



SHOOTING STAR

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

*One man against four—and those four among the mightiest Aces of Germany—
in a rip-roaring sky yarn that packs a mighty punch!*

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SILENCE HELD SWAY in the squadron mess. The major who commanded held the attention of his audience. And just at the moment, he was saying nothing at all. His flyers were watching him carefully. Tautness held the very atmosphere. Mouths were slightly open as the men waited for what Major Gerard, the new skipper, might next say.

Directly across from the major sat "Silent" Orth, subject of the major's concern.

"Orth," said the major at last, "you've raised a lot of hell in this sector. You've downed your quota of enemy crates and more. You've got by without a scratch, so far, because you've always been one jump ahead of your enemies. But I'm afraid your number is up."

Orth grinned tightly.

"We've thought that before, sir."

It wasn't braggadocio. Orth did not believe that the German lived who could destroy him.

The major wagged his massive head.

"That's true. You've outwitted them every time they've tried to get you—and they've never stopped trying. They have to get you! They'll concentrate on it from now on. The devil, or whoever looks after men like you, has always been on your side. But it can't last forever—and we'd hate to lose you, Orth."

Again the silent flyer grinned, mirthlessly. He wasn't afraid. He had never been afraid.

"Yes," said the major, "your number is up. The fastest ships in Germany have been ordered to the field opposite us. Intelligence informs me that four aces, the fastest flyers and fighters on the Western Front, have been assigned the sole task of getting you. It seems impossible for you to survive them all, unless—"

"Unless?" repeated Orth.

"Unless you evolve something new and completely effective with which to combat them."

"I've thought of that, sir," said Orth, "and I think I've got the idea. With the major's permission I intend to make a few changes in the rigging of my crate. Then I'm going out after the men who are out after me. Know their identifications?"

"Yes. They are all captains: *Hauptmann* Kruger, Weisskopf, Buchstabe and Braunstein. Their insignia are, in the order named, a crimson splash on the sides of the fuselage, representing blood; a hooded figure carrying an enemy's head in his hands; the opened Book of Life with blank lines, presumably to hold the names of condemned enemies; and a comet with a tail of fire."

Orth whistled.

"They go in for showmanship, don't they? And thanks. That last one gives me a real idea. I've heard of those babies. One is about as bad as the other, so I'll take them as they come. And don't worry about me, sir. I think I can take care of myself."

Orth worked silently and grimly that night on his Spad. Wires, thin to invisibility, were added here and there to the rigging of his crate. Struts were strengthened. Wings ere made stronger. The motor was tuned.

The greaseballs who labored and sweated at Orth's low voiced commands regarded him with wonder. He was doing strange things to his crate, strange, suggestive things. In their mind's eye they could see the rerigged Spad, dropping out of the heights like a falling star.

When it came time for the morning patrols, Silent Orth, his eyes deep sunken but blazing with the light of determination, had not slept or left his Spad. But he was ready for whatever might eventuate.

He called for a sandwich and cup of coffee, wolfed one and gulped the other, and clambered into his pit. His wingmates were coming forth to see what he had done, but they had no chance. He was on the trail of an idea. He thought it would work; he was going out to see if it would. His Hisso roared defiance. The Spad hurtled down the field, its tail off the ground. Orth yanked the stick back into his belly; lifted into the sky almost straight up. He grinned as his motor responded with a will, and with a sound which told of vast power in reserve. Everything had been done that could be done to make his scheme foolproof.

HE WENT up to fifteen thousand feet before he leveled off and headed into the east. The Germans would be abroad by this time. The speedy crates of his four avowed enemies would soon be cruising the lines, watching for Orth to come over into German-held skies.

The Archies troubled Orth not at all. He didn't even look down. For two minutes he threw his Spad around the sky as it had never before been maneuvered; in wingovers, Immelmans, loops, spins—tight ones. And as he whirled and twisted, his keen ears listened for the faltering of his motors or the protestations of his struts and braces.

His whole body was attuned to his crate, to its vibrations, its shaking, its speed—and when the two minutes were up, Orth nodded to himself. The Spad

was sturdy. It hadn't been shaken by the terrific aerial pounding he had given it.

His altimeter fell; said fifteen thousand feet. He looked back, did something to his throttle—and white smoke spurted from his exhausts. “That comet-tail business will be a help.”

