

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

## EARLY BIRDS

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

*These three fearless flyers had sworn never to have any secrets, never to do anything alone. Yet here was one of them sneaking off on mysterious before-dawn flights. Why? Where? The best yet of the gripping “Three Mosquitoes” yarns.*

**T**HIS TIME Kirby, leader of the famous “Three Mosquitoes,” awoke before Travis had sneaked out of the room which the trio of airmen shared together. It was not yet dawn, and the little cubicle was almost pitch dark. “Shorty” Carn, the stout mild-eyed little man, was still snoring blissfully in his cot. But Kirby, who had passed a restless night in worrying about Travis, was wide awake. He did not betray this fact to Travis, however. He simply lay still and watched his older comrade, whose lanky form was just discernible in the darkness.

Hastily, but taking care not to disturb his comrades, Travis was slipping into his togs. It took him only a couple of minutes to get them on. Then, on tiptoes, he walked to the door, opened it cautiously and went out.

No sooner was he gone than Kirby sprang from his cot, hurried over to Shorty Carn, and started shaking the little man violently.

“Come on out of it!” he whispered, so as not

to awaken the other men sleeping in the thinly partitioned bunks throughout the barracks. “We can’t let him get away with it this time. Let’s see what in hell he’s up to.”

Sluggishly, Carn rolled over, stretched, and gave a prolonged yawn. Like most fat men, he hated to release himself from the pleasant arms of sleep.

“Wha’sa matter?” he sighed wearily, and promptly turned over and fell tight asleep again.

“Come on, you lazy bum.” Impatiently, Kirby pulled the covers clean off the cot. This failing to stir the sleeper, he grabbed Carn’s foot and jerked the little man roughly to the floor. Carn landed violently in a sitting position, and the jolt did the trick. He sat there stupidly, grunting out weak curses and rubbing his eyes.

“Wha’sa matter?” This time his tone was hurt, indignant.

“For cripe’s sake, snap out of it,” Kirby urged him, and was not so altruistic about the other sleepers in the building now. “Trav has sneaked

off again, you poor nut. I let him get out of the room because I aim to find out what he's doing. There's something-damned fishy about these early 'practice flights' of his, I'm thinking."

Slowly the words sank home, and served to rouse Carn to full consciousness. His brain cleared, and suddenly he became alert, active. He struggled to his feet, and now there was no trace of weariness in his voice:

"Damn, but it is fishy," he agreed. "Let's see—this is the third time, and in one week. Practice flights, my eye! No one comes back from a practice flight looking the way he does. I thought he was a ghost the other morning—white as a sheet, and his eyes staring. And then, when he goes up with us later for patrol, no pep at all; we gotta watch his tail like nursemaids. It beats me. And the C.O. doesn't know any thing about it, eh? If he doesn't know anything about it, why in hell doesn't he try to find out? Besides——"

"Say," Kirby, who had already begun dressing, broke in impatiently, "if you don't give your mouth a rest you'll be so exhausted that you'll fall asleep again. Shut up, and dress."

Meekly Shorty obeyed, and was soon grunting in his efforts to get himself into his clothes.

The two men were just leaving the room when the staccato bark of an airplane engine rose on the field outside, shattering the stillness of the 'drome.

"He's revving up," Kirby said. "Let's get a move on." He hurried down the corridor of the barracks, Carn close on his heels. They came out on the field. The first furtive gleams of daybreak were just appearing. A thin white mist shrouded the big 'drome, and the air was chill and damp. The field, usually buzzing with feverish activity, was practically deserted, though a group of mechanics were already wheeling planes from the tent-hangars for the dawn patrol.

THE two Mosquitoes walked briskly towards the tarmac, where a trim Spad was being warmed up. They found Travis in the cockpit, manipulating his throttle and testing the controls. As yet he had not pulled down his goggles, and his face, framed in the napping helmet, looked strangely lean and pale, the features gaunt. That he was nervous was evident from the way he stalled upon seeing his comrades. But his surprise changed immediately to irritation. He eased down the throttle, to make speech possible.

"Get back to bed," he drawled. "What do you want to be getting up at this unholy hour?"

"That's what we came to ask you," Kirby was quick to respond. "This mystery stuff's beginning to get on our nerves. Remember our rules: we Three Mosquitoes must do everything together, and no secrets. So come on, and give us the straight dope."

Travis sighed impatiently. "Haven't I told you? This is a new Spad, and I've been making a few little improvements on it."

"The hell you say," Carn put in. "You can't tell us you have to go up before dawn for two hours, just to make a few improvements."

Travis shifted uncomfortably, averting his eyes from, the questioning, accusing gaze of his comrades. "Well, believe it or not, it's true," he told them. "So you two run along to bed, and I'll be back shortly for our usual morning patrol. And anyway," his thin lips twisted into a tight mirthless grin, "I don't think I'll have to be making many more of these—practice flights. This ought to be about the last, I guess."

He said these words casually enough, yet something in his tone, something that he had not meant to imply, brought a strange chill to Kirby, filled him with apprehensive alarm. He spoke to Travis almost pleadingly, beseechingly:

"Look here, old man, don't try to kid us any more. If you're in some trouble now——"

But he got no further. For his words were cut off completely by a sudden, thunderous roar from the Spad's engine, as Travis, his desire to avoid the question rousing him to furious impatience, opened his throttle full, thus drowning out all further speech. Quickly, the oldest Mosquito pulled down his goggles. He waved to Kirby and Carn, warning them to get out of the way. They saw that they could not hope to stop him now he was desperately determined to take off—so they backed away from the fuselage. Travis signaled the mechanics, who promptly jerked the chocks from in front of the plane's wheels. The little Spad leaped forward, went bounding out across the field.

Kirby and Carn stood helpless, silent, staring after their comrade. They watched the trim Spad as it left the ground to soar upwards through the thin mist, which was now beginning to disperse as the daylight steadily increased. They watched it climb higher and higher, until, it was just a flitting, birdlike shape, which banked over their heads and pointed its nose towards the east—and the German lines.

Soon the gray sky had swallowed it completely, and the two men on the ground looked at one another, and each read his own thoughts in the other's eyes.

“Hell!” Shorty muttered, “but he certainly looked bad. Looked as if he didn’t expect to come back. Cripes!”

But Kirby did not hear him. For, stirred to action, the leader of the Mosquitoes had turned to the mechanics, was bellowing at them, “Our planes— get ‘em out, get ‘em warmed. Snap into it, you sons. Every second counts.” At once the group of mechanics dashed for the hangars. Carn looked at Kirby with anxious inquiry.

“You think we ought to do it?” he asked dubiously. “After all, if he sees us following him he might abandon his stunt or whatever it is. And we might get him in trouble if we poke our noses into his private affairs.”

“Private affairs be damned,” Kirby snorted. “What’s his business is ours. And he won’t see us—we’ll make sure of that. We’ll take field glasses, and stay far enough away from him to be out of his sight.” He turned to watch the mechanics wheeling two ships out to the deadline. The sun was rising now—a red ball appearing bit by bit behind the line of tent-hangars. The mist was almost gone; it was getting lighter and lighter. “We’ve got to hurry,” Kirby shouted. “The dawn patrol fellows will soon be out, and we don’t want to make any explanations about going up without orders now.” He laughed grimly. “There ought to be plenty of explaining later—when we all come back.”

