

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

TWO ACES ~ AND A JOKER

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

Kirby, leader of the famous “Three Mosquitoes,” knew that he was too worn out to jump into another fight. He must get his plane back to the drome. But that lone Fokker that appeared suddenly below him looked too easy to miss—it was a cinch! He dived, with motor roaring, but it wasn’t such a cinch—

KIRBY WAS FLYING ALONE at an altitude of twelve thousand feet, flying homeward in the dusk, when he suddenly saw the Jerry plane. The German ship seemed to appear magically in the grayish air below—a whisking, birdlike shape which Kirby vaguely distinguished as a Fokker D7. It was also flying alone, and its pilot was obviously unaware of the Spad which lurked in the sky above.

A gleam came into Kirby’s goggled eyes, and his blood tingled with warm exhilaration. Cold meat! A cinch! From his advantageous position he could swoop down on that Fokker and shoot it to bits. Ought to plug him on the first dive.

Yet, even though his hand closed more tightly about his joystick, he hesitated. For he realized that this was no time for him to be picking a fight. He had gone through a most trying day, and he was tired. Just now he was returning from a ground-strafing expedition which he and his comrades, “Shorty” Carn and Travis—for the trio, known as the “Three

Mosquitoes,” invariably did their work together—had carried out.

The other two Mosquitoes, their planes both having been shot up considerably by machine-gun fire from the ground, had been forced to withdraw and return home. Kirby, whose machine had fortunately escaped the bullets, had stayed until his work was completed. Now he was on his way to the drome. And the night was coming on fast. It would soon be dark. After all, it might take more time than he figured to plug this Boche. Once it really became dark, he would have a difficult time finding his way home. And he did not have any too much gas or ammunition either.

But then, as his eyes picked out that fleeting Fokker below once more, Kirby’s reckless fighting spirit, his love for combat, got the better of him, and all doubts and fears were cast to the winds. How could he resist this opportunity? It looked so easy. Just dive straight down on him. It would only take seconds—a few bursts into his tail.

“Hell!” the Mosquito burst out, beneath the roar of

his engine. "Here goes! Watch out, Fritz, here I come!"

And, with a savage gesture, he shoved the joy-stick forward. The little Spad nosed over with a roar, went screaming into a steep dive. Down, down, down, with the wind rushing through the flying wires, and the whole ship trembling as if the frenzied speed of the drop must break it to pieces. Faster and faster now it went, now plunging through space like a plummet, smoke trailing from its exhaust stacks.

Nerves alert, muscles tense, Kirby leaned forward to his sights, while his fingers closed about the stick-triggers. The Fokker was looming into clearer focus below now—a black and gray ship with checkered wings, and the usual black cross markings. The German still seemed oblivious of the Spad which was dropping upon him. Even now Kirby was swooping into range, swooping right down on the Fokker's tail. Carefully, the Mosquito sought to frame the Jerry plane in the ring of his sights. There it was now!

He pressed his trigger-buttons. The Spad's twin forward machine guns stuttered into blazing life, vibrated thunderously. Two streams of tracer spat from their muzzles, went zipping downwards on their smoky trail. A thrill of savage exultation swept Kirby. A good shot! Right through the Fokker's top wing.

With his usual expert precision, Kirby swept out of his dive right behind the German, and proceeded to "sit on his tail." Relentlessly he kept pressing the triggers, and his gun continued to pour out their deadly streams of lead. Kirby saw the bullets tearing into the German ship's tail assembly, saw bits of wood and fabric leaping from the Fokker. It wouldn't be long now. A few more rounds—that was all it would require.

But then he got the surprise of his life.

With a swiftness and unexpectedness which took him completely unawares, that Fokker seemed to rear like a sensitive steed. It literally stood on its tail, pivoted around, and the next thing Kirby knew it was rushing towards him head-on, both guns blazing! A fusillade of tracer whistled in the Mosquito's ears, and he heard the tick of bullets through his fuselage. He swore fiercely. He had picked the wrong Jerry! He had picked an ace! No ordinary flyer could have put a ship through such a breathless maneuver.

The gleam faded from Kirby's eyes, and his expression changed to one of serious thought. Shooting down this bird wasn't going to be so simple after all. It was not execution, as he had first planned, but real combat. The Jerry was good, and he was

willing to fight. Well—the Mosquito swore again—all right. Guess he could match the best of them.

THE shrill clatter of a machine gun overhead told him that the German had succeeded in getting altitude on him, and he cursed himself for not acting more swiftly. The Fokker was whipping down on him like a blood-crazed vulture. Furiously, Kirby shot up for an Immelmann turn. The black and gray Fokker swept around to force him on the outside arc, and again came the whistle of bullets. Perforations appeared in the wing-surface above Kirby. He rolled out of the turn, and banked over. The German, now below him, zoomed right for him, and for a second Kirby's blood went cold. The man must be crazy! He seemed eager to collide with Kirby, frantically, the Mosquito rolled over, then hung in a shivering stall. The Fokker swept past, so close that Kirby could see the helmeted head of the pilot clearly—leaning to his sights between the glistening barrels of his twin Spandaus. Kirby shook his fist at him.

