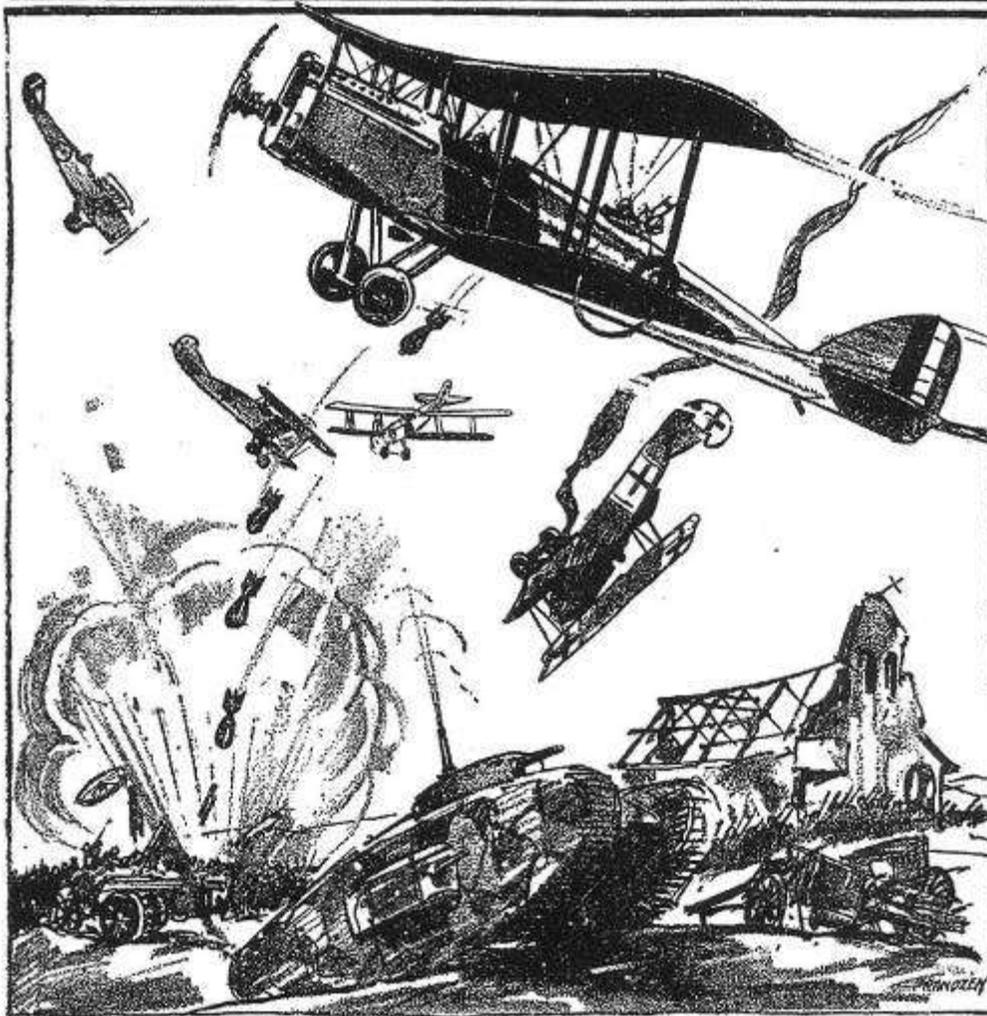


The Other Cockpit



His hand flashed onto the bomb release—pulled six times

*Bat Benson, Flight Leader, Always Panned His
Observers—But Lieutenant Nash Just
Wouldn't Take It!*

By **ROBERT J. HOGAN**

Author of "The Masked Drome," etc.

UP to the time that a certain half-wing joined Hundred and Sixteenth Bombardment Squadron, Bat Benson was the only pilot on the field who had seen any service over the lines to speak of. And Bat Benson was never the one to hide his candle under a cockpit cover. He had a voice like a

fog horn. A horn that was his own exclusively and one that got plenty of blowing. Pilots at the field were getting fed up with his constant flow of personal aggrandizement about the time Nash arrived on the scene. But as First Lieutenant Benson was flight leader of the one and only flight at the new field, there

didn't seem to be much they could do about it.

