



FLAMING DEATH

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Follow a Mad Race Through Roaring Skies on the Trail of a Sinister Hun Whose Guns Spout Outlawed Bullets!

SKY FIGHTERS (V7N2) NOVEMBER 1934

CHAPTER I
SKY JINX

THE DOOR to the galvanized shack on the south end of the tarmac opened with a smash, and two men came reeling out into the dawn.

The fattish one, Tubby Martin, glared at the slimmer pilot.

“The dice were crooked,” he cried fiercely.

“You’re a liar by the clock,” rapped Slim McCarthy.

No further words were spoken. Tubby led with his left and hooked a right to the stomach. Slim McCarthy took it coming in, clinched with the heavier flyer, and they fell to the ground. They rolled, grunted, struck savage blows, fought like two mad wildcats. Out of the room poured three more men who lunged at the two struggling, grunting peelots on the ground.

Unable to separate these two, they cursed and fell to fighting among themselves.

The uproar grew to such proportions that at length the door to a neighboring, bigger shack opened, and a huge, broad-shouldered man whose superbly muscled body was illy-disguised in a pair of screaming red pajamas, came hurtling out.

He took in the situation at once, and a frown knitted his square, bronzed face. Purposefully he waded into the fight, caring not whom he grabbed with his beam-like arms. He hooked a smashing right to Tubby’s jaw and the fat one went out like a light. He grabbed two others and smacked their heads together. He kicked Slim McCarthy loose and when the thin one got up, hooked a punch to the belt that folded the pilot up like an accordion.

“Stand to attention!” he growled.

The fight was over. The pilots of the Pirates’ Flight stood sheepishly, those who could, and with red-rimmed eyes stared at Dale Powers, their flight C.O.

More mildly, Powers said, “What roiled you hellcats now? Who started this?”

Tubby Martin said, “Me and Slim McCarthy. We was rolling the dice for Lisette’s silk stocking—the one I wear around my neck as a good luck charm.”

He paused, worked his sore jaw, added: “He offered a thousand francs against the stocking, and I was broke and needed the money.”

Powers turned to the subdued McCarthy. “All right, Irish, why did you want the silk stocking?”

“You know why,” scowled McCarthy. “In the last five weeks five of us have gone down in flames. I minded the time Tubby caught on fire and got down safely. I figured somebody else was due to burn in this jinx outfit, so I figured it might be me. And if I had the stocking, maybe I could get down from five thousand feet in one piece and breathing.”

Dale Powers nodded, frowned. “Anything for a fight, you animals,” he said, deliberately refraining from discussing the strange mystery of the five burned pilots.

“Get into your clothes and get out on the deadline. We’ll be going upstairs in fifteen minutes and you can take some of that fight out on the Krauts.”

He dismissed them casually, for fighting among themselves was the chief occupation among the Pirates when they weren’t up there in the heights pecking at a few Jerries. As Dale Powers knew too well, the Pirates were a tough lot. Officially they were “B” Flight of the 102nd Aero Pursuit Squadron. Dale Powers was the C.O. of the outfit—and the only god they had.

They could fight and they could drink and raise the devil, but they listened to him when he spoke or felt his good right hook. He let them drink; he let them gamble and howl their songs in Bar-le-Duc. As long as they fought the Krauts.

FIFTEEN minutes later they stood around the collection of pursuit ships on the deadline, cursing and snarling among themselves. But suddenly they ceased cursing, and their faces wreathed in smiles.

“Here comes Babe with Big Red,” someone muttered.

Across the grassy tarmac came Big Red Gray, accompanied by a smaller, more finely built lad—Babe Norwood, the squadron mascot, youngest flyer of them all. And not a man of the Pirates but would have died to give him one minute more of life.

Babe Norwood had found his way to the Pirates, and since he had come, not a pilot had been lost, not a ship had gone down in flames. But even if he hadn’t been good luck, Babe would have got them. He was only nineteen; and he had golden hair and china-blue eyes and a soft pink skin. He had a chuckling, infectious laugh; he was absolutely fearless, and loyal to the core.

Big Red Gray was his roomie, and both were laughing now at something the Babe said. The Babe broke off his own laugh to salute Dale.

"I hope I get a chance today to smack a Jerry, sir," he grinned. "I'm tired of being babied."

"If we run into 'em today, Babe," Dale said, "you gun your own weight."

But nonetheless Dale tipped an eyelid to Big Red, who grinned back and nodded. It was the usual signal. If the kid hit trouble, Big Red would pull him out.

"Rendezvous at three thousand meters over the field," said Dale.

He broke off sharply, for Slim McCarthy cast a malevolent glance at Tubby and said, "If I get hit by the flame-jinx today and get killed, Tubby, I'm coming back and haunt you."

"Shut up," snapped Dale. "You guys got the flame-jinx on your minds—if any."

