

# Tarmac of Treason

By Frederick C. Painton  
A Squadron of the Dead Adventure

*They were a powerful group, those men of the Squadron of the Dead. The dread skull emblem on their planes was their only flag, and to them fell the deadly tasks which no other squadron dared attempt. Yet powerful as they had become in the service of the Allies, a more terrible force had organized against them. For the German chief of Imperial Intelligence had proclaimed the grim order: "Every man in the Squadron of the Dead must be destroyed!"*

AT five-thirty o'clock of a crisp April day in 1918, a black Spad with scarlet trimmings droned steadily southward two miles or so above the rolling Marne countryside. The mosquito-like battle crate had a singular emblem painted on its fuselage—a large grinning skull, resting at a slight angle on two crossed bones.

It was the insignia of the Squadron of the Dead, that mysterious collection of great flyers who belonged to no army, fought for no flag, and who died because they were, to the world, already dead.

The hawk-faced pilot with the tawny, patient eyes staring out from behind his goggles was Barry Dale, commander of the squadron. He was flying home alone, and he was heavy of heart.

It had been no day for flying, anyway. A thick ocean of cloud had hidden the sun from dawn. It hung low and occasionally dripped rain; bayonets of its misty white hung in valleys and spoiled visibility. Every other Allied plane had been grounded by it.

Three other pilots had started out with Barry on the patrol, a reconnaissance patrol to mark ammunition dumps at Fismettes for bombing. Machine-gun fire from a tough gun near Etain had accounted for the Italian, Cappodicia. Twelve Halberstadts had knocked off O'Flaherty and the Portuguese, Gomez, and would have killed Barry, too, save that a small squall had enabled him to dive into the clouds. Yet he knew, even now, that the Halberstadts were searching for him.

He couldn't understand it. For weeks on this follow-up of the German advance, the German crates had fled at sight of the skull emblem. Why,

today, should they throw away five of their comrades to sink two men? Never had he seen the Germans fight so recklessly. No doubt about it, that one Halberstadt had deliberately dived straight into Gomez—two men for one. And they had deliberately given O'Flaherty that one Halberstadt as white meat so as to maneuver him where he didn't have a chance—two men again for one. They had worked the same trick on Barry Dale, but he had crashed the Halberstadt offered as bait and managed to escape the net.

"Maybe," he reflected bitterly, "the German Air Force is taking to *hara kiri* for diversion."

He studied his instruments, allowed, for wind drift and corrected his course. His eyes saw with no alarm that he had less than ten minutes of flying time left. He must be nearly over the field.

He brooded, a little sick at heart. Day after day, week after week, pilots came to the Squadron of the Dead—Irish, English, French, Rumanian, Russian, Portuguese, Belgian, and even Austrian and Germans. All were outlawed men, pilots who had earned the death sentence by their military crimes. But instead of shooting them, the High Command sent them to the Squadron of the Dead, there to throw away their lives on any venture that promised to hurt the enemy. Casualties numbered a hundred per cent. Sixty pilots had been lost in thirty days. It was an endless treadmill of fighting, until the foot slipped and death tapped with a bony finger.

The motionless skipper, himself once of the Foreign Legion, stirred restlessly in the pit, and thrust out the stick. Obediently the Spad dipped its nose and slid down into the turmoil of boiling

cloud. From above, the clouds had looked white, soft, upholstered. Now, a thick, clammy moisture gripped him. The world became gray, and small and dripping. Water flew from the grinding prop; spattered in a stream from the tiny windshield, and glittered on the smooth blue barrels of his twin Vickers.

Dale watched the altimeter, glad he had corrected it that day. A man could dive into a hill if this cloud bank had settled closer. He throttled the motor and the twin-banked Hispano-Suiza whistled and hissed as the struts and stay-wires cleaved a world of sodden, impenetrable gray. Slowly the altimeter needle slid to the left—two thousand, eighteen hundred, and fifteen hundred feet. The cloud bank had settled lower.

At eight hundred feet, he broke out into a world already growing dark with early night. He located himself by Abernay and wheeled the Spad left. It was not bad guessing for blind flying, because the secret tarmac was less than five miles off his port wings.

He ranged through wisps of cloud, settled lower and saw the camouflage that protected the hillside entrance to the great concrete chambers—once dugouts—that now housed Handley Pages, Spads and Breguets.

He never saw the plane that attacked him.

WHITE stars, then holes appeared in his windshield. The wind boiled through. The padding on the cockpit edge frayed, and horsehair flew in a small black storm. A blue light flashed from the cocking handle of his starboard gun where a slug ricocheted.

At the plane's throttled speed, the controls were not sensitive. Barry tried to fade out of the slanting gray burst of death, and barely made it. He never turned around. The throttle jerked open, the Hisso howled, and the pull helped save the spin into which the Spad had nearly fallen.

Now, for the first time, Dale permitted himself a glance up the gleaming surface of his flippers. A Fokker tripe was wheeling to dive at him. He looked down and ahead. Across five hundred feet of air space, he saw a man's figure dart out of the woods that bordered his squadron's secret tarmac on the east. He saw a Salmson reconnaissance ship turned into the wind, and as soon as the running figure had thrown itself into the rear

cockpit, the ship began to move. The Squadron of the Dead did not fly Salmsons.

"What the hell?" muttered Dale.

Something was wrong here. He did a double roll out from under the Fokker's spitting guns, and wheeled to the right to intercept the Salmson. Instantly the Fokker pounced frantically upon him, dived in the wildest angles, and fired even at two hundred yards distance. It was all too obvious that the Fokker was protecting the getaway of that Salmson observation crate with the French cocardes. But why?

With seven minutes of flying time left in the gas tanks, Barry Dale ignored the frantically attacking Fokker. He faded off to the right. His lips pressed hard and his eyes were flashing as his guns drummed a short, warming burst. When the Salmson came out from against the blackness of the darkened earth, he went to the right, turning swiftly. The Fokker burst whipped through his empenage.

Furiously the tripe charged at him. Only the quickest flip prevented a head-on collision. But the very fury of the Fokker's charge gave Dale his chance. Going wide open, the Fokker needed acres to turn around in. The Salmson, at less than a hundred feet of altitude, started hedge-hopping north.

Dale's lips curled. He kicked the rudder. The stick thrust out and the Spad went helling down. The Hotchkiss machine gun mounted on the gleaming tourelle in the rear cockpit of the Salmson tore off a strip of fire. He saw the gunner frantically hurl away the aluminum strip that carried the thirty-two slugs, and push another in the breech feed-mechanism.

Then the smooth blue Vickers mounted on the cowlings ahead of Dale began to rattle. At that distance, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. The Salmson staggered like a falcon winged in mid-air as it tried to right itself. Dale's smashing line of tracer fire, glinting like golden threads, cut the darkening air, smashed into the forward cockpit. The Salmson nosed wildly down, side slipped, and flattened for a second due to its wonderful stability. Then, with one last, wild wheel, it shot sideways like a kite without sufficient tail, and its right wings hit the ground not forty yards from the smooth, level fields that the Squadron of the Dead used as an airdrome.

Dale pulled up, expecting another attack from the Fokker. To his amazement, it flashed downward, black wings against black sky. It whipped around into the wind.

"By God!" Dale marveled. "He's going to pull a rescue."

His own long dive had cost him distance and maneuvering position. So now he whipped over the tree tops, loosening his Colt .45 automatic in its holster. He came into the wind with the Hisso popping on the last few drops of gas. When he nosed down to run alongside the Fokker, he was coming in dead-stick.

What followed occurred under his gaze as if he had a front seat at a theater. From the crumpled wreckage of the Salmson, the Fokker pilot aided a badly limping man. He helped him to the right wing and the man stretched on it close to the fuselage, clinging to a strut. Near the Salmson wreckage, wriggling along the ground, an expression of agony contorting his face, crawled the second man of the Salmson. The Fokker pilot turned; his mouth opened blackly and he spoke, shook his head. The man, dragging like a worm, called something. The Fokker pilot flung an answer, swung into the plane, and instantly it began to move.

Its tail was up and it was air-light by the time Dale set his ship down.

He fired a burst as the Fokker swept across his sights, but the flaming tracer did no harm. Then the Fokker was in the air in a sharp, climbing turn. It wheeled straight into the blackness, and was lost to sight while the thrumming of the Mercedes still hung in Barry Dale's ears.

It was sickening to stand there, knowing the importance of stopping that Fokker, yet unable to move. Where were the rest of the pilots? What did this mean?

DALE dropped to the ground and ran to where the stricken man lay. He had his gun out, but the hurt pilot made no attempt at resistance.

"A broken back, *mein Herr*," he said in perfect English. "One little movement will finish me—should have finished me before this."

