

Stars For China

A Three Mosquitoes Adventure by Ralph Oppenheim

I

This was China! The rolling Tachin hills, rising from the yellow Yangtze fields, looked the same as any other peaceful country panorama. But the blue afternoon sky held menace—the menace of the grim, deadly planes of General Kosimi, invading warlord from Nippon. Rapier ships that could appear out of nowhere and strike with gibbering guns and hurling bombs.

Just now three trim-winged Boeing planes were racing toward the north, Wright rotaries thundering in unison, wings glinting in the slanting sun. And in their cockpits sat three Yank flyers—the world renowned “Three Mosquitoes.”

Kirby, their impetuous young leader, flew the apex ship as always. To his left, the lanky frame of Travis, eldest and wisest Mosquito, protruded from the second Boeing’s cockpit; and in the right-hand ship sat the rotund “Shorty” Carn whose goggled moonlike face wore a look of eager joy.

Thus had they flown for years, a three-man machine of coordinating wings.

Under them, peaceful hills, with squares of slanted rice-farms, roiled past. But Kirby’s eyes were alert to the blue sky, wary, keen. War lurked close; a mighty, undeclared war but still threatening the peace of nations. To the northwest lay Suchow and the Lunghai railroad, which the Chinese was defending against the invaders from Japan.

“But we’re going to keep clear of all that,” Kirby muttered, as he led his comrades due north, toward Tsinchai. “We’re going to stay out of this fracas!”

Not that the ships they flew were altogether peacetime ships. Each was armed with one forward Browning machine gun. But those guns had been put on only to cope with Chinese bandits and bong-piaus—pirates—who endangered peacetime commercial flying. Many valuable shipments had been entrusted to the Three Mosquitoes. But they were flying no baggage now.

A look of tense anxiety tautened Kirby’s goggled face, but beneath the tension, one portion of his mind held more pleasant thoughts—the thoughts of Gloria Clayton, who must be waiting hopefully in Tsinchai, certain that the Three Mosquitoes would come there at once if they received her message.

They had received it all right, and now, after hours of swift flight, they were winging perilously close to the war zone they had meant to avoid. Not only because their country was neutral. After all they were

free agents. But to Kirby it wasn’t a real war with clean-cut sides. Even without Japan in China, warlord was always against warlord, pirate and bandit became governors of provinces and—

Abruptly Kirby jerked out of his musings. His goggled eyes had caught a movement from the cockpit of Travis’ Boeing. Travis was waving in sudden signal to the west!

Kirby’s eyes sharpened. Alert though he had been, Travis eyes had been quicker, keener. Rising over a hillock crest were three glinting dragonfly shapes. In echelon, they were darting through the air, parallel to the Mosquitoes, not more than a quarter of a mile away.

The sun caught them, glinted silver and red. Blood-red balls on wings and fuselage.

Kirby sat up with nerves tense, a cry on his lips.

“Japs!”

Nakajima 92s—swift monoplane Nipponese rapiers of the sky! And at sight of those three darting rapier shapes Kirby felt a sudden full sense of the grim menace hanging over all of China—military invasion, war!

His hand tightened on his stick as his other hand rose to wave command to his comrades. They had best pull off, drop below a hill. No sense being spotted by those Japs. For obviously the Nakajimas were scouting for trouble. Though the Boeings were marked with American commercial markings, the Three Mosquitoes could take no chances.

A sudden alarmed cry broke from Kirby, even as he was about to wave. With a roar Shorty Carn’s plane flung out of the three-ship V like a sudden ignited rocket! Kirby glimpsed Shorty’s helmeted head, bending to the windshield. Shorty was heading toward the three Nakajimas!

“You little fool!” Kirby grated into the slipstream. “Have you gone nuts?”

But Shorty had almost reached the three echeloned Japs and Travis had swung after him with his usual swift decision. Stunned, Kirby fed throttle to spur his Boeing after the two.

Then he saw now another insignia on those Nakajimas— and understood!

Painted on each fuselage was a wide, flat sword—a samurai sword.

The mark of Major General Kosimi! These were planes of that Jap warlord’s corps! Shorty’s anger-keen eyes had seen the swords, and that was

enough—that and the memory of a Eurasian girl he had found in blasted Nanking.

There was no stopping that vengeance-bent little Mosquito now, Kirby realized, as had Travis. Travis and Kirby could only follow him.

Then suddenly Kirby drew a breath of relief. Shorty's crate had slowed, started to turn away from the attack. Shorty's rage must have cooled in that brief, headlong spurt. He must have realized the trouble he'd get his comrades into if—

RAT-TA-TAT-TAT-TAT!

The blurred staccato clatter that reached Kirby's ears brought a fresh amazed cry from his throat. Then his very heart stopped as in a flash, the ghastly thing was happening before his horrified eyes!

Those three Nakajimas had whirled like three startled vultures! Attesting to the flying skill of their pilots, they had pivoted on empty space! They must have seen that Shorty didn't mean to attack; but that didn't stop them! They had opened fire on him in deadly unison. Above their sharp noses livid flame spurted in vicious tonguing streaks.

Kirby groaned as he saw the smoky tracer lines drawing straight to Shorty's crate. Shorty, surprised, was trying to roll to the defense, but had been taken unaware, and his Boeing, originally a two-seater, was slower than those scouts. With the precision of executioners the Japs poured out rounds of deadly lead. Shorty's ship staggered, still trying to pull up. A pitiful spasmodic burst came from his Browning—a wild, hopeless burst from a flyer who was actually one of the greatest of all sky-marksmen. But he had no chance to aim, with a floundering, drunken ship.

"Shorty!" Kirby yelled hoarsely.