Yet Dale Powers was puzzled about the strange sequence of burning ships that had sent Pirate pilots roasting to their deaths. None of the other pursuit squadrons working around the St. Mihiel sector had lost a man by flames. But the night-bombing Breguets assigned to work with the Pirates had also lost four ships and eight men by flames. Dale intended to look seriously into the matter, but he didn't want the Pirates' morale undermined by it.

HE NODDED a curt dismissal and the pilots broke for their crates. The C.O. went to his own ship. In short order he cracked his throttle and waved an arm. The flight wheeled as one ship, blipped into the wind. A forward drive of Dale's fist sent them all drumming in concerted roar down the field, to zoom in right climbing turns, with left wings hooked to the sky.

Spiraling for altitude, Dale Powers had no idea that the flame jinx was loose again. It seemed just another high-offensive patrol. But he learned, thirty minutes later, that something was to start that day that would take a long time to finish.

The Fokkers came down out of the cloud-holes over Montfaucon like a thrown dose of pepper grains. They were tripes, a staircase full of them. And they were tough because the triplanes were flown only by the hot-shots of the German Air Force.

Dale Powers never knew how many there were. He caught the first lean grey shadows, like a shark's silhouette on a white sandy sea bottom, and he nosed up for a zoom. For a split second the two formations screamed head-on. And then the Pirates fanned out, for the Fokkers did not break formation.

It was a breathless second before the planes snarled into the dog-fight. In that brief space Dale Powers

became aware of two things. First, Babe Norwood was catching the devil because he had been a split second too late in answering the order to zoom. Second, the Jerries were not fanning out to dog it. They were staying in their wedge-shape staircase and pounding Babe Norwood.

Dale Powers cursed.

"They're up to their old tricks," he gritted. "Every time a Jerry can gang one of our guys and down him without getting hit himself, they think they're one up on the war."

HE HOOKED on a wing to the air, wheeled on the axis of it and smashed at the outside tripe to break through to Babe's help. Big Red, flying like a madman, was smashing at the same line. The Pirates had one purpose now: to pull Babe out of his jam.

But they couldn't do it.

The staircase of Fokkers did the most amazing thing. The rear fanned out, cutting off the Pirates as surely as a puncher cuts a steer from the herd. The rest of the pointed wedge closed in tightly on Babe, while the Fokker at the point blasted hot streams of tracer fire with twin Spandaus.

In a second all was confusion. Spandau scream rose above the howl of the motors. Like the tearing of calico, the ripping snarls of machine-gun fire attested the frantic efforts of the Pirates to blast a way through to rescue.

Dale Powers cursed. He chandelled, twisted, drove toward the pack. A Fokker tripe fearlessly crossed in front of him, inviting the angry snarl of Vickers fire that Dale poured into him. Dale emptied a hundred rounds and saw the Fokker limp down the sky in a flat spin.

But then, on a sudden, his breath hung pendant in his throat.

FROM the Babe's ship a sudden trail of smoke hung behind. A little angry curl of orange flame burst from the left wing close to the hinge pin.

"He's afire!" croaked Dale. "He's a flamer!"

His ship shot madly at the snarling pack of Fokkers. The rest of the Pirates drove in regardless of collision. The Babe had to be saved.

But then the Fokkers entered their third maneuver. As if by magic the tripes flowed back into the staircase formation behind the leader, whose red ribbons of command streamed from the rudder. They went down the sky. The Pirates like angry dogs streamed after, their guns baying like mad.

But the beauty of the staircase formation is that you can't break it from the rear. And the Fokker formation was running away.

The leader circled once down on Babe's flaming ship. A short burst of Spandau fire sent needles of smoke tracer shooting into the pit. Then the tripe went away from there. Leaving Babe's crate flat-spinning down, the Fokkers ran. Ran with the Pirates hell-tailing after them.

Dale saw Babe's black-helmeted head slide below the crash-pad, come up as with a terrific effort. They had got Babe. Got the kid. Killed him as surely as there was a God. He half-swung after the Germans; but instantly he piqued down, curses flashing through his lips.

The Germans were still running. Having gotten their man they turned neither up nor down, right nor left, but ran straight ahead. And the slowed Pirates couldn't catch them. One minute they were fly specks on the blue of the sky. Another minute and they were gone from sight.

Strange! Mysterious! Dale couldn't believe that a superior formation of Fokkers would flee like that. But they had.

CHAPTER II THE JINX EXPLAINED

HIS EYES TURNED DOWN to the Babe's Sopwith, spinning, side-slipping, as the hurt youth tried to fight off the fire eating back toward the pit. "Slip it, kid!" screamed Dale. "You can make it standing on your head." He was down now circling the doomed ship. He saw Babe's head vanish, saw the Sop stagger out of control.

