

Hawks of the Night

A Three Mosquitoes Adventure by Ralph Oppenheim

Out went the bombing squadron into that shell-filled night—straight for the enemy drome. It was against orders, but the famous “Three Mosquitoes” followed in swift pursuit, led by the daring Kirby. Suddenly, they found themselves headed right into a large Boche formation.

THEY were flying through the night, roaring at full throttle, with red sparks streaming from their exhausts. They had climbed to five thousand feet, and they were now just midway between the clouds and the earth, between heaven and hell. For already they were sweeping over the front, and below them was a veritable inferno, a seething, livid stretch of ripped-up ground, grotesquely illuminated by the bursting shells, the “flaming onions,” the flashing rockets. But above them was that incongruously peaceful sky; one of those rare skies where scores of small fleecy clouds gather like herds of sheep, with the blue-black background, star-cluttered, showing between them. It was an ideal night for flying: the air was mild and clear, with good visibility due to the light from the stars, and with good protection due to the absence of the moon, whose brighter glow so often gave such “night-birds” away.

They flew night-flying Spads, and the hooded lights on the instrument boards cast a soft glow on the goggled faces of the three eager pilots, enabling them to see one another. They kept in their usual V-shaped formation, with Kirby, their impetuous young leader, at the apex, “Shorty” Carn and the lanky Travis a little to the rear, on either side. Kirby was picking their course, checking up on the flaming landmarks below, watching his compass, and, above all, searching the blackness ahead for signs of some twenty-two other American ships which the three were seeking, or for signs of some night-flying Huns which they were not seeking at all, but might very well encounter.

The enterprise held a novel thrill for the “Three Mosquitoes,” as this famous trio was called. Few times had they done night-flying, and never had they joined a “show” as spectacular as the one they intended to join now. But there was also another thrill. It was the thrill that mischievous boys experience when they steal out at night on some forbidden adventure, a thrill that is not wholly a pleasurable one. For it is partly derived from the thought of the consequences that must befall the culprits if they are caught.

By all rights, the Three Mosquitoes should now be sleeping peacefully in their cots. Those had been the C.O.’s orders, and perhaps the thought of those orders helped keep Kirby and his comrades so very wide-awake. It was going to be embarrassing if they were required to explain (as they doubtless would be) just how it came about that, instead of being in their cots, they were in the cockpits of these three planes, roaring through the night sky.

Yet—Kirby swore lustily—what the hell! Orders or no orders, he and his comrades were needed tonight. Every available flyer in the squadron was needed, needed badly. And the Three Mosquitoes could do more than their share.

For there was work to be done tonight, grim and dangerous work. The enterprise on which the squadron had embarked was one of the most daring, hazardous, and sensational jobs that the men who stick pins in maps ever devised.

It consisted of a bomb-raid on a Hun airdrome, far within the German lines. It was the drome of a famous pursuit squadron,

Jagdstaffel 44, which had been raising hell, and which the day-flying fighters had been unable to crush in the air, with the result that Staff Headquarters got the inspiration to crush it in its nest at night. But several attempts by several squadrons to do this had failed disastrously. The last squadron to try it was one belonging to the same wing as this one, and out of the ten ships which had gone out, only two battered wrecks had returned—their crews bringing home a tale of stark tragedy. Though they had all managed to get near their objective, they had been unable to drop a single bomb on the place. It couldn't be done, they explained. It was an impossible feat for those bombing planes, those clumsy D.H. Nines, which can't fight or maneuver when they're drunk with the load of their bombs, to swoop down over that comparatively small spot, low enough to score. There were too many Fokkers, too many searchlights and anti-aircraft guns. "And if the Fokkers don't get you," ran the song, "the A.A.'s must!"

And now the grim duty had been transferred to the bombing unit of this squadron. For 'Staffel 44 must be crushed at all costs. And it must be crushed as soon as possible, for at present it was keeping the allied reconnaissance ships out of German skies, and those reconnaissance ships had to get through to gather information for a coming push. So tonight twelve fresh D.H. Nines had gone out to do what all others had failed to do; twenty-four young pilots and observers had gone forth undaunted by the bleak remembrance which was so firmly stamped on their minds—of those last ten ships which had gone out, and the eight which had failed to return. The odds were terrific. But this time, to protect the twelve slow-flying bombers from the Fokkers, an escort of fighting single-seaters went with them, led by the C.O. of the drome himself, who had planned all the details of the raid and was going right along with his men to

help carry those details out. He had picked the other planes for the escort carefully. He had wanted as many as he could get, but he had wanted only pilots with regular night-work behind them. Ten in all were chosen, out of some twenty-five eager volunteers.

THE THREE MOSQUITOES, being solely day-flyers, had not been among the chosen: therefore they were all the more anxious to go. Ordinarily they scarcely noticed the work that went on at night, but this was a "show" which roused their blood, thrilled them because of its breathless dangers. They wanted to get in on it, wanted to help those bombers blaze their way through. And so they had gone to the C.O. and fairly begged him to let them go.

"I'm sorry," the grizzled old colonel replied, gently but firmly, "but I'm afraid I can't use you tonight. I realize you're wonderful flyers and all that sort of thing, but this is not your line. You haven't had enough night work, and besides,"—there was a slightly acrid note in his voice now, perhaps because his nerves were strained—"this is a job that requires nothing more than the utmost teamwork and co-operation. One of those private stunts of yours, while it's all right in its place, would be the very thing that would throw a monkey-wrench in the whole works. I'm not criticizing you, but you'll admit you have a weakness for getting into the spotlight, performing." Then, with terse authority: "You three hop into bed early—you want to be in good shape for the dawn patrol."

