

The Suicide Strafe

By Major George Fielding Eliot

Those four victories to his credit meant nothing to Bob Sexton—now. At last he had gotten Gerhardt, the invincible German ace—had sent his famous Red-Wing plane crashing down to a fiery doom. Yet that fifth victory—the descendu that made him an ace—was the only one he could never claim.

BOB SEXTON concentrated all his powers of air-vision on the little fleck of scarlet far ahead in the evening sky. Far ahead—and well below the eight-thousand-foot level at which Sexton and his companion, Bill Dorn, were flying.

If it were indeed the German ace, Gerhardt, and his famous Red-Wing monoplane, then, for the first time Sexton had ever heard of, the great Boche flyer had been caught at a disadvantage.

Sexton's heart leaped at the idea. He had four victories to his credit—not a bad record for the short time he'd been flying at the Front—but to get Gerhardt would be an accolade beyond all price, realization of the fond dream of every Yank *chasse* pilot in the sector, and it would make him an ace.

His Nieuport was humming with increased speed. Looking back, he saw Dorn sticking close to his tail. He nodded with satisfaction. Dorn was a vain young flyer, likely to be undependable in pinches because of his erratic habits of mind. He had no Boche scalps at his belt, as yet, no victories to boast of to the ma'm'selles who admired his handsome face, and this fact was a rankling source of grief to him. If only he didn't go haywire now! Sexton would need him to back up his attack; perhaps it would be Dorn's fate to get Gerhardt as the German tried to avoid Sexton's dive. But he must be there, in his proper place, to make deadly sure that the German ace should not escape. That was what mattered to Sexton.

The fleck of scarlet upon which Sexton's attention was riveted flashed brighter in the dying sunlight—and he was sure. He could not mistake the shape of those wings as the plane banked. It was Gerhardt's Red-Wing.

Waving to Dorn to follow. Sexton changed direction and steered a course which, while slowly

losing altitude, would put him in a position for a quick dive on Gerhardt's tail.

His heart was hammering at his chest wall like a trip-hammer, but his hand was steady on the stick, and his eye never left his quarry.

Gerhardt cruised slowly along, apparently quite off his guard, all unconscious of the eager death that swooped above him.

But if the German ace had forgotten caution for once in his wary life, the German anti-aircraft gunners on the ground were more alert. They saw his danger, and they did their best to warn him.

Sexton's Nieuport jerked suddenly at the air-cushioned impact of a close burst. A black chunk of smoke drifted off on the slight breeze.

The hoarse cough of other bursting shells followed in quick succession. The battery was firing rapidly, taking quick aim, more anxious to warn Gerhardt than to hit the Yank planes. But the air trembled with the detonations of the shells all round the two Nieuports; the sky was full of drifting balls of black smoke, and others were constantly arriving, born of the pale, deadly flame of high-explosive at their hearts.

Sexton, like many pilots, had acquired an utter disregard for the futile menace of Archie fire. Not so, he knew, with Dorn. Shell-fire was the one thing Dorn could not stand. His high-strung nerves went all to pieces when he was subjected to it. The initial terror which all fledgling airmen feel of the A.A. shells had not died in him, as familiarity bred contempt. So Sexton looked anxiously back over his shoulder—and swore aloud as he saw Dorn zooming up and away.

By this time, of course, Gerhardt had come out of his dream and had spotted the American planes. But seeing only two enemies, and they far apart, the Boche decided, with the magnificent audacity which was his most pronounced characteristic, to attack. Up he came, gallantly enough, while the

disgusted Sexton, cheated by the alert artillery of his surprise, and by his panicky partner of superiority in numbers, swung away to meet maneuver with maneuver, trying for an attack from the side and hoping now for nothing better than to hold Gerhardt in play until Dorn recovered from his jitters and came down to take his part in the scrap.

SINCE the Archie fire had slackened as the German plane approached Sexton's, Sexton had some hope that Dorn would chip in. Knowing that the German's far greater experience gave him a considerable advantage in combat. Sexton nevertheless drove in to attack without an instant's hesitation. Twice the red plane avoided his tracer streams by last-minute dodges; then, by a quick side-loop, Gerhardt gained the upper position, and Sexton saw flaming bullets ripping through his own wing fabric not more than inches from his cockpit.

He banked away, letting the German dive past him, and came down on Gerhardt's tail. But the wily Boche increased the angle of his dive and went earthward, nose down, at a terrific rate—well aware of the weakness of Nieuport wings, confident that Sexton would not dare follow him at such speed.

Sexton saw Dorn diving at an angle which would intercept the German's dive, and he knew why Gerhardt was trying to get away. Dorn's tracer flickered below him—flickered and missed. The red wings fell on, untouched.

Sexton slammed his stick forward and let the Nieuport go. The wind of his fall screamed in his wires. Unheeding, jaw set like a rock, he whirled down upon Gerhardt, who now was just pulling his ship out of the long dive. Too late he looked up and saw Sexton; too late he swerved.

