



HIGH EXPLOSIVES

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Chattering Vickers and Screaming Spandaus in A Gripping Story of a Hell-Busting Pilot's Savage Determination to Down Death-Dealing Sky Foes!

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SILENT ORTH opened his mouth to give his wingmates all the details of his latest fight with German airmen, in which he had undeniably come out victor. All eyes were upon him, intently watching his lips.

The first syllable of whatever he had intended to say had not even left his mouth, when all his wingmates, as though by a prearranged signal, emitted the following words:

“I’m the best damn’ pilot in the whole A.E.F. There isn’t a German flying that I can’t lick the pants off’a. I can down two planes for every one downed by any other Allied flyer. If I were any better they wouldn’t even let me fly.”

Silent Orth looked pained. His face wore, besides, a look of puzzlement. Could it be possible that they didn’t want to hear what a good job he had done against Baron Badenloch and Count von Krichten? Both had long lists of *descendi* to their credit, and he’d sent them down in flames. Why, vanquishing those two, he had actually saved the lives of any number of flyers whom they might have killed.

And his wingmates wouldn’t listen.

Of course, he realized, he had talked freely when he had first reported to this group, but certainly not too freely. It always seemed to him that he could never get a word in edgewise. People were always interrupting the even flow of his conversation, forcing him to interrupt in turn in order to finish what he wanted to say.

WELL, to hell with his wingmates! The buzzards might learn something from him if they’d only listen. But since they wouldn’t, it was their loss.

Now they all ended their speech, again as though by prearranged signal, and Orth started to speak again. What he started to say was:

“All right, rats, I won’t speak again from now on, no matter if you beg me to.”

But he didn’t even get the first word out, for Lieutenant Barger said:

“Give us a few well chosen words, Silent.”

And Cliff Morton said:

“Tell us the dirt on Badenloch and Krichten, Silent.”

But when he started to make answer to both men at once, the mess went into a veritable buzz of conversation, none of which had any relation to anything else that was being said. It was as though every member started blurting out whatever came to his mind, without pausing to listen to what anybody else had to say.

It was no wonder that Orth was puzzled. That he really talked too much, given a chance; that his nickname of “Silent” was a libelous misnomer, never even occurred to him. But there was one thing sure, he decided. If they wouldn’t listen to him, he would be avenged on them. From this moment on he wouldn’t say a blasted word.

SO HE bowed his head in his beans, his face red and pale by turn, and ate in silence. Gradually his wingmates, too, fell silent. There was good reason for this.

Today’s flight over the lines had been disastrous. Twelve Spads had flown over to meet the hellions of von Flugler, and only six had come back. The great German flyer had just been assigned to the sector opposite Dombasle, and he brought with him the toughest aggregation of veteran fighters known to any front. They were all prime killers, efficient, deadly fighters.

The Twelfth Pursuit Squadron was filled for the most part with youngsters just getting their wings under them. Though the six who had fallen had been less than seventy-two hours with the Fourteenth, they had been a manly crew and had commanded the respect of the oldest veteran in the Twelfth. Silent Orth, who never expected to die in this war—certainly not at the hands of any German flyer—had grown to like all six. And now their places at the table were empty.

IN ACCORDANCE with a custom established by Captain Hagedorn, now commanding ‘A’ Flight, to which Orth belonged, there were plates on the table for the missing ones, and their chairs were leaned against the table. On a shelf back of the table, in the midst of a row of glasses, all of them broken—each one representing a toast to a flyer who had died—were six newly cracked and broken glasses, which had given their last toast in honor of the newly slain.

The words of the toast rang in Orth’s mind:

“ . . . a toast to the dead already, And here’s to the next one to die!”

They had even made a song about it. Orth felt that they got too sentimental about lads who died. For all anybody knew, they might be the war’s lucky ones.

Other eyes followed those of Orth. They took in the broken glasses, the inverted plates, the leaning chairs; and it was as if the ghosts of the vanquished six had

actually come back, though none could see them. It seemed that a cold hand touched the back of the necks of the survivors of 'A' Flight.