Faster and faster the rolling country south of Montfaucon came up to smite them. Dale, watching, took hope. The ship was not bursting into a mass of roaring flames. And as a wheat field slid up under their landing gear, he saw Babe Norwood stir with that bird instinct that tells of an approaching crash.

"That's it," Dale breathed. "Fight, kid, and you're aces."

He saw Babe try to turn as if to bring his ship home. Then the field came slithering under them, and the Sopwith Pup leveled off, munched and coasted to a ground loop. Regardless, Dale set a swift bank, came

nose into the wind and squatted on the wheat stubble. Before the wheels had ceased to turn he had leaped from the pit and was running headlong. But even yet the Sopwith Pup had not burst into flames. It merely smoldered.

RUNNING alongside, Dale saw the Babe crumpled in the pit. He dragged him loose, carried him far-enough for safety and gently placed him on the ground.

"Where'd it get you, kid?" he cried gently.

The pink cheeks were clay-colored now, the blue eyes closed. But Babe's mouth was open and on the ashen face was the most indescribable look of agony that Dale Powers had ever seen. A look of unendurable pain. A look of a man undergoing the most awful torture.

Dale jerked his flask of cognac, dumped part of it in the boy's mouth. He stood up, looked around anxiously for doughboys to lend a hand.

"He might pull through," he muttered, "if we can just get him to a hospital."

Suddenly the Babe moved, an instinctive gesture of his hands toward his abdomen. Gently, Dale Powers, eyes smarting, felt inside the flying coat. His hands came away crimson and sticky. And he smelled then the stench of burned flesh; and he had never before smelled that around a wound.

Babe opened his eyes. Wide, innocent blue eyes, clouded now with the last agony.

"I—I tried to—bring—crate—home—" his weak voice faltered. A little sob came, a small-boy sob of a lad wanting comfort in hurt. "Oh—it burns—burns. I—"

Weakly he tried to press his stomach. Then the Stokes respiration—called the death rattle—drummed in his throat. "Hur—" he tried to finish; and he died then, died on a breath with his tongue trying to say the word that a dead will had sent.

DALE POWERS knelt there. His throat was dry. Emotions shook him; his soul burned. He looked down at the Babe. The boy's face was already blue, nor had it lost any of the pain-torture limned there. A little while ago, oh, such a little while ago, that face had been merry, jolly. And now, presently, there would be nothing but bones and rot.

Dale took a drink of cognac as if it were water.

As he stood silent, prey to his grief, his face grim, terrible, a sharp crackle from the Sopwith Pup made

him turn. It was burning furiously now, from the wing in. Dale Powers suddenly remembered the strange actions of the Germans. The failure of the Pup to burn outright. The sequence of strange flamers.

On a sudden, he crouched beside the corpse. He took a screwdriver from his pocket kit and he probed the belly wound that had killed Babe. He endured the burned flesh stench—and he ruthlessly probed and extracted the bullet.

Now a black look swept his face and he cursed. Straightening, he looked at the slug he had recovered. An incendiary slug.

It was a copper-encased 7.90 millimeter Maxim slug that had been dum-dummed and would set fire to anything inflammable that it touched. And if in a man it would burn his flesh until its own ardor died.

Dale Powers flung back his head and cursed the sky. He knew now why all the Pirates and the night-bombing Breguets had been burned down. The Germans were using incendiary bullets.

All of the fighting nations had agreed to ban their use. And so rigidly were they banned that any flyer caught using them was instantly stood against the wall with barely the mockery of a drum-head court-martial. You couldn't use incendiary slugs even against observation balloons.

"They got Babe with an incendiary," Dale muttered. "They got the other guys with incendiaries. And they'll pay for it."

He looked down at the Babe's body.

"I'll get the guy that did this, Babe," he said. "And I'll kill him myself on the ground—so help me God."

Holding the black pellet of steel he waited for the oncoming Yank doughboys to lift the corpse on a stretcher. "If you can see anything, Babe," Powers said, "watch what happens now."

WILLY THE INK, the squadron kiwi, shoved his head out of the operations office door a few days later.

"Message here from G-2-D, Dale," he called to Powers, who was standing talking to the men of his flight.

Powers grunted. "Come on, you eggs," he ordered. "I've had the counter-espionage and Intelligence busy on this. Maybe we're going to get a chance to throw some lead."

In the office was Captain Foley, commander of the squadron, a dried-up, disappointed man who had hoped to be a general in the war and was now drowning his disappointment in rare vintage cognac.

"It's a German staff bulletin," he hiccupped. "And tough luck for you."

"What do you mean tough luck?" Dale took the bulletin, and read the attached note from the combat intelligence unit. The message said:

The Fokker tripe unit using incendiaries is Jagdstafel Nine, which, according to the attached bulletin, is honorarily commanded by Baron Eitel Hans von Gorlich, son of Prince Friederich von Gorlich, third cousin of the Kaiser and general commanding the Eighth Army groupement facing us in St. Mihiel.

