

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



With a roar the Three Mosquitoes were off—off on one of the strangest and most perilous raids ever planned. They were off to bomb a British tank as it stood in the center of a German town. And down on the secret field they had just left, a worried brigadier general was glancing at his wrist watch. Just one hour and fifteen minutes to go!

THE FLYING TANK

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

OUT OF A SWIRLING CLOUD of dust, its siren wailing with piercing shrillness, the big staff car came tearing onto the drome of the 44th pursuit squadron, bursting rudely upon the scene of quiet and relaxation which had followed the safe return of the mid-morning patrol. Tired pilots who were just beginning to breathe freely again and forget the grim tension of battle, were brought back to

the war with a shock. Mechanics tinkering leisurely at the squatting planes dropped their work in startled surprise, and stood gaping with wide-eyed awe. Tensely, every eye on the field followed the streaking course of that speeding auto. Everybody watched it as it bounded and jounced across the uneven ground, watched it as, with an agonized squeal of brakes, it lurched to an abrupt stop right beside the headquarters shack.

The driver leaped from his wheel, jumping down to open the rear door of the big open car. And out of the rear, with the chauffeur's polite assistance, climbed a tall thin personage whose uniform showed him to be a full brigadier general of the British army! The English officer seemed to be in a great hurry. Leaving car and chauffeur, he turned and made a bee line for the headquarters shack, moving with surprising vigor for one of his years. The awed men on the sunny field saw him disappear through the doorway. They kept watching, with tense curiosity—wishing they could see through the wood walls of that shack and learn what could have caused a high officer of the dignified British staff to come rushing here as unceremoniously and with as little pomp as the merest dispatch rider.

Not more than a minute passed before the tense watchers saw their C.O.'s orderly burst out of the shack and come dashing wildly across the tarmac, zigzagging his way between the squatting planes while his eyes searched in all directions. At last he seemed to catch sight of what he was seeking, for abruptly he began to run in a straight and unwavering line. He was heading directly toward three pilots who stood together near their Spads, unbuttoning their teddy bears and pulling off their helmets. The orderly drew up breathlessly before this trio, and made a careless, hasty salute.

"The colonel's compliments, sirs," he panted. "And you're to report to him—at once."

The "Three Mosquitoes"—for as such was this famous, hell-raising trio of war birds known—looked at him with bewilderment and wonder.

"What the hell?" Kirby, their impetuous young leader, exploded. "Can it be that Limey brass hat in there asked for us?"

"Maybe we're being hauled up on the carpet," the mild-eyed, corpulent little Mosquito, "Shorty" Carn, suggested. "I don't remember committing any crime against the Limeys lately, but maybe some split-air stunt we did insulted 'em."

"Well, suppose we go and find out," drawled the lanky Travis, eldest and wisest of the trio. He had noticed the orderly's tense impatience—the man was constantly shifting and making moves to start back toward the headquarters shack, as if trying to show the trio as politely and respectfully as he could that there was a need for haste. The Three Mosquitoes followed now, as the orderly led the way. The orderly walked briskly, his pace steadily increasing, until he was running again. The Mosquitoes ran after him. They were conscious, as they hurried across the sunny

tarmac, that every eye was upon them, following them curiously all the way to the shack. They reached the small wood building and entered.

The grizzled old C.O. of the 44th pursuit squadron was standing at his desk, and he had the stern, officious look he always wore in the presence of important visitors. But there also was an expression of puzzlement and anxiety in his grizzled features.

The British brigadier general was walking up and down the room, with feverish impatience. He looked extremely worried. His thin face was drawn and deeply lined, and his eyes were haggard. But he seemed visibly relieved at the sight of the Three Mosquitoes, who stiffened to snap out a precise salute.

The C.O.'s crisp voice broke the silence. "General," he said, respectfully, "here are the three men you asked for."

The general's keen eyes measured the Mosquitoes appraisingly, and the three flyers met his scrutinizing gaze levelly enough. The British officer smiled, somewhat tightly. "Very good," he conceded. "It is indeed fortunate that I was able to get hold of you chaps so quickly."

"The general has requested your services," the C.O. explained, tersely. "You will have to leave immediately."

They nodded obediently, and like true soldiers asked no questions even though the order seemed strangely mysterious to them.

"All right, sir," Kirby said promptly. "We will be off just as soon as our planes are refueled. We just brought them in from the morning patrol."

The general shook his head. "You will leave your planes here," he said, with quiet authority. "I am taking you in my auto."

Again they nodded, though now they were even more mystified.

"Well then," Kirby went on cheerfully, "we'll just get off these clumsy teddy bears and——"

"You will come just as you are—in your flying togs," the general interrupted. He glanced impatiently at his wrist watch, and a tense note crept into his quiet voice. "I am afraid we will have to leave at once. There is not a moment to spare. Time means everything to us now."

As if spurred to immediate action by the general's words, the Three Mosquitoes became instantly alert, ready for anything.

"Let's go!" they exclaimed, giving their famous eager war whoop. And they followed the general, who led them—fairly running—out of the shack, to

the waiting staff car. The C.O. came too, still looking stern but worried. The chauffeur of the car, a British sergeant, opened the door and assisted the general into the machine. The Mosquitoes hesitated.

"You'd better all sit back here with me," the general answered their unasked question. "It will be rather a tight squeeze, but we shall manage it."

THE Mosquitoes complied, and the crowd of men on the tarmac watched with awe as the trio climbed into the rear of the car. With some difficulty they all managed to squeeze in on the rear seat, the general sitting between Kirby and Travis. Cramped and unable to relax into a comfortable position, the Mosquitoes wondered why one of them could not have sat in front with the chauffeur, which would have given all plenty of room. But they did not say anything about it. Orders were orders.

The C.O. stood by to watch their departure. And at the last moment he could control himself no longer. The stern, officious manner suddenly dropped from him, and his hard features relaxed into a warm affectionate grin.

"So long, fellers!" he shouted, not giving a hoot any more about the formalities of rank. "I don't know where in hell you're going, but be sure to come back. Don't take too many chances!"

"We won't!" they promised, even as the impatient general gave a command, and the car lurched forward with a jerk that almost threw them out of their seats. The machine literally tore across the drome, swerved onto the dirt highway—and the men on the field saw it disappear just as it had come, in a swirling cloud of dust.

Down the road streaked the speeding machine, faster and faster as the chauffeur's hasty foot kept pressing down the accelerator pedal. There was traffic on the road, but it had to make room for the speeding auto whose imperious siren demanded the right of way. Horses pulling huge artillery caissons stamped as their frantic drivers struggled to rein them to the side of the road. The car whizzed by them. It passed ambulances, trucks, and plodding columns of infantry who veered like waves to let it by, and cursed as it sent the dust flying into their faces.

All this time the four men in the rear had sat in cramped silence—the Three Mosquitoes puzzled and wondering, the general grim and tight-lipped. But now, abruptly, as they sped along, the British officer dropped his taciturn manner and began to speak, volubly.

"I fancy," he said, with that tight little smile of his, "that it seems a bit peculiar to have a British infantry officer suddenly snatch you away from your drome—making you leave your planes and all that. But that was the only way it could be done, owing to the scarcity of time. I asked you all to sit in back with me so I could explain the situation to you as we ride along—which will probably use up the little time we have left. So, if you'll listen, I'll try to give you all the bloody details now."

The Mosquitoes were all ears. They inclined their heads toward the British officer, though at times the speeding car jerked them away as it went bounding over the ruts and bumps and careening giddily around the curves.

"To begin with," the general was saying, "I have picked you three men from all the flyers in the service—picked you in preference even to the pilots of my own country. I feel," he went on frankly, "that you chaps have just enough Yankee daring combined with your extraordinary flying skill, to pull off this bloody show."

"The matter concerns not only my branch, the infantry, but it also concerns the whole Allied cause. It is a matter connected with our tank corps."

The Three Mosquitoes looked blank. The tank corps! What in hell could the tank corps have to do with them, three scout pilots?

"Recently," the general resumed, "our engineers have constructed, with the cooperation of the American tank corps, a new-type war tank which we call the X tank. This machine is the nearest approach to perfection we will ever achieve in tanks, being faster, more powerful, and more invulnerable than any we have yet produced. We honestly expect it to revolutionize our tactics of warfare. When, together with the United States, we have released hundreds of these extraordinary machines on the Front, they will bring the whole war to a swift and definite close. The Boche have never been able to combat our tanks effectively anyway, nor can they build any of their own. In that field we are, scientifically, years ahead of them. They have never learned the true formula for a tank: the formula of invulnerability plus maneuverability. That is why," he concluded and now his face suddenly became grim, "the secret of this new X tank would be so invaluable to them."

The Three Mosquitoes nodded, though in truth they were having all they could do to show genuine interest in this exposition on tanks. But the general

went right on, as the staff car kept speeding down the highway.

"This morning," he said, "I sent the only completed model of this new X tank on an experimental tour across No-Man's-Land, to see how powerful and effective it was. The same crew which had been handling it all through the trial runs and tests was entrusted with it. There were seven men in all. Three of them were British and three Americans."

"But that only makes six, sir," Kirby protested, somewhat foolishly.

"And the seventh," the general spoke slowly, emphatically, so that each word came like the blow of a hammer, "the seventh was a German—a notorious German spy!"

And at this the Three Mosquitoes tensed, looked up with new interest. The dull discussion of tanks had suddenly developed into something dramatic, gripping.

"We found that out later, in going over the men's records," the general went on grimly. "He's a notorious spy whom intelligence has been trying vainly to hunt down and trap for the past year. His name is von Metz, and he's as wily as the Devil himself, and just as vicious and merciless in his tactics. In some fashion—how, we cannot guess—this von Metz betrayed the X tank to the Germans." The lines in his face deepened, and he looked suddenly old, haggard. "The six Allied soldiers of the crew must have been put out of the way, and the tank was captured intact!"

HE PAUSED, and the Three Mosquitoes sat chilled, tense, wondering what kind of a fiend this von Metz was, how he could ever have managed to betray a tank carrying six alert soldiers. The general did not resume his story now, but instead suddenly gave his attention to the road. He spoke a few words to the chauffeur, and pointed. The chauffeur nodded.

Suddenly, with a sickening lurch which threw the four cramped occupants together and almost made them bump their heads, the machine swerved off this road, and then they were on a smaller and rougher highway, with trees rushing past on either side. They were cutting right through a forest which grew denser and denser, until the bright sunlight was screened off almost entirely by the foliage overhead. The road, which was empty, seemed to get constantly rougher. The car bucked and lurched like a wild broncho while the driver stubbornly kept pressing down the accelerator pedal.

Conversation was becoming difficult, with the four men being shaken, bounced, and swayed violently from side to side, but the general again began to speak. He spoke hurriedly now, as if they were nearing their destination and he was anxious to get finished.

"The tank was captured intact," he said, continuing from where he had left off. "And later on, we learned, through our intelligence operatives across the lines, that it was taken to the nearest German headquarters, a little captured town called Souelly. The tank is there now, right in the center of the public square, surrounded by a heavy guard of Boche soldiers.

"We learned still more from intelligence. Even now two German ordnance experts have left Imperial headquarters at Staffletz, Germany, and are motoring swiftly toward Souelly, to examine the tank and take down observations before it is touched or tampered with. Now, until those experts get to the tank, its secret is still ours. Von Metz, shrewd as he is, could never have learned the intricate, complicated workings of the machine, even if he could drive it. It would take an expert to discover the vital facts and——" He broke off abruptly, for at that moment the brilliant sunlight fell upon them once more, and they were emerging on to a wide clearing right in the center of the forest. The car rolled to a stop, and simultaneously a group of men came hurrying to meet it. Wonderingly, the Three Mosquitoes looked about to take in their surroundings.