On the morning that First Lieutenant Nash seemed to wander quietly into the mess and ask a question, the pilots were not aware that a change was about to take place. They were eating quietly and for a good reason. Bat Benson was doing all the talking as usual.

“IT'S like I've been telling you birds all along,” his voice boomed. “If anybody should ask me, I've had a lousy bunch of observers.”

Silence fell upon the room. Nobody had asked him. Still he ranted on, as though in self-defense.

“Take the last two guys in my rear cockpit. That guy, Turner. And this kid, Molton, that got a slug in his bean yesterday. Neither one of 'em could hit the side of a barn. Makes me look like a dud to the C.O. Me, with all the experience I've had before I came to this hole, and I have to draw a bunch of dumb clucks in my back cockpit to make me look like a ham.”

From somewhere far off, on the other side of the mess shack, came the unmistakable snorting roar of a luscious razzberry, with the accent of a Bronx cheer.

Benson leaped from his bench at the table. Swept his plate crashing to the floor with one sweep of his powerful arm. Glared about the room in baffled rage.

“Who the hell did that?”

The eye of every pilot and observer in the room was deep in his plate before him. Wrinkles of mirth played about the corners of their mouths. They would have liked to razz Bat Benson to his face, had they dared, but every man in the room had two good reasons for not doing so. Bat Benson outranked any of them. Was their flight leader. Then, too, he was bigger and stronger than any of the others and possessed a terrible temper.

“Maybe you guys think I'm kidding you,” he bellowed. “If I could get one good guy with

guts and half an eye in that cockpit behind me, I'd show you some bombing and observation and shooting that would burn you up, see?”

That was the moment that someone noticed the door of the mess open. Saw the figure that stood framed there for a moment like a small picture in an oversized frame. His eyes were keen as they swept the room at a glance. Didn't match the rest of him. He looked like an old man. His face was wrinkled. His right shoulder seemed to sag, and as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, he limped. Every eye in the room turned toward him. Every ear heard his words which came softly. Strained to catch what he said.

“Maybe some of you men will tell me where I can find Lieutenant Benson. I'm his new observer.”

THE room seemed suddenly electrified. Chuck Holden tried to choke off a convulsive laugh, with a swig of coffee half way down his throat, and burst into a fit of coughing. Someone snickered outright. Bat Benson glared.

“Well, I'll be damned!”

Rage flared in Benson's eyes as he strode toward the diminutive half-wing.

“I'm Lieutenant Benson,” he snapped. “Who the hell are you?”

The half-wing merely nodded. There was no move toward a salute.

“Lieutenant Nash is the name,” he announced. Then his wrinkled face grinned at Benson with a twisted smile that seemed to taunt him. A look which said as plainly as words, “I've seen your kind before, Blow-hard.”

Benson snarled. “First thing you better learn to do, Nash, is salute your superiors and say—”

HE stopped short and stared. His eyes had shifted from that wrinkled old face

before him to the drooping right shoulder—shifted to the other. Had focused on a first lieutenant's bars.

"Say, what the hell is this war coming to?" he blurted. "Since when have they been commissioning green observers as first lieutenants?"

Again that slight twisted grin from Nash that seemed characteristic of him.

"Must be on account of my being a son of President Wilson, I guess," he volunteered in seeming sincerity.

Someone snickered. Benson's face went crimson.

"Say, what are you trying to do, kid me?" he roared. "Wilson never had a son." Nash's face took on a look of puzzlement.

"Hum," he mused. "That's funny. There must be some mistake. Sort of knocks my family tree all to hell."

The mess exploded with a roar of laughter. Laughter that reflected on the face of Bat Benson in a purple gleam of hate. He stood trembling with rage as he glared down at Nash. His big hands opened and closed convulsively, as though he wanted to tear this little old man before him into bits.

Benson's big fist came back slowly—ready to strike. Like a flash Nash limped out of his reach. Still grinning, he held up his hand.

"Here, you big bully!" he screamed in mock fear. "Put away that fist. Would you hurt a cripple?"

Benson stood glaring at him like a great animal. Shook with rage and his helplessness to do anything about it in his usual way. Slowly he got control of himself enough to speak.

"All right," he snapped. "You think you're funny. Taking me for a ride, hey? Trying to make a fool out of me."

"But, Lieutenant," mocked Nash seriously, "certainly you can't blame me for that."