TEN minutes later two Spads were speeding eastward through the morning sky. They flew at an altitude of eight thousand feet, and in these high regions, where the dawn comes earlier than on the ground, the air was thin and clear, the sky a translucent blue streaming with golden sunlight. Far below, at about two thousand feet, were drifting puffs of cirrus clouds which looked like balls of cotton.

Visibility was perfect for miles and miles. Yet, though the two pilots strained their eyes as they flew side by side, wing to wing, they were still unable to distinguish any sign of Travis. And Kirby was beginning to wonder whether they would find him at all. The oldest Mosquito had gotten a good ten-minute start on them—and minutes meant miles in the air. Besides, suppose Travis had suspected that his comrades would follow, suppose he had shrewdly changed his course to throw them off?

Furiously, Kirby signaled Carn to put on more speed, and at the same time opened his own throttle full. His engine roared shrilly, half in protest, and his

plane literally shot forward, cleaving the air like a dart. Without turning his head, Kirby was aware of the bobbing ship of his comrade, which kept beside him. On they rushed, their wings rocking, their planes trembling from the strain of the frenzied speed. And still the two pilots kept scanning the blue, looking for a lone ship which they were determined to follow. Soon now they would be reaching the Front. Had Travis crossed the lines, Kirby wondered, or had he——

He broke off from his musings with a start, stiffening from head to foot. Then, eagerly, he was waving to Carn, pointing out the object that he had seen. Far ahead, and off to the right, flying a couple of thousand feet lower than they were, was a tiny speck which glinted in the sun. Travis! Travis, flying not toward the east now, but towards the south! Though he must be right over the Front, for some reason—perhaps to throw off any followers—he had changed his course and was moving on a parallel with the lines. But it was this very fact which had enabled his two comrades, coming towards him on a right-angle, to gain on him and spot him.

Immediately, with expert exactitude, Kirby, waving Carn to keep with him, swept over in a mild bank and was cutting right in towards Travis on a bee-line. As they sped forward, the two pilots climbed their ships to get in the blinding orb of the sun, where they would be invisible to their comrade below. It was only a matter of seconds before they were sweeping high above the lone Spad about a half a mile behind. They banked together, in graceful unison, and followed the ship that sped below and ahead, its wings shimmering in the sun.

Where in hell was Travis going? Below, to their left, the seething, shell-torn battlefront, pock-marked and crisscrossed by trenches. And to their left, just a little further, were the battle lines. The three planes were still moving parallel to those lines.

Suddenly an incredulous exclamation broke from Kirby. By God, Travis was descending! The nose of his Spad had dipped. He was going down, sweeping towards the earth in a long glide-dive.

Again Kirby signaled Carn, and they also started to descend. Travis was now passing the strata of clouds. He swept on, until he was below those fluffy white patches, which now obscured him from his comrades’ view from time to time. But the glimpses they caught of him were enough. He was still descending, gliding straight into the wind. It certainly looked as if he meant to land.

By this time Kirby and Carn had also reached the clouds, and Kirby did some fast thinking. If they went any lower Travis must see them—for against the clouds their planes would be clearly outlined. Better to stay up here, above, where they could always use a cloud as a shield. The ground was only some two thousand feet below, and with the aid of their glasses they could see whatever happened down there.

He conveyed this idea to Carn with a few gestures, and the two of them separated. Kirby commenced circling just above the edge of a big cloud, while Carn swept over to an opposite edge and circled also. In this way they did not have to worry about colliding with one another when, taking their eyes from their flying, they watched the ship of their comrade below.

Travis was almost right above the earth now, still gliding. Looking down, Kirby scanned the landscape. His eyes widened incredulously. Why, there was nothing but forest down there. Travis seemed to be going straight for the trees. The man must be mad. Was he deliberately trying to commit suicide?

Hastily Kirby got out his field glasses. Trusting on sheer flying instinct to keep his plane on its course, he pushed up his goggles and put the glasses to his eyes. Carefully he focused them on the area below towards which the Spad was descending. At first, he could distinguish nothing but those dense tree-tops. But then, to his intense relief, he made out something else.

Right in the midst of those trees, so expertly camouflaged that it merged perfectly with the rest of the landscape, lay a small field. It was to this spot that Travis was gliding. There were men down there—some in khaki uniform, others in the stained overalls of aerial mechanics.

Using his glasses, pausing only to attend to his flying, Kirby watched. He saw Travis' Spad swoop over the treetops, to drop on that field in a perfect landing. He saw the men crowd around that ship. The lanky figure of Travis climbed out of the cockpit. And then, to Kirby's amazement, the men were wheeling the Spad away, wheeling it straight into the trees, it seemed! A moment, and the plane was out of sight. It——

"Well, I'll be a——" Kirby muttered in awe. For now, as if by magic, another plane appeared. They were wheeling it out from under that same camouflage of trees. It was also a scout plane, but of unfamiliar design. Though heavily camouflaged, smeared crazily with every color of the rainbow, it had no markings—neither Allied or German. The mechanics got it to the

end of the field facing the wind, and placed chocks under the wheels. At once Travis was getting into the cockpit, strapping himself in the seat. Kirby saw them turning the propeller through compression; then, as the mechanics leaped aside and a puff of smoke broke from the exhaust, he knew that the engine had been started.

FOR a couple of minutes the plane squatted there, warming up. Then, with dramatic suddenness, it went streaking across the field and literally shot into the air. Kirby marveled at the breathless speed of the ship, it must be one of the newest and most modern models out. It climbed almost vertically, with graceful ease. And before Kirby had time to get into action again, it was almost up to the clouds, right below and ahead of the spot where he and Carn were circling. Unless they moved out of here, Travis would surely see them when he came through. They must beat it—beat it quickly.

Kirby ruddered over, waved to Carn, who immediately swung in beside him again. With their planes side by side once more, the two pilots looked across at one another. Shorty shook his head, as if to say: "Damned if I understand." Kirby threw up his hands in a gesture meaning the same thing.

Then both of them pulled back their sticks and went roaring upwards in a long zoom. They climbed for several thousand feet, back into the eye of the sun, before they straightened out. And when they looked down once more, they saw the crazily painted ship which Travis flew, leveling off above the clouds, to bank swiftly towards the east.

Kirby and Carn banked too. But now the sun was right in front of them, and could not hide them from Travis. They must keep out of his sight. Again they climbed, and fell back far behind and above their comrade, until they could barely make out the speck that was his ship. It was doubtful that he would look up and see them now.

The chase was on once more. To keep pace with that speck, the two Mosquitoes had to race their ships at full throttle. At times they lost sight of it altogether, and had to use their field glasses to pick it up again.

In a moment Travis was crossing the lines, entering German skies. And in another moment Kirby and Carn were crossing them too, and fortunately there was no anti-aircraft fire to greet them in this sector. A feeling of intense excitement began to grip Kirby, a sense of impending drama. Any minute now, any second, the mysterious flights that Travis had been

making ought to be explained. What would be the outcome? Where would Travis lead them?