The first thing they saw were the two planes which stood out on the field, side by side, facing the wind as if ready for a take-off, their propellers, turning over while a group of mechanics swarmed about them, tightening wires, testing controls, and making all the usual final preparations for flight. They presented a strange contrast, those two planes. There was as much difference between them as between a small, fleeting sparrow and an enormous winged hawk. One of them was a little, speedy-looking S.E.5 scout, and it looked absolutely tiny alongside the other ship—a giant D.H.9 bombing plane with a powerful Liberty engine whose idling purr could have drowned out the loudest roar of the smaller plane. And even at first glance, the Three Mosquitoes saw, tucked beneath the belly of the D.H.9, a score of huge, fish-shaped objects of steel. Bombs—giant bombs!

The Mosquitoes saw now that the men who had come to meet the car were all British officers, of the infantry, tank corps, and even of the flying corps. At the general's order, the three Yanks climbed with him

out of the car, alighting stiffly to the ground. The general faced the group of British officers.

"Is everything ready?" he asked crisply.

"Yes, sir," replied one of the flying corps officers.

"We just flew the planes here, and the mechanics are making a last inspection, sir."

"Very good!" The general turned to the Three Mosquitoes again. "That will give me time to finish up. I was explaining that these two experts from Staffletz are now motoring to the tank. Now, if our reports are accurate, they ought not to reach Souelly before eleven this morning." He glanced at his wrist watch. "It is now nine thirty-five. That allows less than an hour and a half—but it ought to be sufficient."

The Three Mosquitoes nodded slowly, but they were still extremely puzzled. They glanced dubiously at the two waiting planes, the huge D.H. and the tiny S.E.5.

"But—but," Kirby said bewilderedly, "do you want us to stop those experts from getting to the tank or—"

"No, that would be useless," the general replied.

"There would be plenty of other experts in their wake. What we want you to do," he said, and now he assumed the role of a stern commander, giving terse orders, "is to fly over Souelly and, before those experts arrive, destroy that tank completely by bombing it!"

And then at last full understanding came over the Three Mosquitoes. At last they realized the part they were to play in this peculiar business of the tank corps. They nodded, eagerly.

"Why, that's a cinch!" Kirby grinned. "There's nothing to it!"

The general frowned. "Don't entertain any illusions about the job being easy," he warned, grimly. "It is going to be extremely perilous—perhaps impossible. To begin with, that tank is a small objective for bombing—it will require low flying and careful aiming. There will be anti-aircraft and machine guns all over the ground, for the Germans are guarding their prize with jealous care. And there may be enemy aircraft. However, you must do your best. The only way we can save the secret of our X tank is to destroy the model before those experts can examine it. Unfortunately Souelly is not within range of our artillery—it is ten miles across the lines. Therefore, airplanes remain our only hope." He glanced anxiously toward the two throbbing ships out on the field. Then he snapped out, "Now which one of you thinks he can best handle that big De Haviland plane?"

Kirby spoke up instantly. "The job's mine, sir.

I've handled crates like that before. And Lieutenant Carn here has always been my bomber. He's the best marksman in the service." And Shorty modestly grinned his agreement.

"Very well, that settles that," the general decided quickly. "You two will take the D.H. And Lieutenant Travis," he added, turning to the lanky Mosquito, who was beginning to wonder where he fit into the picture, "your job will be to escort the bombing plane and protect it with that S.E.5, also to serve as lookout for any approaching enemy aircraft. I'd send more planes with you, but it would only mean a greater risk. The Germans would surely get wind that we were sending them over, or they'd sight a big formation—and then there wouldn't be enough sky to hold all the Fokkers they would have waiting. We've tried to keep this whole stunt secret, and it is our hope that we'll surprise the bloody Boche. The sight of a D.H. and a lone scout escort ought not to excite suspicion. They'll probably think it's just some photography bus going over to take pictures and—" The rest of his words were interrupted by a sudden shout from the planes. The mechanics were announcing that the ships were ready for flight.

THE general finished up as quickly as he could. He took two roll-maps from one of the other officers and gave them to Kirby and Travis. "You'll find your route plainly marked out on these," he explained hastily. "Look at them when you're in the air. Once you get to Souelly you ought to have no trouble locating the tank. It's right in the center of the town." He paused, and then for the last time his keen eyes were measuring them once more. "It's a tall order," he said slowly, "but the whole tide of the war may depend on it. Now, do you feel up to it?"

The Mosquitoes laughed at the question.

"Let's go!" they said, and gave their reckless, carefree whoop once more.

The general smiled, with unconcealed admiration. "Go to it!" he urged, cheerfully. "And the best of luck!"

The Three Mosquitoes turned and dashed eagerly to the waiting planes. Mechanics assisted Kirby and Shorty into the cockpits of the big D.H., and they changed their helmets for headgear with ear phones. Travis climbed into the little S.E.5. The two pilots jazzed their throttles, felt their controls. Then all pulled down their goggles.

A moment later the earth shook from the thunderous roar of the D.H.'s engine. The bombing

plane, being so slow, was starting out first. At a signal from Kirby the chocks were jerked from its great wheels. The British general and the group of officers waved and yelled wishes of good luck which were drowned completely by the thunder of the motor. Slowly, the giant bomber moved forward across the field, rocking and bumping. Slowly, ever so slowly, it gathered speed—a clumsy, cumbersome monster so heavily loaded with bombs that one thought it could never leave the ground. But then, miraculously, its tail was lifting, lifting—and then its wheels were spinning slowly to a stop as they rose from the earth. Like a giant, slow-moving hawk, the great D.H. swept over the tree tops and climbed smoothly toward the sunny blue sky.

And in the next instant there was another roar on the ground, a roar not so loud but extremely powerful. And across the field a little S.E.5 went skimming like a streak, to leap gracefully into the air and dart like a dragon fly toward the big craft overhead. From below, the British officers saw both planes straighten out toward the east—saw the bomber move smoothly and slowly away while the tiny S.E.5 hovered behind and above it, gyrating and circling to keep its slow pace.

The Three Mosquitoes were off—off on one of the strangest and most perilous raids ever planned. They were off to bomb a British tank as it stood in the center of a German town.

And down on the secret field which they had just left, a worried British brigadier general was glancing at his wrist watch, and remarking, “Nine-forty-five. That leaves one hour and fifteen minutes, if the reports are correct.”

“They ought to make it without trouble,” one of the flying-corps officers said, reassuringly.

“I don’t doubt they will make it,” the British general replied, with firm confidence, and then added, grimly, “but not without trouble.”

Twenty minutes flying, and the Three Mosquitoes were nearing their objective. Their trip had been smooth and uneventful. They had passed unnoticed over the seething, shell-torn Front, over the zigzag lines of German trenches, and into the enemy’s sky. After that they were met from time to time with anti-aircraft fire, but it was desultory and ineffectual. Just as the English general had hoped, the Jerries doubtless thought this was merely some photographing plane and escort going to take pictures, and they were therefore not sufficiently alarmed to take violent measures against it. Nor were there any Jerry planes

to be seen. The sky was clear and empty, an infinite expanse of sunny, translucent blue.

In his forward cockpit, Kirby carefully guided the lumbering D.H. on, steering by his compass and map. Behind him Shorty Carn sat silent and grim, busying himself from time to time by examining his bomb sights and releases to make sure they were ready and in working order. And all throughout, the little S.E.5, piloted by Travis, hovered and gyrated over the D.H.’s tail like a protecting bird.

On, on, moved the giant bomber, its engine chanting in full-throated power, its great wings rocking gently. The little S.E.5 faithfully kept stunting above and behind it. On, on, deeper and deeper into Boche-land, farther and farther, until, out of the blurred landscape below and ahead, a tiny cluster of buildings appeared, and loomed slowly into larger and clearer focus. And at the sight of those buildings Kirby’s nerves tensed, and his hand tightened a bit on the joystick. He brought the speaking tube to his lips.

“Souelly!” he shouted into the mouthpiece. “There it is—we’re getting there! Are you ready with those bombs, Shorty?”

The cheerful voice of his comrade came to his ears through the tube. “I’m rarin’ to go!” shouted the little Mosquito. Everything’s OK back here.”

Kirby nodded and bent to his controls once more. The D.H. moved unwaveringly toward the town, with the S.E.5 ever circling and dancing behind it. The village loomed closer. The clustered houses seemed to spread apart as they grew larger, and streets appeared like winding ribbons between them. Getting there now, and the closer they got the tenser they grew. A cold excitement held them in its chill grip. All three of them, even Travis in his gyrating S.E.5, were now scanning the village for signs of their objective.

THEY did not have to search long. In the center of the town was a wide, open square, into which all the streets ran like rivers into an ocean. And in the center of this square, surrounded by a swarm of tiny gray-clad figures, was a squatting, rugged thing of massive steel.

The X tank! There it was—the strange objective of their raid! And the sight of it actually brought a groan from Shorty Carn.

“Holy Hell!” he exclaimed through the tube. “But it looks tiny! It’s going to be a helluva target to hit!”

“We’ll have to fly low,” Kirby replied grimly. “Don’t drop any eggs until we can get right over the damn thing!”

Meanwhile, the big D.H. and its gyrating escort were drawing closer and closer to that square, until now they were coming almost overhead. The tank in the square loomed into clearer shape. Soon they could see it in almost all its details, with its huge twin tractors, its jutting gun turrets. They were getting right overhead now. Their nerves were tense as springs, their hearts pounding. Already Kirby was measuring his distance, judging his time. Once more he spoke into the tube.

“All set?”

“Let’s go!” came the eager reply.

For a final split second Kirby hesitated, looking down at that square far below like a high diver looks into the infinitesimal pool before taking the fateful plunge. And then, with a reckless oath, Kirby’s arm shot upwards—waving the signal to the S.E.5. And with his other hand he shoved the D.H.’s joystick forward.

Down dropped the blunt nose of the D.H., and then the giant ship was roaring down in a steep, breathless power dive, its nose pointed straight and true for the public square and the tank. The little S.E.5 did not dive with it, however. Instead, Travis hovered up in the high blue, circling like a watching eagle to play his part as lookout.

Wings rocking, wires shrilling in the wind, the D.H. kept rushing down a hill of space, at the foot of which would be the X tank. Closer and closer now. Already the public square was looming toward Kirby as he grimly held his stick forward. Already he could see the gray-clad Boche soldiers running around in confusion, looking up, pointing, gesticulating. And then the trouble began.

From all parts of the square, and from the roofs of several buildings, a score of anti-aircraft guns suddenly opened up. *Grumpf! Grumpf!* The rasping cough of the archies shattered the roar of the D.H.’s engine. Shells began to burst on all sides of the diving bomber, sprouting like black mushrooms in the translucent blue. Whizzing shrapnel whistled in the ears of Kirby and Shorty. But they ignored the fire and went right on down, though Kirby now ruddered in a slight zigzag to throw off the gunner’s range.

Lower and lower now. The tank was growing into size with breathless rapidity. With grim precision, Kirby was steering the diving D.H. for it. And in the rear Shorty Carn was gluing his eyes to the bomb sights, while his nervous fingers toyed with the release controls.

Down, down. And now they were too low for the anti-aircrafts. But a newer and greater peril met them now. Machine guns! Machine guns which are so much more of a menace than the clumsy, erratic archies. Everywhere below they were stuttering into blazing life, sending six hundred slugs of steel a minute at the descending bomber. Bullets began to sing wildly about the Mosquitoes. They heard them ticking through the fuselage of the bomber, saw them perforating the wings. But again they ignored the fire, seeking comfort in the fact that they were moving too fast to afford a suitable target.

The square came up with a rush now, Kirby saw the cobble-stoned streets, the frantic upturned faces, the scurrying figures, and in the center of all the confusion, the great steel tank, squatting immobile and unperturbed. As the bomber came on down, Kirby found his stick triggers and pressed them savagely. The forward Vickers on the D.H. vibrated and thundered, spitting streams of tracer down upon the public square. With grim satisfaction Kirby saw his bullets scattering death among the mob of Boche. That ought to help some, he told himself.

THE square seemed to be right under the D.H. now. Gently, ever so gently, Kirby pulled back on the joystick, and slowly the nose of the D.H. began to come up, up, and the angle of its dive decreased. Another second and the big ship was swooping right over the square like a monstrous hawk, swooping straight and true for the tank in the center.

