



SKY HERDIN' HEINIE

by **FREDERICK G. PAINTON**

They called the German ace a Sky-Jinx and said his plane couldn't be shot down. But Midget, the cowboy-flier, didn't believe in jinxes and he swore to kill the man who had shot down his friend and old range buddy.

THE MESQUITE MIDGET finished lacing his shoes, tip-toed across the bunk-shack and leaned over to tap a sleeping youth on the shoulder. But something held his hand poised, and a gentle, sweet look swept across his homely, narrow face. The boy—for he was hardly nineteen—rolled sleepily. He had fine, handsome features, smoothed and angelic by sleep, and his curly golden rumped hair was like a frame. The Midget regarded him tenderly.

Jim Sills' boy! For a second the Midget's mind left the war, the rumble of the guns, and returned to his own 'teens when he rode herd for the Bar-bee. That was before Old Man Sills went into the sheep business. But it was Old Man Sills who had saved the Midget's life that time the side-winder had sprung, then rattled. And he thought of the many times he and this very lad—young Harv Sills—had ridden the range together.

He reached down and shook the boy.

"Daylight patrol, Harv," he said gently.

The boy's eyes popped open, wide blue eyes, hazy with sleep. But as the Midget repeated the words, they suddenly became wideawake and glittering with excitement.

"Right with you, Midge," he cried, and as the ex-cowpuncher finished dressing, the boy tumbled into his flying clothes in record time.

Midge thought of the note in his pocket, the note from Old Man Sills. "Keep an eye on the boy, Midge," it read. "See that he plays the game, and teach him something about cutting out these Heinies."

Midge looked affectionately at the stalwart pink body of the boy. By Jimpers, he'd be as big a man as his daddy when he got his growth.

Meantime, Harvey Sills, preparing for his first trip over the lines, chattered volubly, asking a score of questions.

"What's it like out there, Midge? Think I'll get by? They gave me a good rating at Issoudun; and I passed aces in the machine gun school."

Midget's real name was Billy Sanders, but he was a short, wiry man, so bowed that he seemed to walk on the outside of his soles. Uncle Jack had given him the nickname when he once remarked: "Land o' Goshen, the lad's a midget. He ain't knee-high tuh the mesquite."

Midget slipped on his leather helmet before replying.

"You'll be all right, son," he drawled. "We're flyin' in formation, and I'll be right behind you. Just stick to

the saddle and watch. Von Steffen's got his circus on this front, and Harv, he's one tough hombre."

"You mean I won't get a chance to fight?"

Midge smiled grimly, but an admiring light flickered in his eyes. A chip off the old block. "They'll be plenty of chance of that, Harv. But not this time, I hope. Ain't no schools and no theories gonna teach you what to do when a Fokker gets on yer tail with his guns popping. You just sit tight and see how it's done."

He paused for a moment, then continued. "Just one word of advice from me, old timer. Don't pass up a pal in distress. Stick to him, no matter what happens. If he's shot down, get the guy that done it; an' if he's helpless, protect him all you can. Remember that."

The boy nodded. "I get you. Teamwork—just like out on the range."

"That's right," said Midge. "Stick to yer pard. If you should run away and he got back it might be—well, embarrassing."

Harvey Sills laughed a high-pitched laugh. "I won't run away, Billy Sanders, and you know it."

THEY walked to the door and instinctively Midget's arm went around the boy's waist. Just as unconsciously, Harv did the same, only his arm passed around the diminutive Midget's shoulders.

"Gee, it's great to be making my first trip with you, Midge," he said. "It's pretty swell to have an ace—a real ace—show you how it's done. You won't have any reason to be ashamed of me."

"I know it, son," replied Midge, softly. "Just remember, stick in formation and watch Chickering's wings for signals."

A faint, mystical light, presaging the arrival of day, painted the hangars a bleak gray and softly touched the scene with mysterious shadows. Clouds hung low, filled with swirling holes. A ceiling, Midge judged, of some six thousand feet. Tricky flying weather, especially with those holes.

B Flight Spads were on the line, mechanics warming them up. The air shivered to the thunder of exhausts and the pungent aroma of burnt castor oil was everywhere. As the motors roared a deep-throated bellow the tiny single-seaters, the acme of combat planes, strained at the chocks while the prop-blasts filled the air with flying grass and dust.

