Kirk gave Tank one look, but the ape twisted around, ripped out the guns again, and opened a wild garden-hose fire on the bomber that was

banking behind them. A hopeless but gallant stand to the finish!

Kirk peered over the side and saw the landing strip directly below him. He acted fast now and slithered the Breda into a knifing side-slip. The trim-winged bullet-like ship slipped down. Coffin set the flaps to their limit. The bomber was coming down after them, regardless of the wild fusillade Tank was slamming across his own tail.

This was the end—unless . . .

Kirk waited for a thud of bullets as he slipped toward the field. And he waited for that trowel-like wing-tip of the Breda to dig into the lush grass below. The sideslip was taking the flame and smoke clear of the fuselage, but the hungry fire would soon be gnawing at the ship's vitals.

He waited a few more seconds, expecting any minute to feel the fire wall slide back to his knees and snuff him out of existence.

They were almost down now, and approaching the jungle runway at express-train speed. Kirk reversed his rudder, bringing the nose around. Then a short savage shove at the throttle knob and the Breda eased around into a slow, fluttering glide. The flaps held and she seemed to hang on unseen wires for a moment.

A curtain of flame and a shroud of smoke whipped up as Kirk went through the automatic motions of landing.

Thump! . . . Thump! . . . Bang!

CRASH!

They were down. And by some act of providence Kirk had forgotten to lower the landing gear. Thus the belly-landing had prevented them from barging on through into the jungle brush at the end of the runway.

The rattle of a Safat gun continued as Kirk fought to get clear of the wrenched cockpit.

"Hey, Tank!" he bawled. "Some of your muscle here, lad. Get this damn bus apart!"

The ape stared at Kirk for some seconds, peered out of the shattered hatchway as if he were astonished to find himself on the ground, and gave a final jungle snarl at the Fiat which was still peppering at them from a tight turn above.

WHEN, amid a wild barrage of Italian lead. Tank went bull-in-a-china-shop. His long paws grabbed lengths of stiff dural and his thumbs constricted. The stiff metal gave like lead-foil. He

snatched at stringers, grabbed them with his firm yellow teeth, and tore with savage rage until the fuselage of the Breda had been ripped apart like a shoulder of beef in a lion cage.

Smoke blinded them and flame seared their flesh as they fought their way out of the cockpit. Kirk grabbed a short lug, twisted it, drew out the brace of Safat guns, and tucked them under his arm as he turned for the hangar.

Then he remembered "Betsy."

He bawled at Tank, who was gnashing his teeth at the Fiats.

"Come on, you fool! Don't stand there baring your dentistry. You can't do anything about them out here!"

At last the ape caught on. Together they ran to "Betsy," lifted the metal hatch, and clambered in. The ape was ill at ease for a moment, for somewhere back in his simian mind he must have remembered being a biological exhibition in a somewhat similar steel cage, placed on view to be gazed upon.

"Take it easy," argued Kirk. "Sit there while I play the organ."

Kirk charged the pom-pom and waited to see what the remaining Fiat would do. He rammed home another charge of shells and watched. The Fiat was being flown in a wide circle now, as if the pilot was not quite sure just what to do. "Betsy," fortunately, was in a secluded position just around the corner of the hangar, and Kirk hoped they had not spotted the British tank.

"We'll get 'em cold if they try to land," he muttered quietly.

The Fiat showed every indication of making a landing. Kirk patted Tank on the shoulder and soothed him, for the ape was watching the bomber through the peep-slits, and showing increased anxiety.

"Take it easy, boy. We'll get 'em if they land. I'll pick out their cylinders one by one and then cut their wheels off. You watch, boy!"

The ape purred, gave Kirk a grateful glance, and then rubbed his great beezzer in anticipation.

Kirk took an angle sight past the corner of the hangar and figured he could just make it—if the Fiat landed far enough up the green strip. Still, he took no chances, but stepped up and started the Lanchester motor so that they could run her out farther should it be necessary.

They watched again once the engine was purring quietly, and saw the Fiat turn in for a landing. Coffin Kirk's eyes sparkled with glee and anticipation, for he saw an easy capture. He moved back to the saddle seat below the gun turret, and reached for the trigger as the Fiat swished around and set herself for the final glide.