Those words, and the polite but at the same time stinging tone in which they were spoken, had cut deep, and had planted the first seeds of rebellion.

"The old duffer!" Kirby exploded, as soon as they had left the Headquarters shack. "Here we go and offer to help—and he needs help—but all the thanks we get is a swift kick! Hell," he said, his eyes shining

eagerly, “we ought to go up anyway, show the Old Man we’re not such dubs. Night work or no night work, we can fly!”

“We can,” Shorty Carn agreed, dubiously, “but—” He paused to take another puff at his ancient briar.

“But,” the lanky Travis pursued, in his wise, mature way, “we can also be court-martialed and sent to Blois for ‘Insubordination and conduct unbecoming officers and gentlemen’.”

“How’s the Old Man to find out if we go?” Kirby challenged.

“Well, inasmuch as he’s leading the flight himself—” Travis began, and his words were sufficient. Kirby’s face fell, and with his comrades, he resigned himself to the fate of staying home. But they did not go to bed. They stayed up to see the others leave.

And they watched that thrilling night take-off, cheered their comrades enviously and wished them luck as the men climbed into their cockpits, fastened their belts, and pulled goggles down over their eager, determined faces. First the twelve giant D.H. Nines on Field Number 2, their twelve Liberty engines making a thunderous bellow that shook the very earth, roared down that field one by one and, with clumsy efforts, lifted themselves and their heavy cargoes off the ground and climbed slowly into the night—strange, panting monsters which breathed fire from their exhausts.

Then, when they were up, the ten trim little Spads on Field Number 1, so graceful and swift in comparison with their great sisters, swept into the air like dragon flies and soared away to join them. Soon the night had swallowed them all, and the drome, which had been alive with feverish excitement and activity, with bustling, shouting men and all those throbbing planes, was suddenly dark and empty, seemed absolutely deserted; the ground-crew had already scampered back to their quarters.

And the Three Mosquitoes stood there, alone in the dark, their eyes still shining with the thrill of seeing those men going off into the night for the big adventure. And over the little trio came a desolate sense of being left out in the cold, of having to stay at home while everybody else went off to the “party.” It was too much. All their buoyant eagerness and enthusiasm seemed to be bursting within them, breaking all bonds, until, at last, it was Travis himself, Travis the reticent and skeptical, who exclaimed in a voice unlike his own:

“Hell! Let’s go up, fellows!” And up they went, in three Spads “stolen” for them by their trusty mechanics, who were always willing to join their little conspiracies and keep mum. Up they went, their blood tingling with warm exhilaration, their faces flushed as they too climbed into the night. Yes, they could fly all right. Their take-off was perfect, and their formation faultless. They raced forward, led by Kirby, who was certain he knew every inch of the sky which they had to travel. Their plan was to catch up with that bombing party, and quietly join the escort. If, by some freak, the C.O. didn’t notice them—it was almost impossible to keep counting the planes in a big night formation—or if, noticing them, he didn’t recognize them, so much the better. But they must assume that the C.O. would both notice and recognize them, and that they would make a good enough showing to cause the old colonel to forget those orders and let them off. They were unanimously agreed not to pull any stunts, or try to get “in the spotlight,” as the C.O. had termed it. No, they would cooperate with the rest, prove that they did know how to do teamwork after all.

NOW, however, as they neared the lines, as they roared over the seething front, Kirby was beginning to worry, and his enthusiasm was a little ebbed. Though he ridiculed

himself for it, he had a coldly disturbing premonition—and his premonitions were seldom wrong—that he and his comrades, no matter how hard they tried to avoid it, were going to make one of those Gawd-awful, unforgivable blunders which, just as the C.O. feared, would throw a monkey wrench into the works, and would queer the trio for sure. And anyway, where was that bombing party? Once more Kirby searched the sky ahead, straining his eyes to pierce through the murk. Still nothing but blackness: no sign of any planes. Surely he and his comrades should be catching up to them by now—the three throbbing Spads were fairly shooting through the air. A thousand doubts assailed Kirby.

Suppose it was true that, inexperienced in night-flying, he was not taking the right course after all. For didn't they tell how the landmarks by which one went at day were completely changed, elusively misleading, in the light of the stars? Or suppose that bombing party had decided, at the last moment, to take a different route for some reason or other. In either of these cases, the three might fail to find them, might just be going on a fool's errand which—

He broke off, suddenly surprised by the change in the ground below. No longer were they over that flaming inferno; now the earth lay in shadowy darkness, in black and gray patches. They had crossed the lines, and were well within German territory. Kirby had not noticed it because he was used to being informed when he went over by the anti-aircraft fire which had always greeted him at day. There was none now, nor were there any searchlights sweeping the sky hereabouts. He remembered then that, through the aid of Intelligence, the route picked out was one practically unguarded from the ground, that is, all save the objective itself, the drome, which must have plenty of ground defenses.

The realization that they should soon be nearing this objective, with still no signs of the bombing party, came to Kirby with a shock. He must find those planes at once! A new thought suddenly dawned on him: perhaps the others were flying above those fleecy cloud-masses, to further insure their concealment. Well, he decided, he'd go up and see if they were there, and if they weren't he'd come right down again, so he wouldn't make the mistake of passing over them, unawares.

