

Q-Boat of the Air

A Three Mosquitoes Adventure by Ralph Oppenheim



Gunther's circus just wouldn't fight, but G.H.Q. worked out a daring plan to make them fight! And the famous "Three Mosquitoes" were chosen for the job.

IT was with awe and respect that the "Three Mosquitoes" followed the orderly into the office of Brigadier General Saunders, commander of all the air forces in this sector. To Kirby and his comrades, "Shorty" Carn and the lanky Travis, this was a momentous occasion, for not often did a general at G.H.Q. desire an interview with ordinary pilots. Stiffly, the three men drew up before the desk of the high officer. In perfect unison, their hands clicked up to their caps for a salute such as was seldom seen outside of West Point, and never at the Front. The general looked up from his papers, and returned this remarkable salute with careless indifference. With a nod, he dismissed the orderly. Then, when the door of the office had been closed, he surveyed the three pilots with piercing scrutiny. He was white-haired, the general, but age had in no way dimmed his fighting spirit. He was a grizzled old veteran with a fiery disposition.

He wasted no time with preliminaries or formalities. In a voice which sounded like the roar of a lion, he came right to the point.

"For a whole week now," he thundered, "not one enemy plane has been shot down in this

sector!" And he glared at the three men almost accusingly.

Kirby and his comrades shifted uneasily. The young leader of the Mosquitoes made a meek attempt to defend himself and all his fellow-pilots.

"The general is right, but I hope he'll believe that we've all been trying our best. The Hein—the Germans simply refuse to fight. They have the new-type Fokkers, the D 7s, and with their superior speed they can always slip away from us, avoid combat. We've tried to—"

The general waved him off with furious impatience. "I don't want excuses, I want results," he snapped, repeating the familiar, time-worn sentence which came to all military commanders' lips automatically. "Gunther and his circus, as you, very well know, have been picking on our reconnaissance two-seaters— those old, lumbering box kites which have all they can do to fly, much less fight. Despite the fact that Gunther and his crowd have new and powerful Fokkers, they show their cowardly hides only when they see one of these helpless ships flying alone—cold meat. Then," he went on grimly, "it's just a slaughter.

"Our reconnaissance work is being blocked, and staff is raving for information. We've lost countless ships, and scores of brave flyers who had the guts to man them. We've tried constantly to get better planes for this work, but we won't have the new D.H. 9s with the Liberty motors until the end of the month. Meanwhile, we've got to take other measures." His eyes blazed with anger. He pounded his fist on the table. "Since the Germans refuse to fight us on even terms, since they will only attack those slow and ancient crates, we're going to resort to a few tricky tactics ourselves."

He paused, to clear his throat with a rasping cough. The Three Mosquitoes remained respectfully silent. Finally the general spoke again, and now once more his piercing eyes studied the faces of the three men shrewdly.

“You three are supposed to be the best flyers we have,” he barked, and despite the fact that there was no praise in his words, for he accented the “supposed,” he could not entirely conceal the warm admiration he really felt towards them. “That’s why I picked on you. Now, before I tell you what I want you to do, I must know if you’re willing to risk your necks. It’s a dangerous job, and you might have to work on it for some time. It means fighting in every sense of the word—reckless, desperate fighting against odds that will sometimes be great. More than that, it means expert flying. Only the most skilled of pilots could tackle it, for the slightest slip will prove disastrous to the whole enterprise. It’s a tall order, I admit.” He smiled, but the smile was grim and tight-lipped. “Think you can measure up to it?”

The three men looked at one another, as if each expected to read the answer in the other’s eyes. They had no idea what this was all about, but, from the general’s words, they knew it must be one of those big, perilous assignments which so often ended the careers of the men who undertook them. But it was not in their natures to flinch from any enterprise, regardless of how dangerous it might be.

Kirby’s voice was calm and cool when he replied, “If the general will consider us at his service, and give us the details, we’ll be ready to go right ahead.”

“Good,” the high officer said tersely, and again he could not conceal his admiration. “Now,” he went on, seeming to digress strangely from the problem in hand, “I guess you three men have heard something about the famous Q-boats.”

The three men nodded, “The general means those mystery ships which are used to snare submarines?” the lanky Travis drawled.

“Exactly. The submarines had been preying on helpless old merchant ships and sailing vessels, which could not defend themselves in any way. But then the Allied naval experts invented a trick to turn the tables. They took old vessels, loaded their hulls with wood so they would be difficult to sink, and armed them with guns which, when not in use, were concealed by the sides of the ship or by some fake cabin. In appearance these Q-boats were the same as the other helpless, old merchant ships. The submarine would rise to the surface to make an easy capture. Then, to the surprise and

horror of the Germans, the sides of the Q-boat would drop and several big guns would be exposed. At such close range, it was easy work to sink the submarine with a few bursts. And the effect of this move was instantaneous. Not only were many submarines trapped, but the blow to the morale of the German crews was so great that thereafter they approached any merchant ship, regardless of how helpless it looked, with caution, thus often giving their prey time to elude them.”

AGAIN he paused, and the three men waited, still curious to know just what the general was driving at. They did not have to wait long. The general’s face lit up with triumph.

“Do you see the point?” he asked. “If the trick worked on the sea, why can’t it work in the sky? In short,” his voice rose with eager excitement, “why not a Q-boat of the air?”

The eyes of the Three Mosquitoes widened with incredulity. They stared at the general in puzzled bewilderment.

“A Q-boat of the air?” Kirby echoed, and shook his head, “I can’t see how it can be done. After all, you can’t deal with airplanes the way you can with ships. On the Q-ships, the whole thing is worked by those concealed cannons, and the boat can be as old and junky as you want, because it doesn’t have to do anything but stand pat. But fighting in the air depends upon speed, maneuverability, and altitude, so you can’t take a clumsy old plane and—”

“Who said anything about a clumsy old plane?” the general roared, his face reddening with indignation. “I want you to understand that this thing is not just a joke or a ridiculous idea. It was worked out by experts, and we’ve spent lots of time and money on it. As a matter of fact, the Q-boat of the air has been built. And you’re the men who are going to fly it.”

