

# No Survivors

## A Three Mosquitoes Adventure by Ralph Oppenheim

*The Three Mosquitoes made the scar of their Vickers hated by every flying Hun. But even the skill of their wings was child's play when they went to sea against that dread Channel menace. Then came the day when the red courage of madness swept their leader to unknown heights.*

IN THE anteroom of the U.S. naval intelligence headquarters at Brillion-sur-Mer, France, three khaki-clad aviators sat and waited with growing impatience and expectancy. They shifted about on their comfortable, upholstered chairs, and glanced idly at the pictures on the wall—pictures of navy men, of battleships, destroyers, submarines; and artists' conceptions of famous sea engagements. They glanced out of the French windows, where there was a clear view of the English Channel, which lay calm and glistening in the bright sunlight.

The "Three Mosquitoes"—for they were the famous warbirds known throughout the Western Front—felt peculiarly out of place in this anteroom. They were army men, and the naval atmosphere of these surroundings seemed strange and alien. Also, it made them feel uncomfortable, almost tense, as if they sensed that they were about to become involved in some mysterious and dangerous intrigue of the sea.

"Wonder why they're keeping us so long?" Kirby, the young leader of the trio, suddenly muttered. "It's damned queer—this whole business. I'd like to know why in hell they called us here."

"Maybe," suggested "Shorty" Carn, the mild little fighter, "maybe they want us to win the war on the sea for 'em. We've done about every kind of work except this navy stuff. Gosh," he sighed, "I hope we don't have to pilot a submarine, or something like that!" He glanced out at the waters of the Channel once more. "Boy, I'm beginning to feel seasick already. As a sailor, I'm' all wet!"

The lanky Travis, eldest and wisest of the trio, frowned darkly.

"Why all these guesses and conjectures?" he asked, in his familiar drawl. "We'll soon know what it's all about. And we do know," he added,

grimly, "that it's not going to be a picnic. There must be a reason or two why G.H.Q. would authorize the navy to kidnap us for this duty!"

At last the door leading to the office opened, and an orderly stepped through. He saluted briskly, and announced, "Commander Braddock will see you now, sirs."

At once the Three Mosquitoes jumped up and followed the orderly through the doorway. The moment they stepped into that office they knew they had been right in suspecting that some strange intrigue was going on. There was something tense and dramatic in the scene which met the eyes of the three pilots.

Over in a corner of the big office, a wireless instrument was buzzing insistently, sending the sparks flying, as the operator bent over his key, the earphones clapped around his head. And pacing up and down the length of the room was a tall, stern figure dressed in the trim blue uniform of a naval commander. His face, the face of a grizzled seafaring man, seemed strangely drawn and haggard, and there was a haunted bloodshot look in his eyes—a look which gave evidence of sleepless nights, of constant worry and anxiety.

The commander stopped pacing as the Three Mosquitoes walked in. They saluted, and he returned their salute carelessly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he began. "I had to straighten out some messages." His tone was as friendly as could be, yet there was a peculiar harshness in his voice, perhaps because of the strain under which he was suffering. He was wasting no words on formalities or introductions. Tersely, he hurried to get down to business. "Now, I presume you have your orders from G.H.Q."

“Yes, sir,” Kirby replied. “We were told that for the time being we’re to consider ourselves in the naval intelligence corps. At your service, sir.”

“Exactly,” the commander said, and gave a wry smile—a smile which seemed to lack mirth. “Sometimes we must call upon the army, just as they have to call upon us. You’re the very best flyers we can get hold of, and,” he added, with grim conviction, “we need you!” He turned and walked over to a huge table-desk. “Now if you three will be seated, I’ll try to give you a slant on the situation.”

Wonderingly, the Three Mosquitoes drew up chairs around the desk. The commander seated himself, and unfurled a large chart of the English Channel and the North Sea. Over in the corner the wireless kept clicking monotonously, its operator sitting like one apart.

“We Americans,” the commander began his explanation in a terse, officious manner, “are supposed to patrol these waters, here.” He dabbed the chart with his finger, indicating an area which included the mouth of the Channel and part of the North Sea, on the continental side, off the coasts of France and a small piece of recaptured Belgium. “Of course, in patrolling the waters, we all cooperate—British, French, and Americans. But whatever happens in our area is really our responsibility.

“Now, you are doubtless aware of the present situation on the sea. The Allies have won decided supremacy. We have virtually driven the Boche out of the water. And Germany’s greatest weapon of the sea, her greatest hope for bringing England to submission, the U-boat, has been decisively conquered. Months ago we made it impossible for any U-boats to get near the Channel.

“MODERN and anti-submarine methods were too much for them. We had fooled them with the Q-boats, and bombed them right out of their underwater lairs with the deadly depth bombs. Their defeat was spelled by the many new systems of mines, nets, and detecting devices such as the hydrophone, which can pick up the hum of a submarine’s motors, submerged or on the surface, from several miles’ distance.

“The mouth of the Channel at the North Sea is locked by an impenetrable barrier of mines and nets, and is guarded by fleets of destroyers, patrol

boats, and our own subs. In short, it would be suicidal for a German vessel to enter any of our waters, or try to get through our blockade into the Channel. So you see,” he pursued, and now his voice changed, shook with emotion, and once more that haggard look was on his face, “considering all the facts, the thing that has happened is all the more amazing, all the more ghastly!”

He paused, drew in his breath. The Three Mosquitoes sat tense, expectant, sensing what was coming. In the silence the buzzing of the wireless instrument filled the room.

At last the commander spoke again, with mingled awe and horror.

“It began the day before yesterday. Since that time, right in the zone we are supposed to patrol,” he pointed to the map, and his voice began to rise, “right near the mouth of the Channel, almost under our very noses” The voice seemed to break, and he blurted out the rest of his words. “Six ships—six of them, three British and three American, were sunk without a trace, and *no survivors!*”

The Three Mosquitoes started, and a cold chill went tingling through them. The wireless kept ticking away inexorably. The commander pulled himself together once more and spoke in a calmer tone.

“It’s the most mysterious and inexplicable thing that’s ever happened,” he was saying. He shook his head. “However, I’ll just try to sum up all the facts for you.”

The facts proved to be meager, inasmuch as there were no survivors, no witnesses to tell of the catastrophes. The first ship sunk had been a British destroyer. This ship had apparently been cruising in American-patrolled waters well within the barriers of mines and nets which formed the first gateway to the Channel, although at the time of the disaster the British craft was not within sight of any other Allied vessels. At 9:11 a.m., the day before yesterday, the frantic wireless calls had been picked up. But outside of the usual S.O.S. signals, and the ship’s position, nothing else had come through. There had been some mysterious interference. And then had come the grim silence on that wave length, the silence which indicated that the ship was gone.

Destroyers and patrol boats were the first to reach the scene of the disaster. And it was a picture of horror and ghastliness that the waters of the sea tossed before their eyes. There was floating, twisted wreckage, and in its midst, mingled with all the scum and debris, the bloated, mangled bodies of men whose lips were mute to tell of what had happened. No survivors.

An accident—that was the first conclusion, of course. One of those accidents which sometimes happen. It might have been an explosion in the powder magazine, a boiler bursting, any one of a number of things. Thus was the tragedy dismissed. It was dreadful, but it could not be helped.

BUT when, just four hours later, and in an exactly similar manner, an American destroyer was mysteriously swallowed by the sea, and when, after another lapse of four hours, a third vessel—this time an American patrol boat—also took a fatal plunge, then things began to look different.

The alarm was spread. There was dirty work afoot, and all vessels must be on their guard. But the whole thing had happened so suddenly that the reaction to it was slow in coming. By the following day, which was yesterday, brains had not yet cleared, wits had not yet been collected. And so again at the inevitable four-hour intervals, three more ships—an American and a British destroyer, and a British patrol boat—were sunk without a trace, and the mystery still lay hidden in the depth of the sea. For always, like a sickening refrain, came the shocking, unbelievable report: *no survivors!*

It had happened in U.S.-patrolled waters, and the U.S. navy felt the dreadful burden of responsibility. They were stirred savagely to action. Feverishly they threw themselves into the task of stopping the sinkings. But the whole thing really looked like a job for intelligence, and in this quarter was the greatest activity. Every resource was used to get at the bottom of the mystery.

“When we had gathered all the frail threads and tied them together,” the commander was telling the Three Mosquitoes, who sat awed and fascinated by this lurid tale, “we were at least able to bring several illuminating facts to the surface.

“To begin with, all the vessels sunk were of the light warship class, destroyers or patrol boats. Why? Was it because such ships carried small crews, thus insuring less chance of survivors? As it is, I can’t understand how, out of those six wrecks, not a single man was saved. It seldom happens that every man on a ship goes down. There’s something damned queer about that. Also remember that all the ships, when sunk, were cruising alone, out of sight of any other craft—in other words, quite isolated, though within protected waters. This seems to point to the fact that the agents responsible for the sinkings cannot do their work unseen. They have to reveal their trick, and consequently they have to attack isolated vessels, and remove them without a trace. Dead men tell no tales. That also explains why they had to confine their ghastly work to warships. Only warships would cruise alone, for we never sail merchant ships without convoys.

“But the big and impossible question which confronts us is: how were these ships sunk at four-hour intervals? Certainly not by a U-boat. That’s out of the question, as you can gather from what I’ve told you. It would be physically impossible for a U-boat, no matter how wonderfully designed or skillfully navigated, to come through the barrier mines, nets and destroyers which cover every inch of the water. It just couldn’t be done! Also, consider the fact that the boats sunk were mainly destroyers—vessels designed to crush the U-boats. They could detect a submarine miles away, and they could never be sunk so swiftly and completely that they could not send out a detailed wireless report or take to their boats.

“With the U-boats absolutely eliminated, what remains? Mines? There are no mine zones near the scenes of the sinkings, and our mine sweepers keep the waters clear. What else is there to consider? Airplanes? Another impossibility. German flyers do not dare to venture so far over, and certainly such a complete demolition of six ships could not be accomplished by an aerial bombardment.”

He paused, and mopped his brow. The three flyers shifted, a look of bewildered puzzlement on their faces. With every possible method the Germans could use apparently rejected, the mystery seemed impenetrable.

ABRUPTLY, the C.O. glanced at his wrist-watch. Evidently the subject of airplanes had brought him back to the business in hand.

"Only eight twenty-two," he murmured. "Now, I've taken all this time to explain the situation to you because I want you to know what we're up against.

"We've taken measures which we hope will put a stop to this damnable business. Working on the theory that the Germans will only try their stunt on lone, isolated vessels, we've issued Orders that no ships are to sail unaccompanied, with one exception. The exception is a piece of bait we are using in the hope of uncovering the mystery. And that," suddenly his eyes went to the three men, studying them shrewdly, "that is where you fellows come in."

Instinctively, the Three Mosquitoes stiffened, as if coming to attention. Up to this time, although the whole problem had absorbed them deeply, they had really been outsiders, looking at the thing objectively. But now, suddenly, the issue had become personal. They themselves were going to play a part in this lurid drama!

"As I said," the commander pursued, "the idea is to bait the Boche." Then, seeming to digress, he suddenly called out to the man at the wireless, "Say, Sparks, what's the latest from the Georgia?"

The wireless man, who until now had seemed like some inanimate figure detached from the rest of the room, suddenly came to life, turned to his seat and said crisply, "Last message arrived five minutes ago, sir. Report is that she's proceeding according to schedule, within sight of other ships. Everything O.K." And, having given his report, he wheeled right back to his instruments, once more closing himself out of the scene.

"The Georgia," the commander now explained to the flyers, "is a U.S. destroyer which has been so badly battered up in action that she is ready for the scrap heap, so we don't mind sacrificing her. We patched her up a bit, and sent her out with a minimum crew of only ten daring men to work this little stunt. She is now steaming toward a specified zone around the general scene of the disasters. At nine o'clock she will isolate herself in these waters. We figure that the Germans, judging from their past performances and the knowledge that they are always methodical in

their habits, will try to work their trick at the usual time, a little past nine.

"The ten men on the Georgia have orders not to try to defend their ship against whatever attacks them. They are merely to act as observers. In order to combat the unknown enemy, we must first find out what it is. As soon as the Georgia is alone and in the zone of danger, all her crew will gather on the deck. The steam pressure will have been run up sufficiently to keep the engines going by themselves. If—" grimly, he changed the word—"When the Georgia starts to sink, these men will instantly abandon her, and get on a raft which they will have ready to toss overboard. In this way they will all surely be saved when the rescuing vessels hurry to the scene.

"However, we want to go even further than this, to cover every possible contingency. Of course, we cannot dare to have any other sea craft around, even submarines, for the Germans might spot them. But," he went on, significantly, "suppose we should have three airplanes flying high above the scene, where they could watch and—"

The eyes of the three pilots lit up eagerly.

"In other words," Kirby said, "you want us to fly out there, hang around above the Georgia when she is going alone, and get a slant on the show."

"Exactly. You three fellows have an extraordinary knack of concealing yourselves in the sun, and yet getting a clear view of everything below." He spoke with frank admiration. "You're about the only flyers we could trust to do the thing perfectly. Now, I've thought of giving you seaplanes—I understand you can handle them—but it seems your land scouts would be better suited for this purpose. A seaplane cannot make as good altitude or speed, and would be harder to conceal. Besides, land planes ought to be perfectly safe. You won't have to go more than twelve or fifteen miles from the coast."

"We can do that easily," the lanky Travis put in. "We have enough gas for a couple of hundred miles. And our planes are all ready, waiting for us at the naval drome here."

"Good. You ought to be able to overtake the Georgia in the next twenty minutes or so. There's still ample time. I guess I've cleared up every point for you now, given you all the facts. All that

remains is to give you your route and some maps." This he proceeded to do. And he had just finished his instructions, was ready to dismiss the three flyers, when there came a most sudden and startling interruption.

## CHAPTER II BOCHE BAIT

FOR the second time the wireless man had come to life, and now he was very much alive indeed. He had all but jumped from the chair. His face was white, and he was shouting confusedly.

"The Georgia—the Georgia—S.O.S.—Signals coming in strong!"

