



# SOFT THUNDER

by FREDERICK E. PAINTON

*It was a grim game they played—they stuck to the rules and played like sports, but they knew that the loser would find flying death. And then into their game kited a kid who seemed soft—but there is lightning with even soft thunder.*

CAPTAIN BING HALL, commanding the Sixth American Pursuit Squadron, came back from Souilly at ten o'clock. He was no sight for the gods. His heavy-jawed face, that somehow resembled a battleship's prow, had two days' growth of dark whiskers; his olive drab uniform hung wrinkled and dirty on his six feet of tremendous body. His gray eyes were bloodshot; his mouth tasted as if a couple of birds had nested there for years; his brain was shaky and irritable; and his stomach felt as if it held a three-alarm fire; it was burning up. Two days of rain and mist had prevented patrol flying, and Bing Hall had gone on one hell of a bender. He was just sobering up and ready to pick a fight with angels.

He climbed out of the bathtub side-car of the motorcycle when it drew to a halt in front of the operations room; and cast a bloodshot gaze over the familiar tarmac. He saw many things that were not there before. And these extraordinary objects caused him to stare in amazement, frown and relieve himself of a thick curse.

"For crysake!" he snarled at the motorcycle driver, "what's coming off here?"

"Search me, sir," replied the man. He waved his hand in the general direction of the hangars. "They all come this morning."

BING HALL considered the unusual activity. On the dead-line a couple of orange Spads were warming up. Down behind the repair shop a couple of Vickers machine-guns made a mad clatter as they were being tested out on the short range. The whine of reamers reboring Hispano-Suiza motors came from the overhaul shop. Like a bass orchestration came the dull kettledrum beat of the hot guns baying twenty kilometers to the north. All this was as it should be.

But those men out there in olive drab uniforms, with red brassards on their left arm, bearing the white "C", were not part of the picture. Neither were the motion picture cameras on tripods, nor the slickly dressed men who were undoubtedly newspaper correspondents. They all stood around expectantly, staring on occasion at the southeast sky. The Sixth Pursuit was the second American combat squadron on the Western Front, but even so, as Bing Hall now reflected, there was no necessity for this bunch of reporters and cameramen.

"We'll see about this," he muttered, and turned into

the operations room. Willy the Grin, the kiwi adjutant, sat there, making out the morning report. He took one look at Bing Hall's yellowish-red face, caught the aroma of stale cognac and his cherubic face expanded.

"Boy," he muttered, "you must have had yourself a real snootful, Skipper."

Bing Hall sat down heavily, got out a crumpled cigarette, straightened it with his fingers and then gestured with his thumb toward the tarmac.

"What the hell's all the fuss about?" he demanded.

Willy the Grin laughed. "Oh, that. Well, we're receiving reinforcements today, Skipper dear. The Sixth Pursuit is about to acquire the famous, the marvelous, the outstanding hero of Americain—in short—Sunny Lawrence, idol of Newport, is joining the Sixth."

THE INFORMATION apparently conveyed nothing to Bing Hall. He lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply, blasted twin jets of gray smoke from his big nostrils and looked puzzled. There was a reason for this: Since he had run away to Mexico at the age of seventeen and become an expert machine-gunner in Madero's revolutionaries, Bing Hall had spent little if any time in the United States. As soon as one war was finished, he and Bart Morrel went looking for another, and usually found it. They had commanded machine-guns with Huerta, flew antiquated Wright reconnaissance planes in Honduras and later did work with the Bulgarians against the Turks. Wherever they could get fifty dollars gold a day, in a swell war, there you would find them.

Hence, the social foibles of the United States—of which Sunny Lawrence was one—were something of which Bing knew nothing. Soldiers of fortune know war and battles and strategy, they know how to hold their liquor, fight to the last man for a friend, understand how to endure hardship, fatigue, fix a Maxim machine-gun, and how to hit a tin can six times running with a six-gun before the said can hits the ground.

But phenomena like Sunny Lawrence were beyond their ken.

SO NOW, ready to be angry but so far puzzled, Bing Hall stared at his adjutant and said: "Who and what is Sunny Lawrence—a ration?"

Willy the Grin flung up his hands in mock horror.

“My Gawd, man!” he cried, “where is your education. Sunny Lawrence, Skipper dear, is the amateur tennis champion of the world. He is society’s pet darling. He is the girls’ dream of the ideal husband, the flashing meteor from Newport who can smite a tennis ball harder than anyone can return it. One of Yale’s best-looking men, the most popular member of his class, the one chosen as the most likely to achieve success.”

He stood up and made a mock bow. “That, Captain Hall, is Sunny Lawrence whose first name, I believe, is John—or better yet, Johnny.”

Captain Bing Hall listened. He spat reflectively and then said: “Nuts! Is this a war or a pink tea? Send him to hell back. I don’t want him in this squadron.”

Again Willy the Grin smiled and shook his head. “Nothing doing. Here’s a memorandum from Corps, transmitted from Chaumont, likely from Black Jack Pershing himself. It seems, Captain darling, that back in them United States the government is trying to make this war popular. It is endeavoring to get the young college bloods and athletes into the Air Service. Somebody—probably a publicity guy got the bright idea that athletes make the best combat flyers. So here comes Sunny Lawrence, trained at Kelly Field and Issoudun, and your orders are to let the movies and the reporters make a lot of publicity about him. Presently, after he has shot down a nasty Boche, he will go back to the United States and lecture in colleges to get smashing football stars to kick the Heinies for a goal. Meantime, he is attached here, and here he’ll stay.”

The curse which Captain Hall then emitted was blistering and smoking with sulphur. He leaped to his feet and the floorboards creaked beneath his tremendous muscled body.

“What the hell,” he cried, “do they think I’m running here—a nursing school for brats that ain’t dry behind the ears? Think I’m going to put a puling kid like that in a hard-boiled outfit and lose what good flyers I got? No, and again, no! I won’t have it. I—”

THE SIGHT of a tall, lean figure coming through the sunshiny entrance of the operations room stopped what further he had intended to say. The new arrival was six feet two inches tall, which is to say, he was an inch taller than Captain Bing Hall. His shoulders were

so broad that he seemed built like a triangle. His face was bronzed like Hall’s, with deep-sunk clear eyes, and those lines of character that come with danger and adventure had riven themselves deep on his face. He had crisp dark-brown hair and a casually alert appearance. He was Bart Morrel and he was a flying fool with one weakness—women.

He came in silently, sat on the edge of a table and regarded Hall.

“By God, you look like you drunk up all the likker in la Belle France,” he offered.

“If I’d known what they were reaming me for here,” replied Hall bitterly, “I’d stayed drunk. Lissen, Bart, they’re sending me a puling brat by the name of Sunny Lawrence.”

BART, who was Captain Bing Hall’s chum and partner in several wars, showed no great interest, nor did he get unduly excited when Hall, punctuating his narrative with picturesque oaths, proceeded to elucidate.

“Keep your shirt on,” he advised. “In a big guerre like this one, you got to expect amateurs. There aren’t enough professionals in this war to keep it going.” He paused, then: “Listen, I’m in love at last, Bing. She’s marvelous.”

Bing Hall sighed noisily. “Willy, fetch me that cognac bottle. I need strength. Sunny Lawrence is coming here, and now this big pin-head goes and falls in love for the seventieth time. Six bits to a Dijon franc she’s a blonde.”

“Sure,” assented Bart Morrel amiably. “I have a weakness for blondes. But this time it’s taking, Bing—I’m gonna marry her. She’s a Y.W.C.A. girl down at Souilly and what it takes to make a knockout, she’s got in clusters. Her eyes—blue like the heavens—her lips red like cherries—her figure, boy, she’s all curves. Her name’s Anita Selfridge, and we’re going to get married next month.”

Slowly Bing Hall tipped the bottle to his lips; the amber contents began to gurgle, and continued gurgling while Willy the Grin watched in growing fascination. He was panting for breath just watching, waiting for Bing Hall to pause to draw breath. The contents had vanished one-fourth before Bing Hall took away the bottle, snorted, breathed heavily and then belched.

“Listen, Willy,” he said thickly. “Down in the spig coun-

tries this guy was in love oftener than they had revolutions—and that was once a week. He loved a Georgian when we was in Turkey, a Hungarian when we was in Bulgaria, and a Greek when we fought for Polepodides. Every time he fell in love it was pure hell for me, as well as him. If I had my guts with me—what I got are burning up—I'd send in my resignation and join the navy and find some peace."

"Wait'll you see her," Bart Morrel took no offense. "She—"

Through the comparative quiet cut the steady high-pitched drone of a wide-gunned Hisso engine. It was circling high, the thin thrum whining as the ship circled in the wind. Even as they paused to listen, the sound abruptly ceased, and a moment or so later came the shrill of brace wires cleaving the air.

"Sunny Lawrence has come," said Willy the Grin.

Captain Bing Hall turned to the desk and picked up the Corps memorandum. He read it through and found it told him no more than Willy the Grin had said. Hall's teeth clicked and a hard light came into his eyes.

CAPTAIN BING HALL'S squadron was the best organized on the Western Front. He was hard on his pilots and his greaseballs, but he was hard on himself, too. The men liked him because they knew he was just. They believed he was duty-struck, but you can't pick a fight with a man for that. They knew that, given his duty to do, Bing Hall would do it, despite hell and high water. The man who failed, be it his most beloved friend, Bart Morrel, received the full brunt of Bing Hall's wrath. He was, in short, the ideal military leader.

HE THRUST the order on the spike. "That guy'll soldier here or I'll fan his tail to Blois," he muttered. "Let's go out and look over America's spoiled darling."

As they reached the grassy tarmac, a black and red Spad was just shooting up-wind. for a neat three-point landing. It rolled a bit, taxied a little bit more, and came to a stop. From the cockpit a tall, lean youngster stepped out. He was instantly swamped by cameramen and reporters.

"Take off the helmet, Sunny," one shouted.

"Hold that pose, one leg in the pit, Sunny," cried a movie man.