Shorty Carn was going down! The Boeing was a crazy, broken thing, hurtling down toward those rolling hills.

Hurling his own crate forward, Kirby's hands gripped his gun-trips. Where was Travis? They must get these devils— get to Shorty! His eyes searched frantically for the eldest Mosquito's crate.

He saw it then—saw it with eyes bulging incredulously now behind his goggles.

"No!" he grated crazily. "No!"

And in that moment he realized what kind of fighters these Japs were. No sooner had they bagged Shorty than they had swung upon Travis, like vultures who'd tasted blood and wanted more.

The glinting arc of Travis' propeller spread suddenly into an immense spewing disc of fragments, shot off by Jap bullets. And then Travis was fighting controls as his Boeing, too, went down, screaming, with its propellerless motor.

Kirby thought he saw a tiny upheaval down there, Shorty's plane crashing, somersaulting!

Crazily, Kirby was trying to put down his nose, with some thought of trying to aid Travis' spinning, crash-headed Boeing. A smoky wraith of tracer zigzagged viciously across his cockpit, slugs ricocheting past his face. He heard lead hacking through his fuselage, but dazed and shocked as he was he had the sense to pull up.

The three Nakajimas were bobbing above him, pointing their noses downward, with the goggled, little kill-wreathed faces of their pilots limned between the butts of their flame-tipped guns.

Cursing, he flung his Boeing up at them, fingers closing on his trips. His Browning flamed and gibbered, grazing a sun-marked wing. The Japs, startled by this sudden attack, soared up as one just as Kirby saw that Travis must have struck earth.

II

In a red fighting rage, Kirby hurled after the soaring Nakajimas, trying to assuage his grief and shocked horror by fury. The Boeing answered to his anger, swinging up through the sky with a speed it had never been built to make.

He might have reached those three Japs, but at that instant a new sight met his goggled eyes, sobering even in his frenzy. More darting dragon flies, a full dozen of them now, flitting out of the west, coming to join the trio of Japs. Already they darkened the sky over his head like a threatening storm cloud.

He was already having some trouble with his left aileron where bullets had nicked it. To stay here would mean suicide. His own slaughter would be the only result and would aid no one.

He stucked over, ruddered, streaking over the hills towards the north. Tsinchai! He must get there. To General Mang T'ao's Chinese stronghold, get the Chinese to organize a search party for the two fallen Mosquitoes if they had crashed alive!

It seemed almost incredible now that only this morning the Three Mosquitoes had been in Hongkong, with their Boeings sold to a Chinese merchant, and with reservations made for a cabin on the S.S. President Jackson, sailing at noon for the United States.

The scene at the crowded, glaring dock came to Kirby. He could see the big liner, the Americans jamming its decks, eager to get out of war-torn China, the dirty dock ronins begging last pennies, and the Lascars loading the ship. And his comrades and himself sitting on their baggage on the dock, dressed in linen suits and Panama hats.

"We'd better be getting aboard, guys," Kirby remembered himself saying, "Be cooler at the ship's bar."

The lanky Travis, nodding, had started to unkink his long legs. But Shorty Carn had been loathe to move.

“Must we really sail?” the corpulent little Mosquito had demanded, blowing a puff of smoke from his briar pipe toward one of the “No Smoking” signs. “I swear I never believed you two meant to go through with it! I thought when it came to the final showdown you’d want to stay.”

Kirby remembered how tolerantly he had smiled. “What’s got into you, Shorty? What’s the difference to you whether you’re in China or Frisco? All you care about is sleeping, taking things easy.”

A strange fire had gleamed in Shorty’s mild eyes.

“Listen, fellers. There’s a war here—an awful big war! There’s fighting to be done, and we’ve never run from a fight yet.”

“This isn’t our fight,” Travis had reminded.

His eyes had lifted significantly to the Stars and Stripes fluttering above the liner’s prow, against a background of junk sails, sam pans, and the blue-green of the China Sea.

“Oh, I know the U.S. is neutral,” Shorty had protested. “But I’m talking as an individual, and I know which side I’m rooting for. When a nation just decides to walk into another nation and grab off neat hunks of it, that kinda gets my goat. And when a little tin major-general goes around burning villages, massacring helpless non-combatants, doing stuff even a Chinese bong-piau bandit wouldn’t do, all in the name of ‘protection’—”

Shorty’s voice had been intense, his happy-go-lucky face grim. And his two comrades had understood. They had all seen some of this undeclared war, even while trying, as neutrals, to keep clear of it. But it had not struck home to Kirby and Travis as it had to Shorty Carn. Shorty had gone alone to Nanking after its historic sacking by the Nipponese invaders—to find and rescue a pretty Eurasian girl upon whom he had one of his periodic crushes. The little Mosquito was a born romantic.

He had found her. And when he had rejoined his comrades at Shanghai he had been wildly raving for two days. Raving about the brutal, kill-crazy soldiers of Major General Kosimi, a leader of the Japanese campaign in Central China.

Henceforth to Shorty the word “Japanese” and Kosimi had been synonymous; Kosimi, the samurai whose ancestral sword insignia appropriately marked his planes, his tanks, his other mechanized instruments of war. And Shorty had wanted to fight the Japanese. But he was one of a trio who fought together or not at all, and he had been overruled.

He had been still trying to dissuade his comrades when a deepthroated growl from the siren of the President Jackson, the first warning call, sounded.

“Come on, old feller!” Kirby had said. “Let’s forget China and this war—go back where we belong!”

So the Three Mosquitoes, with Shorty Carn silent and morose, had headed for the first class gangplank, making ready their passports, pushing through the thick crowd at the foot of the gangplank.

