

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

## DEVILS OF THE AIR

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

*Here again is Kirby, the great leader of the “Three Mosquitoes.” The pilot of the new Fokker knew every trick, and Kirby matched him—then went into straight fighting. A brilliant air story—and one that is totally different.*

**O**UTSIDE of the impotent shelling of anti-aircraft guns, the “Three Mosquitoes” reached their objective without interruption. But when they reached it they were ready for a very hot reception. Kirby, leader of the famous trio of aces, sighted it first, and waved his free arm to tell his two comrades, who flew behind him on either side. “Shorty” Carn, right-hand man of the V, waved back first, and then Travis, on the left, made his vigorous response. Though they were flying at eight thousand feet, and the air was hazy, they had no difficulty in picking out the tiny winding road below. This road had to be reconnoitered from beginning to end at only a hundred feet—a dangerous task indeed, since the place was fifteen miles across the lines, and swarming with enemy troops and artillery.

Even as a new battery of A.A.s barked forth, and the shells burst and mushroomed out on all sides, Kirby gave the signal to descend. The three graceful Spads dipped as one, and went swooping clown. The Germans, not knowing whether this was to be a ground-strafe or a reconnaissance, did the only thing they could: opened up. As the planes swooped

lower, maxims, pom-poms, and even a few field guns thundered up at them, until the air turned black with smoke and shrapnel. But they ignored the barrage, kept going down, until the details of the road became visible, and they could pierce through the camouflage which obscured guns and soldiers.

Then they leveled off, and Kirby led them above the road, flying slowly, zigzagging and doing half rolls to avoid the maelstrom of bullets. They went on, each noting troop placements and battery indentations. There were three miles to cover, and the information most desired was at the very end of the road. Staff headquarters wanted details about the artillery there, so they could know whether to anticipate a new push.

The further they penetrated into this enemy territory, the hotter grew the ground fire. They were passing over a company of infantry now, and the shrill *crack-crack* of rifles was added to the clatter of maxims and pom-poms. Kirby heard the bullets whizzing past, saw the streaking tracer coming closer. A screaming, hissing sound told him his wing surface was being hit, and he rolled hastily.

As usual, the idea of being hit filled him with rage,

a desire to fight back. He longed to go down there and empty both his Vickers into the gray-clad mass. But he was out for information, and was to take no chances. Besides, they had to watch for an air attack. Any moment Boche planes might come along. A few Fokkers——

HIS MUSCLES grew taut, and a gleam came into his eyes. Fokkers! In former times, that word would not have excited him. He knew the little single-seaters, and had brought down many of them. But now the word took on a different meaning. Now it brought to his mind a picture of a shining plane, made of welded steel tubing, equipped with a 200 horse-power B.M.W.I. motor, and capable of maneuvers which no other plane could duplicate. The new Fokker! The Germans were just introducing them into the war, and only a few pilots had met with them. But those pilots, if they lived, told amazing tales about the new machines, claimed you couldn't fight them alone. They could out-climb, out-speed, out-dive, and out-maneuver you at every turn. And, since they were designed to be under control of their pilot in any position, they could perform all their evolutions with lightning speed and deadly accuracy.

All this Kirby knew, though he had never seen one of the new ships. But the idea had been enough to rouse his blood. During the past week, as he saw the pilots in his squadron growing more and more uneasy about a possible meeting with the new Fokkers, a burning desire had seized him. He wanted to meet one of them, wanted to go out and prove that they were not invincible, that they could be out-maneuvered. And he wanted to do it alone, to flaunt the Huns' boast that it took two Allied planes to fight one new Fokker.

He had been so sure that his own graceful Spad could do anything a Hun plane could do that he had tried to duplicate the maneuvers reported. Finding a lonely spot in the sky, he went through a series of extraordinary turns and twists and loops, at break-neck speed. The result was a breathless tail-spin, and he avoided a crash only by sheer luck. And, adding to the chagrin of this failure, he learned that the other two Mosquitoes had witnessed part of his maneuvers—had been flying around to look for him. Both of them laid into him: "I admit we're all equally damn fools," said Shorty Carn, taking his inseparable briar pipe from his lips and pointing its stem at Kirby, "but even so we've never gone as far as this. What were you doing? Try it again and they'll be sticking your busted propeller over you, in the earth!"