He laughed, not bitterly, but naturally, as if somewhat amused. Dale's eye-brows went up, then tightened as he scrutinized this man who laughed at death. Helmet and goggles had been

taken off. He saw a thin, narrow skull, and a pasty-white face with great cavernous sockets for eyes. The body attached to the head was wasted to the point of emaciation.

The German laughed. "Yes, I've been a long time dying." He nodded. "Disease would have got me. That's why I volunteered. But you can bury me as a German." He gestured feebly. "I wear the uniform."

"What does this mean?" Dale asked.

Hatred blazed in the deep-set eyes. "You renegades will find out soon enough—but not from me."

"We'll see about that." Dale came closer. "There are ways of making even you talk."

The face took on a touch of color, as if a ghost's cheeks had been tinted with rouge. "Impossible! I control my own life. I am tired of waiting. So—"

Before Dale could stop him, the German raised his body by pressing his hands palm downwards against the ground and bracing his elbows. The front of his body rose. From the hips down he stayed motionless.

"You fool," cried Dale. "Don't!"

The snap was audible, as if a violin string had broken.

"Death—is easy." The German had mastered his fate. A second after he died, the forepart of his frame settled gently back to the ground and his face flattened against the dirt.

Dale swore, and felt the pulse, knowing how useless it was. He studied the dead man a second, and finally lifted him in his arms and bore him away across the tarmac to the subterranean hangars.

Here was a most ingenious arrangement. Once, long before, when the Germans had held this sector, they had spent soldiers' time hollowing out immense caverns in a limestone hillside, to hold their reserves in case of a big attack. They made concrete entrances, concrete floors, they equipped the interior with electric lights and special ventilation fans. It was one of their most elaborate places.

Dale had seized upon it when he learned that the German General Staff was bending every effort to find his strange squadron. So far, it had escaped notice. But as he entered what was his Operations room, with the dead German over his

shoulder, he had a chill sense of foreboding. The secret, he knew, was out.

"Willie!" He yelled for the kiwi adjutant, but Willie the Web did not answer. Dale laid the corpse on a desk top and ran out into the repair shop, then to the hangar. But not a soul was to be seen.

The Handley Pages stood there, gigantic but untouched. So did the Breguets and the smaller Spads. Nothing had been harmed.

"Yet if the gang is missing," Dale muttered, "they could have destroyed all our equipment. Why didn't they do it?"

He went back to the Operations office, lit a cigarette and stared pityingly at the cadaverous face of the German who had killed himself for fear of torture. He was still standing motionless, brooding, when Willie the Web, leading the other fifteen pilots of the squadron, came in. Willie was cursing vigorously.

"By God," he cried, "what does Cartwright mean by summoning us all to Meaux and then not showing up?"

Dale said, "Cartwright never summoned any of you. But what it's all about is beyond me."

He found the telephone wire cut, and later that evening, after it had been spliced, he called Cartwright and told him what had happened.

"It's a trick," cried Cartwright. "You know the Germans have put a price on your head—a hundred thousand marks, dead or alive."

"But why go about it this way?" demanded Dale.

"I don't know," moaned Cartwright. "But trouble's coming."

It was not until later that Barry Dale found out that the only objects taken in that mysterious visit were four photographs.

THE man known as Anton von Hauser came into the Coblenzer Bahnhof at nine-thirty from Cologne—a tall, slender young man with blond hair verging on red. He curtly ordered the porter to follow him and took a cab for the Park Haus. The Park Haus is on the Kaiserwilhelmstrasse, the wide boulevard that runs from the Festhalle east; and it is the finest hotel in this city that squats at the confluence of the Rhine and Moselle rivers, under the frowning shadow of Ehrenbreitstein, the great German fortress.

The motor trip was made in, darkness, for although Coblenz was two hundred miles from the Front, it was also a vital railroad link in German communications, and one could never tell when a push would bring it within range of airplane bombing. Anton von Hauser lit a cigarette and stared thoughtfully into space.

He had no right to use the "von" of nobility. He was the son of an East Prussian peasant. But being a spy, he could use the title as part of a *nom de guerre*, and fervently hope that some piece of luck would ennoble him. He passionately wanted to be ennobled. He was in love with a girl named Helena von der Madden, and Helena's father had once booted him from the door a year or so before a Serbian peasant did a job of murder in Serajevo.

"No peasant clods can marry a von der Macklen," the old *Graf* had said.

As Anton Hauser, he had become an *Unterleutnant* in a cavalry regiment, and prayed that history would repeat itself and peasants would be ennobled for great heroism in war. Cavalry swords were as useless as picks in fighting this war, so he transferred to the air force.

Two months later he was shot down. A Frenchman in a Morane-Parasol, with a Winchester repeating rifle strapped to the fuselage, put four shots through Hauser's engine and the fifth through Hauser's thigh. God's grace let him crack up in No-Man's-Land, and there, for eighty-two hours, he lay under a hellish barrage.

A German advance found him hysterically insane in a shell hole, screaming, "Stop the noise. It pounds on my brain. The noise—for God's sake, stop it!"

Physicians said shell shock. Hauser told his Excellency, General von Spath, "I speak five languages fluently. I have traveled. In Intelligence, I can serve the Fatherland, but at the Front, I will be a raving madman in twenty-four hours."

Anton Hauser became Germany's greatest spy within one year. It was he who produced the new British gas formula ten days after the second Ypres affair. Seventy-two hours after being landed from a submarine off Wolf's Head, he brought back the blueprints and specifications of the British tank. He stole the French signaling code that cost twenty-seven ships off Gris Nez.

Espionage in Germany is considered so honorable that princes of the royal house have acted for Intelligence. So honors came to Anton Hauser. He received the Iron Cross, second and first class, the Royal Order of Hohenzollern conferred *en cabinet* by Majestaat himself, and the rank and emoluments of an *Oberst-Leutnant*.

One thing only was needed for Hauser to achieve his ambition and Helena von Macklen—the order of the Imperial Eagle. And so, as he rode now along the wide, darkened street of Coblenz, he wondered if the imperative summons of *Oberst* Nicolai presaged the final honor. He hoped so.

The grizzled old head of the *Deutsches Nachrientendienst* bowed stiffly and nodded toward a chair. “Eat first,” he said.

Germans were already suffering from the blockade, dying of malnutrition, but these two ate of the best—a roast of beef, a fine pheasant, washed down with the best vintage of Moselle. They drank champagne and then a chartreuse liqueur.

“Now,” said *Oberst* Nicolai, lighting a long black cigar, “we might touch upon this affair.”

“By all means,” assented Hauser.

A MOMENTARY lull followed, and he thought he heard the faint drone as of a blue-bottle fly skimming along the surface of a windowpane. He dismissed it as imagination, and studied the face of Nicolai, head of Imperial Intelligence.

“By the way, *Excellenz*” he said, “my brother is stationed at the Festehall. After the discussion, with your permission—”

“Of course.” Nicolai frowned. He had a one-track mind and hated to be interrupted. He blew a thin gray cone of smoke.

“You know, naturally,” he began, “that Marshal Foch has been made Supreme Commander of the Allied armies.”

“Yes.” Hauser nodded. “With their backs to the wall, the enemy could do nothing else. Their jealousies have kept them from striking together.”

“Precisely,” assented Nicolai. “And their jealousies have acted in our favor, enabled us to defeat them individually. But now—”

“The action comes too late, I think,” cut in Hauser. “Von Ludendorff’s hammer blows are exhausting their reserves. We shall have victory before July.”

Nicolai raised his eyebrows and critically examined the fine ash of his cigar. “Suppose we don’t?” he suddenly demanded.

Hauser looked startled. As a spy, he acted within his narrow path and knew nothing of the actual state of affairs.

“Meaning, *Excellenz*?”

“Meaning, my dear Hauser, that we must plan beyond the present.” Nicolai hesitated, as if hating to confide, then said, “We beat the British at Amiens, but we did not break through. We beat the Belgians on the coast, and did not break through. The new drive to smash the French may yield the desired victory. Certainly reserves are going fast, ours as well as theirs. But if the final blow does not beat them to their knees, what then?”

Hauser thought a while. “Why, it would be more trench warfare, and a stalemate until winter puts an end to campaigning. Victory for us in 1919.”

“You are optimistic.” Nicolai wagged a little finger at the cigar tip, and watched the ash float to the floor. “Ludendorff promised victory with a million casualties. If we don’t get it, we must retreat, shorten our line and try for a stalemate peace.”

He paused a space, and added, “But the Allies having stopped our blows, with Foch to regulate concerted attacks along our entire front, and with the American reinforcements coming along—there is a stark possibility of defeat.”

“*Gott!*” muttered Hauser.

Trained in the German espionage school, he knew strategy as well as guns and languages. He saw even more than Nicolai intended.