The cameras began to click, the shutters of the Graflexes clacked; reporters made notes and a confusion of sound swept the tarmac.

It was the strangest sight on the Western Front, indeed.

The youngster removed his helmet, and a weary, disillusioned expression crossed his young, handsome features. He had wavy blond hair that swept back from a high forehead, a straight nose, wide hazel eyes, and his full, sensitive lips twisted wistfully. His strong stubborn chin jutted a trifle. Sunny Lawrence didn't like this publicity fandango and made no pretense of hiding his dislike.

Yet as Captain Bing Hall spat disgustedly at the sight, and Bart Morrel stared interestedly, Sunny Lawrence went through his little act; posed in the Spad, over the Vickers, examining the tail surfaces. He gave interviews, approved certain quotations thought up by ambitious newspapermen. He played his part because the American War Department in sending him here had asked him to do just that. But he didn't like it—not one bit,

And presently, when a lull came in this publicity activity, he walked over to where Captain Bing Hall stood.

Thus fate brought together the three chief actors in the drama—Sunny Lawrence, Bart Morrel and Bing Hall—and raised the curtain on the play.

Sunny Lawrence's eyes espied the twin silver bars on Bing's shoulders. He came to a smart salute, heels clicking.

"Lieutenant John Lawrence reporting for duty, sir," he said.

His voice was low, pleasantly vibrant, but its personable effect was lost on Captain Bing Hall.

"Heard about you," he snapped succinctly. "Corp memo! O.K. with me to have them snap your mug and take down what hot air you want to let out. But while you're in this squadron, you're a flyer. You'll do three patrols a day, and more if we want it, and you won't bellyache or I'll ship you to hell out of here. You'll get a square deal as long as you give one. You'll obey orders and play ball. And God help you if you don't."

HE PAUSED abruptly, ignoring Sunny Lawrence's suddenly flushed face.

"This is First Lieutenant Bart Morrel. He commands B-Flight. You'll take your joy-hops with him and fly number three in his outfit. That's all."

Whereupon, Captain Bing Hall turned abruptly on his heel and vanished into the operations room to consult his cognac bottle.

IT IS quite likely that Sunny Lawrence might have let off a lot of steam at this ungracious speech. But whatever hot retort hovered on his tongue was forgotten at the mention of Bart Morrel's name. Sunny Lawrence gave a little start, stepped forward, peered into Morrel's face. An expression of awe and worship filled his eyes.

"You're the great Bart Morrel?" he spoke it as a question, but conviction underlay the words.

Morrel, busily engaged in manufacturing a cigarette of rice paper and sack tobacco looked up in surprise.

"Sure. I'm Bart Morrel," he spoke kindly.

"Bart Morrel!" repeated Lawrence, awe-struck. "The famous soldier of fortune. Good Lord, I've read about you, heard about you. You were at Yale, too, and we've followed your career. That time in Bulgaria when you rescued that girl from the Turk harem!" he paused dreamily. "Shot seven men. Flew away with her in your plane. Gee, that was real romance."

Lawrence was twenty-one then, and Morrel was twenty-six. But hero-worship had raised between them a barrier greater than years. It was obvious to anyone who cared to look that Lawrence was adoring a hero. He gazed upon Morrel as if the latter were a god.

Bart Morrel laughed, puzzled. "Yeah, I remember that. Blond girl. Georgian, and a peach. She—"

"And Frederick Palmer, the famous war correspondent, described how you wiped out a whole battery of Turks that would have defeated the Bulgars," cut in Sunny Lawrence eagerly. He stepped forward and boyishly held out his hand. "I'm proud to meet you. I'm tickled pink you're my C.O. I hope—" this shyly—"I won't let you down."

"Good enough, kid," said Morrel indulgently. "What's all this grandstand act you do?"

Lawrence flushed. "Oh, that! The United States has gone publicity-crazy. I don't like it, but I have to do it. They say it'll help win the war."

Morrel smiled and patted Lawrence's shoulder. "I'll help you all I can. You'll need it because Bing don't like that grandstand play. You can bunk in with me if you like."

Lawrence's eyes glowed. "Thanks," he said simply.

"O.K.," laughed Bart, turning away. "We Yale men have to stick together. And by the way, don't pay too much attention to Bing's growling. He's a square-shooter." He strode away whistling.

Lawrence stared after him, cheeks flushed, eyes shining. "Boy, what luck!" he muttered, "to be his bunky."

He frowned suddenly as his dreadful problem oppressed him once more and he walked slowly toward the line of galvanized iron huts where he would live.

Before he had gone ten yards, a stentorian bellow came from the operations room. Captain Bing Hall stood in the doorway.

"Everybody on the dead-line in ten minutes, in full flying kit," he yelled. "A circus of krauts are jazzing our balloon lines."

He espied Lawrence, frowned, and added: "You might as well get a bellyfull of this war here and now. You go, too."

Fate had plucked the strings and the puppets began acting the first scene of the tragedy.

## CHAPTER II DOG FIGHT AND FEAR

WHAT A turmoil assailed the Sixth's tarmac then! The newspapermen and photographers that had started for their cars, returned in frantic haste. To them it did not matter that Bing Hall, seven times victor in high combat, was going up, or that Bart Morrel, nine times a sky conqueror, was going out to strafe some Fokkers; nor were they interested in the other twelve members of the squadron, all of whom had at least three victories. As one man they raced to record for posterity, Sunny Lawrence stepping into his cockpit for his first combat patrol.

Those movie men were experts in the art of faking; they got closeups of Sunny Lawrence, grim-lipped, stern-eyed, sitting in his cockpit behind his twin Vickers and these movies, captioned, "Famous Tennis Star, Sunny Lawrence, Shoots Down First Enemy Aircraft,"

would later thrill the United States. For their benefit, Sunny crawled all over his ship. He did everything but examine the tail-skid while the cranks turned.

“Issue a statement, Sunny,” yelled a reporter. “Tell us what you intend to do.” The said reporter had once covered sports and he likely had the idea Sunny Lawrence was a prize-fighter about to enter the ring.

The other pilots stood around, aghast at this, and Bing Hall was boiling with rage. Lawrence looked helplessly around, his eyes met Hall’s and were downcast. He started to refuse and then remembered his promise to the War Department.

“Say,” he muttered, “say that I said I’d bring home the bacon.”

Now, indeed, the pilots and Bing Hall stared in furious anger. A new pilot in a combat squadron is about as useful for his first three patrols as a flock of feathers to a frog. No matter what his previous training; no matter how well he flies; no matter how clever he is with machine-guns; he is useless in the sky until he gets air sense. Records like Von Richtofen’s are built up of shooting down rookie pilots who fly out over No Man’s Land and because they are sky-blind, are easy targets for the past masters who know how to achieve surprise. To these men, listening and knowing that Sunny Lawrence would be lucky to get back alive, for him to talk about victory and bacon was rank bragging; worse, damned insolence. And that was bad, for a rookie pilot has to depend on the old hands to save his neck when a Boche is screwing slugs at it.

“Ah, God!” muttered Bing Hall.

“Cut out that crap, and get into your pit. I ought to—”

“Leave the kid alone,” cut in Bart Morrel. “He can’t help it because they want that stuff. Give him a chance.”

“I’ll give him a chance,” snapped Hall. “Pits, men. Rendezvous three thousand, tight formation, no break till I give the signal.”

FACE BURNING, Sunny Lawrence strapped himself in, tested his controls, looked to his blue-black Vickers with bright ribbons of brass cartridges in their teeth. He felt Morrel’s hand. “Never mind, Lawrence,” he heard. “You’re jake with me.”

A quick handclasp and suddenly Lawrence saw the flashing signal of Hall’s. Mechanically he gunned out of

line, goosed the Spad into the wind and poured the gun to the Hisso.

His tail came up, the Hisso blatted, gradually increased her revs to a smashing roar. The Spad carried him down the field, leaving behind the rank stink of castor oil, the swirl of grass bits. He took off in a climbing turn, avoiding Morrel’s wash, and then banked tightly around and around in tight spirals for altitude.

ALL THIS he did because he was essentially. a good flyer. But his mind was already occupied with the problem which had haunted him since he had first heard the rumble of the red hot guns of war. Again the question tormented him: how was he going to perform out there in the grim game where death came to the loser? Probably every rookie flyer who took his first joy-hop over the lines thought the same thing; but Lawrence, like them, took the problem as particularly his own. Flying wing to fuselage with Bart Morrel, he “tried to visualize what would happen when he saw his first enemy crate. How would he feel when steel bullets came singing the song of death in his ears? And into his mind crept that dreadful thought that always came to him: what would he do if bullets ruined his tennis arm or blinded him so he could never see the lovely world again?

Droning along fourteen thousand feet in the air, he suddenly knew he loved tennis passionately. The game was his very heart and soul. He had made up his mind that, after winning the next internationals, he would turn professional and make it a life career. Nothing else interested him. He lived only for the ringing thud of tennis ball on racket, for the smashing impact of his ground stroke that would send a ball flying like a white flash down the side line for a placement. He had often thought that without tennis, life would not be worth living for him. To lose that—he shuddered—and looked over at Bart Morrel. The soldier of fortune saw the sun glint on Lawrence’s glasses and waved a cheery arm of encouragement. At the signal, Lawrence suddenly felt peace. He waved back; he shouted, “I’ll show you, Bart. I’ll play ball.”

And then, suddenly, the Fokkers came. The sky rained planes.

Out of nowhere streaks of flaming fire shot across his eyes; the sky seemed filled with a hellish roar. Red and

green and white planes turned and dove and zoomed and screamed around him like mad bats. Bewildered, Lawrence saw that of a sudden Bart Morrel's Spad was gone, vanished into clear blue sky.

A crate leap-frogged him and he could count the spokes in the slowly turning wheels of the landing gear above his head. A wildly gyrating ship went down past him, wheeling so swiftly, so terrifically that the wings came off and the fuselage shot like a javelin toward the checkered carpet two miles below.

