



RING AROUND THE SKY

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

"Never Look Back!" That Was the Iron-Bound Rule of Micky Rand, Maker of Aces!

WITH THE BACK of my neck-scarf I wiped the moisture from my goggles, then settled in the bucket seat of the climbing Spad. I could see the early morning mists dissipating in

front of the whirling propeller. The Hisso motor was turning over beautifully.

My compass needle showed due east: I was climbing toward the battle-lines, toward Hunland. Soon, as I was breaking through the haze into

clearer sky above, I felt the first golden warmth of the sun on me, saw it flash from the Spad's khaki wings. I knew the trim ship in which I sat must be a pretty sight, winging up into that sunshine—and I knew, also, that anyone seeing it would get quite a thrill.

For it was a Spad marked with the painted insignia of a bantam rooster—the private insignia of America's greatest ranking ace!

But I was not that ace. I was just a peelo by the name of Jim Conway. It was only by a strange series of events that I was now piloting the plane of the great Micky Rand toward Hunland.

A few weeks ago I had never even dreamed I'd be in Micky Rand's squadron, much less fly his plane. Everyone longed to get into Micky's outfit, even though the moment you got in Micky worked like hell to get you out again.

That sounds funny, but it isn't. The idea was: when you came to the 104th, Micky at once began teaching you his bag of sky-tricks, all the wonderful strategy which had made him the coolest and fastest thing ever seen on wings. As soon as you learned, you'd be transferred to some outfit that needed a pivot man; which means a guy to take the brunt of the fighting while the greener peelots are still drying their ears.

TWO WEEKS AGO I had been picked from the 21st to come to Micky's for this training. I came full of awe, having heard what a wonderful guy he was. But no sooner did I get to know Micky than I got a disappointment—and, except at times, it was hard for me to believe that this indeed was the great Yank ace, the cool Boche-killer.

Micky Rand was a little man—at least he seemed so to a six-footer like me—but he was built wiry and strong. The first time I saw him he seemed to have a steel sword for a backbone, and you could see the steel in his eyes, which were grey and piercing, at times hard enough to chill you. He had a tight little face which you'd never think was plastered in every newspaper back in the States, and every hotel in Paris and London.

But in a few days I noticed that some sort of shadow seemed to hang over that tight face, and his eyes often had a dull, tired look—the steel had lost its luster. Not that he wasn't a wonderful teacher once we got into the air. He taught just the right way, not by talking, but by using the sky as a blackboard and planes as chalk.

Inside of a week I learned what was really the secret

of his whole success: his great combat maneuver which had doomed every Hun he ever tried it on. Micky never claimed to have invented it. Richthofen had been the first to use it, and it was called the Richthofen-circle. But Micky had turned it from a mere stunt into a cold, mathematical science.

The idea was to get your opponent in the air to circle with you. Both of you would go round and round, chasing each other's tail like puppies. If you could keep the other guy from creeping up on you, and lining you with his forward guns, you could consider yourself pretty good. If you could creep up on him, you could name your own medals.

The real trick of the whole maneuver, and the hardest thing to learn, was a rule which Micky kept pounding at day after day.

“Never look back!”

To look back while doing a Richthofen circle was as unhealthy as it had been for that fellow's wife in the Bible, who had looked back and turned to a pillar of salt. Only it wouldn't be salt in this case—it would be a mass of riddled, bloody pulp!

Why? Try doing a series of tight banking turns and then look behind you. Pop goes your sense of balance and direction, and by a reflex action you will veer. And if you veer only a trifle, your opponent, by keeping his circle tight, will be right on your tail, and his guns can tear you to pieces.

But believe me, when you know a guy is chasing your tail, it's damn hard to keep your eyes front. I still had been unable to completely break the habit of taking the tiniest peck back, even by yesterday, which looked like my last lesson. For a new replacement, a young black-haired chap named Ferguson, had come up to be the next pupil—and that meant I must be about ready to “graduate.”

I had noticed, before we went up for the last lesson, that Micky looked more down in the dumps than ever. But in the air everything went smooth as usual, until—

The wind had drifted our two maneuvering Spads pretty close to the front. While we were getting ready to try the Richthofen-circle again, I spotted a lone Hun Albatross, heading for the lines at an almost leisurely pace. It was painted a gaudy green, with red rings on its tail; the Huns were still going in for decorating their crates the way an Indian smears on war paint.