"What was the idea?" pursued Travis, the oldest and wisest of the trio—a lanky man with hair greying at the temples. "You must have had some reason——"

Kirby was indignant. "Hell, can't a man do a little practicing without——"

"Practicing!" snorted Travis.

"If that's practicing," Carn laughed, "I'd hate to see you in earnest!" His tone changed. "Come on," he pleaded, "tell us what's up your sleeve. Remember our rule: no secrets."

"But, damn it," Kirby exploded. "Who's keeping secrets? I tell you it was nothing."

They tried to pump him then, getting more and more serious, but he would not talk. He didn't want them to know that he was preoccupied with the new Fokkers, that he wanted to fight one of them alone, without their help. They would not understand: they might be offended that he was leaving them out, and they might think him a jackass. They were not worrying about the new machines. As usual, they were ready for anything. If they met a new Fokker, well and good—they'd put up their customary fight, together. But Kirby, being young and impetuous, felt different about it. He wanted to beat that Fokker alone, out-maneuver it!

And so, for the last few days, Carn and Travis had kept trying to find out what he was hiding, joking about it though they were considerably worried. They knew Kirby's love of reckless adventure, and were afraid he was planning to put on a private show, under overwhelming odds. But thus far nothing had happened. They fought together with their usual coordination, the insistent lunging style which had won them their nicknames. No new Fokkers had come along, and Kirby was simply biding his time.

NOW, while his trained eye kept picking up information, and while he rolled instinctively to avoid the constant ground fire, Kirby thought of the new ships. He looked up into the sky, then blinked as the sun met his eyes. He closed one eye and put his thumb up to the other—the method of picking enemy ships out of the sun. Nothing there. This should have pleased him. They had to get that information and get back to the lines as soon as they could, and if they got through without being attacked, so much the better. But Kirby wasn't pleased. He wished his glance had caught a shining little plane, flying up there.

He jerked his head from side to side to look at his men, saw that they were holding the formation. Then

he scanned the road beneath him. The discovery he made absorbed all his interest and attention, and he forgot momentarily the new Fokkers. Why, they were nearing the end of the road: they had pulled through very well. A few minutes more and they would have their important information. So far——

A shrill, deafening clatter seemed to sound in his very ears, and his whole plane trembled. Then he was moving the controls, kicking the rudder from side to side to zig-zag. The air was thick with smoking lead—he saw it, heard it whizzing from the ground. Then he realized. A barrage! The Germans were particularly anxious that no planes come over, the end of the road, and they had taken ample precautions. There was a whole army of machine guns down there, blazing in shrill unison, sweeping the sky, putting up a wall of lead and fire. They couldn't fly through it at such a low altitude: they'd be shot to bits. Already the tracer was tearing through Kirby's fuselage and wings—he heard the ripping of fabric, the splintering of wood. They must climb, climb at once. Then they could risk all in a final swoop, come down over the place and try to get their information and escape with it.

Kirby signaled his men, who were doing half rolls beside him, and then let out his throttle. The three planes zoomed up with a mighty roar, and the air became clearer as the streams of bullets fell short. But not for long. As they reached a thousand feet, there came a reverberating crash, and Kirby felt his plane being swept along by the concussion. More crashes followed, in swift succession, until the roar of his own exhaust was entirely drowned out. Archie, the anti-aircraft gun, had started barking again, as soon as the planes were high enough. Usually these shells were harmless, but the Germans had this spot well ranged, and concentrated so much fire on it that, even though they could not aim at the dodging planes, it seemed that some of those bursts must find their marks. The air was so black now that visibility was difficult: Kirby could no longer see the two planes at his sides. He kept up the climb, fighting to keep his plane in control as it wobbled and side-slipped from the concussions. They were in a tight fix. Any second they might be shattered to bits, blown to smithereens.

But then, with dramatic suddenness, the A.A. firing ceased. Kirby was too experienced to be surprised. There could only be one reason why the Germans had stopped firing. He glanced up apprehensively. The smoke was clearing away, and he could see the sunny sky once more. He put his thumb to his eye again, and then he was sitting rigid, tense, every nerve and muscle alert.