It was the dawn of October 9, and the second phase of the Argonne was just beginning.

First Lieutenant Bennett Chickering called his pilots together.

"Our communications are jammed," he explained. "There are damn few roads into this morass and those are simply littered with traffic. It's so bad that even ambulances are side-tracked for ammo and food. Our big job is to keep Von Steffen or any of his sky-jinxers from doing any road-strafting. But the main thing is to watch my signals. He's got a big circus and he's tricky. So we won't break formation unless it's emergency, see?"

Every one saw. Midge had watched Harv Sills drink in these instructions for his first combat patrol over the lines. But when the little gathering broke up, Midge just shook the boy's hand and walked to his own plane.

Jimmy, the mechanic, sat in the cockpit gradually revving up the motor. Presently he cut the throttle and the engine tick-tocked sweetly.

"Sounds swell, Jimmy" said Midge. He pulled out his cigarettes and he and the mechanic got a light off the same match.

"Is swell, lootebant," said Jimmy. Jimmy was proud of his pilot. He had said: "I told you so," so many times to Skcets, his assistant, that Skeets finally in despair said: "Cork it up—I admit your sun-fishin' cow-puncher is a real flier."

So Jimmy saw to it that Midget's ship was always up to snuff when the time came to take off.

"Who's on Lootenant Sill's ship, Jimmy?" asked Midge, fastening his helmet.

"Johnson. Good man. Careful."

Midge climbed into the cockpit and fastened his safety belt.

"Keep an eye on her yourself, will you? He's a—he's a friend of mine."

"I sure will, sir,"

CHICKERING'S motor sang a full-throated roar and shot down the field in a swirl of dust. One after another followed. Midget adjusted his goggles, motioned for the chocks to be pulled away, and blipped the engine. He pulled out, was swung into the wind, then gave her the gun. Down the field roared the Spad while Midget held her nose down until she acted like a fractious bronc. Then he zoomed her in a climbing turn that brought up the rear of the flight. At six thousand feet, seemingly skimming right under the gray clouds, the flight went into a V-shaped formation and turned north toward the lines.

Below them in the wooded fastness of the Bois d'Argonne and in the wildly rolling hills along the Meuse, a titanic battle was in progress. The

Germans guarding their jugular vein, the Mezieres Railroad, were throwing their last reserves against the indomitable thrust of the blooded American divisions. Their best jagstaffels sought to hold air supremacy.

Of them all, Eric von Steffen and his "Checkered Circus" were the most dangerous. A pupil of Von Richtofen, he had mastered all the tactics of air-fighting and added some tricks of his own. He was called "the sky-jinx" by the Americans, for it seemed he bore a charmed life; and he seemed always successful in luring American aviators into traps where they were shot down like clay pigeons. While ganging on lone eagles was while his favorite device, that did not mean he would not fight. He would, as forty-six Allied planes to his credit showed.

Midget gazed over the side and behind. Against the dawn three American blimps swayed like sleepy elephants. To their right the silvery Meuse gleamed like molten quick-silver. Shells burst in the vast stretches of woods leaving white smoke, like steam from a locomotive. Beyond the Meuse American shells answered. Jagged lines of trenches cut across what open ground there was; and as the flight passed the last of these, black shrapnel bursts bloomed suddenly like poisoned roses.

At Cunel the flight swung west toward Landres St. George. It was just then that the Midget spotted a German Rumpler tearing along, evidently on a photographic mission. It was about a thousand feet below them. Midget thought of the low ceiling and smiled grimly. A decoy, of course. Above somewhere hung Boche Fokkers waiting to pounce on the pilot who sought to crash the Rumplcr.

He looked toward Chickering. To his surprise Chickering dropped behind toward Midge. The latter instantly surmised what was up. Chickering knew it was a trick, a trap, a decoy, but still he could not afford to have photographs of the disorganized American communication lines in German hands.

The flight commander wiggled his wings, and Midge could see his hand pointing. He wanted Midge to make the dive, the rest to hold formation and stave off the circus.

"Well, old girl," muttered Midge. "This is our busy day. Come on."