The tiny speck below still clung unwaveringly to its course, penetrating further and further into enemy territory. And the Spads of his comrades followed, their engines chanting a thunderous, even drone. Five miles from the lines now. Kirby's nerves were growing taut, as the minutes measured off the distance. Eight miles. Ten——

And then, suddenly, Carn was waving with frantic excitement, trying to attract Kirby's attention to something in the sky below, and to their left. Quickly, Kirby looked there. Then he was sitting rigid, his heart pounding.

Sweeping in like a small swarm of insects, moving speedily on a line which would bring them right in front of Travis' airpath, were half a dozen new specks. And even before Kirby adjusted his field glasses on them to see them clearly, he knew, knew with grim certainty, what they were. Enemy aircraft. Fokkers, D 7s, the glasses told him, for they showed him six flitting gray shapes that looked like darting dragonflies.

What would Travis do? Even now those Fokkers were almost up to him, moving closer and closer, cutting right in. And then a tortured groan escaped Kirby. Good God, Travis seemed absolutely oblivious of those Jerry planes! He was flying right on, in blissful serenity. He was not altering his course in the least.

TORN by anguish, Kirby had a wild insane impulse to shout out to Travis, to warn him, as if his voice could carry down through the miles of space that separated them. But instead, his hand tightened about the joy-stick, and he motioned Carn to be ready, to dive to their comrade's assistance. For against all those Fokkers, Travis would be helpless, and——

A cry of incredulous amazement tore from Kirby's throat. Could he believe his eyes? Could it be possible that the Fokkers were *passing* Travis, as if they were unaware of him too? By God, they were! Smoothly, they swept right in front of him, and moved on. It must be that plane of his. They must think him a German, for some reason or other.

Then a new fear assailed Kirby. The German formation was turning, swinging around in a long, graceful curve. Had they seen the two Spads miles above? If they came after Kirby and Carn, their chances of following Travis would be gone.

But fortune was with the two Mosquitoes this

time. The Fokkers did not head this way. Instead, they swung back towards the north, and presently the blue sky had swallowed them again. Heaving a sigh of relief, Kirby again settled back in the cockpit to resume the business of following Travis. Shorty caught his eye, and grinned at him with tight lips. Kirby nodded grimly. That was a close one.

Once more Travis was leading them on, though unknowingly. The tiny speck of a Spad still moved forward, still kept going deeper and deeper into the enemy's sky. Fifteen miles now. Gosh—— Kirby shook his head——how far was the man going? Twenty miles—— and Kirby's question was answered.

Travis was descending again. Though twenty miles within the German lines, he was obviously going to make another landing. For the second time, he was sweeping down towards the clouds. And for the second time his comrades, without delay, were sweeping after him.

They followed the speck as it dipped lower and lower. It was still far ahead of them, but now, suddenly, it turned to get in the wind, and gave their speeding ships a chance to catch up. Kirby, keeping Carn beside him, timed their descent with such mathematical precision that they got overhead of Travis just as the latter came out below the clouds, which again served to shield his comrades from his view. Once more the two Mosquitoes split apart to circle above one of those clouds. And once more, using their glasses, they watched Travis' plane as it glided earthward.

This time Kirby had no trouble in locating the field towards which the crazily-painted ship was headed, for the place was directly below. It was also laid in some trees, close to a road, and it, too, was heavily camouflaged. There was quite a crowd of men down there, both on the field and the road. And these men were not dressed in Khaki. They were dressed in the field gray of the Imperial army!

And Kirby could only stare in awful fascination as he saw Travis, his comrade, one of the most red-blooded Yanks in the force, deliberately going down to make a landing among all those Jerries. It was incredible. Yet it was true. For now the camouflaged ship was swooping right over the field. Its wheels touched the ground, settled, and it rolled to a stop.

The Germans at once crowded around it. And what Kirby saw then, through his glasses, was so incongruous that he was absolutely dumfounded. For as Travis climbed out of his ship, those Jerries, acting as one man, stiffened to attention, and saluted

him! And he returned their salute smartly, in the true Teutonic fashion. He seemed to be talking to them, and Kirby remembered that he could speak German perfectly, without a trace of accent. This realization brought a faint inkling of an idea to the Mosquito's mind. Could it be that Travis——

He shook his head. As yet, he could form no definite conclusions, for it was all too confusing. Nothing seemed to fit together.

Now some Jerry mechanics were swarming about that camouflaged plane like a lot of industrious ants, putting fresh water into the radiator, refueling, and examining the engine controls. And Travis was walking across the field, accompanied by a group of men whom Kirby distinguished through the glasses as officers. For a few seconds the party disappeared in the trees, but presently they emerged on the road which ran close by. Kirby scanned the highway. In the distance, he saw what looked like a black beetle, moving down the road in a cloud of dust. Closer and closer it came, until, as it loomed into clear focus, it proved to be a speeding staff car. And Kirby had to marvel at the wonderful timing with which the whole mysterious business was being conducted. The arrival of Travis and that staff car had been executed to the dot.

THE speeding, high-powered auto was slowing down now, as it approached the spot where Travis and the group of officers were standing. It pulled up beside them, and Kirby carefully focused his glasses on it. There were four men in it. In the front were the chauffeur and an attendant. In the rear sat a corpulent man with ribbons on his breast—a high officer, Kirby knew, most likely a general. Next to him was another fellow who must be his aide.

Travis and the officers on the road saluted the man in the car, who returned their salutes. Then Travis stepped on the running board, and the high officer leaned over towards him. Kirby could not clearly make out just what was taking place, but it seemed that the general was handing Travis something—a paper, it appeared. Travis stepped down, and again there was a lot of saluting, after which the staff car leaped forward and sped away.

All this Kirby and Carn had been watching from their circling perches with intense concentration. They hardly realized that they were flying their planes. They were so completely absorbed in what was taking place on the ground that they had no eye for anything else.

And, consequently, the thing that happened took them entirely unawares, caught them napping.

Not until they heard the sudden, unmuffled roar of engines overhead—the shrill staccato clatter of machine guns—did they realize the peril which faced them. And then it was too late to escape. For the six enemy scouts were upon them, plunging right down on them with red streaks flashing from their square noses. Six speedy gray Fokkers, doubtless the same patrol that they had seen before. The Germans had spotted the two American ships circling below, and now they were swooping upon them like blood-crazed vultures, eager to make the kill.

With frantic haste Kirby pulled up the nose of his ship, and caught a vague glimpse of Carn's Spad swinging in to get beside him. Travis was forgotten now, as the two Mosquitoes were forced to struggle desperately for their very lives. Tracer bullets were penciling the sky about them in yellowish, zig-zag lines, and the whistle of lead was in their ears. Furiously they half-rolled, zig-zagged and twisted to throw off the sights of the enemy pilots, who were now leveling off and weaving about them as if in a mad snake-dance. The sky seemed literally dense with those gray, black-crossed planes, that swarmed and bobbed around the two Spads, seeking to fasten themselves to the flanks of the Allied ships. Defiantly, the two Mosquitoes answered the terrific rain of fire with their own guns. Their twin Vickers stuttered into life, blazed away. But, under the circumstances, they could not hope to score. The Germans, with their superior numbers and the added advantage of a surprise attack, had them surrounded, caught in a trap which the enemy pilots were closing with relentless precision.