The roar of laughter drowned out the words that rasped from Benson's throat. He whirled to face the others in the room. "Attention!"

Military discipline did its duty. Men snapped to attention. All save First Lieutenant Nash, who slouched a few paces away from Benson with that grin on his face.

"At ten o'clock this morning we go out on observation. The whole flight. We cover the sector we've been working on from Hill 187 to the town of Cramou. Laugh, you buzzards, while you've got breath. This isn't going to be so funny."

He whirled to face Nash again.

"And you, wise guy," he bellowed.

"I'll see just how good you are. You've had a lot of fun this morning. On the flight it's going to be my turn, see?"

Bat Benson stomped out of the mess and slammed the door behind him.

There was more laughter after the door slammed. But, somehow, now it didn't ring true. Was more easily controlled. Chuck Holden sauntered over to Nash. Saluted and introduced himself.

"Cripes, Lieutenant," he grinned, "your first name must be Daniel by the way you took after the lion in his den."

Nash grinned and shook his head slowly.

"Kind of a dirty trick to take advantage of my equal rank at that, I suppose," he chuckled. "But that guy, Benson! I couldn't help it." Others crowded about him. Moved him to a table.

"Benson's had it coming to him for a long time," someone told him. "You'll have to watch your step from now on. That guy's poison."

"Yeah," cut in Holden, "we've got to give Benson credit for one thing, anyway. He doesn't have much luck with the Jerries in combat, but he doesn't seem to be scared of anything that flies or walks. Been blaming his rotten luck on the observers he's had."

Nash felt every eye upon him. Searching him out.

“I hope he won’t be disappointed this time,” he ventured. “What’s this observation hop we’re going on at ten?”

“Rotten job,” Holden told him. “We’ve been doing the work of the balloonatics for a couple of weeks now. The enemy moved up at a field on the other side of the line with a hell of a big bunch of Fokkers. They’ve got the balloon outfit on this side so damn scared they don’t let up a bag.”

“Sounds like Jerry’s planning a big push in this sector and don’t want us to know anything about it,” Nash observed.

“Right. That’s what the tin hats think. That’s why we’ve been catching hell lately. Been ordering us to take looks in place of the balloons. It’s no cinch, with the Fokkers swarming around like a bunch of hornets.”

“How about some pursuits helping out from some other field around here?” queried Nash.

“They’re too busy where they are. We’re getting a new batch of pursuits here at this field as soon as the mahogany desk squad gets around to it.”

Men of the One Hundred and Sixteenth hung on his words. Wanted to ask questions, but somehow couldn’t bring themselves to it. This seeming little old man with the eye and the voice of a youngster. He seemed certain of himself. Calm and cool, while others were nervous about the coming flight.

They watched him at a distance, when mess was finished, as he walked to the hangar. Asked for Benson’s D.H. Saw him spend two hours working at the guns in the rear cockpit. Checking carefully each round of ammunition. Taking the guns apart. Going over them with the skill of an expert. Putting them back and checking them again with a nod of satisfaction.

SEVEN D.H. observation planes warmed on the line. Bombs nestled under each bottom wing like great eggs being carried carefully— respectfully. Benson was coming

down the tarmac. It was nearly time to shove off. He called the others about him.

“Listen, you birds. Orders from Headquarters. Stay out as long as possible. Report everything you see of great importance. Jot down all things you notice to report when we return—if any of you wise guys are that lucky.”

He was looking full at Nash as he uttered the last words.

“You, Nash!” he barked. “Can you shoot—and handle a key?”

Nash’s face twisted into his grin again as he nodded.

“I’m an observer, according to the records, Benson,” he said.

Benson cursed under his breath. Turned his back and walked to his ship without a word.

LIBERTIES droned. Burst into ear-splitting thunder as the great ships leaped and bounded with their heavy load of bombs. They rose sluggishly into the air and droned north.

Nash’s face was set. There was little mirth there now. Swiftly he checked the implements in his cockpit. Tried out the sending key. Lowered the aerial with the lead fish at the end even before they reached enemy country. Held a pencil pointed over the pad in the rack just above the sending key. Sat a little tense, but ready.

The others spread out to their respective stations. Each ship alone now, roaring over the front. Archies went into ecstasy at their arrival. Grunted incessantly from below, throwing up mushroom-shaped puffs of smoke that were yellow and foreboding.