Again the three men looked at one another. So this was the perilous job which the general had picked for them! Their faces became a little more sober and thoughtful. It sounded laughable, this Q-boat of the air, but not when they knew they were actually going to fly it.

“In a few minutes,” the general was saying now, “I’m going to take you to the secret field where the Q-ship is hidden, and you can try it out for yourselves and become acquainted with it.

Then,” he said slowly, sternly, “tomorrow at dawn, you make your first flight. Is that clear?”

For a moment the three men did not reply, but considered the matter carefully. And then “Shorty” Carn, who had said nothing throughout all the proceedings, popped out with exaggerated enthusiasm, “It couldn’t be clearer, general!”

On the following morning, many soldiers on the ground and some pilots in the sky caught sight of a big, cumbersome-looking reconnaissance two-seater, which was clumsily winging its way towards the lines. All who saw it had the same thought.

“There goes another one o’ them coffins,” a doughboy remarked to his buddy, and shook his head sympathetically. “Poor guys! With crates like that, they’re just so much cold turkey for the Krauts!”

Indeed the ship appeared to be in every way as bad as the worst of the crates which had to be used for want of better planes. It looked old and dilapidated. Its fuselage was patched in many places, though even so there seemed to remain many gaping holes and tears in the faded fabric. The great wings were stained and warped, with the dope peeling from them. Bits of frayed canvas and splintered wood protruded from their trailing edges, and the big wooden struts seemed to be split in many places. There was an overabundance of flying wires, many of them hanging loosely, sloppily. The cowl on the cockpit and on the engine was all rusty and dented. And, like all the coffins, it had an enormous gas tank right between the wings—a big metal box which afforded the Germans almost as good a target as a barn wall.

It was Kirby who sat at the controls, in the forward cockpit. Carefully, he guided the big ship towards the lines. His goggled face was a study of concentration and anxiety. Flying this plane was even harder than it looked; it actually required all the Mosquito’s skill as a pilot. He had to work the stick and rudder like a madman, and his hand was constantly hovering over the twin throttles.

In the observer’s cockpit, with a flanking machine gun before him, sat Travis. The eldest Mosquito’s face was also very serious and thoughtful. With nothing to do just yet, he sat waiting, shifting impatiently, nervously.

KIRBY and Travis were, to all appearances, the only men in the great, lumbering plane. No one would have thought for a moment that the ship, obviously a two-seater, could hold a third passenger. Yet, this was exactly the case. Shorty Carn was in that plane too, though he occupied a strange position indeed. The little man was virtually a stowaway. He was reclining in the fuselage behind the rear cockpit, and from time to time his head would pop out between Travis’ lanky legs, so he could catch a breath of real air. He did not share his comrades’ anxiety and worry. He was too uncomfortable to feel any such emotions. But he was ready—ready to play the part that had been assigned to him in this strange game.

Slowly but steadily, the big ship lumbered on, drew closer and closer to the lines. Already the reserve Allied trenches were swinging below, and Kirby saw the tiny khaki-clad figures down there look up at the passing plane. Some of them waved, as if to encourage the flyers, wish them luck. Kirby waved back cheerfully, and so did Travis.

The third-line trenches were receding from them now, and a moment later they had left the second line behind them. They were crossing the front-line trench now, passing out over the seething stretch of No-Man’s-Land, with the shells bursting beneath them. They were coming to Boche-land.

A tense feeling began to grip Kirby, and he became alert, ready. He picked up the speaking tube, spoke into it.

“You guys all set back there?” he asked. “We’re likely to run into danger soon.

Travis bent down to speak to Carn before replying. “All set. Shorty? Everything ready in there?”

“Absolutely!” The little man poked his head out to answer.

Travis took the tube, “We’re O.K. Don’t worry about us.”

But now they were coming into the zone of danger. Kirby was growing tenser and tenser, and a feverish excitement possessed him. He began to scan the sky keenly, looking in all directions. There was nothing yet, nothing but infinite blue and streaming golden sunshine. But somewhere, enemy planes must be lurking, waiting for prey,

for this was the area patrolled by Gunther and his crew. Gunther! Kirby's eyes narrowed behind their goggles, and his lips drew up into a tight little line. He'd like to get a crack at the famous German ace, the Jerry pilot who refused to risk himself in even combat, but picked on helpless two-seaters. Unconsciously, the Mosquito's fingers hovered about his stick-triggers, as if itching to send the streams of lead from the twin, forward machine guns mounted on the engine. But he must remember that this was not his speedy little Spad he was piloting, must remember the big job he had to do.

Again he seized the speaking tube. "Remember, we're supposed to be reconnaissance, Trav. Get busy. You must be concentrating on the ground when the Jerries see us. Keep looking over the fuselage."

Travis obeyed at once. The lanky man at once appeared to be intensely absorbed by the activity on the ground—troops moving on roads and artillery placements. But he paused to admonish Shorty when the latter poked his head out again.

"Stay in there," Travis told him.

"Don't take any chances on being spotted."

Thus they went on. Minutes dragged by, seeming like hours. Kirby changed their course a little, as they were getting dangerously far within the lines. He kept scanning the sky. Still nothing in sight. The suspense was growing worse and worse.

"We're bound to find them soon," Kirby was saying through the tube, to encourage himself as well as his comrades. "They're sure to come. And remember, if there are too many of them, we don't take them. But there won't be too many. They usually travel in threes nowadays, because three is plenty to slaughter a two-seater!"

Five minutes more, with the big ship still lumbering along. And then, with dramatic suddenness, Travis was shouting through the tube, "Here they come! Right ahead of you!" And he pointed upwards.

Quickly Kirby glanced there. He stiffened, tensing from head to foot.

High in the eastern sky, advancing swiftly this way, were three flitting forms which glinted in the sun. Fokkers! As they loomed closer and closer, assuming shape and color, Kirby saw that they were blue-striped—the markings of Gunther's

circus! But the ace was not there, for his ship was painted all-blue to distinguish it from the rest.