THE gray Fokkers had swept back into formation again—a line of ships in single file. They were circling around the two Spads like Indians riding to close in on their prey. And Kirby and Carn, cut off from every path of escape, could only keep turning and twisting while their attackers continued to wall them in a fatal prison of crossfire. Thicker and thicker the bullets flew: Kirby could hear them ticking through his fuselage, shattering wood and fabric. Splinters flew into his face from the dashboard; perforations appeared magically in the wing above him. And Carn was getting it too. Without turning, Kirby saw his comrade's plane out of the corner of his eye. It was off to his right, and it was twisting and writhing as if in mortal agony from the bullets which pumped it.

Kirby swore thickly. They were going to be shot to hell—Carn and himself. Against this merciless storm of fire they could not hope to hold out another minute. It was not a fight, but a slaughter.

A slaughter? Suddenly an overwhelming volcanic rage was upon Kirby. His eyes blazed, and he swore through clenched teeth. By God, he might go down, but he was going down fighting! Damned if he'd just sit here and wait to be finished off.

His fighting spirit aroused, he straightened out recklessly, and hurled his Spad right into the midst of the enemy formation. A terrific fusillade of bullets rained down on him, but he ignored it. A gray, Fokker-like shape loomed before him. He laughed recklessly, and sped straight towards it. The German pilot, fearing collision, for he saw that his Yankee foe had no intention of avoiding it, swerved hastily out of the way and banked to the right. Kirby kicked right rudder, and was after him in a furious skid turn which seemed almost to raise a cloud of dust. The Mosquito leaned to his sights, and his thumbs were on the stick-triggers. *Rat-tat-tat*. The streams of tracer poured from his guns.

The Fokker veered giddily from its flight, seemed to skid on a slippery current of air, then twisted and lurched to pick itself up. Kirby, with a berserk oath, kept firing at it, peppering it with lead. A ribbon of flame spurted out of the gray ship, went licking greedily along its fuselage. And the next second it was plunging earthward, a fiery torch which left a great trail of oily black smoke in its wake.

Triumphantly, Kirby banked vertically to confront the three ships which swooped on his tail. And as he swung around, he caught a fleeting glimpse of his comrade, who, with only two Jerries left to attack him now, was also fighting like a demon, hurling himself against those two Fokkers, blazing away at them.

Encouraged by this sight, Kirby became reckless. He pulled back his stick and zoomed straight towards his three allackers, trying to take them head-on. He should have realized the sheer folly of such a move, should have known what must happen. But, guided solely by blind rage, by a determination to fight it out to the last ditch, he didn't give a damn. Up he went, his motor roaring thunderously.

He saw their guns blaze in shrill unison, saw the smoky tracer streaking right down at him. *Crash!* The windshield in front of his face was shattered to bits, and the flying pieces of glass cut his cheeks painfully, while the wind that came rushing through flogged

him unmercifully. *Crack!* A strut shivered, collapsed in splinters. *Rat-tat-tat*. Again the Germans' guns blazed. And then it happened.

Kirby's Spad gave a mighty lurch, then see-sawed drunkenly. And as he looked, he saw, to his dazed horror, that half his top wing had been shot away! Broken brace-work and ripped canvas dangled grotesquely where the wing surface had been.

Like a madman, Kirby fought with the controls, tried to keep the plane up in spite of the smashed wing. But though the Spad was a stout ship, it was crippled too badly to hold up. It lurched and side-slipped. And then, as if in resignation, it nosed over, and the next thing Kirby knew he was hurtling downwards, plunging through space in a breathless, gagging tail-spin.

The three Germans, seeing him fall, decided that he was done for, and at once concentrated their attention on Carn, who was still putting up a terrific fight with those other two Fokkers. The three swooped to the aid of their comrades, guns spitting.

Kirby's Spad was still plunging dizzily towards the earth. Down, down, faster and faster, with the wind screaming through the flying wires, whipping at Kirby with a force that all but tore off his helmet. But still the Mosquito struggled with the controls, tried every trick that his experience in flying had taught him.

The ground was looming close now: a blurred mass of green was spinning giddily up at him. Trees. God, if he hit them——!

Desperate, he redoubled his efforts. Only a thousand feet from the earth now, plunging straight down towards those trees, hell-bent. Eight hundred feet. Wild sobs tore from his throat as he realized his utter helplessness. He was going to crash, crash in Germany. Closer and closer loomed those fatal tree-tops. They were rushing up at him with furious speed now. Five hundred feet, four hundred——

JUST how it happened he never knew. But suddenly, even as he had given up hope, that hurtling Spad yielded to his control. The giddy spinning stopped, changed to a straight and steep dive. And Kirby, employing his last atom of strength, performing the greatest bit of flying he had ever done, was pulling that crippled plane up, lifting her nose even as it seemed certain to plunge right into the trees.

The Spad, every strut screaming in shrill protest, lurched upwards, floundering like a drunken man trying to get to his feet. The shattered, dangling top

wing cracked and buckled until the ship was virtually reduced to a monoplane. Kirby used stick and rudder furiously to compensate for the lost wing surface, tried to balance the plane. His arms and legs were aching in every muscle from the tremendous strain, his face was covered with sweat despite the chilling rush of wind. Flying this ship was worse than riding a bucking broncho. The Spad staggered along, yawning and pitching, going constantly into stalling side-slips, threatening always to nose into the trees right below. It was losing altitude steadily, and Kirby knew there was no hope of keeping it in the air much longer. Indeed, it was incredible that it was able to fly at all.

And what about Carn? Despite his own wretched predicament, Kirby suddenly remembered his comrade. What ——had befallen Shorty? Quickly, he glanced upwards. And by a lucky coincidence, he looked at the right time.

Below the clouds, streaking hell-bent for the lines, was Shorty's Spad. And close on its tail, in relentless pursuit, were the five gray Fokkers. Carn had evidently found an opening to dive out, and he had turned tail and run for it. And Kirby could only hope against hope that his comrade would get away from those Jerries. With those enemy scouts so close behind him, peppering away at him, his chances looked slim, very slim indeed.

But Kirby's chances were slim too. The Spad, despite all his efforts, was floundering over the trees now, until its undercarriage seemed to be right in them. He couldn't possibly hold it up any longer. It was either a question of crashing into those trees, which would most certainly mean death, or of finding a place where he could make a forced landing, which would mean life, but capture by the Germans.

Hastily, he looked at the landscape about him. There was only one clearing that he could see. It was ahead of him, a bit to the left. With luck he might be ——able to make it.

But it was the clearing in which Travis had landed. He could see the squatting, camouflaged ship there, see the crowd of Jerries.

Torn by doubt, Kirby hesitated, hesitated even as his ship kept lurching lower. Should he try to land there? Though he did not know just what Travis was doing, he realized that his appearance might get his comrade into serious trouble.

Yet, what else was he to do? True, there was that road near the field, but he didn't see how he could get to it, not to mention bringing down his floundering

ship on the narrow highway. Besides, he would be so close to that field anyway that the crowd Travis was with were bound to find him.

But there was no time for dallying now. He must decide at once, choose between going down into the trees or landing on that field. And, his nature forbidding him to deliberately commit suicide, he reluctantly chose the field.