HE PUSHED the stick forward, motor wide open. The Spad tore down the air-hill like a mad thing, her wires shrilling like tortured ghosts. Midget licked his lips and watched the "nob" in the rear seat of the

Rumpler. The observer was working over a Spandau. Clearly Midge would have to attack from underneath.

A slight pressure on the joy-stick and he veered for position. As he did so he turned his head.

Another Spad was diving just behind him. To his horror, he saw it was Harv. The brave young idiot was covering Midget's tail!

"Go back, go back," shrieked Midget, but he might just as well have had no voice, for it was drowned in the infernal roar of his steep dive.

"My God, old Sky-jinx will drop on him—flowers!" babbled Midge. But there was nothing he could do. He was helpless. By now he was under the Rumpler. He yanked back on the stick, banked and put the Spad's nose squarely at the under-carriage of the Boche.

Up she climbed like an elevator.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! went the Midget's guns, and he saw the tracers glinting like sparks, flash into the long fuselage. He dropped off on one wing to keep away from that dangerous Spandau.

He got a fleeting glimpse of the faithful Harv banking to keep him protected. Then the next instant the air seemed filled with diving, banking planes. Black crosses intermingled with the red white and blue circles. Checkered planes against orange Spads. The Boche had come to their baited trap to collect the pelfs.

An invisible knife began sheering the fabric of his center-piece and he dove. Bullets smacked into his instrument board and he banked sharply. Something clawed at his boot-tops; leaden fingers reaching for him. And before the whirling arc of his prop checkered planes loomed briefly, then vanished. But each time one appeared his Browning chattered. He wormed in and out like an eel, looking for Harv. He must find Harv. In a dogfight like this the poor kid was doomed.

And it was all his own fault, telling the kid to protect his pal. A surge of emotion filled him; he cried aloud in rage and his Brownings barked viciously. A black nob flung up two arms and a checkered Fokker lunged down the sky for the brown carpet below.

He saw the lad diving out from under a blood-red Fokker.

Von Steffen! The Sky-jinx himself!

A whoop broke from Midge's lips as he banked sharply and lunged directly for the arch-enemy. But even as he did so, as if by pre-arranged signal, a checkered Fokker cut in, another dropped out of the sky and enemy tracers marched up his fuselage. Midge zoomed over the intercepting plane and maneuvered to drive Von Steffen's red ship away.

But Von Steffen was a fighter, and he avoided the dash, the while two other planes deliberately broke from their other antagonists and charged blindly at Midge.

"No wonder he's a jinx," yelled Midge, beside himself with fury and anxiety. "The rest of his hombres protect him."

He prayed for luck; he babbled hopes for Harv and sought to break through to where Von Steffen was trailing Harvey Sills like a big fish chasing a smaller one.

Midge at length, he knew not how, broke through, and dove down the air, his Brownings aimed for the black nob in the Red Fokker.

A horrible moan broke from him. His bulging eyes were filled with agony. A tell-tale wisp of smoke broke from Harv's motor. A flicker of yellow flame leaped back. Then others, then more, until the whole front of the Spad was a mass of furious flame.

MIDGE'S eyes went back to that black nob. He fired a burst at long range, saw them miss, the next instant Von Steffen Immelmanned and was out of his reach.

"Oh, Harv, Harv!" cried Midge. He felt his heart was breaking. The flaming Spad was already starting its last slide down the sky. In the midst of the smoke and flame, he saw the conscious figure of Harv. Old Jim Sills' boy, diving to earth in a flaming coffin.

Even as he watched, the black figure straightened in the cockpit. The boy's hand went out in a wave of farewell, a jaunty wave, a gallant gesture. Then the next instant a black dot dropped like a plummet, a mile and a half plunge through space.

Midget turned away his contorted face.

Ages later, it seemed, a furious rage that caused him to howl and swear and dive recklessly at those checkered devils, sent him tearing back to the fight. He tried always for the red fiend, the Mephistopheles who had sent Harv plunging to death.

But Von Steffen escaped him that day.

The mess of B Flight was drearily quiet that night. No gay chatter, no planning of parties. There were two vacant seats, and out there in the wilderness of the Mouse valleys were smashed bodies of comrades.