Scores of people who had been unable to book passage were arguing vainly with ship’s officers, offering fortunes to be let aboard. So frantic to get out of China that it was as if the Japanese were at the gates of British Hongkong, instead of more than eight hundred miles away.

Then the Three Mosquitoes had recognized a young, excited man who worked in the Hongkong associated news office. He was elbowing his way through the crowd, calling their own names.

“Oh, there you are!” The news man had eagerly greeted Kirby. “Got a message for you! But you’d better tell your friends not to make a habit of sending you telegrams via our news wire, for us to deliver, if I hadn’t happened to know you were sailing on this ship—”

He had handed the surprised Kirby a long strip of typewriting, and his two comrades had looked over his shoulder as he read:

KIRBY AND MOSQUITOES UNCLE NORBERT FEARS WAR GETTING TOO CLOSE TO PLANT MUST EVACUATE AS MANY PLANES AS POSSIBLE HE DID NOT WANT TO BOTHER YOU BUT NO ONE ELSE TO TURN TO SO I AM ASKING MYSELF AND PRAYING YOU WILL COME AT ONCE TO TSINCHAI

GLORIA CLAYTON

“I knew Fate would stop us from running out of China!” Shorty had whooped jubilantly.

Kirby had been silent, his thoughts occupied with the sender of the message—lissom, blond Gloria Clayton, doing a man’s job, helping her uncle, Norbert Clayton, run his airplane factory. Norbert Clayton had come from America to fill this industrial need for China-built planes. He’d started building transport jobs for the commercial airlines when the Mosquitoes had come to know him.

They owed him and his lovely niece a debt of gratitude. A round-the-world flying tour had left the trio stranded and broke in China. The Claytons had given them test and inspection work at the plant, then later recommended them to wealthy Chinese merchants for transport jobs. Only the war had interrupted that.

“Can’t understand Clayton wanting to evacuate the plant,” Travis had said then. “True, he’s up in the Anhwei province, near the central war zone, but Tsinchai is the strong-hold of General Mang T’ao!”

“So what?” Shorty had chirped. “The thing is his niece has asked for our help. We owe it to them, fellers, and you know it!”

“You’re not fooling me, Shorty !” Kirby remembered saying. “But get this straight! Even if we do go to help the Claytons we steer clear of any war stuff, see? And”—there had come a fresh growl from the Jackson’s whistle—“we can’t change our plans now! We’ve our tickets, we’ve sold our planes—”

But when the President Jackson nosed out from its pier, its passengers waving farewell to China, the Three Mosquitoes had been taking their three Boeings off the Hongkong airport and flying right back into the heart of China!

It had been the wise Travis who had decided the issue, at the last moment. He had deeply felt that debt they owed the Claytons, and had been sure there was urgency in Gloria Clayton’s plea.

They had disposed of their steamship reservations without the slightest difficulty. Frenzied Americans had eagerly grabbed them. They had succeeded in buying back the Boeings from the astonished Chinese merchant, and swiftly got into their familiar flying togs.

All that such a short time ago—and now this!

Even as Kirby raced on now, the full shock of what had happened engulfed him. It had all been so terribly swift that it seemed like a nightmare. The three invincible Mosquitoes

—two of them downed in seconds! His eyes misted now so that he could scarcely see, Kirby could hardly believe that Shorty and Travis were not bobbing by his side.

But they were not. He was fully conscious of that as he glided his moaning Boeing out of the afternoon sky, his eyes and thoughts still hazed with grief and horror. He scarcely saw the Tsinchai landing field, for as he went down it seemed to him the haze only thickened.

He saw the stubble field swinging up to meet him, sticked back, cut the throttle out. His wheels touched on three points, rolled. Then, with sudden awakening, he was kicking furious rudder, for he saw a gaping hole in the field directly ahead of his taxiing Boeing!

The crate swerved, but not far enough. The hole seemed to leap at it. Kirby cut ignition. He felt his plane carry him up with sickening speed, then down again, heard a roaring crash as wings buckled, telescoping. He felt his body buffeted and stunned.

Then rough hands were wresting him from the wreckage of the plane that had half somersaulted in the hole, then telescoped to a junk-heap. Shaken but luckily unscathed, he was being hoisted to his feet—to see gleaming bayonets encircling him!

And behind the bayonets, the rifles, undersized men in mustard, with bowl-shaped steel helmets and slant-eyed yellow faces. Japanese! Here in Tsinchai. Impossible! They took his only weapon; a Colt. They searched him as he stood there dazed. He heard himself protesting about being an American, but the bayonets only prodded closer. Common sense told him to make no resistance. He knew the swift temper of the invading Japs.

A smart figure in a pill-box hat and the red bands of a tai-i stepped through the ring of soldiers. He carried an automatic. He glanced at Kirby as he might have glanced at some animal, and barked an order.

“March, please!” His precise English came like a hiss to the still dazed Mosquito.

As Kirby marched off the field between bayonets he saw that the hole in which his plane had been wrecked was one of many. Shell-holes! Hangars were smoldering ruins.

Then he was being led through Tsinchai’s cobbled streets, appalled, incredulous, at what he saw. Smoke swirled from ruined buildings, from gaping walls and broken roof-tops.

Tsinchai was in blasted ruins!

The streets were littered with corpses—Chinese corpses, most of them civilians, a few gray soldiers. Some were horribly maimed. Some, like stuck animals, still spilled crimson blood on the walks. And through this litter and ruin clattered open camions filled with Jap soldiers grinning their triumph.

How had the Japs ever taken this Chinese stronghold—evidently driving out General Mang T’ao and his armies? General Mang T’ao was one of the best of all Chinese commanders. Kirby had met him, knew him to be fully versed in military strategy. Yet somehow he had been routed, and the battle must have taken place this very day.