In a leap that almost upset his desk, the commander was on his feet, eyes wild. Kirby swore under his breath. His two comrades sat gaping dumbly. The commander yelled at the wireless man, yelled hoarsely, crazily: "That's impossible! Impossible, I tell you! Not the Georgia—there's a mistake! She was within sight of ships! She—" His voice trailed off to incoherence. Speech seemed to have deserted him. Wildly, he rushed across the room. The Three Mosquitoes followed. They all gathered around the wireless man, who was now once more bending feverishly to his instruments. But now no sound came from the set. It was tuned only for listening. The operator began to jot down the message which came through his earphones, writing with expert speed on a little pad. The others watched over his shoulders, devouring the words he wrote. All was silent, save for the scraping of the operator's pencil against the paper, and the labored, gasping breath of the commander, who stood like one stricken with anguish and horror.

"S.O.S.—S.O.S." the operator scribbled. The position of the ship followed. Then, frantically, "Blown to hell. Sinking fast. Trying to abandon ship. Need help at once—" The dots and dashes buzzed in the operator's earphones, bringing that breathless drama from the sea right into this large, comfortable room on dry land. And the men who stood and read those terse, graphic words could see a vivid picture of the floundering, listing ship, could see the waters surging over her decks, rushing into her holds.

For several seconds only the frantic calls for help came in, and the report that the Georgia was sinking fast. But then, suddenly, something else was coming—something which jerked the nerves of the men in that room taut, made them lean forward, while their eyes followed the rapidly moving pencil of the operator.

"Just found out how we were sunk—" The four watchers held their breaths, as they saw the revelation of the mystery about to come. It was coming now! The pencil was moving right on. "The Germans are using—"

And there, right on the verge of the vital part of the message, the operator's pencil stopped writing, trailed off in a dash, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Frantically, the wireless man was working his instruments, while the commander, tortured by the suspense, almost shrieked at him, "Get it man! Get it, for God's sake!" In a frenzy, he gripped the operator's shoulder, shook it savagely. "Take it down, damn you! Take it down!"

Helplessly, the operator turned to him, shook his head.

"I—I can't, sir," he blurted, bitterly. "There's a lot of crazy interference. I can only hear a jumble of letters which mean nothing! The Boche must be sending out stuff on the Georgia's wave length to stop this message from getting through!"

Again Kirby swore, and his two comrades joined him. The commander almost went out of his head. Tears were in his eyes, and his voice was hoarse.

"God, we've got to get it! They're trying to tell us—We must learn! Damn it, man!" Again he was addressing the operator and now his voice was almost pleading, "Try your best. Use all your skill! Everything depends on it!"

The operator needed no urging. He was doing his level best. Feverishly, he kept working with his instruments, trying to disentangle the confused noises which buzzed in his phones. And at last, with sudden, eager hope, he was shouting.

"Wait, sir—I think I'm getting them again! It's beginning to clear and—" He broke off, and his face fell. For now, suddenly, the buzzing had stopped altogether! The wave length was frozen into a silence more eloquent than words.

He did not have to tell the men. They could see it in his face. Nevertheless he blurted out, despairingly:

“The Georgia’s gone, sir!”

THERE was a silence. The Three Mosquitoes looked at the floor, silently grieving over the tragedy. The commander, his eyes shining, stood pale and bewildered, seemed to be half in a trance. But he still refused to give up the fight altogether. Again he began to give orders to the wireless man, though now his voice was scarcely audible.

“Get in touch—other ships,” he blurted. “There were supposed to be vessels in sight. Maybe they saw—”

The operator obeyed at once and began to pick up various vessels. All the ships in the vicinity had caught the Georgia’s S.O.S. signals, and now were rushing to the scene of the disaster. But all reported unanimously that at the time of the sinking the hapless destroyer had not been in their sight.

So it seemed that the Georgia, intelligence corps’ supreme hope for uncovering the mystery, had simply gone the way of the six other unfortunate vessels. The wily Boche must have gotten wind of the Georgia’s purpose somehow, and, deviating from their usual methodical ways, they had worked their stunt a half an hour early. But how they had caught the Georgia alone and unprotected was another inexplicable mystery. The destroyer was supposed to be keeping in sight of other ships. Yet no other ships had seen it at the time of the disaster. Certainly it had been taken unawares, before its tiny crew of ten could have started preparations for abandoning the craft. It looked like the same old story, and doubtless there would be the same ending—the “*No survivors*” report.

Of all the sinkings, this one was by far the most daring and insolent. The unknown enemies had calmly attacked the very ship sent out to find them, had turned the tables nicely! In short, it was a slap in the face of U.S. naval intelligence—a slap in the face which the commander here felt fully, cruelly. The stern, grizzled old naval veteran had all he could do to hold himself together, to keep from sobbing like a frustrated child.

“Damn them!” he choked. “Damn their dirty tactics! God,” his eyes blazed with futile rage, “if only we could get our hands on them!”

The Three Mosquitoes nodded, sympathetically. And then, suddenly, Kirby became the fighter he was, the leader of his men. A determined look came over his face and his eyes gleamed.

“We’re going up, sir!” he shouted eagerly. “We can shoot right over the scene of this wreck and get there fast! Certainly whatever this unknown thing is, the chances are that it can’t get very far within the next few minutes. We might catch it!”

Eagerly his comrades fell in with the idea, their fighting blood aroused. And the commander, willing to seize any hope that was offered, also welcomed the plan.

“But we must be quick about it,” the naval officer said. “Let me give you the location at once.” He hurried back to his desk and his extreme eagerness was almost pitiful. As the three flyers gathered around him, he hastily told them how to reach the scene of the tragedy. In a moment he was asking them, “Now is everything clear?”

“It couldn’t be clearer,” drawled the lanky Travis.

“Let’s go!” shouted Shorty Carn.

“And we’ll find out Jerry’s little trick all right,” Kirby promised, in a tone so convincing that it seemed to comfort the commander considerably. “Yes, we’ll spot this unknown devil. We may be landlubbers and army men, but,” he laughed grimly, “we’re in the navy now!”

FIFTEEN minutes later and three trim, khaki Spads were racing out over the glistening waters of the North Sea, speeding through the translucent sky with their wings flashing in the sun. Their motors roared in thunderous unison, and black smoke poured from their exhausts. They flew in a V-shaped formation—the usual precise formation of the Three Mosquitoes. Kirby led, and Carn and Travis flanked him on either side, a little to the rear.

Behind them the coast of France was receding into a dim outline, as they kept going farther out to sea. But this ever-widening gap between themselves and dry land did not alarm them.

Though they knew their wheels could never alight on the waves below, there were so many vessels scattered down there that they had no fear of drowning. So they sped right on, throttles wide open.

Kirby kept to the prescribed route, watching his compass and map, and at the same time trying constantly to increase their wild pace, to attain still greater speed. He was wildly impatient to reach his destination, to get to the watery grave of the Georgia. The sooner he and his comrades got there the better would be their chance of catching sight of the unknown thing which had sent the destroyer to its doom. Would they see it, though? Was it something that could be seen or—

He broke off, telling himself it was no sense conjecturing, guessing. The thing to do was to get there, and to this end he applied all his strength and skill. Faster and faster now, with his comrades faithfully keeping pace, keeping their bobbing ships just behind him. They were rushing through the air hell bent, with the wind shrilling wildly through their flying wires, and their engines vibrating in deafening protest.

And in another minute Kirby knew they were getting there. For now, as he scanned the circular expanse of sea below to its distant horizon, he could see several ships steaming in from all directions, steaming in on converging lines toward a point which lay close ahead of the flyers. Some of these ships were just smudges of smoke or tiny black shapes, others were close enough to be distinct to their minutest details. Kirby could even see the American or British ensigns which flew at their masts. He picked out destroyers, trawlers, patrol boats, mine sweepers, and after more careful scrutiny, a couple of British submarines running at surface trim. All the ships were hurrying to the scene of the disaster. But Kirby and his comrades would beat them by a wide margin. They were fairly streaking over the ships which steamed below them on a parallel course to theirs, were passing them in breathless succession.

Very soon they had swept past the vanguard of those vessels below, and they were coming over an open stretch of water. And Kirby knew that somewhere in this stretch was the spot where the Georgia had been swallowed. He strained his eyes, scanning the blue-gray waters. Also he looked about for some signs of the unknown

enemy. He must not miss it if it were still here. He must look for it everywhere in the sky as well as the sea. But in the sky there was nothing but infinite blue and streaming golden sunshine, and in the sea, thus far, nothing but the Allied vessels which were hurrying in from all sides.

But then, abruptly, Kirby's keen eyes picked out something else on the water. Off to the right, in this open stretch, was a scarcely visible mass which floated on the rolling waves. And at the sight of it Kirby's lips drew up into a tight, grim line. The wreck! There it was, all that remained of the hapless Georgia! Hastily, Kirby waved a signal to his comrades and saw them wave their response. The three Spads banked as one, headed toward that distant wreckage. Again Kirby waved, as he shoved his joystick forward and nosed down. His comrades followed. Gracefully the trio of planes descended toward the surface of the sea. The surging waters rose to meet them, and the horizon on all sides drew in closer as they went lower. The floating wreckage was looming before them now, getting more and more distinct. They leveled off.

IT WAS an ugly sight which met their eyes, which told them vividly of the gruesome tragedy. The surface of the water was coated with slimy, blackish oil, and in this scum, tossing about grotesquely, were the few parts of the Georgia which had broken away from the sinking vessel and remained afloat. There were rafts, smashed lifeboats with no occupants, and life preservers whose straps floundered freely. And in all this debris, there was not one sign, not a trace of the Georgia's ten-man crew! There was not even one body to be seen floating down there.

But they must look closer. Once more Kirby signaled his comrades. They piqued down, swooping so low that the salt spray was in their nostrils. Like searching gulls they wheeled and dipped over the wreckage, spuming the waves with their undercarriages. Vainly they kept hunting for bodies—live bodies or corpses. But they could find neither.

Kirby glanced somberly at his two comrades on either side, saw their grim, goggled faces. All three pilots shook their heads at one another. They were all shocked and astounded by this latest development in the mysterious business, this new

sequel to the “*No survivors*” report. At least, in the other sinkings, there had been bodies found. True, the Georgia had a smaller crew than the rest, but it seemed incredible that all of those ten men should disappear without a trace, especially since the ship must have taken quite a few minutes to sink, judging from the length of the wireless calls. Indeed, it was so utterly incredible that Kirby began to wonder whether he and his comrades had really been the first to arrive on the scene after all.

But they must have been the first to arrive. Even now Kirby saw that the nearest of the vessels which were steaming at full speed to the scene were at least a mile away. Baffled and perplexed, Kirby again found his thoughts going to the unknown enemy. What in God’s name was this terrible device which sank ships without a trace in such closely guarded waters? Damn it, but he must look for it until he spotted it! He left his two comrades circling ever the wreckage and zoomed up to get another view of the surroundings. But again he could see no sign of an enemy in the sea or in the sky.

Presently, the rescuing vessels were beginning to reach the scene. They came in one after another, and began to cruise about the wreckage, combing the waters for survivors or corpses. Kirby and his comrades flew all over the place, darted hither and thither in the hope of spotting some clue to the unknown enemy. But it was the same old hopeless story. Time passed, and neither ships nor planes discovered a thing. There were no bodies, and no clues.

After a long and fruitless search, the vessels at last commenced to leave the scene. One by one they pulled out, steered about, and steamed away to resume their previous duties. Kirby glanced at his wrist watch, and discovered to his dismay that a full hour had passed since he and his comrades had left the intelligence office. A full hour, and nothing accomplished! Bitterly, he signaled his comrades back into formation. Travis and Carn both waved to him, indicating that they thought it wisest to drop the chase for the time being and return to the commander for new orders. This Kirby hated to do, for he always hated to give up, and besides they still had plenty of gas.

But what could they do? Kirby shook his head. Nothing, it seemed. If only they had some idea about this thing they were hunting, they might

find it. But this way, not even knowing where to look for it, they seemed up against a hopeless wall. However, Kirby still hesitated to start back for land. Futilely, knowing it was useless, he continued to lead his comrades around, circling over the scene of the wreck while the Allied ships were moving off, scattering in all directions.

### CHAPTER III MOSQUITO PATROL

AGAIN Kirby found himself wondering how in hell there could be no bodies or survivors. That was the thing which got him, kept sticking in his mind. The vague idea he had dismissed before, the idea that he and his comrades might not have been the first to arrive here, bobbed up again. But who else could have gotten here first? Certainly no Allied vessels or—

Suddenly he stiffened in his cockpit, his eyes narrowing behind his goggles. God, could it be that the Germans who had done the sinking had—

It seemed absolutely illogical, and so obvious that someone must have thought of it before. Yet, somehow, Kirby could not thrust it from his mind. Mechanically, he continued to lead his comrades around in circles, while he racked his brain with conjectures, reviewing all the facts he knew about the mystery. Suddenly he remembered something which seemed to connect itself in a vague way with the very idea he had in mind. Those four-hour intervals between the sinkings—four hours—no survivors! By God, they did connect! With increased excitement Kirby hastily glanced at his roll map. He located the spot where he and his comrades now were, found that it was right where the Channel widens out into the North Sea, several miles within the furthest barrier of Allied mines. Zeebrugge, the nearest German port, was about fifty miles away. But the German lines in the North Sea, if one took a straight course to them from Kirby’s present position, were only some eighteen miles away.

The blood raced to Kirby’s cheeks, as he felt the first triumphant flush that comes to a detective when he finds himself on the scent of his quarry. Yes, it was ridiculous to think that he, an ordinary army pilot, could hope to make discoveries which intelligence experts had overlooked. Yet

the very fact that they were experts might have prevented them from suspecting the most obvious thing and caused them to hunt for something miraculous, uncanny. Not by any means did Kirby see the solution of the mystery; but he had a hunch which he felt might put him on the track of that solution!

He did not hesitate. He would take a chance and follow his hunch. There was nothing else he could do anyway. Again he glanced at his roll map. To get to those German waters eighteen miles from here meant following a bee-line, which would take him and his comrades dangerously far from land, far out where the North Sea widened like a funnel. But they'd have plenty of gas. They'd manage it all right.