Closer and closer now, while the Jerry machine guns kept blazing away at it in futile fury. Shorty crouched over the bomb sights, every nerve in his body tense, every muscle taut. The tank was sweeping toward them now—so close that even the rivets in its steel plates were visible. With his usual uncanny skill, Kirby was steering the clumsy D.H. right over the small objective. Shorty waited another second, until the tank was framed in his sights, which were regulated to allow for speed and deflection. And then, just as the big D.H. was coming over the tank, the little Mosquito acted. With a berserk yell, he pulled the release lever—once, twice.

From the belly of the giant plane two fishlike objects of steel and T.N.T. detached themselves and went whizzing and spinning down through space.

B-r-r-room! B-r-r-room! The ear-splitting explosions drowned out all other noise. The D.H. was almost thrown into a sideslip by the terrific

concussions. And below, two mighty eruptions of smoke and debris were slowly settling. The D.H. was far past the spot now, but the two Mosquitoes looked down and back in wild hope. They saw two smoking rings of torn-up street and mangled, grotesque corpses. But they also saw the X tank squatting unperturbed in the center of the square, unscathed and unhurt.

Shorty cursed with all the humiliation of an actor who has missed his cue. "Missed it—missed it by yards!" he shouted bitterly into the tube. "God, but it's a helluva target to aim at."

"I'll go back!" Kirby told him, grimly. "And this time I'll go even lower. We've got to get it!"

He opened his throttle wide. Engine roaring, the big D.H. soared over the buildings which bordered the square. The Jerries below tried more frantically than ever now to pepper the monstrous bomber with their machine guns. As the Mosquitoes swept over a roof top, several guns cut loose on them, and a terrific fusillade of lead zipped right past. Cursing, Kirby used stick and rudder. The great wings of the bomber tilted at a crazy angle, and the big ship groaned protestingly as Kirby made it do the almost impossible feat of a vertical bank. Swinging toward the square again, the Mosquito once more steered the heavy ship for that tank.

Down, down, insolently low this time—so low that the slightest slip, the tiniest miscalculation, would have meant a sure crash! Down, down, again streaking toward that tank amid a maelstrom of machine-gun fire—and once more Kirby used his own forward guns to rake the scurrying, terrified Boche below. Then, the X tank! Once more it was sweeping right beneath them, so close that it seemed right under their landing gear. Shorty peered again through his bomb sights. He felt that his reputation as the best marksman in the service was at stake. God, he must not fail! He could not fail! The tank now, here it was in his sights

B-r-r-room! B-r-r-room! Again two deadly bombs exploded in shattering bursts of smoke and debris. Again the D.H. wobbled and lurched from the terrific concussions right below. Looking back, the two Mosquitoes saw the shrapnel from the high explosives showering down on the tank. But though the bursts had only been a few feet away, the tank still stood there, immobile and unscathed, the shrapnel glancing off its steel flanks like water off a duck.

Shorty almost wept. "God, I just can't seem to hit that damn thing!" he groaned. "I tell you it's impossible—it's too small to range!"

"Don't give up the ship!" Kirby urged, reassuringly. "You came damned close to it. Seems only a direct hit will do the trick though. But you'll get it sure the next time. Just hold on!"

And he pulled up over the other side of the square, to circle and come back anew. The German machine-gun fire kept getting more terrific, but the two reckless Yanks paid scant heed to it. They were fiercely determined to get their quarry.

But even as Kirby swung the D.H.'s nose toward that tank again, a frenzied shout broke from Shorty. Kirby started, then jerked back his head. The little Mosquito in the rear cockpit was pointing up toward the sunny sky, pointing in horrified excitement. Apprehensively, Kirby looked up. The blood drained from his face, and his heart stopped.

Sweeping down from the blue, sweeping down despite the twisting, split-airing S.E.5 which tried vainly to stop them with its spitting guns, were seven black-crossed scouts! Fokkers! Fokkers which had come out of the brilliant orb of the sun where they had been hiding. Vainly Travis was trying to head them off from the clumsy D.H. below, which was a cumbersome, helpless thing against such deadly, speedy scout planes. But Travis was virtually helpless, too. Three of the Fokkers remained to handle his S.E.5 above, closing in on it like vultures lusting for the kill. The other four Jerry planes came swooping down for the more important quarry—the bomber which was trying to destroy the captured X tank. Down they came, diving like streaks with black smoke pouring from their exhaust stacks.

In a frenzy Kirby picked up the speaking tube, shouted wildly, hoarsely, "They've got us, Shorty! We haven't a Chinaman's chance way down here on the carpet, without altitude!" A sob of frustration and despair shook his voice. "They've got us cold—and it looks like they've got poor Trav, too!" And then, suddenly, a fierce gripping determination was upon him, the determination of a desperate man who cannot hope to live and becomes insanely reckless. "Damn it, Shorty!" he yelled, "let's try to get that tank before they get us. It's got to be destroyed now, or it'll be too late—those experts will get to it! I'm gonna go on heading for it, Jerries or no Jerries. Are you game?"

"Game?" Shorty countered, courageously. "Hell, this time I'll hit that damned tank if it's the last thing I do!"

And so, even as the Fokkers came swooping down, even as the shrill clatter of their Spandau machine

guns shattered the air overhead, Kirby grimly held the lumbering D.H. straight to its swooping course—steering once more for the tank. Two desperate, reckless Yanks were trying the impossible: to bomb their objective despite the four deadly scouts who were bent on sending them to their doom. At first it was a mad race, a race to see if the lumbering D.H. could get to the tank before the speedy Fokkers actually closed in for the easy kill.

KIRBY opened his throttle wide, coaxed all the speed he could out of the D. H.'s powerful Liberty motor. The bomber roared on toward the tank. But now the four Fokkers were in range, and their tracers were beginning to draw zigzag lines on all sides of the D.H. Compared to this deadly fire, the machine guns on the ground had been a joke. The bullets literally showered down on the clumsy D.H., ripping through its fabric and wood parts, ricocheting from its engine cowling. With the flying, screaming lead sizzling on all sides of them, the two Mosquitoes crouched low in the cockpits and grimly went on, on toward their objective.

And now they were reaching it. Kirby, recklessly ignoring the Jerry planes and concentrating all his attention on the tank, was once more skilfully steering the big D.H. straight over it. And now Shorty Carn was aiming as he had never aimed before. He was aiming and praying while he aimed. His hand reached again for the release lever. And even as the four Fokkers leveled out of their dives and commenced to swarm around the bomber like maddened hornets, Shorty savagely jerked that release lever. Again two steel-jacketed missiles detached themselves from the bomber's belly.

B-r-r-room! Boom! And the two frenzied Mosquitoes still ignored the swarming Fokkers, and looked down and back to see the results of the bombs. Wild hope leaped into their goggled eyes. The tank was completely swallowed in a dense cloud of smoke and debris, from one of the bombs. Surely it had been hit this time! They kept watching, watching as if oblivious of the Fokkers which closed in upon them with relentless precision, walling them in a prison of fatal crisscross fire which must soon tear them to ribbons.

Slowly the smoke from the bomb burst cleared below—and as it cleared the eager faces of the Mosquitoes fell dismally, and they felt their last remaining hope crushed completely. For there, as the curtain of smoke rolled away, standing as if proud of its invulnerability, was the X tank—still unscratched!

They had failed, failed utterly in the mission with which the British had entrusted them. Their last possible chance to bomb that tank was past. Shorty Carn was whimpering like a frustrated kid. The fact that he had come so close to scoring a direct hit made his despair all the greater. God, just another yard and he would have hit that tank squarely!

All this time the four Fokkers had been closing in around the slow cumbersome D.H., until now the air around the Mosquitoes was literally dense with whizzing, streaking tracers. *Crash!* The instrument board in front of Kirby was struck and shattered, and flying bits of glass cut into his goggled face. The stinging pain of them stirred him savagely to action. He ripped out an oath which almost brought the blood to his mouth. A wild fury was upon him, the fury of frustration. He shouted madly through the tube, "Let's go down fighting, Shorty! Give 'em all the hell we can!"

And Shorty's anguished features suddenly straightened determinedly and he yelled in fierce agreement. The X tank was forgotten—it was useless to think of it now, when the four Jerries had them surrounded, cut off entirely from their objective. The only thing left to do was to fight, even though it must be a losing fight. But, by God, the Germans would not shoot them to shreds without some resistance!

Furiously, Shorty leaped from his seat and seized the rear-flanking machine gun. He swung it around, trying to bring it to bear on the fleeting, speedy German scouts. And at the same time Kirby fought madly with his controls, forcing that cumbersome D.H. to zigzag and half-roll to throw off the Jerries' sights. The deafening clatter of Shorty's gun behind him gave him new confidence. The little Mosquito was fighting now, and his marksmanship was bringing results this time. The Fokkers, met by his spraying bursts, became a little less reckless in their tactics. They spread out a little. And Kirby, seeing his chance, opened his throttle, pulled back his stick, and climbed stubbornly for altitude. Not that it would do much good, but at least it would prolong the end, give them a chance to put up a decent scrap.

Bravely, desperately, the two men fought their losing fight. The lumbering D.H., already bullet-ridden, rose slowly—but the Fokkers rose with it, lunging and swooping at it from all sides, ripping it up with burst upon burst. Kirby's frantic eyes scanned the sky above, even in his predicament he remembered Travis' S.E.5. But it was nowhere to be seen, nor were

the three Fokkers which had attacked it. They must have drifted off, out of sight.

Thicker and thicker grew the Jerrie's bullets, but still the two Mosquitoes held on grimly, fighting to the last ditch. Kirby fired his forward guns now whenever one of the fleeting Fokkers whisked across his path. But it was Shorty who did the scoring, Shorty whose well-aimed burst got one of the enemy scouts cold. A ribbon of flame leaped from the Fokker's engine, went licking greedily down the fabric and wood fuselage. Like a fiery torch, the Jerry ship plunged right into the streets of the town below, and a column of livid fire and smoke proclaimed its landing.

But now the three remaining Jerries, enraged by the fall of their comrade, attacked with a vengeance. Once more they closed in on all sides, gun blazing. And this time the Mosquitoes knew it was the end. The big D.H. actually lurched from the bullets which pumped it and pumped it. There was a sudden shriek of metal tearing through metal, and with cold horror Kirby and Shorty saw the slugs tearing right into their engine cowl. The Liberty motor sputtered, choked vainly for life, and then, with a final gasp, conked out—cold!

Kirby was fighting like a madman with his controls, fighting to stop the motorless bomber from stalling and going into a fatal spin. Sheer instinct guided him, for he knew that even if he did prevent the ship from spinning it would be shot to hell anyway. Nevertheless he fought stubbornly with the joystick and rudder, until he managed to straighten the D.H. out and get her into a glide—heading futilely toward the Allied lines.

The Fokkers, however, were relentlessly determined to finish off their wounded quarry. They pounced eagerly upon the gliding D.H., and kept swarming around it, firing away at leisure. Vainly Shorty tried to bring his flanking gun to bear again. It was useless. Unable to maneuver, unable to do anything except descend, the D. H. had become little more than a good target for the Jerries.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat! The bullets kept pumping into the gliding plane. One of them actually tore a sleeve of Kirby's teddy bear, an other grazed Shorty's face and left a searing pain. *Crash!* The two frenzied Mosquitoes stared with horror at the top wing, where a patch of blue sky showed in place of the taut khaki fabric that had been there a second before. The wing was shivering now, threatening to crack. It was the end! In just another moment, another second——

AT FIRST the two Mosquitoes scarcely knew what was happening. They were not aware that the terrific rain of bullets had suddenly ceased. They were not aware that the three Fokkers were pulling away from the D.H. with frantic speed, zooming confusedly for altitude. Not until they heard the new clatter of guns overhead—the yammer of wide-open motors, did they realize. And then a wave of frenzied relief swept them, and they shouted in hysterical joy.