“But,” Nicolai went on gently, “if Foch were—er—removed, the old jealousies would assert themselves. Petain, Haig and Pershing could never agree on another for a supreme commander. We could definitely hold out until next year and, meanwhile, a peace could be arranged.”

“Foch, then, is the key to their salvation,” murmured Hauser.

“Precisely.”

Hauser shook his head. “He is too well guarded for removal.”

“Are you sure?”

"I saw him in Paris—closely guarded at all times. But come, *Excellenz*, you have an idea. Let me hear it."

Nicolai did not seem disposed to do so. He poured some yellowish chartreuse into the liqueur glass, passed it under his long nose and then sipped.

"Have you heard of the Squadron of the Dead?" he asked.

"*Gott*, yes, *Excellenz*!" Hauser scowled. "Damned renegades. They should all be hung. Even our good German men desert to them."

"And take our secrets with them," said Nicolai calmly, yet with eyes hard and cruel. "For no other reason than that they are outlaws and traitors, they should be destroyed. I have spent the lives of more men and more good marks to destroy them than I care to think about. Now, I have a plan to destroy them—and Foch."

"How interesting," murmured Hauser, his eyes veiled.

"You know, of course, that the Squadron of the Dead is under the direct authority of the Allied Supreme War Council. That means that their commanding officer is now—Foch."

"Ah, yes. And if they die in line of duty, he confers the *Chevalier de Legion d'Honneur*."

"And also to those who do their dirty work, and live," said Nicolai. His eyes were now mere slits as he leaned back in the chair. "Suppose he conferred the honor at the precise moment that we raided their airdrome, and one or more of our men—in the Squadron of the Dead—made sure he died."

"An ambitious plan, *Excellenz*," said Hauser. "I must hear more—what's that?" he broke off suddenly.

TRUMPETS shrilled loudly above a motor roar from the street, and above them came the hoarse shout, "*Alarme! Alarme!*"

Through the opened windows came the thin, high whine of airplane motors.

The manager raced across the room, "Pardon, *Excellenz*, but those are enemy planes. We must put out all lights at once."

"An air raid here! Impossible!" growled Nicolai.

Yet, as if in answer to his statement, searchlights began to stretch across the sky's

blackness like probing fingers, and the sharp, regular slam of fired cannon echoed above the other turmoil.

Nicolai arose. "I can hardly believe if, yet—let us go to the balcony."

As he turned to go, a German *Unter-leutnant* raced across the room and clicked his heels, face pale.

"Yes, Kranz," said Nicolai to his aid.

"Word from H-twenty at Luz, *Excellenz*," panted the man. "Six enemy Handley Page planes with escort, carrying the skull and crossbones insignia, passed over at fourteen thousand. Our ships to intercept were dispersed or destroyed."

"The Squadron of the Dead!" muttered Nicolai. "First Zeebrugge, then Metz, and now Coblenz." He frowned, brooding on his aid's pale face. "Damnation, man!" he suddenly roared. "Does a German's blood turn to water at sight of that *verdammt* insignia? Why so pale? You can die only once. Get out."

He turned on his heel and strode to the balcony just as the lights clicked off. Darkness surrounded them.

"Always I have said it," he muttered, still angrily. "These men, these outlaws, their lives already forfeit, welcome death. And the pilots of our best squadrons flee in terror from them. By God, I'll have their lives—every one."

He grasped Hauser's arm and pulled him to the edge of the balcony so that they could stare up into the clear, moonless sky.

"You will go to them, Hauser," he said. "You will handle the affair, and—"

"There goes the first bomb," cried Hauser.

Above the confused smash of sound came a clear-cut whistle that grew louder, became a roar. There was a sudden brilliant upward flash of red that silhouetted the gables and chimney pots of Coblenz against a frame of crimson. A concussion that seemed to suck the air from their lungs followed.

"The railroad, of course," muttered Nicolai. "It feeds the whole Western Front." He did not seem to notice the sudden trembling of Hauser. "I have spent men's lives to destroy them and Foch, Hauser, and I mean to do it. I know where their airdrome is. I sent men to find out. I have photographs of members of the squadron. Here, you take them."

Hauser did not take them. His eyes were trained upward. He could see the sullen red flashes of exploding shells, where the anti-aircraft batteries placed a barrage to keep the bombers high. He could see the exhaust flashes of night-flying Fokkers winding upward to offer combat. And even as he watched, a series of fifteen small balloons suddenly rose up through the searchlight glare. These balloons had finely meshed steel screens attached to them. They could be raised to any altitude up to eight thousand feet, and airplanes flying into the screen mesh lost their propellers, and the pilots their lives. Gazing at it, Hauser had a moment of pride. It was he who had brought back this idea—a French invention—from Paris.

Fascinated, he watched the battalions of searchlights like silver bayonets, incredibly long, poke across the vastness of the sky.

“Take the photos,” repeated Nicolai.

Hauser shook his head. “*Excellenz*, I would give my right arm to undertake this mission. I do not refuse from lack of courage. I refuse because my very presence would doom it to failure....Feel my heart.”

His heart was racing, and he was shaking like a leaf. Briefly, he told of his terrible experience on the Western Front in 1915. “This noise, if it went on, would drive me mad,” he concluded. “I will get you Stauder, who can carry out the mission as well as—”

“Look out!” yelled Nicolai.

He flung himself down. Hauser hurled himself behind a pillar. Out of the sky, a hissing sound, like ten thousand snakes, grew louder—became a shriek!

*Crash!* A gout of flame leaped upward, five stories high. A building three hundred yards up the street split open like a rotten peach. It billowed out into the street and, where it had stood, only a great, gaping hole now remained. Fragments hurtled like a fine spray around the two frozen Germans, and a hurricane of small stones nicked the facade of the hotel.

When the sound had died away, high above could be heard the thin drone of the enemy motors. The 77’s still slammed like a deep orchestration, and the bayonets of searchlights swept endlessly across the sky. Then a new note, the screaming of maimed and dying, was added.

Fire trucks raced past to put out the fire. Ambulances clattered to pick up the wounded.

Hauser leaned against the stone balcony and slowly slumped in a faint.

THUS he stayed, while the sky eggs dropped remorselessly. A plane fell in flames. There was a gash of redness against the sky, like a meteor suddenly hitting the earth’s atmosphere and bursting into flame. A few sparks flared, and a curving sheet of crimson followed. Then the remorseless drone of enemy planes circling was heard again, while keen-eyed men watched the bomb-range sights. Presently it was over, though Hauser didn’t know it. The drone died away. The flames from the burning buildings sank lower. A bugle shrilled, and the lights within the hotel blazed brightly once more.

“Come, man,” said Nicolai, contemptuously, “get hold of yourself. Perhaps you are right. I shall have to get—”

“*Oberst-Leutnant* Hauser,” came a shrill yell from within.

Hauser wiped his streaming face with shaking hands, and struggled upright, “I am here,” he said.

He looked within and tottered suddenly, like a man struck on the jaw. Two soldiers were bearing the burden of an officer’s body into the hotel room.

“My God—Fritzchen,” screamed Hauser.

The soldiers placed the wounded officer on a white table cloth which quickly became soddenly crimson. Hauser sprang to the officer’s side.

“Fritzchen!” he repeated.

He stared down at his younger and only brother, Fritzchen of the sunny hair and smile, Fritzchen whom the *Mutter* loved as her baby, Fritzchen who alone shared Hauser’s heart with Helena.

The sunny hair was stained. The bright blue eyes were dull, and the boy’s flesh was already putty-colored. The eyes took on a spark of expression as Anton Hauser bent over.

“Anton, dear brother,” gasped the boy, not in a voice, not even a whisper, just a tingling of the vocal cords by a dying breath. “I—am dying—Anton. I had them bring me—to say *auf Wiedersehen*. Tell mother—quick, Anton—kiss me.”

Anton Hauser bent down like an automaton and put his lips against the boy's cheek. A hard sob wrenched his throat.

A brief, smiling expression lifted the boy's pallid lips. "Tell—Helena—first-born boy named—Fritz. Hold—my hand..."

He died between two breaths. A rattle, a sharp convulsion, and the cold fingers clinging so tightly to Anton Hauser's warm ones relaxed their grip and fell back, gray.

A murmur of pity rose, but Anton Hauser did not know it. He stood there, eyes glassy, staring into the past, bringing out memories that broke his heart. His lips quivered once.

Oberst Nicolai said gently, "I'm sorry, *mein Herr*."

Anton Hauser thrust out a hand. "Wait, *Excellenz*," he cried suddenly. His teeth clicked and his eyes burned hotly.

"*Oberst*," he said in a strangely calm voice, "I will undertake the mission. I will carry it out. I swear now to destroy the Squadron of the Dead—and Foch, too. They took my brother's life. I shall take all of theirs—and even then, the reckoning will be small."