Before him, Nash saw the huge head and shoulders of Bat Benson. Heard his voice through the mouth tube that ran to his ears.

“Well, get going, wise guy. It’s my turn now to laugh,” Benson rasped through the tube.

Nash’s answer was short. His eyes were strained downward. They didn’t miss a thing. His hand worked one minute with his pencil

on the pad. Saw huge movements of troops below. Guns rolling up. Marked the point on the map. Ticked out a hurried message in code, with the wireless key, to go back immediately to Headquarters.

“Shut up! I’m busy.” That was all he had time for at the moment.

Minutes passed. His fingers flew at his work. There wouldn’t be much time now. There wasn’t!

“Well, grandpa, here they come.”

That was Bat Benson’s voice rasping through the tube.

Nash didn’t answer now. He was still too busy. He’d seen that flight of five Fokkers headed their way a full half minute before Benson had spoken.

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” barked Benson.

“Keep observing as long as I can,” came back the response. “They’ll be out of range for another half minute. Some things I want to get straight before they get here. You’ll have to take care of ‘em, if I’m not through when they get here.”

Nash heard a curse through the tube.

“Say, what the hell do you think this is, a sight-seeing excursion?”

Nash didn’t answer for a second. His eyes were focused on the torn earth far below. His fingers worked rapidly on the sending key. Then, when he had finished a sentence:

“No, you dumb cluck, and it’s no long-range target practice, either.”

Spandaus rattled wildly about them as the five Fokkers bore down. They were warming bursts as they came close. Once Benson turned a slightly white face behind and stared at Nash. He was staring hard at the ground below. Then his head disappeared inside the cockpit and he worked feverishly at his key. Something of importance down there. Something in movements he must get back to the lines.

THE D.H. whirled and dove. Fought like mad now, with Nash still struggling on in the rear cockpit for a time which was actually five seconds, but which seemed to Bat Benson an age.

Suddenly, life came to the rear cockpit. Nash was standing. Whirling behind his guns. Pouring hot Lewis steel into Fokkers that swarmed on his tail. Fokkers which had thought to take advantage of the abandoned look of that rear cockpit.

Nash stared across his sights. Pressed the triggers. Cursed wildly at the miss. The D.H. had swerved dizzily. Seemed never to stop. He heard the rattle of guns in front of the forward cockpit. Whirled an instant to see what Benson was shooting at.

He was flying like a fool. Trying to follow the Fokkers in their smooth gyrations. Trying to follow them with a bomb-loaded D.H.

Again Nash whirled and moved his guns with him. One Fokker diving wildly at his cockpit with snorting Spandaus.

NASH’S movements were flashing like lightning. His hand pressed this time. The ship swerved again. Threw him off his aim. Still, with clenched teeth, he followed that Fokker with his sights. Stabbed Lewis steel home in a fierce staccato of flame and tracers. Saw his tracers fluff out and scurry into the cockpit of the one Fokker like white ribbons leading from it.

He didn’t wait to see that lone Fokker go down. Things were too hot about him. Instead he peered down for an instant. They were directly over great activity on the ground. Massed troops and trucks and guns.

His hand flashed to the bomb releases. Pulled six times in rapid succession. Then he was back at his guns. Fastening his sights on a Fokker devil. Only to be thrown off his aim the next minute by the sudden lurching movement of the ship as Benson whirled through the air in a futile attempt to get his own sights on some other enemy ship.

Nash cursed frantically. The ship wouldn't stay still an instant. Benson took no heed of the observer in the rear cockpit. He was only thinking of himself. The observer could take whatever he could get. The hell with him.

Stabbing Spandau steel ripped through the bottom of the cockpit of the D.H. Went sizzling past Nash's ear as he lurched to one side. He whirled his guns. Tried to get them pointed at the blind spot. It was hopeless. Benson was on the tail of a Fokker devil that seemed to be playing with him. Making fun of his poor shooting.

Steel drummed wildly on the covering of the bomber. She was acting more easily to the controls now with the bombs gone. The ship lurched. The Fokker dove and snarled up from the other side of the blind spot.