"Now take it easy Tank," he warned. "You've had enough scrapping to last you for awhile."

But Tank was not satisfied. His eyes tightened into slits and he pawed at knobs, handles, and parts of the interior.

"Now what's up?" demanded Kirk, for he knew the animal had drawn on his jungle instinct to scent danger. Suspiciously, he peered about through the slits.

Then, just as he was drawing a bead on the bumping Fiat, something blinded him! He remembered hearing Tank let out a fiendish squeal, and then four million Roman candles seemed to go off in his brain. Concussion blasted all life out of his muscles and battered the electric reaction from his nerves.

COFFIN KIRK'S eyes were in a world of blackness. He knew nothing of the passage of time. He could hear voices, but they meant nothing. Then abruptly he could see strange figures in trim black uniforms. And his returning vision recognized the hated insignia of the Circle of Death on breast pockets!

He put on a silent struggle to gain full possession of his powers of concentration. He listened again, closed his eyes, and waited. He caught words like "Philippines," "Akudo," "Breda," and "Cockosaert"—and then he knew. He struggled with himself and had to restrain the desire to scream.

Kirk then tried to piece it all together: A Fiat bomber coming in to land . . . "Betsy" and her pom-pom . . . He was just about to fire—and then a crashing nothingness . . . Something had slipped up . . . Something had hit them . . . What?

He rolled his body gently, peered around. Near him, in a half reclining position, lay Tank—trussed and bound.

That was queer! Who could have tied Tank up? They must have gassed them. No, "Betsy" was gas-proof. An antitank shell must have hit the tank.

A hundred scenes flashed before his eyes and he saw Evans—Evans, the Englishman who had relied on him. Evans, coming back with as many British pilots as he could carry. Coming in to land—Englishmen coming to their doom . . . "Hell," he muttered, glancing over at Tank again. "Got to get out!"

He moved cautiously, as every muscle move brought on jolts of nerve punishment. The men in the black uniforms formed a dim circle off near the opening of the hangar now. They were at an alert position. Something outside was attracting their attention—something with a throbbing boom to it.

That was it! Evans was coming back with his first load of pilots. They were waiting for him—waiting with guns!

Kirk squirmed again and brought his bound wrists up to the long slender fingers of the ape. He shoved against them and whispered over his shoulder.

"Come on. Tank! Go to work, boy! Untie these knots. Let me loose. Tank!"

He waited, and then the hairy fingers began to move. Swiftly and certainly, too, for they were trained and had the background of jungle years at their tips. Fingers that replaced the lack of what men call intelligence. Fingers that were as true and as strong as steel.

It seemed hours before the bindings were off. But once his hands were free. Kirk lay low, turned slightly, and then untied the ropes knotted at the beast's back.

"Now—now, Tank! Can you hear me? Clean the damn lot of them out, and don't stop until I order you. To the finish. Tank!"

Words, yes. But Kirk's pointing finger, directed at the group of men huddled in the hangar doorway, was the "Finger of Death" as far as Tank was concerned. All he knew was that these men were their enemies and they had to be killed. Animal instinct came to the fore, directed by the intense loyalty to the human being he had accepted as his master.

Kirk looked into the ape's eyes with glances that carried volumes of words. Then Tank eased away like a wraith and skirted the rear of the Bredas. Kirk waited, knowing that the gorilla must carry out the first move to make sure their plan would work.

Kirk flexed his muscles, tested his vision on points at various distances, then got up and moved quickly to the nearest Breda. Here he removed a Safat gun from its mount and took the metal magazine with it. He dropped to the ground, carefully cocked the weapon, and waited for Tank to go into action.

Sure enough! Tank suddenly appeared on top of the front Breda, crouching and poised for a jungle attack. There was an instant of deep silence—then an unearthly bellow of animal rage filled the hangar as Tank charged upon the foe.