Once reaching his decision, he stuck to it. Again he fought with the floundering Spad, tried frantically to swing it over to the left. *R-r-r-ip!* Kirby's blood ran cold as he saw his lower wing grazing a tree-top, saw the canvas tearing. If it got caught——

It didn't get caught, however. And somehow he got that Spad headed in the correct direction, was approaching the field. Closer and closer he came, right overhead. He could see the Jerries clearly now, see their upturned faces as they stood rooted to the spot, staring in awe at the pathetic remnants of a ship which flew drunkenly above. But Kirby couldn't make out the lanky, khaki-clad figure of Travis down there. Well, he would see him soon enough.

HIS fingers hastily reached for the ignition switch, shut off the roaring engine. He whisked over the last tree-tops, just managing to spurn them with his undercarriage. Then he eased his stick forward, and was descending in a jerky, lop-sided glide, his broken wing drooping painfully low.

The Germans scurried like frightened rabbits to get out of the way. The Spad went lower, lower. It whisked right over the camouflaged plane which had been placed at the end of the field facing the wind, and then its nose began to dip precipitously. Again Kirby was employing all his skill, trying to prevent a crack-up. He pulled the stick all the way back, was holding it against his chest. Gently now, gently. The nose of the Spad lifted, but too slowly. Then——

A splintering crash. A dull, shivering impact. The groan of ripping fabric and cracking wood, the snapping of wires and struts. The whole world seemed to turn upside down, and Kirby was flung headlong with a violence which almost tore his safety-belt off.

The Spad, too unbalanced to land on level keel, even for such a skilled pilot as Kirby, had tripped on its wheels, to go somersaulting over and dig its nose into the ground. And when it came to rest, Kirby was hanging out of the cockpit head-first, held only by the belt.

He was unhurt, but dazed and bewildered.

At once, rough hands were unstrapping him, pulling him out. He heard the excited murmur of guttural voices, as he was dragged from under the ship. He was helped as he scrambled to his feet, and then he found himself in the middle of a ring of Germans, who stared at him with hostile curiosity, as though he were some dangerous beast just bagged in the hunt. They were covering him with revolvers. He glared back at them sullenly, then jerked his head around to look at his ship. And the sight of that wreck made him wonder that he was alive. The Spad was just a grotesquely twisted heap of junk.

Now, abruptly, the murmur of voices around Kirby ceased and a hush fell over the crowd of Germans, who were stiffening to attention. There came a sharp command from outside, and the soldiers moved aside, clearing a gap. And through this gap, followed by two Boche officers, came Travis.

The sight of his comrade brought a warm surge of joy to Kirby. He was so delighted to see a friend, and a best friend at that, among all these hostile strangers that his first impulse was to greet Travis with a shout of wild enthusiasm. But, as he looked at the other man, his tongue froze and the shout died in his throat.

Travis was looking straight at him but without a shadow of recognition. The eyes of the eldest Mosquito were stern and hostile, though his face was ashen white, his features tense, strained. Quickly Kirby realized that the lanky man didn't want the Germans to see that they knew each other. And though he had no idea what Travis, was really doing there or what he was, he trusted his comrade implicitly, and was willing to play the game. And so he faced the other American with the same sullen glare he had given his captors.

Travis walked up to him, and now he was averting his eyes from Kirby's as much as possible. He turned to the officers behind him, and spoke in fluent German:

"Another one of these Yankee pigs who call themselves flyers. Most probably he was attempting to spy upon us. Well, I presume we know how to deal with such vermin."

Kirby, who knew only a few words of German, couldn't understand what Travis was saying, but the unmistakable contempt, the blighting malice in his comrade's tone absolutely stunned him. There was no trace of the familiar, good-natured drawl which had always characterized Travis' speech.

Again the lanky man was speaking, barking out a terse order, "Search him!"

At once the soldiers were going through Kirby's

clothes, seizing his Colt, his roll-map, and a few other odds and ends. Travis kept directing them. It was obvious that he had absolute authority here, and it seemed incongruous to see all those Germans submitting humbly to a man dressed in American flying togs. Kirby couldn't understand it all.

TRAVIS took the articles that had been stripped from Kirby and, after a moment's consideration, handed them to one of the two officers. Then he confronted Kirby once more, and now he suddenly spoke in English.

"Where did you come from, swine?" he snapped, and his tone was icy.

Kirby looked at him in foolish bewilderment. He opened his mouth to reply, but he couldn't find any words.

An expression of rage came over And then, as if furious with impatience, Travis' face. "Answer me, you fool!" he deliberately struck Kirby full on the cheek with the back of his hand.

Kirby stiffened, and his fists clenched. For a second he saw red. The blow had not been very hard, but, coming from Travis, it had hurt. The humiliation was more than Kirby could bear. He wanted to shout out, wanted to demand an explanation.

But then he saw that look in Travis' eyes—a look more eloquent than actions or words. It was almost a beseeching look, asking him to hold, himself in. Yet, in ironic contrast to the look was that snarling voice of his:

"Now maybe you'll tell me where you came from."

Kirby wavered, torn between conflicting emotions. Then, in a voice which sounded strangely unnatural to him, he blurted, "I was shot down—Fokkers."

"Good!" Travis smiled with cold satisfaction, and the two German officers smiled too. Evidently they understood English.

Travis seemed lost in thought for a moment. Then he addressed the officers in German once more, this time in a low voice, as if he did not want Kirby to hear.

"I should like to examine this man before you take him away. As I said, it is my belief that he had been trying to spy on us." His voice lowered even more, almost to a whisper. "If he followed my ship across the lines, and watched me transact my business here, we cannot afford to let him live. We'll deal with him as we deal with all spies." A cruel smile played about his thin lips. "I have a way of making these Yankees talk, drawing them out." He turned to the soldiers again,

barked out another command. "Bring him along. Four of you can serve as escort." Then, accompanied by the two officers, he started walking across the field.

A moment later Kirby, escorted by four soldiers with rifles on their shoulders, was also crossing the field. They marched him all the way to the other end, right past the camouflaged plane which squatted there. Finally, just at the fringe of the forest, they halted. There was a rude shelter there, which consisted merely of a piece of canvas stretched to four tree-trunks. Under this shelter was a table, camp-chairs, and, on one of the trees, a field telephone.

Travis and the two officers were just outside, conversing with three other Germans whom Kirby saw were also officers. Travis turned as Kirby was brought up. Then, again, he was giving orders, speaking low enough to make sure that Kirby didn't hear:

"You four stay on guard, but keep far enough away to make him feel at ease. I want to get him to talk freely." Immediately, the four men were off, taking up posts along the edge of the field. Travis addressed the officers: "Gentlemen, you will have to excuse me for the moment. Will you wait for me by that wrecked plane? I'll be with you shortly."

The officers were soon walking off. Travis, an automatic in his hand, turned to Kirby, and spoke quite loudly:

"Get in that shelter, swine, and sit there." He signified one of the camp-stools with his revolver. The group of officers out on the field, hearing him speak, glanced around, then walked on.

Dumbly, Kirby sat down on the chair. The lanky Travis ducked to get under the shelter, and pulled up another stool. He sat at the table, opposite Kirby, and he kept the latter covered with his gun.