For your information, when the Baron flies with the squadron only he is supposed to fight. The rest merely protect him. They usually cut out a single Allied plane and burn it down or attack unprotected two-seaters. The bulletin says that the last Allied plane shot down was numbered SP 7923.

Dale's voice died away on a silence not at once broken. Finally Big Red cursed in his throat.

"That was the Babe's number. That's the swine that got him."

"Tough for you," hiccupped Foley. "A scion of Hohenzollern blood—that puts an end to your scheme to capture him and shoot him."

As if they were fastened to triggers, the eyes of the Pirates turned to Dale. The latter flattened his mouth grimly.

"We swore," he said thinly, "that we'd get the guy that burned Babe. We're going to, even if he was the Crown Quince himself."

Foley wiped his mouth and sat up in his chair. "I forbid it," he cried. "It's suicidal. He'll be closely guarded—you can't do it!"

Dale said nothing. His eyes traversed his hard-bitten flight. His gaze seemed to ask a question, and they all nodded. Then the big leader turned and walked out, with the flight following him. Captain Foley sat scowling in his chair.

IN FRONT of the shacks Dale swung on his men.

"Now get this," he snapped. "We're going to raid that Kraut tarmac and pluck that flame-killer out by his hair. The night-bombing Breguets are just as anxious to get him as we are. And when we set down to get this von Gorlich, we stay and get him if you all stop lead."

That was all that was said then. The word sifted along the front that the Pirates were going to make a raid and an execution. Intelligence was friendly and

slipped them undercover information. The night-bombing Breguets conserved some twenty-pound bombs, saved gasoline, and the skipper, Captain Hardy, said to Dale: "Any night you say go, we'll hop over and dump the tailgates. And we'll set down with you and fight those devils into the ground."

"You'll get your chance," said Dale.

A new pilot came up a week before the full moon when the Pirates intended to pull the raid. His name was Jenkins. He was finally selected to pilot a Bristol Fighter. Its spare seat would be used to bring the killer back.

CHAPTER III YANKEE STRAFE

NIGHT HAD COME. Dale Powers was watching his wrist-watch, timing this move to the last second. Word had been slipped him from the night-bombing Breguets that they would be standing by at a rendezvous over Souilly at nine o'clock.

Finally Dale waved his arm. Abruptly the night silence was broken by the sudden crash of revving motors. Exhaust stacks spat redly, and flashlights glowed briefly as the Pirates moved swiftly about the crates, testing them. On the end was the Bristol Fighter. Motors screamed as the ships strained against the chocks. Then they quieted down to tick-tocking idle.

"Ready, Skipper," called Big Red.

Dale climbed into his own crate. He poured the gun to the ship, suddenly crackled the throttle wide, and the crate began to move. He got the tail up at once, was climbing with a wing hooked to the air. Behind him came the Pirates.

The raid! Von Gorlich dead or alive!

Ill-luck, it seemed to Dale, dogged the venture even now. They lost twenty minutes finding the Breguets. They spiraled around the sky, black shadows under a silver moon, searching for exhaust stack flashes. And Dale realized bitterly that with the gasoline on hand, every second was cutting down just that much the chances of success.

And then, peering aloft, he saw a black shadow like a bat silhouetted against the full disc of the moon. He climbed rapidly, saw the two flashlight signals, and steadying his ship at fourteen thousand feet, headed east.

THERE were no clouds to hide their passage; "tin ears" picked up the drone of their motors. And presently the sword-like beams of searchlights began wheeling across the sky, looking for them.

The front came alive and Dale saw the spitting line of tracer fire from a machine-gun outfit. The slugs were falling short, but they served as a guide. He marked the light on Mont Sec, jerked out his map board and made his calculation. Then on a sudden, he flashed his tiny signal light.

The Pirates dropped behind and below. The Breguets went ahead. Hardy acknowledged the signal, okayed the location and nosed down with cut motor for the long glide that would put them over the objective without warning.

Dale felt his heart pump thickly. His skin began to prickle. His lips skinned back from his teeth in a wolfish grin of joy.

"Watch, Babe," he called hoarsely. "Here we go."

Now the motor drone ceased. There were only the whispering wires, the hiss of strut cutting the air, the slight drum of taut linen. The anti-aircraft guns, with a lost target, ceased to belch. The searchlights held steady, waiting orders.

As Dale had planned, the attacking outfit was lost in the blue-black vault of the sky. Sixteen black shadows swooped silently down. Dale watched the compass, studied Hardy's squadron ahead. He strained his eyes, bared of goggles, to study the silver-etched surface of the earth below.

The Fokker nest lay precisely off his left strut. He wheeled, even as Hardy ahead wheeled. Men crouched over bomb-sights. Toggle trippers hung to the wooden trips, waiting the order to dump the tail-gates of death.