Now, like a hovering eagle, he began to study the clear abyss below him, seeking for prey. There would be no opportunity to ascertain identifications at this height. Impossible to know which, if any, of the German crates were those of his four enemies. But if he carried out his scheme, they would appear soon enough!

Now he saw a formation of German crates, some eight thousand feet down. There were six of them, flying a semicircular formation. They were loafing, dead-heading for the lines. Orth had all the advantage of great altitude. His lips drew back from his white teeth in a sort of snarl.

He nosed down, showing his stick against the dash. Even as he plunged, he fired a burst from his guns, to find them in perfect working order. And as he looked back, he saw a trail of white smoke marking the path of his descent.

The whole world became blurred with his speed. The wires of his superstructure hummed and shrilled and whined. The wind of his passage was a wall against his face. He was dropping almost straight down—under full power.

His speed became a ghastly thing. The Spad was a bullet. His ears became deaf, as though tons of air were pressing against the drums. The fabric of his wings slatted with explosions like those of a Gatling gun, but it held.

The enemy formation, none of whose members had yet seen him, were almost under him. He leaned forward, and his knees gripped his stick.

HIS eyes were glued to the crossed wires of his ring-sight. In it was outlined the cockpit section of the central one of the enemy crates. A quick survey told him that there was no opening in the formation through which he could dive. He must, therefore, make one.

His knees tightened on the stick, holding the rocketing Spad steady as she dropped. Above his ring-sight, capable of being brought into line merely by slightly drawing his knees toward himself, was another Fokker.

Could he make it two?

Even as he thought this, one of the Germans looked

up. His mouth hung open in a blurred white face. Orth imagined he could even see the Boche's eyes protruding with terror, and to him it was not strange. For behind Orth's crate, which had become a falling meteor, the white tail of smoke was strangely like a prospective shroud.

His Vickers began to chatter. The man who had lifted his head was frantically signaling his wingmates. He was preparing to dive out of the formation to safety, but he continued to look up, and his shoulders, his face, his body and the cockpit, were all in Orth's ring-sight as the Yank let his Vickers go with a terrific, inevitable chattering.

THE white face of the German became red. He writhed and twisted as though fighting to escape from the narrow confines of his pit, which had become a nest of hornets whose every sting meant death. Bullets in a leaden hail hammered and smashed at him. His crate dropped its right wing, slewed down and out of the formation which was breaking apart all too slowly.

Orth lifted his nose slightly, his whole crate protesting at even this slight change of direction because of the tremendous strain that smashed against its airfoils. Another cockpit came into line. Another shrill burst hammered from Orth's Vickers. He saw his tracers end at the second cockpit. He nosed down again slightly, aiming for the hole the going of the first Fokker had left in the German formation far above him. It was as though he had fallen into a bottomless pit and had looked back up at its rim as he fell. He was two thousand feet under the Germans, traveling at meteor-like speed, before they really realized what had happened. He did something to his throttle, and the streamer of smoke, which, spreading behind him, hid something of the German formation, broke short off at his tail. Its bottom end seemed to dangle like the broken tail of a kite.

Then Orth, wondering just how good his re-rigging had been, brought his stick part way back. For an instant he was pinned to his seat, as though held down by the hand of a giant. The crate seemed to strike something solid in the air, and, still traveling like a bat out of hades, was two kilometers away before it seemed to be flying without strain.

Orth had struck and was away. Not a shot had been fired at him. There hadn't been time. He had hit like Thor's hammer and escaped before the anvil's sound could reach his ears. He had spotted the crate of his first enemy in the split second of time when he had

dived through the German formation, had seen the Book of Life with the empty lines. The enemy whom he had first slain had been Buchstabe, one of the four!

"And that," he told himself, "will certainly make the other three like me a lot!" His speed was scarcely diminished as he crossed the lines going back. He sliced down to a landing, rolled to a stop.

IT WAS only when he stepped from his crate that he realized how taut his body had been. His head and ears rang with the shocking speed he had made down the invisible stairways of the sky. He felt numb with that blasting descent.

But it had worked! One of his enemies had gone! The other one who had fallen had been, as far as Orth was concerned, just another German flyer.

And he had got away so fast they had recognized the uselessness of pursuit and hadn't even essayed it.

Orth stalked to headquarters, where he told Major Gerard exactly what had happened. The major's eyes were grave.