And so the two men who had been comrades for months and months, who had fought together, saved each other's lives innumerable times, were left alone, face to face. The nearest German was a good hundred feet away, out of earshot, though, like all the other Jerries on the field, he kept his eyes on the open shelter.

Travis' stern expression didn't change in the least, his eyes didn't flicker, and he kept his revolver trained unwaveringly upon Kirby. But there was certainly a change in his voice, as he began to speak, softly but tensely, "Confound it, man! Of all the miles and miles of green earth, why in hell did you have to pick this spot to crash in?"

AND instantly an overwhelming wave of relief

swept Kirby, for he knew that the man who spoke to him was the Travis he had always known. But he suppressed his joy, and following his comrade's example, did not betray anything by his expression.

"Hell, you don't think I crashed on purpose, do you?" he asked.

"No, but you must have been snooping around right over this field. I thought I saw some dog-fighting through a gap in the clouds. And that was Shorty those Huns were chasing?" Kirby nodded. "I thought so. Well—"

He broke off. "Damn them, they're watching closely as the devil! Got to show them something!" He rose, leaned over Kirby, and poked him savagely with the muzzle of his revolver. Then he bellowed out, "Damn you, you might as well talk, you dog!" And added, in a whisper: "*Look scared—for the luvva Pete!*"

Kirby obeyed, acted as frightened as he could. Travis sat down at the table once more, resumed their conversation. Now his tone was reproachful:

"Followed, me, didn't you? Well, I hope you're satisfied. You've certainly gotten us both into one hell of a mess! I've never been so damned nervous in all my life. Thought any minute that you'd give away the whole works."

"I almost did when you smacked me that time," Kirby confessed.

"Sorry about that, but I felt I had to do it. I wanted to keep these Jerries absolutely convinced that I was on the level. Don't you see the position I'm in? If I make one false move, or lift one finger to help you, my goose is cooked. I'd risk my neck to get you away, and I'd like to beat it with you right now, but I can't. I have to go on with this business until the jig's absolutely up. If I show my true colors, I can't get any more papers. True, I got the most valuable one of all this morning, but there may be more." Again he paused, this time to flourish his revolver threateningly.

"I'm afraid I don't quite get you," Kirby was saying, while he winced with wonderful realism. "You haven't told me yet what you're supposed to——"

"Never mind that!" Travis replied. "That's aside from the point. The main thing now is to get you out of here."

He sat silent for a minute, in fierce concentration. But all the time he kept flourishing that revolver, and Kirby responded accordingly. Difficult though it was, they had to keep the show going for the benefit of all those Germans out there.

Suddenly Travis, as if seized with an idea, jumped

up, and called out in German. A man came running over, saluted stiffly.

"Have my ship warmed up immediately!" Travis commanded, while he still kept his revolver pointed at Kirby, who sat silent, submissive. "I shall probably get orders to take off any minute. Tell them to clear away the wreckage out there, so it won't be in my way. And advise the other officers that I shall be finished here in another minute."

THE man saluted again, rushed off. And, a moment later, the field was stirring with feverish activity. Mechanics swarmed around the camouflaged plane, and its engine roared into life. Other men labored industriously to remove the ruins of Kirby's Spad.

Meanwhile, Travis, having reseated himself, was conveying his plan to Kirby in as few words as possible:

"The plane is only twenty-five yards from here. You'll tip this table, knocking me over. I'll yell, and jump up. Then you'll dash for the bus. I'll fire my gun over your head, and follow you so closely that they won't dare shoot at you for fear of hitting me. Run as fast as you can—my long legs will keep pace with you. As for the mechanics, they won't be any trouble. I'll be firing in their general direction, and they'll scatter away. You'll hop in the ship then and you'll have to jump in the wheel-chocks. Give her full throttle. The rest is up to you. Now what do you say?"

"I say that you're crazy," Kirby replied at once. "Do you think I'm going to take your plane and leave you stranded here? What kind of a louse do you take me for? Listen—we'll follow your idea up to the part where I start to run. Then I'll beat it into the woods and——"

"And run into the whole German army," Travis finished grimly. "That forest is lousy with Boche—every inch of it. Besides, do you realize you're twenty miles from the lines? Don't be an idiot. Never mind about me. They'll find me another plane all right from some Jerry 'drome. I have to stick around here anyway until I get orders to take off by this telephone."

"But I'm not going to run off with your ship and——" Kirby began again with stubborn firmness.

"Damn you, will you stop wasting time?" Travis could hardly help showing his nervous excitement now. "If we don't hurry, they'll surely be getting suspicious. Stop arguing now, and do as I said. Otherwise you'll only force me to throw up the works, because I won't leave this field with you in their hands. Any second now that phone will ring, and they'll tell

me to take off. You've got to get that plane away first. So hurry now. Tip the table. Go ahead!"

Kirby hesitated. God, how could he go through with the thing? Yet, after what Travis had said, how could he refuse to? Never before had he faced such a painful dilemma.

"Hurry man, for God's sake!" Travis pleaded with him. "Those Jerry officers are heading this way again!" His voice rose to an excited pitch. "Tip that table! They're coming!"

Sure enough, the group of officers were moving across the field, approaching rapidly. And then Kirby, realizing that he must act at once, if at all, gave in to Travis' will. Quickly he gathered himself for the great effort.

"All right, old man," he said huskily. "S'long and good luck!" His muscles tensed, like springs winding up. "Here goes!"

With a violent shove, he sent the table falling against Travis, who immediately tumbled backwards in the camp-stool. Then Kirby was on his feet, dashing out onto the field. He heard Travis' piercing yell, then the shrill crack of his comrade's revolver. The Germans heard it too. The group of officers walking across the field stopped dead in their tracks, then, grasping the situation, started hurrying over. The four soldiers on guard also sprang to action, advanced with rifles leveled. Kirby ran as fast as he could, and now, jerking his head over his shoulder, he saw Travis galloping madly behind him. *Crack! Crack!* Again the lanky Mosquito's automatic spat, and the bullets sang so close that Kirby feared his comrade would accidentally kill him. Travis had to fire close, had to make a pretense of trying to shoot accurately.

The plane was right ahead of Kirby now—in a second he'd be up to it. He literally hurled himself forward. The alarm had spread throughout the field by this time, and the whole mob of Jerries were swarming out, rushing to stop the escaping Yank. They did not dare to fire, however, for Travis faithfully kept running just a few feet behind Kirby.

As Kirby came right up to the plane the mechanics, who had stood gaping stupidly, gathered enough wits to make a confused rush towards him. But Travis, carefully shifting his running course so that Kirby was right between him and those Jerries, blazed away in their direction, and they scattered in frantic terror to escape from being hit. And Kirby was up to the fuselage of the ship, was clambering into the cockpit.

Travis could not help catching up to him now, and

the oldest Mosquito, realizing that the whole crowd was watching him, and that he could not possibly miss Kirby if he fired, cleverly shook his gun as if it wouldn't shoot, as if he had run out of cartridges. With a loud curse, he threw the pistol away, then hurled himself at Kirby as the latter was getting into the cockpit, and made a pretense of trying to pull him out. Kirby pretended to be warding him off as he plopped down in the seat. He heard Travis' voice, shrilling in his ear:

"Hurry, old man! They're all around you. For God's sake, get off." And the lanky man's hand darted for the throttle, turned it on full. The engine burst into a series of deafening detonations, and the whole ship rocked and trembled. Meanwhile the swarm of Jerries were closing in on all sides. Every rifle was trained on that cockpit, and Travis suddenly realized that as soon as he stopped shielding Kirby those Jerries would plug him like a rat before he moved a foot.