I was all set to go for that green Albatross. Having spent two weeks just training, I was steaming for some real action. Imagine my surprise when, as I started to head for the Hun, Micky Rand suddenly cut right in

on my airpath and blocked the way. Had I tried to go on, it would have meant collision. At first I thought it was because Micky wanted to go for the Hun himself; but when he didn't, and the Hun got clear away, I felt pretty upset.

Micky didn't mention a thing about it when we landed back on the 104th's tarmac. But his tight little face looked strangely white, as if he had seen a ghost. For some reason I didn't have the heart to ask any questions. After all, he was Micky Rand, and who was I to question anything he did, even if it seemed pretty fishy?

Towards evening, staff sent over orders for a dawn reconnaissance of not more than two planes, to be carried out the next morning. I knew Micky would go, of course, and I assumed he would take me—I was still his most finished pupil, so I rated it. I hit the hay early so I'd be in the proper pink, made a couple of banjo-playing peelots shut up, and slept until the grey light of dawn was coming through the flap of the barracks tent.

OUTSIDE I heard the cold bark an airplane engine makes when warming in the early morning. I slid out of bed, hopped into my clothes as fast as a fireman, and tiptoed out, careful not to wake the sleeping men.

The big tarmac looked ghostly in the dawn mist. And I saw that there was just one Spad squatting like a bird on the line—and it was a Spad with a bantam rooster on its fuselage. The gunnery sergeant was putting ammo belts into the twin Vickers. A mechanic was going over the throbbing Hisso and wires.

Then I saw Micky, standing and smoking a cigarette. He looked bad, damned bad. As if he had been on a bat and—but no, it was worse than that. Once I went to a base hospital to visit a wounded pal. I saw a couple of shell-shocked cases, guys who had gotten the wind up.

Yes, Micky reminded me of them as he stood in the cold dawn, smoking his cigarette. His face looked old, and it was grey as the air.

I blurted something, probably "Micky," and he saw me. I hadn't jumped up to him suddenly, yet evidently I gave him an awful turn. The cigarette dropped from his shaking fingers. Then he whirled on me, and his eyes blazed.

"What are you doing up, Conway?" His voice, usually quiet and cool, was so harsh I hardly recognized it. "I didn't order you out for this show."

I looked around foolishly.

"I figured I rated it more than anyone else," I said.

Micky gave a harsh laugh. "Maybe you would—if I was taking anybody. Forget it and go to bed."

I had always been tongue-tied when it came to being personal with Micky, but now, somehow, the words rushed to my lips—without my having to think. I guess I had my nerve, but I said:

"I'M NOT standing by and letting you go out alone, Micky. Not the way you are now—not the way you've been this whole week." I saw his mouth open, but I rushed on. "Don't get me wrong, Micky. There isn't a man who has a right to stand up and criticize you.

"I'm not asking you why you wouldn't let me go for that green Albatross yesterday, or why you looked so bad when we landed. I'm just trying to tell you—hell, there are times when a guy needs a pal, and though you're my superior officer—"

For a moment, small though he was, I thought he was going to snap my head off. But then, to my surprise, he sighed, as if suddenly he was very tired.

"There isn't much time to spare," he said in a dull, flat voice. "Staff must know what's going on behind the lines, whether the Huns are getting ready for anything. But before you make a complete ass of yourself, I'd better tell you a few things."

He drew me away from the working mechanics. We sat down on a couple of empty petrol-tins in front of the hangar. Micky lit another cigarette. He was silent for a long time.

"You think I've got my wind up, Conway?" It was more like a statement of fact than a question. I didn't say anything, but waited. The sun was beginning to peep through the mist now.

"Before you came here," Micky resumed at last, in that same dull voice, "I turned out half a dozen other aces. They were sent as pivot men to various sectors. I taught them just as I've been teaching you. When I turned them loose they knew how to do the Richthofen-circle as well as I do it myself. They had all my tactics to their fingertips." He drew a long drag at his cigarette. "In the last two weeks, that green Albatross you saw shot down three of these men."