THREE PLANES were dropping out of the sun, diving straight for them. Even now they were coming into range; he heard their guns stutter into life, saw the streaks of flame leap hungrily from their noses. The A.A. guns had ceased firing so as not to hit their own planes, which, for some reason Kirby could not fathom, had decided to attack the Americans rather than trust to the barrage. Now they were almost on top of the Three Mosquitoes, pumping out a steady stream of sulphurous lead. Kirby was tense with nervous expectancy. He rolled as the tracer came streaking down, then signaled his men, and pulled up his nose for a steep zoom. And as he went up, he saw that the planes were old Fokkers, the type he had always fought at the Front.

He actually relaxed then, though he was pulling both his triggers, and his guns were spitting up at the enemy planes. This was nothing. Three old Fokkers were cold meat for the Three Mosquitoes. They could beat them in no time, send them down or chase them. Then they could pick up that information.

Up they zoomed together, calling the Germans' bluff, going straight for them. The German planes banked to avoid collisions, and then all of them leveled off. For a few seconds they were face to face, and every gun spat at once. Then Kirby waved to his comrades, who waved back, and they began to attack with their customary precision, in true Mosquito fashion. Worrying the Germans with short, swift lunges, they soon forced them to bank around, and then they crept up on their tails. Kirby watched his sights, saw his tracer getting closer and closer to the plane ahead of him. He sat up and signaled for more speed. Shorty Carn, who happened to be right beside him, waved back. But he was not merely waving his affirmative. He was gesturing wildly, excitedly, pointing forwards and up. Kirby looked up there. Then his heart stood still.

In the distant sky a group of tiny specks moved smoothly on, glinting in the sunlight. They were coming from Boche territory and coming in this direction! A squadron of Huns! In a flash Kirby grasped the whole upshot of the business. No wonder the three Fokkers had decided to attack rather than leave the Americans to the mercy of the barrage. It was a decoy. These Fokkers were holding off the Three Mosquitoes, keeping them from that information until the other squadron should arrive. And the squadron would settle them for good!

The tiny specks were growing up there now, taking on shape and color as they came closer. If the three

men stayed here, they'd be in for it. Yet, Kirby asked himself, what could they do? They had to get that information; they must try for it even if they were shot down.

As he struggled to piece his confused thoughts together the Fokker ahead shook him off, did a beautiful vertical bank, and made him roll aside. Momentary confusion followed. The Three Mosquitoes were trying to figure things out, while the Germans, encouraged by the sight of their own squadron, were proving formidable enemies. Cleverly, they got between the three men and the end of the road. They knew they could delay them long enough for the others to arrive.

Rage seized Kirby then. He would settle these three planes anyway, regardless of what happened. He waved again to his comrades, and this time it was Travis who was trying to convey something to him. In the same moment that they came into range again, and started firing, the third Mosquito flew up close alongside of Kirby, and began to signal him. It took Kirby a moment to grasp what he was driving at. Then he realized. Travis was telling him to race ahead alone, to get that information. The other two Mosquitoes would try to hold off the three Fokkers, meanwhile. Kirby knew how to work fast. There was a fleeting chance that he might manage to reconnoiter the end of the road before the German squadron attacked. Once they had the information they could trust to luck.

THERE WAS NO TIME to argue. Kirby knew this was the sanest course to take, and he signaled it to Carn. The three picked up formation and went charging at the Fokkers. Kirby put on full throttle, went straight ahead. The Germans rolled to avoid a crash, and, his bluff succeeding, he went through between them. They started to pursue, but Carn and Travis were too swift for them. The two headed them off, got between them and Kirby, and stuck there.

Kirby fought to get more speed out of his engine, and the frail Spad trembled from nose to tail. He glanced up. The German planes were coming steadily closer, and he saw now that they were in three flights, three Vs, of three planes each. Nine planes! They were still too far away to distinguish their type, but it didn't matter. Nine planes of any type could settle a mere trio! He thought of his comrades then, glanced back over his shoulder. A feeling of satisfaction came over him. One of the Fokkers was streaking down in a tight spin. They had scored! They knew how to fight all

right! He saw them maneuvering with the remaining two, saw their guns spitting.

But he must concentrate on his own work now. Glancing down, he saw that he was over the end of the road. A triumphant smile crossed his lips as he realized that the A.A. guns couldn't fire at him, couldn't stop him with a barrage. Their own planes were coming into range.