Down, whispering through the night. Eight thousand feet. Six thousand. Raise the nose a bit. Look to the cocking handles. Greased slugs clutched in the mouth of twin Vickers, waiting the impact to belch.

Three thousand. Dale could see the clump of trees that the maps proclaimed the northeast corner of the Fokker tarmac. He caught the glint of moon on metal. That would be the railroad spur that led into the field.

FIFTEEN hundred. Dale sucked in his breath.

"Let 'em have it, Hardy," he yelled.

On a sudden a new note hit the hair: the streaking fall of steel bombs. Falling sideways, straightening out under the directive control of the rudder fins. Falling.

Out of the blackness below a sudden spurt of red flame leaped upward. Like a tree of fire, with limbs

of crimson, foliage of orange. Splashing like liquid color in the night. Upward billowed displaced air. The Pirates' planes rocked.

And now a second gout of evil red splashing. Two, three. The earth shaking to impact. The air trembling to the tortured detonations. The roar on roar, commingling until the night was hideous with sound.

Raid! Yankee strafe! Bombs dropping. Eggs falling. Run, you Krauts!

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Fire below now. Crimson flames spreading from hangars, making the scene bright with the glow as if the gates of hell had opened. Machine-guns firing down there. Shooting sparks rising into the sky, seeking these unseen assailants. The sharp crashing impact of Austrian 88s, making a last bid to save the Fokker tarmac from hell's fire.

Breguets wheeling majestically past, banking, coming back. Dropping the contents of their tail-gates.

Whamma! Whamma! Whamma!

Dale counted. Second time over. Wow! There went the last of the bombs!

INSTANTLY his flashlight signaled. On a sudden his motor roared, and flames and sparks and smoke jetted madly from the exhaust stacks. Power dive, lads, and let them have it.

Down the hill he slid, riding on his rudder bar. Aiming his ship for the line of huts revealed in the glaring blaze of the fire. Down! Down! The shacks were leaping at him. He could see tiny figures darting around in a frenzy. He could see the machine-guns, Maxims mounted on cartwheels, turning and spitting angry sparks of tracer stream at him.

A tiny touch on the rudder. The most delicate shift of the stick. The machine-gunners were in his ring-sights now. He dipped slightly. His thumbs tightened on the Bowden stick trips.

"Take it!" he suddenly yelled, and tripped the pulls.

The Vickers guns trembled on their boltings. Angry flames leaped from the muzzle and curled back at the terrific wind pressure. The tracer bullets leaped brightly through the night like a thrown handful of golden wheat.

Racka-racka-racka-racka-racka!

HE HELD the trigger, watched the spitting tracers squirm through the blackness, strike among the Germans. Some fell over like tenpins before a crashing ball. Others fell on the ground. Others ran madly toward the trees.

A sharp climbing turn, a pivot turn with one wing anchored, and the roaring back and down with the guns beating the drums of death.

On the third turn Dale saw the Breguets settling one by one to the far end of the tarmac, where their cockpit guns could protect an attack.

Instantly he wheeled upward, made his bank. Behind him streaking in single file came the rest of the Pirates. They saw his signal. A fast pivot turn. The wind direction obtained from the drift of the blazing fires below.

Dale piqued over, loosened his automatic in his holster. The earth slid up at him. He saw it lunging at his wheels. He redressed the ship, and let her set. The grass flowed in a molten stream beneath his wheels.

A bump, a jarring run. Three-point landing at night on a strange field. Good work, Dale.

He was out of his cockpit before the plane had ceased to run. With motor throttled, it could wait. Behind him came the Pirates. From the left of the field, Hardy's voice rang out:

"Ready, Powers?"

"Let's go!" Dale shouted.

The bombers and pilots grouped in a thin combat line. From the right came the sudden harsh pound of Lewis guns. Tracer fire blazed ahead, keeping down any Boche who might have the temerity to stop this rush.

Dale led the way. His gun was out. His eyes were grim and merciless. As he neared the shacks where the Jerry pilots slept he came upon a man groaning.

"*Wo ist Graf von Horlich?*" growled Dale.

"*Er ist—*" the officer stopped. He stared up at the menacing figure. The hard, grim face. The flashing eyes.

Dale took him, shook him as a terrier would a rat. "Say where he is," he rapped, "or by God, I'll—" he menaced the man.

He had no courage, that one. He groaned, pointed to the third shack. "He is there—a bomb-proof—under the shack."

Dale turned. "Anybody got any Mills grenades?"

"I've got two."

DALE took them from Hardy. They advanced. The Lewis guns had to cease their covering fire now because Dale was too close to the shacks. And now a brisk revolver and rifle fire burst from the line of huts. The Yank airmen gave a cheer and rushed. Their guns began to spatter slugs.

From the shadow of the shacks men suddenly

dashed out, firing madly. To the right a small portable parabellum machine-gun began to rake them. Dale met the charge head-on. His gun began to leap in his hand.

