



SINGLE ACTION

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

Silent Orth Goes Gunning for Three German Flyers Whose Diabolical Tactics Call for Quick Reprisal!

AFTER THE TOUGHEST DOGFIGHT they had ever been through, "A" Flight was going home. Liebling and his men, a new outfit who had taken up their stand beyond Mont Sec, were relieving the outfit against which the Avocourt Squadron had been battling for weeks with varying success. Liebling was supposed to be the wiliest commander of sky fighters on any front, in any army. He used his brains as well as the brawn and skill of his fighters. And he himself was without a peer as a battler.

To the right rear of the flight flew "Silent" Orth, the man who had come to the squadron with much boasted oratory on his lips. He had remained to discover that the man went the farthest who kept his mouth shut, and to prove to his wingmates that he was a master flyer and destroyer of enemies.

His wingmates had learned to respect him. If, now, he had chosen to extol his own virtues as a sky fighter, they would have listened to him, believing all he said. But the war had made him taciturn—without detracting from his firm attention to the business at hand.

Just now his eyes were fixed on Lieutenant Lebel, across the abyss between the planes in the V formation. Lebel was behaving strangely. He was having difficulty with his Spad. Now it edged in toward the crate ahead of it, while Orth watched the pilot's actions in the pit. Lebel would lean forward as though his head were too heavy to hold up. Then he would sort of roll in his pit, start erect, notice that he was crowding the ship ahead of him, and regain control. He was all over his pit, as though he were a man with jelly for a backbone.

That he had an excellent chance of periling his wingmates, Orth saw at once. Indeed, it would be a miracle if he were able to hold his place in the formation until tarmac's return. If Orth hadn't known better, he would have believed Lebel drunk. The man behaved as though he were.

Orth looked around him. There was a truism in air fighting or formation flying—that when there seemed to be trouble, the thing to do was to dive.

ORTH hesitated for a moment. He flicked the blood from his cheeks with his gauntleted hand—blood which had been drawn by flying splinters of glass torn from his instrument board by the bullets of Liebling's men.

He dived, circled to the right, then zoomed for altitude to slide back over the formation so that he

could look directly down upon Lieutenant Lebel. Then he noticed a ghastly thing. A red flower of huge, jagged proportions seemed to have blossomed in the back of Lebel's flying jacket. It needed no second glance for Orth to know that something terrible had happened to the man.

Lebel had taken a bullet through the back. Yet the courageous flyer, who must have known that he was doomed, that he had but a few minutes left of life, was taking his crate home. Something came up in Orth's throat and almost choked him. He was never able entirely to understand the almost fanatical courage of his wingmates.

Even as he watched, Lebel leaned forward over the front of the pit and blood gushed from his mouth and nostrils. Regaining control when his Spad would have eased to the right to lock wings with someone across the abyss, the pilot leaned his head over the side for a moment. Orth's stomach tightened as he realized the fight Lebel was making to hold his own with the death which was flapping its wings about his shoulders.

Lebel looked up, startled, probably thinking that the wings which cast their sudden shadows over him were those of an enemy. But then he seemed to recognize the red, white and blue cocardes of his own friends, and his weakness returned to him.

"A" Flight rode through the Archie bursts, nearing home. Their Hissos roared defiance. Their wings rose and fell in the air that was troubled by the bursting projectiles. It was a brave sight, one of which Silent Orth never tired. Would Lebel live to reach the home field?

IT SEEMED SO. Now the rest of his wingmates were watching the dauntless flyer, who stared down with bleared eyes at his own tarmac below. Lebel's wingmates were looking out for themselves. Captain Martin, leader of the flight, was watching Lebel. But none could help him. In the air every man was master of his fate, or he was lost. None could help a buddy by stretching forth a hand to hold him up.

One flyer could take an enemy off the tail of a friend, but could never hold him up when he started to fall.

Now "A" Flight was going down to a landing. The wingmates of the stricken Lebel were giving him plenty of sky room. Orth circled the erratically diving Spad, as Lebel went down to the field. The Spad touched wheels and bounded fifty feet.

Orth gasped. Lebel was a perfect flyer. Orth had

never known him to make such a sloppy landing. He guessed the truth then, as the Spad started rolling, scarcely slackening its speed. Lebel was dead in his pit.

One by one the rest of the flight went down and landed. Greaseballs had caught the wings of Lebel's crate in time to keep it from crashing into the walls of a hangar, dragged it to a stop.