The fact that he said it just like that, in that same flat voice, almost brought me to my feet. My heart had missed a beat; I could feel a chill creeping through my chest. I stared at Micky Rand.

"The Hun is named Kemmerer," he went on. "He's their newest premier ace. He's been switching sectors

fast—and each time he got one of those men of mine. I learned it by dispatches. And now Kemmerer’s here—in this sector.”

I was cold all over suddenly, and not from the chill air. I was beginning to understand, even before Micky explained:

“I’d always thought my attack was fool-proof, Conway. I sweated blood perfecting it. I figured out every possible angle, so there would be no loophole left for a counter-attack. Those three men couldn’t have slipped up. I know that. Yet Kemmerer downed them all, in individual combat. Kemmerer must have found a weak spot in my tactics, a way to beat them. And the worst of it is, I can’t figure what that weak spot could be!”

Neither could I. Granted even that Kemmerer had a fast plane, the best he could do would be to equal the circle maneuver—that would leave a deadlock, with both fighting crates unable to creep up on each other.

“So you see why I wouldn’t let you go for Kemmerer yesterday,” Micky said—and I drew a sharp breath, feeling suddenly like a man who has had a narrow escape. “I would have attacked him myself,” Micky continued, “but I just didn’t want to commit suicide—not until I had time to think things over. If he got my three men, that meant he could get me, too. I had to think. I didn’t get a wink of sleep.” His voice shook.

“I sent those three men out—their death is on my hands!” I started to protest, but he stopped me with a quick gesture. “Don’t you see my position? With Kemmerer loose in the sky, I can’t let any man I’ve trained take the air again. Until—” He rose to his feet, and in the lightening air his wiry body was taut. “Until I get Kemmerer myself!”

He flung away his cigarette. I got up too. And in that moment I admired Micky Rand as I have never since admired any man.

“I’ll do the reconnaissance, and then I’ll find him, wherever he is,” said Micky Rand, and there was a gripping strength in his voice now. “If he gets me, Conway, then you and all the rest of my trained aces will know my tactics are cockeyed—and will have to learn all over again from someone else.

“And, Conway, if I don’t come back—try to cheer up that new replacement, young Ferguson, will you? He stayed awake all night too—and I spent several hours with him. He was all hepped up on the idea of learning from me. The fellow transferred to flying from the Medical Corps, and has been shifted all

around before he finally came here. It will be tough on him.” He straightened, put a hand on my shoulder. “You’ll do this for me, Conway?”

I nodded. What else could I do? I knew that Micky was right—that he had to go out alone, to put his tactics to the supreme test, before he could let any man trained only in those tactics take the sky. His whole career was at stake.

And so I remained standing there, trying to fight down a cold feeling of dread, while Micky Rand turned away from me, and walked to his plane—walked resolutely now, shoulders squared back. The crate had been ready several minutes ago. It stood throbbing, the propeller ticking over. I saw Micky Rand put his foot in the stirrup—

AND then I rushed forward with a cry on my lips. For Micky’s wiry figure suddenly seemed to collapse like a rag doll. He crumpled to the tarmac in a little heap.

In a near panic, I roughly pushed my way through the gaping mechanics, reached Micky’s side. I could see his chest moving up and down slowly—he was breathing hard. His eyes were open, but glassy: he was unconscious. Evidently, I thought, the strain had been too much for him. He had fainted.

I knew staff would be howling for the dope Micky had been supposed to get—and besides, I had wanted to go with him in the first place. And I had no intention of hunting Kemmerer: I’d give that Hun a wide berth if I saw him at all.

I had seen that Micky was carried safely to his own cot, and ordered the mechanics to fetch the squadron doc. Then, having assured myself that he was indeed all right, though still out, I had dashed off for helmet and goggles, managed to screw up a cup of coffee and some rolls from the mess kitchen—and hopped into Micky’s already warmed crate rather than waste time getting out my own.

AND now I had climbed out of the ground haze, and could see the sun over the horizon turning from red to gold before me.

By compass, I headed for the lines. Drifting cumulus clouds were piling in a pale blue ceiling above. After a while, I zoomed up through a gap in them, up to about twelve thousand feet. The Hissos were steady in the thin air. The clouds swept like a fleecy sea beneath me.