He waved a signal to his comrades, saw them waving back in the dim glow of their cockpits. Then he pulled back his stick, opened his throttle, and he was leading them upwards. Up they went, climbing straight for those white clouds. Now they were skirting the rifts, entering them, and what had looked like peaceful herds of sheep turned out to be cold soggy masses of mist which closed in around the three, seeping through their clothes and chilling them to their very marrows. For a moment visibility was completely blotted out. Kirby could not see the other planes, nor could he see the front of his own ship. But then, with startling suddenness, they came out above, came out in the thin, clear cold air, beneath the vastest and most infinite dome of sky and stars they had ever seen. There was a sense now of being far removed from the world and humanity cut off by the clouds which floated fantastically beneath them. They were flying alone through the infinite universe of stars and planets.

Alone? As Kirby, leading them on and trying to keep their bearings by means of his compass searched that murk ahead once more, his eyes suddenly lit up. Was he mistaken, or had he actually caught a glimpse of something way above and ahead? He strained his eyes again. And now he was sure of it. Dimly, he could pick-out several tiny pin-points of red, showing against the blackness. Exhausts! There were planes up

there! And as his eyes seemed to focus more clearly on those little red streaks, taking on a wider range of vision as if they were becoming accustomed to the dark, he vaguely made out some of the blurred, birdlike silhouettes from which those sparks were streaming.

They couldn't be the bombers, they were too high. But in all probability they were the escort, flying above and behind the D.H.'s to protect them. For they were moving straight in the direction of that drome. Still, Kirby told himself, he must be careful, must make sure.

Travis now, on his right, was waving to him, calling his attention to those tiny shadowy shapes. Kirby waved back; then, after considering the move carefully, led his comrades into a speedy climb towards the other ships. Swiftly, in order to overtake the others, but at the same time cautiously, they roared upwards. Now they were drawing closer, and those shapes were growing in size, getting clearer, while the pin points of red now became big streamers of fire.

A strange uneasiness began to grip Kirby, and some inner voice sounded a faint warning cry. But he must go closer to see. On they went, and now they were coming up right beneath and behind the others, so close that they could count them, see their outspread wings clearly and—

Too late did that faint warning cry rise to a scream; too late did Kirby try to wave a frantic signal to his comrades, try to turn away.

For already those planes above had suddenly wheeled like startled birds, whose fear promptly turned to demonic fury. Already they had whipped over and around in breathless vertical banks; and now, in beautiful unison, they plunged over one and all and came swooping down, swooping right on the Three Mosquitoes, hurtling down from the night sky like weird comets, with fire streaming behind them. But not

only did fire pour from their exhausts, for now, as they came closer overhead, knife-blades of flame leaped hungrily from their noses, bit out into the darkness.

And, dazed and fearful, cursing himself for not heeding that inner warning, Kirby realized. Fools that they were, they had blundered into a squadron of night-flying Fokkers, a Hun patrol! Inexperienced, they had been unable to tell what was so easy for them to tell by day: enemy ships. And the Germans, regular night-flying pilots, their eyes accustomed to darkness and able to see far more keenly, had spotted the trio at once, spotted them as cold meat, and now they were coming down to make a killing!

EVEN now they were right on top of the three. There must have been at least fifteen of them, and they were closing in on all sides, pouring out their deadly tracer bullets in smoking, blazing streams. Confused, trying to take the situation in hand, Kirby got his comrades closer to him, and they rolled, turned, and zig-zagged to shake off the Germans' sights, at the same time looking for an opening to escape—against odds like these they wouldn't have a show. But their guns were blazing too, trying to answer that hail of enemy bullets. Kirby leaned to his sights, slipped his fingers over the stick-triggers as a vague, Fokker-like shape loomed in front of him. He fired, saw his two machine guns spit, but he missed horribly. Painfully, the realization that night-fighting was altogether different from day-fighting, was being brought home to him. He cursed himself bitterly, called himself a fool and a jackass for disobeying those orders. He couldn't see his enemies clearly enough; he could only fire blindly, aimlessly, at those dark shapes which now swarmed all around, bobbing up on every side, swooping upon the three Spads which clung together so frantically.

And the Germans did know how to shoot accurately at night! Their tracers were beginning to score now. Kirby heard them ripping through his top wing surface, ricocheting on his engine cowling. In vain did he try to lead his men out; the Germans were cutting off every path of escape, placing themselves in front, behind, above and beneath. They made a weird sight, up here above the clouds, in the strange night sky; they seemed almost like fantastic monsters from another world as, roaring and spitting fire, they continued to bear down on their prey. Slowly, but with grim precision, they were closing their trap, walling the Three Mosquitoes in a prison of lead and fire.

Kirby, still rolling and zig-zagging with his two comrades—if they had straightened out for a second they would have been shot to bits at once—saw that trap closing, and his heart sank. Their goose was cooked! Even now the bullets were getting thicker and thicker, the air was livid with flying, screaming tracer, which literally whistled about the ears of the trio. Now the Germans were seeking to close up the last loopholes, crowding in closer. Kirby looked around frantically for some opening, some escape. Panic seized him when still he found none. For a second he did not know what to do.

Then that sixth sense in him prompted him, screamed in his ears:

“Dive! Dive!”

There was an opening below! Pausing only to make sure that his comrades were with him, Kirby plunged his stick forward, put on full throttle, and dived wide-open. Down they shot, straight for the clouds, their planes jerking as if they must break to pieces. Not the orthodox thing to do, diving like that, for even the tough Spad can crack under such a strain, but it was the only course. Kirby hoped that by diving into the clouds, he could lose himself and his comrades from the Germans.

But the Germans were diving too, diving right with them! Their tracer continued to pursue the three plunging Spads, hailing down on them. The Huns, too, were risking their planes in their eagerness to finish their prey.