THERE was only one way to stop them, and Travis, risking his neck to save his comrade, took the desperate chance. As the camouflaged ship, its propeller whirling furiously, bounced crazily over those wheel-chocks, starting to move across the field, the lanky man still pretending to be trying to pull Kirby from his seat, clung to that fuselage with all his strength. Fear gripped Kirby as he saw his comrade being dragged along, and for a second he was so confused that he almost turned the throttle down. But Travis yelled in his ear:

"Hurry! Hurry! Give her all she's got!"

And Kirby obeyed. The ship gathered up speed, went shooting along the ground, bouncing and swaying. The crowd of Jerries broke confusedly to get out of its path. Its tail was lifting now. But Travis, still playing his part as a shield that kept them from filling Kirby with lead, clung on desperately, clung on until the plane was sweeping into the air. Then, with a cheerful yell "S'long old fellow!" he let go, and Kirby saw him drop to the ground, saw him struggling to his feet.

With a heavy heart he pulled back his stick and climbed away from that infernal spot. Bullets zipped up at him, but he did not notice them. He could only think of Travis, left down there without a plane, among that crowd of Boche.

God, he couldn't go home and leave his comrade. Something might happen. He must hang around awhile, despite the fact that by hanging around before he had caused a lot of trouble.

He climbed higher, soared past the strata of clouds. Anxiously he scanned the sky to make certain that no enemy planes were in sight. There were none—not a speck dotted that translucent blue. And Kirby swept down above a big cloud again, and for the third time was circling to watch the activity on the field. He had to trust to his naked eyes this time, for they had taken his glasses. But it was full bright morning now, and the air was crystal clear. He could see well enough.

It took him only a moment to distinguish the tiny, khaki-clad figure of Travis. He was standing in a group of officers and soldiers, gesticulating excitedly, as if he were telling them what had happened. Kirby saw them pointing skywards, saw them shake their heads.

But then he saw something else.

Out of the shelter where that 'phone was located a man came dashing. He rushed towards the group on the field, waving his arms wildly.

The tiny figure which was Travis wheeled around. The others seemed startled for the moment, stood frozen. And before they could move Travis was running madly, darting across the field in the direction of the road. The Germans, recovering their wits almost at once, rushed after him in furious pursuit.

HORROR gripped Kirby then, and he groaned aloud. They were after Travis. Evidently they had discovered his real identity, doubtless through the very 'phone message he had expected. And if they caught him, it meant a firing squad.

With savage frenzy, Kirby plunged his stick forward, and went screaming down in a mad dive, throttle wide-open. He sobbed out wild curses at himself for taking Travis' plane: if he had left the ship his comrade might have got away with it. But this way, with only his legs to rely upon, Travis wouldn't have a chance. They'd catch him.

Like hell they would! Suddenly a fierce, gripping determination came over Kirby, and his eye lighted with wild defiance. They weren't going to get his comrade—not while he was alive and still able to help Travis. He'd stop them, the lousy Heinies!

Cursing and sobbing in turn, he kept rushing downwards. Once more the earth was looming up below, rushing up with terrific speed. His view of the field was blurred, but he strained his eyes to see what was happening. Where was Travis? He wasn't on the field. There he was! On the road now. He was galloping down that highway, and the Germans, swarming out of the trees, were dashing after him, firing their guns.

Kirby kicked the rudder-bar, changed the course of his dive. Down he plunged, straight for the road. And at the same time he was shouting crazily, hysterically, beneath the roar of the engine:

“Go on, old man! Run for it, damn you! Run for it! Just keep far enough ahead so I can mow ‘em down and——” He broke off, with a cry of despair.

Travis had dropped. He was hit. Slowly, as the Germans rushed right up, the lanky man struggled to his feet. He got his footing, and gamely tried to run ahead. But he was limping.

And, as Kirby was sweeping into range overhead, starting to flatten out, the crowd of Germans caught up to Travis, surrounded him. And Kirby, whose thumbs had been on his triggers, ready to send down a furious hail of lead from the twin guns of his ship, held his fire confusedly. He could not shoot now, for fear of killing Travis.

A feeling of panic came over him. Already they must be searching Travis for that paper. And saving that paper, Kirby realized, was as important as saving Travis himself.

Desperately, determined to try any measure, the Mosquito nosed his ship and went plunging straight down at the whole crowd. He couldn't fire, but he hoped he could bluff them—give Travis another break.

Sure enough the Germans, seeing the monster roaring right down for them, dropped to the ground in terror. And as Kirby pulled back his stick to lurch out of the dive, just above the earth, he saw Travis again struggle to his feet, try to escape. But it was futile. As soon as the plane had climbed away, the Germans had surrounded the limping man again.

Furiously, Kirby shot up and over in a breathless Immelmann turn, to get above the crowd again. What to do? He racked his brain with a thousand conjectures as he swung around. Then a wild hope rose within him.

Could he work the trick? Often the Three Mosquitoes had mischievously worked it on each other at the ‘drome. One of them would be on the ground, and the other would do the stunt to give him a scare. If Travis remembered, if he played his part——

Again Kirby plunged the stick forward. This time he did not dive straight for the men. Instead he swooped down behind them. Closer and closer, until he was right between the trees which lined the road on either side, until his wheels were just whisking along that highway. Careful now—easy.

The camouflaged plane went streaking down that

road, straight towards the mob. The Germans saw it coming, charging for them, and, realizing that they'd be run down, scattered in terrified haste. They jumped off the road, seeking shelter in the trees. And as the mob dispersed, Kirby watched with drawn breath. Would Travis understand?

Travis did. As the last Germans scurried away, Kirby saw the huddled figure of his comrade, still remaining on the road. Travis remembered the stunt.

Encouraged, Kirby rushed on with new confidence. The Germans were firing at him from the trees, and firing at Travis too, and the bullets were whining unhealthily close.

On rushed the plane, lurching and swaying, threatening to get caught on those trees. The huddled figure on the road loomed before Kirby. Now——

With his heart in his mouth, he jammed the stick forward, put his nose down. And, almost right in front of Travis, the wheels of the ship struck the ground with a violent impact which sent the plane bounding upwards. And Kirby bounced right over his comrade, bounced over him as he had done in fun so many times before.

He struck the road again on the other side, and furiously dug his tail-skid into the ground to bring the plane to a halt. The ship was slowing down, rolling to a stop. Quickly, Kirby glanced back. Travis was coming. The lanky Mosquito, with that plane in sight, almost forgot his wounded leg, and was putting every ounce of his strength into his mad dash.

BUT now the Germans were swarming out of their shelter, to resume the pursuit. And though Travis was valiantly forcing himself to run fast, he could not run faster than they did. He was still about twenty-five feet from the plane, and they were almost up to him. They were not firing directly at him., but over his head. Evidently they were certain they would catch him alive.

Again Kirby shouted wildly at his comrade: “Come on, Trav old scout, you'll make it! Hurry up!”