Savage anger burned in the breast of Silent Orth, though his face remained grave. He promised himself that he would find out the identification of the enemy planes which had slain the six members of the Twelfth, and down them, one by one. He wanted to tell his wingmates of his vow, but he knew they wouldn't listen.

And now, Captain Hagedorn was speaking:

"If we don't make a sharp reprisal, you buzzards, von Flüger's staffel's morale will go so high that there'll no be no stopping them. I propose that we concentrate on downing those Germans, and doing it as fast as possible. It is the only way we can regain lost ground. I promise a week in Paris to the first man to get one of the Germans."

"What chance have we," said Barger peevishly, "when Silent Orth has already put his sign on them? He'll get the week in Paris, as sure as the devil."

"Yeah," said Morton, "while the rest of us stay up here and keep on getting shot at!"

They seemed quite serious about it, damn them! Orth started to make some answer, but he saw the others tense and lean forward, eyes on him, lips parted. He knew that the moment he made a sound they would literally jump down his throat.

Hagedorn was watching Orth quietly. He was no fool. Silent Orth might talk too much, but he usually did what he promised, and was even better with Spads and Vickers than he said he was.

Hagedorn had an idea. He would make this morale-busting thing a progressive business. Each day he would assign a flyer the task of knocking down a particular German. There would be no other assignment. If he succeeded, he would go after the next German next day, or the next time over. That one man would eventually get all of them was impossible.

Hagedorn thought sadly that it would probably cost the lives of more than six additional flyers to down Friedrich, Morgen and Stolpen; it was literally a sentence of death to ask a flyer to take on any of the three as a special assignment.

BUT he knew that Orth had got in Dutch with his wingmates, and here was a chance for a two-fold recovery—Orth to down at least one German, maybe two if his luck held, and get back in the good graces of his wingmates. Or—to die in the attempt. So—

"I want to see you in my office, Orth," Hagedorn said.

A few minutes later Orth, his lips tightly compressed, as though he were afraid that he would talk in spite of himself, stood before his flight commander.

"Orth," said Hagedorn, "I want you to get Friedrich tomorrow. Concentrate on him."

Orth merely nodded.

"If you do it," smiled Hagedorn, "you will not only get that week in Paris, but I'll make it my personal business to see that you are able to talk about yourself to your heart's content."

Orth's face did not lighten. He said nothing whatever; his lips were a firm straight line. And when the 'A' Flight lined up next morning, just after dawn, he still had kept his vow to say nothing. As he strode to his Spad on the apron, Barger yelled out:

"Are you sick, Silent?"

And Morton chimed in:

"Had bad news, Silent?"

HE SHOOK his head in answer to both, and when the other members of the flight had something to say or ask, he ignored them.

As he stepped into his Spad, the name of the man he must concentrate on today, Friedrich, kept ringing in his ears. He recalled the fight of yesterday, in which Friedrich had knocked down Masters, a promising youngster. It had been a most workmanlike job. The German, deadly in his efficiency, hadn't wasted a shot. Masters hadn't had a ghost of a chance.

Whoever tangled with Friedrich had a fight on his hands, must use every ruse he knew, and his chances of coming out alive were exceedingly slim. Orth's assignment might well be a sentence of death. He didn't care, because he didn't believe that death would touch him.

HAGEDORN shook his head. It was bad for a flyer to go across feeling as Orth apparently felt about his wingmates. But Orth had brought it on himself. Some day he might waken to the fact that it wasn't good policy for even the best of flyers to discourse on his prowess. He could prove his ability, but he mustn't talk about it, even to enlighten his ignorant fellows.

Captain Hagedorn lifted his right hand, brought it down. Twelve planes—replacements had arrived this morning; replacements averaging twenty years of age and fourteen solo flying hours each—started smoothly

across the tarmac, jumped into the sky.

As they sped across the lines, Orth looked down. Archies were snapping at them. Black flowers of death bloomed everywhere aloft. The twelve planes rocked and rolled with the concussions. But nobody was hit.

Orth had noticed at the take-off that the faces of the six newcomers had been white as death, and now they were all scanning the sky as though they feared it would vomit Fokkers, Albatrosses and Aviatiks at any moment. Poor devils, they were afraid. They were in a tough spot.