The white clouds loomed up below Kirby, and suddenly he was plunging through them, nose first. Again visibility was blotted out; he didn't know whether or not his comrades were still with him, and with all those planes there might be a fatal collision. But it did not last long. Once more they were coming out below, coming out with the Germans behind them, plunging with ever-increasing speed. With a hasty sweep of his gloved hand, Kirby wiped his goggles clear of the mist which had frosted them, and now he could see once more.

His heart stopped, his face went white, and he froze with utter horror. In that first second he was absolutely paralyzed, and his plane plunged on, just as the rest plunged on.

For, looming up right below him, right in the path of this furious dive, were two great V's of dark, birdlike shapes, one layer above the other. They were moving on slowly and smoothly, having throttled down enough to send just a few stray sparks drifting lazily from their exhausts.

It was the bombing party! Now, as they loomed right beneath his plunging plane, they stood out in hideous clearness, despite the dark. He could plainly see the twelve big D.H. Nines on the bottom layer, and the ten trim little Spads on the top. Because those planes had been concealing themselves as much as possible by cutting their exhausts, Kirby and his comrades had been unable to pick them out before.

And in their mad plunge, the Three Mosquitoes, the three great and famous aces, were literally leading those fifteen Fokkers down on their comrades, leading them down on the men they had stolen out to help! If it

hadn't been so grim, it would have been screamingly funny! And in one of those Spads below was the C.O. himself, the C.O. who had ordered them to stay home, and who must now be seeing them lead those Huns down!

IN vain did Kirby and his men try to change their course, throw the Germans off the track. For the Germans could not help seeing what was right beneath them. Doubtless blessing their luck, they transferred their attention from the Three Mosquitoes to this greater and far more important prey.

And Kirby and his comrades pulled their protesting, groaning Spads out of the dive at last, only to see the Fokkers streaking down past them on either side, like strange shadows. Dazed and bewildered Kirby got his men back into formation and tried to follow, and now the mad dive was reversed—the Three Mosquitoes were diving after those Fokkers. But the Fokkers, speeded up by the momentum of their long drop, were far below the Three Mosquitoes already, plunging on through the darkness down there. It was too late to stop them! And Kirby sobbed wildly, convulsively, like a helpless child, as he saw them plunge down on that bombing party, saw them plunge down with their guns blazing anew.

The two V's below were thrown into confusion. They had been taken entirely unawares. The escort of Spads wheeled hastily, trying to intercept the Fokkers on their way, stop them from getting down to the bombers. But the Fokkers, dropping like dark streaks, shooting at whatever was in their path, slithered right down between the Spads and pounced like blood-crazed vultures on the slow and cumbersome D.H. Nines, which broke confusedly from their formation, rolling and side-slipping awkwardly, in clumsy efforts to shake off their tiny tormentors. The observers in the

rear seats flanked around their guns, tried frantically to train them on the enemy planes which had now leveled off and were crowding, sweeping in on all sides.

And the next second, as Kirby continued to lead his men down, as they came closer, a sickening shudder went through him. For he saw one of those hard-pressed bombers, it was Number 7 in the formation, lurch suddenly like a wounded beast, and start to nose slowly over. For one awful moment Kirby was certain it was going into a fatal spin, and since he considered himself responsible for the whole rotten business, he felt all the guilt of a murderer. But then the D.H. Nine, reeling perilously, managed to right itself and, headed evidently for its own lines, disappeared slowly into the murk. It was incapacitated, and if it got home it would be lucky!

By this time the ten Spads of the escort, led by the C.O., had reshaped their formation and were dropping on the Fokkers below. But it was of little avail. So much in aerial combat depends on the first few seconds, the opening blow, and the Germans had first taken that bombing party by surprise. They were confused, and confusion is disastrous in a dog-fight. The mix-up which followed was one of the worst Kirby had ever seen. The air below was just a churning mass of planes which whipped all around one another in the dark, as if doing some strange tribal night-dance. Now the Three Mosquitoes were coming into it too, and Kirby could see that the Germans were winning: where the others were confused they were well organized, and stuck stubbornly to those bombers. Though they were fifteen against twenty-one, the Nines were not fighting ships, and hindered rather than helped their side. And though the Huns had put only one ship "out," they were driving the party further and further towards the allied lines, cutting it off from its objective. The raid was spoiled!

Kirby shook his head, and glanced at his comrades to make ready to join the fray. In the glow of their cockpits he saw all his own anguish and remorse reflected on their goggled faces. His cold, premonition' had come true. The awful blunder had been made. In vain did he try to make excuses, try to defend himself and his comrades by the argument that those Fokkers would have found the bombing party anyway. The fact remained that, in a moment of panic, he had led those Huns down—without stopping to think that the bombing party might well be hereabouts. And even if he and his men were not to blame, in the C.O.'s eyes they had done a rash and altogether inexcusable thing. They had disobeyed orders and had sure enough thrown that monkey-wrench into the works, spoiling the raid. And they'd be broken for it, stripped of their wings, sent to Blois—

But this was no time to mope or conjecture. For now they were right in the midst of that mad swarm of planes, saw them diving, zooming, gyrating on every side, and saw the bombers trying confusedly to protect themselves. There was a bomber off to Kirby's right, and one of the Fokkers was attacking it insolently, making repeated lunges from behind. The bomber began to lurch and reel giddily. And at that moment a black rage came over Kirby, a rage against these Huns who were the real cause of their failure. Damn them, they were not going to stop those bombers! Kirby and his comrades might be through, but before they were through they were going to raise hell! And if this was their last fight, it was going to be a good one!