Midget came in quietly, his face pale, his leather flying coat thrown habitually over his shoulders. His heart seemed a lump of lead. His eyes smarted from the unshed tears, his mind shuddered at that last sight of Harv Sills going to his death. Even the fact that four

Fokkers had made their last dive could not make up for the loss of Harv. And the sickening realization that the boy had died trying to protect Midge's tail would haunt him for many a long day.

After dinner Chickering approached him quietly, and flung a light arm around his shoulder.

"A tough break, Midge," he said. "I'll write his father and tell him how it happened."

Midge came suddenly out of his abstraction and turned quickly on the flight commander.

"Don't do it—please," he said. "Not yet. I-I couldn't have Old Jim know the lad is down and the hombre that sent him is still flyin'. Gimme a chance to get that lousy red devil."

Chickering pondered, then shook his head. "He's a jinx—a sky-jinx, Midge. And it might mean you—you, too."

Midge shrugged impatiently. "What would that matter as long as this jinx goes, too? Just a day or so. You don't have to rush, do you? Give us a chance."

Chickering sighed. He knew the thoughts within Midge's head. He had lost a friend once, too. That's why he didn't make any, now.

"All right," he assented reluctantly. "Today's Wednesday. I'll wait till Saturday. And for God's sake, don't be a fool. This chap's a jinx—and there's a war on, you know."

Midget nodded, but he did not see Chickering's clean-cut face; he was seeing a blood-red Fokker bursting into flames. "I'll remember—and thanks."

Slowly he made his way to the cubicle that he and Harv had occupied. There had been delay and the lad's trunk locker was still there, lettered in blue on top: "2nd Lieutenant Harvey Sills, A.S.S.R.C., Barbee, Arizona." A few clothes still hung carelessly around, just as he had light-heartedly left them. A lump came into Midge's throat, his eyes sparkled with unshed tears, tears that would not fall until the score had been settled.

"I'll get him, kid," he vowed brokenly. "As sure as you played the game, I'll play it to the last draw."

THE MIDGET had heard the nickname Sky-Jinx on the lips of the other flyers; but he never had seriously thought of the German ace as bearing a charmed life. Now, however, he began to learn something of the luck that attended the enemy—the luck and the fighting courage that, combined, had earned this man his nickname.

Three times Midge met that terror of the skies in

personal combat and three times he failed to bring him down. He raged and cursed at his luck, but railing, he knew, did little but relieve his feelings.

The first meeting with Von Steffen came the very next day after Midge had vowed to Harv's memory that he would get Von Steffen. He had sighted three planes and was diving at them when an Archie burst had put his motor out of control.

Back at the airdrome he cursed valiantly "Out of one-half of one per cent of hits for those accursed Anti-Aircrafts I had to be one—then of all times."

"You'll believe in the jinx now, perhaps," said Chickering.

But Midget leaped to his feet, eyes blazing, "I'll get him tomorrow or hit the carpet in chunks," he swore.

Next day he broke away from his patrol and was flying to the west when suddenly his instrument board whanged amid flying glass. He veered desperately to see Von Steffen slipping off on a wing. And just as Midge got his sights on his enemy, his gun jammed! Von Steffen swung about but no burst broke from his gun.

"His gun jammed too!" shrieked Midge. "This jinx ain't all one way."

Von Steffen pulled a wicked looking automatic and fired at close range, as Midge slipped quickly to get out of range. Then the German made for his own lines. One of his bullets had nearly hit Midge.

Cursing to himself, Midget swore that next time he would not be caught without his own six shooter that he had packed all the way from Arizona, together with plenty of ammunition for it. He oiled it up and fitted it to a shoulder holster as soon as he returned.

And then came the third encounter. Midge was with his patrol when they mixed in a hot dogfight. Midge spotted the blood red ship of his antagonist an made for it, but suddenly the *pat-pat-pat* of Spandaus came from behind him, A bullet clanged off the Browning breach and then tracers glinted into his motor!. A deluge of hot oil, a splintered propellor! Midge's language was not equal to the occasion, although he gave of his best. He jockeyed the motorless Spad to a fair landing spot near Epinonville, although she dug in her wheels and flopped on him. Luckily the ship did not take fire.

But his thoughts were not of the Spad. Suppose any of the others shot the Jinx down! For once he hoped and prayed that the Boche would escape. To get that hombre was *his* job.

Two hours later he faced Chickering; over the mess table. They were alone.