Orth landed, was among the first to reach Lebel. His head sagged forward on the cockpit coaming.

Orth, since nobody else seemed eager to make a closer examination, climbed up to look at Lebel. When, after a quick look, he turned back to his wingmates, his face was white, his voice a hoarse croak as he said:

"He's dead! A single bullet—an explosive one—through the back. I can't for the life of me see how he got back at all. The bullet couldn't have missed his heart by more than a couple of inches; and when it burst, it must have—"

But he didn't go into details, for his wingmates knew the havoc wrought by explosive bullets. There were certain things a man was supposed to do when hit by a tracer—certain things which they never talked about. Things which didn't save their lives, though they might have prolonged them for a few minutes—long enough, say, to bring a Spad home, because planes were more valuable to the Allies, almost, than the men who flew them.

Orth stepped down to the tarmac as the squadron skipper came across the field. The major's face was grave. His eyes were haunted, somber. He glanced toward the lolling head on the cockpit coaming.

"One bullet?" he asked softly. "Through the back?"

"A" Flight turned as one man to look in startled amazement at the skipper. How could he have known that?

ORTH strode to the major. All eyes were on the pair. Their ears, accustomed to the endless clattering of rifles and machine-guns whose sounds came down from the east, did not hear the noises now. They were attuned to the words of the skipper and Silent Orth, hearing nothing else. Tension had gripped the group, holding them fast, so that they all were suddenly like figures done in stone. "How, sir," asked Orth grimly, "did you know that Lebel had got his with a single bullet through the back?"

"Because," said the major, just as grimly, "it's written in the cards. There's a new group of flyers behind Mont Sec. Intelligence has given me some

information about them, while you've been out on patrol. There are three flyers with them who are the deadliest gunners in the war. Before the war, they were a rifle team. They're masters of all sorts of guns.

"IT JUST happens that they combine their knowledge of guns with almost perfect airmanship. That isn't coincidence, for gunnery requires perfect timing and balance. Airmanship and marksmanship go hand in hand."

"But to fire just one shot, and to count coup with it," said Orth softly. "Why, that requires masterly—"

"Right," said the major. "But don't get the wind up, any of you. It's rather startling, when we're all accustomed to firing by bursts, to encounter gunners who can do the same job with one bullet. We'll have to figure out something that will offset their mastery."

"Now, take care of Lebel. Martin, you'll have to take off in an hour. I've just had orders to ground strafe the area back of Mont Sec, the roads of which appear to be packed with German divisions marching up to regarrison Mont Sec."

Martin nodded.

The flyers glumly watched as the hospital detail took Lebel in hand. The dead flyer was destined for a hole in the ground somewhere, the war entirely over for him. He had sung his swan song when he had risen above life and death and brought his Spad home. For him the war was ended, forever, save that his spirit would linger on somehow, to inspire his living wingmates to emulate his courage. They all felt it, too, which was why nothing was said when he was borne away. Orth, after making out his combat report, went to his hutment and sat for a long time in thought. Among the dozen or so flyers for Liebling, then, were three men who were deadly with Spandaus; so deadly that it was a matter of pride with them to down their enemies with but a single bullet each. Orth knew that the major hadn't told the whole story, that behind the careers of the three men were probably many other dead Allies, all of whom had died in the same deadly fashion.

Some way must be found to bring those three men down. And it wouldn't be sufficient to dot it with stuttering bursts from twin guns.

Single shots must be met by single shots, Orth had already decided.

It would be a tough mission for some one.

The orderly came to inform him that Martin wanted every member of "A" Flight on the apron. An

hour had slipped away while Orth had been making his plans.

HE WENT out, fastening gauntlets, goggles and helmet. Five Spads were ticking over at the deadline, ready for their grim business. Their Vickers were loaded with ammunition. Extra drums were within easy reach of the gunners' hands. Martin studied his four flyers before giving the command to step into pits.

"The single action fellows," he said softly, though every word cut through the droning of five Hissos as though it were an invisible knife, "will probably come out again to show us how rotten we are. I've only one thing to say to you—do your job as you've always done it. If some of us don't get back—well, we can't expect to live forever. If I get mine, Orth is in command."