Instantly the Three Mosquitoes prepared themselves for action. Kirby gripped his stick tighter, and his left hand again hovered over the twin throttles. Shorty Carn rolled around inside the fuselage, getting in the position he must assume. Travis reached for the butt of his flanking gun, gave it a final examination to make sure it was ready.

"Act, for cripes sake!" Kirby was shouting through the tube. "Don't let them suspect!" His voice rose shrilly. "Be calm, like me! Keep taking your damned observations!"

"I am!" Travis replied, nervously. "But don't be so damn jumpy! It's all right. We've got to keep cool." And his voice rose too. "If we get excited they'll see!"

"What's all the excitement about?"

Carn yelled to Travis from the fuselage.

"For God's sake, put down that tube and watch your gun! Stop talking like an old maid! Get into action! Gee whiz, you make me sick the way you blab, blab, blab! Be quiet, like I am. You don't—"

"For the luvva Pete, shut up!" Travis bellowed down at him.

THE big plane was flying sluggishly along, as if in serene oblivion of the danger which approached above. The three Fokkers were now almost overhead, coming closer and closer, until Kirby could clearly see their insignias, the black Maltese crosses. The Mosquito's heart was pounding furiously. It was hell, sitting here, flying slowly around, while three speedy scouts were rushing to attack. He had to fight not to turn and flee for the lines.

Meanwhile, in the cockpit of the lead Fokker, far above, a grim-faced German flight commander peered down through his goggles to take stock of the two-seater below. Slowly, the German's thin lips twisted into a faint smile of satisfaction. Here was another one of those "prehistoric packing-cases," as the great Richthofen called them. It's observer was busy with his work, looking over the terrain below. Its pilot was flying along in blissful ignorance of the fate which awaited him. Cold meat!

The eyes of the leader gleamed. It would be child's play for him and his two comrades to

swoop down and shoot that lumbering crate to ribbons.

The German's gloved hand rose to wave the signal. The pilots on either side of him waved back, grinning eagerly. With a roar, the leader's Fokker nosed over and went plunging down in a breathless dive. Right after it dove the other two German ships. Down they went, like streaks, with black smoke pouring from their exhaust stacks.

And Kirby was shouting wildly, giving his last direction through the tube. "I'll wave my arm when the time comes. That's the signal. But we can show that we see 'em now. Use your gun, Trav! I'll do my part."

Travis, feigning horrified surprise, stopped looking at the ground, and clumsily reached for his gun. He swung it upwards, trained it towards the diving Fokkers which were sweeping into range. The Germans' guns blazed first, however, shattering the air with their shrill, staccato bursts. *Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!* Zigzag lines of tracer began to pencil the air on all sides of the two-seater. But then Travis' gun also stuttered into life, spat at the swift attackers.

In a flash, the Fokkers were almost on top of it, flattening out of their dives. The leader swept around to cut off the big ship from in front, the second Fokker was seeking to get beneath it, under its blind spot, while the third attacked from the rear, above. They were taking their time, those Jerries. They were supremely confident in themselves, sure that this would be just an easy bit of target practice. Like buzzards, they closed in, guns blazing. Bullets began to zip through the wings of the two-seater.

The time was at hand. Kirby's muscles tensed for the big moment. His left hand closed on the throttle, and his right was ready to leave the stick for an instant. He glanced about, saw the fleeting blue-striped Fokkers swooping in. All right—now!

His hand left the stick, shot upwards. A split second later it came down again, went to the dashboard, and turned on a switch. And then it happened.

Those three Germans got the surprise of their lives. It was so totally unexpected, so ludicrously impossible, that they were taken completely unawares, caught like rats in a trap.

Magically, miraculously, a change came over that clumsy two-seater. It was almost as if a slow, plodding truck-horse suddenly became a furious racer.

The engine of the American plane ceased popping and sputtering to burst into a mighty, full-throated roar which the Germans could clearly hear above their own purring Mercedes. The big two-seater literally shot forward, with terrific speed. No longer was it a slow and cumbersome crate, though its appearance had not changed in the least. It was a ferocious monster which had suddenly proved to be extremely fleet of wing. Though not as fast or maneuverable as the Fokkers themselves, it was manned by three aces who knew their stuff, knew it to the highest degree. And added to this was the element of surprise, which counts so much in battle. Right into the midst of those Fokkers Kirby hurled his big ship. The Germans, horrified, panic-stricken, were thrown into confusion. Frantically they tried to recover themselves, tried to fight for their lives. But it was too late.

WITH a savage jerk, Kirby pulled back his stick. The two-seater reared on its tail, giving Travis a beautiful shot at the blue-striped plane which had taken a position behind and above. The lanky Mosquito did not fail to take advantage of his opportunity. He stood up in his cockpit, aimed his gun with deadly precision. It spat, thunderously—a long burst of bullets.

The blue-striped plane above seemed to stop short, like a bird surprised by a sudden wound. It flew queerly, crazily, for a few seconds. Then it nosed over and went hurtling down in a fatal, breathless spin. And Kirby's lips soundlessly recorded the count. "One!"

Then he saw the leader's Fokker, trying to attack him from in front, coming head-on with both guns blazing. With an oath, Kirby straightened out, went racing straight towards the enemy ship.

The third Fokker, meanwhile, made a furious effort to get the two-seater from below, get directly beneath its blind spot. It zoomed up under the tail of the huge American plane. But it zoomed straight into a fatal trap.

Right out of the belly of that two-seater, where the blind spot was supposed to be, a new machine

gun blazed into sudden life. It was Shorty Carn who fired that gun, fired it as he lay in the fuselage. With the Fokker right beneath him, the little man had little difficulty in living up to his reputation as one of the best shots in the force. He riddled the enemy plane with a hail of lead. Its wings buckled and fell off, and it dropped like a stone, with pieces of wood and fabric flying from it.

And Kirby counted, "Two!" as he himself was leaning to his sights, blazing away at the German leader's ship. The jagged streaks of flame leaped from the twin muzzles of his Vickers.