Eagerly, Kirby waved to his comrades, told them all he could by means of gestures. They waved back interrogatively, wanting to know why he meant to lead them out to German waters. Kirby grinned, signaled them to mind their business, and at the same time banked his plane and opened his throttle full. Obediently, they followed.

A moment later they were again roaring through the sky at breakneck speed, this time headed for the open sea, for German waters! On they rushed, with Kirby scanning the waters, constantly. Still Allied ships below, but they seemed to be getting more and more scattered now—just a few little groups of them here and there. Then, quite suddenly, Kirby and his comrades found themselves passing over the great barrier which formed the first gateway to the Channel. Here there were scores and scores of vessels, flotillas of destroyers and patrol boats, which steamed up and down like sentries on watch. It was a veritable wall of ships which guarded that unseen wall of mines, and the sight of them bore out the commander's assertion that no German vessel could possibly slip through here.

A discouraged feeling swept Kirby as he glanced down at the impenetrable barrier. How could his hunch stand up against all those mines and ships? For a moment, condemning himself as a fool and a jackass, he had an impulse to turn back, lead his comrades back to land, and report to the commander for orders. But then, despite everything, his hunch persisted. It might be

impossible, absurd, but nevertheless he was determined to give it a chance.

PAST the barriers now, and out over open water again. A few more ships, little dots and smudges of smoke.

Then nothing but water, surging blue-gray waves which glistened in the sun. The coastline of the continent had vanished altogether. The Three Mosquitoes now had to trust their frail little Spads to hold them in the air, for only the air was safe for the tiny planes now. A forced landing here would mean certain death. But the Three Mosquitoes were not worried. The three reckless aces were more than willing to risk their necks—Kirby because of his hunch, and Carn and Travis because they knew their leader must have something worthwhile up his sleeve.

Mile after mile they chewed up, with nothing in sight. But now Kirby knew that the distant horizon was sufficiently far away to be within German waters. He must watch that horizon closely. He strained his eyes, peering through his goggles.

And in the next second his heart leaped with wild hope. A smudge of smoke! Right ahead, on the horizon! Of course, it might mean nothing, but somehow the fact that it was right on the line which Kirby had followed from the scene of the Georgia's wreck, seemed to bear out Kirby's suspicions. Eagerly, he pointed out the smoke to his comrades. They nodded, just as eagerly.

Then, led by Kirby, they taxed their ships to the very utmost in their efforts to make even greater speed, so they could bring over the horizon that smoke and whatever was beneath it. The Spads went thundering on, and Kirby kept watching. Presently a tiny shape appeared under the smoke. He could not make it out as yet, and he cursed himself for not having brought along any binoculars.

It seemed an interminable period before that distant shape began to assume any clear proportions. It seemed to be some kind of war vessel, but outside of that Kirby was still unable to make it out. It was apparently headed for the German-Belgium coast, and judging by the dense clouds of smoke which rose from it, it was in a hurry!

They must overtake it as soon as possible, so they could investigate. Again Kirby tried to get more speed out of his Spad, but it was impossible to make the throbbing, vibrating ship go any faster. But they were getting closer now. A sudden thought came to Kirby, and at once he signaled his comrades again. They began to climb, soaring into the brilliant orb of the sun. They must take no chances of being seen by the men on that ship.

Another interminable period seemed to drag by, while they kept racing hell bent, now in the sun. And then at last they were drawing over that ship, and it began to loom in detail like a picture coming into focus. But when, finally, Kirby saw it distinctly, made out just what it was, he groaned in utter disgust!

The vessel was a large but old-looking German battleship—a battleship which, because of its colossal size, could have had nothing to do with the happenings in the mouth of the Channel! It was one of those clumsy, tublike affairs which could not make much speed and were easy to spot from miles away! True, it was steaming for all it was worth. The white foam broke and surged over its blunt bow, which rose and dipped with the waves. But that meant nothing. Indeed, Kirby decided bitterly, it was just by a cruel coincidence that the battleship happened to be on the beeline which he had followed from the wreck.

A FEELING of frustration gripped Kirby, and he could have wept. He had led his comrades way out to sea, way out over German waters, on nothing more than a wild-goose chase! Aside from this battleship, there was nothing in sight anywhere. The sea was empty, as if the Germans had virtually retired from the waters. What was the use? The only thing to do now was to go back, after wasting all this time and fuel.

Then, suddenly, Kirby's frustration turned to rage, a rage which, because it had to center on something, centered on the clumsy battleship below—the only enemy around. Kirby began to damn that dreadnaught with ever-increasing vehemence. He damned it for disappointing himself and his comrades; for turning out to be virtually a mirage!

By God—his eyes blazed, and his fist tightened on his joystick—as long as the Three

Mosquitoes were here they might as well treat those Heinie sailors to a little merry hell! The idea kept growing in his mind, and pretty soon it began to bring him a savage glee. It would be fun at that, strafing a battle ship! Little did he stop to think that it would be extremely dangerous fun, because they were out at sea in land planes, and if anything happened—

With eager impetuosity, Kirby waved to his comrades—signaled them by pointing down to the ship below and ahead and then tapping his twin machine guns. They waved back their joyous agreement. At last, after all this aimless searching and conjecturing, they could have a little action.

“Let's go, fellows!” Kirby shouted wildly, though he knew they could not hear him above the drone of engines.

“Down on 'em and give 'em hell!” And his arm shot upward, giving them the cue. With reckless abandon he shoved his stick forward, and was nosing down in a furious dive. Close on his tail dived the other two Mosquitoes. Down they went, plunging like plummet, straight for the unsuspecting battleship crew below.

The blurred gray shape of the dreadnaught loomed before Kirby's eyes. Vaguely he saw the tiny figures on the decks. He leaned to his sights, and his fingers sought his stick triggers.

In range now! All right—

He pressed the triggers, and his guns thundered into blazing life, sending down their streams of tracer. Almost simultaneously came the shrill staccato clatter of the other two Mosquitoes' guns. The three planes were spreading out now, each diving toward a different section of the big ship.

In a second pandemonium raged aboard that German battleship. The crew must have gotten the surprise of their lives when they saw three trim land planes come dropping down right on top of them, right out of the sun! Like frightened rats, they scurried for shelter, several of them sprawling out on the decks, where they lay inert. Like monstrous hawks the three ships swooped right down on them spraying a hail of tracer throughout all the open parts of the vessel. They flattened out overhead, to zoom into a half loop and come down again. But as they zoomed, the German sailors at last got busy. The ship's anti-aircrafts began barking, and they were surprisingly powerful. Shells began to mushroom

out around the swooping Spads, and machine-gun bullets whined up at them. But Kirby and his men laughed recklessly at the barrage. Down they went, guns blazing anew.

Kirby was nosing down for one of the ship's aft decks now, heading for an anti-aircraft gun and its crew, determined to finish them off. Down, down, down—while somewhere below a Maxim which had been brought out was spitting up at him, and he heard the tick of bullets through his fuselage. He answered that gun with his own, firing away defiantly. Lower and lower he dropped, crazily low now. So low that he could see the blue uniforms of the Boche sailors.

A shout of crazed bewilderment broke from him, and his fingers literally froze on the triggers of his guns. So absolutely dumfounded and shocked was he that he almost crashed right into that ship below. Instinct was the only thing that made him pull up from his dive, and even then he floundered about up there like a drunken bird. He did not notice the fact that he was making an excellent target of himself and that the Germans were beginning to rip hell out of his plane. He did not notice that his comrades, seeing him hold his fire, were circling above him, waving questions while they dodged the shells. No, he did not notice anything except that one stupendous sight which had first caught his eyes and held them.

AS HE had come down right on top that deck, he had seen, huddled behind all the German sailors at the gun, a group of some ten men who were garbed in strange and most unmilitary attire. These men were bundled up in blankets, wrapped up like Indian squaws, and they looked wet, disheveled, and miserable. But they had waved eagerly to the Yank pilot as he came down above them, and Kirby had noticed, though he could not see their faces clearly, that they looked like Americans. All these facts, put together, had been sufficient to act upon the Mosquito with the force and effect of a thunderbolt.

For Kirby knew at once, beyond any shadow of doubt, that these men—and there seemed to be ten of them—were the crew of the United States destroyer, Georgia, which had been sunk about an hour and three quarters ago!

It was weird and uncanny to see these men who had been given up for lost and dead, huddled

on the afterdeck of a clumsy German battleship, and at first Kirby wondered if he weren't seeing ghosts. But he had no time to wonder now. Suddenly he felt his plane lurch perilously as an anti-aircraft shell burst close by. Shrapnel whistled in his ears, grazed his cheeks. A machine-gun bullet pierced through a sleeve of his jacket and smashed into his dashboard. With a shock he came back to a full consciousness of his surroundings. Good God, while he was floundering around up here like a jackass, the Germans below were shooting him to ribbons! The air around him was dense with flying, screaming lead. His top wing had a big hole through it, and a patch of blue sky showed where the taut khaki fabric had been before. One of his struts was splintered, and the controls were behaving queerly. He heard a shrill ripping of metal as bullets tore into his engine cowl.

Far above, having pulled up when they saw Kirby deliberately hold his fire, his two comrades circled helplessly, waving frantic signals at their leader, trying to tell him to pull out of that deadly barrage.

Desperately, Kirby began to fight with his damaged controls, and opened his throttle. With bullets zipping after him, he forced his protesting Spad up in a long zoom. And he got out, thank God! He got out, and joined his comrades above. In another moment the three planes were circling behind and above the slowly moving battleship, circling well out of range of the German guns. Kirby's plane was behaving queerly, and there was an ominous rattle in the engine. But the damage did not seem serious; just a few holes, a few broken wires, and a splintered strut.

Once out of danger again, Kirby immediately began to wave to his comrades with wild excitement, trying to tell them what he had seen. But they could not understand, for they could not see the blanketed crew of the Georgia from up there. Even Kirby, who knew they were down there, could scarcely distinguish the group of men. He soon gave up the idea of trying to convey his discovery to Carn and Travis, and instead, while mechanically he led them around overhead, he tried to think things out, tried desperately to fit logic and reason to the amazing thing he had seen.

CHAPTER IV  
SOLO SLEUTH

HIS hunch, the hunch that had brought him here, seemed to be borne out, but in a most extraordinary and unexpected manner. He had thought they were survivors, but how in hell could the presence of those survivors on the big battleship below be explained? Once more a picture of those barriers at the mouth of the Channel came to Kirby's mind. It was an established fact that even a U-boat, which was small and could hide itself by submerging, would not even have a ghost of a chance of slipping through those barriers. And if a U-boat couldn't slip through, how could this huge dreadnaught, this giant tub which stood out boldly on the surface of the water, even dare to approach Allied waters? The answer was simple. It couldn't! And that's what made the whole thing so baffling and unbelievable.

Unable to make head or tail of this crazy puzzle, Kirby devoted himself to working out a course of action. What to do, now that he had seen those survivors? Follow the dreadnaught? No, that would be useless and impossible. The battleship was obviously going to a port miles and miles away. It would take hours to get there, and the three Mosquitoes had only enough gas for an hour or so more. Besides, they could doubtless gain nothing by following the ship, inasmuch as they could not interfere with it in any way. Finally, Kirby's plane was damaged, and the sooner he got back to Allied land the better.

All these things considered, it seemed wisest to ignore the battleship, beat it for home, and report what he had seen. Perhaps intelligence, given this clue to work with, would figure something out.

Reaching his decision, Kirby signaled his comrades. The three Spads banked off, turned their tails on the fat dreadnaught, and soared away, back for Allied waters. Kirby's engine was still rattling queerly, and he had a hard time keeping his plane on even keel; but he simply took it easy, flew carefully and not too fast, and had no fears. His comrades followed his leisurely pace, and the bobbing noses of their ships remained on either side of him. On they flew, while the battleship receded behind them, fading once more into a dim, shadowy shape on the great

sea. Again the flyers were over the lonely, surging waters, with nothing in sight, droning along. And again Kirby was wondering how the devil those Georgia survivors came to be on the battleship, wondering—

There came a sudden hissing sound which made his blood run cold. And before he had time to investigate that sound, before he had time to do anything about it, the engine of his Spad gave a few rasping coughs, choked valiantly for his life, and then, with a sputtering sigh, it conked out!

And Kirby realized with horror what was wrong. No gas! God, those sailors must have plugged his feed line, and his fuel had simply leaked away! And without gas his engine was utterly useless!

His brain whirled. Dazedly, he struggled with his controls, as his plane, deprived of its flying speed, started to nose down. Dazedly he saw the Spads of his comrades swoop beside him; saw the two pilots waving in frenzied alarm. By sheer instinct, he managed to keep his floundering plane out of a spin, got it into a shallow glide. But he was gliding straight down toward the sea, while his comrades, their goggled faces full of anguish and horror, followed him, watching helplessly.

Down, down, down, with the wind shrieking through the taut flying wires like a wailing siren, whipping against his face in lashing gusts. Down, down, down—And now the blue water was rushing up to meet him with nauseating swiftness, as if hungry to swallow him and his frail plane. As he saw those surging waves looming right before him, slowly a full realization of his predicament came over him, and he froze with sheer terror.

He was done for. He was going to certain death, diving right for the open sea in a frail, land plane! And his comrades, because they too had land planes, which could not alight on the sea, would be helpless to aid him. Nothing could save him. Not a thing in sight! Just water, and God—he shuddered as those waves kept looming closer and closer—how cold that water looked!

Panic seized him. Nor was it only the thought of drowning like a rat that tortured him. There was also the thought that now he would be unable to report what he had seen on that German battleship. The secret he had learned, which he felt sure would lead to the solution of the great mystery, would go down to the bottom of the sea

with him. God, if only he had been able to tell his comrades about those survivors! He cursed despairingly, and at the same time he was awed by the irony of the thing. Why, the Germans had gotten him too, just as they had gotten everyone else who had learned anything about their stunt! It seemed that fate was on their side; that anyone who pried into their business was doomed either to capture or death. Indeed, the whole thing seemed to keep getting more and more uncanny, almost supernatural.