"So you didn't get him," said Midge in ill-concealed satisfaction.

"Get hell!" exploded Chickering furiously. "That chap's got a charmed life. I swear I barked up and down his back fit to sink him with lead—and he got away."

"Gimme Hornsby's plane in the mornin, will you?"

"Today is Saturday," said Chickering ominously. "Aren't you satisfied? Next thing you know I'll be writing to your mother."

"That'll be jake with me," said the Midget grimly, "So long as I take that jinx with me."

"Well, I disapprove." Chickering spoke sharply, for he was roiled by the afternoon's events. "You've had your chance. I'm writing to Sill's people tonight."

CONSTERNATION was printed on the little cow-puncher's face. "Wait another day," he begged. "Just another day. My God, Chickering, you can't know what this means to me. I know old Jim. Think of telling him his kid's shot down and I ain't sunk the side-winder that done it. Just another day—"

"No," interrupted Chickering firmly. "I've given you more chances now than I should. This isn't a personal war."

Midget was in despair. But he saw words had no effect. "Well, then," he said, "lemme write the letter. I know old Jim well. Lemme write the letter. I kin do it."

Chickering reflected on this. Such unpleasant duties usually devolved upon the flight commander. But at the same time this was an exceptional case in that the Midget was a friend of the family.

"All right," he said at length. "But do it tonight. First thing you know the War Department announcement will arrive first."

"I'll write tonight," agreed Midget.

"And no more solo stuff. Dawn patrol at 5:45 tomorrow."

Midge slowly retraced his steps to his cubicle. In writing the letter to Jim Sills with Von Steffen still alive, he was confessing to defeat. Jim might forgive him, but he never would forgive himself. The vision of that last gallant gesture would haunt him and reproach him so long as the tricky German was not crashed. Especially when he, Midget, was failing to live up to the creed of air-conduct the observance of which cost the boy his life.

Reluctantly he got out paper and pen and set himself to the composition of a letter. But as he gazed at the smooth white paper the words would not come.

Instead he saw Harv and his flaming Spad, the last wave of the hand, the hurtling kicking figure. And this faded into a picture of the evil grin of the Sky-jinx, Von Steffen. He gritted his teeth, then lapsed into a train of thought that lasted nearly an hour. When he aroused himself from the lethargy, he had made a momentous decision.

Words now came, slowly to be sure, for writing was neither flying nor bronc-busting, but he got them down with frequent bites on his tongue. Then he put the missive in an envelope, sealed it, marked it O.K. for the censor and signed his initials. But he did not mail it. Instead he put it under a tube of shaving cream on his little shelf. Then he went to bed.

In the bustle of getting the flight off next morning at dawn, Chickering failed to ask Midget about the letter, for which the little, bow-legged cow-puncher was fervently thankful. He didn't like to lie, but he knew the letter still reposed under the tube of shaving cream.

It was Sunday, the 13th! The letter would be posted that night, though possibly the Midget would not be the one to hand it to the squadron adjutant. Sunday, the 13th! Midget smiled grimly as he juggled the stick to keep his position in the formation. Maybe jinxes didn't hold on the 13th!

The day was clear, one of those reported in the Communiques as "visibility excellent." A bright sun shone, and even as the V-shaped flight struck the hazy front lines of the new push, German AA began dotting the sky with black shrapnel bursts. Chickering moved up to fourteen thousand feet. Midget held his thumb over his right eye and squinted at the sun. No dots of enemy craft, lurking there to pounce upon the unwary.

CHICKERING veered slightly toward Grand Pre. The German line in the Argonne forest had been turned by a flank stroke, and the Boches were falling back to another line of defense. The roads during such a retreat would offer fine targets for strafing, because the American pressure did not let the Germans choose their own time to make their retreat.

Below them, three hundred men were engaged in ferocious conflict, but there was no sign of a living thing; only the continual burst of shells; and the rattating of machine guns, drowned by the roar of the Midget's motor.

The Midget's thoughts were reflected in his actions. The muscles in his cheeks quivered; his steel, gray eyes were hard and bright. Somehow, he could not explain

the reason but he had a premonition that one way or another his duel with Von Steffen would be settled today. He reached over a hand and patted his six-gun. If he lived through the day he would always carry it. The gun had come in handy that time with Bryson and had he had it when his Brownings jammed—

The wings of Chickering's bus wiggled violently, whereupon the flight strung out and dipped after him in a long dive. They were not yet to Grand Pre, and Midget looked down to see the reason.