Sexton's eye saw Gerhardt's startled face in the center of his ring sight; his thumb closed on his trigger-button, he saw that face dissolve in a welter of splattered blood. The Red-Wing plane whipped over and plunged down in a dive from which there was no hand to bring it out. A dead ace rode in the cockpit to an airman's finish.

Sexton was tugging now at his own stick, holding his rudder amidships. The Nieuport bucked like a spurred bronco, fighting the bumpy air, but her nose came up. Sexton was drawing in

a long breath of relief and triumph when he heard a terrific ripping sound. The Nieuport staggered and sideslipped sickeningly.

One glance to the left was enough. The fabric was tearing itself from the upper wing in long strips. That fast dive had done its work.

As Sexton looked, a row of holes appeared in the lower wing. He realized that he was but fifteen hundred feet above the ground—German ground, into which a famous German ace had just smashed—and was burning, over there where the smoke crawled skyward in black funereal spirals. The German machine-gunners were bent on vengeance.

Sexton, nursing his ship along, tried to gain a little more altitude. A rip from the crippled wing was the result. He increased speed. The wing ripped more.

"Guess I'll just have to rock along here and take it," he told himself grimly.

He was flying the Nieuport heavily over on the right wing, taking all the strain he could off the damaged one. Machine-gun bullets chipped his struts, tore through his tail-assembly, filled the air with ominous whisperings of death. It was growing a little darker. In that there was hope. Sexton held his course, and prayed that the ship would hold together until he'd crossed the lines. He didn't bother looking around for Dorn. Dorn had failed him when he was needed; he could be of no service now.

Expecting every minute to feel those merciless bullets smashing into his body, Sexton held on. He could see the lines; they were not far ahead. American shells were bursting on the earth beneath him. The machine-gun fire was slackening. This chance intervention might save him. He was lucky. He thought of the polite note of thanks he ought to address to the American artillery commander who was thus, all unknowingly, giving a chance to a homing bird.

Now he saw, dimly in the gathering dusk, the front-line bands of opposing wire and the desolate shell-pocked stretch of No-Man's-Land between.

A little more, and he'd be safe. The fabric was still tearing from the weakened wing, whipping out behind in long streamers; but the lower wing was holding, and the plane was flying. And even if it were losing altitude, rather than gaining.

Sexton began to believe he had enough margin to win clear through to his own drome.

He drew a deep breath of heartfelt relief as he saw the American lines beneath him at last.

EVENING settled darker; lower and lower sank the Nieuport, slipping downward a yard at a time. Hedgehopping home on one wing is a task to try the stoutest nerves, the steadiest hand. Sexton had both the nerves and the hand. And he was sustained by a triumphant beat of exultation in his young veins, a hot and heady wine of victory that intoxicated him, even while the crippled Nieuport shuddered beneath him, threatening to fall to pieces with every passing minute of additional strain.

He'd downed Gerhardt! What did he care for stripped wings and failing motors? His was the victory! He thought of the roaring mess-shack that night while his squadron drank to his health, with himself standing on the table. He was neither vainglorious nor selfish, but he would not have been human had he not looked forward to the reward of his success, the reward far dearer to his heart than the medal a grateful government would give him—the acclaim of his comrades. That was worth any pain, any labor, any risk.

He looked down at the dark earth. Alarming close it seemed. His altimeter had dropped to five hundred feet.

"I'd better hit a good road and try taxiing in," he told himself. "I'll be doing it, too, if this damn sideslip can't be checked."

But he couldn't. He couldn't fly at any easier angle; he couldn't rise; he couldn't speed up. The Nieuport would fly the way it was, or not at all.

"I'll either just make, or just miss," was Sexton's calculation.

He'd have tried an emergency landing if he could have seen the ground clearly enough. Not being able to, he decided his own drome was the best bet. The plane labored on.

Sexton gasped suddenly, choking on a breath that seemed to sear his lungs. There was a sweetish odor in the air. His eyes burned, began to water. Gas! He was passing through a German gas concentration, laid behind the American lines during the fighting of the day. He was low enough to get, not the full benefit of the poisonous vapors, but a serious dose.

He tried not to breathe, tried to fly with eyes shut. His lungs were torturing him, and he reeled in the seat, as the plane flopped helplessly.

This wouldn't do. He collected stick and rudder, driving his muscles to their duty by sheer will power. But he couldn't help breathing again.

Luckily by this time he was almost out of the gas, or that breath might have been his last. As it was, he seemed to be breathing in distilled flame. Blinded by tears, choked and gasping from the noxious fumes, he flew more by instinct than by conscious effort.

Presently, as his vision cleared a little, he saw, as he dashed water from his eyes, a rounded lump looming in the darkness ahead. It was a hangar. His undercarriage just cleared the roof of it. He cut off his motor and eased the Nieuport downward.

He knew something was wrong—couldn't think what it was. He must land, must get down somehow.

His right wing tip hit the ground. The plane pitched forward, hit with terrific force, nosed over. Sexton's safety-belt broke, and he was flung out on his own tarmac with a violence that drove every ounce of breath from his body.