Savagely, his arm shot upwards, waved the familiar signal:

"Give 'em hell!"

Vaguely he caught his comrades' eager response as he opened his throttle and his motor gave a mighty roar. On he shot, straight for the Fokker which was molesting

the D.H. Nine there. Now he was coming in range, leaning to his sights, and perhaps his rage sharpened his vision. He didn't stop to think now that this was night, that he was inexperienced. His fighting instinct was guiding him. The Fokker loomed up in front of him, and he pressed his triggers, watched the blazing tracer rip through the air. The Fokker half-rolled away from the D.H., then tried to bank out. But Kirby didn't give him a chance. With a savage oath, he fired again, and this time his bullets went hissing straight into that dark shape ahead. And out of that dark shape licked a ribbon of livid flame, which mounted with incredible speed, until the Fokker was a great flaming torch, lighting up the whole sky as it plunged earthward, and throwing a weird, flickering glow on all those zooming, diving, circling ships here.

A SECOND later another German went down, though not in flames. Travis had gotten it "out-of-control," and it dropped like a black, lifeless stone. The Three Mosquitoes got back into formation, and they were fighting like winged furies, fighting in their old co-ordinated style. Now they were trapping a third Fokker. Shorty Carn missed his first dive, but swept around and cut the German off from in front; Travis held it beneath, while Kirby pounced on it from behind, to finish it. As he swept down another Spad streaked past him, to his left. Kirby caught a glimpse of a big white, luminous 1 on its fuselage, and he knew it was the C.O.'s plane. The man in the cockpit seemed to look around at Kirby as he passed, and Kirby smiled a foolish, bitter smile. Yes, the C.O. knew!

The realization fed his fury, and he fired again at the Fokker ahead. Carn also got in a burst from his position in front. Caught in the deadly streams of cross-fire, the Fokker collapsed, and fell in two great masses of

fire, with pieces of flaming debris showering from them.

It is not an encouraging sight for a squadron to see three of its planes shot down in rapid succession, and the Germans were visibly affected. They pulled away a little, somewhat daunted and confused. But the Americans, greatly encouraged by the sight of those three victims, began to get into better organization, attacked with new fury. Slowly the fight was undergoing a change. The ten Spads were beginning to suck those Fokkers away from the bombers, which played their part by trying to pull out. Two more Boche ships were sent hurtling down by pilots of the escort. And presently the confused whirl began to take on a more definite pattern, a different rhythm. The fight was resolving itself into a series of duels, between the Spads and the Fokkers they picked off the bombers. The fighting couples spread out, until they were scattered all over the dark sky.

Kirby and his comrades were looking about for "partners," but it seemed all the Fokkers were gone. The escort planes, rushing in and choosing their antagonists while the Three Mosquitoes were still resting from those first fierce conflicts, had left no Huns. But Kirby led his comrades around, searching keenly.

And as he went on, he saw something which brought him great relief. The D.H. Nines had reshaped their squadron, gotten back into their V, and now they were moving out, moving for their objective.

But then the feeling of relief vanished, as Kirby realized that those bombers were going on without an escort. Stripped of the ten fighting Spads, they would make cold meat for any other Huns who might drop on them.

Kirby wavered, considering. All those other Spads were occupied, fighting in distant parts of the sky. His course seemed

obvious, yet he didn't want to risk making any more blunders.

His comrades decided for him. Both of them pulled up close to him and waved, pointing to the D.H. Nines which had again become slow-moving, shadowy shapes ahead and below. Kirby waved his assent, and the three Spads rushed forward, until they got into a position above the V of bombers. Then they throttled down to keep the slow, creeping pace of the Nines, and the whole party moved on, droning lazily, until presently the night had swallowed their fighting comrades back there.

And as they moved on, the eagerness and gusto which had returned to Kirby in the fight, left him once more. Though he and his comrades had gotten three Huns, had helped those bombers get through, he knew that was not going to save them. For, in the C.O.'s eyes, there wouldn't have been any Huns to get if they hadn't made that blunder. He groaned, shaking his head again. There was nothing that could save the trio. The C.O., when aroused, was adamant in his decisions. The only thing the three could do now was not to make things any worse; they would do no more funny business. They'd play escort methodically and soberly.

On they droned, and presently Kirby knew they must be getting near their objective. He scanned the shrouded earth below and ahead. It was dark and still down there, not a sign of life.

But when they got near the drome—

As Kirby continued to scan the ground, he dimly made out a lighter patch in that darkness. It was triangular in shape, and he knew it was the field. It was right ahead, they were drawing closer and closer to it. A vague excitement began to grip him. This was going to be a show! Now, in the darkness below, he saw the leading D.H. Nine wagging its wings, and the slight rolling motion ran through that flight like a wave. They were getting ready!

Suddenly the black earth came to life, as if rudely awakened. From several parts of that shadowy field a searchlight blazed forth like an eye opening, sent its great beam stabbing up into the darkness. One after another these narrow bands of white appeared, until there were a dozen criss-crossing ribbons, waving about the sky like a lot of arms gesticulating excitedly. The thing was a dead give-away of the drome's location, but the Germans, knowing that the planes whose drone they heard had found them anyway, were trying to spot them, stop them from coming.