Nicolai took him by the arm and led him away. The *Oberst*'s eyes were as complacent as a cat's. "The bombing is not so bad," he thought, "if it brings me this clever man for my bidding."

BARRY DALE'S tawny eyes saw the Fokker first. He blinked and thought matters were getting complicated again. The Fokker—a Greentail—was fifteen miles behind the barbed wire. It was circling aimlessly at nine thousand feet.

Gregoff, the Russian, waggled his wings for permission to attack. Dale shook his head. Here was another funny move in a queer game. He signaled for Baldy Grogan to take over the flight command, eased open his throttle and wheeled into a vertical dive. He was coming out of the sun, and he meant surprise.

Less than five kilos south was the Squadron of the Dead's hidden airdrome. If this was another incident, Dale intended to get the first burst. A short volley cleared his guns. As he vertical-dived, standing on his rudder bar, the Fokker leaped into the ring-sights.

Dale's lips went flat and grim. At a hundred yards, his fingers punched the trips. But the burst

was not sustained, and a sudden thrust on the rudder threw the lancing stream of tracers off the target.

He whipped down, munched, and brought the Spad hurtling upward in a fast zoom. As he did so, he could see clearly that the German in the Fokker was standing up calmly watching him. Across his chest, held there by wind pressure, was a piece of white cloth. The left hand of the pilot was stretched high in token of surrender. The other steadied the stick.

As Dale whipped around, the German smiled, a gleam of white in bronzed skin. He nodded his head vigorously. Closer now, Dale read, "*Kamerad*," printed on the piece of cloth.

Dale's tawny eyes grew sultry. "One of Kurt Ahlen's Greentails," he muttered, "and surrendering! What the hell is this about?"

He came on almost wing to fuselage with the Fokker on this turn, and saw that no cartridge belts were threaded to the twin Spandaus bolted to the cowlings. The man had started out to surrender, Dale thought, but why?

The German grinned imperturbably and gestured again with his thumb. Like settling falcons, the rest of the Squadron of the Dead flight closed around the prisoner in a tight circle. The German grinned and nodded.

He was still serene when he put the Fokker down on the camouflaged tarmac and climbed out of the pit, sweeping off helmet and goggles. He was a tall, thin lath of a man with broad shoulders, swarthy skin, and curling dark hair above eyes that smoldered with hidden fire. Those fierce eyes swept the silent group of pilots and paused on Barry Dale. In an instant, the German clicked his heels and bowed. "You are Commander *Hauptmann* Barry Dale," he murmured in excellent English.

"Well, what of it?" Dale's eyes gleamed with curiosity.

"I am Josef Sternza," rejoined the German, "formerly *Oberleutnant* in von Berg's flight of Ahlen's Greentails. I have come to join your *Jagdstaffel* of the Dead."

Dale permitted his glance to examine the man, starting at the graceful booted legs. The man had the intent stare of an eagle. His eyes were pale gray, and he had a haughty, dominant personality.



"Why are you here?" demanded Dale. "You betray your own people."

"That is not true." Josef Sternza drew himself up proudly. "I am a Pole. Lineal descendant of Vladimir Sternza. I have fought with the Germans because Germany promised Poland autonomy—freedom. I found now that it was a lie—merely a trick to get good Poles to die for the stupid house of Hohenzollern."

He shrugged, relaxed. "Germany is doomed. If Poland is to get freedom, it is the Allies who will give it to her. I fight for those who fight for my people. Already a Polish Legion exists in your armies. I have heard that the *Jagdstaffel* of the Dead takes any pilot if he be loyal. I have come to fight for Poland in your ranks."

He spoke simply, with no rhetorical flourishes. Sincerity was in his voice. If he was acting, it was superb. Dale studied him for a space, then curtly asked for his papers and paybooks. These he examined while the Pole lounged gracefully and the pilots studied the newcomer with a fierce scrutiny.

"I see you are an ace, with fourteen victories," said Dale. "You would not be, perhaps, the Polish Flash we have heard so much about?"

"I have been called that," assented Sternza simply.

DALE folded the papers and handed them back. He suddenly smiled, a rare expression for him, and all the more infectious because of its rarity.

"The Squadron of the Dead belongs to no army," he said quietly. "It fights for no single flag. It fights for peace, and to give condemned men an honorable death. It closes its ranks to no one." He paused. It was strange that his quiet voice, making no heroics, could grip them all in repeating the time-honored formula of welcome.

"You are welcome here," continued Dale. "No other questions will be asked. There is no rank here, save mine. You will obey me at all times. No matter what the order, to disobey is to receive our punishment—and that is death."

"I understand," said Sternza coolly.

"Disloyalty to me or to the black and red uniform is equally punished. No matter what your beliefs or opinions are, my word—directed by the

Allied Supreme War Council—is final. Do you accept?"

"I swear fealty and accept," said the Pole quickly.

"Then we take you at your face value, and you have an opportunity to serve the country you profess to love."

He held out his hand, and the Pole quickly took it. "You will be assigned to your Fokker, which will be repainted," said Dale. "Also to Gregoff's crew on the Handley Pages. We do mixed jobs here. Gregoff, you—"

Willie the Web, the tiny, cherub-faced kiwi thrust forward. "Cartwright and a recruit are in the worry room, skipper."

Dale nodded briefly to the Pole to follow. His eyes seemed absent as he walked past the great camouflage netting and through the doorway into the hillside cave. A short officer with a huge stomach stood here, and beside him was a handsome young man with no insignia of rank on him.

"The old graveyard smell again." Dale smiled. "Major, how are you?"

"Poorly, Barry, poorly," growled Cartwright. "Those deviled crabs I ate last night. My stomach isn't what it used to be. Hello, who's this?"

"Former *Oberleutnant* Josef Sternza," said Dale. "A new member."

Sternza clicked his heels and bowed. Cartwright, usually the jolliest of men, stared, and made no move to shake hands. "Humph!" he said. "So!"

He pursed his mouth thoughtfully, then became bland. "Good enough," he said. "And here's a new recruit, a hellion that'll take some killing. This, Barry, is Tom Barder. He slugged a colonel, in full view of the colonel's staff. Barder, shake hands with Barry Dale—and Josef Sternza."

The young man, tall and blond, with blue eyes and an arrogant, fresh countenance, held out a hand to Dale.

"How do you do?" he said carelessly. "Damned damp place you live in."

"Don't worry, Barder," growled Cartwright, "Dale's casualties are a hundred a month. You won't live long enough to catch pneumonia."

"Delayed murder, eh?" said Barder. "Well, it's a high price for slugging an ass, but let it not be said that a Barder doesn't pay his debts."

Dale caught the youth up. "You were also presented to Josef Sternza."

"I do not shake hands with traitors," said Barder contemptuously.

Sternza had bowed, clicked his heels. Now, his pale gray eyes searched the newcomer's face. His own remained blank.

Dale flushed angrily. "In this outfit, there are no traitors. You are all one—as you will be in the grave. I don't demand that you shake hands with Sternza, but you will treat him civilly, or fight him. We have our own way of settling disputes here—and I'm damned if I think you'll like them."

He turned. "Willie, take these two men and present them to the rest of the members."

This he said after receiving a look from Cartwright that told of wanting to talk alone. After the men had gone, Cartwright sank into a chair. "A crazy, unbroken stallion of a kid who's been looking for trouble for months. Imagine it," he went on, "he came back from a patrol of the Ninety-third over the lines, stepped out of the cockpit, drunk, and slugged the colonel."

Dale brought out the cognac bottle and poured two drinks. "Brighten up your day," he suggested.

"I will, Barry, I will," sighed Cartwright. "Ought to cure my livers—and I'm liverish."

They drank. Dale lit a cigarette. "All right. Now, what did you really want to see me about?"

Cartwright bit at the knuckle of his thumb. "Barry," he said casually, "there's a German spy in your outfit."

"Ah," murmured Dale, "who said so?"

"It's straight from Wilhelmstrasse," countered Cartwright. "We've got a man in there who knows. Nicolai has a phobia on you and your outfit. He intends to wipe you out. Their best man, Anton Hauser, has been assigned to the job."

Dale did not question the statement. Cartwright should know. "Any suspicions?"

"Yes. Sternza."

"We've had Poles before. There are two Germans in the outfit now."

"I don't like Sternza," declared Cartwright.

"Isn't it a rather obvious way to come?" protested Dale.

"Sure." Cartwright stopped biting his thumb. "But when you want to hide something, you always leave it on the table. Besides," he went on

petulantly, "Nicolai wasted good men's lives just to find out where your tarmac is. He was heard to say your death was worth more than winning a pitched battle."

Dale smiled. "Complimentary old beggar."

Cartwright got up. "I leave it to you. With the warning, you ought to smoke the guy out. Incidentally," he added, close to the door, "the old Marshal Foch will be here a week from Tuesday to pass around a few knickknacks to the living and pin some on the graves of the dead."