THE AIR screamed with stunting engines, howling bullets. Ships streaked out of nowhere. The world had gone mad and Sunny Lawrence sat there, paralyzed, hand to stick, wondering what to do.

He could make out no insignia; these howling planes were merely streaks of different colors. A plane screamed at him, sheered down when Sunny Lawrence had shut his eyes, expecting collision, chaos and death.

To the observers on the ground below, the dog fight was a tightly massed ball of airplanes, a mile high, a mile wide, and as ships dove shrieking down in attack and then spiraled madly upward to get up to a point of vantage, the ball seemed to roll like a gigantic cart-wheel across the sky. And in the center of this ball of planes, Sunny Lawrence, fingers on Bowdoin stick trigger, moved wildly about looking for something to shoot at. Poor lad! Inexperience made him helpless.

*Br-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-whack!*

His instrument board became a mass of ruins. Another ripping crash of sound and a V strut splintered. A row of steel slugs stitched a series of holes in the fabric of his trailing edge and the wind caught hold of the jagged cloth and enlarged the rents.

He looked back, seeing there, slightly below him, shooting up at him, a green plane that had little red eyes in the center that blinked rapidly. He could see the sun reflect on the kraut's goggles, see lips skinned back from white teeth in oil-darkened features.

*Br-r-r-r-rup!*

INVISIBLE FINGERS plucked at his shoulders. He zoomed, twisted in a half roll. This was death, tapping with bony fingers at his shoulder. This was no game like tennis, like football; this was real death, malevolent, ter-

rible. That man back there was not playing any game, he was not filled with romance, the spirit of high adventure. He wanted to kill Sunny Lawrence and laugh at the smashed corpse on the ground.

Sunny Lawrence dove. Unknowingly he dropped on the tail of a Fokker that was shooting its way down in a vertical dive on the tail of a Spad that was making two hundred miles an hour. Another ship cut in. Behind it came a German. Sunny Lawrence saw streaks of white flame leave the Fokker, smash into the Spad. The Spad suddenly had a big tail of smoke, then it had flames around it. Sunny Lawrence sat, stricken by what he saw. He was dropping like a projectile, stupidly watching an American burn to death. He realized that he was as helpless to aid the doomed Yank as if this were a movie he was watching.

AS WITH other eyes he saw the Yank try to slip the ship, and when that failed to keep the mass of orange flame from filling the cockpit, the Yank unfastened his belt, stood up, got a foot on the crashpad and then, in what seemed a leisurely manner, thrust himself out into space.

"Oh, God!" the words bubbled from Sunny Lawrence's mouth. "No! No!"

He saw the black body go hurtling head over heels, then it sort of straightened out and began to turn. Arms outthrust, legs outthrust, it fell through space like a man crucified. And thus it shot down the sky until its shape melted into the browns and greens of the earth and it could be seen no more.

The man was dead by now. A few seconds of falling, falling faster than this roaring ship that carried Sunny downward. A few seconds of wild thought that would come to any man falling two miles. Seconds of thought when the man knew he was doomed, going to die in one terrific smash. Going to strike the earth at two hundred miles an hour and be twisted and pounded into no recognizable form.

DEATH! What did that man think of as he chose to fall two miles rather than burn to death. What fear, agony, horror, gripped him as he stepped over the side and dropped on to that flat carpet way, way down there?

Sunny Lawrence screamed, and hauled back on the

stick. He nearly shed his wings. But the ship came out of the dive. He climbed back up to the mass of fighting planes because he knew nothing else to do. On the way, a Fokker came gliding down at an easy angle. Sunny avoided it by feet. He saw a man in the cockpit, sitting bolt-upright. The goggles were smashed, there was a hole where the throat should be, a trickle of crimson. A dead man riding to earth in his coffin.

A hoarse, vibrant yell left Sunny Lawrence's lips and he went mad. His crate flung around the sky, like a straw in the grasp of a whirlwind. His Vickers smashed out at green objects, yellow objects. Bullets plucked at his right arm and then came no more. He held his Bowdoin stick trips until the leaping cartridge belt, like a slithering snake, leaped into the hungry maw of the breeches, like a mad thing.

His was the helpless fighting fury of the ignorant fighters against the trained boxer. And his mad swoops, his wilder zooms, his wing-under tight banks only served to attract to him a tight-lipped German, seeking a kill.

In the space of a moment, a checkered Fokker came screaming up from below, leveled off just below Lawrence's tail to avoid the back-wash, but aiming upward with red-mouthed Spandaus.

The slugs came like the first fury of a storm. They ripped into the tail assembly, they marched up the pack of the fuselage, they clicked off the engine, off the Vickers; they shredded Lawrence's coat. It was only the miracle of his own inexperience that saved him. A hundred bullets whipped his Spad in ten seconds.

They pattered like the bony fingers of death plucking at his shoulder. He was going to die; he was going to have to jump out and smash to bits on that brown and green carpet swimming in the mist down below. He was going to stop breathing, stop feeling, hearing, knowing. Death!

He shrank down, helpless; and then, as if hypnotized, turned to look into the streaking tracers that shredded the air around him.

He saw the nose of the Fokker shift slightly, as the Spandaus chuckled. And then, as he looked into their grim muzzles, he saw a streaking fury drop down on the German, coming like the breath of a hurricane. A Spad! It smashed at the Fokker, whipped it with bullets even as the German had whipped Lawrence. It struck, that Spad, like the mailed fist of a giant, and pounded

the German down the sky. The Fokker wings broke off at the tips, and it went into a flat spin.

LAWRENCE, watching, mouth open, breath arrested, saw Bart Morrel's insignia on the Spad. Bart had come to his aid when the others wouldn't. Morrel had saved his life, let him breathe, and feel, and know the glory of the world. Lawrence fought down his emotion and charged blindly into the fight once more.

He never knew the fight was over until of a sudden there was nothing to shoot at. Planes vanished in midair and he was totally lost until an orange Spad wheeled in beside him and the black knobbed pilot gestured with a hand. Bart Morrel, guiding him home. Blindly Sunny Lawrence followed, followed right down to the ground and mechanically landed a bouncing, restless Spad that promptly smashed into the crate ahead of him and sawed off the tail assembly and wrecked the fuselage.

He got out, numbly, to find Bing Hall standing there, cursing him in red-eyed rage.

"By God," he cried. "You nearly shot me down. You see Carstairs in a hole and flyaway and desert him. You run around the sky like a crazy idiot, then you land and smash up my crate. You ought to fly for the Germans."

Sunny Lawrence merely stared at him. Slowly he felt himself over, saw the shredded leather of his flying jacket at the right shoulder. Death and mutilation had been that close. He looked up again to see Bart Morrel standing beside him. "Lay off the kid, Bing," Morrel cried angrily, "You shouldn't have flung him into a dogfight like that—first time out. Come on, kid, we'll have a hooker of cognac and you'll feel better."

At that second Sunny Lawrence would have died for Bart Morrel. And destiny grinned and prepared the scene for the second act.

CHAPTER III  
A GIRL AND COMPLICATIONS

IT WAS a week later that Captain Bing Hall stopped Sunny Lawrence as he was going out to the Dodge touring car to be transported to town.

“Now, listen here,” Hall said flatly. “This excuse of air-sickness for not flying don’t go with me any longer. Most times when fellows figure up excuses and alibis day after day, we consider them yellow. You say you ain’t yellow. So show it tomorrow morning when you’re marked up for the dawn patrol.”

Sunny Lawrence looked haggard. The pink cheeks had gone, and his flesh was gray-colored. His eyes were deep-sunk and had circles under them. He looked ten years older.

BUT HE merely said, “Very good, sir,” and climbed into the car.

Sunny Lawrence was not, however, the only one to get bawled out. As the big body of Bart Morrel came striding out of the darkness, Bing Hall hailed him.

“What’s it tonight, that dame?” he demanded.

“Sure,” replied Morrel. “Why not? I told you I’m nuts about her.”

“Well, layoff,” snapped Hall.

“I love you like a brother, Bart, but if you get me into trouble with any more of your blondes, by God, I’ll beat your head off.”

“Says you,” responded Morrel, amiably. “You’ve tried it before and that busted nose of yours is a good souvenir of what happened.”

He shouldered past Hall and whistling a gay tune climbed into the tonneau. He grinned when he made out Sunny Lawrence. “That guy has duty on the brain.”

Lawrence said nothing for quite a while as the Dodge tore through the night toward Souilly. Finally Bart Morrel said, “What’s eating you, lad?”

After a moment or so, Sunny Lawrence said, “Bart, I’m just no good.”

There was a desperate quality to his tone; a heart-breaking pathos in his expression: Bart Morrel was essentially a good-hearted fellow—Bing Hall called him generous and dumb. He remembered now, things he had heard and paid no attention to before. The jibes of the other pilots, “How’s the tennis champion?” “How’s thirty love, or don’t you love thirty?” “The skin you love to touch.” “How the girls will thrill when they see Sunny shooting down nasty Germans.”

He patted Lawrence’s arm.

“Shoot, kid,” he said gently. “I have my troubles myself, what with one thing and another.”

“It’s about m-me,” faltered Sunny Lawrence. “Ever since that first patrol. Oh, God, Bart. I’d give anything in the world to be like you—unafraid.”

“You mean you’re afraid out there when Jerry lead starts snapping?”

Sunny Lawrence took a long time in answering. “No, not that. I’m not afraid the way you mean. A slug through the head—that’s the glorious adventure of high combat. It doesn’t bother me. Even a flamer—and I hate fire—I can go that in spite of what I’ve seen. Or a crackup that leaves my brains plastered on the instrument board.”

HE PAUSED. Then: “That’s death. Quick—finish—the end. I’m not afraid of that, Bart. What gets me is the possibility that I’ll get a fistful of slugs through my right arm—or maybe both arms—and be crippled for life. I love tennis,” he cried passionately. “I cringe at the thought of going through life a cripple, never to hear or feel again the thud of a tennis ball against the taut gut. Why—why—I’d rather be dead, Bart, a thousand times.”