Kirk darted into the clear and opened fire on the group which stood spellbound and unable to draw sidearms from hip holsters. Kirk then held his fire, equally spellbound by the ferocious attack of the simian who was cutting a wide swath through the group, swinging the first wretched swine he had grabbed by the ankles. There was the hollow *thock, thock, thock* of skulls crashing together, the piercing crack and crunch of breaking bones, and the dull leaden thud of pounded carcasses.

Tank was having a jungle field day!

Into the midst of it all ran Kirk, his Safat gun covering the lot. Two game devils tried to get out their weapons and put up a fight, but a swinging burst from Kirk's gun cut them down.

In twenty seconds a major victory had been scored. The black-uniformed mob lay like reaped wheat. A cruel revenge, perhaps, but nothing compared to what might happen if this band of cut-throats could not be stopped. They represented a far greater threat than a few cracked skulls or bullet slashed limbs.

The carnage was ended just as the captured Breda rumbled up to the doorway. Wing-Commander Evans peered out over the front of the Gnome-Rhone cowl and stared at the shambles, unable to figure it all out, until Kirk, with a weary gesture, waved them in.

"WHAT THE DEVIL happened?" demanded Evans, clambering over the tangle of bodies. He grabbed at black Mausers that lay about, and drew a few more from open holsters as he came toward Kirk.

"They downed us and we tried to hold them off with 'Betsy.' But someone conked her with a

nine-point-two, or something," said Kirk. "And now I'd give a Breda for a drink."

Quickly Evans produced a leather-covered flask and shoved it toward Kirk. The American unscrewed the top, placed the short neck to his lips, and added a few much-desired thermal units to his constitution.

Around him flashed the movements of British flying men in khaki shorts, light canvas helmets, and sturdy bare knees. Kirk counted at least four. Then Kirk heard indistinct orders and the bellow of the Fiat bomber's warming motors. And he rightly sensed that Evans had "told off" someone to fly the plane back to Sandakan and bring in another load of men.

Mercy now tempered the movements of the Britons, too; for they went to work with a will on the injured men in the black uniforms. First-aid kits appeared as if by magic, and in no time those left alive were carefully attended to. They were bandaged and eased into the wide cabin of the Fiat for the trip back to the base. Needless to state, also, they were securely bound to prevent any possibility of their attempting to re-capture the bomber once it was in the air.

Kirk watched the Fiat take off with decided satisfaction. Tank was wandering up and down nearby, one eye on his master and the other on the quiet pile of dead his own efforts had heaped up.

"We're damned lucky, you know," said Evans, watching the British pilots as they moved three Bredas out for a take-off. "We managed to get a small spark-set radio going back at the station and have warned Brunei and Singapore, but we have no idea whether they got the message straight. What's more, we have picked up messages from the , and there is no question now but that they are on their way. It'll be a devil of a fight—if we can get into the air in time."

There was determination in Kirk's grin. "We'll get into the air, all right. All I'm worrying about now is that they'll find out we have captured their Bredas."

"All right," argued Evans. "Suppose they do. The can't turn back now. She's probably too far this side of the Singapore-Brunei, The Japs will be safer taking a chance on a landing in Borneo than trying to get back through the British defense units now starting out from Singapore. They've

begun the mess and they'll have to go through with it."

KIRK PONDERED on that as he enjoyed a cigarette, allowing the blue smoke to soothe his nostrils. He spoke quietly to Tank and the ape slumped down, coiled up, and went to sleep.

"If we could only cork off that way," observed Kirk. "One hour and he'll be ready to rip five tanks apart!"

"When I want some tanks ripped apart," said Evans, with a quiet gleam, "I'll file a requisition for him. By the way, did I tell you? We have a bloke back at the station who's a bit of a chemist."

"I hope he doesn't manufacture your liquor."

"No, nothing like that. The thing is that he's been scraping around and making tests on the ruined rubber—and he seems to have found something."

"About the stuff with which they pulverized the rubber?"

"That's it. He's made a couple of simple chemical tests, and he figures the gas they used is a combination of carbon disulphide, benzol, and nitric acid. He explained to me that he once did some time on a rubber plantation and knows a lot about the various curing processes they employ. It was a bit technical for me, but his explanation seemed reasonable when he explained it. It appears they smoke the gum with certain chemicals that have to be blended carefully. But if they're not in the proper proportions, the latex element in the rubber goes spiffo and they find themselves with a lot of muck."