"You probably won't be able to do that again, Orth," he said. "The devil was good to you again. It's a wonder you didn't kill yourself by wrapping your wings around your neck."

"But I didn't, Major," said Orth quietly. "And I'm going to try that again. It'll be a sort of build-up. They'll expect me to do it again because the first attempt was so successful. They'll watch for, and dread, the white-smoking Spad out of the high places.

"They'll figure out a defense against it. I'll try to outfigure them. I'm sure I can do it at least once again, by which time I'll have figured out something else."

And that night there was gloom, not entirely unmixed with exultation, in the squadron mess. Orth had nailed one of his enemies, making one less of the masters of German air to knock down squadron flyers. But the Germans, driven berserk by the fact that Orth had scored again, had smashed into the rest of the squadron—which had followed Orth into German skies—and had refused to be denied.

Two lieutenants had gone down in flammers. Two officers had gone to the hospital. All four must be replaced.

SO INTENT were the flyers on their own problems, none heard the opening and closing of the mess hall door. Some sixth sense must have warned one officer—Lieutenant McKane—for he suddenly looked up and shouted:

"Orth, look out!"

Then McKane hurled himself at Orth, smashing into him with his shoulder, dragging him down, under the table. Orth didn't understand what was happening. The sudden, attack surprised him. And then the mess-shack's silence was broken by the crashing roars of three shots, fired almost together.

Now all eyes were turned to the door. On the threshold a white-faced man stood, solid as a rock, while flames spurted from the muzzle of a Luger held in his white-knuckled right hand. Even as his first three shots rang out, the officers knew the sound of the Luger, tried to square that sound with the American uniform the intruder wore.

AND then half a dozen Colts roared. The room was filled with the acrid, nostril-biting tang of burned powder. Black smoke eddied in the place. The intruder fell backward, flinging down his Luger, his arms suddenly swinging out to either side. He fell as a tree falls, solidly, and his crash rocked the mess-shack.

The attacker was dead.

The door opened. A sentry came rushing in.

"Didn't you see this man?" the major snapped. The amazed sentry stood gaping down at the dead man.

"No, sir. I was at the end of the row when I heard shots."

The major shrugged.

Orth retrieved his seat. The Colts went back into their hiding places. People moved—all save one man. That was Lieutenant Jorgensen, to Orth's left at table. He would never move again, because he had taken, through the head, the bullets which had been intended for Silent Orth.

The squadron exchanged glances. Faces utterly pale. Gerard stared at Orth.

"You see?" he said. "They'll stop at nothing. This man was deliberately sacrificed in the attempt to kill you, Orth. See what happened? The fellow didn't know who you were.

He dared to come in and stand until some one of us spoke your name, and you answered. But for McKane, he would have got you."

Orth's mask-like face did not change.

"Just that much more they'll have to pay for," he said grimly. "They certainly want me badly, don't they?"

Gerard's lips twisted into a wolfish grin.

"We've been trying to tell you that," he said quietly. It wasn't until an hour later, when a man came on

from Intelligence at Gerard's request, that Orth and his wingmates knew just how badly Germany did wish to slay Silent Orth. For the man who had slipped into the mess-shack on a mission which involved almost certain suicide—as certain as though he had actually turned his Luger against himself—was identified by the Intelligence officer as one of the best spies in the German undercover service.

"Kleingeld was worth any dozen other German agents," said Gerard softly. "Yes, Orth my boy, the Germans want you killed, badly, to come here in this way to do it."

"Let's give 'em something to think about," snapped Orth. "Suppose you drop this man's clothing and identification onto the German field at dawn tomorrow, some few minutes before the rest of us take off. Then they'll know they've flopped, and that I'm still on the job. It will be good for their morale!"

Gerard nodded.

THE tension at the field was tighter than ever. Something had to break. It seemed impossible that Orth could beat the three other German aces, good as he was. It only took one bullet to kill a man, even Orth, and how could he expect to evade them forever?

Only Orth himself had no qualms of doubt. But he knew the Germans would be a grim determined bunch this morning, after receiving the mute message contained in Kleingeld's clothing.

Orth examined his Spad carefully, prior to the take-off. He even allowed the morning patrols to get away ahead of him. He was a solo flyer, responsible to none save Gerard, who had given him permission to fly how, when and where he elected.

He was a little more thoughtful, looked a little older, as he climbed into his pit. He hurled his crate down the field with all his old surety; but even the greaseballs sensed that Orth was concentrating on just one thing—destroying those who were patently out to destroy him.