That sounded strange to Orth. It emphasized the tragedy which had stalked through the squadron since Orth had joined it. Then, he had been the junior member of "A" Flight; but so many of his wingmates had gone West, that now only Martin himself was senior to Orth. And before Martin there had been three captains, all of whom, in the last two weeks, had died in their pits.

MARTIN signaled his flyers to their places. Without a moment of hesitation, save on the part of Lieutenant Fenner—who was taking off the crate Lebel had brought home—they climbed into their pits. Fenner hesitated for a single second, and Orth was sure he knew why. Fenner was saying to himself:

"Lebel died in this crate. Am I to follow him?"

Then Fenner stepped into his pit. Martin already had his right hand lifted. He snapped it down. Five Hissos roared deafening defiance, started down the field. Five hands shoved sticks forward, holding them in till five tails came off. Then, as the tails came off, and the crates started weaving as though eager to spurn the ground with their wheels, five hands dragged the sticks back, and the Spads leaped into the blue.

No circling for altitude. Just a straight leap into space, headed for the lines. Then Martin started a wide semi-circle, headed for Mont Sec, which had been won and lost several times at the cost of thousands of lives—which was yet to know some of its grimmest holocausts.

For over behind it, according to the major, German divisions were moving into position to hold the Allies back on their march into the heart of the Fatherland. The Flight was out to make as many gaps as possible in the ranks of the marching men. It would be like

shooting rabbits already caught in traps—except that always above the marching men there would be Albatrosses, Fokkers and Aviatiks, preparing to beat off any winged opposition. It wouldn't be a simple matter of just shooting men down who couldn't fight back because their feet were glued to the ground.

At an altitude of seven thousand feet they were bearing due east, motors full out. Over the rapidly changing lines, where ranks in khaki met ranks in *feldgrau*, both sides studded with bristling bayonets, fled "A" Flight. Not a member looked down as the Archie projectiles snapped past, to burst into countless fragments thousand of feet above.

They were flying too low to be in danger from the bursts, and only direct hits, which came so seldom—perhaps once in a thousand shots—could do them any harm. The chances were too slim even to be considered.

Now they nosed up, once past the Archies, to lift over Mont Sec, at the moment in German hands. From the hill came volleys of rifle and machine-gun fire. Bullets probed for their scudding wings, but they hammered on. No use paying any attention to ground fire. Either it got you or it didn't. If it did, that was tough luck.

BEYOND the hill, Orth gasped as he looked down. As far as the eye could reach, the roads down there were packed with German troops in gray.

Bullets hurled into that mass could not possibly be wasted. Every bullet would surely find its mark in the bodies of the enemy.

Martin, too, looked down. All other eyes, for the moment, scanned the sky for the flashing wings of enemy airmen. The sky seemed empty, but Orth knew that when it seemed utterly deserted, then it was the most dangerous. Wings had a way of materializing, with dramatic suddenness, out of nothing at all, and death usually rode on their spreader-bars.

Martin signaled for the dive, secure for the time in the idea that the sky, save for themselves, was empty. The five crates, separated to allow sky room for each, flashed down with the wind screaming louder and louder through struts and braces. As they dived, they cleared their Vickers with brief bursts, spitting bullets through the arcs of their propellers.

ORTH'S EYES were fixed on the rivers of gray below. The rivers did not seem to realize just yet that death flashed down upon them from above, at a hundred

and fifty miles an hour. But soon they did realize, for Martin led the parade, his Vickers chattering shrilly, to be heard above the tumult. Men were screaming down there, Orth knew without actually being able to hear—for they were quitting the roads like frightened quail.

“A” Flight had split apart, each flyer taking one of the main arteries of traffic. As Orth dived toward one road, Martin vanished over another, proof that he had dropped below the paralleling trees and was smashing at the troops from right above their heads.

Before those streams of hot lead, the Germans were dashing into the woods. They would emerge when the planes had flown over, to reform for the continuation of the march—because, death, or no death, the war must go on. It was important for the Boche to hold their own on Mont Sec. It was important in the war, far beyond its true value, because it was an island of resistance in a long line which was threatening to collapse in so many other places.

Orth concentrated on the road under him, and his Vickers bucked and jumped under his hands, grew white hot from the passage of countless bullets through their muzzles. The Vickers chanted and chattered. Men who couldn’t make the trees swiftly enough fell like ripe wheat before the sickle, as Orth yawed from right to left. His guns were never still, their bullets hammering away at the chests of the Germans. When he had traversed the road for a mile, he would come back, taking them from the rear, downing them anew on the backward track.