"Look where you're going, you flying fool!" the Mosquito yelled out, wishing the man could hear. But the German did not even bother to glance over at him, and in a second he was behind the Spad once more. Cursing, Kirby performed a swift vertical bank, which brought the two planes face to face. The fight was on for sure!

And it was one of the grimmest, fiercest, and most nerve-racking fights Kirby had ever been through. Not only did he find the German well able to match him in every trick, every maneuver, turn, and twist, but the Jerry seemed to have absolutely no nerves at all. Never before had Kirby seen such utter recklessness, such sheer disregard of one's own life. He became more and more convinced that he was fighting with a madman, and he had to employ all his wits, all his skill as a pilot, to avoid collision with the swift Fokker, which always seemed to be coming at him head-on.

On they fought, in the waning daylight, banking, diving, gyrating about one another like two maddened hawks. Kirby was getting more and more rattled. At last he saw that there was method in the German's madness. By always threatening to ram Kirby, he kept the Mosquito on pins and needles, so that the latter could not throw himself fully into the attack. And his bullets were telling—telling more and more. Kirby's fuselage was now full of holes, and an irregular patch of blue sky showed in the top wing instead of the taut khaki fabric that had formerly been there.

Desperately, with his ammunition and gas supply constantly diminishing, Kirby fought anew. He too began to get reckless. He could resort to threats too. He called the German's bluff, and when the Fokker came head-on again, Kirby did not budge from his course. But the Mosquito could not breathe until, as the plane seemed just about to collide, the German suddenly veered out of the way.

Still it went on, both men getting more and more reckless in their determination to send the other hurtling down. It was close-range stuff, and terrific. The planes missed each other by scant inches, one of the two pilots having brains enough to swerve away in time. This could not go on, and Kirby knew it. They were lunatics to keep it up. And, worse yet, Kirby was getting thoroughly exhausted. The strain of the day's work was beginning to tell on him. The knowledge that his strength was ebbing made him all the more desperate. He must hurry, must end this fight by hook or crook. And, damn it all—his face turned crimson, his eyes narrowed to mere slits—he would!

With a berserk challenge that all but brought the blood to his mouth, he kicked his plane around and roared at the fleeting shape of the Fokker. His rage fed his skill, and his plane responded like a sensitive racehorse. It fairly cleaved the air, and its guns spat with vicious fury. He saw the bullets going into the body of the Fokker, and the sight of them spurred him to even greater recklessness. He knew that he was heading straight for the Fokker, as the German had gone for him, but he didn't give a damn. But the German didn't either! Calmly, the Jerry started to turn. The Spad rushed on, with frenzied speed.

Then it happened. It happened before Kirby could change his course, before he could slow up the furious momentum his speeding plane had gathered.

There was a shrill, rending crash which split his eardrums, and a scream of breaking struts and flying wires, a groaning of shattered wood and ripped fabric. And, dazed and bewildered, Kirby realized.

The two planes had collided! Their wings had locked, and they were fastened together!

For a split second, guided by sheer instinct, Kirby struggled with his controls like a madman, and the Jerry no doubt did likewise. But it was useless. And a spasm of giddy horror shook Kirby as the two planes, locked together, nosed over as one and started spinning slowly downwards.

Down, down, down, twisting and spiraling, with the blurred earth and sky in a confused whirl.

Instinctively, both pilots had shut off their engines—for running motors would have made the danger all the greater. And when the roar of motors stopped, the sound of the wind which rushed up at them rose to a piercing, unholy scream—the ghastly, inhuman cry which aviators know when they go spinning down.

Vaguely, confusedly, Kirby glimpsed the figure of the German pilot, right opposite him, standing up in the cockpit, jumping around crazily, as if he intended to hurl himself into space. The panic of the other man seemed to bring home to Kirby the full realization of their predicament, and he himself became panic-stricken. They were trapped like a couple of rats! No parachutes by which they could save themselves! No method by which they could combat this common danger. Their planes were interlocked, and there was nothing they could do about it.

AND now the ground was looming up right below. Up it came, inexorably, with ever-increasing speed. A dizzy nausea overcame Kirby, and he felt faint with a terror such as he had never before experienced. It was the terror one feels when absolutely powerless to escape from impending disaster. God, if only he could do something! Frantically he moved his hands and legs in futile resistance to his predicament. Wild sobs tore from him as he only became more aware of his utter helplessness. He was not afraid to die, but let him at least die fighting, go down in a blaze of glory and action. Not like this—an accident, due partly to his own folly. His comrades, Carn and Travis—what would they think when they heard that their leader had fallen through a collision?

The ground was right beneath them now, leaping up at them in a sickening blur of brown and gray. The two planes, locked in deadly embrace, were spinning towards it, nose-first. Desperate, Kirby found himself pulling at his safety-belt as if, like the German, he wanted to jump out. But there was no time even for that. They were going to strike! Now!

Mechanically, Kirby's arms flew before his goggled face. A cry broke from him.

Crash! The shivering impact flung him backwards with a violence which rattled his very teeth. Again came the rending sound of shattering wood and fabric, of twisted metal. Kirby had a vague sense of being hurled all around, then it seemed that he lay in the darkness with a great weight upon him, a weight which was crushing the breath out of him.