HE CIRCLED for altitude and banked toward Germany at twelve thousand feet, increasing to fifteen when he was over the almost invisible lines below him. Today, as yesterday had been, was utterly cloudless. The ceiling was the roof of the sky itself, visibility the limit of man's vision alone. And he knew that he himself would readily be spotted.

There was just one qualm of doubt in his mind; there were enemy crates with greater ceilings than his.

One of his enemies, or all three of them, might elect to fight him on his own terms. Well, he'd be ready to do that, too.

That the Germans would re-rig as he had done, he took for granted. They might have some slight advantage over him in speed and maneuverability, but he doubted if any of them had the courage to dive down through the abysses of space as he would.

Even so, he looked forward with something of a dread to repeating the ghastly dive of yesterday.

He could think now, as it hadn't occurred to him to think then, what it would have meant to him had his wings sheared off when he was traveling at over two hundred miles an hour.

He began to cruise about the sky, looking down, searching for the enemy. The Germans would probably try something new this morning. They would have known the instant his plane crossed the lines. They would be setting traps for him.

Would the trap take the form of a decoy, a single plane or a small formation?

He glanced up at the sky. He looked into the very eye of the sun, the only spot where an enemy crate could have been hiding, but could see nothing. Yet he felt uneasy. An enemy ship might well be there.

AND then it came, a rocketing Fokker with its Spandau flaming, coming just as a German formation materialized below. Orth was in the act of nosing down to repeat his dive of yesterday and take at least one German out of the war, when bullets began to hammer at his cockpit.

He looked up again. The Fokker was still a golden streak because the sun was at its back. It was utilizing the full advantage of its superior ceiling.

Orth considered for a second as he fed the juice to his crate. His lips twisted into a grin of sardonic mirth as his speed began to pick up under the hammering drive of his motor. Now he could see the enemy plainly. The German was riding his tail with a vengeance.

Orth knew that the slightest touch on his controls would cause him to yaw all over the sky. It was like the pebble which can throw a speeding car off a great track simply because of its great speed.

Orth handled his crate with delicacy. He edged back and forth through the German's line of sights, allowing him to come just close enough to make him believe that his next burst would be successful. And meantime Orth concentrated on the five plane formation under

him, which was traveling upward with the speed of an Archie projectile.

He wanted the Fokker to follow.

The formation was the decoy. It would hold together to the last minute, giving the crate on Orth's tail every possible chance to get this Nemesis of German air.

Orth hadn't yet started his trail of smoke. That was, in effect, his ace in the hole, to be used in his own good time. The German formation was right under him when he decided to make his greatest bid.

He stopped his yawing from right to left, stopped raising and dipping his nose—but to throw off the aim of his enemy, he started the smoke-tail slicing out along his own trail, into the prop wash of the Boche, and so into his face. Orth grinned a little, like the snarl of a lobo, and concentrated then on the formation under him.

As he had done yesterday, at the psychological moment he let his Vickers flame, watching his tracer crash into the cockpit of one of the Fokkers. The pilot tried, as the flyer had tried yesterday, to escape this white-tailed demon from the skies, to no avail. And Orth dived through the hole the German's going had left.

But no sooner had he got through than he attempted something he would never have thought of attempting yesterday. He brought his stick back into his belly, nine thousand feet above the earth, and deliberately zoomed! Again he had that sickening sensation of being about to go bodily through the bottom of his cockpit.

BUT the crate held. One moment the German formation was a thousand feet above him. Then Orth, shooting back like a skyrocket, was above the German formation, out of which the man he had just downed was falling, wreathed in lurid flames, and Orth's Spad was on its back.

The Fokker which had followed Orth was still above the formation. And Orth was bringing his crate around, having sliced through the sky almost too fast for the eye of man to follow—and he was bringing his nose down, to bring his guns to bear on the diving Fokker.

Now his knees hugged his stick tightly: his eyes were glued to his ring-sight.

The Fokker's fuselage came into line. The distance was great, and both ships were traveling at bullet speed, but Orth was a master gunner. His bullets

smashed across the space with a surety of touch that was astounding to witness. They crashed into the Fokker's motor housing, slid back along the fuselage, smashed into the pilot.