But the smile soon faded, and his lips set grimly. With an almost savage gesture, he pushed his stick forward, and went thundering down. He would get those details as fast as he could. No taking notes this time, no careful scrutiny, but a mental checkup of the salient facts, and then he must trust to his memory. Down he swooped, over that road, and now once more the machine guns blazed at him. But he ignored the bullets. He kept going down until the road became clear, and he could see the troops, the infantry and artillery. Sure enough, they were setting up several big batteries here. The road ended in a cluster of heavy woods, and the Germans used the trees to camouflage their colossal, long-range field guns. Kirby, guided by glimpses of the guns through the leaves, managed to pick out the different placements, and started to fly from one to another to get his details. As he left the first point, after discovering the three guns and noting their sizes, he glanced up at the sky once more. The German squadron was so close that he could see the planes clearly, see the bright stripes across their fuselages, and distinguish their types. The flights were composed of old Fokkers and Hannoveranner two-seaters. They were almost overhead now. A few seconds more and they would attack. He must hurry!

But though he hurried, he did not neglect one important detail. There were three more placements to be examined now. He was flying for the first, and had to swoop lower to pierce through the heavy camouflage. Machine gun fire became hotter, bullets tore into his plane. He noted the guns and zoomed up swiftly. And as he zoomed up he saw that the German planes were now directly overhead. There was not much more time. He went swooping down for the second placement. Again he dodged the ground fire, zoomed up once more. Now the German planes were spreading out, breaking formation, and getting ready to dive on him and his comrades, who were still busy with those two Fokkers up there. It looked like a slaughter. Yet Kirby must finish his work. He dived, then flattened out directly over the last placement.

And in the next second he saw the nine German

planes plunge over in a dive. They came dropping out of the sky, like flashing missiles, with trails of smoke in their wake. But Kirby had secured his information, had seen the last group of guns. He knew now that the Germans were planning a push, and he could tell headquarters just what to expect from this sector. That is, he smiled grimly as the planes drew closer overhead, if he lived to tell it!

A DOGGED DETERMINATION seized him. He would live to tell it! He'd get back somehow! He banked to the left and zoomed up. Then he glanced ahead to watch his two comrades. He saw them pull out of their fight with the two Fokkers, and then they banked and came racing towards him. They must get together before the German squadron drew into range. Kirby put on more throttle, dashed to meet them. The enemy planes were almost on top of him now; he was aware of their flashing shadows. But he reached the other two Spads, and they picked up formation even as the shrill clatter of Spandaus rose overhead.

They rolled to avoid the furious downpour of tracer, then Kirby signaled to break for home, and they all raced forward at full throttle. The Germans leveled off behind them, crept up on their tails, and followed, pumping out a steady stream of lead. Kirby worked frantically for more speed. There was no use trying to fight now. They must escape, get back with that information. But the Germans had no idea of letting them get back. Some of them, faster than the others, crept up in front to cut them off. The rest began to surround them.

Kirby saw a two-seater climbing towards them, its observer flanking his gun around and spraying it up at them. He waved to his men. The three spread out slightly, and poured three streams of bullets down at the Boche plane. The two-seater lurched, then disappeared in a mass of red flames and smoke.

But this was of little avail. The Germans were closing in on them from all sides, cutting off every path of retreat or advance. Kirby knew that they wouldn't have a show if they were caught in this awful trap. He got his men close to him and they worked frantically to break through, rolled and zoomed together. But the Germans kept crowding in on them, and the hail of tracer kept growing thicker. Kirby turned to his right, saw Carn alongside of him. He laughed cheerfully, waved. Carn waved back, and he saw the man smiling behind his goggles. He turned to the left, caught Travis' eye as the latter was about

to fire. Kirby touched his helmet, made a flourishing gesture. Travis, not to be outdone, snapped his hand in a salute. The farewell being over, there was nothing to do but sit tight, keep trying to make headway, and roll, bank, or zig-zag in a pathetic effort to dodge the awful tracer. Slowly, with grim precision, the Germans were working in closer, springing their trap.

But then, as Kirby glanced through the swarm of Boche, a wave of grateful relief swept him. Off to the left, another squadron of planes was moving on, coming from the direction of the Allied lines. He started then as a new fear seized him. Were these simply more German ships? He looked again, and this time he saw the familiar bursting of shells, the black mushrooms falling out in the sky around the planes. A.A. guns. They were Allied planes!