Instinctively, he began to struggle with all his

strength. At the same time his keen mind, always quick to size up the situation, began to grasp things, tentatively. Facts drove themselves home. They had crashed—that was certain. They had crashed, but, miraculously, he had not been killed or even maimed. Nor was there any fire. Lucky!

Then he realized that he was lying beneath a lot of wreckage, and, employing all his strength, he struggled to extricate himself. Pushing the debris off him with his broad shoulders, he crawled along. Progress was slow and painful, and he wondered if he'd ever get out. But suddenly he was out, out in the clear but fading daylight. Dazedly, still trying to piece things together, he got his footing. His body was a mass of aches and scratches, but otherwise he was unharmed. His eyes fell upon the wreckage, took it in with a single glance. The two planes were cracked up beyond repair—twisted and shattered. Kirby shook his head. Yes, he was lucky to come out of that junk-heap alive and unharmed!

But then he saw that there was a reason for it. He noticed now, that the ground beneath him was soggy and slimy: his feet were in it almost up to his ankles. A light of grim understanding came into his eyes. A swamp! Fate had been merciful. The crash had not been fatal because the earth was soft and had deadened the impact. But what a god-forsaken place! A barren stretch of swampy meadow, surrounded by half-rotted trees. Where in hell was it? Was it German or Allied ground? There was no way of telling, for there were no signs of any life, not —

He broke off, starting with the sudden remembrance that he had not crashed alone. The German—what of him? Had he been killed? Anxiously Kirby trudged through the murk, looking at the wreckage. He walked around the shattered planes, was coming to the other side of them.

“Hands up!”

The words, perfectly pronounced, but spoken with peculiar harshness, stopped the Mosquito in his tracks. There before him stood a man in flying togs, a tall, erect figure with a young but earnest-looking face which bore the stamp of inflexible determination as well as reckless courage. The eyes were a cold, steely grey. The man was a stern Prussian. And in his hand flashed a long-barreled Luger, which was trained unwaveringly on Kirby. The Mosquito cursed himself for his lack of foresight. He should have drawn his own Colt, figuring that the German might be on the other side of the wreckage. The Jerry, too, had escaped unscathed, though his togs were quite tattered and

there were several ugly scratches on his face.

“Surrender!” the German spoke again, in perfect English. “I’m taking you prisoner!”

THEN Kirby came out of his daze with a shock. The thought of being taken prisoner roused his fighting spirit once more. His eyes blazed defiantly.

“The hell you are!” the Mosquito bellowed recklessly, and in a flash he leaped right for the other pilot. The report of the Luger seemed to burst right in his ear, and a spurt of livid flame went past his cheek. Then Kirby had seized the wrist which held the revolver, and was twisting it with all his might. Furiously, grunting and cursing, the two men struggled. Kirby clung to the German’s wrist, kept twisting. At last, with a snort of pain, the Jerry released the Luger, which fell to the ground.

But then, enraged, the German flung himself upon the Mosquito with surprising and overwhelming strength. Kirby tripped, went down heavily, pulling the other man with him. They rolled around in the swampy murk, gasping and panting. The German managed to stay on top, however, and now his hands were closing relentlessly about Kirby’s throat. The Mosquito struggled with all his might, began to choke. He rallied all his ebbing strength and lurched with his whole body. The German was taken unaware, and Kirby, seizing the opportunity, managed to free his throat from the other’s tenacious clutch. Again they were rolling around.

Then they were both on their feet, setting to like a couple of sluggers. There, alone in that barren swamp, beside their wrecked planes, they continued to carry out the war, continued to serve their countries. They were enemies, bent on destroying or capturing one another. And on the ground they were as wonderfully matched as in the air. Their strength was about equal, and so was their skill. It was terrific fighting, elemental. They punched, wrestled, kicked and mauled one another unmercifully. They were exhausted, but refused to let up. They were bloody and smeared with mud, but they wouldn’t stop.

On they fought, now at a slower pace, but still willing to keep giving and receiving punishment. The sun was already sinking in the west—a red disk which disappeared behind the rotted trees. Night was on hand. And in the growing darkness, the two men kept struggling, plowing in.

The end came suddenly. Kirby, plodding in stubbornly, saw an opening, saw it through swollen

and blood-stained eyes. He hauled off and, putting his whole body into the blow, swung a right. It landed flush on the "button." The German collapsed, sprawled in a heap. Hastily, Kirby drew out his Colt, and as the man struggled to a sitting posture, the Mosquito covered him.

"Looks like you're my, prisoner," Kirby said tersely.

The German showed that he was a good sport. He nodded soberly. "Looks that way," he conceded, grimly. And then, to Kirby's surprise, the Prussian's stern but battered face broke into a grin, which widened more and more, until a peal of robust laughter came from the man.

Kirby, fearing that the German was laughing at him, flared up. "What's the joke?" he demanded hotly. "Remember, you're a prisoner now, and you'd better watch yourself."

"The joke's on both of us," the German explained, propping himself up with an elbow. Again he was convulsed with mirth. "*Gott im Himmel!*" He resorted to German, then back to English. "Here we've been tearing at each other like a couple of madmen, and, my Yankee friend, do you realize that we may be either in German or Entente territory? I don't know which, and I'm sure you don't either. Is my point clear? If we're on German ground, what good for you to capture me? If we're on Entente, vice-versa. It's a matter of fate!"