He faltered again, wiped the palms of his hands. “I think about that when I’m up there—dreading mutilation. I think of myself blinded—like Galvin was last week. A bullet side-swiping his eyes—putting them out. Never to see God’s earth again. Never to see the glorious sunshine—just doomed to sit, or have someone take you by the hand and lead you across the blackness of time until death mercifully ends all that you are.”

HIS VOICE was tense, low. "That's what I'm afraid of, Bart, the loss of my arms, the loss of my eyes, the loss of tennis. God, if I could just down it—ah, well, I suppose it's yellow."

Bart Morrel listened to the impassioned statement. "Why don't you go back to the States, kid? You've seen the big show. You can tell those college boys what it's all about. That's a job that needs doing and then, why, you won't have anything to worry you."

"No!" the word exploded like a pistol shot: "Not that, Bart. By God, I've come among men over here. I've been a kid. But I'm not one now. I've met you."

He flung back his head. "I'm not a quitter. I'll stick it—and like it. Only—only, I need help—to sort of down that feeling."

"I get you, kid," cut in Bart Morrel kindly. He fell silent for a moment and then went on: "As for getting certain kinds of fright, kid, why that's nothing. This hooey about heroism and bravery is all right, but I've seen plenty of wars, and all kinds of soldiers and I never saw a man yet who wasn't afraid unless he was plain nuts. We're all afraid—way down inside us. We all get wind up. When I get a hunch not to fly, God himself don't get me into a pit. The thing is, kid, never let it get you down. The right kind of a soldier is the one who has fear and conquers it."

Again he paused to manufacture a cigarette. "Why, listen, kid, armies are made up of men governed by intelligent fear. If everybody was wild, reckless, brave, they'd charge into a machine-gun and be stiffed plenty quick. A man takes cover against artillery shells, machine-gun fire, enemy rifles, because why? Because he's afraid of death and wants to kill the other guy and stay alive himself."

He lit the cigarette, saffron glow playing over lean features.

"Take my own case when I'm on lone patrol. I hide in the sun and drop down on some fool kraut like a ton of bricks. Why? So I can shoot him and he can't shoot me. That's intelligent fear."

He slapped Sunny Lawrence's shoulder. "I like you. Tomorrow we'll do a patrol together." He broke off and said, "Now, let me tell you about my girl, Anita. You'll see her tonight."

HE TOLD Lawrence plenty about her during the ride, but even so, Anita Selfridge gave Lawrence a shock

when he met her at the Cafe de la Paix. Pale yellow hair, pale yellow eyebrows, bright blue eyes and a face as beautifully chiseled as a statue—and so cold. She had a tall, rounded figure that was voluptuously curved. She moved sinuously, she became deliberately provocative. She knew she was attractive to men, and let you know it.

Sunny Lawrence took one look and spotted her type. She used men, but never loved them.

"Ah," he sighed to himself as he saw Bart Morrel go eagerly to her, "Bing Hall is right; Bart's a sucker for women. She's playing him for a fool."

She wore the light blue uniform of the American Y.W.C.A., and the little mannish hat, and to eyes less experienced with women than Sunny's, she was a magnificent woman. At the introduction, she gave Lawrence a cold quick look, as calculating as a miser's. Lawrence murmured a few polite words and noticed one important thing about her. She was nervous, ill-at-ease over something.

SHE HAD a sort of hunted air that puzzled Lawrence.

"Your friend is a handsome young man," she murmured, showing white teeth through red lips. "But I've got something important to say to you, Bart dear."

Behind her someone slammed the door to the cafe, and she gave a convulsive start and turned a terrified look in that direction. As Sunny Lawrence politely withdrew, he had the sense that she was frightened to death over something.

"Gold-digger!" he muttered, and ordered a drink.

Others of the Sixth's pilots came in, but they pointedly ignored Sunny Lawrence, so he drank by himself, and, having nothing else to do, watched Morrel and the girl, Anita Selfridge. As the evening wore on, Lawrence saw that she was giving Bart a great deal to drink. First champagne, then cognac, and then whiskey and sodas. Lawrence was furious. "Deliberately getting him drunk," he thought, for Morrel didn't usually mix his drinks that way and was only obliging her.

Lawrence wanted to tell Bart what a fool the girl was making of him. But he dared not, for he had sense enough to know that friendship ceases when you criticize another man's selection in women.

"A fool for girls," sighed Lawrence, yet the knowledge did not lessen his hero worship of Morrel.

IT MUST have been close to midnight, while Bart Morrel was bleary-eyed and quite drunk, that Lawrence got a shock. He saw the girl begin talking swiftly to Bart Morrel, pleading with him, passionately, touching his arms, caressing his face with her hands, pleading with a grim terror that Lawrence could not help but see.

Lawrence saw Bart Morrel's face go pale; he grabbed the girl's arm, dragged her close. He shook his head vehemently, and the girl only pled the more.

And then, on a sudden, too quickly in fact, Morrel paid the score and staggered out the door, the girl pressing close behind him.

Sunny Lawrence had a hunch, paid his own bill and followed. "The girl's in a jam and she's asking Bart to do something he doesn't want to do," he thought. And blind loyalty to the only man who had befriended him, caused him to stick close on their trail.

Sunny Lawrence reached the door in time to see them enter the Dodge touring car. Morrel gave the chauffeur a ten franc note and the lad went on to another *estaminet* to drink it up. Morrel took the driver's seat, the girl beside him. A moment later the Dodge burst into life and turned and sped up the Via Sacre road toward the Sixth's tarmac at Fueillon.

Now, Sunny Lawrence was sure that something was amiss. He hastened up the one street, and because Souilly was the magnet for all Yank soldiers who could get a twenty-four hour pass, he found a soldier with a side-car. Fifty francs commanded a ride to the Sixth's airdrome. But fast as the motorcycle was, it never overhauled the Dodge.

Thirty minutes later, the motorcycle came to a halt before the operations office. It was dark. Lawrence swung across the tarmac to the galvanized iron huts where the pilots slept. Bart Morrel was not in the cubicle which they shared. He went along the rest of the cubicles; they were all dark. Only the enlisted men's quarters showed a light.

Thoroughly worried now, he scouted across toward the billowing canvas hangars whose sides flapped like pistol reports in the night wind. Before he reached the deadline, a Hisso eight-cylinder motor began to blast. He saw the cherry flashes from the exhaust stacks, saw a brief flicker of an electric torch.

"What in the name of God!" cried Sunny Lawrence, and broke into a run.

The cold motor was warming fast. By the time he reached the cockpit, it was purring prettily. He made out the big form of Bart Morrel, by the left wing.

To Sunny Lawrence's utter amazement, the man was lashing Anita Selfridge fast to the inter-wing spars. "My God, Bart, what are you doing?" he cried.

THE GIRL turned. "You fool, go away," she cried.

Bart Morrel snarled a curse. "What the hell are you doing here? Beat it away before—" he didn't finish, but leaped instead into the cockpit.

Sunny Lawrence did not know what Bart Morrel intended, but he knew instinctively that this was wrong—wrong!

"No," he yelled. "No, Bart, you mustn't. Not that. Don't make a fool of yourself over a cold blonde. It—"

He reached up in the darkness and caught hold of Bart Morrel's left elbow. Lights flashed in the enlisted men's quarters; a sergeant's voice yelled for the sentry.

Bart Morrel leaped down. "Get away, you lousy rat," he yelled. "I know what I'm doing. She—"

"Please, Bart, my God—"

Bart Morrel swung a rapid right hook, a terrific blow that started behind him and finished flush on Sunny Lawrence's jaw. The youth catapulted backward as if pole-axed. A second later the Hisso motor roared, as Bart Morrel goosed it out of line, swung into the wind. Slowly it revved up, the ship trundled, got up speed and fled down the field like a ghost. The cherry spit of the exhaust stacks flickered up the sky in a climbing turn and the ship headed north toward the German lines.

## CHAPTER IV FOR BART MORREL'S SAKE

SUNNY LAWRENCE leaped to his feet. He was stunned, not so much by the blow though his head rang like a Chinese gong—as by the incredible fact that Bart Morrel, soldier of fortune, hero, adventurer, was aiding a woman to escape. Yet in that moment when the sentries and sergeant of the guard came running, Sunny Lawrence's first thought was how he could protect Morrel. No one must know. If the girl was a spy—as Lawrence suspected—they'd shoot Morrel for aiding her.

The single fact to be covered at the moment was the take-off of a plane at midnight. By the time the sergeant of the guard was saluting him, Sunny Lawrence had made up his mind.

"A girl," he gasped. "She stole a plane. Quick—get my Spad out. I can catch her."

The sergeant hesitated a moment, then he realized that this youngster was an officer. He gave a yell. The master mechanic responded, orders were barked and Sunny Lawrence's Spad was trundled from the hangar to the line. Its motor choked and coughed and started raggedly. Sunny leaped into the cockpit.

"If Captain Hall comes, tell him I'm chasing a spy," he yelled. "Pull the chocks."

"But the motor ain't warmed," protested the master mechanic.

"The hell!" screamed Sunny.

"Pull those chocks."

He revved up the ship. She responded slowly, got her nose into the wind. A night take-off with a cold motor meant instant death if it conked out on the up-climb. Yet he risked it. And by some miracle the Hisso picked up enough to get him off the ground. He heard the branches of the top trees scrape his under-carriage as the flailing prop sought to give him altitude. Then he was clear, and at three-quarter throttle, so as not to

choke the motor, he hedge-hopped north on the trail of the flashing exhausts of Bart Morrel.

HE HAD no clear idea of what to do now. The act was one of impulse seeking only to cover Bart Morrel by pretending to chase a female spy who had stolen a plane. Now, as the black ground swept back under his wings, he realized that Bart Morrel would be easy prey for any night-flying Fokker. A girl lashed to the wing would put the Spad off balance, render useless any aerial acrobatics. Presently, when the Hisso warmed up and the blast from the exhausts was a clear cherry red, he gained on Morrel by the minute. Within twelve minutes by his wrist watch he was hovering above and behind Bart Morrel's tail.