"We'll be ready," Dale nodded.

After Cartwright had gone, he sat there a long time, brooding, his eyes flaming yellowly, like a tiger's on the scent.

IT was nearly dusk when a thin, monotonous drone came out of the north-west. Barry Dale, protecting his eyes from a drooping sun, made out the thin wings of a combat Spad dropping down in long, lazy spirals. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"That makes three back," he said to Willie the Web. "I had begun to think a jinx had us. But—"

"He's heavy in the left wing," cut in Willie as the Spad straightened out to make a turn of the field. "By cripes, skipper, he's got somebody on the wing. Look!"

"It's Barder's ship," said Dale.

He studied the crate drifting down to a landing. There was a lump on the left wing, hugging the fuselage. And as the ship settled lower, Dale could see it was a man. The Hiss was whistling and sighing, and a soft ripple of sound gave off the struts and staywires as the ship hovered lower. Suddenly the gun was jazzed. The crate dipped to the unusual load, straightened and sat down.

The other pilots of the Squadron of the Dead, always curious as to who had won the last honors that day, ran with Dale to where the pilot was getting stiffly out. The man on the wing got down and began to rub his hands and swing his numbed arms.

Young Barder, the pilot, took off his helmet, flung it to the ground and banged his goggles after it. His eyes were fighting mad and he trembled with fury.

He swung savagely on Dale. "What the hell's going on here?" he choked. "Are you trying to get us all hung?"

Before Dale could reply, Barder's gaze went past him. The young man galvanized into action. He sprang forward in one huge leap. His fist drew a semicircle of blurred white and struck home with a sharp click. A man fell to the ground, and Dale turned to see Josef Sternza holding his jaw and trying to get up.

"It's you," choked Barder. "You dirty swine! I saw you around De Guerre's plane. You fouled the gasoline—or put something in the engine."

He swung on Dale. "Listen to this, skipper. De Guerre and Bassley, Gregoff and Grogan and I make this patrol. A special patrol, you say, to make a reconnaissance of a place to drop a spy. Nobody goes near Grogan's ship—and he's home. So is Gregoff. By luck, I am near my ship, so nothing happens to me."

He forced himself to be calm. "But I see this Sternza near De Guerre's crate, and what happens? He's forced down within two hundred yards of a German infantry patrol. As luck would have it, I could make a landing. De Guerre was ready and came aboard. But poor Bassley was forced down, and they'll hang him."

Dale's face seemed solid granite. "Bassley is back," he said evenly. "He just made it outside of the lines."

He swung on De Guerre, the Frenchman, once idol of the French army. "Is it true that your motor went out?"

"*Mais oui*," De Guerre scowled. He glared viciously at Sternza. "I am going along well, the coffee mill grinding. Poof—it stop. I mus' go down. The wind, she is against me. But for Barder, *oui*, I hang like a dog."

"I had enough to glide over the line," said Bassley coming up. "But somebody was monkeying with my motor."

By this time, Josef Sternza had risen to his feet. Already his jaw was swollen where the unexpected blow had struck home. His face was dark, eyes lidded like a waiting eagle.

"If you say I tampered with the motors, Barder," he said flatly, in a dead monotone, "you lie. For that blow, I expect a reply." He looked at Dale. "I demand an accounting with this swine who strikes like a coward, without warning."

"Demand for satisfaction must be met," said Dale coldly. "But it will have to wait. Retire, all of you. Sternza, come with me."

In the Operations room, he faced the Pole. "Marshal Foch is coming tomorrow," he said icily. "I want no more incidents of this kind. You are placed under arrest."

Sternza drew himself up. "Have I not served you well?" he demanded.

"You've been good," admitted Dale. "In fact, I have you among the recommendations for the *Legion d'Honneur*. But for reasons which I can't explain to you, you're under suspicion—as a spy."

"A spy!" Sternza veiled his eyes.

"Exactly. You will stay in your quarters. If you leave them, the guards will arrest you. If you go near the planes, you will be shot. That's all."

"You make a mistake, my friend," said Sternza. "I am no spy."

He looked like an eagle then, head up-reared, eyes flashing. Dale merely waved his hand. "That's to be seen. My orders stand."

Dale himself stood thoughtfully after the Pole had left. Finally he got his garrison cap of black with red piping, took the Dodge touring car and drove away. Josef Sternza went to his cubicle. He stayed there until the supper call came. His face was hard and cold, his eyes redly furious. He looked extremely dangerous.

CHILL silence, and furiously angry glances greeted Sternza as he entered the mess room. Barry Dale had not come back. Baldy Grogan held the seat of command. Josef Sternza was a brave man; he did not quail before the threatening eyes. He jerked out a chair and sat down. Instantly, Tom Barder, DeGuerre and Bassley leaped to their feet.

"Do we have to sit at the table with the swine?" choked Barder.

"Impossible," growled De Guerre.

Grogan looked up. He did not quite know how to handle the situation. Barry Dale would have known just what to do.

Josef Sternza took the matter in hand himself. "Would you care to settle our affair now—outside?" he spoke quietly to Barder. "I know slightly the boxing technique."

Barder snorted with poorly suppressed laughter. "Box—you! Hell, man, I'd cut you to pieces."

"It is what you hoped to do," assented Sternza. "Now, I give you the opportunity."

"I don't want to murder you," snarled Barder.

"How sportsmanlike," murmured Sternza. "With rapiers, then, or pistols?"

"Either one," agreed Barder.

"Nonsense!" snapped Grogan. "There's only one rule on this tarmac—put up your mitts. No other weapons go."

Josef Sternza then did a very deliberate, rather astonishing thing. His chair scraped back on a dead silence. His booted feet echoed ponderously as he walked around to where Barder, with flushed face, stared at him. Before Barder could be aware of what was impending, Sternza snapped, "Put up your hands!"

In a trice, he whipped over a right cross. It had been preceded by a feint, a jab of the left that any boxer could have known was merely a measuring feint for a fast one-two.

Barder mistook it and ducked into the right cross. It smacked his chin. As he staggered back, the left hook followed. He lolled back against the wall, dizzy, groggy, blood drooling from the corner of his mouth.

De Guerre, enraged, gave a yell and whipped out a pistol. Gregoff knocked it down and held the Frenchman. Bassley snarled, "The filthy swine!" As his hand went up, Grogan gave a yell, and with one roundhouse swing, hurled himself forward and knocked the knife from Bassley's hand.

"Now, by God," he cried, "you listen to me! Tomorrow, after Foch goes, Barder and the Polack can fight it out behind the hangar and tromp in each other's faces for all I care. But until Dale gets back, I'm leader around here, and I'll belt the first man that moves. Now, sit down, all of you, and eat."

Sternza retreated to his chair, jerked it into place and ate. He ate rapidly, without lifting his eyes. The meal was carried on in silence. He finished first, and with the slightest of bows to Grogan, turned his back on the room and strode out into the darkness. At his cubicle, he broke the electric bulb in the ceiling. He made a roll of his blanket and carefully placed it in the bed. He was smiling thinly now, his pale eyes alight and burning. The dummy in place, he took off his boots, replaced them with slippers and slipped silently out into the night.

Here, he suddenly halted. It was a clear, moonless night, and down through the crisp air

came the faint drone of an airplane motor. He listened, marking its position by sound and strength of sound. Suddenly the motor drone, almost directly overhead, ceased. For a space, he could hear the whistle of idling motor and the shrill of drifting struts. This lasted perhaps fifteen seconds, whereupon the drone resumed, made a circle of sound against the night and faded into nothingness.

Josef Sternza suddenly grinned. "Of course," he muttered. "The old plan."

Since the mysterious affair with the Fokker, Barry Dale had had anti-aircraft batteries placed around the tarmac, and a company of French soldiers had been brought in to man them and to mount guard. Looking against the lighter darkness of the sky, Sternza saw the long, needlelike bayonet of the sentry just ahead. He circled the man noiselessly and hastened toward a clump of trees that bordered the open stretch of field to the westward. Beyond this was an abandoned farm, its house long since shot up, its fields a swampy morass where they had been flooded by two shell explosions which had changed the course of a small creek.

If Sternza reached the soggy ground and moved across it, picking up and putting down his feet with the greatest of care, so that sucking sounds would not betray his movements. He listened intently, and heard sounds as of silk rasping against cordage. He froze then, and did not move....

BACK in the subterranean quarters, Barry Dale had arrived. Grogan explained what had happened at dinner.

"You've got to get rid of that Polack, or there'll be murder done," said Grogan positively. "They think he's a spy—and so do I."

"Yes, I know," said Dale. "You're officer of the guard, tonight. I want you to keep special watch. Come on. I'll make the rounds with you now."