Kirby's jaw dropped. But not for long. Soon he was laughing loudly, too. "Cripes!" he exploded. "It is funny!"

"In fact," the German added, "it's unique. And it seems to me there's no sense fighting just now. We're all alone here—and it's a rather lonely place—so we might as well work things out together." He drew out a cigarette case, held it open. "Have a smoke?"

"Thanks," said Kirby, supplying lights.

"And if you don't mind," the German added, "won't you put that nasty-looking automatic away. It's most disconcerting."

Kirby shrugged, then shoved the pistol away. The stars were coming out overhead, and a brilliant moon beamed down on them.

"Let's find a place where we can sit and talk," suggested the German.

They did. The wrecked fuselage of one of the planes made a fair enough seat. Side by side, the two men sat and talked.

"By the way," the German was saying, "I might as well introduce myself. I am the Baron Von Hartberg."

Kirby started at the name. "You mean you're the

'Flying Baron'—sixty-four Allied planes?" Then, as the German nodded, Kirby quickly suppressed his awe, and hastened to say, not without pride: "Well, my name's Kirby—one of the 'Three Mosquitoes.'"

The German was visibly impressed. "Indeed!" he said. "I thought there was something familiar about your insignia. I've heard a lot about you, and have always wanted to meet up with you. And," he went on, warmly, "we two can put on a nice scrap, can't we?"

"I don't know about that," Kirby said, frowning darkly as he remembered those nerve-racking moments in the sky. "I certainly thought you were cuckoo, trying to ram me."

"It usually works," the German explained. "Only you called the bluff, as you Americans say. And this,"—his hand swept outward, indicating the wreckage around them—"is the result." He sighed. "Too bad we can't have that fight over again. I'm sure I could shoot you down."

"Don't kid yourself!" Kirby retorted, and then he sighed, too. "But I wouldn't mind having it over again either."

THEY were both silent then, for the moment. And as soon as they ceased talking, both became aware of the intense stillness of their surroundings. There was no sound at all, not even the usual nocturnal noises of insects or frogs. In the pale moonlight the barren swamp, with its rotted trees, looked even more fantastic and desolate. Evidently this place had been completely laid waste by the ravages of war, of gas and shells—which had destroyed everything living here.

"Gosh!" Kirby broke the silence, and the sound of his own voice was a relief. "I don't like this place. Damn creepy, don't you think, Baron?"

"I do, captain," the Baron agreed. "To tell the truth, I'm grateful to have someone to talk to." Then his tone became a little colder, more businesslike. "Now let's get to the point. It's obvious that eventually we're going to be found, or we'll find somebody. In such a case one of us is bound to be unlucky—one of us is sure to be captured, according to the territory we're in."

"Don't be too sure of that," Kirby said, firmly and determinedly.

The German at once caught the implication. "I get your point. You believe that, even if we are on German ground, you might escape. But you must admit the chances are pretty slim. I myself would have the same chances anyway, if we are on Entente ground. But as long as we are together, such a thing would be

impossible. And I'm sure you wouldn't approve, any more than I would, of each of us going our own way now."

"Not on your life! If we're in Allied territory, I'm not going to muffle the chance of bringing in the Flying Baron."

"And if we're in German territory, I don't intend to lose the leader of the Three Mosquitoes." He chuckled. "A strange situation, eh, captain? But you still have an advantage. You are still armed, and you might kill me, which, I admit, would solve the problem for you. Then, being by yourself, you might escape if you're on German ground."

Kirby laughed. "You certainly don't love life, giving me ideas like that!"

"On the contrary, I do love life," the Baron insisted. "You see, my friend, I know you will do no such thing. We of the air service are sportsmen. Combat is one thing; this is another. You couldn't murder me in cold blood now and walk off any more than I could murder you."

Kirby was about to voice a retort, but, instead, he shrugged and laughed again. "You win, Baron!" he conceded. "And I'll play the game fair with you." And with a debonair gesture, he pulled out his Colt and flung it into the darkness. "Now we're both even. What'll we do about it?"

They both thought hard, and again were oppressed by that awful stillness. There was an unpleasant chill in the air now.

"Hell, I'm cold and I could eat!" Kirby said sadly.

"My appetite is rather healthy too just now," the Baron agreed. He seemed to fumble in his pockets. "Ah! I find I've brought along a chocolate bar. It might help." He proffered it to Kirby. They divided it.

Suddenly the Mosquito exclaimed: "Cripes, that reminds me!" He delved beneath his flying togs and extracted a flask. "Forgot all about the cognac, and here we are freezing! Try it, Baron."

The Baron took the flask, flourished it gracefully. "Here's to! Hoping you will be a guest of my native land until the end of the war!"

"*Prosit!*" Kirby intoned. Then, when the German handed him the bottle he proposed a toast: "*Hoch!* Hoping they treat you nice in the Frog prison camp!"

They soon drained the small flask, and the liquor warmed them considerably. They felt better, and even more sociable. They went on discussing their problem, trying to work out a course of action. And finally the Baron gave a joyous shout.