THE BARBED wire of the front lay underneath.

Their exhaust clatter was heard. Searchlights bit through the darkness with radiant swords to sweep the heavens for them. Ugly red eyes smashed out of the blackness as shrapnel and high explosives tore the air around them. They were bumped around like a small ship in a terrific gale. But both Spads hung on and presently the night pyrotechnics stopped. Blackness lay ahead, above and below. But Sunny Lawrence knew that grim-faced men at field telephones had shouted the alarm to the rear. German *jadgstaeffels* were being aroused from sleep. Tin ears were harkening to the sound of Spad drone. The Germans would come looking for them. Then hell would pop.

Lawrence followed Bart Morrel in a bank to the northeast. The altitude was no more than twelve hundred feet. Suddenly Morrel's Spad piqued over and began a shallow dive toward the ground. A flaming spark streaked down from the ship, struck the ground and burst into a fearful white glow. A magnesium flare to aid Bart Morrel in landing.

Sunny Lawrence groaned, realizing how powerless he was to prevent this traitor's act.

Morrel made a circle around the white radiance that lighted a field below. Sunny Lawrence held his altitude. Now, he suddenly lost track of the Spad entirely, and did not see it again until, like a black bat, it suddenly drifted into the white light, blotted it from view for a moment and then landed.

Sunny Lawrence turned the field in tight banks. His anxious eyes cut the night for sight of enemy aircraft. Presently he gave a groan. Spitting fire was climbing the sky out of the northwest. Fokkers! Their retreat would be cut off.

At the same moment he saw Morrel's Spad shoot up from earth, bank sharply and cut straight to the south. With a thrust of the throttle Sunny went in pursuit.

The Fokkers came. Worse, by some freak of luck Bart Morrel took an old air trail over the front, one frequently used by night bombing squadrons. And so, without warning, the blackness was suddenly cut by seven swords of radiance that shot upward like white fangs of death. Seven searchlights, their beams crossing like scissors.

SUNNY LAWRENCE was suddenly blinded by a brilliant white light that was more dazzling than sun rays. He tried to loop, he chandelled upward, made a reversement, tried every trick to throw the searchlights off the target. But he discovered then what many pilots already knew, that the "scissors" grip of searchlights was not to be shaken. If he escaped one beam, the other moved along and picked him up.

There, high in the heavens, caught like two flies skewered on white-hot pins, the two Spads were trapped.

And then the Fokkers came. One, two, three, four, five—eight of them, their wings thrashing the air, their Mercedes motors howling in rage, their Spandaus red-lipped already at long range burst.

The butchers-come to complete the kill.

There is nothing so deadly, so horrible, so nerve-racking as night combat. The flaming searchlights blind the eyes so that the enemy attacks unseen. The whirling crates howling along at two hundred miles an hour come head-on and collide before the danger is sensed. It is a mad, savage melee and death rattles through the air.

A RAKING flash of white tracer slugs ripped across Sunny Lawrence's center section. He turned, eyes blinded by the searchlight glare. He saw little spitting red eyes, saw slanting tracer fire like long streams of golden rain. They flew around him like a myriad of fireflies gone insane.

He nosed over, pulled up with a sucking gasp as he nearly dove on top of a ship just wheeling to the right. Looking up the searchlight radiance, he saw a kaleidoscope of planes and colors, visible for an instant, then swallowed by blackness.

He knew then that he and Bart Morrel didn't have a chance under God's blue sky to live. Death or mutilation lay here. And a strange doubt gripped him. Who was Bart Morrel that he should risk his neck here for him? Why should he endanger his tennis arm, his eyes, for a man who was a fool?

Fleeting visions crossed his brain as he chandelled up to avoid a raking blast of tracer fire. A picture of himself, one empty sleeve pinned across his chest, sitting on the sidelines watching men bat a tennis ball back and forth. Another vision: himself led by another man, crossing a street, hearing the din of traffic but not seeing it, hearing a pretty girl's voice but not seeing her. Walking through eternal night, darker, more hopeless than even this in which he so confusedly circled.

Death, yes, he could understand that. But the other. He groaned and shrank.

And then of a sudden, a black hawk of a Fokker lunged at him, sat astride his tail and began to pump cupro-nickle steel at fifty yards. A terrific blast. It rained around . Sunny Lawrence like incandescent hailstones. Wings shredded before the blast, pieces of strut flew like white arrows. The center section had a groove up it. Slugs ricocheted with blue flashes. A slug cut the elastic of his goggles and they dropped and his eyes filled with wind tears.

Nothing could live through that hail, yet the instinct to live mounted high in Sunny Lawrence. He wheeled and wriggled and chandelled and looped. His Spad acted for all the world like a small dragon fly impinned on mounting card, making the last feeble attempt to escape his doom. He succeeded for seconds at a time in throwing the grim Boche off the target—his own head—but he could not throw him off his tail.

IT WAS the end. Madly he fired a burst at a black bat that cut in front of him, momentarily illuminated by the merciless searchlights. Across the sky they roared—a doomed Spad and a raging Fokker—lit by the fires of hell from below. The Spad began to sag, her wings were loosened as brace wires parted with pistol-like reports.

The end! This was death. And death it should be. No mutilation, no blindness for Lawrence. He jazzed the Spad up on her nose. The human-like howl of the straining motor rose with a roar. Up he went, over on his back, half-rolled out and found the German shooting jagged flashes of lightning at him from beneath.

"Get me then," screamed Sunny. "Here. Here."

Madly he pounded his breast. And the tracer fire curving across the night was converging on him.

BUT AS the slugs marched with military precision up the fuselage, a streak of fire came out of the east. A hard-driven Spad flying on the wings of hell tore at the Bache and lightning spat from the muzzles of the Vickers. The German, concentrated on killing Lawrence, never knew what hit him. There was a brief spit of blue sparks as the burst of steel bounced off the Mercedes. Rocker arms, spark-plugs flew. A cylinder quit, then two, and the dropping tracer stream found the catch pan, loaded with oil. There was a brief burst of flame, the sky was illuminated yellowly. The doomed German nosed the flaming Fokker toward the ground in the last fruitless race against the fate of being burned alive.

Sunny Lawrence watched this in an unspeakable awe. That was Bart Morrel. Bart had seen that Sunny Lawrence had followed and now had saved his life. The second time!

A strange madness seized Sunny Lawrence then, a worshiping madness that sent him hurtling like a thunderbolt into the confused press of German ships. He shot his way through to get alongside Bart Morrel, easily seen in the flailing bayonets of light that shot up from the earth. Forgotten now was thought of mutilation, loss of arm, blindness; forgotten everything but the need of saving the man who had saved him. The blackness helped Lawrence and Morrel then, as they curved and zoomed and shot streaking tracer fire through the night. The German's numbers blocked their own game. Bart Morrel and Sunny Lawrence had but to shoot at every ship in sight, while the Germans, fearful of colliding or shooting down a comrade, had to make sure before opening fire.

The night wind was out of the north; the fight was drifting south. The very fates were working to aid these two. A few minutes more and they could pique down and

make a forced landing on their own side of the wire.

Sunny Lawrence fought like a madman, flashed across the sky like a blazing meteor. A black bat before his ringsights. Let him have it.

*Rac-rac rac rac rac!*

The Fokker sheered off. Another Boche took its place. Thoughts raced through Lawrence's brain. Where's he going? Banking sharply. Rake him from engine to tail assembly.

*Rac-rac-rac-rac!*

THE VICKERS became red hot, they trembled on their boltings, they chattered like malicious imps of death, and the fiery tracer flew like sparks off the devil's anvil. A great glory flooded Sunny Lawrence, the exaltation of combat, the fiery joy of knowing that death held no fear, that here was the most magnificent thing for which man was created, the fight to the death with another man, equally cunning, equally skillful.

Around and around the Hissos tore in mad scream; the Mercedes roared bell-like in defiance. Up and then down like a flash, riding your rudder bar, pumping slugs at a man whose contorted face looked back in the ghastly searchlight glare, expecting the death you're pumping at him.

*Rac-roc-rac-rac-roc!*

Time ceased to be; eternity was upon them. The sword-like flashes of the searchlights were fires from the opened doors of hell. The black bats flying there were wanted—down there. Let them have it.

Yank strafe! *Rac-rac-rac-rac-rac-rac!*

AND THEN, suddenly, as Sunny Lawrence was tearing along under and behind the tail of a panic-stricken kraut, death settled on him from above. He sensed hot fight greater than the dazzling glow from the searchlights below. He looked up—and shrank down in his cockpit. A Fokker was there—on fire—and it was settling, traveling down upon him. Ten feet above his head it hung, going in the same direction. He could almost reach up and touch the wheels. He yelled in fear. The ship would fall on him, set him on fire, crush him in his cockpit, send him reeling to earth in a flaming pyre.

Madly Lawrence yanked at his controls. Down the ship settled. A contorted face showed over the cockpit edge,

a face without goggles, a man whose face was writhing in the agony of burns. Around that face flames swept back from a burning bonfire of a motor. It was like a face of the devil's son peering out of the flame-riven door of hell itself. For a second, Sunny Lawrence saw it, saw the man hoist a leg up, over the cockpit, a leg coming out of orange flame. Then Sunny understood. A man, mad with fright, fearing the death jump to earth, was deliberately settling the plane here to try and jump to Sunny's plane.

Even as this realization came, the man jumped from eight feet. Sunny Lawrence heard the man's body thud against his fuselage. He saw the man's hands flash out in the white glow of the icy searchlights. The German clasped tightly, he sought to throw his legs over and sprawl flat on the fuselage. The Spad yielded before the weight, the tail went down, the nose up, the ship began to side-slip—then snapped into a spin. With a roar of mad flame bursting from the gas tank, the Fokker shot down past them, barely clearing the gyrating Spad.

Frantically, Sunny Lawrence cut his motor, neutralled the controls. Then he looked back, a mad idea of helping this insane German to safety engulfing him.