"He seems to have hit it," agreed Kirk, sticking his long legs out for a more comfortable position. "They could make a gas like that. It might cost some money. But after all, these devils don't seem to worry about sawbucks."

"Sawbucks?" queried the Englishman.

"Never mind," answered Kirk with a flick of his cigarette. "It's an Americanism for *mazuma*. Now, how's about getting these Breda busses out of here—and damn quick!"

"I've sent Mayberry off with the Fiat for more pilots, of course, I have three other flyers here, and I'm putting them into the air now to do a local patrol over this place. Mayberry will ferry the rest of the pilots in as fast as he can make the trips. You and I can take one apiece when you're ready,

and we can go back any time now and plan the rest of the celebration."

Kirk nodded, lit another cigarette, and twisted with a weary gesture for an easier position.

"There's a lot of work ahead, you know, Evans," he finally said. "We've got to let these men of yours know just what they're up against. You'll have to send one of them around as a dispatch rider to let them know for certain at Lubuk and Brunei so that they can put up some form of defense if the Akudo gets through and lands a gang of marines."

Evans agreed, then went on:

"The Akudo carries about forty of those new Mitsubishi 96's—nasty-looking devils, too. I saw some of them when I was in Hong Kong a few months ago. They look a lot like your Boeing P-26's, and I'd judge have about the same performance."

"Whew!" whistled Kirk. "Forty of those against what we can put into the air will give us a very pleasant evening. By the way, what's the time?"

"Well, it's after noon now, I suppose. Yes, 1:30 to be exact," said Evans, consulting a formidable-looking ticking turnip on the end of a leather shoestring.

"So we've got about nine hours to get ready?"

"Exactly. And in the meantime we can worry about where these Fiats come from and what their next move will be."

"I've already been worrying about that," chimed in Kirk. "We'll have to maintain a patrol over Sandakan in short shifts until we take off for the flare-up tonight—just to play safe, eh?"

"A good idea. It will give my men plenty of time to accustom themselves to the new planes, too."

"Have you had a look at the Breda bomb racks? Can you use them?" Coffin came back.

"They're adjustable. They'll take our stuff, I feel sure. You know the blokes at the Air Ministry have an idea now and then. They have our bombs built so that they can be fitted into almost any rack, interior or exterior. Jerry taught us that trick during the World War. German rifles in those days would take both German and British ammunition, but ours wouldn't take Jerry's."

Kirk pondered on that for some time until it was evident that it was time they all got on their

feet again. He was weary, but he managed to crawl to a Breda, call to Tank, and take off for the R.A.F. drome outside of Sandakan.

By 3 o'clock the full complement of captured Bredas had been transferred safely. Aircraftmen were making slight adjustments on the bomb racks, pilots were checking their guns, and Kirk and Tank were enjoying a short but reviving sleep in Wing-Commander Evan's cubicle.

A THREE-SHIP patrol droned back and forth over the Sandakan field, covering the area and keeping a faithful watch over the R.A.F. station. For hours now this had been going on. A low wind sang through the hangars with lengthy wails that reminded one of some despairing soul shut out in a storm. The sable-vested night, which had fallen with a churchyard gloom, was flecked here and there with light flashes from open doors. And behind those doors was fevered activity in preparation for the "show" which was soon to go on.

The hours hung heavy, even with the excitement of planning and organization. Men sensed what was ahead, realized that a strange menace threatened. A grim battle for life, for existence, in strange craft unfamiliar to their feel and touch. An enemy who had not as yet shown his head.

Some were to live, some to die, in this battle to come. The goal ahead, whether gained or lost, would find record only in the dreary wordings of secret diplomatic papers. Blind faith in a tradition, a national loyalty, an Empire would drive these R.A.F. pilots on, but the world would never know. A mere "Died While Serving Overseas," would be their epitaph.