He must attract their attention. It was quite possible that they didn't see the dog-fight going on here. And so, as he kept rolling, banking, still trying to make headway, he was jerking out his Very pistol, holding it in the air. He fired three red rockets—the signal of distress. The German planes around him must have been momentarily confused by this sudden discharge, must have wondered whether they weren't being attacked. For they moved out, began to pull up slightly, sprang to the defense. This gave Kirby and his men an opportunity. They moved forward, started to gain headway. Kirby glanced up there to the left. The planes were coming! They had banked around, and were on the way.

His spirits revived, he signaled his men to stick to their guns, keep trying to make for the lines. Now they were no longer in such a tight hole. They were able to go forward, though the Germans were shooting at them from all directions. They went racing ahead, and Kirby saw the Allied planes getting closer, coming in at a right-angle. The Germans saw them too, for they began to surround the Three Mosquitoes again, evidently determined to get these planes before they were interfered with. Kirby gritted his teeth, maneuvered for all he was worth, as did his two comrades. If the Allies didn't beat the Germans to it, he knew they couldn't escape from that infernal trap again.

Once more Boche planes were getting in front of them, cutting them off. The three men shot frantically, furiously, often without getting their sights on anything. The tracer began to come from ahead again. If those Allied planes didn't hurry——!

THEN, SUDDENLY, the Germans seemed to give up. They pulled out and started zooming, trying to get the altitude position before the new planes arrived. But the planes were here now, coming straight into it. They met the Germans and forced them to level off, and then it was a dog-fight! All over planes were pairing off and maneuvering with one another, diving, zooming, banking.

Kirby recognized the new planes as Camels and Dolphins; a British squadron. He was about to rush into the fight when he saw both his comrades signaling to him, pointing towards the lines. Then he remembered. He must get back with that information; they must not stay here any longer. He waved his affirmative, then banked around and went ahead, at full throttle. They flew beside him. The three took stock on the way, by means of signaling. The planes of Carn and Travis were badly damaged, full of holes. But Kirby, by some miracle, had escaped with little injury to his machine.

He glanced back to see how the fight was progressing. The swarm of planes was moving further into German territory now. The British squadron had the edge! Kirby watched for a few seconds, guiding his Spad instinctively. And as he watched, his eye caught something which sent a thrill tingling through him.

A little plane suddenly dropped out of the sky, dived vertically on the fight, and then, with an abruptness which made the trick unique, flattened itself straight out in front of one of the British planes, its guns firing. Never before had Kirby seen a plane do anything like this, and it would have been enough to convince him. But there was more. He saw the plane flashing silver in the sun, saw its graceful shape, its extra lifting surface, as well as the red diagonal stripes on its fuselage. There was no doubt about it; it was one of the new Fokkers.

His eyes gleamed, and he straightened up in the cockpit. And in that moment he forgot all about information, forgot his comrades, and forgot that he was extremely tired. Under an uncontrollable impulse, he started to bank around, vertically. Travis, who was directly in the path, moved out of the way, then signaled a demand for an explanation. Kirby waved indifferently, swung around, and started back for the fight at full throttle. The two others flew up alongside of him, kept waving frantically even while they stuck to him. His teeth clenched in a sort of childish rage. He waved them to get off, to go back to the lines. He didn't want them with him. He wanted to do this alone.

They were amazed and incredulous. Why, they always went together, had just been fighting together, and now suddenly Kirby was behaving like this. Unable to understand, they stuck by him, refused to leave him. He cursed at them, shouted out wild oaths, and wished they could hear him above the roar of engines.

They were all near the fight again now, only a few hundred yards away from those maneuvering planes. Kirby saw the Fokker once more as it went flashing around, trying to pick off British planes from the top. It was attacking a Camel now, getting right on its tail. The Camel floundered ludicrously as it tried vainly to shake off the Hun's sights. The German fired a short burst and, to his amazement and rage, Kirby saw the Camel's wings fall off, and the British ship went crashing down. His hand itched to get that Fokker now, to pay the German back for that little trick!

But there were his comrades, flying right at his sides. Damn them, couldn't they see this was his own game, and he wanted to play it himself? He didn't want to be chaperoned. But in spite of his signals, his pointing and waving, they stayed right with him. There was a two-seater ahead of them now, and Kirby decided they might as well attack it. He gave the proper signal and they went about it in their usual way. Shorty Carn zoomed up to cut it off from above, and Travis got beneath it. Firing all the while, they held it there for Kirby, who was supposed to get on its tail. But he didn't do so. He saw his opportunity to escape, and took it. Leaving the two-seater to his comrades, he pulled back his stick and zoomed up, losing himself in the thick of the scrap.