But he was helpless. The hard, jerky spin of the unbalanced Spad completed the doom of the German. His hands slipped, his legs lost their power to grip.

"*Ach, Christo!*" he screamed. "*Helfen mich. Gott—Gott—*"

HIS hands let go, his wildly clutching legs slipped off the smooth fuselage. He plunged downward into the sheath of white glory that was the searchlight. It revealed him for seconds, turning over and over and then plunging headforemost, hands outstretched like a swimmer making a swan dive. And then the night swallowed him and death covered him with a black cloak.

The Spad, relieved of this burden, came out of the spin on the third turn and Sunny Lawrence, white-faced, eyes wide in horror, poured the gun to her.

"Dear God!" he breathed, and bit his lip until the blood spurted.

As out of a trance he turned to the insane dog-fight. But he found the air empty. The black bats were no longer there. He looked wildly around for Bart Morrel.

And Bart Morrel had vanished.

As Sunny Lawrence wheeled on, two red-eyed explosions tore the air. German anti-aircraft shells! Then the Fokkers must have gone!

"Bart!" screamed Sunny Lawrence. "Bart! Where are you?"

The mad howl of his Hisso mocked the words, tore them from his lips, stifled them before they were uttered.

Bart was down! Killed! Sunny Lawrence cursed savagely, nosed his ship down the blinding streamer of radiance from the searchlight and in a power dive that left him riding his rudder bar, held to the ship by his safety belt, he screamed earthward.

"You lice!" he yelled. "You dirty murderous swine!"

STRAIGHT AT the searchlight he tore and his guns began to mutter, to chuckle, to rattle, to roar!

*Rac-rac-rac-rac!*

He howled down the blinding glare, firing at the little round circle of brilliance that was on the ground. But he had forgotten that he carried only two hundred and fifty rounds of ammunition and had used most of this in the night fight. On the thirtieth slug the trigger-pin fell emptily, the ejector mechanism clicked, the Vickers became silent. Two long streamers of empty cartridge belt floated out from the ribs of the Spad.

The searchlight mocked him, held him, until with a mad yell, he banked off and blindly coursed southward.

He found his tarmac only because the master mechanic had set out two flares and two men with searchlights marked the wind direction and the edge of the field. Somehow, he never remembered how, Sunny Lawrence set down the crate.

He climbed down, lurching drunkenly. "Bart!" he muttered. "Bart—" and collapsed in a dead faint.

**CHAPTER V  
DOOMED TO DIE**

LIEUTENANT SUNNY LAWRENCE came to his senses to find himself choking and gagging on raw cognac. He was stretched out on a table, he dimly perceived, in the operations room and there were other men there besides Willy the Grin and grim Captain Bing Hall. For a moment the youth was speechless, his brain awl with the mad pictures of the night fight. He could hear muttering, whispering, and presently Bing Hall forced another hooker of raw cognac between his teeth.

“Snap out of it,” Bing Hall ordered. “There are men here to question you.”

The words acted like an electric shock on Sunny Lawrence. Question him. Ah, then these would be Intelligence men and they would want to know how Anita Selfridge had made her getaway. They’d ask questions, find out about Bart Morrel. He was fully alert now, but he needed time to think, and to get it he lay with eyes closed. He instantly saw what must be done—cover up Bart Morrel. The man was dead, dead gloriously fighting. If he told these Intelligence operatives the truth then they would blast a dead man’s reputation, condemn him as a traitor because he was a fool over women. His mind clicked at terrific speed now. And so, presently, when Bing Hall threw another drink into him he sat up.

FOUR PAIRS of eyes regarded him curiously: Willy the Grin’s, Bing Hall’s, and two lean, hatchet-faced officers from G-2-D.

One of these now stepped forward. “Fully recovered, Lieutenant?” he asked sympathetically.

“I’m all right,” muttered Sunny Lawrence.

“Good. Time is the essence of this matter, Lieutenant. We’ve got the testimony of the sergeant of the guard, the master mechanic. They say they heard a plane take

off and that you rushed up a moment later, demanded a plane, and said a spy had escaped.”

“That’s right,” replied Sunny Lawrence. “That’s the way it happened.”

The Intelligence man stared at him thinly, eyes suspicious. “Let that go then, and tell us what happened before. How did you know a spy had escaped?”

“Her name is Anita Selfridge,” muttered Sunny Lawrence. “She was in the Cafe de la Paix tonight. She looked nervous, distraught. She had a long talk with Bart Morrel. She asked him to do something, and he refused. They had quite a fight, and she called him names. I wasn’t close enough to hear, but—” he paused, shrugged—“they don’t like me around this outfit, and I had nothing else to do but watch Bart. He lost his temper, and went out. When I had first come into the Cafe de la Paix, Bart had introduced me to the girl. She came over after Bart left and began to make a fuss over me. She wanted a lot to drink, she said, a binge. I bought her drinks, and she wasn’t drinking them, but wanted me to drink. She was deliberately trying to get me drunk. I was suspicious right away, because I didn’t like her much from the start. I didn’t do much drinking, but I pretended that I did. And finally she asked me to take her for a night hop. I told her we didn’t have two-seaters, only Spad pursuit ships. She asked a lot of questions about them, how long it took to warm them up, how we guarded them at night, was night flying difficult and what the length of our field was—” he broke off and asked, “give me another shot of cognac.”

BING HALL, watching him closely, gave him a drink. Then he resumed.

“She wanted me to take her out and show her the field. She said she was crazy about me, and when I mentioned Bart Morrel she said he was just a sap. I pretended to pass out. She went outside. She was nervous, I tell you, half-crazy from fear. The next thing I heard was the motor of our Dodge. I ran outside, and she was gone. She must have driven like hell because I ran up the street, got hold of a man with a side-car, a chap out of the Fourteenth Engineers, and he drove me to the tarmac. I got here too late to stop her. But I took off and tried to catch her. I failed. She made the other side. I ran into a flock of Jerries on the way back and they shot hell out of me. And so, that’s all I know.”

Bing Hall was a study then. His face was flat, grim, but his eyes were blazing. However, he said nothing, even when the two Intelligence men began to take Sunny Lawrence over the story, either seeking for flaws in it, or else trying to elicit more information. But Sunny Lawrence knew nothing more, he said, and stuck to the story in its essentials.

Finally one said: "But what became of Bart Morrel? He was in love with this spy—she's Elsa Shragmuller, and a damned dangerous spy."

Sunny Lawrence shrugged. "I haven't seen him since he went out."

When his nerves were jumping and he had repeated his story until he thought he would go mad, he finally cried: "For God's sake, that's all I know. I'm dead for sleep. Can't you come back tomorrow? You can't do anything tonight. I tell you I saw her land in German territory, in a field beyond Seichprey."

HE SHUT his eyes, pretended extreme exhaustion. And presently they went away, promising to come back on the morrow. When they had been gone five minutes Sunny Lawrence sat up to go to his own quarters.

"Wait a minute," said Bing Hall, strangely calm, raising a hand. "Just a minute. You beat it back to bed, Willy. I want to talk to Lawrence alone."

The cherubic adjutant took his departure. Bing Hall saw the door closed, knew they could not be overheard. Slowly he walked toward Sunny Lawrence until he stood almost chest to chest, immense, formidable, hard. Without warning his right hand flashed up and the palm exploded across Sunny Lawrence's face with a report like a pistol shot. Lawrence staggered before the blow, nearly fell.

"It's all right to lie to them," said Bing Hall loweringly. "Keep them out of it—we'll wash our own dirty linen. But now, you little' swine, you tell me what happened. Why did Bart Morrel—"

SUNNY LAWRENCE was swept by a blind rage. "You dirty skunk," he yelled, and sprang forward and swung a terrific punch at Bing Hall's chest. It struck with a thump, but the big man never even took a step backward. His hands reached out, grabbed Sunny Lawrence and despite the youth's struggles, held him helpless.

His face like granite, his voice low, tense, he repeated: "When you get through with the horse-collar, tell me the truth. The truth, do you hear, or, by God, I'll beat your head off."

His gray eyes seemed to have fire in them, his face was red and lowering with suppressed rage. For a frantic instant Sunny Lawrence had thought of telling the truth, for were not Bing Hall and Bart Morrel pals of years' standing? Each had saved the life of the other more times than could be counted. Side by side they had soldiered around the world. But something, a ticsin of alarm, warned Sunny Lawrence that Bing Hall was merciless. No, he could not tell.

"You heard the story," he yelled, trying to wrest loose. "That's the way it was. Let go of me!"

Bing Hall suddenly struck him a savage blow in the face. "The truth, you miserable whelp!" he cried. "That girl never came up here, took a crate and beat it. It's all right for those lousy Intelligence guys to believe that. But not me. I want to know who helped her get away. It was Morrel, wasn't it? Bart? Answer me."

"No! No!" Sunny Lawrence was blinded by tears of impotent fury. "It wasn't he. He never helped her. He wasn't around. If you want to know, it was me who helped her. I was crazy about her. Still am! They were going to shoot her. And I helped her get a crate and then flew after her to pretend pursuit and protect myself."

He saw the disbelieving stare of Bing Hall's eyes.

"What difference did it make?" he raved on, still feebly trying to tear loose from the terrific grip. "She was through. She was caught. She's on her own side of the lines. She dare not come back She can't hurt anybody now. She's washed up—finished."

A SILENCE fell then, and they stood like two bronze statues. Unblinking, Bing Hall stared into the wide eyes before him. Their gaze held and clashed for what seemed centuries.

"Are you—are you doing this to protect Bart Morrell?" muttered Bing Hall. "You've always been crazy about him. It looks like one of his dumb tricks. You look as if you had more sense about women. Are you protecting—"

"No, I tell you. That's the truth. Bart wouldn't do it, and I wanted her, and I did it. You can ask Bart when he comes back."

On a sudden Bing Hall gave Sunny Lawrence a push that sent him spinning across the room to bring up with a crash against the wall.

"I guess maybe that's the truth," he said strangely. "No man would confess such a swinish, idiotic thing on himself unless it was the truth."