And then it was all over! The last Fokker seemed to skid sidewise on a slippery current of air. A tongue of red leaped from its engine, went licking greedily along its fuselage. In a second the whole ship was a mass of livid red, which fluttered slowly to earth, leaving a trail of white, vaporish smoke in its wake.

"Three!"

Dazedly, Kirby straightened out again, stared in surprise at the sky about him. A moment ago the air had seemed dense with planes. Now it seemed strangely empty.

Slowly, Kirby lifted the speaking tube to his mouth again. "Guess we can consider that a day's work," he said grimly. "It wasn't so bad."

Travis was triumphant. "It worked perfectly," he rejoiced. "We fooled 'em proper."

But Shorty Carn poked his head out and lamented sadly, "This damn fuselage is full of gunpowder fumes, and its hotter than hell. Let's go home."

The Q-boat of the air had struck and triumphed. The ingenuity of the Allied aeronautical experts, coupled with the flying skill of Kirby and his comrades, had outwitted the Germans, and had proved the truth of the adage about looks often being deceiving.

THAT first, victorious flight merely marked the beginning of the Q-boat's blazing career. Thereafter, for the next two weeks, it took the air almost daily, and usually it spelled disaster for the Germans. Each time it flew under a different insignia, and at a different hour, so that the Jerries who did meet with it and live would not be able to know that there was only one ship, and not several.

The results were even better than the brigadier general had hoped for. Not only were many enemy planes shot down, but the Germans began to fear every American reconnaissance two-seater they saw. They hesitated to attack, approached slowly and cautiously. This often gave the pilots of the slow, ancient ships time to get away before they were trapped. Consequently, reconnaissance work began to pick up again, and G.H.Q. was getting the information it was crying for.

The adventures which befell the Three Mosquitoes during these two weeks on the Q-ship were the most breathless and hazardous they had ever experienced. They flew in constant apprehension that sooner or later the Germans would get wise to their trick, and set a fatal trap for them. They, too, were careful. They avoided combat with large enemy formations. Four planes were their limit. When they saw more, they put on full speed and eluded them. And more than once their opponents would put up such a stubborn battle that they had to fight desperately for their very lives, and be satisfied to get away themselves, without shooting down their enemies.

It was Kirby's one hope that, before the Q-boat career was ended, the great Gunther himself could be added to its score of victims. Some lucky fate had kept the famous German ace from meeting the deadly two-seater, though he was flying in this sector and was fighting as constantly as the rest of his men.

But Gunther had heard of the work they were doing, though he did not know that it was the work of only one plane. And the German ace had been thinking hard these days, scheming, trying to figure out just what this strange menace was. His circus had suffered a cruel and telling blow. He had lost several of his best men, and the morale of the others was falling dangerously low.

In the rude mess hall, twenty-four gray-clad officers of the Imperial flying corps had stopped eating their breakfasts as a little, hawk-faced man with a nervous demeanor rose from his chair, and tinkled his glass for silence.

"Gentlemen," said Gunther, grimly. "As all of you are aware, our enemies have been tricking us. It seems these swine Americans are flying two-seaters which look old and harmless, but are in reality powerful and speedy fighting machines. I have listened to reports from those of you who

have escaped from these ships, and the reports all agree on the vital point. You attack your enemy, confident of an easy victory, and then he turns upon you and shoots you to ribbons before you can recover from your surprise.”

He paused, his eyes wandering to the faces of his listeners. They sat tense, silent. All had a strangely haunted look, as if this uncanny trick their commander was talking about had robbed them of many nights' sleep.

“Just how many of these deceptive ships are in use,” Gunther went on, “we cannot know. There seem to be several, for their insignias have often been reported and taken down.” The little man drew himself up arrogantly. His eyes narrowed, and his face grew leaner, almost wolfish. “Gentlemen, it is high time we took measures to avenge our fallen comrades, and repay the Americans for their dastardly trick. We have been fooled long enough! We must show them that those who fight for the Fatherland conquer over all!” And he signified the huge banner which hung at the other end of the room, the banner which proclaimed in huge letters: “*Deutschland Uber Alles!*”

The men nodded slowly, thoughtfully. They, too, began to straighten up in their seats, and their faces became grimly determined. Someone muttered his approval of the commanding officer's words, others took it up, until a murmuring of angry voices rose like a deep growl which filled the big room.

Gunther smiled proudly. “It gratifies me to see that your excellent fighting spirit has not been crushed. You are brave men, and the Fatherland will be proud of you. As soon as we have finished breakfast, we shall set out. And now I must ask for two volunteers, two men who must be braver than the brave, who must fly with me and come to grips with these strange, tricky planes. Do not volunteer unless you are absolutely sure of yourselves. Think carefully.” He spoke with grim emphasis. “It will probably mean death—for one of us at least.”

But even before he had finished his speech, the eager cries of the men rose from all sides. Everyone wanted to volunteer, wanted to have the honor of flying and fighting with his leader.

Again Gunther beamed with pride. “Once more I must commend you for your courageous spirit.

The choice is difficult. I can only choose fairly by taking the two men who have the best records.” He glanced across the table, barked out, “Lieutenant Hartwig!” A tall man of Prussian bearing jumped up eagerly, stood at attention. “Do you think you can put up the fight of your life?”

Unflinchingly, the Prussian's steel-gray eyes met the questioning gaze of the commander. “I should not volunteer unless I did,” he replied.

“Very well, you may be seated.” The German ace looked towards another part of the table. Again his rasping voice broke out. “Lieutenant Wolff!” And when the young, broad-shouldered pilot with flaxen hair and blue eyes rose and faced him, he put to him the grim question, “Are you, also, sure of yourself, lieutenant?”

“I am ready to die if my duty demands it,” was the simple reply.

“Well spoken. Be seated. Lieutenant Wolf. And now, gentlemen, I shall explain to you just what we are going to do. We are all going up. But all of you except these two lieutenants and myself shall climb to the highest possible ceiling and hide in the sun, so that the enemy pilots cannot spot you. I shall fly at a much lower altitude with Lieutenants Hartwig and Wolff. Any enemy two-seater we see we shall attack at once, without showing any signs of suspicion. If it is really only an ancient and clumsy ship, all well and good; we three shall take care of it. But if it proves to be one of these mystery planes, it will be up to the rest of you to act at once.