He zig-zagged his way upward. The British were winning all right, but that Fokker had evidently encouraged the Germans. Instead of retreating, they stuck there, determined to fight it out. Kirby went on up, firing whenever a target came his way, keeping his eyes peeled. His heart thumped as he saw the Fokker, now off to his left, and going for another British plane. He sped over there, raced towards it. But then he changed his mind. If he attacked it like this, he would have to share it with the British plane. And he wanted it alone, wanted it off to himself, so he could prove that he could out-manuever it.

AN IDEA came to him. He went over and banked around until he knew the Fokker was behind him. He glanced back. There it was, firing at the British plane. He saw the helmeted pilot leaning forward in his cockpit. He stalled his Spad, then began to

wobble his tail-fin directly in front of the German's nose. The temptation was enough to bait the Hun. He transferred his attention to the Spad, jumped on its tail, and began to fire. Kirby looked back and waved insolently at the pilot, then put on full throttle, raced straight out of the fight. He did not have to look to find out that the German was pursuing him. The tracer told him that. On they went, with the German pumping out bullets, bullets which often struck. Kirby was rolling, but he saw he couldn't dodge by rolling. It was ridiculous, his letting a German stay on his tail, baiting him on, but he could not help it.

Suddenly he saw that they were far from the fight. He glanced down. Again he saw German troops swarming on the ground. His eyes lit up. They would see this fight! He would beat their wonderful plane right in front of them! Abruptly, he set his plane in a steep climb. The German pilot accepted the idea, and they climbed together. Every now and then the tracer tore at Kirby again. They went on up, went on through wisps of clouds, came out in a clear blue sky which kept getting clearer and bluer. The air was thin and cold. Still they climbed. Eighteen thousand feet . . . Kirby was breathing hard, and his motor began to sputter. Twenty thousand, and his plane slowed down, he could not make much headway. But the Fokker was above him! It was a good two hundred yards up there, getting ready to dive on him. Kirby tried to climb further. It was terrible at this height. Every move exhausted him, and his engine was missing; he began to lose altitude.

Then, suddenly, the Fokker was diving. He saw it coming down overhead, and for a moment was rendered helpless by astonishment. No ordinary dive, this, no drop on a straight line. The nose of the German plane, as it came plunging down, was describing a slight spiral, and when its two guns began to pour out a speeded up stream of bullets—they fired six hundred shots a minute—Kirby saw the meaning of this trick. The bullets, flung around in a circle, made a cone of lead which surrounded Kirby's Spad. He rolled quickly, and the outside of the cone took off a piece of his trailing wing surface. At the same time he noticed that he had lost a hundred feet in that roll. He could not stay up here. He kicked his rudder bar, let the plane go into a spin.

As he went spinning down, the bullets continued to leap at him. The German was diving on him, right with him. At eight thousand feet, where he, felt more at home, he leveled off. Thus far he had not managed

to get one shot at the German. But he was determined to out-maneuver him. He started to bank around. And then the Fokker, which was now at his side, did another astonishing trick. Suddenly it seemed to hang there in the air, hang right on its prop, while its nose simply followed Kirby around, pointing at him always. He rolled, side-slipped, zig-zagged frantically. If he straightened out he'd be a gonner. As it was the tracer scarcely missed him.

Now he sped right past the Fokker, and saw the pilot again. This time the German was waving at *him*. Rage seized him. He became wild and reckless, began to do what he had done before—tried to do a Fokker's trick with a Spad. He did an abrupt right bank first, and his wings trembled as if they must snap. The German, momentarily surprised by the maneuver, got off his guard for a second, and Kirby managed to spray him slightly. Then the German zoomed up and pivoted around for a breathless Immelmann turn. Kirby zoomed after him, forced him on the outside arc, and the two guns spat at once.

They began to maneuver then, the German always surprised when the Spad performed his tricks. Kirby was getting more reckless every moment. They had worked up to ten thousand feet now, and both were doing half loops and swift turns for altitude. Each time Kirby did one of those short half loops, his whole plane shook and rolled over with a jerk which threw him hard against his holding strap. He shouldn't be doing this: he'd kill himself!