Down from the blue, plunging straight for the three Fokkers, were five trim little British camels. They had evidently seen the plight of the D.H., and were coming to its rescue. The Fokkers had been caught unawares, taken completely by surprise. Before they could pull up very far to meet their attackers, the British planes were upon them like avenging hawks. High above the floundering, gliding D.H. the onesided dogfight took place. The Fokkers were trying to flee further into the interior of Boche land, but the Camels pursued and harried them relentlessly. One of the Jerry ships suddenly fluttered earthward like a dead bird, and crashed in a heap of debris on a roof top. The other two and their relentless British attackers drifted off into the distant sky—and were soon out of sight of the Mosquitoes.

And all too soon the two Yanks felt their relief vanish. True, they had been spared from being shot to ribbons, but they were doomed to just as certain a death. The D.H. was floundering and settling, quickly losing what little altitude it had. The smashed wing was cracking more and more, and beginning to droop while Kirby madly held the stick to one side, tried to hold it up. Badly damaged and without any motor, the D.H. would soon crash to earth.

Kirby struggled anew with his controls, trying to hold the floundering bomber in its glide toward the lines. But he did not need Shorty to tell him, wildly, "We've got to land in Boche land. She isn't holding out much longer, and she's settling fast!" Kirby nodded grimly, bitterly. They'd have to land in Boche land, and they'd be lucky if they landed alive, in which case they'd be taken prisoners.

The frantic eyes of the two Mosquitoes scanned the terrain below for a possible place to land. Roof tops and narrow cobble-stoned streets met their gaze. No landing there! And outside the village, in the direction toward which they were heading, was a dense, wide forest. And forests were also fatal shoals to the aviator! But if they could find some clearing in that woods——

Clinging to this hope like a drowning man clutching a straw, Kirby steered the floundering D.H. toward the woods. The bomber kept lurching and settling, settling—until it seemed the roof tops below must surely strike it.

“Keep that wing up!” Shorty shouted, tensely, as the damaged wing drooped lower and lower. Again Kirby battled with his controls. They were getting to that forest now—soon the tree tops were sweeping below them, looming toward them as the gliding, lurching ship continued to settle. The two Mosquitoes searched desperately for a clearing. And at last Shorty shouted and pointed, “There’s a spot—right there to the left! It’s rough as hell, but it’s the only place around here!”

Kirby saw it at once—a small open space among the dense trees. Nodding his assent, he steered the wabbling D.H. toward it. He banked with painstaking care, trying to hold altitude. The bad wing of the ship creaked even more ominously and shivered. But then the bomber was heading for that clearing. Lower and lower now, so low that the undercarriage seemed to be settling right into the dense tree tops. But, to the Mosquitoes’ relief, the tree tops dropped away. They were coming over the clearing. The ground was rough and full of twisted growth and rocks. But the place seemed deserted—there were no signs of Jerries down there.

“Keep that wing up!” Shorty repeated frenziedly. The D.H. was see-sawing drunkenly as Kirby guided her down toward the rough clearing. He had already given up hope of making a decent landing, at best he could avoid a fatal crash.

And then another cry broke from Carn—a cry of alarmed realization. “Good God!” he was shouting, “there are still a few bombs with us. If you crash they might go off and then it will be curtains. And it’s too late to release them. We’re so low they’d hit us anyway!”

Kirby drew in his breath sharply. He had forgotten all about those bombs. His horrified eyes took in the ground which was looming straight toward him with breathless rapidity. God, how could he land the see-sawing D.H. among those rocks and brush without crashing? There was only one course he could take. If it failed it would make the crash all the more fatal, but there was a chance—a fleeting chance at least—that he could manage it.

“Hold on, Shorty!” he yelled into the tube. “I’m gonna try to pancake her!”

Tightly, tightly, he pulled back the joystick, still

holding it to the side to keep the damaged wing up. The D.H. began to level out of its glide, but losing flying speed, it also began to go into a stall. Kirby employed all his skill, all his strength. He gritted his teeth and kept trying to hold the big ship level as she settled. And the huge bomber went down like an elevator. The two Mosquitoes held their breaths. The next second would decide their fate.

There was a dull impact. The wheels had struck. They bounced, but only once because the first impact had broken the undercarriage. The D.H. shivered from nose to tail. Its bad wing snapped, and suddenly dangled grotesquely. But otherwise it stood in the middle of that rough clearing on even keel—its bombs still nestled snugly beneath its belly.

EVEN before the two Mosquitoes had moved from their cockpits, sounds reached their ears from within the forest, sounds which made their hearts pound. The running of heavy feet, the clank of rifles, the shouting of men. The whole wood seemed to reverberate and reëcho with the noise.

“Jerries!” Kirby said tensely. “They must have seen where we came down—and they’re coming to nab us!”

“Let’s move!” Shorty suggested, with fierce eagerness. “We can’t stay here. And this crate is just so much junk to us now.”

They leaped from their cockpits. The sounds were getting closer and closer now.

“We’d better burn this damned bus,” Kirby was saying. “Then the Jerries won’t know that we’re still alive, and we’ll have more chance of a get-away. Come on—give me a hand. We’ve got to work fast. They’re coming!”

Shorty complied with alacrity.

While the sounds of the approaching Boche kept getting louder and louder, the two Mosquitoes worked with lightning speed. Presently they had some of the gas from the tank spilled all over the fabric fuselage. Kirby found a match and applied it, and the two men leaped back as the gas-soaked fabric sizzled into a blaze. Simultaneously there was a rustle in the brush at one side of the clearing. Boche were coming through. The two Mosquitoes literally flew off the small rough field, into the dense trees on the other side. They had actually glimpsed a few of the gray-clad figures who were swarming on to the clearing, where the wrecked plane was now slowly being enveloped in flames and smoke.

The three Mosquitoes kept running until they came

to a spot so dense with foliage and brush that they felt it was safe to stop. They paused, panting for breath, listening with ears terribly alert. They heard the Boche out on the clearing, shouting and tramping around. Then——

Boom! The ground shook beneath their feet as the deafening explosion reverberated through the forest. Then silence, deathly silence. And dazedly the two Mosquitoes realized that the bombs on the D.H. must have exploded by the heat of the fire. The Boche had all been killed or wounded. But the two Mosquitoes did not dare to go back and look. Instead they remained here, to take stock of the situation.

"Well," Shorty was saying, ruefully, "here we are—stuck in Boche-land, with the lines ten miles away. Gosh," he sighed, shaking his head bitterly, "if only I had been able to hit that tank I wouldn't feel so bad."

"Hell, you did your best," Kirby consoled him. "We just got a tough break, that's all!" His face filled with sudden anxiety. "Wonder what happened to Travis!"

"Gosh, I hope he got away from those three Jerries somehow!" Shorty muttered, fervently. Then he shrugged, "Well, I suppose the thing for us to do is to stay under cover until night, and then try to sneak our way back to the lines."

Kirby nodded. "Suppose so," he conceded, but his face was clouded. "And when we get back we'll just have to report that we couldn't pull off the stunt!"

"That's what's bothering me," Shorty sighed. "After the general picking us out of every other flyer and all, we'll have to admit we couldn't make the grade. It's pretty lousy!"

"Still, what can we do about it? By this time those experts have probably arrived at the tank already, and are getting their dope." He glanced at his wrist watch and then gave an exclamation of surprise. "Cripes, you know it's only ten thirty-five? I thought sure it must be later. All this excitement seemed to take hours. That means there's still twenty-five minutes before those experts ought to get to the tank."

Shorty was surprised at the tense note which seemed to have suddenly crept into his comrade's tone. "Well, what about it?" he asked. "What good does that do us?"

"Nothing, I guess," Kirby admitted, but now he seemed to be thinking hard. Doubt and hope seemed to conflict in the expression on his face. "I wonder," he suddenly mused aloud, "I wonder if——" He broke off, and then reached with haste beneath his teddy bear. He pulled out the roll-map he had still kept. And while

Shorty watched him in bewildered puzzlement, he opened the map and glanced at it. His eyes suddenly lighted, and excitedly he seized Shorty by the arm. "Look!" he said triumphantly, waving the map in front of Shorty's bewildered eyes. "Look here!"

Shorty looked. All he saw was a map, on which the town of Souelly was the most prominent thing.

"Are you cuckoo or something?" he asked, incredulously. "What in hell do you see here that's any good to us?"

"Use your eyes!" Kirby urged, impatiently. He dabbed at the map with his finger. "Don't you see this forest here—that's where we are now. And don't you see how the forest goes right around Souelly on the left?"

"Well, what if it does?" Shorty wanted to know.

Kirby's excitement seemed to be mounting to a pitch. "You remember the general told us those experts are motoring to Souelly? That means they are coming in a staff car."

Shorty shook his head. "And if they came in a canoe I don't see what difference it would make to us!"

"You poor sap!" Kirby yelled at him. "I told you to use your eyes. Staffletz is in Germany. Well, on this map, there's just one road which comes from the direction of Germany into Souelly. And this road cuts right through the part of this woods on the other side of the town." He pointed it out to Shorty, following the line on the map with his finger.

A VAGUE light began to dawn on Carn's brain, but he was still far from enlightened. "I get you," he said, "but still I ask, what good is all this to us?"

"No good, if I have to waste precious time explaining it!" Kirby countered. Then his voice rose eagerly. "Look here, if we could somehow get to that road, find a deserted place where the car will pass, and then hold it up——"

"You talk as if such a thing would be easy!" Shorty protested.

"Who says it will be easy? But at least we'd stand a chance—and we can't afford to pass up any chance to save the secret of that tank. If we can hold up the Boche experts and whatever other Jerries are in the car, then swipe their uniforms and get into them somehow——"

"Granting we do both those impossible things, what then?"

"Will you shut up and listen? We'll take the car then and drive, as the experts, into Souelly—right up to the

tank. We'll have all the papers and credentials, and why should the Boche there know the difference. Then, when we get access to the tank, it's up to us to find a way to destroy it—even if it's the last thing we do!"

Shorty laughed outright. "Cripes, that's the craziest, most impossible stunt I ever heard of. We'd never get away with it."

"Not if you haven't the guts!" Kirby taunted, and at that insinuation the little Mosquito flared up indignantly.

"Who hasn't the guts?" he burst out. "Say, if that's what's worrying you, go as far as you like! I'll even masquerade as the Kaiser, if you want! Now," he demanded, angrily, "where did you say we're gonna hold up this car?"

"Somewhere on the road. And we've got to get to it a few minutes before eleven. It ought to be just about two miles from here, if we figure on sticking in the forest and skirting around the town." He pulled out his pocket compass. "We go straight east first, and then the rest will be easy—if we don't run into Jerries!"

"Well, let's get going!" Shorty said impatiently. "We're wasting time. We've only got twenty minutes left now—and two miles to go!"

And so the two reckless Yanks set out once more to accomplish their great mission, even though they were stranded in Boche land, without planes, and with telltale khaki uniforms.

But eleven o'clock was just one minute or so away when they finally reached their destination. Their journey had been uneventful, though fraught with cold suspense and fear. With Kirby guiding their course by his compass, they had stolen through the dense woods like stealthy Indians, jumping at every sound even if it was a mere twig snapping beneath their feet. Slowly, in this devious manner, they had worked their way right around the village of Souelly, without meeting any Jerries.

And now, on either side of a dirt highway, in the thickness of the brush, the two men were crouching tensely, their Colt automatics in their hands. They were waiting, waiting and praying that they were not too late. They had picked a spot on the road close to the top of a steep hill, figuring that the car bringing the experts would have to climb the grade in low gear and would thus be moving slowly enough for them to work their desperate, reckless stunt.