He lay there, fighting for air, suffering the torments of the damned, dimly aware of another plane roaring down, cutting off for a landing, smacking the tarmac neatly in a three-pointer. That must be Dorn.

They were shouting, over by the hangars. Men were coming on the run. He could hear the thud of their feet on the hard ground.

He sat up. His inflamed eyes peered through the half-darkness, saw dimly the form of a man—another. A face swam before his vision—the concerned, sober face of his squadron commander, Major Bassett. And there was Bill Dorn, looking rather scared. Afraid Sexton would report him, maybe.

Sexton tried to tell his great news. But from his gas-seared throat there came only a hoarse squawk, of which but a single word was plain: "Gerhardt!"

His hand went out in a helpless gesture, pointing at Dorn. Dorn would tell them what had happened.

Sexton's eyelids closed over eyes that could bear the effort of vision no longer. He felt himself

slumping, felt as though the solid earth were melting away. He was sinking into a bottomless black void. The void closed round him.

IT was a full month later that Bob Sexton walked slowly down the steps of a base hospital far behind the fighting lines, with his orders for “back to duty” in his pocket.

He was taking things easily. It was a fine, bright sunny day, with the tang of autumn in the air; and he had freedom from hospital routine, from fussy doctors, from pain. It was good to see again, too. They’d kept his eyes bandaged so long.

He reveled in the delights of sun and air like a young eagle freed from his cage, looking up into the blue sky. To fly again! That would be good!

He glanced at his watch, quickened his step a little. Wouldn’t do to miss his train. He wanted to get back to the squadron, to his pals, his ship—and the delayed celebration of the Gerhardt victory.

He’d had no news from the outfit. War flyers have little time to write letters, and the hospital was too far from the Front to enable the gang to visit him. It didn’t matter—he’d soon be back.

He reached the station, presented his transportation order, passed on to the platform.

“Hi, Bob!” A young pilot came running toward him, musette bag flopping awkwardly on one hip. He beamed. This was luck. It was Owens, of his own squadron.

Their hands met, and they grinned at each other in great delight. Then Owens began talking.

“On your way to the drome again, hey, Bob? Swell stuff! We need you. I’ve just had four days in Nice. What a leave, boy, what a leave! Now it’s back to the grind, and more guff from that ass Dorn. The major made him leader of B Flight for downing Gerhardt, and his head’s swelled up bigger’n a Drachen.”

“What?”

“Sure’s you’re a foot high, feller. Chesty Dorn’s a flight leader, complete with D.S.C. and inflated ego. Dunno how he ever nailed a smart guy like Gerhardt. But what the hell. Bob, that’s war! How did he do it, anyhow? You were there. Give us the lowdown.”

While words were still choking each other for utterance in Sexton’s congested throat, the warning shout of the conductor gave him respite.

“En voiture! En voiture, messieurs!”

He and Owens jammed their way into a crowded compartment, found seats together.

“Confirmations came through all right on Dorn’s victory, eh?” he asked in a dry voice as the train began to move.

“Yeah. Only at first we all thought it was you got the Hun,” Owens grinned. “You were both out there, you know. It wasn’t until you told the major yourself that Dorn did the job that we knew who to crown with laurel and what-have-you.”

“I—told the major—that?” Sexton stared in stupefied astonishment at his garrulous comrade.

“Sure. I was there. Heard you myself. Sorta down-and-out, you were, what with the gas and your crack-up, but you gobbled out ‘Gerhardt’ and pointed at Dorn, like you were afraid he couldn’t sound his own horn loud enough. He was real overcome and modest about it all at first, but he soon swelled up to his usual pouter-pigeon stuff. Yeah.”

Sexton looked, out of the window at the fields of France flashing by at the startling rate of twenty miles an hour. He saw now—everything. The major had made a natural mistake, and Dorn had taken advantage of it. Hadn’t been able to resist the temptation to be a hero. Maybe he figured Sexton was done for, would never live to contest his claim.

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” Owens was saying, “if it weren’t for the illustrated papers back home publishing Dorn’s picture all over hell’s half-acre and calling him America’s peerless hero of the air, and the fan letters he gets from girls and kids and God knows who, full of mush and wind. He’s the idol of every air-minded brat from Maine to California by this time. They’re even talking about sending him home as an instructor, for inspirational purposes. Can you beat that? Chesty Dorn—inspiration of the youth of America!” Owens made an impolite sound.

“Not so hot,” said Sexton.

But he had seen his duty, as he conceived it, had taken his decision. It was around such “idols” and such “inspirations” that the war-spirit, the driving spirit which was carrying America through this great struggle, upward and onward to victory, was crystallizing.

Dorn might not be a worthy hero. But the point was, the folks back home thought so. For Sexton

to come out now and contest the Gerhardt victory would only make a nasty mess. He had no proof save his unsupported word against Dorn's, and Dorn would lie—lie with fluency and vigor—to save the false throne he had built for himself. He had doubtless spent a good deal of time since he'd heard, as he must have, that Sexton was recovering, planning his story, bolstering it up with this detail and that. For Sexton to put in his bid for glory would, even if he were believed, only cover a shining figure with mud, and Sexton himself would not be able to take the place of that figure in the popular imagination. Over his claim must always hang the shadow of an ugly doubt.