Even veterans were in a tough spot when they flew against von Flüger. Most of his men had been flying and fighting in the air since the first Allied flyer and German flyer had started pot-shooting at each other. They knew all the questions and all the answers, and plenty which were not in the book.

When the woods ahead erupted with Fokkers to the number of fifteen, Orth settled into his pit, watched the youngsters. Sympathy clutched at his heart as they, too, spotted the enemy, and seemed to slide in closer to their wingmates, as though for protection against certain death. And Orth forgot his own unrest.

He would down Friedrich, he told himself, and devote the rest of the fight to keeping those fledglings alive. It was a laudable ambition; for the first time he forgot to laud himself for entertaining one.

The Fokkers came on with a rush. Silent had learned the insignia of the man he must fight against. Friedrich had a skull and cross-bones on the sides of his Fokker's fuselage, and Orth must concentrate on that one plane until he had downed him.

THE Fokkers spread out like flushed quail before the guns of the hunter. For a few seconds 'A' Flight remained bunched, as Hagedorn wagged his wings for combat, signaling that it was every man for himself. Orth was watching the flight commander. Hagedorn looked back, met Orth's eyes. He lifted his hand in a swift gesture which said:

"Good luck, Silent."

Something funny, like a lump of dough, came up into Orth's throat. Hell, whatever the others might think, Hagedorn was wishing him luck. He dropped the others from his mind for the moment, concentrating solely on the Fokker which flew the skull and crossbones. As he sought for his man in the German formation, he made out the insignia of the other two proscribed; a foaming beer mug for Morgen, and a mace for Stolpen.

Save for the beer mug of Morgen, which might indicate a toast to those whom he slew in battle, the insignia of the other ships were insults to their enemies. They were threats of destruction, weapons of murder. Orth's lips were a firm straight line. The skull and cross-bones, at least, he told himself, would not fly again after this fight. If they did, Friedrich would not be using them.

He spotted his man, made sure that he had skyroom, and hurled himself straight at the side of Friedrich's fuselage.

Orth believed in direct attack. He was speeded on his mission by the fact that Friedrich, at the moment of joining in battle, had smashed straight for the cockpit of one of the newest men. Friedrich's hands were on the trips of his Spandau when Orth spun a web of snarling lead about his ears, yawing right and left, to cover the man's whole body with his bullets.

Friedrich, escaping the bullets by one of the countless miracles which stayed the hand of the Grim Reaper in the war, whirled and stared at Orth, even as he rolled out of line of sights. The roll caused his Spandau lead to miss the body of the American directly ahead of his propeller, and to rip holes in his right wing instead.

ORTH breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the youngster fly free. He guessed that the boy's face was white, but the snarling lead had probably steadied his nerves. Yes, it must have, for in the next second, even while Orth and Friedrich were maneuvering for position, the American lad who had just escaped death dived squarely into the cockpit of a Fokker. He blasted the life out of the pilot and zoomed over him just in time to escape collision. Blythe, the newcomer, with his first Fokker smoking and flaming down the sky, had become instantly a veteran. Having slain once, he would have the confidence in himself to slay again.

THEN Orth was too busy with his own problems to think again of Blythe. Orth and the German, as though by common consent, had slipped out of the main area of fighting. They needed room for their grim fight of death.

This man Friedrich was a master at the stick. He flew with the smooth precision of a super-flyer. His bullets spewed through his propeller arc when he had a target, and not otherwise. Orth, missing with his first burst, cursed himself for a rookie. The two banked away for another try.

Orth stared aloft as a burning Spad smoked past him. One of the youngsters had fallen. Orth noted that a Fokker with a mace on the fuselage was on the doomed Spad's tail. His lips moved in a whisper:

"You're next, Stolpen!"

Then Orth and Friedrich were smashing head-on to meet each other. Forgetting the danger to his own propeller from bullets shot by the opposition, each opened with everything he had. Neither flyer was averse to facing lead in order to send in lead.

The German fought coolly, surely, and Orth himself had never been calmer. His Vickers grew hot under his hands. Through his ring-sight he saw his tracer go smoking into the Fokker's propeller arc, beyond which he could see the crouching figure of the German.