But as they crouched, opposite one another on each side of the road, their hopes kept sinking lower. The German car must have passed before they had

come. The road was empty, utterly deserted, and it did not look as if any traffic would ever come on it. Yet traffic must have come before. They could see the tire tracks in the dusty highway. Had the Jerry car made those tracks! Most likely, Kirby concluded bitterly, and glanced at his wrist watch. It was exactly eleven, the hour when the experts were supposed to reach the tank. It would take them several minutes to get to the tank itself from this part of the road. Certainty they must have whizzed by before the Mosquitoes had ever gotten here. They must have—

Simultaneously, the two Mosquitoes started where they crouched, tensing from head to foot. Their straining ears had heard it at once—that soft, throbbing purr which rose steadily higher, approaching closer and closer. Furtively, Kirby parted the curtain of brush before him, peered out. On the opposite side of the road he could just glimpse Shorty's round but tense face, also peering. The two Mosquitoes were glancing down the hill, down the road.

It was coming! Far down the highway, approaching with breathless rapidity as it came around a curve, the outlines of a large open touring car were looming swiftly into largeness. The machine was tearing along the road, putting on all the speed it could as it neared the steep hill. The two Mosquitoes watched it, their hands tightening about their revolvers. It must be their car! They watched it as it came on, and prayed that it would not even have enough speed and power to take this steep grade in high—in which case it might shoot past them so fast they would have no chance to do a thing.

On came the big touring car, and now it was getting right to the foot of the hill. It was close enough now for the two tense Mosquitoes to see its occupants. There were just three of them—a gray-clad soldier driving, and two Jerry officers in the rear. The two Yanks tried to fight down their doubts. Certainly they must be the experts! And yet, if they weren't, if this was the wrong car—

It was starting up the hill now. The nose of its huge, long engine hood—it was a Mercedes, they saw—was rushing right up toward them. It was climbing the hill with terrific speed, chewing up the grade in high. God, it was not slowing down at all! But, no, it was slowing down. It had only reached the middle of the hill when the steep grade proved too much for it. It lost speed with surprising quickness. And the two grateful Mosquitoes could hear the grinding mesh of gears as

the driver shifted into second. The car began to creep like a snail now, gathering only a little momentum as it came on up the grade.

BEHIND their bushes the two Mosquitoes steeled their nerves. They held their Colts in front of them as they crouched, ready, alert. Their hearts were pounding. The car was almost right up to them now, coming, coming. In another moment it would be passing the spot where the tense Yanks waited for it. Kirby, who had agreed to give the cue by acting first, crouched now with his muscles tensing like springs. He drew in a long breath. There was the car now, its long nose was passing right by. For a split second the Mosquito leader hesitated. Then——

Like a tiger he sprang straight out of the bushes, revolver pointed. Scarcely an instant later Shorty's corpulent figure bounced out from the other side of the road. Straight for the laboring, climbing car the two desperate Yanks leaped. They landed with a broad jump on either running board, grabbing the side of the tonneau with one hand while with the other they pointed their automatics at the amazed and awe-stricken Jerry occupants.

No command was required to make the chauffeur pull his emergency brake. The car lurched to a stop right near the top of the hill, and the Mosquitoes held on tightly to keep from being thrown off. The Jerry driver threw up his hands, for Shorty's gun was poking right into his stomach. Kirby was pointing his Colt at the two high officers in the rear—both colonels. They sat motionless, frozen with horror and terror, unable to understand the presence of these two Yankee aviators who had leaped upon their car out of nowhere.

Kirby's voice was as cold and hard as the steel automatic with which he backed it. "Stick 'em up!" he commanded. "And make it snappy! We're a couple of business men, and we're damned serious!"

Whether the two Jerry *Obersts* understood English or not could not be said, but they certainly understood Colt automatics. Dazedly, with their eyes bulging, they raised their hands high above their heads.

"And now," Kirby told Shorty, tersely, "we'll just relieve these birds of whatever weapons they have, and then get to work. I'll keep 'em covered, you take the guns." Shorty nodded. Kirby moved down the running board on this side of the Mercedes, so that his Colt covered all the Jerry occupants. Shorty, still holding his own gun in one hand, started with the colonels in the

rear. He took a Luger from one, and reached for the revolver of the second.

But before he reached that second Luger there rose a sudden noise from over the crest of the hill—a noise which made the two Mosquitoes stiffen, stand rigid on the running boards. With apprehensive haste, they glanced over the hill. The blood froze within them, and their faces blanched.

Coming straight in this direction, just visible over the hill, was a huge open truck. It was tearing along at a terrific speed. And it was full, full to the very brim, with Boche soldiers. Doubtless they were returning to the rear. But they were carrying rifles—the truck fairly bristled with guns!

Another moment and the truck would be coming over the crest of the hill, and the Yanks would be caught cold at their work! Swift death or capture would follow. God, what could they do?

The three Germans in the staff car seemed to realize the sudden predicament of their antagonists. They, too, saw the approaching truck. The sight of it seemed to allay their momentary terror and fill them with confidence as if they suddenly realized that they were safe within their own lines, ten miles within Bocheland, and that it was absurd to think of letting two crazy Yanks hold them up in this fashion. And they noticed, too, with shrewd cunning, that the two Mosquitoes had relaxed their guard a little—because they were giving their attention to the on-coming truck.

It was the unarmed colonel in the rear who acted first. A desperate gleam suddenly leaped into his eyes. Shorty was leaning over him now to reach again for the Luger of the other Jerry officer. Suddenly, with lightning rapidity, the unarmed *Oberst* lurched forward with all his might, giving the little Mosquito a terrific shove. Shorty sprawled backward, losing his balance as he toppled off the running board onto the road. And instantly the other Jerry colonel whipped out his Luger, raised it, aimed straight for Kirby, who was also off his guard and—

Crack! The shrill report shattered the air. But it was Shorty Carn, and not the Jerry, who had fired. It was Shorty, who had brought his Colt to bear even as he was getting to his feet on the road. And again his expert marksmanship had come to the surface. The Jerry slumped forward in his seat, his Luger still in his hands. He had been drilled neatly through the temple, from which a slow trickle of blood oozed down his face.

The sudden tragedy seemed to fill the other two Jerries with insane desperation. They saw that in just another moment the truck would sight them and be coming to their rescue. The driver of the car crazily reached for the emergency brake with one hand, and his foot found the clutch pedal. But even as he tried to start the machine, Kirby hauled off with all his might and sent a terrific left hook to the Jerry's jaw. *Sock!* The driver crumpled over the wheel—out cold! Meanwhile, the unarmed Jerry colonel in the rear was trying to leap forward upon Kirby. But Shorty Carn had already reached the scene again, and he brought the butt of his Colt crashing down on top of the officer's gray cap. And the Jerry colonel also passed out cold.

All this had happened in breathless seconds, before the truck had yet reached the crest of the hill. Swiftly the two Mosquitoes had done away with the three Jerries, killing one and knocking out the two others. But their desperate work would go to no use if the truck spotted them here on top of the hill. And it would spot them in just a few seconds now.

THERE was only one thing to do, and they did it with the frenzied quickness which only desperate men can attain. It was Kirby who roughly shoved the unconscious chauffeur away from the wheel, to the other side of the front seat. The Mosquito leader sprang into the driver's place. At the same time Shorty hopped into the rear next to the two inert Jerry colonels.

Leaving the gears in neutral, Kirby recklessly seized the emergency brake, released it. The big car began to roll backward down the hill, faster and faster as its heavy body quickly gathered momentum. Down, down they rolled, with Kirby steering as best he could—looking back over his shoulder. It was crazy and reckless, but it was the only hope they had of eluding the truck. The car careened perilously, swerving and threatening to go crashing into the trees which lined either side of the hill. It is hard enough to drive backward on a level stretch, in low speed. But to roll backward down a hill, hell-bent, is an almost impossible feat. In the rear, next to the two motionless *Obersts*, Shorty held on for dear life, his face white as a sheet, his stomach nauseated, and his breath drawn. Wildly the machine with its strange cargo kept rolling down the steep grade. In seconds they had reached the bottom, but momentum kept them speeding backward along the level stretch there.

Then Shorty gave an alarmed shout. "That truck's coming over the hill now! God, they'll spot us surely!"

Kirby did not dare to look ahead to see—he had to keep looking behind to steer the rolling auto. But he prayed frantically that he could reach the bend in the road toward which, they were backing, prayed that they could get around it and be temporarily out of sight before they were really seen. The, car was beginning to slow down now! But the bend was coming, coming. Kirby gripped the wheel. God, could he ever perform that difficult steering? The curve was right behind now, looming ominously, tauntingly. With his heart in his mouth, the Mosquito tugged the wheel around.

The big car swayed giddily, and began to skid in the dust. But then it was backing right around that curve, backing while Kirby steered with painstaking care and precision. He had accomplished the impossible maneuver. As soon as they had gotten well around the bend, and were safely screened off from the road ahead, the Mosquito leader jammed on his brakes. Tires squealing in the dust, the big machine skidded to an abrupt stop. The two men could hear the truck coming down the hill now, clattering and roaring.

"What in hell are you gonna do now?" Shorty gasped frenziedly. "Let's turn around and get the hell away from that damn truck!"

Kirby shook his head. "Can't do that—there's a few miles of level stretch around this curve, and they're bound to spot us when they come around the bend. Besides there might be more traffic! We can't risk being seen with these Jerries!" As he spoke his frantic eyes were scanning the road on either side. The truck was coming closer, closer as it tore down the hill. *Clackety-clack! Clackety-clack!* It was coming, coming! Soon it would round the curve and then——

Again Kirby acted with frenzied haste. His eyes had spotted a place on one side of the road where the trees were not so dense. He took a long chance. Shifting the car into first, he pulled the wheel way around and drove straight for that spot. Shorty, not knowing what he was doing, yelled to him to look out—but already the big Mercedes was bouncing and lurching off the road, over the ditch. Madly, Kirby tried to hold her to her course, tried to steer between those trees. *Crash!* The left front fender was twisted and crumpled as it struck one of the heavy trunks. But the car went on. Kirby drove as far as he could from the road—drove until the thickness of the trees stopped him.

Tensely, the two Mosquitoes looked back. They could plainly see the road through the trees—it was just a few hundred feet away. But there was a chance

that the Jerries in the truck would not see them in here, that is if they had not already spotted the staff car! Unaware of its presence, there was no reason why they should look in that direction and see it.

Clackety-clack! The truck was coming around the bend now! The two Mosquitoes sat tense, silent, not daring to breathe. Through the trees they saw the truck suddenly appear, saw it passing. And in their panicky fear they imagined that every Boche soldier on the open lorry was staring straight through the trees in this direction. God, all they would have to do is look here—and they could see the staff car.

But then, to the Mosquitoes' frenzied relief, the truck had passed—and they heard its clattering rumble die out into the distance. They were safe, safe at least for the time being. They paused to take a long breath. "Well," Shorty said then, glancing at the prostrate Jerries in the car, "do you still think it's easy to hold up a car full of Jerries?"

"Who said it was easy?" Kirby growled at him. "But we did it, didn't we? And if everything goes as well as this, I'll be satisfied. Now let's get busy, before some Jerries do come along and spot us. The first thing to find out is whether these two Boche here are the experts we want."

"Be a helluva joke if they're not!" Shorty said, with a mirthless laugh. "And how are we going to tell?"

But Kirby did not answer, for he was already busy searching through the uniforms of the two high officers. Shorty helped him. And their search rewarded them—nothing! Nothing but the usual odds and ends, and two identification discs which read simply: Karl von Bueler, *Oberst*, Franz von Weimer, *Oberst*. There were no papers or credentials to indicate that these men were ordnance experts sent to look at a tank. And their uniforms merely showed that they belonged to the regular Imperial army.

The two Mosquitoes looked at one another, helplessly. But then Kirby refused to be daunted.

"Look here," he insisted. "It stands to reason that these guys must be experts. After all they were coming along the road around eleven o'clock, and there are two of them."

"Yeah, that's all well and true," the skeptical Shorty replied. "But suppose they aren't the experts? Suppose when we get to Souelly we find the real experts there already?"

Kirby's face clouded. Too well he realized that such might be the case, and the consequences would be serious indeed. He glanced ruefully at the Jerry colonel

who had not been killed, but who was out cold. "If you only hadn't socked this guy so hard with your gun butt," he told Shorty, "we might bring him around and make him talk. But just now he's almost as dead as the guy here you plugged."