The Claytons had known it was coming! That was why Gloria Clayton had sent that hurried summons. Kirby’s heart, already full, went tighter. What had happened to Norbert Clayton and his brave niece?

With his captors, he was crossing the town’s square, usually cluttered with tentlike markets. Now the tents were cleared away and, tied to upright posts, lamps and stanchions, were scarecrow, writhing figures. Most of them looked like coolies—but Kirby couldn’t tell because of their disheveled clothes, beaten faces.

A crash of rifle fire split the square. Kirby saw smoke still coming from a line of Japanese guns, a trim firing squad. Three figures on the posts, jerked and went limp.

The firing squad, led by a red-banded officer, moved to another group of helpless victims.

Kirby turned away, sickened, but he heard the rifles crash again. The lieutenant leading his own party

grinned evilly as his slant-eyes swiveled to the outraged Mosquito.

"They make big mistake," he chattered. "They resist. They must be eliminated—for safety."

Kirby's nails dug into his palms. He had not believed stories of these wholesale executions.

War-crazed men were killing for the sheer love of killing!

III

Kirby's captors slowed their march as they reached the outer gate of a large, sprawling building—the biggest "Big House" of the village. It bristled with sentries. The flag with the Rising Sun was being lowered on its roof-staff.

"Mon wo akiri!" barked the officer leading Kirby's party. Rifles snapped up to present arms; a gap appeared in the sentries. Kirby was marched through, and into an immense hall with slat-blinded windows.

Light gleamed on brass and gold and silver of high-ranking uniforms; on swords. Flanking one side of a long table sat a group of Nipponese brass hats. Some looked like mere school-boys; others as old as Methuselah, with wrinkled, prunelike visages and watery eyes.

But Kirby's gaze was drawn to the man in the center of the group, a squat, thick-set figure with black hair cut to bristly closeness. His features were sharp, jutting, despite their Oriental cast. His eyes were deep-embedded, glowing, oblique slits. A pair of thick-lensed glasses enlarged them, making them seem like the eyes of some devil, intense and fanatic.

Among the red bands, the glittering medals on his uniform, Kirby distinguished another insignia—a sewn-in replica of a samurai sword. And instinctively knew this cruel visaged Jap.

"Kosimi!" he gritted aloud, and the bayonets of his captors prodded his spine.

"I am Major General Kosimi, yes." The squat Jap's English was flawless, his face impassive, but he spoke in an unchanging tone that gave his voice menace. "You are Kirby, of the three who call themselves the Three Mosquitoes. You and your friends were summoned here by the American girl and her uncle who own the airplane factory. They used the news wire which unfortunately now is out of commission, as are all other contacts except our own."

Kirby's eyes were slits. What had this devil done with the Claytons?

"Your flyers shot down my two comrades in cold blood!" he grated. "If you think you can get away with that—" A fresh prod of bayonets checked him.

Kosimi raised a hand. "I have received a full report from my flyers. They had no alternative. One of your planes made a hostile move. Your ships were armed,

and my men had to defend themselves. It is regrettable." He sighed.

Only his hopelessness enabled Kirby to control himself. Those Nakajimas had been there to intercept him and his comrades, had just waited for an excuse to attack! And by a cruel irony, Shorty had given them that excuse. The Jap's alibi would stand up, too.

"I have long had interest in you and your comrades," Kosimi said. "I have watched you through my agents more closely than you dreamed. At Shanghai bars sometimes you talked and we learned that only the little one who made the hostile move wished to fight against us on the side of these Chinese barbarians who endanger civilization. Perhaps the tall one felt likewise. You, however, steadfastly refused to fight for the Chinese. You are level-headed and, being a soldier of fortune, know the Chinese have no great riches to pay."

Kirby could restrain himself no longer. Face livid, he lurched forward.

"Listen you," he grated, "do you dare insinuate it was because of money I stayed out of this damned war! You—" He tried to hurl his fist into that cruel yellow face.

But he was wrenched backward. Blows cuffed him, rifle butts slammed against his ribs, one slashing bayonet lunged. Then Kosimi's monotone voice rose, giving orders in Japanese.

His body bruised, Kirby was again maneuvered by bayonet tips.

Night was falling as he was marched across the street to a drab stone building that had been some sort of warehouse.

Within was one large, flag-stoned chamber, dirty, illuminated by strong bulbs. Packing it was a throng of prisoners.

Chinese coolies, merchants, men and women, even children, sat or lay about the floor in misery and despair. A stench of sweating bodies, of sickness too, assailed Kirby's nostrils as he was thrust through a bronze door which closed behind him.

He immediately noted the bamboo-barred windows, the shadows of sentries outside. He passed a moaning half-naked Chinaman, with sweat glistening on his face. A wrinkled Chinese mother was trying to comfort a wailing infant. The air was close, fetid. Rotting scraps of food were on the floor. The unsanitary crowded place was a perfect incubator for disease germs.

Black-faced, grim, he was looking for some vacant spot, this white Yank flyer, amid all these wretched, miserable captives.

'Kirby!'

The low, feminine voice, calling his name jerked him full around. Huddled against the chipped wall, he

saw two figures sitting on straw matting. A girl, a white, blond-haired girl in this festering prison!

"Gloria!"

Kirby rushed to her. A wan welcome came then from Norbert Clayton, beside her. His rugged face was deep-lined with horror and strain.

"The devils!" Kirby choked, squatting down beside them. "How dared they stick you in this place!"

"Kosimi figures we won't want to stay here long—not with Gloria here." Norbert Clayton explained. "It's part of his little campaign to make us capitulate to his devilish plans!"

"How did he take Tsinchai?" Kirby demanded.