Then it was that his heart began to thump. Desperate, their lines of communications menaced by a flank drive, and their roads crammed with traffic, the Germans realized that a road-strafe would clutter lines with dead horses and stalled transport with all its ensuing delay and possibility of capture. So they had turned out their jagstaffels in a last attempt to maintain control of the air and prevent interference with their orderly retreat.

Two thousand feet below them, Midge's flight could see the enemy Fokkers climbing to give combat. Even at the distance Midge could make out the identifying checks; and—his lips tightened to slits—the blood-red Fokker of the Sky-jinx himself.

Midge fired a warming burst, for the high altitude had congealed the oil in his Brownings.

"Now, old girl," he begged. "Hold up. Don't let me down this time."

As if sensing his fervent desire the Spad's brace wires sang a shrill note of encouragement; the motor boomed faithfully, as the shrieking Spad slid down the air-lane toward the combat.

It was seconds only before the mass of ships were diving, zooming, banking and turning in a confusion of roaring fury. With the whole sky as a stage there was enacted a dog-fight that made history. Through it all, Midge tore his way, missing collision by the veriest fraction, his Brownings clattering when a checkered Fokker slid, dove, banked or zoomed in his way; but himself striving furiously to come to grips with Von Steffen, the leader, the man who was said to bear a charmed life.

"Fingers crossed don't go this time," Midge yelled joyously, as Von Steffen slid out of the ruck and banked sharply to get on Pedrick's tail. Midge dove after him, only to have a Boche zoom up in front of him, and flop over, so close to the Midge's fanning prop that the westerner could see the slowly turning wheels of the undercarriage. Midge promptly stuck his nose straight down, and even at that the tail-assembly

of the Fokker barely missed him. Then he went after Von Steffen and drove him off Pedrick's tail, just as that young man was belching tracers into a checkered antagonist.

Von Steffen dived steeply, then pulled up and flopped in an Immelman. Midge promptly yanked back on his own joystick and kicked the Spad over in a renversement, and again was within an ace of sending a burst into the black nob in that red Fokker.

YET it was not to be at that moment, it seemed as if Von Steffen's phenomenal luck pulled him out from under the weight of sheer disaster. After a time he began to sense that he was pursued by a particular adversary, and resorted to every trick and dodge that four years of aerial warfare had produced.

And so the two played the game of diving death a mile and a half above the brown carpet, and it took all of Midge's courage, skill and patience to avoid annihilation.

He flew as one possessed; he seemed, indeed, a part of the ship, his fractional movements being reflected in that faithful Spad whose motor never so much as coughed. Yet pilots will tell you that in the game of dog-fighting, flying skill is less than ten per cent of the battle; it is the man who has daring, resource, quick wit and a steady finger on the joy-stick-trigger who survives.

All this Midge seemed to have. His eyes were squinted nearly shut behind his goggles; his thin lips were red where he had bitten them; and he watched the eellike Von Steffen, timing his own movements to the split-second.

Yet he needed all this phenomenal flying, for in Von Steffen he had an antagonist who knew all the tricks of the trade. The occasional bursts that Midge got in, failed to strike either the pilot or the engine; and just as soon as he got to riding down the sky on Von Steffen's tail, a quick maneuver, a barrel, a loop or a renversement would alter the tables, and it would be Midge squirming away from the deadly bark of the Spandaus.

These misses drew an occasional deep-throated curse from the Arizonan, but he kept telling himself: "Easy does it. The jinx is busted and my turn'll come."

Then a checkered ship plunged down in front of him, turning its belly as it banked on the tail of a Spad. Midge's Brownings chattered but he did not follow up the attack. Yet the infinitesimal delay was sufficient for Von Steffen to make a steep, climbing bank and

flop on the Midget's tail. For the third time that day the Boche's tracers sparkled past his head. But again some saving grace made it miss the westerner and the engine, though the fabric of the left wing was chewed as if by a mad dog.