Grim, silent mechanics worked like beavers on motors and airframes. Armorers toiled over unfamiliar weapons and fought with strange mechanisms. They all had to carry on. Grimy, sweat-fouled men came down from their vigil aloft, sought the soothing warmth of baths and clean clothing, and prepared themselves for—four none knew exactly what.

Then suddenly the pent-up spirits of preparation were released. The American—a man whose very personality injected throbbing amperage of courage and enthusiasm—appeared among them, followed by that strange, slant-

shouldered figure who somehow forged a link between their civilization and the mammoth strength of the jungle. The combination, coupled with man's newest and most formidable weapon, the airplane, inspired them with a new confidence.

Twenty brand-new Breda 65's now gleamed with aircraft grooming. Gun-muzzles flashed with the glint of oil film, prop blades flashed like broadswords. Portable arc lights threw eerie glows of circular intensity and spread gaunt shadows of men across the oil-soaked tarmac.

In small groups the men stood about, passing on bits of information concerning the quirks and twists of their new mounts, the manner of loading and reloading Breda-Saftas, A year's training had been crammed into a few short hours.

Wrist watches were consulted. Then the reliable Evans, who was dead on his feet but yet still retained the erect dignity of his responsibilities, appeared.

He called his Squadron Leaders around him and they bustled up, clicked heels, and saluted gravely.

"I could say a lot," the Wing Commander opened. "But I won't. You know what we are up against, and you know what is expected of you. That's all, gentlemen, and the best of luck."

They saluted again. True, some hesitated as if they wished to say something, but tradition and discipline tempered their emotions. They simply answered: "Thank you. Sir!" and moved off.

Evans turned to Kirk, and the expression on his face proved he was profoundly touched. He flicked a tear from the corner of his eye.

"Craziest people in the world, you Britishers," commented Kirk, likewise affected. "Just take orders, keep their traps shut—and go out and probably get killed. How do you do it?"

"You should talk," cracked Evans. "They have to do it. While in this case, you don't. But you've been in the thick of it for hours—and still you want to go along."

"Why not? I owe those raider devils plenty. This is a personal battle with me, and I don't quit until I've cleaned the lot out."

"A very laudatory objective, my lad," agreed Evans moving over toward the lead Breda. "And now how do you like our insignia?"

Then for the first time Kirk noticed that the scarlet discs of Nippon had been quickly but

skillfully changed to a familiar outline—the outline of a British Mark II.B tank superimposed by the head of a gorilla.

“Great!” smiled Kirk. “I suppose that is your way of paying a compliment to my pal, Tank?”

“Exactly! And if these Mussolini busses stand up like your—er—your gentleman’s gentleman, then we should put up quite a showing.”

“In response,” added Kirk with a courtly bow, “I’ll tag my particular Breda with the title of ‘Betsy.’ Agreeable to you?”

“Perfect! I had a maiden aunt named ‘Betsy.’ She was a howler! Once she pulled a letter box up out of the pavement just because she received a birthday card a day late!” Lovely soul, old Aunt Betsy.”

“Let’s shove off before we go ‘relations’ on each other,” laughed Kirk, “Else we’ll never blow the old Akudo out of the water. Best of luck, Evans, old lad.”

They shook hands, exchanged glances, and headed for their respective machines.

“Nevertheless I hope I get back to hear further episodes from the adventures of Aunt Betsy,” Kirk muttered.

THE BREDAS were ordered into two flights of ten ships each. One flock was led by a young, thin-faced Squadron Leader named Cliff, the other by Kirk, with Tank in the rear office, as usual. Wing-Commander Evans took the Fiat bomber as his flagship and planned to maintain touch with both flights via radio.

Twenty-one to take on at least forty high speed single-seaters that were well armed and flown by pilots who were charged with the fanatic patriotism engendered by promises of a new Oriental Empire! Even so, the Bredas were manned by highly skilled crews and carried a vast amount of worthy armament. In addition, all these planes carried twelve light bombs suitable for an attack on the flight deck of the Akudo. And Evans’ Fiat was equipped with British delayed-fuse bombs for attacks on the deck of the enemy aircraft carrier—bombs that would pierce the teak and metal landing deck and hurtle on through to the more vulnerable compartments below before exploding.