The pilot never came out of his dive, never had a chance to escape the crates under him. The Germans, sure that their comrade would not hit them because they knew him to be a master gunner, had remained in formation all during the dive. And the pilot, on whose cockpit sides was the insignia of a hooded figure with an enemy's head in his hands, went through the formation between two other planes—where there lacked many feet of room for his passage.

The shock of the tri-ship collision was almost audible above the roaring of Hisso and Benz'. The three Fokkers, almost inextricably locked together, fell down the sky.

ORTH'S face was white. It was almost as though he had shot down the three planes with a single burst. That made four for the day. He licked his dry lips as, coming down the side of his loop, he let his motor full out on a prolonged dive that carried him far below the remaining German ships. Strike and get away—that was his plan.

And as he smashed for the home field, he knew that nothing that he could ever do would outweigh, with the Germans, what he had done today. Shocked and dismayed, their reaction would be:

"Get Orth if it takes the lives of a dozen flyers!"

And there were still two of the aces to be accounted for.

Weisskopf had gone, the second of the four aces. That left Kruger and Braunstein. And their reputations would be ruined for all time if they did not figure out some way to destroy Silent Orth.

ORTH strode to headquarters after landing, spoke quietly to the major, whose face went white at the stark details of Orth's report. He shook his head, but offered no comment. Orth was doing all right without the comments of others to guide him.

"I've been expecting a strafe of the field by way of retaliation," said Gerard after a moment, while Orth was writing out his combat report. "And I'm a little troubled that it hasn't come. It makes the situation seem even more desperate, as though the Germans regarded the usual methods of vengeance as not being sufficiently savage. They're planning something."

"They'd be fools," retorted Orth coolly, "if they

didn't. Well, there's no turning back. I could, of course, take a few days leave in Paris—"

Both officers grinned. Orth had no desire to do anything of the sort, though Gerard would have granted him permission instantly. But Braunstein and Weisskopf would still be there to tackle him when he got back.

"Get those two," said Gerard, "and you will be *ordered* by me to take a week in Paris!"

"And I'll take it, too," said Orth, "with a satisfied feeling that I've earned it."

There were few words next morning when the Spads lined up at the deadline. Hissos ticked over. The ships tugged gently at their chocks, under reduced power. Orth looked around at the faces of his wingmates. They licked their dry lips as they met his gaze, then looked quickly away. Orth knew why. They didn't expect him to come back, this time.

But he didn't mind that. He had the fatalist's belief that what is to be, will be. If he were destined to die he'd take it—but he didn't believe he was.

He gunned his crate down the field after his wingmates had flown about their duties eastward, northward and southward—and as he had done on the two previous days, Silent Orth went up to fifteen thousand feet. Again the day was clear, bright.

No hint of what he might expect had reached him, even through Intelligence. He was flying blindly into whatever traps the Germans might have set for him. His crate was marked. Every German knew it, but he disdained to alter its shape or insignia in any way. Besides, he was the only flyer who went to such great heights. He would be spotted immediately he started his screaming dive.

Over the lines, into German-held skies he flew; then, the usual circling, waiting, watching.

This morning many German formations were up. Allied formations were plentiful, too. They kept to their respective sides of the line, each seeming to be waiting for some signal or other to be at one another's throats.

A FORMATION started to come under Orth. Seven crates, all Albatrosses. The sky seemed to empty around him, save for two crates, at least a mile apart, to the east of him, and to the west, and slightly above him. Apparently the Germans, if they were planning anything, weren't ready to spring their trap.

It was not until he had started his devastating dive that Orth understood that the two solitary crates were

part of the trap, for which the seven-plane formation was the bait.

He was smashing down. His fabric was booming with the speed. His wires were screeching like rusty hinges. Even his struts seemed to bow in the mighty drive through the wall of air.

And the two apparently innocent crates were diving, too. But they were diving at greater speed than Orth's! They were slanting down at terrific speed, aiming to come together at some spot below Orth, and below the German formation.

THEN Orth got it. The two Germans, Kruger and Braunstein without doubt, intended to catch him when he had made his kill in the formation. One of those Germans in formation, maybe two, were going to be sacrificed to give the two aces their chance to get Orth. It was a good trick if they could do it.

Orth decided not to change his plan of attack in one iota. But as he dived, and the two diving Fokkers seemed to be making a yard and a half for every yard of his dive, he estimated about where the two ships would meet below the German formation.