Then, through cloud gaps, I soon caught glimpses

of battlefields—pock-marked stretches of earth with smoke rolling across them, and here and there the seamed zigzag of trenches. You could tell the Hun trenches from the Allied by their calcium sides, which made them look like chalk marks on the dull brown earth. There was an artillery duel going on—little umbrellas of flame were sprouting here and there. I felt quite detached from it all, as if it were all some unreal pageant.

But in the next moment I was jolted out of my indifference. Black mushrooms spewed up through the clouds, I felt rather than heard the muffled barking explosions under my own Hisso. My crate must have been spotted through the cloud gaps or picked up by sound detectors. I zigzagged the rudder with my two feet, altering my course at intervals to throw them off my range. The A.A. shells looked ridiculously useless as they kept sprouting aimlessly in the sky, but I knew that if one of them broke close it would be a different story.

I cruised into Hun skies that looked quite empty. Then I cut the throttle, pushed the stick forward, and went down easily, with a sort of sliding motion, through a cloud gap.

The morning sunlight was now rushing across the Hun terrain below, lighting up all the shadowy greens and browns. I went down to five thousand and took a general look. There were lots of tan ribbons crossing here and there—roads—and on them were little moving masses of men.

The wind sang through my flying wires as I headed down lower in an easy glide. One of the roads loomed toward me. The tiny masses moving on it became distinct—coal-scuttle helmets, gleaming bayonets, boots marching, not in the cocky goose-step, but with a sort of weary persistence. As I swept over the carpet, opening my throttle, there was a sound as of pebbles hitting the side of my crate. Ground machine-guns had opened up on me, and they were something to worry about. There were still some who claimed that Richthofen had been plugged by them instead of the Canadian flyer, Brown.

I got mad right away. Here I was, sweeping along peacefully, and those Huns were trying to plug me with their chow-chows. All right, I could spoil their day a bit, too! I pushed the throttle across the quadrant, and my Spad shivered and thundered under me as I dived over the road. The bobbing columns of grey rushed up to meet me on a crazy slant. I put my thumbs on the Bowdens and pressed.

I could see my Vickers firing, just feel their vibrations over the roar of my engine. The mass of grey below seemed to melt as if by magic, parting as if a giant had combed it from side to side. The Jerries were hurling themselves for shelter. Some stayed on the road in little heaps, as I sent down a rain of tracer and saw the dirt fly.

I emptied several rounds into the road and then pulled away with chow-chow buzzing after me. Climbing back to five thousand, I continued my tour. I saw the Huns building bridges across the river Meuse, a winding ribbon of silver. I saw heavy artillery moving up on tractors. A couple of times more I went down to the carpet, did a bit of strafing, even took a few pot shots at a staff car which I saw whizzing along—and missed it.

I was now deep in Hunland, and decided I had seen enough. The signs had been unmistakable: The Germans were obviously concentrating for some sort of show. I'd go back and report.

I banked around widely, and started climbing westward toward the clouds.

My Spad shivered.

That was the first thing I knew. I could feel it shiver all around me, as if a gigantic hand were shaking it. Then, crazily, bits of fabric were flying from the fuselage outside, and a line of perforations appeared in my wing.

Instinctively I was woggling the stick to a half-roll. My eyes were jerking up. The sun, coming down through a cloud gap, momentarily blinded me—I saw only a myriad of colors, until I squinted. Then the colors resolved themselves into a gaudy green—and my heart was in my throat.

The Boche crate was rolling out of the bottom of a cloud, rolling with a motion which seemed easy, leisurely. It seemed to hang, then, almost motionless on its whirling propeller above me—while the red flame tongues leaped from its forward Spandaus.

“Kemmerer!” I shouted. There was no mistaking that green Albatross with the red-ringed tail. God, of all the Huns to run into!

For a full moment, it seemed, everything stood very still. There was the green Albatross, hanging above me. And there was I, caught in a climb, staring at it. I remember taking in every detail—I could just see the bullet nose, even glimpse moving rocker-arms where the cowl was partly open. I could see a helmeted head peering over the windshield—a face hard and goggled, as if etched out of stone, and in front of the face two

black spots which were muzzles gone momentarily dark.