Bullets by the thousand reached for him, but always just too late. Ground troops, in the excitement of a strafe, could not remember to aim ahead of flashing wings, so that those wings would fly into the line of fire, instead of out of it.

Orth flashed on. Now he had come to the end of his traverse. He brought his stick back into his belly, climbing up to start back. He spared time for a quick glance around.

Over to his right, Lieutenant Makin was just rising out of his side road, and a single Fokker out of nowhere was sitting on his tail. Orth watched the fight. Makin was trying desperately to elude his attacker. Orth, his eyes grimly narrowed, watched for thin streamers of tracer smoke between the Fokker and the Spad, but saw none.

IN A FEW SECONDS, he realized that the terror was stalking again—that the German was withholding his fire, waiting. Waiting for what?

The answer to that was not far to seek. The German, relying on his perfect flying, was waiting for the chance to end it all with one bullet.

Orth could imagine what Makin was suffering as each maneuver he tried served only to prove to him the futility of trying anything. The German stuck to him like a burr to the tail of a cavalry horse. Orth forgot his job. He swung wide toward Makin, hoping to arrive in time to save his wingmate.

Now Makin was free for a second, trying to get around for a shot at his adversary. Then the German, with consummate ease, was back on his tail again.

“He’ll do it any moment now,” thought Orth.

AND then he saw it—a thin pencil of smoke, which looked like a long slim spear. It came out of the nose of the Fokker and ended, with sure accuracy, squarely in the center of Makin’s back. Orth, of course, could not tell how it was for variation to right or left, because he was far to one side himself, but the subsequent action of Makin told him the truth. Makin simply flung up his arms. Maybe his feet did something to his controls, for though the motor was still full out, the Spad suddenly spun as on a dime, banking into a nose-down spin, and vanished into the trees. Orth hurled his crate toward the German who had downed Makin, but all he saw, as the German headed for home, was the insignia on the sides of his fuselage—a bull’s eye with black and white circles circumscribing it.

Orth’s duty was very clear, had been covered by commands issued by Martin before the take-off—to strafe the roads behind Mont Sec. That left him no alternative. He couldn’t go off chasing the flier with the bull’s-eye on his fuselage, leaving the roads for his wingmates to handle. He had to watch the German fly away.

It galled him bitterly.

It proved to him that the flyer, having taken his toll for the day, was finished for the time being. He would come back tomorrow, or when “A” Flight flew over again.

Starting to bank back to the road, oblivious of the ground fire which still searched for him, Orth saw, with a start, that another flyer was in difficulties — Lieutenant Fenner. Instantly his mind went back to the hesitation Fenner had shown before the take-off, just before he had flung a leg over the cockpit coaming of his Spad for this flight.

A German was sitting on Fenner’s tail, and Orth had almost to rub his eyes to make sure he wasn’t

watching the fall of Makin all over again. For the same thing was happening, as though the two events had been cut from a single piece of sky life.

Fenner was trying his level best, after having smashed the life from an unnumbered mass of the soldiers on the road, to fight clear of the attacker who stuck to him as though they had been blood brothers. And he was having the same luck at it which Makin had had—which was none at all.

And even as Fenner flew wild, with a single bullet hurled into him from the rear, Orth stared wildly at a spot above the main road. Martin himself was desperately trying to elude a third Fokker, with little success.

FENNER flew crazily for all of a minute, left wing up, right wing down, and even then Orth knew that his Spad was out of control, that Fenner was dead at the stick. If he hadn't been, he would have done something to stay the headlong, wild flight of his Spad, whose nose, in its crazy banking, was coming second by second closer to the trees through which the Germans marched.

Fenner went in at last, and the spot where he had landed was marked by a column of black smoke.

And his killer calmly flew home. He had loosed just one shot, a tracer, an incendiary bullet which struck as any other bullet did, but which burst into countless fragments once it entered the living tissue of a body.

Incendiary bullets were banned by all forces as projectiles to use against the bodies of enemies. There were often times when men were struck by them, when they were intended to fire hangars, planes, or material—but that was considered accidental.

THEY were used mostly because their trace could be seen, and gunners could tell where their main bursts were going. But no flyer could use them exclusively. If a flyer with a pan filled with incendiaries were captured by the enemy of either side, he was shot out of hand, as though he had been a spy in civilian garb.