Orth's Spad shuddered and shook with the pounding of Spandau lead. Bits of fabric slatted free from the wings as bullets ripped and tore at the Spad. Orth could see the teeth of his enemy, snarling. In a second the two planes must collide if neither turned aside, dived or zoomed.

Orth flew straight ahead, never doubting his courage to go through to the bitter end if the German persisted in holding his course. Which alternative would the German take? Orth guessed that he would dive and try for a belly shot. His left hand slipped back to the stick.

He saw the nose of the Fokker dip slightly. Then the Fokker dropped under Orth and he shoved his stick forward, his eyes glued to his ring-sight. For an infinitesimal instant the whole broad chest of the German was squarely before Orth's eyes. His Vickers chattered and jammed. The Fokker vanished below him.

INSTANTLY Orth zoomed, standing on his tail to look back. The Fokker, preparing to dive, had not yet started to pull out. It started, instead, to spin. The propeller began to become visible. The German had cut his switch.

Orth corkscrewed around, following the German down. And then he saw something that gave away the truth. Friedrich's left hand and forearm hung over the side of the cockpit coaming, dangling in the wash of the slipstream—nerveless, lifeless. And no man in that condition could pull the trick.

Even as Orth, for a moment, continued to dive, he glanced back up, picking out his next victim. If any German were watching him, that German would expect him to do what all flyers were supposed to do—

follow their victims to the ground to make absolutely sure of their kills. But instead he sought, in the tumbling maelstrom of fighting planes above him, a Fokker which sported a medieval mace on the fuselage.

He saw it. Its Spandaus were slashing away at the back of an American fledgling who, if left alone, would, in another second, knock the life out of the German whose tail he was riding.

Orth gasped. The doomed kid in the center was Blythe.

ORTH yanked his stick back into his belly. He slammed right rudder to his crate, slewed around, scarcely thinking of what he did. His eyes clung to the Fokker flown by Stolpen, the next man he had sworn to get. His nose came around with agonizing slowness. He grabbed the stick with his knees, wondering if he could possibly swing into line before Stolpen smashed Blythe's back into a mess of blood and broken flesh, blasted bones.

The German's nose, three hundred feet above Orth, began to crawl into his ring-sight. His Spad was beginning to slow down on the climb. He must get him in a split second. His one burst would be his last and it must be as accurate as any burst he had ever fired in his life. Estimation of time in heartbeats, estimation of space in fractions of feet.

Then Orth's Vickers were screaming again, hurling lead upward at a slanting angle, from a distance of three hundred feet. Even a breath would make him miss. He didn't, for that split second, breathe at all.

Bullets ranted through. Blythe, he noticed, had not yet even got wise to the death which rode his tail. Blythe didn't know until Stolpen, smashed through the bottom, the bullets crashing through him in a steady stream, shoved his throttle wide open in the act of dying, and plunged straight over Blythe's head.

At that identical moment the German ahead of Blythe nosed up. The American banked instantly to the right to avoid a three-way collision.

The two Fokkers crashed, with a noise which rang above the chattering voice of the gods of battle.

To any who saw, it must have seemed that Blythe was responsible for the death of Stolpen and his nameless wingmate. Orth grinned slightly to himself. Let them think that. Blythe, with a week in Paris, would be spared that much longer.

Then three planes dropped like a shot on Silent Orth, to pay him for slaying Friedrich and, perhaps, Stolpen. Instantly he was involved in a cat-and-dog

affair which kept feet, hands and brain busy for what seemed like an eternity.

Bullets came at him from three angles, from both sides and the rear. They snapped past his ears with a sound like pins being jabbed through a drumhead. They came close enough to fan his cheeks. They all but touched his ears. They went past his nose.

He fought a mad desire to duck into the pit, whose fabric covering would have been no protection at all. He fought the desire to dodge from side to side, because he expected bullets to get him from the right or the left. But he controlled his desire because he knew he might as easily duck into the bullets as away from them.

HE ROCKED and rolled, he dived and spun, trying to escape the jaws of the three-Fokker trap. Once he caught one of the enemy pilots in his sights and his Vickers instantly leaped into life. The enemy went down with his body draped across the cockpit coaming, and Orth could not follow him because of the other two.