"Tanks," Norbert Clayton said simply. "That's what drove General Mang T'ao out. Kosimi brought them under an aerial smoke-screen—a huge squadron of them. They forced the south and east gates, drove the Chinese out like steam-rollers."

"They want Uncle Norbert to run his air plant for them!" Gloria said defiantly.

Kirby stiffened. If the Japs had such a plant in the heart of China there'd be no stopping them. Planes set loose to bomb women and children!

"But they can't do it! That plant is American property! You can make representation to the U.S. and—"

Clayton laughed harshly. "Not when we're cut off from all communication. We might even have been killed during the attack—one of those accidents of war for which the Japs will nicely apologize. They could have said they took over the plant rather than let it fall into the hands of the Chinese."

"In other words," Kirby said tightly, "if you don't agree to run the plant for them they'll take it anyway."

Clayton's jaw jutted. "We're not licked yet, though!" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "We've planned to get out of this hole! Our faithful Number One Boy—you remember Ah Foy—is going to help us. He's with a staff of coolies the Japs sent here to remove the sick—on stretchers."

He waved an arm over the sweating, seething mass of humanity. "Poor devils! Cholera's broken out, they go down like flies— Just before dawn tomorrow. Ah Foy intends to try to smuggle us out as sick ones. They take them outside the city walls, to die and be buried."

Gloria Clayton's blue eyes lifted to Kirby. "Perhaps you can be smuggled out, too," she whispered. Then new anxiety came to her eyes. "You came to Tsinchai alone, Kirby? What of Shorty—Travis?"

Kirby told them about that. The girl's eyes misted, her hand reaching for Kirby's.

"I know how you feel, Kirby. And I'm to blame. I sent for you."

"You had a right," Kirby said slowly. "And it was my fault!" His voice shook. "Because I thought Shorty was exaggerating, getting war fever. If we'd all been

together on the idea of attacking those planes it would have been a different story. Nothing can lick us when we're together!" His voice broke, then corrected: "When we were together."

It was still hard to believe.

Kirby pulled himself together. "How about the plant?" he demanded. "Are there any available planes there now?"

"There's one ship, in the test hangar," Clayton said. "A transport cabin job. The Japs were talking of converting it to a bomber. But even if we got to it, it would take time to fuel—"

Kirby was thinking hard. To him the plan for the Clayton's escape seemed a flimsy one. He could not jeopardize it by trying to include himself in it.

"I've got to find a way to get out of here, get there ahead of you," he said. "I'll try to fly us all out."

"But how will you get out?" Gloria whispered.

"I don't know yet, but—"

Kirby broke off abruptly. His eyes had been keenly roving over the sweating prisoners and now his gaze was taking in a coolie edging across the floor. His mushroom straw hat shielded the man's face, but it struck Kirby strange also that the coolie wore wooden sandals. All the other coolies were barefooted. And Kirby was recalling Kosimi's boast of having had the Three Mosquitoes watched.

He was sure this coolie, if he was a spy, couldn't have heard what had gone before. Hateful though the idea in his mind was, suddenly he leaped to his feet, apparently in a temper. He whirled at the huddled girl and her uncle.

"Sure!" he shouted at them, fiercely. "I'm a soldier of fortune! What about it? A guy can choose his own way of making a living! And now that my pals got it, because they were hot-headed, I don't care any more! I'm looking to see where my bread's buttered! You can't offer me anything—you're in a spot! But if these Japs have the money they're said to have—why should I be a fool and rot in here?"

Gloria Clayton's eyes were wide. Norbert Clayton looked stunned. Both stared, speechless.

The Mosquito ranted on, glancing covertly toward the "coolie" who was edging away through the crowd. He became lost to Kirby's view, but Kirby took no chances. Perhaps other ears might be listening. The Mosquito, playing out his grim hunch, he shouted at Gloria Clayton:

"No, I don't blame the Japs! You sent for us! If you hadn't we'd all three still be together. And now that I'm here, I'm going to try to make the most of it! The Japs could use my experience with planes and flying—"

He could see every word sear into those two other Americans, though he desperately strove to speak

other words to them with his eyes, to let them know this was not betrayal.

He thought he caught one glimmer of faith, trust, in Gloria's eyes.

And then, suddenly, the bronze door opened. Soldiers were marching in, with shouldered rifles. Pushing through the crowd, kicking aside moaning Chinese.

The dapper tai-i who had captured Kirby, once more confronted the Mosquito.

"Come," he said in his rapid voice. "General Kosimi—he wants to speak to you."

That coolie had worked fast.

IV

A few minutes later, the thick-lensed eyes of Major General Kosimi were once more regarding Kirby, as he stood before Jap commanders.

"I take it"—Kosimi's smile was as slow as his monotone voice—"you felt cramped in our prison. So sorry. But we had to cool you off a bit."

His hands moved idly, lifted a small bag, dropped it on the table. There was a clinking sound and a few glittering gold sovereigns rolled out.

"For the safety of our people," said Kosimi, "we are setting up a protective state here at Tsinchai. We must run the various industries since the Chinese are too untutored to run them properly. We intend to take over the Clayton air plant. A man who knows planes, knows of their design and manufacture, would be invaluable to us."

"I see." Kirby tried to make his voice casual. "You want me to help you run the plant. The Claytons are stubborn?"

He shrugged, his eyes on the sovereigns. "Well, tell me when to begin."

Kosimi carefully put the gold in a drawer.

"Not so fast, please. It may be days, perhaps a week. Meanwhile, you will have your freedom—with limitations. You are to report, twice a day, to this headquarters, and you are not to go outside the city walls. They are well guarded and — But I am sure you will be discreet. Prove yourself amenable and the work will be yours."