They started at the first anti-aircraft group and found the guns in excellent order. They were "75's", those guns, able to fire twenty shots a minute of high explosive or shrapnel and make life miserable for any planes that attempted to strafe the tarmac. Ammunition was in order. Sentries were alert, and gunner-officers polite and

watchful. As they retraced their steps, a form loomed up out of the darkness.

"Dale?" called an anxious voice.

"Yes. You, Barder?"

"Yes. Listen. That damned German turncoat has run out—escaped."

"How do you know?"

"I just came from his cubicle with De Guerre. We went there to arrange a settlement. He struck me tonight—twice—and by God, I mean to kill him. But he knew the game was up, and he's run away."

He fell in step, saying, "He had a dummy roll arranged in his bunk. He left his boots. Dale, you've got to get him back. Marshal Foch will be here tomorrow. It's dangerous, a spy running around like that."

"Yes." Dale drawled the word.

They quickened their pace toward the marshy ground of the *Ferme de la Falashe*. As they approached, a French guard challenged them.

Dale responded in French, and the guard sighed. "*Monsieur le Capitaine*, there is a noise out there in the wet ground—toward the farm. A man moved. I heard the splash, the suck of feet."

"Sternza!" cried Barder positively. "That is the least guarded section. If he cuts through, he can reach the Monsard-Sarthe road."

"But he can't get through," said Dale. "The ground's a quagmire."

"He's trying," cried Barder. He jerked a heavy .45 pistol from his pocket, "I'll go after him. Grogan, you come, too."

"Sure," nodded Grogan. "Dale, you watch here."

Dale hesitated doubtfully, then assented. "Separate and meet at the edge of the old farmyard," he ordered. "Capture, but don't kill him. Understand?"

They stepped into the soft ground and were almost instantly lost to sight. Josef Sternza, crouching, heard their movements distinctly. There was silence after that, save for the odd noises of the night. Trees rubbed their branches with a slicking sound, like an old man warming his hands before a fire. There was the hiss of rushes bowing before a biting night wind, and faint sounds as of animals shrinking from this invasion.

Out in the quagmire, a man crouched in ankle-deep water. There had been no visible water there before he had dug with his hands in the muck and made a hole into which he had stuffed and then trampled the shrouds and silk of a parachute recently used. He waited, listening with pricked ears and following with almost a superhuman sense, the movement of a man toward him. The careful lifting and placing of feet bore to his right. He himself also began to move, on hands and knees, pushing out hands to pluck any twigs from his path that might crack and betray him under his weight. Clearing a place with his fingers, he gently put his knees there.

He looked up against the dark sky, pausing every few seconds to make sure his path and that of the approacher would collide. And presently, staring up, he saw the dark silhouette of the man who was moving slowly, silently forward. The man on his knees straightened a bit, tensed his feet beneath him, set his muscles for the movement which must not fail.

The oncomer paused a second, straining forward, attempting to pierce the cloying darkness that was blacker than the pit. Thus pausing, his attention elsewhere, he did not see the black figure rear up from the ground. Fingers of biting steel encircled his neck. A sudden upthrust of a cruel knee caught his groin. The fingers stifled his inward shriek of pain. He was jerked downward. His feet thrashed. A few subtle sounds followed. Upward flooded the warm, fetid smell of blood, horrible against the crisp clearness of the air.

The murderer crouched there over his kill and smiled....

JOSEF STERNZA moved forward slightly and eased to the right. Despite the muck that soiled his uniform, soaked and froze his feet, he crawled on hands and knees. His hands sank into the muck up to the wrist, but he made no noise.

As he reached a point twenty yards or so farther into the muck, a figure loomed ahead, saw him.

"*Oberst Hauser?*" came the soft query.

"Ja," said Sternza. "*Ich bin Anton Hauser.*"

"Good, *Excellenz*. All is arranged. Kurt Ahlen is prepared. I arrived a few moments ago. Nothing has been left to chance. Your information makes it easy."

"Gut!" Sternza kept his head bent. "Follow the plan. I will talk to you later." He shrank back, and the darkness swallowed him....

On the edge of the marshy ground, Dale paused with the sentry. Ten minutes had passed. He called softly, "Barder!"

There was no reply. Then, "Grogan! Baldy!" he called.

A grunt came from the marshy land out there. Feet stumbled, and a man cursed. He cursed again, as he tripped, face-down, in the mud and picked himself up.

"It's me, Grogan," he said thickly, spitting mud. "He can't have got through, skipper. It's up to your waist back there along the old creek-line."

"Let it go," said Dale. "I'll tip Intelligence tomorrow. He can't get away. Where's Barder?" He watched Grogan wipe at the mud, smearing his face.

"I don't know. I didn't see him."

"Barder!" called Dale.

Two minutes passed, and the marshy blackness hid the kill, and all sound. Barry Dale swore. "What can have happened to him?" He raised his voice still louder.

"Barder! Barder!"

Out of the darkness came a short hail. "Coming!"

Dale sighed with relief. "By God, I was beginning to get worried." He came forward as the second dark shadow staggered and stumbled out of the quagmire. "Find anything?"

"Not a thing," replied Barder, panting. "It's a terrible place. He never could get through, skipper. It's impossible."

"Well, let it go. Change your clothes, Baldy, while I stand your trick. Get to bed, Barder. We've got to be on our toes tomorrow, with Foch coming."

They retreated toward the hillside, and Josef Sternza, listening in the marsh, nodded and smiled mirthlessly.

A MARSHAL of France, with gold stars pinned to the sleeves of his sky-blue tunic, does not usually travel without dignity or splendor. The *generalissimo* of all the Allied armies, commander of nine million soldiers, achieves regal display. But common sense sometimes abrogates this. So while Marshal Ferdinand Foch,

the tiny wizened man with the walrus mustache, arrived at Savigny in his private train—not as elaborate as Haig's, nor yet Pershing's or Nivelle's—he dropped his splendor there.

Wars are won by the generals who make the fewest mistakes, and the greatest mistake of all is to fail of the human touch. Napoleon was great because he remembered private soldiers' names. Ludendorff failed because he was an upstart impressed by his own importance. Foch became the idol of the world because he could take time out to place a flower on a *poilu's* grave, decorate with his own hand some soldier who had distinguished himself.

A man playing for the common touch does not surround himself with pomp. *Le grand* Marshal Foch arrived at the tarmac of the Squadron of the Dead accompanied by Weygand, his aid, a couple of *aides de camp*, and a plush box filled with gold and ivory medals of the *Legion d'Honneur*.

He was doing this because a publicity stunt was in demand. Propaganda, that dread weapon which does most to defeat an enemy, was being used. Today, on the broad fields in front of the camouflaged hillside hideout of the Death Squadron, a German, a Frenchman, an Englishman and a Russian were to be decorated. Other pilots of the Squadron of the Dead had done as much—perhaps even more—to win the war.

But the newsreels would record for a waiting world that these men, drawn even from the enemy ranks, had banded together in a strange organization devoted to the peace of the world. The films would show that Germany was a pariah even among her own intelligent people. The public relations men of the *Quai d'Orsay* were enthusiastic about making the Squadron of the Dead the most famous organization of fighting pilots in the world.

No censorship was needed, for they had done remarkable things. They had thrown the fear of God into the enemy air pilots; they had made people in Coblenz and German cities cower of nights, for fear of bombing. So, today, Marshal Foch would stand, in history and on the screen, beside these outcasts and honor them.

The ceremony was set for sharp noon, when the light would be best. Foch arrived at eleven forty-five. Skipper Barry Dale met him, and murmured a respectful French greeting. He knew

the political claptrap that animated the visit. But since it might help win the war, he could not object.

Marshal Foch looked out across the tarmac. Out from the subterranean hangars, the great Handley Pages had been wheeled. The clumsier Breguets, the tiny combat Spads, were aligned wing to wing. The anti-aircraft batteries were polished, and every soldier was in place. The mechanics had on their best coveralls. The Squadron of the Dead, to the last man—save Josef Sternza—were lined up stiffly, smart and swaggering in their uniforms of black with crimson piping.

They saluted their one commanding officer. It was an impressive scene, and none noticed the great pile of cumulus cloud drifting south on a north wind, to cast its shadow over the tarmac.

General Weygand bowed stiffly to Barry Dale. As a soldier, he looked askance at decorating men who worshipped no single flag. As a politician, he was there to do his duty.

"The marshal," he said, "must be at Vitry-le-Francois in forty minutes. Shall we proceed?"

"We are ready," Barry Dale nodded. His tawny eyes swept the field. A moment's pride lifted the corners of his patient mouth.

"Attention!" he called.

A sudden stillness, immobility, gripped the men. The movie cameramen arranged their cameras, eyes on the short, scrubby figure of the *generalissimo*. Dale took four steps, pivoted. "Present arms!" he yelled.