Sunny Lawrence's fists doubled so tightly that the nails bit half-moons in his palms. He said: "And I suppose you're going to call in those Intelligence men and turn me over and get me shot?"

Bing Hall's hugh arms folded across his chest. "No," he said slowly, "we wash our own dirty linen in this outfit. No use bringing disgrace on the squadron. And probably you got a family that wouldn't want it known the son was such a damn fool. No, I got better ways of handling it than that!"

"And what is that?"

"You go to your quarters," ordered Bing Hall, slowly. "Don't try to beat it away because I'll be watching. You're going to die, you dirty little rat. But you'll get a chance to die like a man."

"What are you going to do?" cried Sunny Lawrence.

"You'll find out at dawn," suddenly Bing Hall seemed to grow in stature, his arms reached out. "Get to your quarters," he muttered thickly, "before I lose control of myself and kill you myself. Go, do you hear?" he roared.

Sunny Lawrence went out the door and through the darkness to his and Bart Morrel's little cubicle. Behind him, steps thudding, came the remorseless Bing Hall. Lawrence went into his bunk, and the door lock grated behind him. Then the steps retreated and Sunny Lawrence was a prisoner. He sat down on the edge of his bunk, knees apart, elbows on them, and hands cupping his face in his palms.

A SWARM of thoughts came to taunt him. His brain called him a fool. He was putting himself in this situation to protect a dead man. He was never going to play tennis again, hear the gallery applaud a splendid return, a hard "get", a beautifully played set. He was done, washed up!

But the other part of his brain replied: "He saved your life. He pulled you out of sure death. You owe it to him."

And according to Sunny Lawrence's code, that was enough. You played the game, sportsmanlike and hard,

but you never let a pal down, you never quit worshipping the god of your youth. Tennis, life, career—you laid them all on the altar in defense.

"They'll never know," he muttered aloud. "Never."

And thereupon he lay himself down upon the cot and waited for the dawn and death.

## CHAPTER VI MILE-HIGH COMBAT

DAWN! GRAY DIRTY light creeping out of an eastern night, fighting darkness, driving it before the oncoming sun. A moaning wind that howled mournfully across the tarmac, cold, and miserable.

The door to Sunny Lawrence's cubicle opened. He had been in the sleep of exhaustion, but at the slight sounds of the key grating in the lock he leaped to his feet. Gray face in a gray light, bright eyes blazing with determination.

Huge and formidable Bing Hall loomed in the doorway. His eyes fastened thoughtfully on Sunny Lawrence. In them was a strange, weird expression that Lawrence had never seen there before. He seemed weary, pale.

"Get up, come on," he said, not unkindly.

Without comment Sunny Lawrence got into his shoes, puttees and buckled on his Sam Browne belt. He reached for his leather helmet and goggles, his flying coat, for he foresaw the sort of death that Bing Hall had planned for him.

"Never mind those," said Bing Hall. "You won't need them—now."

Sunny Lawrence stifled the surprise the retort had engendered, and silently followed the big captain out onto the tarmac. The clatter of a machine-gun being tested at the range struck sharply on the ear, vying with the explosions of cold Hissos being warmed up on the deadline. Mechanics were swarming over four ships, two of whose motors were slowly idling. Silently Captain Bing Hall led the way to the operations room. He thrust open the door, stepped aside for Sunny Lawrence to enter.

The latter did so, wondering what form Hall's punishment would take.

The door closed behind him, he looked around, stopped as if shot and staggered back.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Bart! Bart Morrel!"

Seated there, coolly smoking a hand-made cigarette, sat the man he thought lying dead in a crushed cockpit out in No Man's Land. Bart Morrel's face was a little pale, but he smiled as he saw Sunny Lawrence's astonishment.

SURE, KID," he replied composedly. "It's me." He grinned. "Quite a scrap last night, huh?"

Sunny Lawrence swung, peered into Bing Hall's silent, stern face. One look told him that Bing Hall knew the truth. The latter pushed Sunny Lawrence gently to a chair, "I know what happened, lad," he said softly. "You're just a damn fool—but I sort of like damn fools like you." He sighed. "I was pretty rough on you, lad, but when a man comes to an outfit surrounded by all the tinsel you were wearing, it's pretty hard to judge what kind of a man he is. I know now—and here's my hand on it."

Slowly, unbelievably, Sunny Lawrence took the hand, felt the gorilla-like squeeze of it.

"I thought you were dead," he muttered to Bart Morrel.

"Shot away my prop," replied Morrel. "Made a forced landing in No Man's Land just ahead of our wire. Hit a shell-hole and smashed the crate to hell and gone. You did a good job, kid. I knew it was you following when I circled up after landing Anita." He smiled shyly. "That was damn fine of you—after I punched you down."

He glanced at his wrist watch.

"Well," he flung down the cigarette, stamped on it, "it's getting late. Bing, better get this over with."

HE CAME over to Sunny Lawrence and held out his hand. "You're aces with me, lad. You'll come out all right. Good luck and so long."

He moved toward the door. A sudden spasm of terror seized Sunny Lawrence. What were these men doing? Why this odd, strained situation? What was going to happen?

He seized Bart Morrel's arm. "Where are you going," he cried. "You don't go on patrol until after chow."

Bart Morrel laughed shortly. "I don't need any chow."

"What does he mean?" cried Lawrence, turning to Bing Hall.

Thin-eyed flat-mouthed Bing Hall stared back at him. "Bart's going out on lone patrol—and he isn't coming back," he said in a monotone.

Sunny Lawrence staggered, his face drained pale. "You mean—you mean, he's going out and—and die?"

Slowly Bing Hall nodded. "That spy woman knew a lot about our first line outfits. The Jerries raided last night—or rather a couple of hours ago and wiped out three companies of the Seventh Infantry. Caught them flat. Bart Morrel's to blame for that. He's paying the price."

REALIZATION CAME to Sunny Lawrence. The death that Bing Hall had condemned him to was now being inflicted on Bart Morrel. He darted forward, seized Bing Hall's sleeve. "But you can't," he cried. "You can't do that. Bart Morrel's your pal. He saved your life that time in the Balkans. He's been your chum for years. You can't let him go like that."

Not ungently Bing Hall removed the restraining hand. His face was grim, but his eyes had the hurt look Sunny had seen there from the first.

"Sure he's my pal," he replied in the odd strained voice. "We've bunked together and swapped lice for years. I love him like a brother. Aside from being a fool over women, he's the squarest, finest guy I've ever known. But he played the hand once too often. Good American lads died last night on account of him. He's got to pay for that."

Tears flooded into Sunny Lawrence's eyes. "You damned swine!" he yelled. "Haven't you got any sense of decency? Have you got the coldblooded guts to send your pal out to his death? The man who saved your life?"

Bing Hall's grasp tightened and he jerked Sunny Lawrence to him. His face was terrible to behold. "You—ah, God!" he muttered. "Do you think it's nice for me to be here and know he's got to go out there and die? Don't you think I can feel? Worse than you ever thought of feeling. I love him, do you hear? And I'm sending him out there because he and I play the game on the justice of right. Whether he's my friend or not, he let that girl get away—helped her to get away—and good men are being shoveled underground as a result. He's got to pay."

"No—" Sunny Lawrence stopped, a terrible fear eat-

ing at his stomach. From the dead-line came the roar of a jazzed Hisso. It was goosing out of line, blasting the tail into the wind. Bart Morrel was going—going on the death patrol.

“Bart!” he yelled, and raced from the room. Bing Hall ran after him. They came to the ship just as Bart Morrel was about to open the throttle for the take-off. Sunny Lawrence sprang onto the lower wing, grabbed Bart’s shoulder.

“To hell with him,” he yelled above the idling Hisso. “He can’t make you do this, Bart. Don’t do it. After all—”

BART MORREL pushed up his goggles. His face was still pale, but his eyes smiled.

“Forget it, kid,” he said. “Bing and I have our own standards. He can’t make me do this—but I do it. A lot of good guys are pushing daisies—”

“But you were drunk, crazy,” cut in Sunny Lawrence.

“Drunk or crazy doesn’t matter; I got them killed. I couldn’t go on myself. Bing understands. So will you some time.” He twisted in his seat as Bing Hall came up on the other side. He held out his hand.

“So long, Bing, I’ll see you in hell.”

Bing Hall took the hand, squeezed it, mouth twitching. “So long Bart, take a lot of company with you.”

The blast of the prop stream tore Sunny Lawrence from his grip. The Spad trundled down the field, gathered speed, its tail came up, it streaked across the tarmac and lifted prettily in a climbing turn, leveled off over the pond and began to spiral for altitude.

For a moment Sunny Lawrence stood stunned by what had happened. Then on a sudden he turned and raced to the dead-line. “Twist that one up,” he yelled. “I’m going after him. He can’t—”

He stopped speaking and leaped into the cockpit. The motor was already warm. At the word “contact” the greaseball gave the prop a twist and the motor caught. In an instant Sunny Lawrence had blasted out of line.

Vaguely he saw Bing Hall rushing at him, cursing, yelling. Then the Spad had gathered power, was shooting down the field like a projectile. Sunny Lawrence took her off in a sweeping zoom, leveled off at two hundred and raced the ship upward in tight spirals. Watching the doomed Spad of Bart Morrel ahead, he never saw Bing Hall take-off in a Spad and start in swift pursuit.

## CHAPTER VII THE ACE FROM HELL

FOURTEEN THOUSAND feet up! Rosy-tinted clouds to the northeast. A world below struggling against the cloak of darkness. High in the heavens three orange Spads glistening like dragonflies in the glory of the new sun. Below, a thunderous roar, smoke, a million men like moles of the earth seeking to kill each other; high above, a man seeking in the clean heavens the death he had chosen for himself.

Anti-aircraft shells bursting like black roses. Sausage balloons dragging at their cables like chained elephants and swaying as uneasily. And out of the northeast a circus of twelve German Fokkers droned south.