All these thoughts raced through his mind as he kept gliding down closer, ever closer to the water now, while his anguished comrades wheeled and circled helplessly right above him. Now the surging waves were so close that the spray of them was wetting his face. And the spray was icy. It stung his cheeks fiercely. Only a few seconds more now, and the nose of his ship would plunge into that deep water.

MADLY, futilely, he struggled to make his glide more shallow, to avoid the inevitable contact with those waters, kept his swiftly descending plane in the air. He pulled his joystick all the way back, held it violently against his chest. But though he managed to flatten out somewhat, to avoid a headfirst plunge, nevertheless, with sickening speed, those waves kept rushing toward him. Wild sobs tore from his throat as he realized his utter helplessness. And right above, his comrades were sobbing too, because they had to endure the torture of standing by with idle hands while their leader's Spad kept settling on the surface at the water, settling, settling—

There came a mighty splash. With a force which tore Kirby's helmet and goggles clean off, and knocked the breath from him, a deluge of water broke over him, chilling him to the very marrow as it seeped through his heavy flying togs. He gasped and choked, swallowing great gulps of salty water, blinking his stinging eyes. His whole body was shivering wet, and he felt his plane, in which he was still strapped, lurching and careening giddily. Then the deluge was over, and he was gratefully breathing the reviving air again. Slowly his dazed senses cleared.

The Spad was in the water, its light wood and fabric parts keeping it temporarily afloat. The frail plane was bobbing and tossing on the waves like a

cork. The heavy engine was already-submerged, dragging down the rest of the ship relentlessly; and the fuselage and Kirby's cockpit were flooded, fast filling with water. Swiftly, the Spad was sinking. And, still circling overhead, Carn and Travis watched it sinking, found their eyes glued to it, though they wished they did not have to look at the heart-rending spectacle.

For a few seconds Kirby, dazed and bewildered, continued to sit in his cockpit, though it had virtually become a bathtub full of cold water, which was rising higher and higher—almost up to his neck now. Then, dumbly, he was groping in that water for his safety belt, struggling to unfasten it. Freeing himself, he got to his feet, though the sickening lurching and rocking of the plane made it almost impossible for him to keep his balance. He felt the Spad sinking beneath him, going down, down. Swiftly, inexorably, the sea was enveloping the little plane. The fuselage and the bottom wing were submerged now. Only the top wing remained out of the water. Desperately, Kirby seized a strut, pulled himself up onto this top wing, and sprawled there, holding on for dear life while he shivered from head to foot. Carn and Travis waved to him from their cockpits to give him futile encouragement, knowing only too well that it was only a matter of seconds before that top wing, too, would go under.

IT WAS starting to go under now. It was tilting, as one end of it began to sink. Slowly the waters were sucking it down, creeping up toward Kirby. The Mosquito, with all his strength, wriggled up to the other end of the wing, where he held on frantically. The wing kept tilting more and more as it sank, and his strength was fast ebbing. Still he clung on, trying to delay as long as possible the moment when he would be left floundering in the sea with no refuge to swim to, nothing to do except to struggle awhile and then drown.

Up crept those waters, closer and closer, until only a few feet of the wing were sticking out of the water, a few feet of wet fabric and wood to which Kirby clung. That single jutting wing tip was all that was left of the trim Spad now, and it was going, while two perfect undamaged Spads droned slowly overhead, looking ever so much like two vultures waiting for their prey, though in

reality their pilots were two anguished men who sobbed hysterically while they watched their leader going to his death.

Even now, Kirby was pulling his legs up under him as the water began to reach him. Even now he was resigning to his fate, ready to relax and take it gamely, though he had always hoped that if he was to die, he might go down fighting, in a blaze of glory. But what was the use? Hungrily the sea was reaching for him, licking up at him to seize him.

It was Travis who saw the thing first. It was Travis who saw it, and came swooping down breathlessly. Right over Kirby's head flew the eldest Mosquito, and as he passed he tilted his plane, leaned out of his cockpit, and waved and pointed with wild excitement. Kirby, still clinging to the little tip of the wing which remained, looked bewilderedly in the direction which Travis was pointing. At first he could see nothing but waves. But then, abruptly, his eyes picked out the object his comrade was showing him. A few hundred yards away, poking out of the water, was what looked like a thin stick. Often the waves hid it from view, but Kirby could see that it was moving. His eyes widened with incredulous surprise. It was moving this way! It was coming toward him!

Suddenly the stick began to descend, even as it moved closer. Down it went, and then it was gone. And that, thought Kirby dismally, was that. But not quite! For now, just where the stick should be, another object appeared. Slowly it rose out of the sea, a small tower of gray steel. Higher and higher it rose, until, at its base, the water seemed to bulge and break along a line of some two hundred feet, and a long, grayish hulk emerged like a whale, with water falling from its flanks.

There, right before Kirby, and coming toward him, was a large submarine. By some remarkable coincidence, that sub, running at periscope depth, had spotted the sinking plane. Carn and Travis, being up in the air, had been able to see the submersible through the blue water, which explained Travis' wild excitement.

Kirby was going to be rescued, or captured. For that must be a U-boat, out in these German waters. But Kirby, whose wing even now was going under, pulling him down into the sea, would

have welcomed even the Kaiser himself at this moment. Thank God, he was saved! Sobbing with relief, he released his clutch on the submerging wing, let go. Then he was struggling to swim in the cold sea while his heavy flying togs, weighed down even more by the water which soaked them, almost dragged him under. But he fought his way to the surface and waved one arm vigorously.

A wave lifted him to its crest, and before it fell it gave him an excellent and clear-cut view of the submarine. As he took that view, a shout of hoarse joy broke from his gasping lips.

For he had seen, painted clearly on the conning tower of that submarine, the white insignia: E-27, An E-boat! English! Sure enough, as Kirby was lifted by another wave, he saw a wet but bright British ensign come fluttering from the conning-tower bridge.

And Carn and Travis, who had identified the submarine long before, were stunting above the steel fish like birds crazed with joy. They split-aired idiotically, looped and sideslipped and rolled.

With his spirits completely revived, Kirby commenced to swim with great gusto. No longer did he feel the icy waters, no longer did his clothes seem like leaden weights. He splashed along joyously.

The British sub was quite close now, moving slowly so as not to hit him by mistake. He could hear its Diesels pounding. And as he watched, getting short but vivid glimpses from the crest of each succeeding wave, he saw a figure emerge from the conning tower, the figure of a dapper young English lieutenant commander. After him came more figures, British sailors and officers, who stood on the deck and bridge. Kirby gulped a breath of air, then shouted at those Britishers at the top of his lungs.

The submarine's captain, the lieutenant commander, leaned from the bridge and gave the swimmer a good Oxford hail. "Cheerio, my good man!" he called pleasantly, but as coolly as if he were inviting Kirby to tea. "Cheerio! I say there, take it easy. You'll make it!"

And Kirby did make it. In another moment he was almost right up to the submarine, which was now lying adrift with its engines idling. A life ring was tossed out by the crew on deck. Kirby got it,

clung to it, and was pulled in. Rough but friendly hands seized him and helped him up.

PRESENTLY Kirby, dripping wet, and shivering, found himself standing on the conning-tower bridge of the submarine, with the dapper British lieutenant commander confronting him, smiling amiably. The rest of the crew was disappearing through the deck hatches, going back into the interior of the boat. The submarine still lay adrift, rocking and pitching in the waves.

"Well, my good man," said the lieutenant commander, in his pleasant voice. "Welcome to our pigboat and all that sort of rot! I say, we arrived in the old nick of time, what ho? Rather!"

Kirby had a little difficulty in making out this somewhat confusing speech, but he grinned amiably.

"Hell, yes!" he swore joyfully. "Boy, this is what I call service. Damn it, but I'm a son of a gun if I thought I'd get out of that lousy, blasted ocean!"

The Britisher's smile broadened.

"Strike me pink!" he exclaimed. "If it isn't a Yank!"

"You guessed it," Kirby conceded, with a laugh. "And I have a sort of hunch that you're an Englishman."

"Rather, rather! Righto! Commander Woodley is the name, of the Royal Navy you know."

"Captain Kirby's my name, of the U. S. air force—army."

"Well, I'll be bewitched, befuddled, and bewildered!" the lieutenant commander exclaimed. "An army aviator, fancy that! An army aviator on a submarine! The jolly old rot about opposites attracting one another, one might say!" He looked up at the two Spads which gyrated above. "And those two sky lads—your friends, what? Fancy those kites fishing around and not being able to do a bloody thing to help you, ho, ho!"

## CHAPTER V PIGBOAT PAROLE

THE thought and sight of those planes served to bring Kirby back to his mission with a shock. At once he forgot his discomfort and his wet

clothes, while his mind once more fastened itself on the mystery.

"Say, commander," he said, "I've got a lot on my mind, and I don't know where to begin. But the first thing is to get my two pals up there on their way. Let them hike it back for home. Now before I give them the word, will you tell me what you can do with me?"

"Righto! Luckily, we are at this moment bound for port, having spent four days looking for some nice fat Jerry ships around these bloody waters. A stroke of luck, for you! We are due at Remiens, France, in the Channel."

"Fine! Maybe you can get rid of me when we reach the Channel. Some ship will pick me up. So now I'll just signal those two fellows up there." He commenced to wave at the circling planes. They were low enough to see, and Shorty Carn came down right overhead. Kirby made it clear to the pilot, by gestures, that everything was all right, and that Shorty and Travis should fly back to Brillion-sur-Mer. They did not hesitate to comply. Their gas supply was beginning to diminish now, and since Kirby was safe, they were willing to leave him. Waving their cheery farewell, they soared aloft. The two trim Spads faded slowly into tiny specks, until presently the blue sky had swallowed them.

"Now let's get back to the point," Kirby was saying. He was still on the conning-tower bridge with the Englishman. The latter was constantly on the alert, keeping his eyes on the surrounding waters, scanning the horizon to make certain that no German vessel should approach unexpectedly. "I suppose," Kirby went on, "that you know something about this dirty work in the Channel?"

"The mysterious sinkings, you mean?" the lieutenant commander nodded, frowning. "Rather. Though out of port, we've kept in touch and have heard all about the bloody business." He sighed. "What a mess! It is the most extraordinary and awful business I have heard of, truly. But I say, haven't they found out anything about it yet?"

"It's got them guessing," Kirby told him. "But, just a while ago, I spotted something which looks big." A sudden thought came to him, and he clutched the commander's arm eagerly. "Say, you've got a wireless, haven't you?"

"Right you are!"

“That ought to help a lot! I want to get some information in as soon as possible. I followed a hunch this morning, after the Georgia went down. My partners and I flew over this way, and spotted a big German battleship steaming for some port. And on that battleship, I saw, with my own eyes, the crew of the Georgia.”

The lieutenant commander stared at him askance, his eyes widening with incredulity. “No! I say, that’s impossible! I heard of the Georgia, for we picked up her S.O.S. signals. Certainly, my good man, you don’t mean to tell me that you actually saw her men on a German battleship, way out here?”

“I’d swear to it,” Kirby stated, decisively. “Of course there’s nothing we can really do about it. We can’t stop that ship and try to get back the men. But perhaps U.S. naval intelligence will get an idea, that is, if you’ll be kind enough to wireless them for me.”

“Why, to be sure. But do you think they’ll believe you, man?” Then he added, as an afterthought. “But of course your two partners will bear you out, as soon as they get back.”

Kirby shook his head. “No, the joke of the thing is that they didn’t see those survivors. I’m the only one, as far as I know, who knows anything about them. That’s why you’ll have to help me out.” Suddenly he realized that all this time the submarine had just been lying on the surface, and that the lieutenant commander, out of true English politeness, was patiently waiting for Kirby to give him the word to start. The Mosquito was apologetic. “Gosh, here I’ve been holding you fellows up, wasting your time, when we might just as well have been on our way! Sorry!”

“Oh, not at all, not at all,” the other hastened to reassure him. “On the contrary, I should apologize for permitting you to stand here, all wet and shivering. What say we go below, and I’ll wangle some dry clothes and perhaps nip off the old bottle for you. We’ll submerge again to periscope depth. We must stay down until we come to our own mine barriers, you know. These waters are usually deserted, but on account of these bloody sinkings, one had better stay below, as they say.”

“Let’s go,” Kirby complied, eagerly, and at the same time felt a thrill. This was going to be fun, going down in a submarine for the first time in his life.

Abruptly, the lieutenant commander became the captain of his ship, a serious young officer who realized his responsibility. He moved from the bridge to the open hatch of the conning-tower and picked up a tube.

“Make ready for diving,” he barked. “Stop Diesels—connect batteries!”

Instantly the throbbing of the Diesels, which had been idling all this time, ceased. The commander went on shouting out orders. “All right, close her up, my lads. Take stations—ready with air-valves!”

The submarine now seemed to be bustling with strange and noisy activity. Kirby still stood on the bridge with the commander waiting to be told what to do. He heard the sound of slamming hatches and compartments. Two sailors emerged from the conning-tower, and, taking in the British ensign, they seized the hinged cover of the conning-tower well, made ready to close it.

The commander requested Kirby to follow him, stepped down into the conning-tower hatchway, and descended the ladder. Kirby, feeling somewhat nervous and also in a hurry to get off the deck of the submarine which seemed about to submerge, climbed down after him. He had to hold on tightly, and lower himself gingerly through the somewhat cramped passageway, for the ship was still pitching and rocking.

ABOVE Kirby the two British sailors were coming down, and the sunny daylight was suddenly closed out as they banged the hatch behind them and screwed it shut. But there were electric lights in here to illuminate the place.

A humming sound reached the Mosquito’s ears now, the hum of electric motors, by which a submarine runs beneath the surface. Kirby, full of misgivings, kept going slowly down the ladder.

The commander, now far below Kirby, where there seemed to be brighter lights, was giving another order: “All right, lads! Flood the tanks!”

Immediately there came an ominous hissing noise, followed by a rush of water through steel compartments. The clanging and hissing so disarmed the innocent aviator that, with visions of being trapped and drowned in this steel monster, he stopped on the ladder, forcing the two sailors above him to stop also. Now the Mosquito could feel the movement of the ship. The rocking and

pitching had stopped. Instead, the submarine seemed to be tilting, and there was a forward and at the same time a sinking motion. That sinking motion seemed to have a queer effect on Kirby's stomach. They were going down, down under the sea! One of the conning tower portholes was right above him, and through the glass he saw the greenish waters closing in, and saw the sunlight through them. The light was fading more and more. He didn't like the view, so he hurried on down to the bottom of the ladder.