There was only an instant when Nash acted. But it was enough. His guns were almost straight down. As straight down as they could be. His fingers pressed the triggers. Lewis guns rattled and bucked. Orange and crimson flame spurted from their muzzles and sent another Fokker hurtling down at the bottom end of a pillar of smoke.

THREE now. Three enemy planes left. He felt the ship lurch suddenly. Felt it turning for home. Glanced about for an instant. Then whirled his guns with him at the Fokkers that snarled about his tail as they raced for home.

He saw other D.H.'s roaring south. Four others. Searched for the other two. They were down. Only five planes in the sky now. Five Allied D.H.'s, where there had been seven.

Nash's lips tightened at the thought. Two gone out of seven. He pitied the poor devils. Knew the feeling. Shuddered at the thought and struggled to control himself again.

Benson was turning round in the seat now. His face was a little white, but he was grinning. Grinning in frank admiration of his new observer.

The Fokkers had veered off now before the terrific fire of Nash's twin Lewis guns. They were racing for home. Could do little more. In that brief space of time he'd gotten considerable information. The enemy was massing all along the front. Still, they wouldn't attack the full length of the front. When the time came, there would be a point at which they would concentrate for the beginning. Nash knew these things from his past experience.

HIS mind was still struggling with the idea, the thought of what he had seen down below them on the German side of the lines, all during noon mess. He paid little attention to Benson's ravings.

He felt tenseness in the air as Benson talked. Tried not to pay attention to what he was saying.

"Laugh now, you buzzards," Benson was cackling. "I told you I'd show you some stuff, some results, if I got a good observer. This guy Nash is going to be a world beater when I get through with him. You guys saw what happened this morning. We got two Fokkers with a D.H. How's that for a start?"

Nash bent lower over his plate and the corners of his mouth wrinkled in a grin. The rest of the mess was silent as usual. Two ships had gone down. Four men who would never be eating with them again lay dead on the other side of the lines. Benson's voice was going on. Heedless of the feeling of the room.

"Come on, Nash, stand up and tell 'em how we did it."

Nash looked up from his plate. His grin had gone. Utter disgust was there now. Every eye in the room was on him as he got to his feet,

"Men," he began, "we did have a little luck this morning, but I feel all the credit should go to my pilot." He emphasized the word before the last. Saw Benson stick out his chest proudly and went on: "If it hadn't been for Bat Benson being in that front cockpit and

flying the ship, there's no telling how many Jerries I'd have knocked down!"

The spell was broken. Someone laughed. Others joined. Benson stood grinning happily in his egotism. So dumb he didn't get the note of derision in the laughter. In the smugness of his shell of confidence, there could be nothing now but praise, with no thought of anything else.

He was about to speak when Nash with a gesture of authority waved him down again. Then Nash held high his steaming coffee cup, "To four good boys, gone West," he proposed.

Cups were drained. Clinked to the table again. And from the enthusiasm with which Bat Benson entered into the spirit of the thing, one might have thought that he was being toasted. But his flare of self pride was not to last long.

THE first sign of the break came that night at evening mess when two Fokkers were chalked up on the board to one First Lieutenant Nash. Every other man who had seen the affair had given him the rightful credit of shooting down those two Jerries. There was no mention of the fact that Benson had even been in the plane.

He flamed with indignation as he saw it there. Glared about the room at the second lieutenants under his command. Roared at them.

"Hey, what the hell! I was in that plane. I flew her. I should have had credit for those two Jerries, too. Nash and I should have split them together. Who turned in this report?"

Then Nash spoke. His words came at the end of a hectic afternoon, with everyone about mad from the incessant flow of braggardly words from the lips of Bat Benson. Benson hadn't had anything like this to rave about for a long time. At last he had an observer such as he had been crying for. And now all credit was suddenly taken away from him.

"Listen, Benson," Nash drawled in his soft voice. "I've heard too much already about this

affair this morning. When I want a personal publicity agent, I'll hire one myself. As far as I'm concerned, you can have all the credit for those two Jerries, if you'll just shut that big mouth of yours and give somebody a little peace."

UNCONTROLLABLE rage flared in Benson's eyes. He leaped at Nash. But something in the coolness of the smaller man before him held him back. Kept Benson from laying a hand on Nash. He towered over him, shaking with anger.

"So that's the kind of a guy you are!" he snarled. "Have luck enough to get a couple of Jerries and then try playing the hero stuff. The guy that doesn't want any medals and glory. If you ask me, Nash, you're just a little four-flusher with a lot of luck."