Midge crossed his controls, realizing as he did so that the weakened wing might break off. But somehow it held and he flipped wing-over-wing sideways as Von Steffen screamed past. Forward went Midge's joystick and he slid down the sky directly behind the red Fokker. Fooled in the past so many times, dogged by ill-luck, the advantage this time was such as to cause the Midget to give a wild yip of joy. He tore down the sky, could see Von Steffen look back as he squirmed to escape the nemesis that roared after him.

"This time," yelled Midge, his finger on the joystick-trigger. "This time, hombre."

NO SQUIRMING or maneuvering kept Von Steffen out of the expected burst. He started to bank, his ship turning broadside in Midget's line of fire. The westerner jiggled the stick, caught the tail surface in his ring-sights and, easing up just a trifle, caught the nob and pulled the trigger.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat! went the Brownings.

From the tail fin to the fuselage, past the nob, into the motor, marched the glinting tracers. Still Von Steffen ducked, side-slipped, and tried every trick. Then as another burst followed the first, he flung up his hands. The Red Fokker plunging up the sky, came to the end of her pull and fell off on one wing, turned nose downward and started for the carpet below. As she fell the wings circled lazily like a falling leaf in a breeze.

Midge came up in a whip-stall, then nosed over and followed like a cat on the trail of a rat. He withheld his fire, but was vigilant for a ship falling out of control is easily imitated and the trick is frequently used to get an antagonist off your tail. He hung onto the Fokker's tail, ready to fire a burst at the first signs of trickery.

But apparently the fight was out of the German. An occasional movement of the nob told Midget the man was not dead. But his ship continued the aimless, whirling glide to earth, Midget banking continually around.

Slowly, like a wounded bird, the Boche slid down the sky way. Closer and closer came the brown panels of the earth. Two thousand feet! One thousand feet! The ground gradually assumed depth, and thickly wooded hills and ravines revealed themselves. This dense mass of trees was broken in one place, narrow strip of field with a ruined farm at one end.

There was no joy in Midget's heart at this victory. He had seen enough of Von Steffen's luck to fear a trick. And yet even he was convinced the Fokker was going to plunge her nose into the ground, when suddenly the ship nosed up and darted like a pursued rabbit for the single landing spot.

Midge cursed. "I had a hunch, all right."

His own Spad stood wing-on-wing as he banked, then flipped into a shallow dive. He managed to get in one burst before the proximity of the ground made him look to his own safety.

"But that won't get you a thing," he yelled. He would have followed Von Steffen into the German High Command Headquarters rather than let him escape. So quickly did he recover from the surprise that his own Spad was set down on the field and a burst of the gun sent him taxiing before the other ship ceased rolling.

With incredible speed Von Steffen leaped from his grounded ship, crouched on the wing with the motor as a protection, and yanking his automatic, began firing at Midge, not thirty yards distant.

The first intimation Midge had of this was when a steel-jacketed slug seared across his chest. An inch deeper and it would have pierced his heart.

Yet he was joyous and unafraid, glad that Von Steffen would shoot it out. His motor idling, he hastily got loose from his safety belt and vaulted over the side of the fuselage, crouching, his six-gun ready to bellow at the elusive target. Even as he cautiously peered over the fuselage he heard loud yells. Germans! Plenty of them from the sound.

Von Steffen suddenly sighted his Luger and emptied the clip, evidently hoping to stave off capture or death until the approaching aid could kill this verdant, persistent *Amerikaner*.

HE WAS emptying the Luger at one pressure of the trigger finger. The fuselage was no protection against such a storm of steel-jacketed missiles. They ripped through the fabric, buzzed into nothing. And just as Midget was watching carefully for a pot-shot, a slug tore through his helmet ripped away the top part of his right ear and creased his skull.

He had a sensation of sudden blindness, weakening legs. Then he was on the ground, a Niagara of sound in his ears. Piercing this was the shout of triumph from Von Steffen and the answering yells of the oncoming Germans.

The sky-jinx's luck had held! He was invincible.

This thought ran through Midget's head and acted like smelling salts to clear away the fog of semi-unconsciousness.

"Harv, he won't get away," he muttered, shaking his head like a groggy prize-fighter to clear away the blackness. Hours later, it seemed, though it was only a matter of seconds, he managed to stagger to his feet. The yelling Germans seemed to be right there now.