Then, somewhat dazed, and still shivering in his wet clothes, he found himself standing in an iron-walled room which seemed to be nothing more than a shining mass of instruments, levers, valves, and wheels; and men who stood working them with fierce concentration. There were two helmsmen, one operating the diving fins, the other operating the regular vertical rudder. There was a man who worked a bunch of valves and gadgets at the wall. There was an officer in the center of the room who stood with his eyes glued to a sort of box which was suspended by a pipe from above, and which he turned by its handles from side to side. The periscope, Kirby figured.

In a corner of the room, a navigation officer sat over his charts, and in another corner a wireless operator was listening in on his hydrophones. Other men came and went, passing through the doorways at either end of the room. The lieutenant commander himself was jumping all about, giving his orders. "Trim her down to eighteen!" Silently the helmsmen worked their wheels, and Kirby felt the submarine straightening out. Already the air seemed cramped in here, and full of the smell of oil. The sound of gurgling water and hissing air continued.

AT LAST the lieutenant commander, having seen that everything was going in order, turned to Kirby once more.

"Well, my good fellow," he said, "I fancy this all seems strange and queer to you, eh what? I hope you don't feel as peculiar as I did when I went up in an airplane." He winced, in reminiscence. "By Jove, but I should much prefer to be under the jolly sea than up in the sky."

"Not me," Kirby confessed, frankly. "I feel much safer up in the sky. It's nearer to heaven!"

The commander laughed heartily, and so did some of the men in the room who had heard. Then the commander said eagerly, "And now, my dear friend, let me attend to you. Oh yes, you want me to send a Marconi." He went to the wireless man. "Sparks, my lad, send the following message." And he told him what Kirby had requested.

The wireless man, a pleasant-faced fellow as young as the commander, nodded. "Aye, sir!"

The commander then proceeded to make Kirby as comfortable as possible. He led the Mosquito into the officers' quarters, and found him some old overalls and a coat. And by the time Kirby was back in the central control room again, where the commander invited him to stay, he felt much better. True, the air in the submarine was even closer now, and the odors were not pleasant, but a healthy swig of Scotch and the dry clothes went a long way. Kirby was getting quite accustomed to the pigboat, as it was called. He liked the crew. They were a jolly, young-looking bunch. And he liked the commander especially.

"Sparks tells me," the commander was now informing Kirby, "that he has communicated with U.S. naval intelligence for you. They seem to be all up in the air about your report, but they can't make head or tail out of the bloody business of those survivors. They say for you to report as soon as you arrive."

Kirby frowned. "Well, I guess there's nothing else to do about it, then."

"I say, it certainly is peculiar about those survivors," the commander went on, as once more his mind seemed to fasten on the mysterious business. "I wonder what it could mean?"

"Damned if I know. The more I think of the whole business the crazier it gets! It's a helluva mess, if you ask me!"

"But certainly," the commander persisted, "by this time they should have some means of combating it, putting a stop to it. Can't they take measures to—"

"Believe me, they have! No vessels are allowed to sail alone any more. Only subs, I guess, can go without accompanying ships. That ought to help."

"Rather," the commander agreed. "But you say they still have no clues, no idea what this mysterious monster might be? They have no inkling?"

“None, except that stuff I just found out for them about the survivors on the battleship.”

“Hmmm—” The commander seemed to consider a moment. Then he shrugged. “Well,” he said, and now, somehow, his manner of speaking seemed to change. There was no longer that pseudo, almost stogy English accentuation. “I guess I’ve gotten all the information I want out of you, my friend. Thanks—a lot!”

Kirby stared at him in puzzled bewilderment. The man was still smiling, as pleasantly as ever. And the others in the control room were absorbed in their work.

“Wh—what,” Kirby stammered, dumbly, “wh—what do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing at all, nothing at all!” Whereupon the smiling commander turned, and shouted out to all the other men in the room, in a clear, vibrant voice: “*Gans gut, jezt mogen wir sprechen Deutsch!*”

The men in the room responded with a relieved cheer.

“*Gott zei dank!*” shouted the one at the periscope.

“*Ja wohl!*” another chimed in.

KIRBY stood gaping, as if stricken by a thunderbolt. His mind whirled, and a confused welter of emotions swept over him in crazy succession. Unbelief and amazement were written on his features, written in his widened, staring eyes. But then, slowly the light began to dawn on him. Slowly he stiffened, and his fists clenched, his eyes blazed. In a savage fury he faced the smiling commander.

“You dirty, lousy, skunks!” he croaked, hoarsely. “You squareheaded murderers! So this is your game, is it? This is your wonderful racket? Masquerading as Britishers, using a British sub, sinking our unsuspecting ships!” His voice rose shrilly, almost to a scream, while his whole body tensed.

“That will do!” The cool, crisp, voice of the commander cut him off. It was frigid now, that voice—frigid as cold steel. It seemed to restrain Kirby in spite of himself. “Now,” the pseudo-Britisher argued, with calm logic, “these histrionics won’t get you anywhere at all, my friend. Remember you are unarmed, and there are twenty of us loyal Germans aboard against one of

you! Nor is there any escape. We are under the sea. Of course, if you want us to put you back in the water, whence we rescued you, we’ll do it.

And we may be forced to do it, if you give us the slightest bit of trouble.”

He said all this so convincingly that Kirby realized at once how utterly helpless he was. He could not make a false move. Almost every man in the room, though all faithfully attended their instruments, was watching him. Frustrated, he let his muscles relax, stood there resignedly, while at the same time his mind tried vainly to piece the whole confusing business together.

“Why did you pick me up in the first place?” he asked, dismally.

“Well,” said his captor, “I suppose I might as well tell you. When we saw your sinking plane in our periscope, it set us thinking. A plane snooping around these waters—perhaps there had been even more of them. And perhaps they had seen something they had no business to see. I figured that if I picked you up, and reassured you that we were all true Britishers—and you’ll have to admit I handled my speeches well—you’d tell us anything you knew, and whether we were in danger of being betrayed. However, upon coming to the surface, I was surprised to find two other planes flying around. I didn’t want to go through with the thing then, because not knowing just what your comrades knew, I feared they might smell a rat. But it was too late to back out. We had to play our part as a British sub. And then,” he beamed, pleasantly, “you soon reassured me when you told me your comrades knew nothing. Indeed, you told me many things of interest.”

Kirby winced, and a feeling of despair gripped him. It was bad enough to find himself suddenly trapped in a submarine by a bunch of Germans; but it was still worse to realize that he had blindly, innocently spilled a lot of important information to them.

“And that wireless message,” he almost groaned. “That was just a bunch of lies—” Again rage seized him. “Think you’re damn clever, don’t you?” he muttered, between clenched teeth. “Think you’re marvels to put this thing over! Well, it’s no wonder you fooled us. Naturally, we didn’t suspect you, didn’t suspect that even you Boche would go so far as to disobey international

law, and attack under the flag of your enemy. You dirty—”

A murmur of protests throughout the room cut him off. And the commander drew himself up with wounded dignity, as if he had been highly offended.

“Let me remind my friend,” he told Kirby, with great feeling, “that we are all Germans, Germans of the blood, and we are proud of it. It is humiliating enough for us to sail at all under a British flag, but we shall never go to battle under any flag but our own. My name will be enough to assure you of this. I am *Korvettenkapitan* Eric von Feldner.”

## CHAPTER VI THE EAGLE SWIMS

KIRBY Started, unable to conceal his awe as he looked at the tall, dapper young German before him. Von Feldner! He knew that name well, had heard many stories about the ace of submarine commanders. Von Feldner, famed for his daring exploits during the U-boats’ reign of terror, famed for his stupendous record of tonnage sunk.

Nevertheless, the Mosquito was not convinced about this international law business. A new thought had just come to him.

“I’m not quite as thick as you think I am,” he told von Feldner. “Naturally you don’t have to attack under a British flag. A submarine under the water doesn’t fly any flag.”

Von Feldner did not reply to this. Instead, he barked out an order. A sailor appeared from somewhere, carrying a bundle with him. Together, the sailor and von Feldner unfurled this bundle, holding it with tender care. And there before Kirby they folded out a somewhat tattered but plainly visible German battle flag, with its beautiful pattern of imperial Eagles, the Iron Cross, and the red, white and black stripes up in the corner.

“This flag,” von Feldner was saying, and now he spoke with strange reverence, while everyone in the room seemed to stiffen a bit at his station, as if coming to attention, “this flag belonged to the famous U-54, my last command, which sent down forty-six vessels. It had been through the hardest fights, the most harrowing battles that any naval flag can boast of. It means more to me than

anything else in the world. And I shall die fighting beneath it! That is why,” he went on, “every ship we have sunk with the E-27, with this British submarine, saw this flag flying from our conning-tower before we attacked, and knew it was being fired upon by Germans.”

The sincerity of this speech made Kirby feel vaguely ashamed of himself for his hot accusations. Von Feldner evidently was playing his game as fairly as he could. But how the devil was he doing it? This flag business only baffled Kirby more. Though he now knew the answer to the mystery, he could not tie the confused threads together at all. How did they work their trick? How come they all looked and spoke like true Englishmen? How had they gotten this submarine in the first place, and why hadn’t the Allies known it was missing and gotten suspicious? All these things remained inexplicable.

“Anyway,” he was saying, defiantly, while von Feldner refurled the flag, “you won’t get away with it any longer, von Feldner. You’ve gone far enough, and we’ve got you checked. You won’t dare to try sinking any more of these destroyers or patrol boats.”

The German nodded, in frank agreement.

“Quite right, my friend,” he conceded. “We shall not try our usual trick any more, especially since you tell us no ships will be sailing alone. But those seven victims were merely small fry for us. We were just killing time.” He smiled, as if in keen anticipation. “We’re after bigger game—much bigger game indeed! And it had been your fate and your misfortune to join us just when we are on our way to perform our great mission.”

Kirby could not conceal his tense curiosity. “What the hell are you going to do?” he demanded, brusquely.

Von Feldner smiled again. “You are a most inquisitive fellow,” he remarked. “However—” He broke off, then addressed the other men in the room in German, seeming to ask them a question. They gave a cheerful, good-natured response. Von Feldner turned to Kirby once more. “My officers here agree that, inasmuch as we are all going to our deaths, and we know why, you, who must go with us, are also entitled to know the reason.”

A peculiar shiver tingled up Kirby’s spine, and his heart jumped. Von Feldner had said those words as casually as if he were making some

trivial remark about the weather, but it was just that casual tone of his that gave his speech such a fearful significance.

“Going to your deaths?” the Mosquito echoed, dumbly. “Going to your deaths?”

“Well, there is about one chance in a hundred that we might live,” von Feldner conceded, cheerfully. “Certainly, you can have no objections, my friend. You were a goner, as you Yanks say, and already you must have given yourself up for dead, when we rescued you. Well, just consider that you have a reprieve of a couple of hours. I regret that we must force you to accompany us, but that is the most humane thing it is in my power to do. Our only alternative, inasmuch as you know our secret, would be to put you back in the sea and let you drown. This way, you at least share whatever chances of living we have.”

His tone became warm and friendly. “Why not be a good sport about it, my friend? It is not your fault that you are here, and there is nothing you can do about it anyway. Take it gamely. Forget that we are enemies, so we don’t have to put you in irons and keep you under submission. We’ll try to make your last hours with us as pleasant and comfortable as possible. Yes,” he shook his head, “they call us Huns, but we are only human beings like you. We have no grudge against you at all, have we?”

This to the others in the room, and several sailors who had come to the doorways to listen.

“No, no!” they all chorused cheerfully, in their good English, and confused shouts of “No grudge, Yank! Be a good fellow! Have a laugh with us!” reached Kirby’s ears, and with a strange effect. In spite of himself, the Mosquito couldn’t help admiring these daring and cheerful Germans. They were such a jolly, good-natured young bunch; just a merry group of adventurers who laughed though they intended to go to their deaths. Indeed, they were much like the Germans of the air service. It seemed that in both these most dangerous services of the war there prevailed a touch of the chivalry of old, a feeling of kinship and respect.

KIRBY did not intend to let any sentiment stand between him and his duty. He was still the keen soldier, the fighter who was determined to

put an end to the Germans’ mysterious stunt. But, as von Feldner had said, there seemed to be nothing he could do. How could he, one man, disable this monster of steel which slid beneath the waters? It seemed hopeless, and so he might as well take his predicament gamely, and try in the meantime to find out all he could about the sub’s mission.

The Mosquito shrugged, then gave a grin.

“You win!” he announced to von Feldner. “You’ve got me, and I know it! I only hope you’ll let me in on your program, so I’ll know what to expect!”

The men cheered their hearty approval. Von Feldner then glanced at his watch. He barked out some orders in German. The men in the room once more fiercely concentrated on their instruments. The man at the depth gauges gave his report, and the officer at the periscope gave his. The navigation officer shouted corrections of their course. The two helmsmen silently worked their wheels. Somewhere a pump was chugging. Air and water continued to clang and gurgle through the steel compartments, and the electric motors hummed their steady tune. The boat was running very smoothly now, balancing on even keel. There was no rocking, only a sense of slow, forward motion. The air was even more stale and cramped, but Kirby had become accustomed to it, and did not mind it.

“We still have plenty of time before we reach enemy waters,” von Feldner was announcing. “And I shall take that time, my friend, to amuse you with the story of our adventures, and the purpose of our mission.”

And so, a few minutes later, there took place one of the strangest scenes of the war.

DOWN under the sea, inside the bowels of a steel fish, two men sat at a table in the *Korvettenkapitan’s* cabin, a small coop adjoining the central control room. These two men, according to the prevailing conditions, were enemies. One was a German submarine commander, the other a Yankee flyer. But now they sat almost as if they were at some fireside, while the German spun his yarn to the accompaniment of chugging pumps, hissing air, and humming electric motors as the submarine slowly but steadily moved on toward British

waters. And Kirby listened in awed fascination to the story which U. S. naval intelligence was so eager to learn.