"Attention!"

The tense moment was heightened at the order from the lips of someone near the mess door. Men snapped upright. Stood at attention, facing the door where the C.O. stood framed there.

"At ease, men," Major Harvey commanded, entering and closing the door behind him. He turned to Nash and smiled.

"You've gotten a lot of valuable information, Lieutenant," he announced. "You've all done your best. I know, but one thing is lacking. We lack ships to protect our balloon. We can't hope to do that with De Havilands, of course, and the results we get by observing from planes is for too brief a time. We must get our balloons in the air tomorrow morning at dawn, men. That's orders from G.H.Q. But how? Have any of you any ideas?"

Nash limped as he stepped forward and saluted.

"I think I have, sir," he announced. "Today I spotted the field where the Fokkers came from. I looked it over pretty carefully. Marked it on the map. It's cleverly camouflaged, and if it hadn't been for the fact that I actually saw them take off from it, I'd have thought it was

rough country. I was wiring the information back to the lines at the time we were actually attacked by the Fokkers, sir.”

Major Harvey nodded, and Nash went on:

“Ten bombs would clean out that field—if well placed,” he announced coolly. “If Benson here is willing to go with me, I’ll volunteer to do the job. I think we can get off with the load of bombs and half a tank of gas. I’m light. That ought to help.”

MAJOR HARVEY’S eyes lighted with renewed hope.

“Great, Nash.” He turned to Benson. “What do you say, Lieutenant?”

“Sure, I’ll go,” he nodded. “Why not?”

“Good, then,” Major Harvey agreed. “You, Nash, will be in charge, since it was your idea. You’ll take off when ready.”

Nash spun round and faced Benson as Major Harvey closed the door.

“You got some guts, Benson,” he drawled, “or maybe you haven’t. I’m going to put a proposition up to you now to see whether you have or whether you’re just a big bag of wind.”

He saw Benson bristle with anger, but didn’t give him a chance to speak.

As a pilot I think you’re lousy.”

He raced on. “You’re the rottenest observation pilot I’ve ever seen—and I’ve seen plenty. You haven’t the slightest idea what it means to be an observer behind you or anyone else. You’ve either got a world of guts or you’ve had a hell of a lot of luck, Benson. I’m inclined to think it’s mere luck. Anyway, we’ll see.”

“Why, you dirty little—”

Benson only got that far when Nash cut him off.

“Shut up!” His words snapped like the crack of a pistol. “I’m not through with you yet, Benson. Here’s the proposition. We change cockpits for this hop tomorrow before sunrise. I’ll fly and you take my place in the rear cockpit. There won’t be any dual controls

there, but you won’t have much to do anyway. Just pull the bomb releases when I tell you to and maybe a little plain and fancy shooting, if we get in a jam.”

Benson stared at him in astonishment and rage.

“You fly?” he broke off in a hoarse laugh. “Say, who the hell ever told you you could fly?”

Nash’s old wrinkled face twisted in his peculiar grin.

“I’ve been an observation pilot for eleven months, Benson. Up until the time I was shot down and messed up in a crash. I didn’t come out of the medical machine so well, but I guess they did the best they could with me. I was hit with a bad attack of crash-shock and some wise guys in the medical corps figured I couldn’t be trusted in a plane alone. “So they shoved me up here for observation. I changed to half-wings then,”—he eyed Benson coldly— “because I hate a four-flusher, Benson, and you’ve been bordering on that ever since I first saw you at Issoudon.”

“You—you saw me at Issoudon?”

“Sure,” grinned Nash. “I was your instructor for a while down there. You wouldn’t recognize me now after the mess I got in. You’ve always been pig-headed from that day on, Benson. Always knew it all. Well, you don’t, see?”

“But before I get through with you, if you’ve got guts, Benson, you’re going to know a hell of a lot more than you do now. You’ll know what it feels like to be an observer behind a pilot who doesn’t give a tinker’s damn about you, as long as he gets glory and comes out with a whole skin.”

Then Nash stopped short. Stared hard at Benson. Issued the challenge.

“How’s your guts, fella? Is it a go?”

Every eye in the mess was on Bat Benson. His face was white. His big hands were trembling. He nodded.