Then, putting the two out of his mind for the moment, he concentrated on the formation. It held together firmly, proof that its commander insisted that it do so, even in the face of sure death for some of its members.

The grim determination of the Germans thus proven beyond all shadow of doubt, Orth set himself to fight in their way. His Vickers began to flame as he came within range. But instead of concentrating on any one ship, he raked the whole formation, from his advantage in altitude, with lead from Vickers which were never still, which grew white-hot under his hands.

The German formation faltered. One crate started down, its propeller becoming visible as it dived. His bullets had done something to either the prop or the motor. Another ship sliced out of the formation in flames, and the German put one wing down in a side-slip to earth, striving to make the flames wash away from him along the other wing.

And then, with a flash of speed that was terrific, Orth was through the hole in the formation, as he had gone through similar holes yesterday and the day before. And below him he could see that he was diving straight into a pocket. Somehow, the diving Fokkers had checked their speed.

Orth hadn't. He didn't try to now. He looked to his

speed to save him from the last two of his toughest enemies.

They were firing at him, laying down a cone of fire into which he must dive, as into a well lined with spraying hot lead. He ducked into his pit. It seemed impossible that he could dive through that cone of fire and emerge alive. The trap was perfect.

But Orth took the chance. He would show these Germans just what he could do when he actually put his mind to it.

His guns were still. The ships he had just downed were going past him, well outside the cone of fire which the two Fokkers had laid down.

ORTH studied the converging ships. In a few brief seconds, both would be on his tail, slightly apart.

He gritted his teeth. He had no intention of going out like this. Bullets ripped the fabric of his wings. Wind caught at the torn places and ripped at them as with powerful, mischievous, invisible hands. But he held his dive, pulling the Germans after him. In a second or two they would have him in their ring-sights, and the end would be in sight.

His altimeter said five thousand feet. He was doomed if he held his course. He might be doomed if he did the wild reckless thing he had in mind. But it was six of one, half a dozen of the other, with the odds slightly in favor of his sudden scheme. He might shed his wings. But he would have a gamble for his life.

He didn't, therefore, bring his crate out of the dive gradually.

GOING full tilt, almost straight down, with his motor full out, he closed his eyes momentarily and yanked the stick back into his belly!

The sudden change of direction was a ghastly shock to him. But the wings held! They threatened to bow back around his neck. Fabric slatted in the mighty wind of his passage—but, miracle of miracles, his wings held!

"And now try to stop me!" shrieked Orth into the slipstream. He shouted like a crazy man. He was anything but silent. He went berserk when he realized that his Spad, at least, had played its part for him—a miracle in itself. Up, over, traveling bullet-swift, he

found himself looking down into the faces of the two Germans, whose mouths were open as they witnessed the unbelievable escape of a man they had already counted as dead.

Orth's Vickers flamed across the abyss. He couldn't miss, even at that range—because he dared not miss. He let his guns go until he saw one of his enemies crumple, sink into his pit, with limp arms flopping about the cockpit coaming.

Then he dived savagely, concentrating on the other one—whom he saw was Braunstein. And, having seen what had happened to all his ace-comrades, the German did an unbelievable thing—he started to run; but then he saw what he was doing, got himself in hand, and stayed to meet his fate face to face as became a German gentleman and a man of high courage. He elected to meet Orth head on—but the German didn't live who could do that.

Orth was everywhere about Braunstein. It took exactly one minute for him to make an end. And Braunstein, who had saved himself from a coward's living, by electing to die a hero, managed to touch his forehead in salute as Orth's bullets hammered at his body, drove the life out of him with a rush.

And Orth flew home to report.

Gerard said nothing. Orth's voice was very low as he reported.

"I forgot myself, sir," said Orth. "I yelled like a Comanche Indian. I thought I'd cured myself of making too much noise with my mouth. But you've no idea how relieved I was to get away from those two when they had me dead to rights."

"I UNDERSTAND," said Gerard softly. "You want to go to Paris now to forget the tension under which you've been flying for the last three days."

"I want to go to Paris, yes," said Orth thoughtfully, "because if I stay here I may be tempted to forget all past lessons, and let myself talk too much about how good I am. And I'm not good at all. I'm merely lucky!"

But Gerard, watching Silent Orth depart after signing his combat report, knew that if Orth wanted to talk endlessly, from now until Doomsday, not one of his wingmates would ever again offer the slightest objection.