The story started right out with a tense, dramatic incident. The U-54, von Feldner's famous raider, had been sent out to make a last, desperate attempt to penetrate into the English Channel, after several other U-boat commanders had failed disastrously.

"No sooner did we approach the enemy's waters," the German told Kirby, "than we heard a loud scraping sound, and our boat gave a great lurch and seemed to stand still. Nets! We had been caught on them, and we were still miles from the Channel, our destination. I thought it was the end, and so did my crew. We felt sure that we were going to join our ill-fated sister ships which had tried to break through here. However, I gave the order to reverse the propellers, and we tried to back our way out of the nets. Furiously we struggled, lurching, pulling, our motors straining. Then, to make matters worse, a British destroyer came above us and started to rain depth bombs upon us. There were explosions on every side of us as we struggled helplessly in the net. Yes, certainly we were dead men.

"But no! The gods must have been with us that unhappy day. By some miracle, we finally jerked free of the nets, and we lay quiet on the bottom of the sea, waiting for the destroyer to go away, while water leaked in through our damaged seams, and our air supply began to diminish. At last, to our joy, the destroyer was gone. Exhausted and stifled by gas fumes, we broke surface and, with our ship battered and disabled, we limped back to our base at Zeebrugge. There I made my report, explaining that it was absolutely impossible for a U-boat to get into the Channel."

Thus did von Feldner describe the final defeat of the U-boat, the defeat, which was such a cruel blow to the Germans, who had banked their greatest hope of bringing the war to a swift close on these deadly, undersea sharks. That was the last attempt of any U-boat to break through the waters.

The morale of the German navy suffered severely, just as the morale of the Allied navies was bolstered up. Something had to be done to make the enemy once more fear the German undersea menace, to destroy that confidence

which was enabling the Allies to win victory upon victory in the sea. Yes, something had to be done at all costs.

German naval intelligence got the idea, and decided to carry it out with the utmost secrecy. Quietly they combed the U-boat service for a group of brave, patriotic volunteers who must not only be daredevils, but must also be able to pass as Englishmen. Von Feldner fitted both these requisites, and because of his excellent record, he was chosen as the commander of this expedition.

"I was called before the high command to get my orders," the German was telling Kirby, "and the first thing they asked me was: 'Are you willing to die for the Fatherland?' There was only one answer I could give. 'Then,' I was told, 'you will take a British submarine, run right into the Channel as Britishers, and strike one supreme blow which will not only have a telling and direct effect on Allied naval activities, but will also restore our navy's morale and terrorize our enemies once more.' Then the problem of international law came up, of course. And we decided then and there that we would never attack under any flag but our own. Otherwise the very purpose of our mission would be useless. The enemy must know that we are Germans, real Germans!"

Securing the British submarine was one of those remarkable and ingenious stunts which only Imperial intelligence could have accomplished, due to its tremendous network of spies. There were several German spies right in the British submarine service. They had started at the very beginning of the war and worked themselves into the enemy's trust. It so happened that one of these spies was wireless operator on the E-27, which operated from its base at Remiens, right in the Channel. This wireless operator, a young, reckless, daredevil, had already succeeded in wreaking havoc by his access to all the Allied secret codes. He had done this so cleverly, however, that he was not even suspected. A more fitting man to get a submarine into the Germans' hands could not have been found.

Patiently the Germans had waited, until, four days ago, the E-27 had left port, with orders to cruise around German waters and, keeping in touch with her base, wipe out any Boche ships she could find. She was one of the most modern type

submersibles, with a crew of forty, and torpedo tubes fore and aft. An excellent ship for the Germans' purpose.

Unsuspecting, she sailed out of the Channel into the North Sea, and penetrated well into German waters, looking for prey. And the spy who was her wireless man simply betrayed her position to three German destroyers, which instantly surrounded her. She was forced to surrender, rather than be demolished by depth bombs. Quickly and quietly her crew was taken off and whisked off to a German port, while von Feldner and his smaller crew of twenty boarded the captured craft. And the British at Remiens never knew of the transaction, for the spy wireless operator merely continued sending his usual, reassuring messages, saying that nothing had happened. The spy remained on the submarine with von Feldner's crew, functioning in his same position. In this way every loophole was closed, and every track covered.

All this had been done in the most clandestine manner. The three destroyers which had made the capture were warned to say nothing about it. Nobody was to know what was going on, else there would surely be a leak.

THUS was the stage set for the strange, breathless drama. "With the submarine in our hands," von Feldner said, "we took stock. We had all the mine charts, all the code signals, necessary to get into the Channel. But also, we had three days before the E-27 was officially ordered to return to its base. Three days! Why should we waste them? Instead of immediately going into the Channel to perform our supreme mission which we knew meant our finish, why not try a few other tricks first—go after some small fry? We would! It would aid us in our plan to terrorize our enemies, and also it would boost our morale, giving us courage for the hard duty which lay ahead of us.

"We could experiment on a few ships, catch them alone just outside the Channel and see if we could fool them. We must not be caught, however. The moment there was any danger of our being suspected, we must drop this sport and go after our big game. This brought up the question of survivors. Surely there would be survivors, and when they were rescued they would tell their tale

and betray us. True, we could shell them and wipe them out in the water, but we were not murderers. Then we got an inspiration. We would, first of all, tackle only small ships, with small crews. Our submarine was half empty. We were only twenty-odd men and there was room for over forty. So we could pick up the survivors of each vessel sunk and—"

Here Kirby broke in, excitedly, "And you'd take them out and transfer them to a German battleship, where I saw them this morning. I thought my hunch was right. And that whole round trip would take you exactly four hours—"

"You guessed it!" von Feldner conceded, grinning. "I must admit it was pretty clever of you, too. The battleship you saw was the only other party in this conspiracy besides ourselves and those first three destroyers. It served us as our mother ship, and each time we met it we took on new supplies—food, torpedoes, and so forth. The reason we went back and forth after each sinking was twofold; we wanted to make sure of getting rid of our survivors quickly and safely, and also we wanted to clear out of enemy waters as soon as possible after each sinking, to keep suspicion from falling on us. So, every four hours we met out in German waters with our mother ship, which also took four hours to ferry back and forth from Zeebrugge.

"And so, with everything arranged, we started out three days ago for our preliminary work. With our hearts beating hopefully, we submerged and headed for the Channel. We had to run submerged in German waters, for with no one knowing our true identity, we were in danger of being attacked by German ships.

"Reaching the barriers which had spelled disaster to so many a U-boat—almost including my own U-54—we broke surface, for now we were in British-American waters, and a British submarine would never submerge here. With our stolen charts, we had no difficulty in zigzagging our way through all the mines, and calmly, trying not to show our nervous excitement, we cruised right into the waters of our enemies, hailing scores of passing American and British vessels, which were not at all suspicious.

"Our loyal wireless operator, of Imperial intelligence, kept sending out the proper signals and picking up information for us. We soon

learned that a British destroyer was sailing alone through a practically deserted zone. We could meet it. We cruised to the zone, and lay in wait. The destroyer appears! We are right on the surface, and she sees us at once. We pretend to be cruising slowly, and let her overtake us. She comes and dips her flag. We dip ours, the British ensign, but, alas, our British friends do not know that we have our beloved German battle flag ready on the halyard. With one move I can pull down the British ensign and send up the German. My hand is on the string.

“The British destroyer is passing us. We begin to turn our back on her. Our stern swings around. We move off at a right angle. The moment is drawing close. At five hundred yards we have a perfect broadside target. The torpedoes are ready in our stern tubes, two big silver fish which will blow that destroyer to bits. We cannot possibly miss. The moment has come now! I look all around, to make sure we are not seen. I wait one second more —”

## CHAPTER VII AT FIVE HUNDRED YARDS

AS IF reliving that experience, von Feldner actually did pause a second in his story, and Kirby sat tense, gripping the table edge, forgetting everything except this absorbing, thrilling tale which had now reached its climax.

“The second passes,” von Feldner resumed, and now he spoke in tense, staccato tones, his voice keyed up to a high pitch of excitement. “All right! I seize the halyard. Down comes the British flag! Up goes my beloved battle flag from the U-54. I shout the command: *‘Torpedos los!’* And our British friends get the surprise of their lives! The survivors we picked up later told us of the confusion and panic we had caused. They saw our German ensign go up, and an instant later they saw the telltale wake of our two torpedoes, snaking swiftly toward them. The destroyer swerves in its course. Men rush wildly to the guns and torpedo tubes. But it is too late!

“The first torpedo finds its mark. We see a terrible geyser of smoke rise from the destroyer’s midships, then another, as the second torpedo strikes home. Seconds later the slower traveling sounds of the explosions reach our ears, two

thundering bursts which make our frail craft bob and toss like a cork. That second torpedo must have hit a powder magazine or a gun nest, for the explosion is terrific. Standing on the conning tower I am almost thrown overboard by the concussion.

“We cannot see our destroyer now. Clouds of dense smoke conceal it from our view. That smoke is good—for us. For those brave British sailors—and I shall always admire their courage—were opening up on us with their guns, firing away even as the ship sank swiftly beneath them. Shells whine over our heads, exploding in the water far behind us. They cannot, see to aim because of that smoke.

“Meanwhile, our wireless operator is not idle. The British destroyer has been trying to send out messages about us. We let her send the S.O.S. calls because we want to make sure the Allies know she was attacked and sunk. But as soon as she starts giving information about our submarine, our spy operator cleverly interferes. While all Allied communications have stopped and the air is cleared for the distressed ship’s calls, our operator sends out a lot of meaningless buzzing on the sinking vessel’s wave length and shatters their message hopelessly.

“Soon it is all over. That destroyer sank pretty fast. It sank in three minutes, I believe. When the smoke cleared away, I couldn’t help feeling an uncanny shock. It was strange to see an empty space where, just a moment before, there had been a trim, gray destroyer. It was like one of those magician’s tricks where something is made to disappear in a cloud of steam. That was the first time in all my experience with submarines that I observed such a phenomenon. It happened just because we had gotten a perfect shot. We had time to take deliberate aim and did not have to worry about dodging as we did in our own U-boats.

“The water was full of wreckage and oil. We pulled up our British ensign again and headed for the spot. There were men swimming in the water, shouting and waving for help. There were also men who were not swimming—they were dead. We cruised around, carefully picking up all the survivors. But our hearts were in our mouths now, because we were afraid that the smoke of the explosions had been seen by other vessels, which

would appear any minute. We had to hurry. Yet we had to be sure to get every survivor. It seemed eternities before we had picked them all up. There were eleven of them. Once more we cruised about to make sure there were none left.

“PART of my crew attended to the survivors, huddled them in the forward torpedo room and wrapped them in blankets. They were all dazed and seemed to be in a trance, as if they had seen a ghost. We felt sorry for them. But we had no time to console them now. We started to cruise away from that spot as fast as our Diesels could carry us. We were just about two knots away when the rescuing vessels began to appear. The destroyers, those swift greyhounds of the sea, arrived there first. They could see us plainly, and it was hard for us to remain convinced that, in their eyes, we were just one of the many Allied vessels which had come to the scene. We felt like criminals, thought surely that they would know we were Germans. But we were careful not to arouse their suspicions. We hung around there for several minutes, and like all the other ships, sent our wireless report: ‘The E-27 is at the scene of the disaster, but sees no survivors or signs of the enemy.’

“Some of the rescuing vessels were leaving then, so we left too. Fast as we could, we cruised back through the mine barriers into German waters. And not until we had our captives safely transferred to the waiting battleship did we express our elation. Then we cheered and shouted and clapped each other on the back. A good beginning!

“That first sinking naturally remains in my mind as the most thrilling, because it was such a novelty for me. After that the work became more or less routine. Back and forth we went, three times a day, for I did not want to overtax my men. By night we lay at the bottom of the North Sea, grabbing a bit of sleep. And always, we were ready to drop this preliminary sport the moment our enemies got suspicious—ready to sail into the Channel and perform our real mission.

“Of course, each sinking had its own special thrills. Sometimes the vessels put up a gallant scrap—especially the last ones we sank, for by this time everyone was so filled with the thought of the mystery that the mere sight of our German

flag was enough to explain everything. More than once our sinking victim, when it remained afloat a little longer than the usual time, almost shot us to bits. But at other times our torpedoes would strike a powder magazine and blow up our quarry in no time. On one occasion there were no survivors at all. But in the case of the Georgia this morning, every man was saved.”

“And how,” Kirby broke in, to ask in an awed voice, “did you come to attack the Georgia half an hour before your usual time, and when she was supposed to be within sight of other ships?”

“Well,” the German explained, “this morning we decided that, since the E-27 was soon due at her base at Remiens, and since our enemies must soon be getting suspicious, we had better stop playing around and tackle our real job. However, when we reached the Channel barriers we received a wireless message, as did every other Allied vessel, ordering us to keep away from the destroyer Georgia and let her isolate herself at nine o’clock. We realized at once what the Georgia was up to. Some trap was being set. ‘Why not,’ I asked my men, ‘turn the tables on them and knock their stunt to pieces? It will be a fitting climax to our preliminary work, and it will have a nice effect on our enemies. Yes, we will make it the prologue to our big enterprise!’ My men agreed heartily, so we put on more speed and ran ahead of our usual schedule.

“The Georgia had orders to keep within sight of other ships until nine. Well, she did just that. Only, it so happened that one of the ships in whose sight she kept was the E-27. With much difficulty, we managed to find a deserted zone right in the Georgia’s path. She came along and saw us, and, assured that she was now safely within view of another Allied vessel—a British submarine this time—she came right on with serene confidence. And we got her. Her small crew must have been well prepared to abandon ship. We rescued them all, as they later told us. We were well experienced in our work by now, and we accomplished our rescue with remarkable speed. That was lucky for us. For the next thing we knew, as we cruised away, three airplanes were flying over the scene of the wreck.”

A STRANGE thrill passed through Kirby as he found himself suddenly introduced into this breathless story.

“Why, that was my comrades and I!” he exclaimed, like an excited kid. Then his eyes widened incredulously. “And so you mean to say you were right near there when we came? By God, we did see a couple of British subs!”