“We three shall try to hold off the enemy craft until you can drop right down from the sun, and then we shall have the Yankee pigs trapped.” His eyes gleamed in anticipation. “We shall continue with this little scheme until we can clear the sky of all those mystery ships. That is all.” And he resumed his seat.

The men bellowed their enthusiastic approval of the ingenious plan. And then Gunther delivered an unusual command. He ordered wine to be brought—wine for breakfast! When the glasses were filled, he rose once more, held out his glass.

“To the mystery ships! May this be their finish!”

Twenty-four officers stood up. Twenty-four glasses were raised. And twenty-four hearty voices shook the very rafters with their “*hochs*”

and “*prosits.*” Then, in the strangely contrasting silence which followed, they drank.

ONCE more the Q-boat roamed the enemy’s skies, out to trap new victims. Once more it lumbered slowly along with its motor popping and sputtering, and its fake gas tank standing out like a tempting chunk of bait for the German pilots.

Now Kirby flew it with comparative ease; he had become well accustomed to it, and could guide it almost mechanically. Travis, too, was so experienced in his part as an observer that he did not have to keep looking down over the side of the fuselage. And even Shorty Carn was used to his position in the fuselage, and no longer squirmed uncomfortably. In short, the three had become a practiced, veteran team, and each knew his part in the game to perfection.

Nevertheless, despite all their experience, despite the fact that they had been through countless fights and emerged the victors, they always found themselves strangely tense and apprehensive during this period of waiting for their foes to appear. As always, Kirby was constantly scanning the sky in all directions, straining his eyes to catch sight of the familiar little specks which could grow so swiftly into deadly Fokkers. They must be extremely careful, the leader of the Mosquitoes told himself, careful to turn and flee at the first sign of a large Jerry formation. K the Germans had learned of the Q-ship, had planned—

He forced himself to drop this ridiculous conjecture. Why should they have learned just now, when for two weeks they had been fooled completely? Besides, he remembered, this business would soon be over, and he and his comrades would go back to their scout planes.

Only yesterday Brigadier General Saunders had told them: “You won’t have to make many more flights, gentlemen. The D. H. 9’s are coming at last, and we won’t have further use for the Q-boat. All these slow, junky two-seaters will be obsolete, and our reconnaissance squadrons will be able to defend themselves.” Then, suffering himself to give out some praise, with which he was so economical, he added gruffly, “You men have done well, very well indeed. Your work shall not be overlooked by the staff.”

And so, after a few trips more, Kirby and his comrades would be through. But—again the Mosquito’s lips drew up into a tight little line—much could happen during those few trips. If—

He stopped short. Even as his trained eyes were picking out those objects in the sky, he was shouting, shouting wildly through the speaking-tube, “Jerries! They’re coming, fellows! Get ready! Three of ‘em—as usual!”

Again the trio were clearing the decks for action. Travis instinctively patted his gun, looking as usual to see that it was loaded. Shorty Carn gripped his weapon under the fuselage, held it in readiness, and Kirby, his eyes on the advancing enemy planes, prepared to switch on the missing sparkplugs.

The three German planes were coming overhead with furious speed, coming like three darting dragon flies. Clearer and clearer they grew. And then, suddenly, Kirby gave a yell, and a thrill tingled through him like an electric shock. For now he saw that one of those planes was all-blue in color, all-blue except for the black cross insignias and its squadron markings.

“It’s Gunther, fellows!” he shouted through the tube. “He’s coming at last. The old boy himself is falling for our show. For cripes sake, we gotta do our work right this time! If we can get him, we’re made. Act up to it!”

“We’d better watch out,” Travis warned, with the authority of the oldest and wisest of the bio. “That bird can fly—don’t forget that!” Nevertheless, the lanky man’s hands were itching to swing his flanking machine gun into action. And in the fuselage, little Shorty Carn, rubbed his palms together eagerly.

“Don’t worry!” Kirby was reassuring Travis. “Just look how he’s coming right along. It’s true, the bigger they come the harder they fall. He’s as innocent as a new-born babe.”

But the pilot of that all-blue Fokker was not so innocent. No, indeed. High above, as he was sweeping into position for a dive with his two men, he studied that two-seater below with suspicious scrutiny, straining his goggled eyes to see every detail of the big, cumbersome ship.

Already, Gunther’s three-plane formation had found two real, honest-to-goodness old two-seaters, and they had shot both of them down in

flames. They were still flushed with the triumph of their victories, which had only aroused in them a lust for more. Lieutenants Hartwig and Wolff, after the two easy battles, had become optimistic, bolstered up with confidence. They forgot all their qualms, and were eager to pounce on any two-seater that showed itself. But not so their leader.

SHOOTING down those two-seaters had started a new train of thought in the German's shrewd mind. How elusive these mystery planes were! Here he had encountered two ships and neither proved to be one of the tricky machines. In fact, during the past two weeks, he had downed several two-seaters and had failed to meet up with any mystery planes. The thought that there might be only one mystery plane had never occurred to him, because his men had reported several, bearing different insignias. But now it had suddenly dawned on him that one ship could easily fly under different insignias each trip. It was mostly a hunch, but somehow he felt that he was correct, that there was indeed only one mystery ship. Get this one and the menace would be removed. And he was grimly determined to get it, even if he had to chase around all day.

So now he studied the third two-seater that had appeared this morning, and wondered vaguely if this was the one. It seemed ridiculous that it should be; it looked almost exactly like the other two flying junk heaps. Besides, since he had decided there was only one such ship, his chances of meeting it soon were very slim. Nevertheless, he must be wary. He looked upwards, squinting in the brilliant sun, trying to pick out the rest of his *jagdstaffel* which must be hiding there. He couldn't see them—they were too high and the sun blinded his vision. The thought that they might not be there after all seemed foolish, but it bothered him considerably.