"Well, look at the driver, you didn't tap him any too lightly yourself," Shorty countered. "After the wallop you gave him, he won't come to for hours!"

Kirby sighed, and pondered hard. And then, suddenly, he gave a reckless snort. "Well, what the hell, we'll take a chance, that's all. If these aren't the experts—well, then we'll be out of luck! And now"—he roused himself once more to action—"let's see if we can get into these uniforms. That dead guy's the biggest—I'll try his, and you take the other."

SHORTY had no choice but to assent, and so the two Mosquitoes lifted all three Jerries out of the car, and laid them on the ground. Minutes later, Kirby was struggling to squeeze into a uniform far too small for him, while Shorty was trying to tighten up the gray clothes in which he literally swam. But finally they managed to make the misfit uniforms do. When they were finished Kirby looked quite immaculate in his tight-fitting suit, while Shorty looked a trifle sloppy, but convincing. However, Kirby had to abandon the cape which the real Jerry had worn. For the cape had been stained with blood from the fatal wound. Fortunately the rest of the uniform was unspotted.

They next turned their attention to the three Jerries stretched out on the ground. In order to take the fullest precautions, they hid the corpse of the dead colonel in some brush. Then, with their own discarded clothes, they bound the two unconscious Boche securely, gagged them with handkerchiefs, and concealed them also in some bushes.

They sheathed the Jerries' Lugers in their belts, leaving their own Colts here. They must not risk carrying anything that might attract suspicion.

"Well," Kirby said, finally, "I guess we're all set. Now remember, from now on I'm *Oberst* von Bueler, and you're *Oberst* von Weimer. And you'd better let me do all the talking. My Dutch is a little smoother than yours."

"Don't worry!" Shorty agreed, readily. "I'll probably be so damned excited I won't be able to speak even if I want to!"

"Then let's go!" Kirby said. "Guess this bus is okay, except for that fender. Hop in!" He was already getting behind the wheel himself. Shorty quickly climbed in

beside him. The engine was still going at idling speed, and Kirby shifted into reverse and slowly released the clutch. Slowly, with painful, jerking efforts, the car began to back its way out of the labyrinth of trees into which it had darted so furiously.

Emerging on the road, Kirby turned the machine toward its original destination, Souelly. A moment later, having rounded the curve, they were climbing up that hill, the engine roaring in second. Up the grade they went, and over the top. And then, with a clear level stretch ahead, Kirby put her into high and let her out. The powerful Mercedes was a pleasure to drive. It chewed up the road with easy smooth speed, its motor purring.

“This is the second time to-day we’ve been riding in a staff car,” Shorty remarked, as they sped along. “And I gotta admit I enjoyed the first ride more—with that Limey brass hat.”

“Trouble with you,” Kirby bantered, resorting to a jocular tone as if to fight down his own inner tremors as well as Shorty’s, “you don’t appreciate that not every Yank can joy-ride around Bocheland in a Jerry staff car. And——” He broke off, suddenly tensing at the sight which loomed in the road ahead. Boche infantry! A long gray column of them were marching this way, rifles on their shoulders. Evidently they were also men returning to the rear.

With his pulse throbbing, Kirby boldly pressed the horn-button, and the staff car’s siren shrieked imperiously. The Boche infantrymen did not stop marching at all, nor did they even look up. But, mechanically, the gray column veered like a wave to the side of the road, clearing the way. The two Mosquitoes marveled at this machinelike precision of the Imperial army. Then they were whizzing past the gray-clad soldiers, and praying that they would not attract suspicion. Their fears were soon allayed. The officers of the Boche detachment saluted crisply as the car passed, the soldiers presented arms—but otherwise they showed no interest in the auto.

Leaving the gray column in the road behind, the two Yanks sped onward. And now they began to pass all kinds of traffic—trucks, supply lorries, wagons and tractors, which all gave them the right of way. The reason for this growing traffic soon became apparent. They were getting to the town. Already the road on which they sped was widening, and presently it became a cobble-stoned street. Houses appeared on either side, and lamp-post. They were entering Souelly, entering a town swarming with the enemy!

The streets were full of Boche soldiers, who strolled along leisurely. Several of them looked up at the staff car which sped down the cobble-stoned highway, and the fearful Mosquitoes drew in their breaths, half-expecting that the Germans would instantly see through their disguise and recognize them as Yanks. But no such thing happened. The staff car went on, unchallenged, unsuspected.

Down this wide main street they kept driving, their nerves growing tenser and tenser. And then, with abrupt suddenness, they were coming right out on the public square they had bombed from the air just a short time ago. Kirby tensely applied his brakes and the big Mercedes slowed down as it started across the open place. There was even a larger mob of Boche here than they had seen before. And now they could see the real result of their bombs. The cobble-stoned street was ripped up everywhere from the force of the explosions—Kirby had to swerve to avoid the huge gaping breaks and holes. And there were three ambulances still engaged in picking up the dead and wounded Jerry soldiers.

But there, in the center of the square, impassive and untouched, stood the rugged steel X tank.

Sounding his siren, Kirby slowly steered through the crowd of Boche soldiers who scurried like frightened rabbits from his path. He steered right toward the center of the square, until the crowd became so thick that he dared not go any farther. And then, with his heart in his mouth, he stopped the Mercedes.

The test would soon come. If the men whose uniforms they wore were not the experts, they would soon find out. And it would be a fatal mistake—a mistake which would lead them both straight to the firing squad.

JERRIES were surrounding the big car now, presenting arms respectfully as they saw the uniforms of its occupants. One of the Boche, noticing that there was no chauffeur, leaped forward alertly to open the door. Kirby nudged Shorty tensely, and the latter proceeded to climb out. The little Mosquito’s face paled a bit as the Boche soldier politely assisted him—never before had a Boche touched him without being bent on seizing or killing him. Kirby now followed him. The two men alighted to the street and faced the inquiring throng of soldiers. Outwardly they were calm and cool, but inwardly they were seething with dread and near panic.

It took all Kirby's will power to give him the nerve to speak. It was difficult to find his voice, and at the same time think of the exactly proper words. A slip in grammar or vocabulary now might well prove fatal. But then he cleared his throat and spoke—and though it was his tense excitement that made him speak so loudly, the Jerries fortunately thought he was roaring at them as most high officers roared.

"Who is in command here?" was what he said.

An answer from the Boche was unnecessary, for at that moment the crowd shifted respectfully to clear a path for an officer who came walking through, hurriedly. Straight to the two Yanks at the staff car he came. He too was an *Oberst*, with a hawklike face and sharp, intelligent features. There was malevolence as well as shrewd cunning in the small, beadlike eyes, and the lips were thin and cruel. At first sight, the two Mosquitos felt an inexplicable hatred toward this cruel-looking officer.

They didn't know just why, but for some reason they hated the Boche's guts.

He was confronting them now, and his beadlike eyes seemed to pierce right through them, giving them a look of keen scrutiny which they fearfully translated as open suspicion.

"I am in command here," he told them, in a clipped, almost staccato voice. The tone seemed to take all the politeness out of his words. "What is it you gentlemen wish?"

This time Kirby found it less difficult to speak, having already tried it. He answered quietly. "I am *Oberst* von Bueler," he introduced himself. He nodded toward Shorty. "This is *Oberst* von Weimer." But then he hesitated. The names seemed to have no significance to the cruel-faced colonel who confronted them. He showed no sign of recognition but kept studying them with his piercing eyes. Kirby dared not take the chance of saying that he and Shorty were the experts, for fear that he might be wrong. And yet he must say something—the Jerry was waiting for him to speak. He screwed up all his nerve, and took a long chance. "We have just motored here from Imperial headquarters at Staffletz," he said, and there, cleverly, he paused, leaving an opening which he prayed the Boche would fill.

And the Boche did. "Are you the two ordnance experts who were sent here to examine the tank?" he inquired—but his voice seemed so much like a challenge that the Mosquitoes did not feel any relief. Was he just trying to draw them into a trap, to make them betray themselves?

There was nothing for Kirby to do, however, but to assent. He nodded quickly. "Exactly," he conceded. "We came here to learn the secret of the captured machine."

And both waited then, in tense suspense. And then, to their intense relief, the Jerry *Oberst's* hard face relaxed into a smile. His tone changed, became polite at last.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," he apologized. "I should have known it—but you arrived in such an unceremonious fashion I thought perhaps you were not the men. I naturally expected you would have a chauffeur."

"We did have one," Kirby came back, quickly, and at the same time searched desperately for an excuse and found it. "On the way, however, we discovered that our man had been drinking. He crashed into a tree—"

And cleverly he pointed to the twisted front fender which, he noticed, the shrewd Jerry had also glanced at. "We turned him in to some officers, under arrest, and I drove the rest of the way myself."

The Boche *Oberst* nodded. His doubts seemed entirely allayed now. "I see," he said, and then again he became apologetic. "I hope you will forgive my rather brusque manner, gentlemen. You will understand that we have to be on our guard here, for we know that the accursed Allies will spare no measures to prevent us from learning the secret of the tank we captured. They tried to destroy it only a short time ago by bombs, but our excellent scout pilots shot down the swine Yankees, and they died in their burning ship." Relief swept the Mosquitoes at this. The Jerries thought they were dead, thank God! But then the *Oberst* went on, "However, we are taking no chances. We are keeping on the lookout for spies, and if we catch any we shall shoot them down like dogs—at once, and without asking any questions!"

"An excellent idea!" Kirby commended, though his voice sounded strangely hollow.

The *Oberst* smiled, pleasantly. "Well, I shall not delay you with any further inquiries. Instead, allow me to introduce myself. I am *Oberst* von Metz, of Imperial intelligence."

Involuntarily the two Mosquitoes stiffened. Von Metz! The notorious spy who had betrayed this tank to the Jerries, who had done away with its crew. No wonder they had instinctively hated the cruel-faced, cunning Boche.

"Well, I suppose you gentlemen are anxious to begin your work," the Boche resumed. "And I think it would be advisable if I first showed you the

tank myself, giving you the few facts I was able to learn about it. Unfortunately, I am not enough of a mechanic to understand the vital secrets of the machine, but I can explain to you its various parts and the method of driving."

Kirby turned to Shorty. "The idea seems suitable to me, *Oberst* von Weimer, what do you think?"

Shorty realized that Kirby wanted him to speak, lest his continued silence attract suspicion. The look in Kirby's eye told him to take a chance, to get up his nerve. He nodded.

"*Ja, wohl,*" he conceded. "An excellent plan!"

"We'll proceed at once then," von Metz said, unsuspectingly. And he led the way. Kirby and Shorty followed tensely. Both realized it was best to have the tank explained to them, for they knew next to nothing about tanks. Perhaps, through von Metz' explanation, they could learn some way to destroy the machine.

THREADING through the Boche, they came upon the X tank at last. And now the steel machine which had seemed so tiny from the air loomed gigantic and formidable in front of them. It was a monstrous thing, fully twenty-five feet long and ten feet high. There was power in every rugged line of it, power in its great tractors, its riveted steel flanks, its jutting gun turrets.

Even the access to this mobile fortress was difficult, its only entrance being on the very top. Von Metz was now climbing the steel ladder to get there. Kirby and Shorty followed. The manhole cover was open, and von Metz lowered himself through it. Kirby went after him, found the steel ladder in the interior, and descended. Shorty came down an instant later.

At first, despite the daylight which flooded in through the open manhole above, it was too dark to see in the interior. But then von Metz snapped on a switch, and the Mosquitoes blinked in the dazzling glare of several electric bulbs. They discovered that they were standing on a floor of steel, amid strange surroundings. It was the first time they had even been inside of a tank, and this tank was unusually complicated in its apparatus. They saw the butts of machine guns protruding from the slitted steel sides, saw the breeches of larger guns in the turrets. The whole length of the tank's center was entirely taken up by the huge, six-cylindrical engine, the enormous, tubular radiator, and the crankshaft. In front of all this machinery, high above the floor, with a special turret of its own, was the driver's seat, with its strange-looking gears on either side.