Yet these three flyers were using them, deliberately hurling them into the backs of their enemies.

Orth flung himself toward Martin. But he knew, even as he kned his crate around, that he was too late.

Martin went in as Makin and Fenner had done, and Orth was in command of all that was left of "A" Flight. The flight now was composed of Lieutenant Fuller and Orth himself.

Fuller, as the third Fokker flew away, lifted swiftly to an elevation of five thousand feet or so, and looked

around for his wingmates. Orth swiftly flashed toward him—even as a dozen Albatrosses, with intent to mop up the remnants left by their trio of single-action gunners, dived straight at Orth and Fuller.

Orth signaled for Fuller to fight and fly his way home. Fuller waved back. Orth swung in, flying wing and wing with him. They hurled themselves straight into the thick of the Albatrosses..

No use to maneuver for position, for the Germans were too many. Liebling had almost succeeded in finishing off "A" Flight entirely. Orth's lips were a firm, straight line, his eyes agonized.

It hadn't been a pleasant thing to see three men shot down without a chance for their lives.

The two jammed into the Albatrosses, their Vickers flaming. They flew straight ahead, leaving the Albatrosses to get out of their way the best they could. Personally, Orth didn't care a tinker's damn if he crashed the Germans. There were times when he felt that death was the happiest way out of this war. This was one of those times.

Back on his own tarmac he would not feel that way. By that time he would in some measure have forgotten the horror of seeing three of his wingmates downed, without a chance of fighting back at their fate as it rode their tails.

Somehow, anyhow, the two got through, and put their noses down for the long race for the home field. They fed the juice to their crates, while the Germans contented themselves by following them to the lines, where they drew off, allowing the two to fly home.

MAYBE they let them go in order for them to get back to tell what had happened to their trio of fellows. Maybe—but Orth didn't give their reasons much thought or speculation. It was enough that, for the time, the fight had ended.

The two crates landed.

The major stalked across the field. He glanced at the two crates, but he didn't say anything.

Orth leaned against the fuselage of his crate for a moment, his back to his superior, his shoulders heaving. Fuller stumbled across the tarmac toward his hutment like a drunken man, apparently forgetting his duty to make out a combat report. But halfway to his destination he seemed to remember.

He lurched, straightened as by a tremendous effort. Stiffening his sagging shoulders which, next time over, might feel the weight of a single bullet, he started toward headquarters building.

THE MAJOR stared at Orth and spoke.

“Three?”

“Yes, sir, just as you see it. They didn’t have a chance.”

“That puts you in command of ‘A’ Flight,” said the major.

“Yes, sir, composed of Fuller and myself.”

“I expected something of the sort, Orth,” said the major tonelessly. “I’ve already asked for seven flyers, all junior to yourself, to fill up ‘A’ Flight.”

Orth’s face was agonized as he stared now at his superior. He leaned his back against his fuselage, as though it were his sole bulwark against the horror whose memory showed in his stricken eyes. His lips trembled a little.

“All beginners, sir?” he asked, croakingly.

“I’m afraid so, Orth.”

“They’ll down them like shooting fish in a barrel!”

Orth’s voice was a groan which came out of his very heart.

“That’s up to you, Orth. Come with me.”

In headquarters office they waited until Fuller had finished his report. He seemed to be having difficulty with it, because his hand trembled as he wrote. They heard him swear.

Orth looked at Fuller. Fuller was holding the wrist of his right hand with the fingers of his left, to keep it steady. And now he flung down his pen and stalked out without looking at his superiors.

“He’ll be all right,” said Orth, answering an unspoken question in the eyes of his superior. “He’ll have to be. I’ll need him plenty when those seven come up. When will they be here?”

“At dawn tomorrow.”

“That means that I have to—”

“It means you have to do something today to those three single-shot fighters, or tomorrow—”

He left what he would have said hanging in the air. A palpable something, invisible, hung there between the major and Silent Orth.

“You used to talk a lot, Orth,” said the major, as though he merely made conversation to hide his thoughts, “but you’ve a way of making good on what you say. I’m depending on you.”

“Maybe it would be better for the kids to be knocked off, first thing,” said Orth. “They wouldn’t become like Fuller.”

The major’s lips twisted.

“No!” The single word was an explosion.

“All right, sir,” Orth’s voice seemed dead somehow,

like the voice which came out of the heart’s chamber of the Skeleton in Armor.