“Su-sure, I’ll go.”

THAT night Benson didn't sleep. His eyes told that at four in the morning when he found Nash working on the D.H. Found him going over the guns. Inspecting the four new bomb hangers under the wings to hold the extra bombs.

Nash grinned at him in the dimly lighted hangar and went on with his work.

"You might go over your own guns in that back cockpit," he suggested.

Something strange had changed Benson. He did not answer. There seemed to be no malice in his eyes now. He worked at his guns on the turret. Inspected them with fingers that trembled slightly. Fear clutched him.

Up there in that front cockpit he'd felt safe. He seemed out in the open, back there in the observer's cockpit.

Then they roared into the air, ten minutes later, with a warmed Liberty cutting off her explosion short and snappy. It was a struggle to get off the ground in the darkness. Nash's hand was steady on the stick. She rose unhurriedly. Trees loomed in the way, slipped under the landing gear, missing by inches as Nash played safe with his heavy load.

NOTHING but darkness about them. A dim gray to the east helped Nash to orient himself. He plugged on and his lips curled with a grin of joy that he felt to be back at a stick once again.

By his flashlight he studied his map. Headed directly toward the point he had marked there where the new field was hidden in clever camouflage.

The light of day was slower in coming than he had expected. He had laid his plans. He'd circle back high above the enemy country and attack from the north. Give them less hint of their danger at the field.

Then the light and the storming back toward the hidden field. He swung low over the field. Saw men running about wildly. Saw pilots leap into the first ships warming on the line.

Three Fokkers there on the line. Those might get away. But the rest—those that were still in the hangar. If his plan worked they would never fly again!

His hand tensed on the stick as he roared down at one end of the row of low hangars. Then, for the first time, he spoke through the tube to Benson behind him.

"When I say 'pull' pull that handle as fast as you can until all ten bombs are gone, Benson."

That was all. He heard a meek "Okay" come back at him. Grinned to himself. Benson's lesson had not started.

They were almost on top of the first hangar.

"Pull!" Nash snapped his order.

Men scattered like flies from before the racing D.H. And behind the earth seemed to upheave in a mighty convulsion, as bomb after bomb crashed through roof and side of hangar after hangar.

Three toy ships spun on the tarmac now below them. Spun and roared wildly to be off. Three Fokkers—all that remained of the great flock of hungry birds there at the enemy field. Deliberately, Nash let them rise. Climbed frantically for altitude as they circled up at him. Heard Benson pleading through the tube. "For God's sake, run for home, Nash! They'll get us sure."

NASH only grinned and climbed higher. Up, up and up they circled. He thrilled at the touch on the stick. His old lust for battle was back now that he sat at the controls.

Once he had been mentioned as one of the greatest observation pilots on the front. Then had come the crash. And the shock that followed. Doctors had shaken their heads. Had said he could never be trusted again at the controls. But now Nash knew they had lied.

He half turned in his seat and stared back at Benson. He was whirling with his guns. The three Fokkers snarled about them. And Nash whirled the lumbering D.H., escaping by

inches, one here, another there, as their guns spat flame and hate.

Then he was speaking through the tube to Benson.

“There’s one to your right.” He turned to see how Benson was taking it. Saw Benson whirl and take aim. “Now I’m going to show you what a poor pilot does when his observer takes aim.”

The D.H. burst into a convulsion of movement. He heard Benson cursing wildly in the rear cockpit. Grinned as he heard him. Fastened the Vickers in front on the side of a Fokker that had snarled down before him in a frantic attempt to get at the blind spot. And spoke.

“Too bad. You missed, Benson.” His voice was calm. “Now it’s my turn Benson. Get what you can—if any—from that back cockpit.”

Round and round, the D, H. and the Fokker spun, almost together. It was marvelous what could be done with the D.H., with a good hand on the stick. The two-place bomber shuddered with the recoil of the Vickers. Tracers fluffed out wildly. Scurried into the cockpit of that Fokker.

Nash heard the rattle of Spandaus guns beneath him now. A Fokker, one of the two left, attacking from the blind spot. His voice cooed through the tube to Benson.

“Too bad. There’s a Fokker under your tail. You can’t get at him, but I was in a jam like that yesterday, so we’re even.”