Von Metz was speaking. "Doubtless you two gentlemen have already been able to see more things than I myself know about this tank. How ever, if there is anything you'd like me to try to explain—"

"Yes, indeed," Kirby nodded eagerly. "Suppose, *Herr Oberst*, you tell us all you have learned about the tank. I can see that it is a very modern type of machine, heavily armoured."

"It is," von Metz agreed. "It carries those two six pounders in the side sponsons, as well as the four Hotchkiss machine guns. The engine here is unusually powerful. The tank can attain almost twice the speed of any other we have yet seen—going almost four miles an hour. There are four forward speeds." He indicated the gears on either side of the driver's seat. "Each tractor has a separate gear and clutch. Yes, the whole thing is as modern as can be. There is even a silencer, on top of the tank. Here's where the exhaust leads to it." He tapped a thick pipe which ran up through the steel ceiling, and at the same time an expression of cruel satisfaction came over his features, and his eyes gleamed evilly. "This is the pipe by which I betrayed the six swine of the crew!" he boasted. "You see this patch here, gentlemen?" He pointed to a portion of the pipe which had been covered with new metal. "Well, we just put this on a few minutes ago. When the tank started on its cruise this morning, I was number-three machine gunner. I had no trouble secretly cutting the exhaust pipe. And with the six foolhardy pigs entirely oblivious of it, the deadly, odorless fumes of carbon monoxide gas soon filled the close interior. I had a special device consisting of a rubber tube and a mask, by which I was able to breathe the fresh air through the slits of the tank. The rest of them were swiftly overcome by the gas, which is as invisible and odorless as air, and died without ever knowing what had happened to them!"

The two Mosquitoes had all they could do to control their horror and their rage. So this was the treacherous method von Metz had used to do away with the crew. Six Allied soldiers had died that horrible, stifling death, and three of those six were Yanks. Kirby's fists were clenched so tightly that his nails dug cruelly into his palms. God, how he longed to bash in the gloating, evil face of this Boche fiend who employed such foul tactics.

But aloud he said, with profound admiration. "A very clever trick indeed, *Herr Oberst!* You are to be congratulated for the splendid way you managed the whole affair."

“Oh, it was really nothing at all,” von Metz replied, with that exaggerated modesty that always betrays self-conceit and egotism. “It was quite simple. Not a shot had been fired from this tank when the carbon monoxide took its effect. I simply drove the machine into our lines, among my countrymen. We removed the bodies and, after changing into my German uniform, I brought the tank here. Thus we captured it intact—with its full supply of ammunition, though we had to refuel it with gas and oil.”

He proceeded then with his explanation of the various parts of the tank. Through it all, the tense Mosquitoes kept looking desperately for some means by which they could destroy this steel monster. They would risk everything if they could possibly find this means. They would not hesitate to knock the Jerry spy out and do their work, despite the surrounding Boche outside.

But the more they examined the tank, the more their hopes dwindled and sank. The thing seemed as impregnable within as outside. Even the gas tanks were inaccessible, being steel-plated, and on the rear outside surface of the machine.

Von Metz now suggested that they climb out of the tank so he could show them the exterior. There was nothing for the crestfallen Mosquitoes to do but assent, hoping against hope that something would turn up, that they would find some vulnerable spot on this impregnable steel fortress.

They followed von Metz up the ladder and out through the manhole, then down to the street again, with its watching throng of Boche soldiers. Von Metz led them all around the tank, pointing out this feature and that. God, was there no means of destroying the thing?

AND then a desperate plan came to Kirby, and because it was the only possible hope he saw, he seized on it without hesitation. He faced von Metz. “Did I understand you to say that this tank was all fueled and in running condition?” he asked.

Von Metz nodded. “Certainly. Everything is in perfect working order.”

“Well now,” the desperate Mosquito went on, trying not to betray his tense excitement in his tone, “I wonder whether you, who know well how to drive this tank, would object to taking *Oberst* von Weimer and myself for a brief cruise?”

Von Metz’ face clouded a bit, and he seemed to consider the matter. Kirby prayed fervently. If they could get von Metz to drive this monster away from all

these Boche, then overpower the spy, they could work with leisure and surely find some way of destroying the tank.

The Boche spy was still considering. “It is a little difficult,” he told them, dubiously. “If we were not in a town like this, with narrow streets and all, I should see nothing wrong with the idea. But——”

“In order to take our observations we must see how the tank runs,” Kirby broke in, with desperate insistence. “And the sooner we run it, the quicker we can learn its secret. I realize that a cruise in a village is hardly adequate—but you can take it out of the town, and run it in the open where we can really see its performance.”

Von Metz wavered. Then he reached his decision. “Very well,” he conceded. “After all you two are the experts, and I shall do anything I can to expedite your work. Suppose you gentlemen continue your examination of the exterior, and meanwhile I shall crank up the engine and get ready for the cruise.”

They nodded, all too eagerly—though they wished they could go right into the tank with the spy and hasten its departure. But they were supposed to be experts, interested in examining the tank. They must play their part. And so they remained outside, while von Metz again lowered himself into the machine.

With the Boche soldiers watching them curiously, the two Mosquitoes continued to walk around the great steel monster, looking at it with feigned interest and concentration.

But in reality they were merely listening, with ears alert, to the sounds which rose from within the machine. They could hear von Metz grunting, hear the squeak of the turning crank handle.

And at that moment there was a sudden staccato noise somewhere across the square, a noise which caused every Jerry to start and wheel around. The tense Mosquitoes looked too, and saw a motor cycle and side car come bounding across the cobble stones! And at the sight of it the two Yanks froze in their tracks, and sheer horror descended upon them.

For, riding in the side car of that motor cycle, wild-eyed and disheveled, was a gesticulating man clad only in underclothes. Recognition was instantaneous with Kirby and Shorty. It was the real *Oberst* von Weimer, the expert they had knocked cold. Somehow, in some manner the Mosquitoes could not guess, he had come to, and had been found or had found help himself. And now he was coming here to betray the whole game and expose the Mosquitoes as Yanks and spies.

Helplessly, the two horrified aviators looked at one another, and each saw his own hopeless despair mirrored in the other's eyes. The jig was up. Even now the motor cycle was slowing down, and Boche were beginning to go up to it. God, why hadn't they killed this Jerry as well as the other!

And then, as they stood there, waiting in helpless despair, there was a sudden raucous bark from within the tank, and they saw the great steel monster actually trembling and vibrating. The spy inside had started its motor.

Kirby acted upon the first desperate idea that flashed across his panic-stricken mind. The Germans out here did not yet know what this was all about—the excited colonel in the side car was just beginning to explain and point at the Mosquitoes. With frenzied haste, Kirby spoke to Shorty out of the corner of his mouth, "Into that tank! Quick!" Shorty needed no urging. Together the two men fairly leaped up that side-ladder, and lowered themselves into the manhole. Kirby went in last, and as he did so he unobtrusively pulled the manhole cover shut behind him, fastening the bolt he found there.

Von Metz was in the driver's seat now, jazzing his engine. He did not seem surprised to see them.

"I was just about to summon you," he said pleasantly.

"We knew you were ready, so we came," Kirby replied, calmly enough. "And now suppose we get started right away, so we can do our work as swiftly as possible."

Von Metz gave a nod, and the panicky Mosquitoes saw his feet press on both the clutch pedals. With either hand he shifted the twin gear levers. He had opened the steel flap in the turret before him now, and was looking out. But evidently the Germans out there were still confused, still unaware that Yanks were in the tank. For von Metz was letting up the clutches.

Clack-clack-clack! Clactkety-clack-clack! With a clumsy lurch the big tank was beginning to move forward, its great tracks banging and slamming against the cobblestones. The six-cylindrical engine was pounding for all it was worth, vibrating the steel walls and shaking up the men inside.

But before it had moved far across the square, where the Jerry soldiers scurried from its path, things began to happen. Von Metz gave a sudden exclamation as he peered from the aperture in front of him. He saw his own countrymen running before the lumbering tank, waving to him, shouting words he could not hear because of the clattering din of the tractors.

"There seems to be a lot of excitement outside," he called down to the two panicky Mosquitoes below. "We'd better stop and see what's causing the disturbance."

"No, it's nothing!" Kirby replied, crazily, and then seized upon the first explanation that came to his confused mind. "It is just that some authorities in the town are complaining about running the tank in the streets, I saw the officials arrive."

A shabby, ridiculous explanation—and yet, to his own surprise, it worked." By sheer luck, or perhaps intuition, he had hit upon the right track.

"In that case we'll go right on," von Metz said, to his joy. "It is probably the French burgomaster of this captured town. He is always complaining, but it means nothing."

As he spoke he calmly shifted the gears in second speed, and the tank lumbered on. The two Mosquitoes cursed at its slowness. It had not occurred to them that men could easily walk as fast as this clumsy steel monster could race. Too late now they realized that there was no chance of slipping away from that crowd of Boche, no chance of out-distancing them and making a real break.

AND now there came a violent pounding on the outside of the steel walls. Soldiers were beating frantically with the butts of their guns to signal their comrade within and warn him that his two passengers were Yank spies. And they were also clambering up the steel flanks of the slowly moving monster, trying to pry open the bolted manhole cover—the Mosquitoes could hear them hammering and banging up there.

Von Metz became suddenly alarmed. "There's something wrong out there!" he insisted this time. "Something has happened!" And, to the Mosquitoes' horror, he suddenly brought the clattering machine to a stop.

And then Kirby, seeing that the game was up, that further pretense was useless, acted with desperate fury. Before the alarmed von Metz could move from the driver's seat, the Mosquito leader whipped out his captured Luger and poked it right up into the body of the spy. His voice rang out crisply in the noisy machine.

"Get going!" he clipped out, in good American. "And if you make one false move, you dirty Boche, I'll send you to hell where you belong! You're gonna drive this tank, and you're gonna like it. Snap into it, now—got going!"

Von Metz' momentary surprise gave way to furious realization. A guttural curse ripped from his throat, and at first he made no move to obey. Meanwhile the clamor of the Boche outside was increasing, getting more and more ominous. Cursing, Kirby poked the muzzle of the Luger so viciously against von Metz' body that the spy grunted in pain.

"Go on, start driving! If you stall off any more I'm gonna let you have it—right through your dirty carcass! And believe me, it'll be a pleasure to shoot a skunk like you! Come on!" And he accompanied each command by a violent poke with the Luger. And Shorty Carn, who had stood gaping at this unexpected scene with awe and bewilderment, suddenly got busy, too, drawing his own Luger and aiming it unwaveringly at the Boche.

Von Metz, realizing that these two desperate Yanks meant business, reached reluctantly for the gears.

Clackety-clack! Clackety-clack! Again the tank was lumbering forward across the square, while the Jerries outside gave a cry of surprise and anger, and renewed their efforts to stop it. Kirby now stood up next to von Metz, keeping him covered, watching him like a hawk and at the same time looking through the open flap to see where he was driving.

The spy, his face a mask of sullen rage, drove on across the square. And then the Jerries outside, seeing that he would not stop, began to work in earnest. After all the X tank was more valuable to them even than the German intelligence man inside. They must stop it, recapture it! At the command of their frantic officers, they closed in all around the creeping, clattering machine.

Crack! Crack! Rifles and revolvers began to punctuate the clanging din with their shrill reports. The Mosquitoes heard the bullets glancing like pellets of hail from the steel flanks of the tank. But not all of those bullets were going wasted! Some of the more clever Jerries were seeking to fire through the slits in the steel, literally poking their gun muzzles right through the apertures. *Ping!* A bullet sang right past the startled Shorty's face and ricocheted from the steel wall opposite. *Ping! Ping!* The leaden slugs were coming right into the tank, one after another.

Von Metz shouted in a wild frenzy. "*Gott*, they'll kill me—my own countrymen will kill me if I don't stop!"