ORTH made out his own report, surprised that his hand did not tremble as Fuller’s had. Then he looked up at the major, for his mind had been busy as he wrote.

“I’ll need the cooperation of ‘B’ and ‘C’ Flights,” he said softly.

“Yes? You’ve an idea?”

“Maybe. A desperate one. The only one I can think of. I’m going to stake my flying ability against each of the three flyers in turn. It’s the only way. And I’m going to forestall any criticism by downing them as they’ve been downing us—with a single shot for each.”

The major’s brows lifted.

“Incendiary bullets?” he asked.

“No, sir. I have to do what they’ve done, but I have to do it better. I’m not going to violate any of the unwritten agreements of the armies, even against that trio. I’m going to use regulation bullets. I can depend on my shooting, even if I’m none too sure of my flying. And the sooner we get it over with, the better. Maybe,” he ended, “I won’t have to boss those kids tomorrow.”

THE MAJOR understood what Orth meant—that tomorrow he might not be alive to lead the seven to almost sure death. The major may have got the idea that Orth would have been immensely relieved to get out of it so easily. But Orth spoke up, beating his superior to any comment.

“I don’t mean that, of course,” he said hastily.

“I suppose I’m rather shot on account of what has happened. I’ll get that co-operation?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’m flying right now, alone. ‘B’ and ‘C’ are to back me up, but they’re to remain this side of the lines, to cover my retreat each time. The Germans won’t make it easy for me, and they’ll be protecting their bull’s-eye fighters with everything they’ve got. Let’s go.”

Orth stalked onto the tarmac. The major sent orderlies scurrying. Greaseballs worked prodigiously on Orth’s crate, made sure he had plenty of ammunition, enough for far more than the usual air fight.

The planes of ‘B’ and ‘C’ Flights were being trundled out. Even as Orth studied his own instruments, the props of a dozen crates were ticking

over, their pilots climbing into pits. He didn't know many of those flyers, most of whom were recent replacements. He didn't want to know them. It hurt too much to see men fall whom you had grown to appreciate deeply.

The two flights would be ready in a few minutes. Orth signaled for his chocks to be kicked free. In his mind's eye he visualized the staffel of the three Germans, directly toward which he would soon be heading.

He saw the skippers of "B" and "C" Flights signaling for their men to make ready. He slammed his throttle wide, smashed down the field, rose into the air like a discharged rocket, and flew toward the lines without looking back.

Over the trenches he flashed, his wings rocking and rolling. He paid no heed to Archie bursts, for though the explosions hurled him about the sky, he didn't endanger other flyers because there were none with him.

HE ROSE over Mont Sec. Down there, the rivers of gray were still moving westward. Soon hell would break loose on the ground about Mont Sec, but that seemed far away. He was thinking of the seven new ones coming up tomorrow, and what it would mean to them if he failed today. Fledglings needed seasoning to make them able to stand the gaff; the constant strain crushed the morale even of men like Fuller, in spite of their courage.

Now he headed for the drome of Liebling. His eyes studied the sky aloft and on all sides. He glanced swiftly over each clearing above which he flew, looking for fuselages with bull's-eyes.

He saw none.

Now he was slanting down at the German field, along one side of which scores of planes were lined up. Some had their props ticking over, as though their flyers were in constant readiness for whatever might develop.

He couldn't make out the ships he sought. There was one way to make sure, and he took it without thought of the consequences. He dived, pointing his nose at the line of crates. He didn't fire, didn't even extend his hands for his trips.

Down there men were running for the ships. Ground crews were throwing lead at him from a dozen bracketed Maxims. But he paid them no heed, even when they began to stitch bullet holes in his wings.

ONE FOKKER edged out of line, moved onto the field. Its propeller became invisible as it gathered speed. The Fokker moved into the wind, lifted above the field even as Orth dived over it. Orth glued his attention to that one, and stiffened. On the fuselage, plain to be seen, was the bull's-eye insignia. Orth took a deep breath.

He noted that other crates were moving onto the field, too—knew that the marksman's friends would be up to make sure that he got more than an even break. Orth considered his guns. One bullet for that man taking off—no more. Would he ever get a chance to fire it?

Why should he use sportsman's tactics? Why didn't he dive as the flyer rose, and let him have it?