A fourth pilot dropped down to take the place of the slain man. It did not occur to Orth, busy as he was, to realize that he had performed a rare feat that day in "shooting a triple." He scarcely thought of himself at all. He was cold with anger at three flyers who would so coolly gang up on a single enemy flyer.

BUT he would show them. One American could handle himself even against three Germans.

But as the bullets came closer and closer; as his dash became a mass of debris from the Spandau lead that crashed through it into his motor; as his wings became ribbons of torn fabric which could only hold his Spad up by a miracle; as flying wires, knocked free of their fittings, stuck straight out in the wind of the Spad's crazy flight to escape the trap, Orth realized that even a flyer as good as himself could not hope to whip all German air.

He felt himself doomed and was preparing, as a last mad gesture, to bank squarely into the nearest German Fokker—when four flyers of 'A' Flight dropped like falling stones squarely into the center of his enemies.

One second and death was riding his shoulders. Next second, and no bullets snapped past his ears. He watched the four Americans drive his enemies away, forcing them to turn tail for home. That doughy lump came back into his throat and he found there were many things about men who went to war that he did not understand.

Why should these four, who had withered him with sarcasm, risk their lives to keep him from being shot down? They would have been happier if he never returned to the mess, yet they did their level best now to see that he should return.

Something moist rolled down Silent's cheeks, and he rubbed his face with his gauntlets. The moisture on the leather was not blood.

"They'd laugh me to death if they thought I was weak enough for tears," he told himself. "The blasted, hypocritical buzzards! Maybe, after they know me, they won't mind."

But whatever else he was thinking was forgotten as Hagedorn, whose Spad was even more of a mess than Orth's own, dropped down from the heights. The captain was not far behind a Fokker which he had just turned into a blazing torch, and he signaled to those who remained of 'A' Flight that it was time to go home. Orth saw the signal with relief. His thoughts about his wingmates were twisted. He dreaded to see them, back at the field. There were things he wanted to say to them; but would they, believing him merely a windbag, listen? He doubted it.

HE DIDN'T know what to say or do, even when the nine returning Spads had finally rolled to a stop and their pilots climbed stiffly forth. Seven of the nine pilots had blood on their faces. All were covered with the soot of burned oil. Eyes were wild, circled by finely drawn lines of tension which would never relax while life lasted.

Hands that lighted bedraggled cigarettes trembled and could not be controlled. Haunted eyes turned to look eastward, as though their owners expected the hellions of von Flüger, even now, to dive on them with Spandaus chattering their songs of death.

Morton, Barger, Cleaver and Hynes—the four who had come to Orth's rescue—were standing together, watching him. Their faces wore no expression that was not common to them all—the set expression of men who have just escaped death and know that they have but been granted brief reprieves. Orth hesitated, walked over to them. His eyes met the eyes of each in turn,

"Thanks!" he said briefly.

When he turned and walked away, their eyes were wide open in amazement, and their jaws hung slack. Orth, Silent Orth, the man who knew he was good and never hesitated to tell everybody, had actually dismissed the activity of the day with a single word,

and that one of appreciation for the efforts of others. The four men blinked.

The flyers gathered about the captain. All stared after Orth as the “silent” one walked, staggering a little with fatigue and the reaction of his narrow escape, toward his hutment. Hagedorn gulped.

“Well,” he said, “I’m damned! Here that guy goes and does the impossible, shoots a triple—and one of them Friedrich—and says nothing about it whatever, except thanks. I wonder if, after all, he might be human?”

“DO YOU suppose, maybe, we’ve been a little tough on him, Skipper?” asked Morton. “So far I haven’t found him amusing or entertaining, but maybe I’ve missed something in him. He’s certainly there when it comes to this knight of the sky business.”

“Let’s wait,” said Hagedorn, “until we see what he does next. He may be a flash in the pan. There’s one break for him, though: Bythe downed Stolpen, which means that Orth won’t have him to worry about tomorrow. Morgen isn’t as tough as either of the other two, though he’s the luckiest flyer I ever saw in action. His luck may beat Orth.”