Back and forth swished those beams, great feelers groping for the strangers who dared to approach. And as the squadron, moving steadily on, drew closer, one of the longest of the beams managed to give the leading bombers a fleeting caress which momentarily threw parts of the big planes into bold relief. And in the next second livid red flashes began to burst from various parts of the ground, and their bursts were echoed in the sky. With loud, racking coughs, the anti-aircraft shells began to fill the air, and Kirby saw their flaming shrapnel shooting out in all directions—a weird display of fireworks. But he knew they couldn't hit the planes way off here, and the D.H.'s were changing their course a little, keeping as far away as they could from those beams. The searchlights kept sweeping the sky, trying vainly to reveal the squadron, but revealing only the smoky cloudlets left hanging by the shells. The danger, however, was yet to come. For while they couldn't pick the planes out here, what would happen when those bombers had to swoop into that area of lights to drop their bombs?

The question was about to be answered. The Nines now spread out, and started a circular course. They were sweeping in a wide arc about the field, far enough out so those lights couldn't reach them.

SUDDENLY bomber Number 1 detached itself from the rest and started to descend right for the field. Kirby knew that its mission was to swoop over the place and drop a phosphorous bomb which would illuminate the whole drome and enable others to score. As he saw it swooping down, faster and faster now as its motor speeded up, a thrill went through him, and he cheered those two brave men going right into those waving lights. His eyes gleamed: he'd like to go down himself, groundstrafe those Huns or—He broke off, remembering his resolution, and had to content himself by leading his comrades around with the bombers.

Down swooped bomber Number 1, lower and lower, for it must get down to only a few feet above the drome in order to do its work. Now it was nearing the field, and instantly those lights stabbed out at it, several of them. One of them was on it now, throwing it into bold relief. Simultaneously another glaring beam fastened itself, and the two were following it down, revealing it clearly. And the big D.H. writhed with pitiful slowness, struggled like the cumbersome monster it was in a vain effort to shake itself back into the darkness. Those beams clung to it relentlessly, until they gave the appearance of two great supports, on which the plane was fastened, and which moved it along. Cripes, thought Kirby, if only a bomber were as cozy to manipulate as a Spad; then that unfortunate ship could slip out of the lights.

It went on valiantly, all the time rolling, striving to unfasten those fingers which gripped it. Now the guns on the ground opened up, sent shells and pompoms and tracer showering up along the beams. Kirby saw those shells bursting closer and closer, saw the bomber still trying to throw off their range. It was only a few hundred feet from the field now. If it could go a little farther!

A cry of horror broke from Kirby. For it had happened.

With a deafening crash which almost threw his Spad into a side-slip, that D.H. Nine disappeared in a mass of flames and smoke, destroyed by its own bombs, which had been set off by the bullets. Down it crashed, and lay in a smouldering, glowing heap some distance from the field.

But now, undaunted, bomber Number 2 was going down To do what its comrades had failed to do. And Kirby, in anguished apprehension, watched it. Now it too was writhing in those deadly lights, trying vainly to struggle through. Again those guns blazed forth.

And bomber Number 2 dove into the ground, where it too went up in a shattering burst of flames and smoke!

Tears welled in Kirby's eyes. Four men gone, and those last two, Roberts and McDonald, were good friends of his. It was a gruesome thing!

The D.H.'s refused to give up. Their new leader, Number 3, signaled with his Very light. They would try to go down together, in the hope of confusing the Germans by appearing en masse, not giving the Huns a chance to concentrate on any one of them. With a slow movement, they spread out, started to swoop for that field, into the arc of danger. They could not bomb it properly this way, but it was their only resort—a last, desperate attempt to score a little at any rate.

Down they started, and Kirby longed to lead his comrades with them. But he must stay up here. If any Fokkers came things would be even worse.

Now they too were coming into those lights. Like the hellish tentacles of a huge octopus, those beams fastened on one plane after another, and sought to suck the ships to destruction.

This time a deadly, thick barrage met them. The ground erupted it like a volcano, and it was aimed with fatal accuracy at the

planes, every one of which was now revealed by the lights. And bombers 5 and 6, being nearest to the field, got it. A shell burst right beneath them, lifted those four-and-a-half ton D.H. Nines like feathers, swept them right up against each other. And they spun slowly down in flaming deadlock.

Eight men gone, and not a single bomb landed. These were grimly convincing facts, and the rest of the squadron realizing that it would be plain suicide to go on, that they'd be picked off like flies as each one went nearer, wheeled from their course and started to climb away. Reshaping their formation, now only seven strong, they started to head for their lines. And Kirby recalled the familiar order: "In event the squadron cannot reach its objective, it will drop its bombs on suitable targets on the way home."

A futile, despairing rage seized him, even though he was leading his comrades over the other squadron again, to escort them. The raid had failed solely because of some dozen bright lights, which had dragged down eight men who would remain unavenged. Kirby's hands itched to do something, anything to enable the bombers to get through.

Those lights, if only he and his comrades could—

His eyes lit up, and a thrill tingled through him, even while he fought to suppress the wild scheme which had thrust itself upon his mind. It would be an act of folly, but there was a chance—a fleeting chance at least—that it might work. Their fast little Spads might do it—maneuver where the bombers couldn't.

Then his face fell. No, it would just be another fool move! The C.O. would be sore enough at them for making that blunder, but if they did a wild stunt like this on top of it, well, it would just make matters ten times worse. Forcing himself to decide against it, he continued to follow that bombing party homeward.

But as he went on a strange, tingling sensation warned him from head to foot, seemed to thrust out all other thoughts or arguments. His heart beat wildly. What a stunt it would be! One of the most glorious, reckless stunts!

“Hell!” he burst out, vibrantly. “We’ll try it!”