Sexton shrugged. "I hope," he said rather wearily, "that I don't get assigned to B Flight. I don't think I'd enjoy flying under Dorn."

It was a hope which was doomed to early disappointment.

MAJOR BASSETT received Sexton with open delight.

"Just the lad I need," he cried slapping Sexton on the back. "I'm going to put you in B Flight. Dorn needs a steady flyer for deputy flight-leader. Just the spot for you, Sexton."

Sexton opened his mouth in protest, thought better of it, said, "Yes, sir," without enthusiasm. After all, it was his job to do what he was told. And the major evidently thought Dorn required steadying.

Several pilots came into the office to greet him while he was still talking to the major. Last of all came Dorn.

Dorn was rather white of face and notably defiant of manner; but when he gathered from the major's expression that Sexton had not made any revelations, he greeted Sexton with overdone effusion.

At mess that night, Sexton found Dorn's dark eyes upon him several times, and they were filled with troubled questions. Once he permitted his own gaze to drop to the D.S.C. ribbon on Dorn's chest, while a sardonic smile played about the corners of his own mouth. Dorn winced visibly. He was worried. He couldn't understand Sexton's attitude. And if he had been able to look into Sexton's heart, to see the motives which kept Sexton's mouth shut, he still wouldn't have been able to understand.

That week, B Flight had the early patrol. Early next morning, Dorn led out four pilots besides himself, Sexton flying at the rear in the deputy leader's position. It was a routine patrol over ground well known to Sexton.

The troubles and worries of earth seemed to drop away as his Nieuport rose up and up into the brisk morning air. Sexton was a true flyer, never so happy as when in the air. Let Dorn have the glory. Sexton could fly and be happy and forget everything else in the sheer delight of flying.

The patrol was flying high that morning. Orders were to cross the lines at ten thousand feet, watching especially for German camera ships which were reported to be coming over for early shots of the new American trenches.

As the altimeter needle quivered past eight thousand. Sexton began to find difficulty in breathing. It took an unusual amount of effort to handle the controls. Funny! He hadn't thought even a long spell in hospital would leave his stout muscles as weak as all that.

At nine thousand feet, he was actually gasping for breath. Spots danced before his eyes, and he could scarcely see his instruments. The patrol seemed to be drawing away from him. He had a vague glimpse of other planes far ahead—maybe Germans. He kept driving the Nieuport upward.

His head was bursting with terrific pressure, as though caught in a giant vise. His lungs labored in vain for air, the hammering of his heart shook his body. The world was black. He could no longer see.

Putting his stick forward, he set his teeth and hung on. The Nieuport swooped down, down....

Gradually the awful pressure relaxed, and vision came back. Sexton drew in long, painful breaths of air. His lungs began to function, though the pain in his chest was still intense. At five thousand feet, he was breathing almost normally.

The patrol was nowhere in sight up there in the gray morning, but Sexton carried on over the required patrol route alone, between four and five thousand feet up.

And while he flew, he thought—bitter, terrible thoughts. It was plain to him what happened. The gas had affected his lungs, perhaps permanently. He could no longer breathe at the high altitudes which a war pilot must attain. He was through—through.

No! He hammered a violent fist on the padded coaming of his cockpit. He wouldn't admit it, yet. He'd try it again. Perhaps tomorrow morning things would be better. The first strain was over. Yes, that was it. He'd be all right.

HE headed back for the drome, arriving there about the same time that the rest of the gang came in.

Dorn walked up to him at once. "What happened to you, Sexton?" he asked gruffly. "How come you pulled out of the formation just as we sighted Boche?"

"Engine trouble," Sexton snapped, reddening at the thinly disguised insinuation.

"Oh, I see," said Dorn with a peculiar smile. He hesitated—seemed about to say something else, then shrugged and turned away.

He walked off with a little swagger, as though trying to tell himself what hot stuff he was. Yet Sexton had seen the fear and the naked shame in his eyes, far back.

He knew that he himself must still be white and shaken from the experience he had gone through. Had Dorn guessed the truth? And did Dorn mean to use his knowledge to get rid of a man whose mere presence in the squadron must be, to him, at once a constant threat, and a constant reminder of his own treachery?

The following morning the patrol had the same orders. Dorn, speaking to the assembled pilots as they gulped their coffee, announced a variation of his own.

"Let's try a new stunt, fellows," he said. "Let's climb right up to fifteen thousand and go over so high that the camera buses can't spot us. Then, as it gets lighter, we'll drop down on 'em like a bolt from the blue. They got away from us yesterday. We'll get 'em today. What d'you think of the idea. Sexton?"

Dorn was not smiling as he looked at Sexton; his expression was rather one of hope—hope, perhaps that Sexton would quit.

"Sounds all right to me," replied Sexton promptly, setting down his empty cup. "Let's go."

He managed to keep a poker face until he was in his plane—but fear clutched at his heart with icy fingers.