The guards thrust forward their Lebel's. The hands of the Squadron of the Dead flew to their caps. Marshal Foch, with Weygand at his elbow, holding the plush box, advanced until he stood six paces from the rigid line of outlaws.

"*Mes amis*," he cried. "*Je suis tres heureux aujourd'hui*—"

What he was happy about that day never appeared. Out of the cumulus cloud floating so dangerously low suddenly burst a concerted roar of jazzed motors. The sky rained planes as buckshot pours from the snout of a shotgun. They were vertically diving, with tracer stream pouring from their Spandaus even at six hundred feet.

One, two, three, four, five planes shot down, then four were diving wing to wing. They were Fokkers—triplanes, with green tails.

KURT AHLEN'S Greentails were splintering the sky with the howl of motors, the patter of machine-gun fire. The French captain of the anti-aircraft battery screamed, "*Feu!*" Soldiers raced madly, slammed home shells to the breeches, jerked the lanyards as men ground wheels round and around to make the snouts of the 75's track this falling hurricane.

But the guns did not slam. There were no firing pins to smash the detonators. They had been removed. The twenty-two triplanes of the first wave fell down the sky and there was nothing to oppose their attack.

In the center of that hot, sky-filled tornado rode Kurt Ahlen, head bared, eyes flashing, yelling, "*Hoch! Hoch!*" In his mind were the remembered words of *Oberst* Nicholai. "Strafe the tarmac, then land. No matter what happens, no matter who dies—kill Foch!"

Riding his rudder bar, peering down through the white whorl of his prop, he saw the solid lines of paraded soldiers break. He saw the small man in the blue uniform. He touched his rudder, tripped his guns, and watched the smoke tracer shoot lines of gray across the intervening space. Dust kicked, and a little line of bouncing dirt particles swept across the ground as if an invisible giant were drawing lines with an invisible pencil.

The planes rushed once across the tarmac, then twice. Then forty men were sent down, the rest to lie above as protection, while the hated members of the Squadron of the Dead were to be killed to the last man, and their planes and equipment burned.

Behind Ahlen came the bigger Albatrosses, Aviatiks, L.V.G.'s and Halberstadts. Sixty planes hid the sun from the earth, and the air was bedlam with the whirring of their wings. The clatter of machine-gun fire made a roaring song that battered men's ears.

Kurt Ahlen, his blond hair flying in the wind, was sweeping along the ground with his wheels touching, his Spandaus crackling. Fat Goblich was diving at the Handley Pages and casting, with his huge right hand, the flaming darts that would set them afire. Hell's hot doors opened and spewed out screaming death—death playing taps for a hundred men!

The ground puckered to a thousand bullets a second. Handley Pages burst into fire. Exploding gas tanks scattered flames a hundred yards. Hand bombs fell like the first great drops of a driving rainstorm, and red flashes leaped from where they hit. And over it all was the inhuman howl of motors hauling planes up for a swift turn and a new dive and new desolation.

Nicolai's trap, carefully loaded and aimed, was now being fired. Down below, among those neat lines of stiff men, hell's fire smashed with the detonation of a world's end. Barry Dale's right hand streaked to his belt and came away with a great blue automatic pistol.

"Down!" he yelled. "Down!"

The words were lost in the battering uproar. Yet men knew enough instinctively to scatter like a flock of grouse and fling themselves down to avoid the trickling patterns of bullets that whipsawed the ground.

Barry Dale flung himself at the small, grizzled marshal. Foch's eyes widened, not with fear. The next thing he knew, he went headlong backward under the terrific push of Barry Dale's hand. Dale flung himself across the marshal. His own body would shield the man upon whom the destinies of the Allies rested. Screaming imprecations, General Weygand hurled himself in an arc and crouched across the face and shoulders of the *generalissimo*.

The lines of the Squadron of the Dead pilots broke. Two men came toward Marshal Foch, guns in their hands. Their faces were contorted in a snarl, their eyes hot, and murder gleaming there. De Guerre and Bassley! What were they coming for? Their guns rose and aimed, and one slug dug the dirt beneath Dale's body. The second whipped a burn across his arm and tore the great star of the Commander of the *Legion d'Honneur* from Marshal Foch's breast. It rested a foot away, a torn and bent bit of silver and gold and blazing diamonds.

In the confusion of sound, the gun in Barry Dale's hand made no noise. A fine blue haze leaped twice from the snout, and the muzzle jerked to the kick of the exploding shell. De Guerre, a look of supreme astonishment on his face, dropped his gun. His hands pressed over his breast, and a trickle of crimson came through. Slowly he settled back on his heels, dropped on

his back, and with a slight, tired movement, rolled over on his side. His eyes still stared, as if astonished at what had happened.

The second slug struck Bassley across the face as he tried to dodge. The bridge of his nose vanished, and he whirled, clawing madly. The gun in his hand exploded with the convulsive jerking of his hands, until the trigger fell on empty shells. He ran straight ahead, and stopped, groping. He was blind.

SLIDING down a steep air-hill from above came a Fokker tripe with Kurt Ahlen at the controls. Ahead of the screaming ship raced a precise row of tracer bullets. They tore over the ground up to Bassley's feet, as he headed blindly into the stream. His right leg crumpled at the impact of a dozen slugs. As he fell the rest of the torrential drum of bullets beat into his prone body.

A grim expression tightened Dale's lips. Godlike retribution sometimes came, even in war.

He yelled, "The Spads—get to the ships. Fight them up there!"

To the marshal and Weygand, he screamed, "Pretend death. *Tranquille!*"

In that precise second, the German squadrons were zooming up the sky to make one last sweep before the landing party came in to tear hell loose. A moment of startling quiet came after the furious uproar. The Squadron of the Dead pilots raced toward the waiting line of ships, planes warmed and inspected for the marshal's pleasure. Propellers began to turn over. There was a new motor drone—Hisso drone.

One ship wheeled out and came down the field toward them. It was not a Spad. It was a Breguet two-seater. It came to a stop, and a man, hatless and without goggles, leaped out. He was plastered with mud from the top of his head to his shoeless feet. Josef Sternza!

His pale gray eyes gleamed, and his hawk-like face was flushed. Swiftly, he bent over Barry Dale. The latter's gun muzzle dug into his stomach, but Sternza paid it no attention.

"They'll land—next time," he yelled. "You can't hold them. The only chance—" He gestured toward the rear cockpit of the Breguet, and pointed with his eyes toward the prone, miraculously calm Marshal Foch.



For an instant, Barry Dale stiffened. The trigger was pulled on his weapon; only his thumb pressing against the knurled lip of the hammer kept it from descending. His eyes probed deep—eyes that had seen the Chluh in Morocco; that had seen revolution in Honduras—eyes that weighed men in the balance of a second's regard.

Suddenly he drew himself to one side. The air tornado of Germans was returning. Already the first battering smash of bullets was sweeping the far end of the field. Dale grabbed the marshal, jerked rather than helped him to his feet.

"*Ascendez, marshal!*" he yelled. "*Les Boches, ils—*"

Marshal Foch caught the significance at once. Fearless, a man who weighed chances in a second, he nodded. Awkwardly—for he was a small and an old man—he climbed into the rear cockpit. Dale never waited to see the take-off. Two *poilus* were fumbling frantically with a Hotchkiss machine gun in which an aluminum feeder had jammed. He raced to them and seized the gun.

A second later, he saw another Hun ship go by him. He fired swiftly at the pilot, but was not certain whether he had hit him. Josef Sternza sprang into the cockpit. Before he could open the throttle, a figure in black uniform with red piping raced to him. A gun was extended. A face malevolent with murderous rage twisted up at him.

"No, you fool!" yelled Sternza in German. "I'm taking him away. You made a mistake. Hauser's orders!"

He pushed the gun snout downward and, in bringing back his hand, knocked the throttle open. The Breguet howled and began to move. Sliding overhead came the first planes of the new strafe. They raced in, low-flying, guns battering, shadows slipping along the ground like a shark's on the bottom of a sandy, shallow inlet. A blast of bullets, a blizzard of them, tore the wings of the Breguet and fanned the air around their heads. Then the Breguet was shooting up the field, tail up, going against the onrush of Germans, bathed in bullets, yet not vitally hit.

It swung up over the camouflage netting in a fast, climbing turn. Josef Sternza laughed mirthlessly, as he whipped the ship around and headed north toward the German lines.

TOM BARDER leaped, cursing, at Barry Dale. "You damned traitor!" he yelled. "You delivered the marshal to a spy."

"Drop that gun," snapped Dale, "or I'll tunnel you for a carline."

Barder's reply was to smash at Dale's forehead with the muzzle of his gun. He ran to a Spad ticking on the line, his own Spad. He leaped into the cockpit, and before he had settled on the cushions, the ship was moving. As he whipped into the wind, the last of the German hurricane had swept the field. The Halberstadts and Albatrosses had landed. Men carrying light Parabellum machine guns, men carrying incendiary bombs, and men carrying pistols and Mauser carbines leaped out and charged down the field.