But then his goggled face assumed the lean, wolfish look which characterized it when he became the fighter, the ace who swooped on his prey. He turned his head from side to side, glimpsing the pilots who flew their planes wing to wing with his. Their grinning, unsuspecting faces made the leader a trifle uneasy, and he waved them a brief signal which meant: "Be on your guard." Again he looked down at the cumbersome two-seater far below. For a final second he

paused, hesitated. Then his arm shot upwards, gave the signal to attack.

Hartwig and Wolff, carried away by their eager enthusiasm, nosed their ships downwards and were plunging like plummet even before their leader had roared into the dive himself. Grimly, eyes glued to sights, Gunther followed a trifle above them.

"Here they come, fellows!" Kirby shouted through the tube. "Watch that blue baby above the others? He's the dangerous bird. We gotta work fast now and—" He dropped the tube with feverish haste, as he heard the clatter of the Germans' Spandaus guns, saw the smoky tracer streaking past. The Fokkers, with the two Lieutenants in the lead, were upon the two-seater, swooping like hawks after a chicken.

But then, as it had done so many times before, the big, lumbering plane threw off its deceiving mask and became itself. Gunther, surprised in spite of himself, stared in awe and horror as the big ship, responding to Kirby's expert control, zoomed like a rocket, smoke pouring from its exhausts. The German ace crazily shouted out a warning cry, a cry which he knew would never reach the ears of Lieutenant Wolff because of the din of motors and guns.

"Look out, Wolff! Look out!"

For as the big two-seater zoomed, it swept right under Wolff's blue-striped Fokker. The lieutenant, taken completely off his guard, saw too late. Relentlessly, Travis, given a perfect shot, blazed away with his flanking gun.

Rat-tat-tat!

And Lieutenant Wolff made good his promise that he was willing to die if his duty demanded it. With a game smile, the young, blue-eyed pilot lurched forward in his cockpit, a bullet through his heart. His Fokker dived like a crazed bird, and crashed in a column of flame and smoke.

But almost at the same moment a cry of frenzied horror broke from Kirby, and the blood drained from his face. Down from the sky, dropping from the sun like hornets from their nests, came the twenty Fokkers of Gunther's *jagdstaffel*, faithful to their leader's orders. The sight of so many planes diving was terrific. The sky seemed to be raining Fokkers.

Before Kirby and his comrades could move, that squadron, bent on vengeance, was upon them,

and the deafening thunder of their guns joined that of Gunther's and Hartwig's, and shook the very heavens.

FRANTICALLY, Kirby began rolling and zigzagging the big ship for all she was worth, working the controls like a demon. Tracer bullets were zipping all around him; he heard them tearing the fabric, ripping the wood. With despair, he picked up the speaking-tube, shouted hoarsely, "Hold on, fellows! Fight for all you're worth!" A strangled, hysterical sob tore from him. "The whole damn German air force is on us!"

Even as he spoke the Fokkers were surrounding them, swarming about them like a pack of angry wolves. Gunther, preferring to direct his men rather than unnecessarily fight himself, shot off Very lights, signaled them to close in on the two-seater from every side. They did. Vainly, Kirby struggled to head for the lines. But everywhere he looked he saw nothing but Fokkers, Fokkers which kept swarming about, weaving around the two-seater as if in some fantastic snake-dance.

With deadly precision, the Germans were closing their trap around the two-seater, seeking to wall the unfortunate ship in a prison of crisscross fire which must shatter it to bits. Thicker and thicker grew the rain of bullets, until the air was dense with flying, screaming lead. Long lines of perforations appeared, as if by magic, in the great wing above Kirby's head. A strut splintered, shivered in its place, threatening to collapse. Flying wires snapped with shrill musical pings, like those of plucked mandolin strings. God, they were done for; they didn't have a chance against this horde of Fokkers!

Then, suddenly, a savage rage swept Kirby, and his eyes blazed with mad defiance. Yes, they were done for all right, he and his comrades; but, by God, they would not be finished so easily!

He grabbed the speaking tube, spoke through clenched teeth, "Fight, Trav! We'll show these lousy square-headed sons! Fight! Don't let's go down without taking a few of them with us!"

He felt a grim satisfaction as he heard the lanky man's gun start clattering furiously behind him. Travis was fighting. And so was Shorty. The little man was the first of the trio to score now. His gun blazed out of the belly of the two-seater,

as one of the blue-striped Fokkers tried the usual trick of getting under the blind spot. The Fokker, caught cold, fluttered earthward like a dead bird.

Another blue-striped plane suddenly swept in front of Kirby's sights, to the right. He kicked right rudder and banked, fired blindly without taking time to aim. Triumph surged through him as he saw his tracers rip up the Fokker's tail-fins. The German plane was not put out of the running, but it flew queerly, lurching and side-slipping all over the place.

The rest of the Jerries, realizing that these Yanks in the two-seater were determined men, doubled the fury of their attack. Again came the deadly streams of lead. *Crash!* Splinters of wood and lead leaped out at Kirby, some of them cutting his face painfully. They had shot away half his instruments, made a mess of his dashboard. A mad laugh broke from his throat. It wouldn't be long now.

He became reckless, as a cornered man will. Damn these Krauts, he'll show them! He'd head for the Allied lines in spite of them, so that at least the Q-ship could be downed in its own territory and the Germans would be unable to examine it.

With a berserk challenge, he opened his throttle full, straightened out, and roared full-speed ahead, guns blazing at the Fokkers in his path. The two-seater lurched in the maelstrom of lead which surrounded it, as the Germans, given an even better target, blazed away. But Kirby and his comrades were fighting like demons, fighting as they had never fought before. Their guns belched and clattered. And two more blue-striped Fokkers were sent hurtling down. Kirby caught one with his forward guns, and Travis got the other as it swooped down from above.

They were getting shot to hell, the Three Mosquitoes, but they were making headway, nevertheless. Slowly, painfully, they were moving towards the Allied lines. The Fokkers tried to intercept them, but Kirby, his recklessness increasing every second, went rushing right towards them, ready to crash into them head-on, if they did not get out of his path. And the Germans, who loved life as much as any other humans, swerved hastily to avoid the fatal collisions.