As he passed the five-thousand-foot level, he found himself trembling violently, waiting for the

first gasp that would warn him that things were, after all, no better—that his curse was an abiding one.

At eight thousand it came—the same shortness of breath, the same sense of pressure about the head, the same heavy-handedness and lassitude. It came, and increased as the needle crawled slowly around the dial of the altimeter. Sexton tried to fight it off, tried to tell himself that it wasn't as bad as yesterday. But all the time he knew. It was worse, if anything.

He made a game fight. He stuck to his controls till a great numbness overcame him, till sight was blotted out and the world was a great red ball of agony and the stick slipped from relaxing fingers which would no longer answer the commands of his relentless will.

He came to himself with a terrible wind beating at his face, found himself—true to an airman's instinct—tugging feebly at the stick even before he had regained his senses. The ship was spinning earthward in a crazy, screaming whirl. The altimeter was dropping back from three thousand to twenty-eight hundred as his dull eye fixed itself first of all on that inexorable dial. He had fallen a good seven thousand feet.

Somehow he managed to bring the Nieuport out of the spin, to sane and level flight.

Despair abode in his soul. There was no use.

He went home, turned in his ship to the mechanics. Soon the major's orderly knocked at his door.

"C.O. wants to see you in his office, sir."

DORN was standing by the major's desk as Sexton came in. His handsome face was set in an expression of judicial disapproval. And yet—the shame was still there.

The major looked at Sexton gravely. "Lieutenant Dorn reports," he said, "that on two successive mornings you have left the formation just before encountering enemy aircraft. Yesterday morning, he tells me, you reported engine trouble, which the mechanics were unable to find. I'd like to hear what you have to say."

Sexton would have died on the spot rather than admit, in Dorn's presence, the weakness which beset him—rather than speak the words which, he knew, would doom him never to fly a war plane again.

"I was taken suddenly ill, sir," he asserted, truthfully enough.

The major nodded. He looked a little less grave. The taut lines in his face relaxed.

"I thought it might be something like that," he answered. "You young fellows will never learn. You probably badgered the poor medico in that hospital morning, noon and night until he certified you fit for duty. You had a tough dose of gas, Sexton. You should have given yourself time to recover from it properly. Report to the medical officer, have him look you over, and take it easy for a while. There's a war on, of course, but don't overdo things. We can't afford to lose you."

"I've heard of cases where flyers who cracked up lost their nerve and were never any good afterward—when there were German planes in sight, sir," put in Dorn.

The major turned slowly around and looked at the flight leader. He said nothing, but his look was filled with meaning.

Dorn began to stammer apologies, muttering that he didn't mean to insinuate that anything like that had happened to Sexton. He was just making a remark.

Sexton thanked the major, went out and marched himself to the infirmary. He told the doctor nothing about shortness of breath at high altitudes; he complained of his stomach. He got a dose of medicine and some excellent advice on the subject of giving up alcoholic stimulant.

His next port of call was the *estaminet* in the nearby village, where he showed his high regard for medical service by drinking four double cognacs neat. Thereafter, on a wave of false elation he returned to the drome, highly confident of his ability to fly as high as the stars.

Near his quarters he encountered Dorn.

"We're going to pull the same stunt tomorrow," Dorn informed him. "Up to fifteen thousand and over at that level. You'll be with us?"

"I'll be with you, Dorn," replied Sexton. "And if you think I've lost my nerve, you four-flusher, just step out behind that hangar and take off your coat."

Dorn laughed nastily. "Why should I bother?" he inquired. "You won't be around here long, anyway." He walked away, his laughter a derisive trail behind him.

Dorn knew. That was certain. He'd penetrated Sexton's secret, and he meant to use his knowledge—not straightforwardly, by reporting Sexton's condition to the major, but crookedly, as his mind worked, making out a case of loss of nerve. Cowardice, to call the thing by its plain and ugly name.

THE rest of that week was plain hell for Sexton. Three times he went up with patrols led by Dorn; three times his treacherous lungs betrayed him, and he had to leave the formation. He was not called before the major again, though the adjutant told him that Dorn so reported his conduct as to make it appear that he left each time just as enemy ships appeared. The other pilots began to look at him queerly. Conversations were abruptly stopped and changed to a key of false heartiness when he approached. He could read the pity, and the contempt, in their young eyes. They thought him a coward.

He could have given in; he could have gone to the major and told him the truth. But a fierce pride upheld him, made him keep on striving for what, he knew now, was the unattainable.

At last, one night when he was alone in his cabin, the adjutant came in, very solemn and ill at ease.

"Bob," said he, "I oughtn't to tell you. But—damn it all, I don't know what's wrong with you, but I know you're not yellow. That stuffed shirt of a Dorn has filed formal charges against you for cowardice in the face of the enemy. The major can't just lay 'em aside. He's got to act on 'em. I thought you ought to know."

Sexton was cold all over. He sat and stared at the adjutant for a long moment.

Then, "Thanks, Jim," he said briefly. The adjutant started to say something else, looked at Sexton's face, swore angrily and stamped out, slamming the door behind him.