NEVERTHELESS, he saw his chance for a full loop which ought to bring him straight on the German's tail. The loop a Spad usually did wouldn't be sharp enough: he had to do it like the Fokker. He pulled back his joy-stick violently, and the whole plane trembled as it stood straight on its tail. Up he zoomed. Then he made the mistake. He put on full throttle. He was on top of the loop now, his nose just turning over. As the engine burst into a series of deafening detonations, the plane gave a mighty lurch. Again he was hurled against the belt. The plane lurched once more, and then it happened. The belt suddenly slipped from its buckle, he felt that sole support drop away, and then knew he was falling, dropping out into space.

With frantic instinct his hands clutched out, tried to catch something. He felt a tangle of wires, a bit of fabric, and knew he was falling between the two wings. Then he was Clinging to a strut, gripping it with frenzy, his body suspended from the lower wing.

And at almost the same moment the plane nosed over and started down. The German, thinking he had scored, left it to its fate, zoomed away. Down shot the little Spad, with Kirby clinging to the strut, his feet flying behind him. He was hurtling through space, crashing down there. The wind screamed at him, flogged him unmercifully. The strut almost tore off his hands. He thought he must let go: nausea and dizziness were overcoming him as the plane went on that break-neck plunge. And down below he saw the blurred brown earth rising up to meet him, looming up ever closer.

Then he knew he was going to certain death. Strangely enough, only one thought bothered him: the thought that, due to his own silliness, he had failed to take back his information. He felt he deserved to die: after all he had brought it on himself by that wild maneuvering. He had failed in his duty. Now he must pay the penalty.

But all at once, this thought was supplanted by a realization. He could not die like this! No, if he must be killed, he must be killed in battle, by a better man! Not like this—an accident.

He must do something! He was dizzy and out of breath, and the earth was coming up faster now, directly at him. But his desire to live gave him a new strength. Holding to the strut with his right hand, he reached forward with the left, seized another strut, and tried to pull himself up onto the lower wing. A spasm of pain stopped him, and he groaned and ground his teeth. He bent up his leg, tried to get it over the edge. Another pull, and he was working his way up there, getting on that downward slanting floor. His hopes sank as he saw he was down to about 2000 feet—with the earth getting ever closer. But he began to creep along the wing, holding onto every strut and wire which offered support. Once or twice he almost slipped, and a dizzy spell seized him, but then he stirred himself to savage action and continued to work his way down. 1500 feet—the plane was shaking and trying to fly to pieces: the struts trembled in his hand, threatened to break, the flying wires shrilled and snapped. Kirby was a foot away from the fuselage and his cockpit. The whole universe centered on that little space for him—all his hopes, his faith, his strength were concentrated on those scant twelve inches. To him they were miles. Yet he fought to lessen the distance, to press that space into smallness.

1000 feet . . . His dazed glance caught men running down there, staring up, too amazed to shoot. The

Germans saw the Spad hurtling down, saw the pilot crawling along the wing, inch by inch. They sympathized with him, and crowded together to cheer him, told him not to give up. But he did not hear. He only knew that there were several more inches to go.

Closer and closer came the Spad, and the Germans stood rooted to the spot, watching, clenching their teeth in suspense. The pilot was working frantically—stretching out one hand to reach the cockpit. Could he make it? The drone of the engine rose to a mighty thunder, and the plane was so low they could see it to the minutest detail. Five hundred feet now, plunging wildly, furiously.

Once more Kirby felt himself growing numb, felt consciousness slipping away. But as he saw the ground again, saw how close it was, he made a last frantic effort. He almost leaped forward, reached out. Sobs broke from him as his hand gripped the cockpit cowling. He jerked himself forward, pulled himself half up, and reached into the cockpit for the joy-stick. His hand floundered around in space for a moment and, dazed and bewildered, he had the awful idea that the joy-stick was gone, that it had fallen off or something. The distance between himself and the ground was diminishing now with nauseating rapidity. Then he saw that he was down to almost a hundred feet, and in that fraction of a second he got the stick and jerked it with all his strength.