Momentarily, for even as I stared, I saw them go on like opening lights, blazing into flame again. A hornets' nest seemed to be loosed around my cockpit. I heard the buzz of bullets, and when you hear that buzz you know your life is worth less than two cents.

I ROLLED, side-slipped. The sky was a hail-storm now. I saw the green Albatross flop over. Its long wings seemed to shorten as it sideslipped, then dived after me. Vaguely I glimpsed a gauntleted arm waving from the cockpit in a sort of grim invitation. That wave brought me the real shock of horror and realization.

It was the legendary wave of one ace to another, to begin a duel!

God, my Spad was the Spad of Micky Rand, the Spad which every Hun knew—the Spad with the bantam rooster insignia! Kemmerer thought I was Rand!

He thought I was one of the greatest aces living, and that was worse than his thinking me a kiwi! For he would be on his very toes, he would fight without quarter, with every ounce of skill!

For a moment my panic brought a wave of desperation, the kind that will make even a cornered rat fight back. I only knew what Rand had taught me—and it was my second nature which made my muscles start moving the controls. A quick flip of the ailerons—a banking turn, away from the spitting green Albatross.

Promptly, too promptly, Kemmerer accepted the maneuver, fell in with me. Started to circle with me.

“No!” I cried aloud then. “No— you don’t get me in the trap you got the others!” For now full realization had come. I remembered what Micky had told me, in the cold dawn of the tarmac. How Kemmerer must have found a vulnerable spot in his circling tactic—and how he had downed those three aces of Micky’s school.

My stomach was suddenly empty, my throat dry. The controls seemed weighted with lead in my hands. In a panic I was abandoning the maneuver, skidding out of the beginning of the circle. I felt invisible drumsticks rattling on my tail-fins as Kemmerer got a good shot at me.

He was all over me then. I cannot describe those next minutes, which were timeless to me, which had no place anywhere. I think I must have split-aired—flopped all around the sky like some bird gone

haywire, while the green Albatross calmly hung above me, like a green nemesis, squirting tracer at me like a hose.

HE THINKS I am Rand, I kept telling myself, and I believe I even laughed hysterically. All I knew was what Rand had taught me, yet I dared not use his tactics. Not using his tactics, I had none to use whatever—I was a flopping kiwi, a blind bat, a target being shot to hell.

The hornet bullets were buzzing in my very ears now. I remember seeing a strut split right down the middle, and I remember ducking a flying wire that whipped past me with a singing sound. I dodged, twisted, turned. I tried in vain to line my guns on my green nemesis, but he was never there when I fired.

Time and again I had the opportunity to go into the Richthofen-circle, but I didn’t dare—though death seemed sure enough right now.

Kemmerer is getting me, my Hisso seemed to shriek. He’s filling my Spad with lead. Maybe I’m hit and don’t know it: they say a man can keep on going a while even with a bullet in his heart. Am I hit? No—there would be blood. But he’s getting me, in that green Albatross which flies as if it were a feather.

Dizzily, I saw my altimeter needle flickering down to five thousand. He was forcing me down, and I was miles within Hunland. Must get home—information—my brain was still trying to be a soldier. I started to turn stupidly toward the lines—and the green Albatross cut me off like a knife, cut me off with tracers.

A spot danced before my eyes—crazily. I tried to wipe my goggles. The spot remained there. It was in the sky—it was moving!

It was a plane coming!

My head cleared. In a flash I caught a clear picture of my surroundings. I saw the green Albatross fleck up deftly, like a bird momentarily diverted. Kemmerer too had seen the oncoming plane.

I stared, while my plane flew groggily of its own accord. The crate that was coming grew larger, more distinct. I began to shout, though I couldn’t hear my own voice. The plane was a Spad—it was my Spad. But that way of flying—that swift, arrowlike way, with streaking exhaust smoke.

“Micky!” I was crying now. “Micky Rand!”

I knew it was Micky. I didn’t know how he happened to be coming, when I had last seen him out cold. But he was coming—that was enough. He was

coming—and there would be two of us against the green Albatross.