Orth waited until the German was up to five thousand, directly over his home field, then sailed straight toward him, motor full out. His fingers fiddled with his controls, as he learned them all over again, noting how easily they answered to the touches of his fingers. He would need all his consummate skill to beat any one of the three Germans, to say nothing of all three.

They met over the field. Before starting to maneuver for position, Orth stared down. A dozen, ships were getting off, rising to his own level. He laughed a brittle laugh and hurled himself at his enemy.

Easily, surely, the German evaded his every lunge and thrust. Easily, surely, he dropped down on Orth's tail. But he didn't fire, because Orth rolled out of line of sights.

Orth was acutely conscious of the Germans coming up to help their prize gunner. He must make an end, swiftly.

With a wing-buckling turn, he sat for an infinitesimal instant on the tail of the German. His hand shot to his trips. His eyes were glued to his ring-sight. For just that hairs-breadth of time, his crossed wires covered the back of his enemy. He fired—once. He leaned back.

The German flung up his hands in the very act of rolling out of line of sights—and Orth, knowing that he had made his kill, that those seven tomorrow were that much safer, banked straight away and flung himself hell-bent for the lines.

AFTER him, with less than his elevation, came the Germans, a dozen strong. He didn't look down. His mind, his skill, were concentrated on the race. He saw the planes of "B" and "C" Flights, like a wall of wings, a gate through which he must pass to safety. They were

coming on to meet him, led by one man in a flame colored Spad. That was the major's crate.

Orth, as he slipped behind the protecting wall of wings, lifted his right hand to the major, the index finger extended.

"One!" the finger said.

The major's right hand went to his forehead in salute. Then the wings closed around Orth, and he leaned back, panting like a spent runner. A breathing space and he must get back among the enemy, through walls of wings stronger even than these, to reach the two gunners who remained. The Germans came on swiftly, intent on getting Orth.

ORTH, behind his own wingmates, turned his nose eastward again, and watched the sky become a whirling maelstrom of ships as "B" and "C" Flights engaged. But he saw two crates cut out of the fight, and knew, without being able to see the insignia, that they were the other two he sought. His lips moved:

"It has to come sometime; when better than now?"

He banked, hurling himself through the wings of his friends like a thrown cleaver. His eyes were glued to the sides of one of the two crates which had drawn off. The two friendly flights were holding the other Germans in check. He smashed directly on one of the enemy crates.

Easily, gracefully, the German started climbing.

His broad belly showed in Orth's ring-sights. But that belly was far bigger than a man. What part of it should show the crossed wires of his ring-sights, if he were to get the man in one shot? He estimated the area of surfaces in a lightning flash, moved his wires over that belly, taking a chance on the accuracy of his calculations. If he missed—but he dare not miss.

His Vickers spoke once.

The crate went mad, diving straight into the thick of the dogfight. Orth laughed. His lips shaped the words. "Two down—one to go!"

Then, while four German ships cut out to take him

on, and their bullets snapped about his ears, he turned on the third and last of the crates which carried the bull's-eye. Nothing, he told himself, could keep him from getting that man.

The German sat on his tail.

A bullet smashed over his shoulder, crackling into his already smashed instrument board. Orth laughed. The German had missed.

Orth concentrated on him.

The man ducked into the heart of the dog-fight, with Orth on his tail. And there, while bullets from German guns played havoc with his crate, and bullets from his friends blasted away at the Germans, Orth fired again—just once. His crossed wires were on the shoulderblades of the German when the single bullet sped through his propeller.

"B" and "C" Flights, watching the Germans go down, could not control themselves. They went mad with glee. They smashed crazily through the center of the Germans. It lasted for five minutes. Four Fokkers, two Albatrosses—and three Spads—went down in the interchange.

But the three single-action fighters were gone. Orth watched the last one crash in, westward of Mont Sec.

LATER, on the field, the major quietly congratulated Orth on what he had done. Orth waved a hand that seemed heavy as lead when the major said:

"It gives those seven a break for their lives, Orth."

"Yeah," said Orth, and again, "Yeah. But I can't help thinking of how many bullets in this war haven't been fired yet—and wondering how many of them carry the names of the seven who are coming up tomorrow. But if God and the Germans let me live, major, I'll keep on doing the best I know how—and if that sounds sloppy, the devil with it! Right now, just one thing is important—the hottest, strongest, bitterest cup of coffee that ever burned hide and hair off the back of a dog. No three bullets ever made me so weary, so damned sick and tired of hot lead!"