In the blaring light of the flames he saw the leader's face. He was trying to fire the Luger in his hand. Dale's slug caught him in the mouth. It reminded Dale of a trick stage magician changing a white rose to a red one. The man's white face was suddenly incarnadined.

The Kraut behind saw Dale's face, and screamed. Two swift slugs pumped into the man's middle. He grabbed for his belly and sat down stiff-legged like a doll. Over Dale's shoulder poured a hail of fire from Big Red.

THEY had rushed the line of huts now, and there was the entrance to the bomb-proof.

Dale jerked the pin of the grenade. "I hope he isn't hurt by this," he muttered. "But it might be just my luck."

There was a trapdoor in the floor of the hut, and a set of steps leading down into the dugout, topped with railroad iron. Dale opened the trap door, yelled, "Look out below," and heaved in the pineapple.

A shout came from below. Then a dull muffled crash, and a billow of smoke gushed up into Dale's face.

He held the other bomb poised, but before he had jerked the pin, a scream came up the staircase.

"Kameraden! Kameraden!"

"Come out with your hands up," yelled Dale.

He turned to the eager men. Three were grouped around him. The rest were faced around, guarding against an attack from the rear.

"Shoot anybody with a gun in his hands," he said. "Hardy, you've seen von Gorlich's picture. Point him out."

Up the staircase came a file of men. Some wore pajamas; some had merely trousers on. Their faces were frightened and bewildered. The only one who had a gun hastily tossed it onto the floor above as soon as he saw the menacing grim faces glaring down at him.

"There—there he is, Dale," yelled Hardy. "By God—we've pulled it off."

He gestured toward a tall, lean man with a squirrel-like face. He had a thin head, big nose and protruding buck teeth in front; a small mustache grew wispy beneath his nostrils.

He looked nervously at Dale, and then bit

affrightedly at a hangnail on his right thumb. Dale looked back at him. A supreme satisfaction engulfed his soul,

ONE beam-like arm went out. His fingers closed on the ornate shoulder straps of the thin one.

"You, von Gorlich!" he growled. "We've come for you."

"But—but why?" The German spoke with a sharp Prussian accent.

"Because you fired incendiary bullets and the answer to that is a slug in your innards," said Dale.

He turned to the other Prussian pilots. "Stand over there, facing the wall. And the first one that looks sideways will get a slug in his belt."

They went. The Baron von Gorlich, sudden realization dawning on him, cried, "But you can't shoot me. You can't. I'm Baron von Gorlich. My father—"

Dale struck him sharply in the mouth and his buck teeth cut his lip. "Keep your rat-face closed," ordered Dale.

Von Gorlich began to scream. "*Meine Freunde, hulf mir!* Help me! Don't let them shoot me like a dog. My father—he will reward—help—I cannot die like this."

Dale cursed and swung. There came the dull sock of a set of knuckles caroming off a jaw point. The German slumped. Dale caught him, dragged him like a sack of wheat.

"We fight it back," he ordered. "Get going. Where's Jenkins?"

Nobody, it appeared, had seen Jenkins. "A couple of our guys got knocked off in charging the huts," said Big Red. "Maybe he's one. But I'll fly the Bristol."

"All right. Take this lug and tie him soundly. Follow me."

Dale went through the door, crouching, gun thrust forward, head sunk between shoulders. But there was no organized resistance. The completely terrific savagery of the attack had demoralized the Germans. A few were firing in desultory fashion from the protection of the woods. But those still alive on the tarmac were making no move.

Dale broke into a run for the line of crates. Behind him streamed the excited pilots, laughing, joking, thrilling to the mad happiness of victory. Halfway back, Dale flashed his signal. Instantly the Lewis guns began to chatter. What few Germans had been firing now ceased completely; and with the protecting barrage of the Lewis guns, the Yank pilots reached their ships in safety.

CHAPTER IV
EVENING THE SCORE

AS DALE RAN to the Bristol Fighter, he was amazed to see Jenkins perched in the cockpit. "Why—I thought—" he began.

"I didn't want to get knocked off," said Jenkins cheerfully, "or who else would fly that dirty rat back? Shove him up here and I'll get going."

Dale didn't stop to think. He yelled to Red to dump von Gorlich's body into the rear cockpit and lash him fast to the *tourelle*.

The firing from the other end of the field became stronger now, blasting fire.

"That's infantry volley firing," muttered Dale. "All right, gang, everybody off. All to our tarmac."

He leaped to his own ship and whipped open the throttle. They moved squarely into the line of fire, wheeled and got up speed. They went shooting over the blazing huts and hangars and Dale grinned as he felt the updraft of hot air that sent him shooting up into the night sky like an elevator.

It was done. By God, they had von Gorlich; and now, Babe, you watch him cringe and scream when he sees the line of rifles.

"And I'll fly back and dump his carcass on their own tarmac," Dale muttered.