And once reaching this decision, he stuck to it. First he signaled his comrades to remain in their positions for the moment. He swept down, coming up right beside the bombers. Then he got out his Very pistol, held it in the air. For a second he hesitated, realizing that he was taking the liberty of being temporary commander, of giving orders he had no business to give. But then he pulled the trigger, and a green light popped into the air. In the squadron’s signals it meant: “Stand by, circle, ready to attack again when signaled!”

THE bombers, having lost their commanders, were glad to take orders from anyone who would give them. And as Kirby shot upwards again, he saw the formation of D.H.’s turning back to resume their circling. Now he was between his comrades again, and getting them as close to him as he could, he waved his arm, pointed down over the side of his fuselage, giving the signal that meant: “Ground-strafe!”

They gestured interrogatively. What did he mean? He couldn’t make his plan clear to them for, while they were almost as reckless as he was, such a wild idea as this never entered their heads.

Kirby signaled again, signaled them to follow and watch. Then, opening his throttle, he pushed his stick forward and was roaring down for that field, roaring down in his old, reckless, what-the-hell spirit.

He saw those narrow beams reaching for him ahead now, but he plunged right amidst them, went on down. Presently they were picking him up; a light held his plane, and

its blinding glare made colors dance before his eyes. Two of them were on him now, as he swept lower. He knew his plane was revealed fully—they could see every detail of it. And a grim laugh broke from him as he remembered the C.O.’s words: “—you’ll admit you have a weakness for getting into the spotlight.”

The men below were seeking to aim their guns at him now. But this was no big D.H. Nine, no “barn door” they had in that glare. It was a dancing, gyrating, flashing Spad—a tiny bird which kept throwing off their sights. Deftly, Kirby kept dodging the rain of bullets and shrapnel which was trying to destroy him.

And now, abruptly, he nosed right into one of the beams, and plunged right down in the blinding glare, though he had to keep his eyes half closed. Down he shot, and he was groping for his triggers. He got them and pressed them, pressed them eagerly, heard his twin guns stutter into blazing life. And he sent a spray of lead right down into that beam, a spray which, to his triumph, snuffed that big searchlight out like one blows out a candle.

Instantly he zoomed up, started to nose into another beam. And as he did so he saw two other lights sputter out in other parts of the field, caught a vague glimpse of Carn and Travis also sweeping around in the spotlights’ glares. A wave of warm affection for the two men came over Kirby. Good old Shorty and Travis: they were willing to let him lead them through hell!

And then there followed one of the strangest, weirdest, and most thrilling spectacles that airplanes ever engaged in. The Three Mosquitoes defying that awful barrage of fire, ground-strafted those lights, went from one to another, plunging for them like moths into candle flame. In their three tiny Spads, which they flew so brilliantly, they were giving battle to this great monster, chopping off its terrible tentacles one after

another. They were working as they had never worked before.

To the men below they seemed to be everywhere at once, swooping down again and again, always from an unexpected quarter of darkness. And the Germans, confused and bewildered, could not put those lights out to save them, for the constant drone of Liberty motors overhead, where the Nines continued to circle, kept them on pins and needles, and they kept trying to train those lights on either the bombers or the three darting Spads. They could not send up planes to fight their enemy either, 'Staffel 44 was solely a day-flying unit, and besides, planes cannot dare to take off during a strafe on their drome.

But the Germans were far from inactive. Despite their confusion they stuck to their guns, kept sending up a terrific barrage which they hoped might luckily catch one of the Spads, at least. And it certainly seemed as if it would. Kirby, plunging upon a fresh light, heard the tracer bullets whistling all about him, saw them ripping through his fuselage, making smoky criss-crosses in front of his face. But they did not stop him; he finished off the light and swept up to look for another.

Now seven of those searchlights had gone out, their crews often deserting them as the deadly tracer poured down on them. The Three Mosquitoes kept on relentlessly, plunging and swooping to complete their job. But Kirby was beginning to feel exhausted, and he knew the same must be true of his comrades. The previous dog-fight had tired him considerably, and the blinding searchlights were burning into his eyes, until he could hardly see. When he swept back into the darkness those colors continued to dance before him, dazing him. But he did not stop. He went on, even though now his tired muscles could not make the Spad maneuver so gracefully, and the bullets consequently got closer.

Down he went on another light, and this time he saw a terrific stream of tracer coming right towards, him. He ducked into his cockpit, saw the bullets ricocheting from the cowling right in front of him. There were several shrill pings, like twicked mandolin strings, and he looked up, in fearful apprehension, to discover that they had shot away most of his stay-wires. His lower wing was weakened! The strain of these mad plunges and zooms must surely break it! If he went on—

He did go. And though before there had seemed to be only a handful of lights, there seemed to be an endless score of them now. His plane was being shot to hell, and each time he went down that lower wing shivered, threatened to break. Then there was the constant suspense about his comrades, when they were lost to his view. It was incredible that all three of them could pull through.

On he plunged, growing more and more tired and dazed. He was almost in a mad stupor, wondering whether he were suddenly in the burning, glaring presence of a lot of suns. Now a strut had been splintered, and he knew, knew for sure that the wing would crack if he had to go any further.

And then, in frenzied, dumb relief, he suddenly noticed that the lights were all out! He still saw them glaring in his whirling head, but they were really all gone!

With a trembling hand he pulled out that Very pistol, fired again—a white rocket which zoomed straight at the D.H. Nines way above. Then, dazedly, he saw his comrades coming close to him, and started to go up.

ANOTHER lone D.H. Nine was coming down now, swooping over the field. Kirby watched in eager hope, watched to see its bomb fall.