"Eureka!" he exclaimed. "I have it! We're both sports, you and I, *ami* we're both willing to gamble. Our chances are exactly even. Well, we'll start hiking together, and we'll walk until we come to some signs of life. Then we'll face the consequences. If we're in German territory, you're my prisoner; if we're on French soil, I'm yours. It's unfortunate for one of us, but it's the only fair way. What do you say? A gentleman's agreement!"

Kirby hesitated, reluctantly. Somehow he had a vague feeling that they were in German territory, and he did not want to commit himself. Yet what else was there to do? And if it was Allied territory, he couldn't bear the thought of losing one of the deadliest of enemy aces. So, finally, he consented.

"You win again, Baron," he said cheerfully. "Now which way do we travel?"

The German fumbled again in his pockets.

"I have a little compass here. Now we mustn't walk either east or west, for in those directions lie German and Entente territory respectively. I think the fairest way would be south. But if you'd rather go north—"

"South it is," Kirby agreed. Then his glance went to the wreckage again. "But what about our buses?"

"Leave them here," the German suggested. "They're worthless junk anyway, and no one will find them in this hole."

And so, steered by the German's compass, the two men set off, began to march southward.

"Listen here, Baron," Kirby said uneasily, "if I find out you're stringing me—leading me into a trap——"

"Naturally you distrust me," the Baron sympathized. "And I distrust you too. For all I know, you might secretly be aware that we are in Entente territory, and are just playing me."

"Hell, what do you think I am?" Kirby flared up.

"And what do you think I am?" the German countered.

Both laughed warmly then. But, though Kirby believed the German was playing fair, he could not entirely suppress his feeling of distrust. And that feeling was enough to keep him keyed up, alert. The Baron also seemed just a bit tense.

THUS the two enemy pilots set forth on their strange hike through the night, a hike through swamps and marshes and woods, a journey fraught with suspense and doubt, and yet having nevertheless a spirit of comradeship and good feeling. On they trudged, growing ever more tired, listening for sounds

of life, jumping at shadows, each fearing that he might soon find himself a prisoner. Which one would lose? Where would this journey take them?

Hours dragged by. Still they seemed to be in desolate territory: wild, war-ravaged country, where they were the only trespassers. Exhausted, their cuts and bruises increased by brambles and rocks, they sat down to rest. Both had all they could do to stay awake now, yet, though nothing would have pleased them more than to sleep a bit, they distrusted each other enough to be afraid to take the chance.

On, on, on. Hunger gnawed at them; their throats became so parched that they drank out of filthy streams which were, mostly mud. Walking became more difficult and, anxious to come to the end of their journey rather than delay by resting, they spurred themselves on by humming marching tunes—both German and Allied—to which they could keep step.

Another interminable hour passed. And then, suddenly, both men stopped short, stiffening from head to foot.

“What’s that?” Kirby whispered tensely.

They listened, strained their ears. From the far distance came a faint but ominous rumble.

“Artillery!” the German said. “Look!”

Kirby looked. They were standing on a wooded hill. Ahead of them, directly south it seemed, the dark sky glowed as if illuminated by an aurora-borealis.

“We’re near the battle, anyway,” the German said.

“But what artillery is that? American or German?”

“That’s the question. We’d better go on. Guess we’ll know soon now where we are.”

And from then on the tension increased more and more, for now they began to hear sounds, and see lights in the distance. The wildness of the country was beginning to lessen. It could not be much longer now!

Kirby’s heart was pounding frightfully. Cripes, if this was Germany, and he was taken prisoner!

Now they were in a dense forest again, breaking their way through heavy underbrush. And the rumble of artillery had grown much louder: they could hear the dull but reverberating thuds of bursting shells. If they had been ground-soldiers, perhaps they might have figured out their position by the direction of those sounds; but they were aviators, and this was all Greek to them.

Suddenly both heard the unmistakable sound of trucks, and the clattering of engines, the clanking of heavy metal! Trucks on a road!

“Seems to be over that way,” the German pointed

out. “Want to see if we can get to those trucks? We’ll find out then.”

“Yes,” said Kirby, and again his heart was pounding.

They hurried along. But then they realized how elusive sounds can be in the night. Now they heard the trucks, now they didn’t. And though they covered a lot of distance, they didn’t find any road.

So they resumed their dismal march, still in the woods. Several times, after that, they were deceived by lights or sounds which they could never get to, which floated away like mirages. The strain of it all began to tell on them; their nerves became raw, and they fell into an ominous silence.

Thus it went on, until, at last, the night began to reach its end. Furtive gleams of light appeared, grew steadily brighter. Day began to break. And daybreak found them still plodding their way through the big forest.

And then, to their listening ears, there came another sound—a sound much more familiar to them than the rest, and so close that it could not fool them. It was an incessant, staccato drone, like that of a bumble-bee. Again they stopped, listened tensely.

“Planes!” Kirby said. “And on the ground. Must be an airdrome!”

“But is it Entente or German?” the Baron asked wearily.

“If only they were in the air we could tell. But on the ground, when they’re just warming up, they could be either. Anyway, it must be right over that way,”—he pointed—“so let’s have a look.”

Again they hurried towards the sound. Both were ready to meet with failure, and both were so worn out that their anxiety was not as terrific as it had previously been. On they went, and the drone grew louder—closer. The forest was thinning out now. There was a slight slope ahead. They climbed it.

And there, spread out below them, was the airdrome!