On they came, those Fokkers, three skimming along at eight thousand feet; three more riding at ten thousand, alert to pounce upon the Yanks who thought these lower layer ships were white meat. And at fourteen thousand feet six more ready to plunge downward and surprise the unwary. The usual Boche trick!

SUNNY LAWRENCE saw none of them. His eyes were only for the Spad he was pursuing. He never realized German aircraft were near until he saw Bart Morrel’s Spad bank like a swinging falcon and plunge in a vertical dive on the second layer of Germans. Magnificent, that dive, winging down out of the sun. The Germans never knew what hit them. One moment they flew steadily in echelon formation, the next a hurtling meteor leaped upon them, scattered them, sent one reeling down out of control, a dead pilot at the stick, sent another screaming in mad fear back the way he had come.

And then hell blew asunder. As Bart Morrel chandelled upward to strike the surviving Germans, the sky rained Fokkers. Out of the sun they came, Spandaus hot, keen eyes behind the ring-sights. Fabric thundered, brace wires screamed, motors howled. Hun-strafe!

A hoarse yell left Sunny Lawrence's lips. He wheeled to strike into the center of this writhing mass of ships. In an instant he saw the Boche trick. One went vertically down the sky with Bart Morrel riding its tail like grim death.

As if this were the signal, one Fokker—a triplane—slid in on Bart Morrel's right. Another wheeled in on the left. Almost by magic a third howled down, curved in madly and rode Bart Morrel's tail. Spandaus spat curving lines of gray smoke as the tracers bit into the Yank's tail assembly.

"A box!" groaned Sunny Lawrence. "They got him—got him."

It was true. The four ships made an irregular square as they screamed down the sky. The leading Fokker went on, luring Bart Morrel after him. The two ships on either side prevented Morrel from curving away from the Nemesis that rode his tail. He was caught in a box.

Sunny Lawrence's Spad groaned as he flung it into a vertical plunge so steep that he stood erect on his rudder bar, and his body strained at the safety belt that held him to this diving projectile. Like a mad ghost he lashed at the tripe. The man never knew what hit him. One fleeting second he had to look back and see what roaring devil this was that smashed at him with cupronickle slugs. Then a ten-shot burst caught him in the middle of the back and spewed his heart out against the instrument board. He died between two breaths.

SUNNY LAWRENCE banked so sharply that the Spad's wings seemed to lay back like the ears of a dog. He was angling in toward Bart Morrel's pursuer.

He pressed the Bowdoin stick trips. The Vickers trembled on their boltings, smoke haze came back to blacken Sunny Lawrence's face. The spitting flashes came from the muzzles like the red tongues of a mighty snake.

*Rac-rac-rac-rac-rac!*

The sweeping burst caught the Fokker at the tail assembly. In military precision the slugs marched up the fuselage, stitching the holes of death. The German, in an insane frenzy of fear, flung his Fokker up in a zoom. But wings were never meant to stand such a strain. The lower left wing folded back against the side of the fuselage, hung there a brief interval, and was torn loose by the fierce presence of the wind. The Fokker reeled like a struck bird and fluttered down the sky.

THAT WAS the last coherent memory Sunny Lawrence had. The next instant the Fokkers swarmed up the sky, they smashed downward in power dives. They coalesced in a tight ball that held Bart Morrel and Sunny Lawrence in the center as Indians circling on horseback trapped the old-time covered wagon.

Then they proceeded coolly to shoot these incredible Yanks out of their crates. The air grew bright with tracer stream; ears numbed to the howl of the roar of straining motors; the sky shrieked to the wire scream, trembled to the ghastly chuckle of red-hot Spandaus,

Into this turning mass of bright wings Bing Hall tore, cursing Sunny Lawrence's damn foolishness. It was almost like three men standing back to back fighting off the attack of three times their number.

Aces from Hell! Men down below, watching that magnificent attack, screamed in suspense, prayed in fear, howled in pride. Turn and twist, leap-frog and shoot. Zoom and roll! Bank and dive.

Sunny Lawrence saw nothing. His eyes were to the ring-sights of his guns. There's one that rolled. White cross. Let him have it.

*Racka-racka-racka!*

A white-faced German, mouth black and open in fear. He's gone! Another came slashing in. Turn away, damn you, or take it! The German came racing into the white tracer stream. Slugs bounced off his motor, slit his wings, down he plunged and came slanting up from beneath. Steel bullets came raining through Sunny Lawrence's floorboards. A terrific grooving pain in his left leg. Iron went home that time. But the leg still could work the rudder bar.

Down plunged a German, leaving a mile-long train of black smoke in his wake. Another was pressing Bart Morrel close, shooting the tail assembly to shreds. Sunny Lawrence pounced at him. The tail surfaces seemed to leap into his ring-sights. Outward smashed the bullets from his Vickers like giant needles. They flew like a fistful of death into the fuselage. The German turned his head, started to twist away.

ACROSS HIS face the bright tracers screamed, struck home. Splotches of blood flew that the German's prop blast caught and sent hurtling back to spatter on Sunny

Lawrence, so close was he to the Fokker's tail. The man screamed, but the sound went unheard. His hands covered his face. The ship, unguided, whirled out and smashed into another Fokker that had no time to leap-frog. The two, inextricably welded together, dropped down the sky.

Less than ten seconds later Sunny Lawrence found himself trapped. A German came racing up from behind, dropped down a bit until he saw below Lawrence's back wash, and made his Spandaus to speak.

He was within thirty yards; point blank range.

*Wham!*

A fifteen-shot burst reduced Lawrence's right Vickers to junk.

*Br-r-r-r-r-r-rup!*

Another burst; into the tail surfaces this time. The right rudder control was shot away. The Spad began to slip.

Death! Too late for Sunny Lawrence to do anything now. He tried. The left rudder control wire went. He couldn't turn now. He tried to zoom, and an elevator wire went with a pistol-like report. Helpless! The German knew it, crept closer. Guns vomited smoke and red flame. Tracer stream like coiling gray snakes!

Sunny Lawrence turned. He could look at this death unafraid. The German pointed the nose of his Fokker. The tracer stream moved to the right, crept closer. Closer. Fraying the trailing edge now, picking at the center section, shooting over Sunny Lawrence's head.

A LITTLE adjustment now, and the stream of flying fire would move lower, smash the life out of Sunny Lawrence, send him reeling down the sky.

But the range correction never came. Out of the east like a cyclone came a wildly gyrating Spad. It was shot to pieces. It had no tail control, and was maneuvering on its ailerons alone. It was Bart Morrel, body out by slugs, a tracer bullet burning like fire in his stomach, his Spad ready to fall apart.

He was hardly conscious, and quite mad with the pain and knowledge of death. And that phosphorous bullet in his stomach burned and burned.

He saw Sunny Lawrence's white face looking back expectantly for the final burst. He saw the German touching his stick to correct his range. He saw that he could never dive into the German in time to prevent that death burst from striking home.

Somehow Bart Morrel's hands found his safety belt, below which the tracer slug in his guts burned through to his backbone. The safety belt fell off. The side-slipping Spad hurtled at the German. Three yards away. The German's tracer stream was creeping along the whaleback of the Spad. Tearing into Sunny Lawrence's right arm, ripping through his shoulder muscles.

"Good kid!" muttered Bart Morrel.

He reared up, abandoned his Spad. Headforemost he dove out of the seat. His sprawling body hurtled through space. Down it fell squarely into the path of the German Fokker. The propeller hit it with a sickening smash. The wooden blades went to pieces even as the body itself did. The unleashed motor screamed madly for a second and exploded, throwing cylinders and parts to the foul winds. A valve stem came hurtling back and pierced through the German pilot's chest like an arrow and let the life out of him so swiftly his soul was confused.

AND WITH Bart Morrel's mangled body somehow held to the battered nose of the Fokker, the doomed crate went into a flat spin and wiggled and curved down the sky until it melted into the greens and browns of the carpet a mile below.

Sunny Lawrence had seen that stupendous feat of self-sacrifice. He had been looking back when the hurtling body shot down in front of the Fokker.

"No! No, Bart, not that!" he screamed, and then he realized that it was too late. Morrel had met the death he had played with for so many years. The Germans, panic stricken, awed by such tactics and shaken by their losses, veered off and flew into the protection of a cloud bank.

SUNNY LAWRENCE nosed down by cutting his Hisso, and following the doomed Fokker with its dead burden.

"Bart!" he muttered. "Oh, God, Bart, move, show me you're not—"

But the twisted body, so awkwardly arranged on the nose of the Fokker, never moved, nor did anything in the ship move until the Fokker smashed its nose into the ground. There came a bright flash of fire, volumes of smoke and a great bonfire that blazed for minutes. It was the last Sunny Lawrence ever saw of Bart Morrel.

Back on the tarmac where he piled up his crippled Spad in one crash of broken wings, greaseballs lifted his wounded body from the cockpit. Bing Hall sent him to Evacuation Hospital Four at Souilly. Here he lay for days in a delirium, calling for Bart Morrel, the man he had worshiped above all.

It was all of a month later that Bing Hall came to see him. He was convalescent then. Bing Hall silently shook hands. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," Sunny Lawrence's face looked ten years older; in his eyes was a look that would never leave them.

"Newspapermen and camera guys outside, want to talk to you, get your story," said Bing.

"To hell with them," replied Lawrence.

"There's a transfer for you to the states, too."

Sunny Lawrence stiffened, sat up, held out his hand. "No," he cried passionately. "Not that. I couldn't—they don't know what it's all about. Let me stay, Bing, stay here."

HE SAW the look of suffering in Bing Hall's eyes, the look that would never leave, the look that told Bing Hall had seen the end of the man he had loved above most.

"If I went back it would be letting Bart down," whispered Sunny Lawrence. "Let me stay, Bing, with you."

Bing Hall's hand gently closed around Sunny Lawrence's thin one.

"Sure you can stay, kid," he muttered softly. "You can have B Flight. You're all wool and a yard wide, kid. I'd like to have you stay—and bunk"—he hesitated—"and bunk with me if you'd want to."

"I'd like that," said Sunny Lawrence wistfully.