Cowardice in the face of the enemy.

Sexton spent a sleepless night, tossing on his hard bunk. In the morning he reported for patrol as usual.

To his surprise, the major was in the mess-room when he went in for his coffee.

"New job for you, gentlemen," the C.O. announced when all the pilots of B Flight were present. "G.H.Q. has been making a study of

German ground-strafting methods. The 99th Division is putting on a small attack in the Bonneville sector this morning. This is the place. His finger stabbed at a wall-map. The Germans will counter-attack, of course, as they always do. You gentlemen will deal with their counter-attacking infantry as they cross the open space between their reserve line, here, and their new switch line, which is incomplete at this point. Take an extra belt of ammunition. The armorer has some light fragmentation bombs ready, of which you will take six each. You will use the emergency field at Flanchette, here, for a rendezvous. Fly back there after your attack. You may be required again in the afternoon if the division undertakes any further operations. There will be fresh orders for you at Flanchette, also more ammunition and bombs. You understand just what you are to do, Dorn?"

"Yes, sir," said Dorn promptly. "I'm to take my entire flight?"

"Of course."

"I'd rather not take Sexton on a ticklish job like this," Dorn snapped out.

"I'm not asking you what you'd rather do," the major retorted. "Here's a time schedule and a map for each pilot. Carry on, and make a good job of it. This is new work, and it's been sprung on us suddenly. See that you don't let me down, gentlemen. Good luck."

The major stamped out. The other pilots looked at Sexton with doubt and pity, at Dorn without much confidence. It was a fine situation for a flight going on an untried, unknown sort of detail.

But Sexton was grinning for the first time in days. "No high flying today, eh, Dorn?" he suggested. "Now we'll see something."

THE Germans were apparently none too well pleased at the sudden appearance of ground-strafting planes above their position at a critical moment.

At any rate, as B Flight swooped in a long line to attack the masses of gray infantry creeping forward toward the switch trench, they were greeted with a perfect storm of fire, not only from the assailed infantry's machine guns, but from every battery of 77's and 105's within range. The air rocked with the detonations of exploding

shells. Fragments of steel whizzed in all directions, piercing wings, ripping through fuselages. Nevertheless, four of the planes of B Flight swept the infantry with their diving bursts of tracers, leveled off at the dizzy height of fifty feet, let go their light bombs and zoomed away.

As Sexton, last of the lot, turned loose his bombs and gave his Nieuport the gun, he looked up—and saw, as he had expected, another Nieuport high above him. It was flying an erratic course, surrounded by shell-bursts, and from its wing tips fluttered the streamers of a flight leader.

Sexton laughed grimly. He couldn't stand altitude, but Dorn couldn't stand shell-fire.

He swung into the lead of the flight and led them down into another dive, using only tracers this time. The infantry had scattered to what shelter was to be found in incomplete trenches, shell-holes, ditches. They were not used to being attacked from the air, and they didn't like it.

Sexton fired a red Very star—the agreed signal to "Make the best of your way to rendezvous." Nothing more to be done just now. He was happy—fiercely, exultantly happy. Here was work he could do without suffering the pangs of altitude. And he'd done it well.

He came down on the emergency field to find a truck waiting with a load of ammunition and bombs, and orders from the major to stand by for a second attempt that afternoon, at a slightly different location. The 99th Division's attack had been successful, and they were now going to try to extend their flank to the right, where another German counter-attack could be expected.

Sexton had scarcely finished digesting this news, when Dorn came gliding in for a landing. Sexton walked over to the flight leader's plane as it rolled to a stop.

Dorn sat in the cockpit, gasping, eyes protruding as he swept his goggles back with a despairing gesture.

"What's the matter, Dorn?" asked Sexton, knowing the answer.

Dorn stared at him, wetting his dry lips, not trusting himself to speak.

"Don't like shells any better than you used to, do you?" Sexton remarked. "Well, boy, you haven't seen anything yet. Just wait till you see what Fritz will serve up this afternoon. He'll be laying for us this time."

"This afternoon?" stammered Dorn.

"Sure. Look." Sexton handed over the new order.

Dorn stared at the sheet of flimsy with its curt instructions. "God!" he breathed, leaning against the side of the ship, eyes lifting themselves to Sexton's as though pleading for help.

"I can't do it," he added, slowly, each syllable a separate gasp.

"You've got to," Sexton retorted.

"No!" Inspiration seemed to come to Dorn suddenly. He gripped Sexton's sleeve with insistent fingers which would not be shaken off. "You led the flight this morning. Bob. Do it this afternoon, again. I know I've treated you like a skunk. Bob, but I was afraid—afraid of what you might say. I'll withdraw those charges—I swear I will. Just take my plane and let me take yours. Who'll know the difference, in the big rush of a take-off, with goggles on? Then I can keep out of it. Maybe the fellows didn't notice much this morning, but if it happens again, I'm done for. You'll help me, won't you Bob?"

Sexton looked at the man before him and felt, despite everything, a stab of pity. It wasn't really Dorn's fault. He was a good pilot, and brave enough ordinarily. He simply couldn't stand shell-fire.