Both men took the whole scene in with a single glance. In the misty, furtive light of dawn they saw a few machines, motors running, squatting like ghostly birds on the field. But it was too dim to determine whether they were German or Allied ships. There were also a few groups of men—mechanics, doubtless. The two pilots scanned the camouflaged hangars.

And then, with frenzied excitement, Kirby gripped the Baron’s arm, pointed.

“Look, Baron, look at that roof over there!” he yelled eagerly.

The Baron looked. His face fell, and turned strangely pale. On the roof of the hangar were the tri-colored, circular markings of the Allied air service!

"A French airdrome!" Kirby shouted joyously, overcome by his intense relief. "That means you lose, Baron! So come along and—"

He stopped, quick to detect the change which had just come over the German. The Baron seemed to stiffen, and a cold, hard glint came into his gray eyes. Hastily, anticipating treachery, Kirby made to seize him, get a grip on him. But when a man is desperate he is quick.

With one mighty lunge, the German gave Kirby a push which sent the Mosquito back on his heels. A harsh laugh broke from the Baron.

"All's fair in war, my Yankee friend!" he shouted, and before Kirby could completely recover his balance, the other man swung a terrific left to his jaw. The Mosquito sagged, fought to retain his footing.

Dazedly, he saw the German running down the sloping field, running straight for one of the planes, whose motor was on, but around which there were no mechanics at the moment. Furiously the Mosquito rushed in pursuit, and could have wept for having thrown away his revolver. Mechanics working in other parts of the field started from their work, stared with gaping eyes at the two running men. Kirby shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Stop that Jerry! Stop him! Damn you, after him! Get—"

He broke off, his eyes widening incredulously. To his amazement, the German, just as he readied the plane, stopped in his tracks, and seemed suddenly at ease. For a second Kirby, still running towards him, could not comprehend. But then, to his horror, he saw.

Out of one of the buildings—the messhall it was—rushed a swarm of gray-clad figures. They wore coal-scuttle helmets, and carried rifles—German infantry!

Kirby stopped short, the blood freezing within him. In a flash he grasped the whole upshot of the business. This was an Allied drome, true enough, but it had just been captured by the advancing Germans! And now he saw that the planes were Boche ships—Albatrosses! A Jagdstaffel was evidently moving in here, and they hadn't had time yet to change the markings on the hangars.

THE whole thing was such a shock that the Mosquito was confused for the moment, and in his confusion he stood there like a gaping idiot. But

the Flying Baron had already run up to the German soldiers who, joined by mechanics and other men in the uniform, of the Imperial flying corps, were rushing straight at Kirby, rifles leveled.

"Surrender, my friend!" the Baron's voice reached Kirby's ears above the drone of motors.

Then a wave of crazy recklessness swept Kirby. He leaped with savage defiance. "All's fair in war, Baron!" he bellowed, and, turning, began to run down the length of the field.

The Germans turned too, tried to head him off. But Kirby, exhausted thought he was, fairly flew across that ground. He was headed for one of the Albatrosses, which also had its motor running. Behind him rose the angry shouts of his pursuers, demanding his surrender, and then, suddenly, came the shrill crack of rifles and small-arms. A fusillade of bullets whined unhealthily close. But they only served to spur the reckless Mosquito on.

He redoubled his efforts. The Albatross was scarcely twenty yards away now. He hurled himself forward. Closer now! But then, cursing, he tripped, stumbled, fell. Frantically he picked himself up, ran on. Again rose the whine of lead. A bullet grazed his shoulder, left a hot, stabbing pain there. Surely they would get him!

A second now, and he would be in that plane. He rallied all his remaining strength for the final leap. Suddenly a mechanic appeared, loomed in his path. Kirby's fist crashed out mightily, and the man sprawled. With bullets whistling all about him, the Mosquito reached the ship, grabbed the fuselage, and was climbing in. He got in, and instantly pulled out the throttle wide. The motor roared thunderously. The Germans were right behind him, their guns blazing away. Kirby ducked low in his cockpit, heard the lead screaming overhead, ticking through the fuselage of the plane now. But the ship was moving! Out across the field it moved, faster and faster. It gained on the running men, began to pull out of their range.

The hail of bullets lessened, and Kirby could lift his head. Glancing back he saw the Germans rushing around confusedly, trying to set up machine guns. And also he saw the tall figure of the Flying Baron—easy to distinguish because of his tattered clothes—climbing into another Albatross, a ship marked with the number 4.

Then Kirby was in the air. The Albatross was a little strange to him, but he was an expert pilot and in a pinch he could handle any ship. And he managed to

take the German scout off with the grace of a swallow. Gently he climbed her towards the hazy morning sky.

Up—up—up with the air growing clearer and clearer. Mechanically, he fastened his safety belt, then glanced down behind him. His eyes narrowed. There it was—number 4, climbing towards him at full speed. The flying Baron was in pursuit. Well—Kirby shrugged—all right! If the Baron wasn't too exhausted for a scrap, why, neither was he. Calmly, he went on climbing, determined to make good altitude. He reached forward to trip his Spandau machine guns, to make sure that they were loaded and functioning. They were. All right. He'd fight it out and then beat it for home.