“I didn’t down Stolpen,” said young Blythe quietly. “He’d have got me if somebody hadn’t taken him off my tail. I looked back as he zoomed over me, wondering who had blasted him. Only one person was in a position even remotely possible. That was Orth, and he was all of three hundred feet below, standing on his tail. Sorry to disappoint you all, but I’m sure it was Orth that got Stolpen. Stolpen crashed into the guy ahead of me, which probably makes Orth responsible for that guy, too.”

“GOOD Lord!” said Hagedorn. “Orth must know it was his bullets did that trick, and he didn’t open his face. He had a right to brag then. I don’t mind saying I’m a bit ashamed.

“But we can’t go to him now. He’d probably break down and cry if we showed him a little sympathy and understanding, and the guy that does that might be a soft touch for Morgen tomorrow. But when he’s knocked down Morgen, if he manages it, let’s cut out this noisy Coventry business and give him a break.”

So they paid Orth no heed at meals that day, Orth believed that he hated them all, even the four he had thanked for saving his life. He ate with his head lowered over his plate. Now and again, as his wingmates talked, they glanced at him. He could feel

their glances; he felt that if he even lifted his head or looked as though he were going to speak, they would drown him out with their chatter.

And he knew that if that happened, taut as his nerves were, he would leap into the midst of them with flailing fists and feet and batter at their faces until he downed them all or they killed him. His teeth were tightly clenched.

He had made out his combat report. In it he made no mention of the fall of Stolpen, except some slight reference which might have indicated that young Blythe deserved credit for the German ace.

Blythe and Orth were bidden into Hagedorn’s office together. Hagedorn looked at Blythe first.

“You got Stolpen today, kid,” he said. “It’s Paris for you if you want it.”

“No, Skipper, thanks,” said Blythe quietly. “I didn’t get—”

A spasm of pain crossed the face of young Blythe as Orth kicked him savagely on the ankle. Hagedorn might have heard the sound. Certainly he must have heard the suppressed groan of Blythe. But if he did, he merely looked a question and did not ask it. He cleared his throat, turned to Orth.

“I promised a week in Paris to the first flyer to get one of the Germans who downed our men yesterday. When do you want your week?”

Orth licked his lips with a dry tongue. His eyes were hard, bitter. If Hagedorn played in character as they had at mess—Orth’s fists clenched. He had had about all he could stand.

HE STARTED to speak, hesitated, watching the face of his skipper. Hagedorn looked receptive, didn’t seem to be getting set to shower him with sarcasm. Orth, to his own surprise, spoke quietly.

“I’ll take the week as soon as Morgen is out of the air!”

Hagedorn’s face did not change expression. His words, when they came, surprised Orth, made that lump rise in his throat again.

“Okay, Orth,” the captain said. “It will be Morgen tomorrow. Funny that the guy’s name, in German, should mean ‘tomorrow’, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said Orth. “Funny.”

And Orth faced about and left the office, while Hagedorn stared after him with a peculiar expression on his face.

“I wonder,” thought Hagedorn, “if maybe he didn’t talk so much when he first came here, because he was

afraid? Talked to keep up his own courage? Maybe now he has got hold of himself, somehow. If that's the answer, we're doing him an injustice to treat him as we do. On the other hand—"

He didn't say what came after that. He went to work on his papers.

He studied the combat reports of Blythe and Orth, side by side. Neither had taken credit for Stolpen. The skipper scratched his head.

That afternoon, late, a fast flying Fokker dropped a note on the tarmac. It was a warning to the man who had shot down Stolpen that the writer, August Morgen, would make it his personal business, when next the enemy squadron met, to send the killer of Stolpen down in flames. To make sure that he was not misunderstood, he referred to the Spad by its identifying numbers—and they were the numbers of Orth's Spad.

The Fourteenth probably wondered why Hagedorn did not apprise them of the contents of the message. Hagedorn himself wondered. But in withholding the message which gave full credit for the *descendu* to Silent Orth, Hagedorn felt that he was somehow a man of destiny,

HE HAD a feeling that the climax to all this, when it came, would be something to remember.