Over my engine then I heard a vicious staccato *rat-ta-tat*—and when you hear machine-guns, you know they must be damn close! They were. The green Albatross was diving now, swooping like some monstrous hawk, spitting tracers which drew like spidery tendrils around me. Kemmerer was trying to finish me before the other plane could get here. But I had second wind now. The sight of Micky coming had restored my confidence, and confidence can do a lot. I half-rolled, turned like a dervish, felt my own body being whirled by my split-airing plane. I literally dodged between the smoking sulphur streams of Kemmerer's furious tracer.

I was holding him off, while the Spad of Micky Rand came winging on—closer, closer, until I could see the little black knob which was Micky Rand's head sticking just over the fuselage.

I was shouting like a maniac, shouting and laughing. And then all at once my laughter froze as if a joke which had at first seemed hilarious had suddenly fallen flat. And a clammy grip of horror seemed to hold me paralyzed while I stared.

Where there had been one plane in the west, there were now four! The three Fokkers must have dived out of the clouds, where they had been lurking all the time. God, I might have known it! An ace like Kemmerer would not travel without protection. They had sighted Micky's Spad—or rather my Spad which Micky flew.

They had attacked.

At the moment I looked they were just flattening from a dive. All four planes began to tangle crazily then—I could discern the wisps of tracers. They were like a spinning ball which hurled across the sky. It swept my way only a moment. I caught another clear glimpse of the Spad, and then I saw Micky Rand's arm waving—up in my direction. He was waving, and his arm was describing a circle over his head.

I didn't get it at first. All I understood, in my dazed horror, was that Micky had tried in vain to break from the three Fokkers and come on to help me against Kemmerer, whose Albatross was now once more starting to stand on a wing overhead. I felt Micky would manage somehow, even if he was still weak from having passed out. But I knew that he would never finish them in time to aid me.

For the hornets had started buzzing again. Kemmerer was back on the job—the job of executioner!

And at the same time I saw the dog-fighting four planes roll away. The Fokkers were driving Micky off now, though he was holding them, matching them. I had no chance to watch any further, for my Spad lurched under such a terrific impact of Kemmerer's bullets that I thought it was the end.

THIS time he would finish me! Micky must have seen it, yet he had been unable to help me. He'd only been able to wave and—

Yes, my brain was slow until then. And even when I knew, of a sudden, what Micky had meant, I couldn't see it.

Why, he had been telling me to do the circling stunt! The stunt I had dreaded trying, because of what Micky had said before—because Kemmerer knew the answer to it! But Micky had spent that last effort to get near enough to tell me to do it. Micky, the ace who had taught me all I knew. Certainly he wouldn't have told me if—

Another blast from Kemmerer's guns decided me. For a moment I lost my identity as an individual. I became Micky's student, obeying my teacher.

I half-rolled, then had the rudder swerving, the stick to one side. I felt the familiar tilt of my body as the Spad turned on its side and went into the circle. I glimpsed the green Albatross promptly following—again too promptly.

We started to go around.

I did not have to think. It had become habit now. And though my plane was riddled in a score of places, it was still responding. I was gathering speed; I could feel the centrifugal force pressing against my lungs. I was going around, tighter, faster, in a void of space and an eon of time.

Where was Kemmerer? My head started to jerk back, the old impulse strong in me. But I didn't look back.

Around and around. The terrific dizzying speed of it, the deafening din of the engine. And above all, that icy fear of death riding behind your back, of guns trained on your spine. Round and round and round—forever and ever, it seemed now.

THEN, of a sudden, though there was still just space before me, a sudden calm seemed to come over me. I can't explain it, but all at once I was cool as a cucumber. I had an absolute feeling of assurance. I wasn't myself—not now. I was actually, for that moment, Micky Rand—flying his plane, thinking

perhaps as he thought when he did his famous maneuver.

And I knew that Kemmerer didn't have any answer! Somehow it had all been a mistaken notion, though I could not see why in that case he had downed those other three men. Yet I knew, I knew!

And, as my Spad roared around perhaps two more times, my conviction was borne out!

A slanted, red-ringed tail was swinging dimly before me, coming closer. I let out a whoop and slammed the throttle open to the last notch. The red-ringed tail straightened. In front of it appeared fuselage wings—the back of Kemmerer's head! I had crept up on him! And now I leaned to my sights, and my fingers felt for my trips.