But all the time the two-seater was being pumped with streams of deadly tracer, and now it was beginning to lurch and reel perilously, as if

drunk from the bullets. Kirby's hopes of getting across the lines began to sink. He was exhausted, and his head was splitting from the terrific din of guns and motors which rang in his ears. The acrid stench of powder choked him, clogged his nostrils. Blood was on his face, streaming from a big gash on his left cheek, and he tasted blood in his mouth, too. Fearfully, he glanced over his shoulders from time to time to reassure himself that Travis was still all right. He was. The lanky man clung faithfully to his flanking gun, training it on every Fokker in sight.

But when Kirby heard the unmistakable *tic-tac-tac* of bullets tearing through the rear fuselage, he winced in anguished horror, as if he himself, instead of Carn, were lying in that fuselage. And he knew, knew even before Travis shouted to him through the tube.

"Shorty!" The eldest Mosquito's voice shook with horror. "They've hit him! He can't move!"

"Damn their souls to hell!" Kirby shrieked, with sobbing hysteria. "They'll pay—the lousy Krauts!"

WITH Travis cooperating in every way, he hurled the big, bullet-ridden ship forward again, made another reckless spurt towards the lines. They fought like two madmen, while their comrade writhed helplessly inside the fuselage, his clothes soaked in the blood which poured from his wound. They plowed and churned their way through the swarm of Fokkers which buzzed all about them, which fastened on their flanks like leeches, and peppered them unmercifully. Death leered at them, screamed at them, spat into their faces from all sides, as they struggled on forward, trying to make this a running fight instead of an execution. And they scored again—another Fokker crumpled before Kirby's smoking guns.

Gunther, who perched above his squadron and directed the attack like a good general, was amazed. What were these bold Yanks made of? He had thought that it would take only a few seconds to shoot them to ribbons, but they were putting up such a stiff fight that his men, surprised, couldn't seem to down them. Perhaps he had better swoop down himself and—but no, that would not be wise. Even now the two-seater was careening so dizzily that he knew his men practically had it. Better to let them get it alone. It

would raise their morale, whereas if their leader had to do the job for them they would never forget it.

By this time Kirby and Travis, fighting with tooth and nail, had managed to struggle as far as the German frontline trenches, and their own lines were in sight. But that was as far as they got. For then the Germans, directed by the shrewd Gunther, rallied their forces for a stupendous, overwhelming attack which Kirby, tired and dizzy, knew meant the end.

The two-seater shivered from nose to tail under a terrific fusillade of tracer. It staggered painfully, and a sudden slackening of Kirby's rudderbar told him they had shot away part of his vertical fin. He struggled to keep control of his ship. *R-r-r-rip!* And a gaping hole appeared in the wing, a hole which began to grow larger and larger, as the rush of wind tore at the frayed canvas and splintered wood. The whole wing was cracking, threatening to break.

Their goose was cooked. They didn't have a chance. It was just a matter of another second now, and—

A wave of giddy joy swept through Kirby, and he tried in vain to voice the happy shout that was in his throat. For in that last second, even as he was resigning himself to his fate, was expecting to go hurtling down, everything changed.

Out of the sky above dropped some two-dozen, flashing Spads, with the familiar tri-colored circles on their wings. As they came down, straight for the horde of Fokkers, closer and closer, Kirby caught their insignias, and his joy mounted even higher. He found his voice at last, shouted through the tube.

"Our crowd, Trav! Our own squadron! Boy, look at 'em coming! Damn them, they're the best lousy squadron in the world!"

And Travis, his grimy, bloody face relaxing into a grin, replied weakly, "So maybe we'll live, after all."

The Germans were thrown into a confusion which almost amounted to a panic. They had been too absorbed in the Q-boat to see the Spads creeping up on them overhead. And the Americans, their pilots overjoyed at the opportunity which had come at last, the opportunity to come to grips with Gunther's elusive circus, came down with a vengeance.

Guns stuttering, motors roaring, they leaped like blood-crazed vultures on the Fokkers. Four German planes reeled out of the fray, and went spinning down. The others at once forgot the Q-ship and turned to fight for their very lives. Madly the dogfight raged—a mass of churning, banking, gyrating ships which fought each other all over the sky.

But Kirby, with his two-seater riddled, and that wing getting constantly worse, did not try to join the battle. Realizing that he would be lucky if he could get across the lines and land, he threw all his remaining strength into this effort. The path was free; the Spads had literally swept the Fokkers away from the two-seater. Kirby got his ship away from that fighting mass of scouts and, struggling with its controls, headed out across No-Man's-Land.

"Can we make it?" Travis' voice was in his ear.

"I—hope—so!" Kirby answered, gasping from the strain of his efforts to keep the big ship level. "How's Shorty?"

"Pretty weak. He still can't move very much, and feels faint."

Kirby shook his head. Then again he put all his efforts into guiding his ship. The Q-boat was now actually reduced to the junky, lumbering crate which it had been painted up to resemble. Its motor was really missing, and its wings wobbled dizzily. From time to time it fell into stalling side-slips, and Kirby had to make his aching muscles respond, fight to hold it up. They, were losing altitude steadily, and the hole in that cracked wing was getting larger and larger. A big patch of blue sky showed through it.

But they were getting across that stretch of No-Man's-Land. Slowly but steadily, the American trenches swung towards them in a maze of zigzag cuts. Closer and closer, until, to Kirby's intense relief, he was passing over them. They were in their own lines. Now if he could only manage to land at once, before that wing cracked, all would be well.

BUT even as the new life-blood flowed back into his veins, and his confidence returned, a sudden burst from Travis' gun brought him up to his seat with a cry of alarm. Fearfully, he glanced over his shoulder. His heart stopped.