There was a strained kind of silence among the Fourteenth when it lined up next morning, for the second march against von Flüger's staffel since Hagedorn had proscribed the three. It was a silence that could be felt, a silence unaffected by the roaring, singing motors of the ten Spads.

It was a silence in the center of which stood Silent Orth, the enigma of 'A' Flight, the man who talked too much, yet always seemed to make good on anything he said. Eyes were turned questioningly on him. He met them calmly, saying nothing. There were spots of red on his cheekbones, as though he blushed a little, but his eyes were calm. Somehow the Fourteenth had the idea that Orth was laughing at them all.

His hand did not tremble when he lighted a cigarette for a few brief puffs before the take-off. His lips did not quiver. He seemed absolutely sure of himself. Yet not a man in the Fourteenth but knew that for a man to expect to down three leading German aces, two days in succession, was to ask too much of the gods. Yet Orth didn't even seem to give it a thought.

AND today he faced "Lucky" Moreen. This man's flying was never the graceful work of men like Friedrich and Stolpen, but his luck was a thing to marvel at. The Germans had even fostered a legend about him, to the effect that the bullets of the enemy could go right through him without killing him; that the holes would close up and leave him unhurt. Psychologically, then, everything was aligned against Orth.

Yet he climbed into his ship as calmly as though he were taking off for Paris, instead of for the hell which was the sky east of Dombasle. 'A' Flight smashed down the field. It jumped off as one, the planes in perfect formation from the take-off.

Orth, when the flight had passed through the archies, kept his eyes on Hagedorn for a signal. The flight was fully two kilometers behind the lines before the Germans put in an appearance. Then Hagedorn looked back and waved Orth out of the formation, reforming it to fill in the gap he had left.

Hagedorn's gesture said plainly:

"It's up to you; fight it out alone, in your own way."

Orth dived, then banked away, taking up a position to the right of his flight. He kept his eyes glued on the way ahead. He knew that Hagedorn had had some sort of communication from the enemy, and he believed that it must have had something to do with the skipper's signal just now, the signal to fly free, alone.

Hagedorn hadn't changed his order to Orth to take Morgen next on the list. So, Orth reasoned, the dropped message had been a challenge to him from Morgen. And Hagedorn hadn't read it to 'A' Flight!

"So," thought Orth, "it's a test, eh? Or maybe he doesn't believe I have a chance, and wants me to get it where I won't crash into somebody else."

He knew all his guesses might be wrong, so he shrugged his shoulders. Driving all conjecture from his mind, Silent Orth concentrated on thoughts of Morgen, the third on the list of the condemned—condemned, that is, if Orth were man enough to carry out the sentence imposed by Hagedorn.

THE Germans came, as they had come yesterday, with a rush which spoke of their great confidence in themselves. Orth watched them intently.

The Fourteenth swung into formation to meet them. Orth tried to make out the insignia of Morgen, the devil-may-care beer mug on the sides of a Fokker fuselage. He didn't find it, though he watched carefully.

And then, suddenly, a single plane shot from the German formation, and dove like a shot, straight

at Silent Orth. Orth watched him come. He noted, critically, the uncertainty of the man's manner of flying, and was sure that this was Morgen, who couldn't fly, but had the luck of the devil. Only a man with greater luck could beat him.

Morgen opened fire before he had come within effective range. Orth grinned slightly.

THE bullets splattered the sky. One or two touched his wings, far out near their tips to the left. But now more holes appeared as the diving Fokker came closer and closer. A stream of bullets fed into Orth's tail surfaces as he goosed his throttle to jump ahead and so escape the direct charge of the Fokker. Morgen yawed, and the turtle-back directly behind Orth was smashed and jarred by a single savage burst that almost cut the Spad in two. Morgen's fire had jumped seven or eight feet—as jittery as would have been the firing of an hysterical woman.

And in the instant, Orth knew how to beat the luckiest flyer in Germany. It came to him in a flash of inspiration.

Morgen flew like a crazy man. Orth would fly like a crazier one.