The take-off was as imposing a display as could be imagined. The big Fiat hammered down

the parched turf first and hoiked into the air under the skilled hands of the Wing-Commander with a young Flying Officer, Lewis, at his side. Up front, a pink-cheeked Limey gunner, hardly in his teens, peered anxiously out of the shatter-proof glass turret and gave a feeble wave to a couple of pals at the wing-tips. There was another officer in the avigation compartment and a radio operator behind the control pit. Still another gunner, who might have been a twin to the one up front, fumbled with the Breda-Safats in the rear turret.

The Bredas took off in chain formation, zoomed at the end of the runway, and hammered for altitude. They swung into position over the city, and Kirk saw several cheering signals flash up from the entrance steps of the Governor’s mansion as they turned in glorious grouping and headed up the coast toward Lubuk Bay,

Finally, they swung off for Pindassan and cut around the mountains past Jesselton, the actual capitol of North Borneo.

Since their return after taking over the Bredas in the jungle hide-out, Wing-Commander Evans had made a more careful study of the papers procured by Tank, and, with the Squadron interpreter officer, had further learned the general plan of the proposed attack. They knew now that the Akudo planned to appear suddenly off Brunei Bay—about thirty miles southwest of Jesselton—then ease into the sheltered waters and stage their proposed landing of marines, light field guns, and supplies while their planes bombed Brunei, Jesselton, and if necessary, Lubuk and Sandakan.

Evans, flying high, up front, led the way out to sea once they had studied the situation around Jesselton.

“He’s making all the right moves,” reflected Kirk, when he saw the Englishman lead them out over the ocean. “If we can come up from behind we’ll have all the advantage. But, Lord, what a night this is going to be if we do clash with them!”

They flew almost due west for nearly thirty minutes. Then Evans gave a signal and reported that he was going down low in an effort to search the surface below. The two flight leaders repeated his signal and headed on toward Brunei Bay, holding their altitude at about 6,000 feet.

The next fifteen minutes were grim, spine-tickling, and eerie. The twenty fighters carrying

the Tank insignia opened their formation slightly to cover a greater area and to play safe. Kirk watched the moves of Cliff, the No. 1 Flight leader, and then caught a signal in his helmet phones.

A report from Evans!

"Tank squadron" came the words. "Prepare for action at point due north of Barum. Have spotted enemy fleet approximately six miles off Barum Point."

Kirk glanced at his map in the clips and saw that the spot designated was but a few miles south-west of Brunei.

The speaker phones crackled again and he caught:

"Flight One: Action on target, half left. Enemy planes leaving flight deck of Akudo. Form, echelon for attack. Flight Two: Maintain altitude until further orders. Leaders repeat signal—Evans."

In turn, Cliff and Kirk repeated Evans' signal, and then Kirk saw Cliff's outfit swing into echelon formation and go down. At first Coffin had no idea what they were heading for. But as the first flight went down he followed their tail lights and then caught the gleam of a long spear-shaped platform ahead and below—not four miles away. The Japs had illuminated their flight-deck, a move displaying total ignorance of the threat above—and which betrayed them to the Breda formations above. Or were they really ignorant?

"They're getting those ships off fast, though," sensed Kirk. "They're buzzing off like flies. I hope young Cliff can beat them down so that we can get that plane-loaded baby."

From that instant on the world went mad!

The first flight of Bredas flew smack into a curtain barrage of 3-inch antiaircraft stuff that threw a "Hell's Arbor" of flame-shot rosettes against the ebon night. Kirk saw the flight under young Cliff slam headlong into this De-sign of Death. Two searchlight beams sworded into the night and slashed the sky savagely.

"Good Lord! They must have known after all! They must have been tipped off somehow. Those poor devils slammed right into a beautiful trap!"

Three Bredas blew up before they were within range either of the flight deck or the Jap fighters that were streaming off the carrier like wasps.

Flame, smoke, and flickering sections of bright dural added to the crazy backdrop of Doom.

"Their microphone men had the decibel rating of those motors down to the last tick," snarled Kirk. "Those poor fellows were trapped the instant they started down!"