Swooping for them like a hawk for its prey, diving right down on them with guns blazing, was the all-blue Fokker of Gunther, the ace. Cleverly, the leader had eluded the Spads and climbed into the sun. He was determined to get that Q-ship, believing it to be the only one in use. And now he came down like a streak, right for its tail.

Again the infernal whine of bullets was in Kirby's ears. He realized at once that it would be useless for him to try any maneuvers. The shattered two-seater was ready to drop into a spin as it was, and it took all Kirby's skill to merely keep it in the air. It was up to Travis, Travis who stood up again and flanked his machine gun towards the blurred shape of blue which loomed overhead.

Rat-tat-tat! Kirby heard the gun clatter—three long bursts. It started again. Then, with awful suddenness, it stopped, was silent.

Kirby jerked his head around, looked. He saw Travis huddled in the fuselage, blood streaming from his helmet, streaming down his goggled face. Sobs of anguish tore from Kirby's lips. Gunther had gotten Travis!

And now the two-seater, without any observer to fire that rear gun, which was its only means of defense in this situation, was entirely at the mercy of Gunther. Shorty Carn, having seen Travis slump in the cockpit, made a game effort to struggle out of the fuselage and get to that gun. But it was hopeless. He couldn't move himself.

Down came the blue Fokker in another deadly swoop. Helpless, Kirby writhed in his cockpit, cursed wildly at the merciless German who had him caught like a rat in a trap. *Rat-tat-tat*, the Spandaus kept clattering, the bullets kept screaming down.

"Damn you!" Kirby bellowed. "If only I could get a chance at you, you lousy skunk, I'd—"

A sharp, stabbing pain ran through his leg, with paralyzing intensity. He was hit. Blood dripped from his leg to the floor of the cockpit, and the sight of it made him feel faint. His leg wobbled helplessly on the rudder-bar; he could not steer at all now.

The blue Fokker Immelmanned overhead, then came down in another breathless swoop. With a shriek, the German's bullets tore into the two-seater's engine. The engine gave one great choke, then froze. The big ship lurched with a force

which almost threw Kirby out of his cockpit. He gave a cry of agony, as his wounded leg was roughly pressed against the joy-stick. Dizzy, his mind in a whirl, he heard the top wing cracking, buckling.

Then he knew he was hurtling down in a fatal, breathless spin, with the wind tearing at him in a gagging rush, and the flying wires screaming like a weird siren. Down, down, down, with Kirby too weak and dizzy to do anything but sit in the cockpit, his head swaying from side to side.

And close above, diving and leveling off in turn, Gunther followed his prey, watching to see that it crashed.

Again Shorty Carn writhed in the fuselage, as he saw the blurred brown earth coming up with a breathless rush. Again he could not move, and cursed with weak, futile fury.

But as the ground loomed closer, the sight of it seemed to stir Kirby back to life again. God, they were going to crash head-on! Weakly, his hand closed on the stick, tried to move it. But his tired, aching muscles refused to respond. He waited, tried to rally up new strength. Again he gripped the stick, and put his whole body into the effort. It moved. He was getting it back.

He was just in time. Even as the nose of the riddled two-seater was about to plunge itself into the earth, Kirby got it up, managed, he knew not how, to pancake. *Crash!* The terrific impact smashed the undercarriage to smithereens, and the fuselage slid down and settled, whole, but badly shattered. They had landed on a swampy, desolate-looking field, just behind the Allied trenches.

BUT before Kirby could struggle out of his cockpit, before he could look to see how his two comrades were, the wily Gunther, seeing that there were still signs of life on the Q-boat, instantly nosed his blue plane down again, and plunged in a cloud of black smoke from his own exhausts. Not content with shooting the mystery ship to bits, the German ace was coming down to slaughter its crew.

In a second, the blue Fokker was right over Kirby's head. He saw its square, coffinlike nose, saw the jagged streaks of flame leaping from it. Bullets tore up the dirt on the swampy field. They were a little short of the wrecked Q-boat.

Carefully, with mathematical exactitude, Gunther pulled back his stick just a trifle, decreasing the angle of his dive. The nose of the Fokker swung forward, and the streams of tracer began to move towards the Q-boat. They were coming closer every second. And Kirby knew that at such close range, firing at this stationary ground target, Gunther could not miss.

Trapped, caught in the tightest corner he had ever been in, Kirby looked about wildly, frantically, praying for some loophole, some way to stop this fiend whose bullets were creeping up along the ground. His eye fell on the flanking machine gun mounted on the observer's cockpit. It was still intact, still loaded. A faint hope flickered in Kirby. He unbuckled his strap, tried to get to his feet. His wounded leg burned as if it were on fire, and at first he couldn't move at all. But then he ground his teeth, and forced it to respond. Gripping the cockpit cowl, he half-hoisted himself to a standing posture, reached for the gun. It was too far—he couldn't get it.

The Fokker was almost right on top of him now, and some of its bullets were raking the wrecked ship. He must hurry, hurry—or all was lost. With one stupendous effort, he climbed from his cockpit to the fuselage, straddled it, while his face contorted as the pain in his leg shot through his whole body. But now he could reach the gun. His two arms went over Travis' huddled figure, got the butt of the weapon. And as the all-blue Fokker seemed to pounce like a tiger right on the Q-boat, as Gunther got the target in his sights and commenced peppering away at it, Kirby swung that gun upwards, swung half-blindly towards the blurred shape of blue above. He pulled the trigger, felt the gun vibrating in his hands. He kept firing, kept clinging to that gibbering machine gun even after the blue Fokker, its engine torn apart, its propeller shattered to bits, dived into the earth and crashed close by the Q-boat in a shattering burst of smoke and flame.

Gunther was dead. He had gotten the Q-boat, but the Q-boat had gotten him.

Soon the Red Cross men appeared and bandaged the three up temporarily.

Travis had come to now, and as the three lay side by side, they grinned at each other tiredly.

"Guess we'll be out of this war for a couple of weeks," Kirby said, bitterly. "Doesn't that get

you? Here I was thinking we'd soon be through, that we could get back to our Spads and do some real, honest-to-goodness fighting, but now we gotta lie around."

And the others agreed with him.