He lifted his hand, gave an order. Kirby walked out free, though slant-eyes still watched him.

Though he moved on devious routes through devastated Tsinchai, there was scarcely a moment of the next few hours the Mosquito felt he was not being watched. Jap sentries patrolled everywhere. Wholesale executions in the square continued deep into the night.

In the east side of the captured village Kirby saw the mechanized implements of war that had routed General Mang Tao. In a barbed-wire-fenced compound stood rows of gleaming tanks, with turreted guns. Nearby stood piles of petrol tins, fuel for the

steel monsters and, under tarpaulin, other piles—plainly, shells.

The Mosquito slipped away from the barbed wire fence as he heard a sentry's tread, moving on toward the east gate. Camions were moving out, empty, evidently to fetch more supplies. Kirby stood in the gloom, watching. No chance to slip through that gate unseen. Sentries with bristling bayonets guarded it; sentries paced atop the stone wall.

But those camions were going through! Kirby peered through the darkness, down the street, to a small unloading shed. A truck was being unloaded there; bundles, probably clothing, being taken off. The motor was idling. That truck would soon go back through the gate.

Kirby slipped forward, like a shadow. His eyes gleamed desperately. And he saw that there were no more trucks. It was now or never!

He bent low, hurried forward, keeping in shadows. Another minute and the truck clattered away from the shed swinging toward the gate bouncing over cobblestones.

"Akiri!" the gate sentries shouted, waving it by.

Out through the gate went the truck lurching on the rough dirt road. And underneath it, balanced precariously over the rear axle-case, Kirby clung for dear life. The wheels churned in his ears, the ground bounced beneath him. But he was out of Tsinchai!

Somehow he desperately held on through. But the jolting ride seemed interminable before at last the truck stopped at a cross-roads.

Kirby dropped to the road, spurred to mad haste as the motor rose, but crawled out safely even as the vehicle started again.

Unseen he slipped off the road, through brush, to a grassy field where he paused to get his bearings by the wan starlight. He was more than a mile from Tsinchai—close to the Clayton air plant!

With cautious speed he reached the sprawling buildings on a vast clearing. In the dark he heard the sentries who guarded it for the Jap conquerors. But Kirby knew every byway between the buildings.

Furtively circling a machine-shop, he came to a large, dimly lighted corrugated iron hangar. He worked his way toward the front, flattened against the side wall when a sentry passed.

Like a flash he slipped around to the front sliding door. He slid it open a little, jumping at the sound. The sentry hadn't heard, he was sure, but the Jap would be on his way back.

Breathing a prayer, Kirby slipped into the hangar, closed the door after him, cautiously silent now. The single bulb night-light, a protection, was near the rear of the hangar. By its dim illumination, Kirby could see that there was a plane in here, as Clayton had said—a huge graceful-winged cabin plane built for a transport.

The Japs had been at work on it, converting it to a bomber. Kirby saw bomb-racks, and releases, and a forward machine gun had been mounted. But there were no bombs or ammunition, nor was there fuel in the tanks. The tires needed air. Kirby's eyes swept about the test hangar. He saw a pump; then—blessed relief—a petrol drum!

The night sped on. Outside, paced the vigilant Jap sentries. And inside the hangar, a desperate Yank did the work of a whole staff of mechanics, making little sound. Pumping air into the huge tires until they supported the big silvery plane. Using a pail and funnel painstakingly to pour petrol into the tanks. At last he finished checking major details.

Outside one high window he saw the gray dawn pressing, misty and chill.

He moved to the door, opened it a bit. That sentry—still outside. Other sentries were within view, in their bowl-shaped helmets. Kirby's eyes, sleepless and alert, looked out in worry. Had Clayton and his niece made their escape through the help of their Number One Boy? And if so, how

would they get to this rendezvous, with the guards watching? But Clayton and Gloria knew this place like a book, too. And Kirby would be watching for them, ready to take care of that guard outside. His hand tightened upon his improvised weapon, a bit of steel tubing.

Then, even as the first rays of the sun were slanting over the grounds, Kirby stiffened with alarm. Across the grounds came a whole crowd of Jap soldiers, with the smart tai-i in their lead! And they had a prisoner they were pushing, dragging, prodding.

In the dawn light Kirby saw a disheveled young Chinese. Ah Foy! The Clayton's Number One Boy.

The tai-i's voice, speaking to Ah Foy, reached Kirby's tense ears.

"Dog and barbarian, tell us what we wish to know! Where were your employers to meet this treacherous Kirby? If it was here, a search will find him. Talk!"

Ah Foy glared with the stoic defiance of a stoic race. He was silent.

"It will save your miserable life!" the tai-i urged. "Did we not catch you trying to load them on a stretcher?"

Kirby had never thought the Clayton's wild scheme would work, but it was bitter to know they were still Kosimi's captives.

"Accursed dog!" The tai-i backhanded the brave Chinese houseboy viciously. "Perhaps you believe this great Kirby will still aid you and your employers!"

Ah Foy spoke then. "Many men your Kosimi has killed, taipan! But those who call themselves the Three Mosquitoes no Wah-N'u can kill! They live—they will make you pay!" The tai-i cursed at the word "Wah-N'u"—Little Dwarf, the Chinese word for Japanese.

A thrill of incredulous hope shot through Kirby.

"Ah, so you heard the new prisoners talk when we brought them in—the soldiers of General Mang T'ao!" the officer snarled. "You heard that they found the two accursed 'Amelicans' in the hills, that the two had joined their army to fight for them! Well, know this—dog! We are ready for them when they fly this way this morning. On the Great East Plain are enough machine guns and anti-aircrafts to devastate them completely!"