HE HAD wound up the sky in tight spirals, cruised a second to settle his compass. And then as he turned to line up his men, he saw the Bristol Fighter suddenly shoot off to the right and head straight toward Mont Blanc.

"What the heck!" he muttered. Automatically he whipped his own ship over into a vertical bank, opened the throttle wide. The Bristol kept going. Dale searched the night. There was no danger, no reason for this.

"Ah, gee!" he suddenly screamed. He saw it all now. Jenkins had been a bad *hombre*. He had refused duty several times, and someone said he had had the wind up before he came to the Pirates.

"And now," groaned Dale, "he'll fly back into Germany with that lousy von Gorlich stiff, and because he saved the guy from being shot he'll be a swell prisoner of war, living on the fat of the land. And what can we do?"

A terrible fury shook him. He had the throttle against the peg now. He was driving the plane as he had never driven a ship before. He was not going to try and head the Bristol off. He was not going to try and argue with Jenkins.

His fingers stiffened on the stick, thumb hovering over the stick trips.

"I'm going to shoot him down," he muttered.

He cast but one look backward. Far buried in the blackness of the night, he saw a few faint exhaust flashes. The Pirates were coming, but they'd be too late. It might mean prison camp for him, perhaps death, if von Gorlich managed to live long enough to squeal, because Dale did not have enough gas for this extra pursuit. But he would go on. Nothing could turn him back.

He gained rapidly. He flew with a cunning that conserved every foot of space; he flew like a man possessed. It might have been Babe there in the cockpit with him, urging him on.

The exhaust flashes were getting closer. Jenkins was doubling the Bristol Fighter back into Germany. Once he banked sharply. And now, on a sudden, seeing that he could not escape in the air, he nosed down to make a forced landing. Then Dale Powers struck.

He dove the plane until it seemed his ship would fall over on her face. He was standing straight up on the rudder bar. The wind tore at his hair. The wind tears streamed from his eyes. The motor screamed until it was a banshee's wail. Strut and brace wire cleaved the air with a ghostly wail.

HE CAME onto the Bristol Fighter as if it had been standing still. The thumbs on the stick trigger closed tightly. The machine-guns snarled, rattled, roared with a sound as if some giant hand were tearing linoleum.

Racka-racka-racka-racka!

Jenkins' head was in the ring-sights. As he came up, spouting gashes of flame came from the rear cockpit of the Bristol. Slugs screamed around Dale's head.

He cursed. "Jenkins cut the Prussian loose and he's firing the spare gun," he told himself. But it didn't matter. He'd collide with the Bristol if there was no other way.

And then suddenly with a swift mush Dale came streaking in from the rear and low. For the moment, sweet maneuver that it was, he had forced von Gorlich to stop firing unless the German wanted to shoot out his own tail surfaces. And with the Bristol's tail surfaces protecting him from von Gorlich, Dale steadied himself.

“Make this one good,” he muttered.

He whipped the nose of his ship slightly higher, caught the knob of Jenkins’ head in the ring-sights. And holding there, he unleashed the hell’s fire of his guns. There was no head there a second later, because Dale’s aim had been perfect. The arcing tracer bullets found the target. Fifteen slugs caught Jenkins at the base of the brain.

The Bristol, as the dead body fell against the stick, made a wild zoom upward. It rose to the full power of the zoom, hung for a space by the prop pull, and then wheeled off in a bad slip. It went down the sky then, and fast.

DALE followed. He had nothing to fear from von Gorlich now. He could see in the dim rays of the moon how the man was working frantically to dump Jenkins’ body out of the front cockpit. Dale wound around and around, walking on a right wing bank. And he heaved lead into the Bristol until an ominous click from his guns told him that he had exhausted the five hundred rounds.

Still he went down. He intended to get von Gorlich if he had to choke him to death.

“We’re riding together, Babe,” he muttered. “He can’t make it.”

Yet, amazingly enough, von Gorlich finally dumped Jenkins overboard. Dale saw the body hang for a space in the glare of exhaust stack flashes, then go plunging down, hurtling over and over again. And then von Gorlich was in the front cockpit and the Bristol came out of the slow flat spin and began to glide. The full moon was an aid here, for it revealed a series of wheat fields down below where a landing of sorts could be made.

GRIMLY, silently, with motor cut now, Dale followed down. When von Gorlich slid in over the field, Dale was less than twenty yards behind him. When the Bristol’s wheels kissed the ground, Dale’s were plowing through the uncut wheat. When the Bristol came to a halt, Dale’s motor suddenly roared and he taxied like an express train. He came up onto the Bristol just as von Gorlich leaped to the ground and started to run madly for the trees that bordered it.

Dale was behind him, gun in hand. There was something terrific, demoralizing, in this remorseless pursuit.