"Go into action, Flight Two!" bawled Evans from somewhere below. *"Action—fast!"*

Kirk repeated the order, then barked it back to the men in his flight.

"Follow me," he ordered. "We're going down to zero level. They have us spotted this way. So we're going down low and attack from their deck-line level. Repeat!"

A babble of voices came back to him, but it was obvious they had caught the order. Behind, Tank was yanking out the guns in preparation for the battle that they were heading into.

"Only fire at that!" ordered Kirk, pointing down at the carrier. "Only that ship, Tank!"

He wanted no trouble with the ape, who might mistake the Bredas for the Jap Mitsubishi planes. If he confined his efforts to the carrier, he could do no harm to the Britishers.

The flight under Kirk's command followed him down in perfect formation. With the gray-green waves rushing up toward him, Kirk pulled out, nosed around, and headed straight for the Akudo. From somewhere above, a trio of Rising Sun ships slammed at them and sprayed the sky with lead. But Kirk kept on, sensing that the gunners in the Bredas behind him would hold them off.

He tightened his belt, adjusted the buckles of his life-jacket provided by Evans—and headed dead for the carrier!

"IT'S now or never," he growled. "If that vessel gets into the bay we'll never stop them. They'll call for a destroyer fleet and take over like Grant took Richmond."

The Bredas fell in line astern now on his order, and together they hammered at the knife prow of the Akudo that was still spewing Mitsubishis.

Kirk fingered for the bomb releases and held the Breda dead on the nose of the carrier. He gulped, wondering whether he would make it. But he hung on as the nose of the Jap carrier came on at express speed.

“Good Lord!” he gasped, as a low-wing fighter flipped off the deck and screamed a hair’s breadth over his hatchway.

There was a resounding crash behind as the Jap fighter collided head-on with the Breda following him. Kirk did not look back, but his mind’s eye developed a picture of the wreckage of two planes being run down by a massive carrier that was doing about thirty knots. He winced at that—and pulled his releases!

The Breda jerked as the bombs slipped out of internal racks. He hoiked hard to clear another Mitsubishi that was pounding down the deck. He jerked the releases again and let the rest of the “eggs” go full on the deck.

A portion of the carrier’s “island” superstructure then toppled across the deck and floundered across the last three Mitsubishi fighters waiting to get away.

CR-R-R-UMP! BR-R-R-R-UM!

Flame, smoke, and concussion battered at Kirk as he slewed off to starboard. He turned and saw Tank sending a wild burst of fire down at a group of bluejackets huddled about a 3-incher. A light flashed out and blinded him for a moment, but he cleared and danced in the concussion of a burst of anti-aircraft fire that fanged out from a hidden turret below the battered flight-deck.

The remaining Bredas of his flight followed him and rained their explosives down upon the teak and steel deck, then skudded through the welter of flame and debris each bomb threw up. One Breda ran smack into the lip of the carrier deck and scattered its parts all over the flight deck. Flame billowed out and Kirk knew another brave British crew had gone west.

But by now the Jap pilots were in action against the raiding Bredas. Off to the right, young Cliff was weaving his flight—or what was left of it—in and out of a Mitsubishi formation. The gunners were fighting like Waterloo heroes from their rear turrets, and the British pilots were hammering heavy caliber stuff at the dancing single seaters.

The sky was a mad theater of tumbling fire-balls. Bredas and Mitsubishi fighters locked wings, rammed noses, and slithered into each other from all angles.

Kirk led his mob into it all and gave signals calmly as he slapped short but deadly bursts at the

Jap single-seaters. Tank, dancing his jungle war hop, still blazed away madly at the indistinct carrier from which sizzling 3-inch shells continued to blaze.

“Where’s Evans and his Big Berthas?” raged Kirk: “Where the devil is that bird?”

Now the American rammed through a scattering formation of Mitsubishi fighters and sought the Fiat. His guns splashed lead at a Jap directly in his path and blew it to bits. He darted clear of the debris and banked to avoid three attacking Mitsubishis. Two Britons in Bredas somewhere above picked two more Japs off, sending one down in flames and ripping the wings off another. A third Nipponese hoiked so hard he flamed up dead into the path of another and they both went down in a swirl of smoke and flames.