I pressed them, as I had been taught to do, before I came in range—sending a burst well past the Hun.

And Kemmerer looked back!

I saw the flash of his two goggles, saw the fear in his hard face. Fear, of course, of Micky Rand, whom he thought was behind him.

And I saw the green Albatross veer, just a trifle. I did not hesitate. I felt no emotion about the idea of killing this man.

I kept right to my course. The Albatross leaped toward me. Its tail seemed almost in my propeller. My fingers clamped down on the Bowdens. I could see my guns trembling. I could see the tail-fins of the Albatross melt away.

Kemmerer's figure leaped in the cockpit, as if jerked by a string. A tendril of smoke was curling up around him, a tongue of flame. The Albatross was curving dizzily away, the flames spreading.

I lost it a moment, then saw it below. I saw, or thought I saw, Kemmerer sitting there in the flaming ship, saluting gamely. Saluting not to me, but to the man he thought I was. The flames swallowed him in the next instant.

Then a plume of smoke showed the flaming green Albatross' mad plunge to earth—down, down, out of sight and gone.

MY BREATH was coming hard as I pulled up, staring around the sky. Way off to the right I saw a Fokker limping eastward. A second was fluttering down like a dead bird. And in the sky, the Spad flown by Micky Rand was even now slicing at the third and last Fokker.

He finished it before I got there. It must have taken his lead broadside, for I saw it buckle as it went down, flinging out wreckage.

And Micky Rand was pulling in beside me, looking at me across space. He was grinning a tight little grin, and I could see that the steel was back in his goggled eyes.

We flew home side by side. We landed as usual, with me behind Micky. I was out of my riddled, borrowed ship in a leap, rushing to Micky as he climbed out of the other crate.

"Micky!" I yelled. "How the— I thought you said that Kemmerer—"

Micky was grinning.

"I know," he answered, and his voice was once more quiet. "I know."

And at that moment, from across the grounds, there came the sound of a shot.

I stiffened in surprise. Micky's face went grim all at once, and suddenly he started running toward the drome guardhouse. I followed. The shot, I realized, had seemed to come from that direction.

Sentries were milling about the little barred shack. Two officers were inside when we got there—hard-looking men I had never seen before.

"He got my gun," one of them was cursing. "Grabbed it and—" He pointed at the floor. I followed Micky's glance there.

Young Ferguson, the new replacement who was to have taken my place, lay in a sprawled heap. A smoking Colt was hanging limp from his hand, and a bloody hole decorated his temple.

I stared. And now I saw that Ferguson did not look so young. His cheeks were not so rosy, but smeared. Make-up! And the roots of his black hair showed grey.

Micky was speaking quietly, explaining to me.

"I knew he was a spy when I came to. I had told him I couldn't sleep when I learned he had been in the Medical Corps, and he gave me a sedative. He acted like a doctor."

"He really was a doctor and had been in the Medical Corps," one of the two officers spoke then. Intelligence men! "We got his full confession. He was one of the Huns' most clever operatives—his real name was von Blum."

We never learned all the facts, for the confession had been brief. But we did get enough to understand what had happened. Worming his way into our own army, Ferguson—or von Blum—had transferred to the air corps, and managed to get into the various squadrons where Micky Rand's graduated aces were.

He had worked in conjunction with Kemmerer. He had drugged those three aces before they went out—

and it was the drug and not Kemmerer which had doomed them. Whether Kemmerer actually shot down any of them we never knew. But he took the credit.

It was a neat plot to undermine morale and stop Micky Rand from turning out aces. What had saved Micky was that talk he had had with me on the tarmac at dawn. That had used up so much time that the drug had worked before he was in the air.

I LEFT for my new drome, the 94th, that night, after they had thrown me a farewell binge. I wanted Micky to claim credit for Kemmerer—because the way I felt, it was Micky who had gotten that victory. It was his plane and his attack. But Micky said, before he shook my hand:

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll be the last ace on the front I turn out now, and I understand they’re going to ease me back to the States to do instruction at Kelly. So—well, since you’ve made such a good start, you might as well take my place altogether from now on, and keep that insignia rooster crowing.”

He was a swell guy, all right. I never saw him again.