Von Steffen, his gun ready for instant use, was advancing cautiously to regard his victim. As he saw Midget's bloody face appear above the fuselage he yelled in alarm and lifted the automatic to fire.

A singular smile swept Midget's face. He threw his six-gun and fired. And when the Midget threw a gun at thirty yards he could not miss. The two reports seemed to come as one.

Midge remained upright, untouched. Von Steffen gave a convulsive leap, his cruel mouth set in a queer expression. Then as he tried to take a step, the Luger weaving feebly, he seemed to collapse in sections until he stretched kicking, on the ground. Then all movement ceased and Midge could tell by his punctured appearance that he was dead.

The Sky-jinx had run his last course—the wheel had turned and fate had called his number.

There was no time to stop and gloat over his triumph even if Midget had been so inclined, which he was not. Men had broken from the trees. Ten, fifteen, twenty of them—a platoon, their Mausers at the port. Infantry in heavy clumsy boots that made their run lumbering.

By now Midge's head had cleared. In a flash the situation summed itself up. He could throw up his hands and surrender, or make a break for freedom that probably would cost him his life.

The decision did not take half a second. He had that letter to post to Jim Sills!

HE LOOKED at the Germans. They were approaching rapidly, a scant seventy-five yards away, and already their leader was calling in English—"Surrender Yankee."

To run *from* the Germans was to invite a volley.

He made up his mind. He kicked left rudder and gave the Spad the gun. The prop blast tore against the angled rudder and flung the tail halfway around, the tail-skid digging a deep groove in the earth. One more blast and the Spad now headed toward the running infantry.

He gave the Spad the gun for the third time. It

quivered into life and at a rapidly accelerating speed bumped down the field toward the figures in field-gray. At the sight of this air-dragon charging toward them, boring at them with spinning prop, the Germans ceased to approach. A non-com bawled an order, and the front rank dropped to one knee.

Midge bethought himself of his own guns, and pushed the joy-stick forward until the flailing prop barely missed the ground. He fired a burst with the Brownings, but it angled overhead. The guns could not be brought to bear.

The front-rank fired a volley. But the sight of that plane plunging at them unnerved them, and only one bullet came close, this sheering through the little curved windshield and barely missing Midget's head.

The next instant, they scattered as the Spad, thundering its note of power, tore through them at terrific speed. Midge smiled, wanly and eased back on the stick. The Spad quivered, took off, then angled a bit as the wind got under her tail. But somehow she managed to keep climbing, and Midge stuck her nose to the ceiling as close as she would climb.

The enraged Germans fired hopeless volleys. Midge, unmoved, watching men scatter and run like animated mannikins, did his duty, and followed home as rear guard when the flight shot into the field like so many homing pigeons.

He taxied across the field, then tore off his goggles and climbed silently down. His head hurt dreadfully as did his chest. He pulled out a cigarette but did not have strength to light it.

Chickering, approaching to ask about the letter, seized him with gentle arms.

"Hit, Midge?"

"Just creased, that's all. I got the Jinx."

Chickering helped him to the flight-commander's cubicle and then poured out two stiff drinks of brandy. One he gave to Midge, the other he held poised.

"I drink to the chap from Arizona who sunk the jinx," he said solemnly. Midge smiled slightly, but the fiery liquor strengthened him.

Midge briefly told him what had happened.

"By God," marveled the young flight commander. "That's the second time you've gone behind the Boche lines to settle a score. Shake!"

Presently: "By the Lord Harry, Midge, I'm sorry now I was so impatient about the letter. You'll have to write another."

Midge's shy smile came and went so swiftly Chickering barely saw it.

“No, I won’t. It’s in my dugout now, I wrote it like I promised you. But I dated it today. I had a hunch me and the sky-jinx would settle scores.”

He did not add he had planned to dive his machine into the Fokker if no other way had presented itself.

Four weeks later, Old Jim Sills sat in the bunkhouse of the Bar-bee ranch and read the following letter:

Dear Jim:

Harv was shot down by the German ace Von Steffen. He died with His boots on to protect my tail, like the gallant kid he was. The hombre that downed him died today. That don’t square the account; nothing could make up for Harv. But I done the best I could. I loved the kid and miss him like hell. You can be proud of his memory forever. Yours truly,

—BILLY SANDERS (MIDGET).