"Kill Foch!" came the roar. "Death to the *Jagdstaffel* of the Skull!"

Their barrage swept an already shattered field. But this time there was an answer. Hotchkiss machine guns, commanded by Barry Dale, were hosing the far end of the field with steel. Germans began to drop, but it did not slow up the advance. On they came, like a human steam roller, crushing all in their path.

Josef Sternza picked up two thousand feet of altitude and turned his propeller into a cloud. He put the cloud between him and the charnel house below. He had the prize of this show, and he would hold him, yes, even if the very sky fell in.

He looked below, after emerging again into the sun. Shooting across the upholstered whiteness of the cloud, wheeling around in a tight climbing spiral, a Spad tore for him. It climbed two feet to his one and angled upward fiercely to head him off, stop his retreat.

A few fleeting tracer slugs flicked across the sky as Barder warmed his guns. He went up in a long, shooting zoom that brought his guns to bear on the Breguet's underside and sent slugs boiling through the thin wood plates of her keel.

Josef Sternza was the Polish Flash. No man had ever questioned his bravery or his cunning. What man could do with flying wires and fabric he had done—and more. He was flying a two-seater that was built for reconnaissance rather than for stunting, but stunt he did. A shooting zoom, a half-roll, left the crate riding on her back with gasoline spurting out of the vent hole, and another

half-roll that brought the crate right-side-up, and nosed it into the tail of the Spad. His guns spoke briefly. The cupro-nickel bullets stitched a seam up Barder's fuselage, but they never reached the pilot.

Barder faded to the right in a fast slip, and left the slugs boring holes through empty air. Yet his very maneuver twisted him, drove him back to where hell roared unleashed on the Squadron of the Dead's tarmac. He couldn't turn, for to pause long enough for that meant that the close-pressing Breguet had him. He nosed down until his landing wheels buried themselves in the cloud. He tore upward in a screaming zoom that threw him over on his back. With a lightning renversement, he came tearing back, catching the Breguet under his guns.

Sternza laughed, although the sound never rose above the fury of his motor roar. The Spad howled behind him, coming down at two hundred an hour. Sternza saw the first lick of tracer fire around his motor. The stick came back in his lap, and his feet kicked the rudder bar. Up the sky, struggling like some heavily weighted bird, the Breguet roared in a chandelle, never reaching the stall-point. It fell off, and Barder, looking back, saw the ambling old crate straighten out, then as Barder turned, he felt gun spray. Something tapped violently at his back. Something burned across his leg, his neck. The sky suddenly became a whirling blur of white and blue to him.

STERNZA saw the Spad falter and sway. Swiftly, he fell off in a wing-slip, nosed over and dived into the cloud. He stayed within its gloomy, gray mists for fifteen minutes. When he emerged, the Spad was nowhere to be seen.

Off his right trailing edge, the tarmac of the Squadron of the Dead lay bare. Small, motionless dots marred its surface. Men were still running around, a few toward the crumpled heap of an airplane crash. The Germans had gone. At least there was no more fighting, and those Halberstadts and Albatrosses at the lower end of the field were not flying because their pilots were dead.

Josef Sternza turned around and smiled at Marshal Foch. The latter's mouth quivered. His eyes, set deep in wrinkles, squinted. He nodded

toward the field, and Sternza set the ship down three-point. The jar wouldn't have broken an egg.

"*Mon Marechal*," he said in French, "permit me to help you alight."

"*Merci bien*," murmured the *generalissimo*. "I have much to thank you for, *mon ami*."

General Weygand, with a shallow wound along his cheek, raced to the marshal. The anti-aircraft battery soldiers made an immediate cordon, and in that fashion they walked across the field to where Barry Dale and the survivors of the Squadron of the Dead had gathered.

Nearby was the crash of a Spad combat crate. Beside the broken plane lay a man whose leg was obviously broken, and who leaked blood from minor wounds.

He was screaming, "The noise! My God, stop the noise! It's driving me mad." He trembled violently,

Sternza smiled gravely and pointed. "Anton Hauser!" he said.

"Yes," said Dale, shaking his hand to throw drops of crimson in a circle. "The spy!"

"There were others," said Sternza. "Nicolai does not do things by halves."

"The report, *mon commandant*," ordered Marshal Foch crisply. "What does this all mean?"

"*Monsieur*," said Dale, "a full report will come later. Now, I must guess at part of it. This I do know. A young American pilot named Tom Barder was ganged over the German lines and shot down. German spies must have had his photograph, for he apparently was singled out for death. He came back, presumably, to our lines. It was not he. It was Anton Hauser, ace agent of Wilhelmstrasse."

"Yes, and the purpose?"

"To destroy you and the Squadron of the Dead," said Dale. "It was a mammoth plan. Hauser was to get into the squadron and arrange to get other agents in. The Germans had photographs of some of our members. They were stolen in a special raid. The photographs were of De Guerre, Bassley, Baldy Grogan and one other, which apparently wasn't used. Cotton was put in the gas line of Bassley's and De Guerre's planes by Hauser here."

His face grew grim and relentless. "Poor devils! I suppose they were hanged. Let us hope

they died shooting it out. Two German agents came back disguised as Bassley and De Guerre.”

“*Extraordinaire!*” murmured Foch, listening intently.

“Last-word instructions apparently had to be sent. The man to take Baldy Grogan’s place was dropped from a parachute. He murdered Grogan in the marshes. We’ll find his body presently. With these agents and the massed air force of the Germans on this front, the time was set to strike when you came here to honor our squadron.”

He paused. “Some of this. I know. Some is guessing. The rest we’ll never know—unless that hysterical fool there—” he pointed at the moaning Anton Hauser—“will talk before he hangs.”

The word struck through the hysterical brain of Anton Hauser. “Hang!” he screamed. “I am a spy. I can at least be shot.”

“You are a murderer and you’ll hang—here,” said Dale grimly.

Anton Hauser mouthed an incoherent protest and fell over in a dead faint.

JOSEF STERNZA had listened quietly while the story was pieced together. Now, he said, “Captain Dale, how much of this did you know yesterday?”

“Not a bit of it. I didn’t know anything, but I suspected that the real Tom Barder was dead. And I didn’t know that until last night. I went to the Ninety-second Squadron to learn some facts.”

“Why did you trust me, then?” asked Sternza.

Dale shrugged. “A hunch, I guess.”

“Commandant” snapped Marshal Foch. “I am thirty minutes late. I have a duty here to perform. Pray, then, let us perform it at once.”

Dale looked startled and then grinned. The cool little marshal, the past forgotten in the pressure of the present, nodded at Weygand, who picked up from the ground the plush box that had fallen there.

Sixteen survivors of the Squadron of the Dead lined up. Twelve more would never hear reveille again. They cursed among themselves at this delay and cast longing glances at the remaining planes. Thoughts of retaliation for this blow made them impatient.

Marshal Foch said, “I have only four decorations here. Please take the names of the rest

of these men, and send them to me in a citation. I personally will see they are decorated.”

Thereupon he turned and began again, “*Mes amis, je suis tres heureux aujourd-’hui—*” and he spoke the words of the citation. Clearly, he called the names.

“Josef Sternza!”

The tall, dark Pole, pale eyes flashing, head thrown back, advanced three paces. He held himself very stiffly, rigidly. Into the black tunic, Marshal Foch thrust the pin of the decoration.

“France thanks you, *mon ami*,” said the marshal. “I thank you. Someday, if you need my friendship, you have only to ask for it.”

Josef Sternza gave a German salute, but none noticed it. He stepped back, mouth still lifted in the queer smile. His step was not smart. He seemed to sag. Yet he stood there straight enough until the other three men had received their awards of gold and ivory. He stayed there until the salute had been given, until Marshal Foch had entered the car that was to take him to the special train.

Then Dale happened to turn, and saw the tall Pole sag.

“You’re hit!” he exclaimed.

Sternza put a hand on Dale’s shoulder. He smiled. “A little worse than that, I should say.” His face was deathly pale, now, his eyes set in their stare. The *Legion d’Honneur* still hung unpinned. He jerked it loose, gave it to Dale.

“A present from me,” he muttered.

“But the marshal—he gave it to you for saving his life.”

Josef Sternza laughed once more. His voice stuttered in his throat. “He will save Poland—make Poland a great state. That is all that counts. *A bientot!*”

When the doctor whom Dale summoned arrived, Josef Sternza had been dead a full minute. Curiously the doctor examined the wound.

“Good God,” he broke out. “Just under the heart. An ordinary man would have died almost instantly.”

Dale stared down at the face, still as an eagle’s, even in death. “Yes—an ordinary man would have,” he murmured.