But in the next second, as he glanced downwards again, he changed his mind abruptly. For he saw two other Albatrosses taking off, sweeping into the air like dragon flies. Up they sped, following the trail of number 4.

Kirby's lips drew up into a light little line. Three were too many. He'd beat it for home!

He had already climbed to five thousand feet. Number 4 was about half a mile behind and below. The other two ships were almost a full mile away.

Kirby eased his stick forward, leveled off. Scanning the relief-map earth below he was able at last to see where he was. The smoke of bursting shells hung over to his right. He kicked his rudder, banked, and, knowing that he was headed straight for his drome, raced through the air at full throttle.

But now his unfamiliarity with the Albatross began to hinder him. To get the best possible speed out of a ship requires more than just putting on full throttle. You've got to know your plane like a jockey knows his horse, know just how to let it out, how to make it respond. Kirby didn't. The Germans who pursued him did. And though he was fairly streaking through the air, the Mosquito saw that the Albatrosses were gaining on him, creeping up on him slowly but steadily. He employed all his skill as a pilot to make his own ship go faster, but it was to no avail. Closer and closer the three pursuing ships drew, with the Flying Baron in the lead.

Now Kirby was streaking over the Front, and the zig-zag cuts which were trenches swam below him. He was crossing the lines, getting into Allied territory. However, in the sky it was almost as dangerous on one side as on the other.

Still those three ships came on. In seconds now, before Kirby could reach his drome, they would be

in range! Number 4 was so close that Kirby could see it in every detail, see the glistening guns protruding from either side of its nose. It was coming, coming. Desperately, the Mosquito made a final frantic effort to get more speed out of his ship.

Rat-tat-tat! The shrill staccato clatter rose right behind him. The flying Baron had caught up to him, had come into range! His guns were both blazing away!

MECHANICALLY, as the tracers began to streak close by, Kirby half-rolled and zig-zagged to throw off the German's sights. But by such maneuvers he consequently lost speed, and number 4 came even closer. Again rose the clatter of guns behind. Bullets ticked through Kirby's plane, and invisible drum-sticks seemed to beat a vibrating tattoo on his tailfins. He swore fiercely, savagely. Damn it, if only those other two Albatrosses weren't back there, if only he could turn around and fight!

A cry of wild joy broke from him. For now, suddenly, he saw the two little planes which were diving down from above, the two trim Spads with the tri-colored markings. And at the sight of them he forgot his exhaustion, and the blood flowed back into his cheeks. His two comrades! Carn and Travis! They were doubtless out on a dawn patrol, and now they were coming down, coming down on the Jerry behind him!

But in the next second he froze with a horrified realization. Only one of those Spads—it was Carn—was diving on the German behind. The other was diving on *him!* Travis, his own comrade, was swooping down to attack him! And he remembered then what he had forgotten in the moment of excitement—that he was flying an Albatross just like the other Germans! To his comrades, he was an enemy ship!

Down Travis came plunging like a plummet, right overhead. Frantically, Kirby half-stood in his cockpit, turned his face upwards, began waving every signal and countersign he knew.

"Travis!" he shouted, wishing his voice could be heard above all the noise of motors. "Travis—it's me, Kirby!" Hysterical sobs tore from him. "Don't you recognize me? God!"

Rat-tat-tat-tat! Down came the deadly streams of tracer from the diving Spad. They pumped right into Kirby's plane. A bullet tore through a sleeve of his tattered jacket, another shattered the windshield in front of him. Realizing that his signals were useless,

Kirby settled in the cockpit and began to roll and twist the Albatross frantically. He kicked his rudder, banked vertically, as Travis went streaking past behind.

Kirby now found himself headed towards the two planes of Carn and the Flying Baron, which were engaged in a furious duel. The number 4 Albatross, swinging around, suddenly was nosed in Kirby's direction. And then Kirby saw what a frightful predicament he was in. For the Flying Baron, spotting him, took the time to blaze away at him. He was being shot at by them all! And because of the confusion, his comrades could not see that the Flying Baron was spraying lead at another Albatross, which would have told them that the ship was on their side.

Stubbornly, Kirby kept floundering around, trying to signal by every means.

And then hell really broke loose. For the other two Albatrosses, having reached the scene, plunged into the dog-fight with a vengeance. The six ships wheeled, dove, gyrated all about each other. The sky seemed dense with them—a churning mass of planes which spat lead at one another. And every one of them was shooting at Kirby. He could not fight, for when he tried to attack a Fokker he would find Carn or Travis swooping for his tail. His ship was being shot to hell, and, realizing that he was sure to be sent hurtling down unless he pulled out at once, he did the only thing he could.

He flung his hands backwards, stiffened, as if he had just been killed. Then he kicked the Albatross into a tight spin. Down he hurtled, out of that confused mass of planes. And they let him go, assuming that he was done for.

Down, down, down he went, in a gagging rush of air. Finally, at two thousand feet, with the dog-fight raging safely above him, he pulled out of the spin, leveled off. Then a fresh danger faced him. On all sides of him, white puffs mushroomed out in the sky, bursting with deafening coughs. Allied anti-aircrafts, shooting at him! He zigzagged, threw off their range. At last, after much maneuvering, he won clear of that particular battery and was free again. But only for a moment, only long enough to catch his breath.