Von Gorlich finally turned in panicky desperation. A flash, sparks, leaped from his hand. He had evidently taken Jenkins’ gun, and now he intended to shoot it out.

He ran on an angle now to get back to the Bristol and use it as a sort of fort. Dale went after him, crouching, head thrust forward, gun outthrust. On a sudden as von Gorlich, cursing in German, went around behind the fuselage, Dale made a furious burst of speed. He came onto the German unprepared.

“Now,” he yelled, “take it.”

He threw down the gun and fired. One slug belched from the snout. The trigger fell with a dull click. Dale cursed. The fight on the German tarmac had used up his slugs. He had no more.

His one bullet had caught the German in the thigh. But from a kneeling position, screaming invectives, von Gorlich fired. Dale felt steel go into him, staggered and half-turned from the impact of the slug which had torn through the thick muscles of his upper leg. He lost his balance and went down; and this probably saved his life, for the German kept firing high.

DALE swore bitterly. Unarmed, he was facing the man he had sworn to kill. He forced himself to forget the numbness of his leg, the German over there with a full clip of shells.

And then he remembered a fact. As it came to mind Dale laughed, suddenly, harshly, terribly. The German must have shivered at that raucous sound on the night air, for in nervous frenzy he fired once again and the bullet threw dirt into Dale’s eyes.

Nonetheless Dale started to crawl. He went around the rear of the Bristol and when he got it between him and von Gorlich he stood up. His leg felt numb, lame, but he cursed it and ran to his own ship.

From the pocket in the side of the pit he quickly jerked out a flare pistol for use in signaling ground troops or artillery. It had one shell in it, for it was a long, iron-barreled affair resembling a horse pistol.

Inside was one shell, a red flare. It could kill if a man was close enough, kill terribly. And thinking of Babe and his last words, “It burns,” Dale laughed again. He went back to the Bristol.

Von Gorlich, who had thought, evidently, that Dale was through, had turned and was crawling toward the trees. But now hearing Dale swish in the grass, he got in front of the Bristol again and waited desperately for what was to come.

Dale crawled now. Gained a yard. Three yards. Von Gorlich saw him.

“Go away,” he screamed. “Leave me alone. I kill.”

Dale came on. The German screamed an imprecation again and fired. Dale took that one along

the left chest where it broke a rib, caromed and tore out of his arm pit. He kept on coming.

The German began to moan.

He fired again. You could hear the peculiar sound of a slug tearing through flesh and bone. The same leg and just below the knee. Went through bone this time.

Dale was probably not quite sane now. "Hold up, leg," he muttered.

He went on. Another yard. Two. The German, in a frightful state of terror, smashed out the last two slugs in his gun. But he missed.

Dale was on top of von Gorlich now. A yard separated them. Von Gorlich flung the empty gun. He fell to the ground. He yelled.

"*Mein Gott!* No! No! Don't—"

Slowly Dale Powers raised the flare pistol. He held it a foot from von Gorlich's body. The man lunged forward to knock it aside. Dale pulled the trigger.

THERE was a flash of red fire, a loud blunderbus report.

From the front of von Gorlich a crimson flame leaped out. The man gave a scream and went backwards, clutching at the blazing red fire that boiled out of the hole in his stomach.

"It burns! Save—save—oh—"

He died as quickly as that.

Dale flung back his blackened face and stared unwinkingly at the great round disc of yellow moon floating so high, so serene, up there. And then he laughed.

"Babe! It came out better than we thought. You can sleep now, lad. We've cleaned the slate."

Dale Powers never had any knowledge of what happened after that last cry of triumph. They told him

in the hospital that he must have crawled to the Bristol Fighter and taken it off. They told him he must have had eyes like a cat's to set it down in a field just short of Souilly.

They said he must have had the strength of ten men to walk to Souilly, where he collapsed. Two stretcher-bearers dragged him to Evacuation Hospital Four.

All he remembered himself was lying in a soft bed with clean sheets next to his body. And the next clear thing was when Colonel Atterbury of Corps came to see him.

"I suppose you know you've violated all the articles of war and ought to be shot," the colonel said.

"We served notice what we intended to do," Dale rejoined. "And we can pay the score."

"Well, there won't be any," said Atterbury, "because from your report you didn't shoot von Gorlich like a dog but gave him a chance. The Germans are putting in no howl. So we're just forgetting it."

"Suits me," said Dale.

"Dealing with a bunch of hellions you have," said Atterbury, "I've decided to relieve Foley, who is an old-fashioned soldier anyway. I'm creating a special service squadron for the hell-cats of the A.E.F. You will be in command."

"To get all the dirty jobs of the A.E.F.," said Dale.

"Of course, and some worse than that. But you should worry. You're not going to jail."

"No," nodded Dale and smiled. "In fact, I'd say it's a pretty good war. I find a staff officer at last with horse sense."

Atterbury grinned. "On that I'll buy you a drink," he said.

And he promptly did.