“Yes, you probably saw us but over-looked us,” von Feldner told him, and made a grimace. “Believe me, if you had gotten your hunch just a little earlier, you certainly would have spoiled our game. If you had caught us when we were transferring our survivors to that battleship—well, I guess your authorities couldn’t have found enough decorations to give you!”

A feeling of despair gripped Kirby then, as he realized that he had just missed success by a few minutes! God, why hadn’t he gotten there earlier? Now it was hopeless. He knew the mystery but there was nothing he could do about it.

Slowly, bitterly, he shook his head. “I’ve got to hand it to you, von Feldner,” he said. “But I still think it’s a damned rotten game you’re playing. Yes, you show your German flag—but when? When it’s too late for the unsuspecting ship to do anything about it.”

The German was resentful. “That’s no argument at all!” he snapped. “Why, what about your famous Q-boats? How do they play the game? I myself had a narrow escape from one of them, and I know. They hide under false colors and let us come right up to them to investigate. Then when it is too late for us to do anything, they hoist up their true flag and fire the guns they already have trained on us. It’s all legitimate. This is submarine warfare, and as a matter of fact there is nothing in international law to cover submarines at all. And don’t think we’re not taking any chances! Not only did we have several close shaves with some of those seven ships we sank, but what we are about to do now, as I told you, is absolutely suicidal for us!”

At the mention of the present and still mysterious mission of von Feldner and his crew, Kirby found himself tensing once more, again becoming acutely conscious of his predicament.

“What the devil do you intend to do, anyway?” he demanded.

Von Feldner smiled, tapping the table with his fingers.

“We are going to cruise straight toward our base at Remiens, going right into the narrow part of the English Channel. There are a great many ships in there. Especially,” he seemed almost to lick his lips, “there is one ship—a nice, shining new ship. In fact it has just been completed, and it is the largest, the most modern and powerful dreadnaught in the world. It is the British super-dreadnaught H.M.S. Fortitude. The British depend on it. It is scheduled to join their Grand Fleet in a big effort to wipe our navy out of the Mediterranean. There is to be a fierce battle, and the Fortitude would certainly be the decisive factor in the enemy’s favor. The mere sight of it would raise the morale of all the other British crews, and scare our own sailors. It would bring the Grand Fleet the necessary power and courage to win through.” He paused a moment. Then: “For the last five days that ship has been lying at anchor in the Channel, preparing to set out for the big battle. It is scheduled to leave tomorrow. But,” he gave a grim smile, “I greatly fear it will not leave to-morrow.”

AS HE heard these words, the blood drained from Kirby’s face, and a look of horror came over his features. So this was the prize the Germans were after, the prize they were willing to pay for even with their deaths! This was their supreme blow at the Allies, their answer to the defeat of the U-boat!

They were going right into the Channel and sink a battleship under the enemy’s very noses. Little though the Mosquito knew about naval affairs, he realized the awfulness of such a stratagem. With money and materials at such a premium, a brand new dreadnaught, the largest in the world, needed to win a great battle, needed—”

Furiously, he jumped from his chair, leaning over the table, staring at the German who still sat calm and smiling.

“No, you wouldn’t—you wouldn’t dare!” The Mosquito shouted crazily. “It’s too damned big. You couldn’t get away with it! There are ships all around there. They’ll blow you to hell in no time!”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” von Feldner admitted, grimly. “Yes, they will blow us to hell.

We haven't a ghost of a chance to get out of that narrow Channel alive. Even if we didn't show a German flag our goose would be cooked. But we are going to show a German flag, and though we go down, our torpedoes will have been fired first, and the H.M.S. Fortitude will go down with us." His voice rose with vibrant determination. "No, my friend, we can't fail! The Fatherland depends on us. The war on the sea depends on us. We shall make good, and shall die like true Germans of the blood!"

And if Kirby had felt any doubts, this last speech served to dispel them completely. Plainly he saw now how flawless, how cleverly worked out, was the Germans' scheme. There seemed to be no way of stopping them. Yet, the thought beat madly against his tortured brain, they must be stopped! They must be stopped and, moreover, it was up to him to stop them. He was the only one who could, the only one who knew their secret, their plans. It was up to him but—he felt weak with helplessness—what could he do?

In a frenzy he faced von Feldner across the table again, and again his whole body tensed.

"Damn you!" he yelled out, almost ready to hurl himself upon the smiling, cheerful German and seize him by the throat. "Damn you, you'll—"

Hopelessly, futilely, he broke off. A man had just appeared in the doorway between this cabin and the central control room. The man spoke excitedly in German. Von Feldner jumped up eagerly.

"We are reaching enemy waters!" he exclaimed, and Kirby's heart sank. "I hope I have managed to keep you amused, my friend. Now we must break surface. And," he warned, and once more his voice had that frigid, deadly calmness, "I must caution you to behave yourself. Remember you are being watched by all of us. One false move will be disastrous for you. Now kindly follow me."

## CHAPTER VIII UNDERSEA STEEL

KIRBY followed von Feldner back into the central control room, where once more he found himself in that maze of shining instruments and wheels. He looked helplessly at those instruments.

God, if only there was some lever, some valve he could seize and turn, anything that would wreck this steel monster. He wouldn't hesitate to try it, even if it did mean his death. His life was cheap now. He was already doomed to die. And if these Germans would give their lives to get that dreadnaught, he would gladly give his to stop them. But it was no use. With all these men in here he wouldn't have a chance to touch the instruments, and his total ignorance of them would make it impossible for him to use them effectively anyway.

Von Feldner was barking out orders. The officer at the periscope left his station, as the periscope was being lowered.

The man at the diving fins was working his wheel vigorously. Then again there was a furious clanging of air through steel compartments, as the tanks were blown. Kirby felt the ship rising beneath him. It tilted gently, bow first, as it climbed to the surface of the sea. Men were rushing in and out of the control room. Somebody was climbing up into the conning tower. Abruptly, the sub leveled again, and then it commenced to rock and pitch in rhythmic monotony. There was a banging of hatches, and all at once a gleam of sunlight seeped through from above, and with it came the fresh, invigorating gusts of air. The conning tower had been opened. They were on the surface, and were preparing for surface navigation. The coxswain climbed up to take the wheel above, and the navigation officer went up with him. Von Feldner still remained below, barking out order after order.

In the next moment there started a steady, pounding sound which caused the steel walls of the ship to vibrate and shiver. It was the Diesels, those powerful oil engines which now took up the burden of pushing the ship through the water. Their forward speed seemed to be increased now, though they rocked and pitched continuously.

"We are at the mine barriers," von Feldner explained to Kirby, who stood there, listening to all the noise, trying vainly to think of something he could do. "And we shall soon reach our goal."

The navigation officer had just gotten up from his table. With his charts in hand he walked toward the conning-tower, to go up and guide the coxswain through the treacherous waters. He had to pass Kirby, and as the Mosquito saw those

charts a wild light leaped to his eyes. Desperate, ready to seize any opportunity he could to frustrate these Germans, he felt a vague hope that if he could get those charts, tear them up, he could at least make it more difficult for them to get into the Channel. The navigation officer was passing now. The Mosquito's muscles tensed. He measured his distance, Judged his time—

Silently, he lurched forward, his hand darting toward those charts. The navigation officer gave a shout of alarm. But before anyone could stop him the Mosquito had snatched away those papers, had gotten them in his hands. Wildly, he made to tear them. But then rough hands seized him, stopped him at once. Someone staggered him with a punch to the jaw. When his dazed senses cleared he found himself, empty handed, staring into the dark muzzle of a gleaming automatic. And behind that automatic, deadly calm, his eyes narrowed to mere slits, was von Feldner. Two sailors stood by, on either side of Kirby. One of them had given him that blow, and seemed anxious to strike again. But von Feldner stopped him with a gesture.

"You have made a very serious mistake," the *Korvettenkapitan* told Kirby, icily. "You have betrayed our trust in you. Why? You could have gained nothing anyway. In fact your folly will cost you dearly. I had hoped that I would not be forced to put you in irons, for I hate to send a man to the bottom of the sea in chains, but—" he shrugged and shook his head slowly. Kirby shuddered, and a chill of horror went through him. To be put in irons, to be helplessly shackled in a submarine that was doomed! God, he cursed himself for trying to grab those charts! They could have done him little good anyway, and now he had destroyed whatever chances he might have of doing anything to stop these Germans. Now he would no longer be free to move about.

Von Feldner spoke again, musingly.

"I guess that, owing to the unusual circumstances, I shall give you one more chance." Instantly Kirby's wild hopes mounted again, only to fall once more as von Feldner went on. "However, from now on I shall have to keep you under heavy guard, though I haven't too many men to spare here." He turned to the two sailors and gave them instructions. They drew revolvers, and marched Kirby over to a bench in the corner

of the control room. They forced him to sit down, and stood above him like two watchdogs, keeping him covered.

Von Feldner came over to say a few more words to his prisoner.

"So now you will remain here, where I can keep my eye on you from time to time. I must go above now. But remember, my friend, one more false move and there shall be no mercy. You shall be put in irons, and take the consequences." And with that last warning he turned and clambered up through the conning-tower. A moment later the second officer, whom von Feldner had relieved, came down.

KIRBY sat there in the corner helplessly, while the submarine, rocking steadily, moved on, its Diesels pounding. Even now they were going right through the great barrier, carefully steering clear of the mine and net zones. Even now, up on the bridge, von Feldner peered through his glasses on the Allied patrol boats and destroyers that had come within sight.

The wireless man, down in the control room, suddenly turned from his sparking set toward Kirby with a grin. The grin was friendly, but to the unhappy Mosquito it seemed like a malicious leer, for he remembered that this young, reckless wireless man was the spy responsible for all this mysterious business, the agent who had gotten the submarine. "Got news for you, Yank," the wireless man said cheerfully. "I have just been in communication with U.S. naval intelligence headquarters. Your two comrades wanted to know if we were bringing you in all right. Of course," he added, mischievously. "I didn't want to worry them, and told them you'd be safe in port."

Kirby said nothing to this. It merely increased his sense of frustration and despair. Lord, what a frightful and uncanny situation this was! Here was the submarine calmly communicating with U. S. naval intelligence, who were thinking of nothing but the mystery. If only they realized that the submarine with which they were exchanging messages was the unknown menace they were hunting, racking their wits to discover!

Slowly but steadily the E-27 ploughed her way through the waves. Now there were scores of British and American vessels, all around it, but they, too merely passed up this inconspicuous pig-

boat indifferently. It was just another British submarine. And so it cruised right on past them, serenely confident.

Time dragged, while Kirby writhed futilely on his bench, trying in vain to think up some way he could stop these determined Germans, wreck the submarine or betray it to the scores of vessels which must be in the surrounding waters. But all the time the two sailors kept watching him closely, covering him with their revolvers, and the realization that a false move would land him in irons held him weak and submissive. Relentlessly the Diesels kept pounding away, until it seemed that they were pounding against his fevered head, and he thought he'd go mad at the sound of them.

No torture could have been worse than this, sitting powerless in the bowels of a submarine which moved steadily toward its deadly mission. And like the crudest tortures devised by man, it lasted interminably long, so long that Kirby felt his nerves must break from the strain of it. It lasted while the E-27 slowly made her way through one barrier after another, slowly entered the mouth of the Channel, and slowly cruised down the stretch of water which narrowed like the bottom of a funnel between France and England. With the Coasts of two great nations on either side of her, the E-27 became one of the hundreds of vessels which crowded the narrow waters, vessels of all types and sizes.

A tense atmosphere seemed to be coming over the sub now, an atmosphere which Kirby noticed at once. Conversation among the men died out, and a hush fell over the steel interior, a hush broken only by the pounding Diesels, and the shouting of orders through speaking tubes. The men were quiet, sober-looking. And, with growing panic, Kirby realized that there could be only one reason. They must be nearing their destination. God, they were getting ready to work their terrible stratagem.

VON FELDNER came down from the conning tower. His youthful face seemed to have grown thin and stern. Quietly, he gave a command. The whole crew of the submarine temporarily left their stations, to gather around their leader. All save the two sailors who kept watch over Kirby.

Von Feldner began to make a speech, in calm, measured tones. Kirby could not understand the

words, but he could sense their import. Von Feldner was telling his crew that the great moment was close at hand, asking them if they were ready, sure of themselves. When the *Korvettenkapitan* finished speaking, a low but hearty cheer went up. Von Feldner then came over to Kirby.

"In a few minutes," he told the Mosquito, "we shall have reached our goal. The moment the torpedoes are fired, you are free to try to get out of here alive." He smiled, tacitly. "I am afraid you won't though, my friend. At any rate, I have tried to play the game with you as best I could. I have gone out of my way to give you the best possible treatment under the circumstances. I realize how you feel, and I am sorry for you."

Kirby glanced up at him miserably. And now the Mosquito, realizing that there was absolutely nothing he could do by means of force, tried to argue with his captor, tried to dissuade him. His voice was pleading.

"You're making a mistake, von Feldner," he shouted frantically. "You can't get away with it. It isn't worth the sacrifice. Why kill all of these men of yours? Is it fair to them?"

Von Feldner did not seem to like these words at all. The German spoke with piercing irony.

"My friend's altruism is very touching indeed," he said, slowly. "However, I must inform him once more that my men are only too glad to die in order to perform this patriotic duty. Yes, they are only too glad. And why not? They have all seen the defeat of the U-boats, they have lost their dearest friends, their comrades. The war has wrecked their lives and given them little to live for now. Well then, why not go down in a burst of glory, in a defiant victory over our enemies? Ah," he sighed, with deep feeling, "I have a gallant crew. Even now they have refused to come up on deck with the coxswain, the navigation officer, and myself, to come above where they might have a chance of escaping alive. They have refused because their comrades in the torpedo room must remain below to discharge our silver fish, and the others insist on sharing the peril with them. As for us three above—" He shrugged. "Well, we shall not let the submarine go down without us."

And so saying, he turned from Kirby and walked back into the center of the room. Another low command, and the furled German battle flag

was placed in his hands. He opened it slowly, and one of the men helped him hold it out. Every man in the room, even Kirby's two guards, stiffened, and their hands snapped up in a salute. Then, rolling up the beautiful but tattered banner again, von Feldner spoke a few more words. His eyes seemed just a little misty now, and his voice was very low.