Even as Kirby's incredulity turned to joyous realization that Shorty and Travis were alive, his joy became horror. A trap was set for them! They had declared themselves in with the Chinese, were probably going to fly to get to Kirby. They must know he was here. And they would fly to their doom!

The tai-i was shouting orders in Japanese, questioning sentries. Soldiers were rushing to buildings, to search. None headed for Kirby's hangar, probably never dreaming he would dare to come to where they guarded a plane.

He must get that plane going, get out of here! Must get to General Mang T'ao, find his camp which evidently was in those hills where Shorty and Travis had fallen. He must get to Shorty and Travis, then find a way to rescue the Claytons. But what about Ah Foy? The Chinese was doomed amid those Japs.

Even as Kirby paused, Ah Foy gave a defiant yell, made a sudden break for it. His fists flayed out, knocking down one Jap, clawing at another. He broke free, racing like the wind across the field.

The vicious crack of rifles split the morning air. Ah Foy plunged headlong in the grass. The faithful Chinese servant had died serving those he loved and his country. Died while a helpless, enraged Kirby looked on.

V

Now the whole plant bustled with the search for the Mosquito leader. Any moment they'd be coming to this hangar.

Kirby dashed to the big plane. He had already turned on the ignition. Breathing a final prayer he reached for the self-starter crank, turning it furiously.

The starter whined, gathering momentum by its flywheel just as Kirby saw the sentry dashing in, lowering his bayonet-tipped rifle to attack position as his slant-eyes saw the desperate Yank.

Kirby leaped for him even as the propeller took. The engine shook the very hangar as it roared into life. The Mosquito swung steel-tubing, ducking that lunging bayonet. There was an awful crunch of metal against flesh and bone as the steel tubing caught the sentry just under the helmet.

As the sentry went down like a log, Kirby leaped to the slide-door. The whole crowd was coming now.

Using the door as a shield, he slid it wide open. The Japs almost stumbled in, but in the instant it took them to get their bearings and raise their weapons Kirby had catapulted across the floor to the plane, was at the dep-wheel, yanking the throttle bar all the way out!

The big ship lurched forward, thundering!

The Japs parted like a frantic wave from its onrushing path. Rifles barked as it gathered speed. Kirby ducked low, feeding choke to the cold motor, turning into the wind.

Another instant and he had the transport with its bullet-less gun, off the ground, was soaring into the dawn sky with bullets zipping ineffectually after him.

He swung in a wide circle, to avoid the barrage area of hidden anti-aircrafts on the Great East Plain. He circled it, then headed for those hills! There was no sign of pursuit yet. It would take time to get word to the Jap field. Soon the hills began to roll beneath his soaring wings, the sun dissipating the shadows between them. Even his haste seemed to guide him. Spirals of smoke arose from a flat valley between two hills. He swung over it, looked down, eyes gleaming as he saw bonfires, bamboo-supported tents, the compounds of cannon, trucks, horses.

The Chinese encampment!

Minutes later he was entering the tent of General Mang T'ao. A few rifles had been fired at his plane as it came down for a landing, but the Chinese had quickly seen it wasn't Japanese-marked, had given it leeway.

General Mang T'ao, a well set elderly member of a noble Chinese family, was formerly tutu of a province, and also a member of the Purple Swords.

Kirby greeted him Chinese fashion bowing solemnly, shaking hands with himself as the general made the same gestures. Kirby knew it would be a frightful breach not to go through those amenities before he asked his hasty question. General Mang T'ao recognized that—and Kirby's desperate eagerness.

"Your two comrades, you seek them no doubt?" he asked. "They have joined our service now, to my gratitude. They left at dawn."

Kirby's heart went cold. They were already headed for Tsinchai and their doom!

"It was their plan to make a landing on the East Plain, to try to find you and the Claytons," the general said. "But that will not be for at least three hours yet. They went by car to our nearest aviation field, near Suchow, for planes."

Kirby breathed again. A gleam was in his eyes as he said to the general:

"Have you thought of trying to recapture Tsinchai, General Mang?"

A grim smile flecked across the warrior's lips. "We shall attempt it, of course. I am awaiting reinforcements. Even then I fear it will be suicide. As

soon as we approach they will send out those tanks. Against them we are helpless."

"General," Kirby snapped, "where can I get heavy demolition bombs for my plane? And ammunition for the machine gun?"

"Wufan is the nearest supply base, fifteen miles from here. I can give you the requisition. But what is your purpose?"

Recklessly, Kirby threw his hat in the ring then. "I'm joining your army too, General Mang! If I can find my two buddies, I think we'll dispose of those tanks. You say it will take them three hours to get to Tsinchai." He paused for one impressive instant. "General, you've got to prepare your attack on Tsinchai at once! Time it for three hours from now! Can you do it?"

"It can be done, but I fear—" The general saw that gleam in Kirby's eyes, and the grizzled war-veteran's face broke into a grin. "We will attack," he said simply.

"And be careful of that warehouse opposite the Big House. The Claytons are probably still in it."

"It shall be done," said Mang T'ao. He stepped forward and, Occidental fashion, grasped Kirby's hand firmly.

The three hours had only minutes to go when, high in the sunny blue sky of full morning, Kirby was winging back toward the blasted town of Tsinchai. He had left in an ammunition-less transport. Now he brought that same transport back literally rocking under the load of destruction it carried. And on the wings were freshly painted stars of China!

Kirby was near the Great East Plain, alert for signs of Jap patrols, but even more alert for signs of his two comrades, now due here.

As he swung the converted transport in a slow circle, he could discern movement on the slope of the hills, a dark mass of movement, coming down that hill like human lava. The army of General Mang T'ao—approaching to attack!

His nerves tensed. This thing had to be timed to exact nicety. Otherwise those tanks—

Suddenly his hand slammed the dep-wheel forward, his heart jumping to his throat.