And Travis redoubled his efforts. Ten feet to go now—but with his bad leg he couldn't just leap for it. The Germans were getting closer and closer, rushing up behind him, demanding his surrender. It looked hopeless.

And then a cry of wild joy broke from Kirby's throat. For in that last breathless second, a plane suddenly came streaking down from above. It was a Spad. And its pilot was Shorty Carn.

The second Mosquito had evidently managed

to elude those Fokkers. He had come back, and one glance was enough to show him how things stood on the ground. Without hesitating, he was diving straight down in front of the Boche who pursued Travis.

*Rat-tat-tat.* His guns blazed with thunderous triumph, and scattered death throughout the German ranks. Like a winged fury, he kept swooping on that crowd, peppering away unmercifully.

The Three Mosquitoes were re-united again, working together in their usual co-ordinated way. And while Carn held the Boche back, Travis brought himself to the plane. He grabbed a strut, and was hoisting himself onto the wing. Kirby re-opened his throttle, and the ship was moving forward. Travis, gripping a strut for support, huddled on the wing, next to the fuselage; for only thus could a single-seater accommodate an extra passenger. Kirby leaned out to give him a reassuring pat, and shouted:

"Think you can hold on, old horse? I'll fly carefully."

"I'm O.K.," Travis replied. "Can you get to that field I got this ship from?"

"I'll try," Kirby yelled, as they swept off the ground. Gently, so as not to throw Travis off, he climbed towards the west. And a moment later Carn, leaving the rest of those Boche, climbed after them.

Twenty minutes later, guided by Travis' directions, Kirby carefully swung down and landed on the little secret field across the lines. Carn landed too, though there was scarcely room for another ship.

A crowd of doughboys and mechanics received them warmly. There was a Red Cross man there, and he bandaged up Travis' leg. Then all of them saluted, as a stern figure, escorted by two aides, approached the flyers. He was a brigadier-general, and Kirby knew he was the head of the intelligence corps in this sector.

"Well, sir," Travis told him sadly, "the jig's up. Someone managed to get through information about me, and they almost nabbed me. By luck, my comrades here were in that vicinity, and rescued me."

The general nodded slowly. "It's unfortunate," he began, and then put a reassuring hand on Travis' shoulder. "But it's all right. You've done more than we hoped for. Of course, if we could have gotten that paper to-day, that most valuable paper—"

Travis' eyes lit up. Carefully, he drew a packet from his tunic, handed it to the high officer. "I guess you mean this, sir," he said casually, but not without pride.

The general's eyes also brightened. He beamed. But though he was fairly bursting with admiration for Travis, he restrained himself. It was bad policy

to shower a soldier with laudations, when, in a strict sense, he was merely carrying out his duty.

Nevertheless he did say, "Good work, lieutenant! I'll see that it's properly recorded. You've helped us a lot."

"And now, sir," Travis put in, "since it's all over, may I explain to these two old maids what I was doing? They won't give me a minute's rest until I do."

"You may tell them. There's no advantage keeping it secret any longer."

As soon as the general had left, Kirby and Carn cornered Travis eagerly.

"Come on, out with it," Kirby demanded. "Give us the yarn."

"Not now," Travis taunted them. "Wait until we get back, and can sit around Papa Renier's estaminet with a few drinks."

AND when, later, the Three Mosquitoes sat at a secluded table in the musty bar-room, with plenty of cognac before them, Travis gave them the story.

"It all began," the lanky Mosquito told them, in his old, familiar drawl, "on the day you thought I was getting my new Spad. I was getting it, but my real mission was to answer a call from intelligence headquarters. The brass-hat you saw before was the one who talked to me."

"They had just caught the chief of German spies in our sector, the man who directed all the other secret agents working here. They had captured him on the field we just left, as he was about to take off in a ship like the one I just flew. It seemed that for months the Jerries had been using that field, and we didn't know a thing about it. The ship was so cleverly fixed up that it might have been either Allied or German, and it got by both sides because the pilot was always able to give the countersigns."

He paused to gulp down another drink, and his comrades followed suit.

"This German chief," he resumed, "had been flying across the lines to get his orders for the spies throughout our sector. It was the safest means of communication, because he did it in person, without relying on any wires. He'd meet his general on the road over there, get the paper written in code, and tell them the latest news. And the Germans had orders to bow to his authority. When he got back, he'd communicate with the spies here by 'phone or other means, giving them their instructions."

Again he refilled his glass, and the three silently drank to each other.

“It happened that we were able to seize the spy, the plane, and the field so quietly that nobody knew about it. Intelligence decided to take advantage of that. They had gotten all the facts they needed from the spy, who broke down under cross-examination and threw up the works. So why shouldn’t they get a man, they figured, a man who resembled the spy enough to get by, who could fly a plane and speak German fluently, who in short could take this fellow’s place. All of which seemed a very difficult arrangement. But intelligence seems to know how to go about things. And, being born lucky, I proved to be the bird who looked enough like the spy to be his twin brother, and I could speak German better than any Dutchman, and fly—at least, after a fashion.

“And so,” he said sadly, as he swallowed another drink, “they picked on me. My job was to get those papers whenever that Heinie general over there wanted to give them to me. In return I had to give him the news—and, boy, what news I gave him. The Jerries must be wondering why we’re attacking them so successfully, and why they can’t surprise us.

“I’d turn the paper over to our intelligence chief, who would keep it. Then, through some other flukey trick, our agents would communicate the orders on the paper, which they were able to decode, to the proper spies. Do you see the point? We’d give them their real orders, tell them where to move and so on, and in that way we’d have the drop on every one of them, and were moving towards cleaning up the entire system. It was great while it lasted, but the Germans were bound to get suspicious after awhile, when they kept losing valuable agents here and getting all messed up by the information I delivered. “On my trip previous to this,

I was told that I must get busy here, see what was the matter. Then I was ordered to return to-day, and get a paper giving orders to the largest number of spies they had ever issued instructions to at the same time. That’s what made that paper so valuable. Well, you fellows know the rest.”

HE SMILED, and poured himself another drink. The strong liquor seemed to be taking hold of him, and Kirby and Carn felt it too. Travis began to grow more animated. “That’s my story and I’ll stick to it,” he said, and pounded the table. “That’s what happened to me, fellers, and it’s God’s truth.”

“Ish a damn good shtory,” Kirby said, slapping him on the back. “And I believe it, old pal. I don’t care what anyone shaysh, but I believe you. I shtick by you.”

Shorty Carn looked up, a bit sleepily. He blinked his eyes.

“Horse-collar!” he grunted sadly. “You’re both—*hic*—drunk.”

“But you’re my pal, aren’t you?” Travis asked, with sudden anxiety. “You’re both my pals, aren’t you? Saved my life. True friend. Friend in need!”

“Shure, we’re all friends,” Kirby boomed. “H’ray for ush! We’re birdsh of a feather shtuck together.”

“I thought so all the time,” Travis replied, brightly. Then, suddenly, he seemed to remember something. “But say, I was going to tell the story of what I was doing. You know, how I was supposed to be a spy.”

“Thash right,” Kirby exclaimed. “Tell ush.”

“Yes—*hic*,” Carn put in. “Tell ush.”

Travis took a long breath.

“Well,” he began, “you see it was this way——”