"*Lebe-wohl, meine Kinder,*" he said, "Farewell, my lads!"

"*Nein! Nein!*" someone shouted, huskily. "*Aufwiedersehen!* Until we meet again, *lieber Korvettenkapitan.*"

The eyes of all the men were shining now, and some of them could not control themselves. One by one they rushed forward to shake their captain's hand and embrace him. Someone relieved Kirby's guards so they could take their turn in the farewell. It was a touching scene, and despite his horror and despair, Kirby could not help feeling affected by it. Again he admired this gallant crew. Whatever they were doing, whatever could be said against them, they were brave, patriotic fellows. They were men in every sense of the word.

Suddenly von Feldner stiffened, drew himself up arrogantly, and his voice became hard and crisp again, the voice of a stern commander. He shouted out an order. At once the men suppressed all their emotions, wiped the tears from their eyes, and swallowed the lumps in their throats. They snapped back into action like automatons. The crew proper filed out of the control room to resume their stations. Kirby's guards once more stood watch over him with their pistols. And von Feldner, very erect, very military, marched straight to the conning-tower, the German flag in his arm. There he turned and this time he spoke to Kirby.

"Farewell, my Yankee friend," he said. "See you in Davy Jones' Locker." He disappeared into the tower.

And then, once more sitting on his bench under heavy guard, Kirby's frenzied anguish reached its height. Von Feldner was taking up the German flag! And that meant they were getting there, getting close to that battleship! God, there was still nothing he could do—nothing he could do!

The E-27 kept moving right on, moving on while through the tube from above came von

Feldner's crisp voice, shouting out orders. The orders were coming faster now, in swifter succession. And the atmosphere inside of the submarine seemed to be getting tenser every moment. The men who came in and out of the control room looked pale and drawn, and sometimes their lips twitched or the muscles on their faces were working. Damn those pounding Diesels! If only they would let up for a moment! If only they would let up so Kirby could think, think.

OUT in the glistening blue waters of the English Channel, close to the coast of France, surrounded by swarms of protecting patrol boats, lay the pride of the British navy, the finest dreadnaught in the world, His Majesty's ship, *Fortitude*. There she rested on the waters, a proud and rugged monster of steel gray, with her massive observation towers, her many turrets, her huge, jutting guns. There she lay at anchor while tenders plied back and forth, bringing men and supplies, and on the decks the sailors were kept busy scrubbing, cleaning, setting everything in ship-shape order for the voyage to battle.

The British knew just how valuable their ship was, and they were guarding it well. There must have been at least twenty destroyers and patrol boats swarming around that gigantic monster, swarming like insects. The crews of these destroyers and patrol boats, as well as the crew of the *Fortitude*, were constantly alert. True, they were safe within the corked-up Channel, but since those mysterious sinkings had been taking place out at the North Sea, all vessels must be on their guard. If the unknown menace should somehow get into the Channel, try to wreak destruction here—

And so it was a strange irony that when, among all the other vessels around here, the dim outline of a British submarine running at surface trim appeared out in the Channel and moved slowly this way, not one of those alert sailors felt the slightest suspicion. Slowly and unobtrusively the British E-boat approached, hailing other vessels and dipping her British ensign. Slowly she loomed into clearer focus before the eyes of the men on the *Fortitude* and its surrounding protectors. Through their glasses, for they did stop to look at all ships, the British officers could see

her insignia, E-27. And through their glasses, as she came on still closer, they could dimly make out three tiny figures atop her conning-tower.

But little did they guess how tense and apprehensive those three figures were, or what thoughts were in their minds. Von Feldner, the young ace of submarine commanders, stood on his bridge, every nerve taut and alert, every muscle tense. He stood there with his glasses glued to his eyes, peering at the great dreadnaught which loomed before him, taking stock of its rugged, shining contours, its powerful guns. A great prize indeed! But he was too worried and full of forebodings to feel any sense of elation now. Not until the torpedoes were safely on their way would he be certain of his triumph.

Quietly, von Feldner kept speaking his orders into the tube, giving his commands to the men below. In front of him the coxswain, silent and stern, turned his wheel, guiding the submarine on its course. The navigation officer, who no longer had to consult his charts, stood by helping von Feldner lay out the route which would maneuver them into their deadly position. And from time to time von Feldner dropped his glasses and glanced down into a small box at the foot of the flag halyard, an open box in which the crumpled silken banner of the Fatherland, already attached to the halyard, lay waiting to be hoisted as soon as the accursed British ensign could be torn down.

## CHAPTER IX NO SURVIVORS

CLOSER and closer to the H. M. S. Fortitude drew the E-27, and now it was going right into the midst of the unsuspecting patrol boats, as if it merely intended to cruise by. Down in the interior of that submarine, a helpless Yankee aviator sat before his two relentless guards with the secret in his possession, but with no means of conveying it to the scores of Allies outside. By this time Kirby was in a cold panic. He knew that they must be close to their destination by the look of the men in here. The atmosphere had become so tense that the men scarcely breathed. Beads of sweat stood out on the foreheads of many. And all the time the crisp voice of von Feldner, giving his orders, came down from above.

Suddenly there was an ominous scraping and scuffling sound, coming somewhere from the stern of the sub. It was followed by a metallic banging, as of iron doors. Kirby glanced up bewilderedly. And it was the young wireless operator, of imperial intelligence, who explained those noises to him.

“Torpedoes, Yank!” the young operator grinned. “Torpedoes! They’re putting them into the tubes now! We are getting ready!”

An icy wire seemed to tighten around Kirby’s heart, and his face became ashen pale. God, in a couple of minutes the terrible work would be done! And he just had to sit here and listen until the end. Those damned pounding Diesels were—

The E-27 was just a few hundred yards from that dreadnaught now. The battleship lay ahead and to starboard. Steadily, the submarine continued to approach her victim. Steadily she moved on, yard by yard, while on every side of her were patrol boats and destroyers which could blow her to bits in a moment.

On the bridge von Feldner waited with tense impatience. With him waited the coxswain and the navigation officer. As soon as the E-27 would be passing the Fortitude on a parallel course, the submarine would steer hard apart and swing its stern on the British vessel. Then would come the perfect, carefully aimed shot with the two torpedoes.

Closer and closer now. So close that von Feldner could see the sailors on the dreadnaught’s decks. Some of those sailors were leaning over the rail, watching the submarine with that vague interest which a submarine always inspires. The E-27 moved right on, until now it was just about to start passing the Fortitude. Von Feldner directed the coxswain. The latter began to bring his wheel hard around. The bow of the submarine veered slowly. It was veering off from the battleship. Von Feldner now stood very still, his face a mask. But his hand hovered about the flag halyard. He was prepared to bark out his last order—the order which would cause the waiting men in the torpedo room below to press their release-buttons.

Down below Kirby felt the veering of the submarine, and he knew at once what it meant.

They were getting into position. They were swinging around.

Then it was that something snapped in the Mosquito, and he lost his head. All logic and reason seemed to desert him. Suddenly he became a madman.

LIKE a crazed animal he sprang from that bench. His two guards, taken totally unawares, tried to jump on him, but a demon seemed to be inside of that Yank now, a demon which no obstacles could stop. Madly, he lashed out with fists of iron, right, left, right, left! He felled one of the sailors with a blow to the jaw. The other doubled up from a terrific punch in the stomach. Then Kirby, eyes wild, was lurching out across the control room. He saw figures rushing toward him. He saw the wireless operator, the spy, leap to intercept him. He saw the gleam of revolvers but none of them was fired. They did not dare to fire a shot when so near their enemies.

Before they had reached him the Mosquito was already at the foot of the conning-tower ladder. He grabbed the rungs, and started to pull himself up. His large, borrowed trousers got caught, almost made him fall. Cursing he jerked them free. But by this time the men in the room had rushed up, were trying to seize him, pull him down. Madly, he took one foot off the ladder and kicked out for all he was worth. He heard grunts of pain, saw the men sprawling to the floor. Then, agile as a monkey, he was darting up that ladder straight up through the conning-tower into the sunlight.

He popped out above like a jack-in-the-box, and caused von Feldner and the other two men up there to stare at him dumbly, transfixed for the moment. Kirby used that moment to his advantage. In one swift, comprehensive glance he took in the surrounding scene. There was the dreadnaught, off to the side. There were all the destroyers and patrol boats. And the submarine, thank God, was not yet in any position to fire its torpedoes.

In a second glance, Kirby's eyes fell on the flag halyard. He saw the British ensign, and he saw the German ensign in the box below. He did not have to think out his course of action. At once he saw it clearly.

FURIOUSLY, he leaped toward the halyard. But then the three men up there came to their senses while from below other men were scrambling up the ladder. A savage oath tore from von Feldner, and he sprang upon the Yank. The navigation officer was with him. The coxswain, however, went back to his wheel, desperately trying to guide the submarine around to its firing position. Kirby, struggling in the grip of von Feldner and the navigation officer, turned from the halyard and again lashed out with his mighty fists. The navigation officer slipped and fell right into the hatch, knocking down the men on the ladder below as he tumbled. Von Feldner was pushed backward for a moment, and again Kirby made for the halyard. He got it, started to pull for all he was worth. The British flag began to descend, and simultaneously the German ensign began to rise out of its box.

Then von Feldner, snarling out curses, was upon Kirby again. Madly, the two men struggled, punching and mauling each other unmercifully. Madly they fought over that halyard. Now Kirby would get it, would start to pull up the German flag. But then von Feldner would clutch it frantically, and the British flag would fly back into its place. What a paradox, where two men each tried to hoist the flag of his enemies, the flag he hated!

All the time von Feldner kept shouting out orders, and the faithful coxswain kept steering the craft around. God, Kirby must hurry before it was too late, before they could get in position. The British sailors on the near-by battleship and the other vessels did not see this scrap on the conning-tower. But they would see the flags.

Again men were climbing up the conning-tower ladder, to come to von Feldner's assistance. Desperately Kirby rallied every last ounce of his strength. He took a breath, jerked back his arm, and putting his whole body and soul into the blow, brought a mighty uppercut to von Feldner's jaw. The *Korvettenkapitan* reeled backward, fell on the bridge, and struggled to rise. Kirby got the halyard. He pulled it as fast as he could. Down came the British ensign. Up went the crumpled and folded German battle flag. Up, up, up, to the top of the mast, where the breeze caught it eagerly, and it fluttered out in all its splendor.

It took just about three seconds for a few of the near-by ships to spot that flag. It took just about five seconds for them to realize what it meant, to connect it with the mysterious sinkings, and to notice that this submarine was trying to get into a position to launch torpedoes for the Fortitude. It took just about twenty seconds for the alarm to be relayed to every ship in the place. And it took just about forty seconds for hell to break loose!

Even as von Feldner hurled himself upon Kirby, and tried to tear down that tell-tale ensign, even as the other men from the sub started to pop out of the conning tower, the guns of the nearest destroyer blazed forth. Shells came screaming through the air. There came a deafening explosion which seemed to lift the submarine right out of the water. The men in the conning tower tumbled down again. The coxswain was knocked from his wheel. Kirby and von Feldner, separated, clung wildly to the rail of the bridge.

Shells were bursting all over the place now, and shrapnel was screaming through the air. One after another, the destroyers and patrol boats were opening up. The great dreadnaught Fortitude joined in with her small deck guns, and pretty soon the hapless submarine was tossing about like a cork in a virtual maelstrom of shells and shrapnel.

A cry broke from the coxswain as he fell with a mortal gash in his head. But von Feldner, his face contorted with wild anguish, held onto the bridge rail, sobbing out frantic, useless orders.

"*Torpedos los!*" he screamed. "*Torpedos—schnell! Gott im Himmel!*"

But even if the order had been obeyed it would have done no good. The submarine was in no position to shoot at patrol boats carefully kept out of the way of her tubes. But the order could not be obeyed. For just then a shell went tearing into the torpedo room, and the explosion which followed was so terrific that it lifted Kirby right off that conning tower and flung him far out into the sea. It was lucky for him that it did. For, as he struggled and floundered in the waves, while the shells which burst all around made those waters a seething inferno, he glanced back and he saw what was left of the E-27 sinking.

It was plunging into the sea stern first, with terrific rapidity. Even as Kirby looked, the waters swallowed the hapless craft completely. But

before it was gone the Mosquito had caught one fleeting but vivid picture which he would never forget, which would remain firmly imprinted on his mind. It was a picture of von Feldner, greatest and most daring of U-boat commanders, clinging weakly to the bridge rail, while his eyes stared upwards at the ensign of his Fatherland, the ensign which had ironically betrayed him and brought defeat upon him and his gallant crew.

*"Von Feldner and a crew of twenty Germans, manning the E-27, were sunk by shell fire in the English Channel while making an attempt to torpedo the H.M.S. Fortitude. Citation for Captain Kirby, U. S. Air Service, for extreme valor. The E-27 sank instantly when a shell struck her stern torpedo room, setting off one of her torpedoes.*

*Remarks: No survivors."*

Commander Braddock, of U. S. naval intelligence, beamed as he read this report aloud. And the Three Mosquitoes, who listened to it, grinned with him. For once more the famous trio of aces, all three of them, were gathered in the commander's office at Brillion-sur-Mer. Once more they stood around the commander's desk, while the wireless instrument sparked and sputtered-over in the corner.

"But where the deuce do they get that '*No survivors*' stuff this time?" Kirby wanted to know. "I'm standing right here, and I'm alive and healthy."

His two comrades were quick to jump on him. They were so relieved and delighted to find him safe in their midst once more that they were ready to kid the life out of him.

"What do you mean?" Shorty Carn demanded. "You're no survivor. Why, you weren't even supposed to be on that submarine at all."

"Just because you were swimming when a patrol boat picked you up," the lanky Travis put in, "you want to be called a survivor!"

Kirby glared at them indignantly.

"Now listen here, guys "

"Now, now," the commander interceded, gently. "Let me straighten this business out. There is one survivor. And," his eyes twinkled, "the binge we naval men are going to throw for that one survivor and his comrades—and it isn't often that the navy will throw a binge for the army—well, this binge, I fear, will not get into the report either!"