Then, out of the corner of his eye. Kirk caught the outline of the Wing-Commander’s Fiat. It was fighting its way through a veritable wall of Mitsubishis. Kirk changed his course, barked a crisp order into his phone, and went to the rescue. Number Two Flight slammed at the heavy formation of Mitsubishi fighters, sprayed it with Italian lead, and broke it up.

A report then came through from the Fiat, and Kirk slammed at the Japs again—keeping them in the clear until Evans could get set for his personal raid.

Kirk saw Evans dive for the carrier and then saw three more Bredas kick out of nowhere and blast at the deck, too. It was obvious that they were still trying to get at the carrier deck with what bombs they had left.

“Look out!” screamed Kirk. But the Breda guys were intent on doing what they came to do. They slammed full at the Akudo and released everything they had left amid a welter of anti-aircraft fire and the blinding glare of a lone searchlight that was picking out the raiders.

Kirk saw them hoik up and saw the first blast of flame from their bombs. Then, as the Akudo belched forth a mass of searing flame, the Fiat flew into the middle of the lot just in time to take the full force of a massive explosion.

“Wow!” gasped Kirk. “One of those Bredas put a bomb through that caught their magazine!”

BRRR-R-R-OOOM!

The decking of the carrier suddenly blew out and engulfed the Fiat which had roared in to loose its heavy armor-piercing stuff.

The great carrier's blazing maw now spewed gigantic blossom of scarlet flame. Great forks of fire flashed out, pierced the Fiat—and hurled it over the side of the still speeding hull!

"Lord!" Kirk raged. "He flew right into it. What the—"

He himself now cleared the doomed hulk and saw men leaping into the sea. He tried to glance down and see where the Fiat had hit, but the blinding glare of flame and the mushrooming smoke blotted out all vision of the water below.

"Poor old Evans—and not a boat anywhere."

He roared past again and drew his wing men with him as Cliff rounded up his formation to chase the fleeing Mitsubishi fighters. There was now no carrier deck left, and it was obvious that the Nippon planes left in the air must scurry off.

THEN, before his startled eyes, appeared the most beautiful formation Kirk had ever seen. Six majestic flying boats, glinting in steel gray, and gay with red, white, and blue cocardes came roaring over!

"Cripes, the Navy—our Navy!" gulped Kirk. "What the devil! Who called 'em?"

He caught the identification numerals on the sides of the hulls and saw them go down to the water, great landing lights laying broad pathways for them. He realized that they were Consolidated PB3Y-1 patrol boats out of Manila. They had made the 750-mile flight that afternoon. The Philippine Navy radio somehow had caught the faint sparks of warning sent out of Sandakan. And these planes had hastily flown south.

All this flashed through Kirk's mind as he watched a long silver pencil of light from the blunt nose of a Consolidated pierce the smoke and flame to pick out a floundering Fiat. That beam showed Evans standing on the roof of the cabin and waving—of all things—a handkerchief!

"Oh, well. Let the Navy clean up. They always do," muttered Kirk. "I'll take my lads home—what's left of them, at any rate."

He did, and later watched the battle-weary R.A.F. pilots crawl out of their planes at Sandakan and stagger off toward the medical hut. Kirk and

Tank then rolled up to the "A" Flight hangar and asked that their tanks be filled.

Finally, the American went in to Evans' recording office. Here he conversed with the Adjutant and told him what had happened. Then, while the adjutant hurried off to get a short message through to Singapore, Kirk sat down and scrawled a note. He stuck it in an envelope and addressed it to Wing-Commander Evans. It read:

Sorry not to be here on the welcoming committee, but we can't stand scenes. Hope you get your shirt dried out in time for the decoration that is sure to come. But we have other things to attend to, Tank and I. It has just occurred to me that we must track down those birds who flew the Breda in. And so—we may meet again, on less exciting terms, I hope. Thanks for the memories, as the song goes—and lots of luck.

Brian "Coffin" Kirk—and Tank.