Coming on a swift oblique line toward the East Plain were two fleet-winged scouts! Vickers—English-made ships—but they wore the stars of China too.

"Shorty—Trav!" Kirby cried joyously.

But as he hurtled down he saw that they were almost over that barrage field!

Kirby dropped the big laden bomber like a plummet, helping gravity by giving its roaring engine full throttle. He was arcing out of the dive in another moment, hurling to intercept them. It was a tense,

terrible instant. Then, madly as he swung toward them, Kirby fired a warning burst over their wings.

Both banked like startled, bewildered birds. Simultaneously, from the field below, flame tongues winked. Hidden machine guns and pom-poms were hurling up lead at six hundred rounds the minute.

But Kirby's warning had come in time, and Shorty and Travis were swinging way out from that barrage. Another instant and the two Vickers winged in close to Kirby—a grinning Shorty Carn and a tight-smiling Travis, who had once more cheated death, were waving to their leader in joyous greeting.

The Three Mosquitoes were reunited!

And with the Chinese army approaching closer, Kirby was waving commands, signals by which the great flying trio had learned to converse as well as by speech: "Follow me! We're going to attack!"

They did—Kirby's big bomber at the apex, Shorty and Travis flanking it with their Vickers.

They were over the walls of Tsinchai, over the tank compound even as the town was stirring to arms, as Jap soldiers were filling the streets, falling into columns. And as those tanks were starting to move!

The oncoming Chinese had been sighted!

Kirby dived for the tank compound, a reckless light in his eyes, while his comrades hovered overhead like guardian angels. Down—ignoring the frantic spat of a.a. pompoms. With a reckless yell, he swooped over the compound, tugging at bomb-releases. Two of his demolition bombs dropped like overripe pears, went shrieking down.

B-room! B-r-r-rO OM!

The explosions made Kirby's crate, soaring in a zoom, wobble from their concussions. Even as he turned to dive anew he saw the smoke clearing, saw two swaths of ruin, two tanks overturned, a cluster of dead Japs.

But there were more tanks, plenty of them. They must be stopped before they were sent out to crush General Mang's army.

A sudden yammering roar overhead then. Kirby jerked up his eyes, cursed. Half a dozen Nakajima scouts, pouring out of the morning sun! The patrol had been signaled, were here to stop the three reckless Yanks.

But those Yanks were not offguard, playing neutral now. They had found reason to fight, and were fighting like the hellions they were!

Shorty and Travis took on those scouts as if welcoming the odds. Into the midst of them they flung their Vickers ships, the guns on their forward mounts gibbering and flaming.

A Nakajima burst into flames, trying to rival the morning sun by its fiendish glare. Shorty had scored and the next instant crippled another Jap. Travis was pouring lead into a third.

One slipped by the two Mosquitoes and Kirby heard its guns over his head, its lead on his cabin roof. He pulled back on the dep-wheel, kicking rudder, leaning to his sights.

The Nakajima appeared like a perfect framed picture, and Kirby pressed his stick triggers, sent out a long spearhead of tracer.

The Jap plane slid off as on a slippery current of air, went plummeting down for the other side of Tsinchai's wall, its pilot fighting controls.

Shorty and Travis were holding the rest at bay, though two more had come now. And as they gyrated in the upper sky, Kirby dived again amid a growing storm of ground-fire. Once more he swooped over that tank compound, his eyes gauging the pile of petrol cans. Tugging the bomb-releases, he kept unloading bombs, one after another, as he thundered across the entire compound. Explosion followed explosion, and then—

A hissing roar shattered the morning air, followed by a detonation which rocked the town. The petrol cans had ignited first, sending a sheet of flame high; then the ammunition pile had gone off.

The compound and every tank in it was reduced to a shambles! But even as he zoomed in triumph, Kirby knew the destruction had been confined to this isolated part of the town. He had endangered no civilian lives.

He went up, his gun spitting, to aid his two comrades. There were three Nakajima's left, but they had had enough of it. They hoicked away and the Three Mosquitoes, as if at last appeased, let them go.

Circling then, in the sky, they watched a sight that thrilled them. The well disciplined gray troops of Mang T'ao were arriving, charging at three gates, bringing up small deadly mortars to blow those gates wide. The battle was brief—as it was historic and headline-making.

The Japs, deprived of their tanks, were no match for the attacking Chinese. For awhile they held out with machine guns and field pieces, then in disgraceful disorder they fled! Fled in cars and trucks from one end of the city as the triumphant Chinese entered the other.

Later, in the Big House, now occupied by General Mang T'ao, that grateful general and Norbert Clayton and his niece all beamed upon the grimy, disheveled Three Mosquitoes.

"I knew it!" Gloria Clayton was saying, her blue eyes dancing. "Even when our escape plan failed, I knew we'd be rescued, the plant saved from the Japanese, as long as Kirby was loose."

"Yes, but he sure had me worried, with that talk of his," Clayton growled. He shook his head. "I still don't understand how he could get the whole town recaptured."

“Nor I,” Mang T’ao admitted. “It honors as well as surprises me that these great American flyers have seen fit to fight for us. But I suppose”—he sighed—“it was just for this one occasion, yes?”

Kirby started to answer, his face dubious. Travis was tightly smiling, but Shorty burst out vehemently:

“Kosimi and his army are still on the loose, aren’t they?”

Mang T’ao nodded.

“Then,” said Shorty, “we’re still fighting the Japs! I’ll leave you two fellers to attend to the details.” The little Mosquito yawned wearily, pocketing his briar pipe. “Me, I’m going to find some place to lie down and get some peace and repose. It’s the only thing I like!”