But then the eagerness was crushed out of him as if by a final, relentless blow. For

as the D.H. swept down, two new lights opened up on it! Perhaps the Germans had still more in reserve, in which case—

His comrades had disappeared! Suddenly he saw them going for one of the two remaining lights, spraying it. The Germans continued to hold the D.H., and were already shooting at it. Though he scarcely had the energy left, Kirby forced himself to plunge on the other light.

Again he was going into that blinding glare, pulling his triggers furiously.

There was a groaning, creaking sound from his lower wing—it was cracking! Cripes, he was done for! But he plunged on, while that sound grew louder, kept his Spad dashing down until that light, too, went out.

And to his intense relief no more lights went on. His work was finished, though with that loose wing he wondered how he would get home.

The D.H. swept on, safe in the darkness. Suddenly a black object fell from it, struck the earth with a deafening crash and blazed brilliantly. Phosphorus! The whole drome was thrown into clear relief: all the hangars, the A.A. guns, and a bunch of tiny, rushing figures, showed plainly.

Kirby, struggling with his broken plane, was striving to lead his comrades up again, to continue playing escort. And while they went up, they saw that raid being carried off.

Swooping down in turn, those great D.H. Nines dropped their terrible cargoes on hangars, on huts, on petrol tanks and ammunition dumps. They turned that drome into a picture of hell, nor could the Germans stop them. Without their searchlights, though they fired constantly, they could not range the monsters which, despite their clumsiness, now turned out to be pretty ferocious beasts. And to further confuse the Germans, the intense light on the ground, the phosphorus which blazed so mightily, devouring everything flammable nearby,

blinded them so they could not see the ships above.

With grim thoughts of their comrades who had gone to death, and of all the others who had gone to death in the same way before, those bombers left nothing undone in their avenging attack. Several hangars were blazing below, several planes must have been damaged inside of them, and there were so many holes in the field that a takeoff tomorrow would be practically impossible. ‘Staffel 44 would have to leave the allied reconnaissance ships alone for awhile. The raid was a complete success!

But Kirby and his comrades, their planes battered and ripped, were in a tight predicament. They had to keep flying above, though every second in the air endangered them the more, until, a few minutes later, when it was all over but the shouting, the escort suddenly appeared. All ten Spads arrived, which meant they must have beaten the Fokkers, chased them back into their nests. And with the escort safely above, while the bombers put a last flourish to the job, the Three Mosquitoes left for home.

All through that return trip, Kirby’s wing kept cracking, breaking, its fabric peeling off. Though the three flew slowly, so as not to strain their ships, Kirby didn’t see how he could make it. And to add to his suspense was the thought that if any Fokkers appeared, he and his comrades would be absolutely helpless.

But even as he was expecting his plane to go into a fatal spin, as the bottom wing did break, and hung flapping, they were coming in sight of their drome. And to his surprise the tough little Spad, though it had virtually been reduced to a monoplane, held together. And they landed!

However, as they walked across the field, Kirby’s face suddenly lit up with triumphant enthusiasm.

“Hell, fellows, why should we keep mum?” he demanded. “The old geezer

probably spotted us anyway, and, damn it, look what we did! We pulled that raid when it had been given up!”

“Gosh!” Shorty agreed, in the same boasting tone, “that’s true! Even if we did lead those Fokkers down we certainly made up for it! The C.O. ought to be glad we disobeyed those orders!”

“There is a lot to that,” even Travis conceded. And they promptly fell into a boasting match, assuring each other that they were great stuff. And they waited proudly for the C.O.’s return.

Soon the ten Spads came down on the field, and the Three Mosquitoes made their way towards a circle of pilots in which they knew stood the C.O. But before them, an orderly pushed his way through and whispered mysteriously to the grizzled old colonel: “They’re coming, sir!”

The C.O. nodded. Then, raising his voice to a loud bark, he said: “Yes, we came through. A bunch of Fokkers dived on us, but we stopped ‘em, and the raid was a success.”

Kirby nudged his comrades. “Gosh, he doesn’t even know we led down the Fokkers!” And they took a step closer.

“The raid was a success,” the C.O. repeated firmly, “due to some pilots who went down and put out those searchlights. It saved the night!”

And the three took another step closer.

“However,” suddenly the C.O.’s voice was an ominous roar, “if I ever catch those damn-fools who risked their necks in that idiotic stunt, I’ll break them as sure as I’m alive!”

Whereupon the Three Mosquitoes took a backward step this time.

“Maybe,” suggested one of the other pilots, “it was the Three Mosquitoes. Sounds like ‘em.”

“Impossible!” the C.O.’s voice was blankly incredulous. “I ordered them to stay home, and they’d have more sense than to

disobey my orders. However, orderly, you’d better take a look—see where they are.”

The orderly hurried out, but his advance was preceded by the much swifter advance of three blurred figures. The orderly went straight to the room the three shared, knocked on the door, and, receiving no answer, peered in furtively. The room was dark, but he distinctly heard peaceful snores emanating from the three cots. Snickering to himself, he went back to the field office, where the C.O. had repaired, and saluted.

“They’re fast asleep, sir,” he tried to keep his voice level.

The C.O. looked up from his desk, and nodded grimly. But there was a twinkle in his eye.

“Just as I thought—Hmm.” Now he could hardly suppress his mirth. “I suppose it was a dirty trick, not giving them credit for their wonderful work, but,” he banged his fist on the desk, “I’ve got to have discipline in this squadron!” Then he added, as an afterthought, “Perhaps I’ll use those fellows for more night work, in the future.”