"Yes," Sexton said slowly. "I'll help you—on one condition."

"Anything, Bob, anything!" gasped Dorn with piteous eagerness.

"You'll withdraw those lying charges you filed against me."

"Yes, of course—and I'm sorry, Bob."

That afternoon, when the patrol took off, Dorn's plane stood close to Sexton's, The two pilots, both wearing helmet and goggles, went in between the roaring ships, and no one noticed that Dorn got into Sexton's plane, and that it was Sexton who led off the streamer-bearing Nieuport.

SEXTON soon discovered that he had not exaggerated the warmth of the German reception for ground-strafer.

At three thousand feet, as he swooped down toward the target, he encountered heavy artillery fire, obviously from batteries specially detailed to attend to grand-strafer.

Counting on speed and a sudden change of direction to throw off the German gunners. Sexton was received by another aerial barrage a thousand feet below. Machine guns came into action, firing from carefully selected positions, well camouflaged. The advancing infantry, split up into small groups which doubled forward from cover to cover, offered no such target as had the massive columns of the morning.

But Sexton had anticipated all this. He had foreseen just about what the German tactics would be, and he had, through Dorn, issued certain instructions to his pilots. They assailed the small groups with machine-gun fire, scattering several. Then, instead of pulling quickly up and away, they flew low above the German positions, at a height where ordinary camouflage was of little use, and bombed such of the hidden German machine guns as they could locate.

Having disorganized this section of the German defenses, they zoomed away, formed a column, and came sweeping down again above the trench in which the greater part of the advancing infantry had taken refuge. With machine gun fire and the remainder of the bombs they raked the crowded trench-bays, doing terrific execution.

But they were not unscathed. Owens, flying behind Sexton, crashed to the ground with startling speed. His plane dissolved into a mass of wreckage.

Sexton, climbing at last with the patrol at his tail, discovered the loss of the cheery little pilot and resolved on one more dive to expend the last of his ammunition—and get a few more Huns to follow Owens to the Valhalla of brave airmen.

He looked round for Dorn, and found him, flying high, yet not so high that any of the other pilots, in the furor and excitement of ground-strafering, could have sworn there was an absentee.

Things would be all right yet, Sexton felt, as he led the flight downward for a last machine gunning of the German trench.

He was met with a vicious burst of fire, not only from the remaining German Maxims, but from automatic rifles in the trench itself. Nevertheless, he strafed them savagely. The following ships managed to get in their bursts of fire and pull away without loss.

But as Sexton zoomed, he saw wings above him, dark against the sky—wings which bore the black crosses of the enemy. Fokkers!

They were all round him, three or four of them attacking him at once. The world was a place of flashing bullet-trails, vengeful and deadly.

Tracers smashed viciously into Sexton's instrument board, spattering him with stinging splinters. He managed to fling his ship aside just in time to save himself, only to see another Fokker swooping upon him.

He was cold meat. He knew that moment of terrible anticipation which comes to the flyer attacked without hope of escape. And then, as he braced his body to take the smash of bullets, the attacking Fokker swerved and side-looped away.

Hot on its tail, guns blazing, roared a Nieuport.

SEXTON recognized his own ship, and knew that it was Dorn who had come to his rescue. Dorn—yes, Dorn was brave when it wasn't a question of shell-fire. And he could hardly afford to have Sexton shot down in the flight commander's ship while he had to report home in Sexton's bus.

That thought flashed through Sexton's mind even as, with a quick bank, he swung away from another Fokker and poured in a vicious burst at still another which was just coming out of a luckless dive at Dorn.

Below, a Fokker was falling, black smoke tinged with flame whipping out behind. Dorn had a victory of his own at last. The other Fokkers were drawing off. Far to the eastward, the khaki wings of reinforcing Nieuports were appearing in the bright sky; the remaining ships of B Flight were climbing into the scrap.

And at that moment Sexton's engine gave one expiring gasp and conked. Too many bullets in its interior had proved indigestible.

He got his nose down and commenced a flat glide for the lines, hoping against hope that the 99th had driven far enough forward to enable him to escape a German prison camp.

Machine guns and rifles were spitting at him from below. He tried to pierce with his eyes the smoky battle-veil, but he could not be sure who held the welter of trenches and wire which he saw through the drifting gaps.

He was going down fast. Shell-explosions kept flinging his tail up, destroying the angle of his glide, forcing him continually to correct that angle while losing altitude with shocking speed. He saw the brown shell-tortured earth just beneath him. There was no time to pick a place to land, nothing to do but just let her hit—and hope.

He landed on a fairly flat piece of ground, rolled perhaps ten feet; then he crashed into a shell-hole with a shock that bruised him from head to foot. His wings crumpled as his tail went up. Dazedly he struggled with his safety belt, won free, and climbed out of the wreckage of his plane.

As he wriggled over the edge of the hole, a shell burst just beyond him. The blast of it threw him back against the wrecked ship. He felt the bite of steel in his side, felt a leg give way beneath him.