Then he dove out wildly. Veered away and swung back. Heard Benson’s frightened voice coming to him—pleading.

“For the love of heaven, Nash, don’t kid me this way. We’ll be killed. They’ll get me out here in this damned open-porch cockpit.”

Nash grinned to himself. He was in his element now. Forgot danger and all else save his lesson to Benson.

“There’s one coming down on top of you, Benson.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Nash saw Benson whirl with his guns and aim upward. Jerked the stick just as he was taking aim and snarled up in a slamming loop toward the Fokker.

“Sorry. You missed. Now it’s my turn.”

Vickers belched flame and steel. Tracers fluffed into the engine of the Fokker. Stopped the prop with a jerk and sent the plane scurrying for a quick landing.

“One against one, Benson. I’ll leave that one for you.”

Something gave him a start then, Nash’s ears caught the cough of the engine. He’d been working his way back toward his own lines, but they were still far away. The motor had sneezed. There it was again,

HE cursed tensely under his breath. He’d been playing too long. Figured on a full tank of gas and had forgotten he’d started with only half a tank to lighten the load.

The tank was empty!

Frantically, he turned for the lines. Gauged the distance. There might be a chance. A scant one. A lone Fokker bore down on them from behind now as they glided helplessly for their own lines,

“He’s all yours, Benson,” he said, trying to keep calm. “I’ll have to hold her still now, if we make our own lines.”

No answer came from that rear cockpit, Nash jerked round. Stared back, Benson was taking careful aim at the demon that charged down on them. He felt the vibration as the twin Lewis guns spoke. Turned, half-afraid to look at the results.

Benson was firing wildly now. Desperation was in his every movement.

Again and again he tried. Each time the Fokker swerved and came on. Spandaus steel drummed on the wings, the fuselage.

Nash jerked upright as he heard a groan through the tube. Whirled and stared behind him. Benson was down somewhere, out of sight.

The Fokker snarled overhead. Whirled and dove for attack again. Lucky thing that Fokker pilot, too, was a poor shot. Down he came like the hubs of hell. His Spandaus snarled again. Nash tensed. He had two choices. He could zigzag and force himself to land in Germany, due to the loss that the turns would require, or he could fly straight, and if no Spandaus slug found him, get into his own lines.

HE picked the latter. Swerved slightly. Shuddered a little at the thought. No sound came from the rear cockpit. He shouted into the mouthpiece. Screamed his lungs out. If Benson would only come back!

Get back to his guns again.

He heard a moan again. Felt the slight movement of the ship as Benson moved in the back cockpit. Turned and grinned. Saw him crouching behind his guns now. Blood oozed from his head where a bullet had creased him. Must have knocked him out for a moment.

Desperately, Nash held the D.H. level and fled straight. Their last chance! One more time. One more burst of Benson's guns and the Fokker would be tearing at their vitals, this time much closer.

"It's up to you, Benson," he snapped through the tube.

He heard the rattle of Lewis guns. Felt the D.H. quiver. Heard an exultant cry. "Got him!"

The D.H. turned over on its back when they landed behind their own lines. But it was a good landing. They both dropped clear of the plane and managed to walk away before she burst into flames. Benson's expression was penitent.

"Nash, you're a damn fine instructor," he grinned, sheepishly. "I learned some stuff in the last fifteen minutes I never dreamed of. I hope you will go on flying with me. I've been a damned, swell-headed rotter. I've practically murdered my observers. I can see it now. I haven't begun to learn this

observation flying racket. I suppose you'll be getting yourself a berth in the front cockpit of some other crate before long, though."

Nash grinned that characteristic, twisted grin of his.

"I hope so, Benson. Maybe in a couple of weeks I can make some of the brass hats see the light. In the meantime, we'll do a little more work along this line. You know an instructor takes pride in turning out a mighty good student. I'll have you ready to cut loose about then, I guess. Spend more time with your eyes on the target range and less with your mouth at the small end of a wind bag, and I think you'll make me proud of you yet, Benson."

AND after Benson's head had been bound up they'd returned to the field via a jolting car, they entered the mess. Pilots and observers clustered about them. Asked questions. "Did you get the field bombed?" "Yeah," Benson nodded. "That is, Nash got it. This was his party."

"What happened to your head?"

"Wind bag inside of me blew up and came out there," Benson grinned sheepishly.