For now, looking up, he saw Albatross number 4 dropping down for him like a streak! The keen eyes of the Flying Baron had seen him leveling off and, determined not to let Kirby escape, the German had pulled out of the fight to get him. Above, Kirby's two comrades were still struggling.

Kirby did not wait until the other man dropped on

him. Furiously, he pulled back his stick, and zoomed for the Albatross above. Their guns spat in unison, and the tracer flew thick and fast. The German pulled out of his dive, and Kirby swept past him. Again the two pilots caught a glimpse of one another. This time the Baron shook his fist ominously. Kirby answered by thumbing his nose.

THEN, alone at last, they set to with all their former fury and recklessness. It was by far the most terrific fight that Kirby had ever gone through, even though it was fought when he and his antagonist were both practically exhausted. They fought each other all over the place, they used every trick of the game and invented new ones. The men below, artillerymen, stared at the fight with awe and wonderment. Here were two German planes fighting like a couple of furies, tearing around the sky as if their pilots had gone mad!

Neither man seemed able to gain headway. Again they were superbly matched, exactly even in their prowess. True, the German was more familiar with his Albatross, but by this time Kirby had learned how to make his ship respond, and he was able to match the other's speed.

Evidently the fact that he could not seem to knock down his foe made the Baron desperate once more. Abruptly, he began to resume his nerve-racking, close-range tactics. Now he seemed absolutely determined to ram Kirby. Again the Mosquito had to use all his skill to avoid collision.

On they went, forgetting the other conflict which raged above. The Baron kept heading straight at Kirby, and the Mosquito's anger mounted higher and higher.

"Damn you!" he bellowed. "I'll fix you so you won't be ramming me, you—"

He broke off, drawing in his breath sharply. The other plane had just started a tight circle, directly in front of Kirby. And Kirby saw, saw at once, that if that circle were completed, the two planes were sure to collide. There was no time to swerve, no time to change his course. In the split second that was left, there was only one way Kirby could prevent the crash.

With frenzied haste, but with expert precision, the Mosquito, eyes to sights, banked slightly to the right. And as the German came right for him, he pressed his triggers, shooting as he had never shot before.

The streams of tracer ripped out. And the aim was true. Like a charging beast hit between the eyes by the hunter, the Baron's plane lurched in its tracks. It veered

giddily, seemed to slide away on a slippery current of air. Then abruptly, it burst into flames and went down like a fiery torch.

The flying Baron was dead. He had died as he would have wished to die.

Dazedly, the Mosquito saw the flaming plane crash, and a column of fire and black smoke proclaimed its landing. Dazedly, he saw that the two Spads of his comrades were coming down—not diving, but coming cautiously. They had evidently seen one Albatross shoot down the other, and suspected the reason. But what of the other German ships? Kirby scanned the sky. At first he saw nothing. Then he picked out the distant, birdlike shape of an Albatross. It was staggering towards Germany, obviously crippled. There was no sign of the other. Carn and Travis had doubtless shot one down and let the other go.

Now Travis was sweeping carefully down beside Kirby, and Kirby swung over to him. The two planes were soon wing to wing, and Travis was peering across the space that separated the two cockpits. Kirby turned his face about, grinned, and waved their signals. For a second Travis did not see. Then Kirby saw his goggled face turn blank with incredulous amazement. The other Mosquito waved with frantic excitement, and signaled Shorty Carn with a Very rocket. All three gesticulated joyously at this unexpected reunion in the sky.

Then, as always, though he flew a German plane, Kirby got them on either side of him and led them home. It was a strange sight—a Jerry plane leading two Allied ships, and it caused many men on the ground to scratch their heads and ask themselves what in hell they would see next in this war. But, because no one knew what it was all about, no one fired at the three ships.

The reception which Kirby got was stupendous.

The whole drome rang with praise for him. Even the grizzled old C.O., usually so economical with his laudations, was enthusiastic.

“Wonderful work, Kirby!” he told the Mosquito, who, having been patched up by the doctor and having stepped into clean togs, stood before him on the tarmac. “Not only did you bag one of Germany’s greatest aces, but you also brought us a perfectly good Albatross—one of those new ships we’ve been wanting to get to study. It was great stuff!”

“Yeah,” Kirby murmured, absently, and through his mind flashed a picture of the Baron, flourishing the flask and drinking to him.

“You look down in the mouth,” Shorty Carn observed when the Three Mosquitoes were by themselves. The little, mild-eyed man puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. “Guess your experience took the starch out of you, eh?”

“Yeah,” Kirby said, staring into vacancy, and hearing the Baron’s voice saying: “We’re both good sports, you and I—”

“You need some sleep,” drawled the lanky Travis. “Better go and get some.”

“Yeah,” Kirby agreed, and heard the music of a march he and the Baron had hummed as they tramped through the night.

“Say!” Carn exploded. “What in hell’s the matter with you? Everything we say, it’s ‘Yeah! Yeah!’ Can’t you talk?”

“Yeah,” Kirby said sadly. Well, after all, *Cest la guerre*.

“Perhaps,” suggested Travis, “we’d better go and take a few drinks.”

“What’s that?” Kirby asked, suddenly interested. “Drinks? Good idea! Come on fellers, we’ll trot down to Papa Renier’s estaminet. Let’s go!”