The numbness that marks a bad wound seized upon his right leg from hip to ankle. He could feel the hot blood running down his side as he lay there, half-stunned, unable to move.

And he realized that he had come down in No-Man's-Land, for bullets were whistling past in both directions. Another shell landed, not quite so close. The Boche were shelling the plane, bitterly determined to destroy it and its pilot.

The smoke was drifting away above him on a rising breeze. Too bad it hadn't drifted away just five minutes earlier, for a slight change of direction, he now saw, would have enabled him to pick a smoother spot for landing.

As he peered up through the smoke, he caught sight of khaki wings and tri-colored cocardes. A Nieuport—one of his gang! Perhaps it meant rescue.

Then for the second time he recognized his own ship. It was Dorn. No hope there, for Dorn would never dare venture down into that hell of shell-fire.

Yet here he came—down, at a steep angle, straight for that bit of open ground!

He made an excellent landing and rolled to a stop perhaps fifty feet from where Sexton lay. Sexton tried to drag himself up. Agony twisted his body. He saw Dorn jump out of the ship, come running toward him, white-faced, jaw set, dark eyes blazing with determination.

Then the world rocked—and dissolved in a thunderous hell of flame and smoke.

SEXTON lay blinking up at the clean white ceiling of the hospital room, where the sunlight, filtered through the leaves outside the window, made an ever-changing pattern of gold and shadow.

His leg throbbed dully in its plaster cast. For the rest, his body was a patchwork of bandages and dressings, and his head was swathed in a white turban. However, the doctor had said he'd be up and about in a month's time. Up and about—perhaps back to duty in another month. But what duty remained for such, as he? Ground details—that was all. He would be a kiwi, a wingless bird. Bitterness was in his heart.

There was a stir at the door. Two orderlies came in, pushing and pulling at a rubber-tired cot-on-wheels.

On that cot, so bandaged of face as to be scarcely recognizable, lay Dorn. It was Dorn, Sexton was sure. He knew those eyes, though hardly any of the rest of the man's face was visible.

"Hello, Bob," said Dorn in feeble greeting, through a slit in the swathing strips.

"Hello, old-timer!" Sexton grinned.

All rancor against the man had departed from Sexton when they had told him how Dorn, his plane wrecked by shells, had carried Sexton into the American lines on his back, falling down three times as shells burst near him, terribly wounded, at last, but keeping on till he had brought Sexton to safety. His face, the doctor said, had been all but shot away. The girls would never flock round handsome Chesty Dorn again.

Before anything more could be said, a heavy step sounded in the corridor, and Major Bassett strode into the room.

"So here you are!" said he, shaking both young men by the hand. "Well, well! Glad to see you both. Thank God you're pulling through. Now then, Dorn, you sent for me? What's it all about?"

"I wanted Sexton to hear, sir," Dorn answered. And then, in simple straight-forward words—words which trembled a little, for very shame—Dorn made the full confession which is supposed to be good for the soul. The Gerhardt business, the

high-flying torture, the false charges—everything, he told.

As he talked on, the major's face grew sterner and sterner. When he had finished, there was silence for a moment. Then the major spoke. "You'll face a court as soon as you're well enough, Dorn," he said. "I'll see justice done."

Sexton stretched out a hand toward his C.O. "Please, sir," he begged. "Why stir up a rotten mess? I'm not that hungry for glory. If Dorn is tried, it'll hurt the squadron, and it'll hurt the service. Let it go, sir."

"But, damn it all, man, Dorn has no right to the D.S.C. He's wearing your decoration."

"He earned it twice over the other day, sir, when he came down in that shell-fire to pick me up," was Sexton's instant answer.

"Hrrmp!" The major glanced from one young pilot to the other. "Well, have it your own way. I appreciate your feelings for the honor of the squadron, Sexton. We're damned sorry to lose you."

Sexton nodded. "I know, sir," he said. "Neither of us will ever fly again. Dorn's too badly cracked up, and my damaged lungs—" He choked. He could say no more.

"Who said you'd never fly again?" retorted the major. "I merely said I was sorry to lose you. They're organizing a new ground-strafting squadron for that duty alone. I've been asked to recommend a good officer to command it—rank of captain. Would you like the job, Sexton?"

Would he like the job! Words failed him, but his eyes were eloquent. The major read those eyes correctly.

"Then get well," he rumbled, getting to his feet. "I've got to be going along. Be back next week. See that I find you sitting up, you hear?"

"Yes, sir!" said Sexton with fervor.

As the door closed behind the major, Sexton turned his head slowly and looked at Dorn. Poor Dorn! No more flying for him. Not for months, anyway, would he leave that bed. While Sexton would be out there in the air, doing a man's work—an airman's work.

Yet somehow there was no sadness in Dorn's gaze. His face-bandages wrinkled, and Sexton fancied he was trying to smile.

"Thanks, Bob," said Dorn very softly.

“Aw, that’s all right,” grunted Sexton. “Say! Y’ know that new nurse? She’s a good kid. Suppose she’d get us a little shot of cognac?”