A splintering of wood, a rippling of fabric, and another shrill of struts. A cry of astonishment went up from the Germans on the ground. For, even as the plane loomed into largeness over their heads, its nose, seeming to scorn the earth, lifted upwards. Then they saw. The pilot was in the cockpit, guiding his ship in a zoom. As soon as they realized he was safe they remembered that this was war. Men rushed to machine guns, aimed them, and tried hard to shoot down the plane they had just been hoping wouldn't crash!

Kirby, still dazed, fastened his safety belt again as he zoomed up. Though extremely shaken, and aching from head to foot, he had escaped without any serious injury, and his plane was still in good condition. Making five thousand feet, he leveled off and headed for the Allied lines.

BUT THEN, as the whole thing came back to him, a feeling of shame and humiliation seized him. He had made a damn-fool of himself in every possible way. He had run off from his comrades, then tried to out-maneuver a Fokker, with the result of being

thrown from his cockpit. And he had held up that information! A fine mess he was in now. The C.O. would be sore, the squadron would laugh at him. Worst of all, he had not even beaten the Fokker.

He shook his head. Then, as he thought of his two comrades, he looked back into the sky. It was empty. The dog-fight evidently had ended and, thinking he had gone home, the other two Mosquitoes doubtless had gone back, too. At least they were not up there. He looked again, put his thumb to his eyes——

Then, once more, he was tense, rigid, alert. It didn't seem possible, yet there it was, up in the clouds. He'd know it a mile away. The same Fokker! Doubtless it was hovering there, waiting for some cold meat.

An overwhelming fury swept Kirby, and his face turned crimson. Damn that German, he'd like to go up there and settle him cold! In fact, his eyes gleamed, why shouldn't he? He wanted some compensation for all his trouble.

With a savage motion, he pulled out his plane, went zooming up towards that patch of white cloud. He knew the Fokker would soon dive on him, as soon as the pilot spotted him. He climbed ahead, his rage growing blacker every second. All his disgust, his worry, his anguish, he laid on that Fokker. He went on up, got closer to the mist there.

Then he smiled knowingly as the Fokker came dropping down on him. It was diving in a spiral again. Kirby ignored the cone of bullets. He kept his climb, went speeding straight up for the German, lunging towards it in his old style of fighting. He wasn't maneuvering now, wasn't trying to make his plane perform. Instinct was guiding him, instinct prompted by rage. He was fighting without realizing how he was fighting. On he went, straight for the German, while the bullets ripped past. The German, seeing that he'd be "rammed" if he stayed there, started to roll. Kirby rolled after him, his guns firing. The German started to Immelmann then. As he stood on his tail, Kirby raced towards him, got his nose pointed at the underpart of the German's fuselage. Then he let both guns go, firing two short bursts.

The German never finished that Immelmann turn.

His machine went over in a left hand spin. Kirby dived after it, sprayed it again and again until he saw it break into flames. Then he was satisfied, and headed back for the lines. And as he went back, a strange realization struck him.

"Holy hell!" he exclaimed. "I got him without any tricks. I—I just went up there and got him!"

THE CROWD of pilots pressed around Kirby, all talking at once. But he was listening only to Shorty Carn and Travis. It was shortly past noon, and he had turned in his information. The C.O. had said nothing, though there had been a sly smile on his face. So Kirby's worries were over.

"Yes," said Carn, between pipe-puffs, "we heard all about it. A Camel saw you doing it. Gosh, that was certainly a great one you pulled off."

A feeling of pride swept Kirby. He grinned.

"Well, I knew I'd get him after——"

"Yes," put in Travis, "it was great. The idea of crawling back into that cockpit and righting your plane when—— Why," he broke off, "what's the matter?"

Kirby was furious. "Damn it!" he burst out. "Here I go up and beat hell out of one of those new Fokkers you're all so scared of, take it on single-handed, and——"

"Oh, that," said Travis, and his tone was slightly contemptuous. "That was all right, but why compare it to a stunt like you pulled off? After all, you ought to be able to beat any Hun plane." And a chorus of voices chimed in in agreement.

"Well, maybe," Kirby conceded, earnestly. "Anyway, I've learned a few things to-day. I guess I was a fool, trying to duplicate those maneuvers, keeping it from you fellows and then beating it off by myself. I had to use our own method anyway. If we had met that Fokker together we would have settled his hash in no time. After all, what's a new plane? It isn't the plane that counts, it's the pilot."

Whereupon several fellows patted him on the back, all exclaiming: "How modest!"