So he deliberately, with calm decision, threw his Spad into the most impossible positions. He fired when he was out of line. His Vickers sent lead on the empty sky through which Morgen had just plunged his Fokker. He rolled on the axis of his fuselage when Morgen got on his tail. He started to roll to the right, changed his mind with the maneuver barely begun, and rolled to the left again.

He gave a perfect imitation of a rookie who was having his first try at fighting in the air. Such a one would have been raw meat for Stolpen or Friedrich, just as orthodox flying would have been raw meat for "Lucky" Morgen.

Morgen must have been the most surprised flyer in all Germany at this strange turn of events. Instantly he ducked out of the fight, zoomed away, started a climbing turn, and stared at Orth as though he thought he must be fighting against a drunken man. And Orth, hoping for just such a break, sideslipped lazily into exactly the position he wanted.

His eyes gauged the speed of Morgen's sloppy climbing turn, timing it in order to get the man at the exact point where his speed was the lowest, where the German must level off or side-slip.

Then Orth gave his crate full gun. He jammed his nose around, aimed it at the cockpit of the German,

which was now like a hole in a leaning wall against the sky, and gripped the stick with his knees. His teeth were exposed as though he snarled. His eyes were savage pinpoints of determination. His hands went to his trips. His Vickers began to bark.

MORGEN, caught flat-footed, had only his luck to protect him. He tried to roll out of the way, but he was in no position for rolling. He tried to goose his throttle to jump ahead, out of line of sights, but he was near the top of his climb and his pick-up was too slow. Orth's bullets smashed into the cockpit directly ahead of Morgen's face.

Then Orth saw his tracers go into the pit itself, directly back of the dash. Many of them, he knew, had wreaked havoc with the instrument board.

Then the figure of Morgen himself was dead in Orth's ring-sight!

Orth's fingers never released their grip on the trips, never trembled or shifted. His Vickers' lead smashed through and through the German.

The Fokker started slipping down the sky. Morgen was looking across at Orth. Blood burst forth on his white face, but the German, frozen where he sat, continued to look at Orth. The Fokker, unaided by Morgen's dead hands, started to level off, then fell into a spin.

ORTH, thinking of the legend of Morgen, kept his guns hammering until the ship began to smoke, then to flame a murderous orange. And when he followed the Fokker down until its own comet-tail of smoke hid the ship from view, Morgen still sat in the midst of the smoke and the flame, staring straight ahead at where Orth had been.

That night there was an uncomfortable shifting of feet and a concerted clearing of throats when Silent Orth came in, a few minutes late, and took his place at the table. Orth knew that something was due to happen. So did Hagedorn. So did the survivors of 'A' Flight.

Orth had proved himself. It was up to the Fourteenth to show in some fashion that they appreciated him. It was Barger, who had heckled him the most, who acted as spokesman.

"Listen, Orth," he said, a bit uncertainly, "maybe we didn't get you right when you first came here. We know now that you're every bit as good as you told us. We set you down as a windbag at first. When you knocked off Friedrich we called it luck. We figured you

got him because you were afraid not to.

“The skipper says that the message dropped today is proof that you got Stolpen, too. That couldn’t have been entirely luck. And then—Morgen. You outguessed, outsmarted him, and we figure no windbag could do that.

“So we’ve sort of got together to tell you that the razzing stops, here and now. You can have the floor when you want it, to say anything you want to say; we’ll chip in and hire a hall if the mess shack isn’t big enough. Right now, if you want to get up and cuss us all out from here to Halifax, it’s your move!”

Orth looked at the faces of the others to see if they were sincere. They smiled—a bit uncertainly, but they did smile. Now was his chance.

He had sworn to make them swallow their words; they had swallowed them without being made to do so. He had vowed that they should swallow plenty of his, too. Here was his chance to blast and blister them all with stinging sarcasm. Here at last was his chance to get even.

SLOWLY, savoring the joy of the moment, Silent Orth rose to his feet. He put his palm on the table, glanced around at his audience.

And a queer thing happened as he looked into the eyes of men whom the war had haunted with memories out of hell itself. That lump started to rise in his throat. So—

“Thanks,” he said huskily, and sat down amid the silence. The silence which told his wingmates, now, all his friends, that hereafter his nickname would really fit him.