"And if you do stop I'll kill you!" Kirby grated, still poking that Luger viciously into the Jerry's side. "If your Boche comrades weren't such merciless skunks, they wouldn't be shooting at you! Go on, keep

driving!" They were reaching the edge of the square. Kirby pointed. "Down that street there! And keep heading in that direction—toward the Allied lines! No treachery either—I'll be here to see that you keep heading right!"

Von Metz had no alternative but to obey. Kirby watched him like a hawk while he steered for the street, steered by means of stopping one tractor and letting the other go on. Clumsily, the blunt monster swung around, and went lumbering into the street. But the Germans outside kept right on with it, kept trying to stop it with their guns. Thicker and thicker grew the hail of lead, and bullet upon bullet came whistling in through the slitted steel sides of the tank.

And then, suddenly, Shorty Carn, who had been cursing because he had nothing really to do, caught sight of the machine guns which protruded from all sides of the tank. The expert little gunner gave a yell of sudden glee. There was a turret near the rear and there were two guns there, pointing fore and aft. He looked about, and presently found several belts of ammunition. With lightning dexterity he got to work, standing on the platform beneath the turret. He knew the mechanism of the Hotchkiss well, and it only took him a few breathless seconds to load the breeches. Then——

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! Right into the very faces of the terrified Boche outside, the machine gun suddenly spat from the turret of the tank. Shorty, aiming with his usual uncanny marksmanship through the slitted steel, swung the gun backward and forward, scattering death in every direction.

"Ataboy, Shorty!" Kirby yelled to him. "Keep'em off! Give'em hell!"

Even now the bullets had stopped coming into the tank. Though the Jerries outside were still firing frantically, they were no longer daring to come so close. Shorty changed guns, using the rear as well as the forward weapon, spraying round after round of deadly lead out at the Boche.

The horrified von Metz was driving down the street now, and the tank was clattering along at its maximum speed. Kirby was watching every move of the Boche spy, watching with the grim knowledge that this man—who could treacherously betray a whole crew of six—would hesitate at nothing. He watched keenly as the Boche shifted the gear levers.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Shorty kept blazing away at the Boche who still followed relentlessly. The air inside the tank was getting stifling now, stifling with the

acrid stench of gunpowder and the fumes of gasoline. The pounding, vibrating engine was giving the men a headache.

SUDDENLY all three of them, the two Yanks and the Boche, gave a shout of alarm. Straight ahead of them, swinging onto this street from another, appeared a huge, heavy truck. The Jerries were deliberately putting it in their path to block the way! Vainly Shorty tried to reach it with his machine gun, but though he dropped several of the Jerries in it, he was too late. Not until it was so turned that it took up practically the whole road did the truck stop.

Frantically von Metz was reaching to cut his throttle.

"No, you don't!" Kirby roared at him. "You're gonna get past there if it's the last thing you do!"

"But I can't!" the spy yelled wildly. "I can't go through a truck!"

"Then go up on the sidewalk to the right of it—there's room. You can't kid me. If we don't get through, your life won't be worth a damn. Go on!"

Again he shoved the Luger viciously into the Jerry's body. Von Metz, cursing wildly but futilely, went on driving. The truck loomed ahead—Jerries were behind it, firing while they tried to screen themselves from Shorty's continuously blazing gun. Again von Metz stopped one of the tractors, kept the other going. The tank veered slowly, rumbled on.

"No tricks, now!" Kirby warned, glancing through the aperture and seeing that von Metz was heading for the sidewalk, for the space between the truck and the buildings. "Remember if anything happens to this tank, something happens to you first!"

Von Metz said nothing. The tank went on. *Brump! Blang-blang!* With a lurch which almost threw the Mosquitoes off their balance, the huge monster climbed upon the curb. The space was all too small. *Crash.* The whole front of a store was carried away as the roaring machine squeezed through. Debris rained down on the steel surface. But they were getting through, passing the truck! A lamppost, obstructing their path, snapped before them like a match stick, and with a lurch they were back on the road—clattering ahead.

"Good!" Kirby commended. "You're doing fine. Now get out of this damned town so we can make some headway. Hurry up!"

Von Metz merely scowled in reply. The tank clattered on, with the Jerries still swarming around it,

but helplessly. Shorty's gun kept scattering destruction among them. The little man reloaded one belt after another, for he had found plenty of ammunition.

The street before them suddenly curved, and von Metz steered the lumbering tank around the bend. And then Kirby and Shorty got a cruel surprise.

For they discovered that this was a dead-end street. As they rounded the curve they saw, through their slitted louvres, that the street ended with a massive wall of brick which stretched clear across it, between the buildings. And at the same moment Shorty, happening to glance behind from his turret, gave a frantic cry.

"Gosh, they're closing in on us with three big trucks like that other one! They've followed us and——" The clatter of his gun cut off the rest of his sentence. He was firing frantically at the trucks which sought to imprison the tank between themselves and that wall ahead.

Kirby was crimson with fury. "You dirty skunk!" he bellowed at von Metz, in whose eyes there had leaped a gleam of triumph. "Tricked us, didn't you? Deliberately followed, this street until you came to this wall. You knew it was here, didn't you? Well," he spoke with gripping fierceness, "you're gonna go right on. This tank ought to go through that wall—and then we'll be out of the town. Go on."

The gleam left von Metz' eyes. "I tell you it is impossible!" He explained. "You are crazy. We can't go through that wall!" Even now he was forced to bring the lumbering tank to a stop, for the wall was right before them—solid, impassive.

"Go on!" Kirby repeated, madly.

Von Metz again started the tank. It lurched forward. *Bang!* Resounding dully, it struck the wall—and stopped. And behind it the three trucks moved in closer, despite Shorty's withering fire.

"There you are!" von Metz shouted. "You see, it can't be done!"

But somehow Kirby thought he detected a look of shrewd cunning in the cruel face of the Boche. "I have a hunch you're a dirty liar, in which case it will be tough on you!" he grated. "I'll bet this tank can go through that wall! Back her up!" he ordered. "Get some distance and try again!"

The German obediently threw the gears into reverse. The tank lurched backward, until the trucks prevented it from going further. "All right, try it now!" Kirby snapped. Von Metz started driving forward again. And again the tank balked as it clanged into the

brick wall. But again Kirby was sure he could read that cunning crafty look in the Jerry's face.

"Look here!" the Mosquito roared. "I'm tired of this stalling. I'll give you your choice—either back up and try to get through those three trucks, or go through the wall! If you don't do one or the other, I'm pulling my trigger. Go on!"

And then, suddenly, a wild look came over the spy's features. The tank, he knew, was virtually trapped if he could only keep it here. It was hemmed in, and sooner or later the Jerries outside could get it if it remained, and get the swine Yanks in it.

He reached for the gears, and the muscles in his arms tensed. He summoned all his strength. He then jerked the levers without pressing his clutch pedals—his purpose being to jam the gears and thus render the tank immovable.

BUT when he had scarcely moved those levers, Kirby's keen eye caught him at his treacherous work. In a split second the deed would be done—the gears ground and smashed. The Mosquito did not hesitate. His free hand clenched into a fist of iron. Then——

Sock! And he enjoyed the pleasure he had longed for—the pleasure of bashing the cruel face of the Jerry spy. Flush on the Boche's jaw the terrific blow landed. With a grunt von Metz collapsed, toppled right out of the raised seat, and tumbled to the floor, where he lay stretched out cold. Quickly, Kirby stooped to relieve the Boche of his Luger, pocketed it.

And from his place at the guns, Shorty was staring down at Kirby with horror. "Holy hell, now we're stuck sure!" the little Mosquito exclaimed, "You've gone and knocked him cold, and he'll probably never come to. What are we gonna do here by ourselves?"

"You take care of that gun!" Kirby shouted back, for even now the rain of Jerry lead was beginning to reach the tank again as the men outside, unmolested by the machine gun, surged forward to attack anew. "Keep giving the Boche hell! As for me, I've been watching this skunk drive, and I think I savvy the gears now. If not, it'll be just too bad! But we'll see!"

He leaped into the driver's seat, even as Shorty's gun renewed its clatter. Timidly, Kirby put his feet on the clutch pedals and reached for the gears. He remembered how von Metz had shifted them into reverse. He tried the levers—they meshed in smoothly. Then, drawing a long breath, he opened the throttle and let out the clutch pedals.

To his almost incredulous joy, the tank moved

backward, somewhat jerkily, but satisfactorily enough. Shorty yelled that the trucks were in the way, and Kirby hastily pressed in both pedals. The tank stopped. The Mosquito shifted the gears into first. Again he left out the pedals. *Clack-clackety-clack!* The tank ploughed forward. The wall loomed before the aperture in front of Kirby's face. Stubbornly he went on in first, opening the throttle until the engine vibrated as if it must burst. With all its power, the tank slowly went toward the brick wall. *Clang-bang!* Again it struck resounding metalically. For a second it stopped, and Kirby could hear its tracks clacking around though it was not moving. And then——

Cr-r-r-rash! The wall suddenly gave way before the powerful monster which bucked against it. It crumpled in a shower of falling bricks and dust. The tank was moving, tilting at a crazy angle as it climbed over the ruins. Triumphantly, Kirby kept driving it through. The surprised and enraged Jerries again took the pursuit, with new fury.

"Boy, that was a stunt!" Shorty howled with glee. "I never thought you could drive the thing—but you're good!"

"Wait a while!" Kirby yelled back, conservatively. "Remember, I haven't had to steer the darn thing yet! You keep at that gun, that's our only hope." They were crossing a field now, out of the town. Ahead of them was the same forest in which they had landed their incapacitated plane, hours before. The swarm of Boche, growing steadily in size now, kept pace with them, kept firing away. "No chance of losing these Heinies," groaned Kirby. "They'll stick with us until we stop and give up. We'll have to keep going."

"But how will we destroy the tank?" Shorty wanted to know.

"We won't!" Kirby replied. "We can't! We'll have to try to drive the damn thing all the way to the lines!"

"God, we'll never make it!" Shorty protested.

"I'm gonna take a chance and drive through that forest," Kirby went on, calmly. "It'll be harder for the Boche, and the trees aren't so thick that we can't get through. Besides, it ought to bring us out pretty near the lines."

And he went on heading straight for the woods. He had shifted from first to second, and now he went through the other two shifts into fourth. He was learning the complicated control with his usual quickness in understanding anything mechanical. It was not so difficult, once he got used to it.

The tank crawled over the field, at four miles an

hour, with the Jerries around it doing their damndest. They had machine guns now and were setting them up ahead and blazing away with them. Their fire was ineffectual, though now and then, a bullet accidentally found its way through one of the slits, and came whining into the interior. And all the time the unconscious von Metz lay in serene oblivion on the floor.

The forest now! A huge tree loomed ahead of Kirby, and he knew he must veer to the right to avoid it. Remembering how von Metz had done it, he stepped on the right clutch pedal. The right tractor stopped and the left tractor swung the monstrous tank around. Straight into the forest Kirby steered her. The Jerries still following, and Shorty still firing away at them.

The trees soon became so dense that Kirby could no longer steer between them. Recklessly he went straight ahead, with throttle open. *Crash! R-r-r-rip!* Like snapping twigs the trees buckled and toppled before the powerful, charging tank, which crawled over the fallen boughs. Only to avoid the larger and deep-rooted trees did Kirby veer from his course.

Thus they went on, crashing through the forest, with trees often falling on top of them, but with the tank standing up as stoutly and impassively as it had stood during their own raid on it. With increasing confidence, until soon he felt almost like an experienced tank driver, Kirby guided the clumsy craft onward. The powerful six-cylindered engine continued its pounding, and the air in the interior kept getting more stifling with the stench of gas. Outside the Jerries stubbornly continued their chase, though as yet they had found no means to cope with this moving fortress whose turret spat death at them. But their helplessness did not last long.

SUDDENLY, to his surprise, Kirby saw smoke issuing from the trees some distance ahead. Shorty saw it too. At first the two men could not comprehend—then they could see flames rippling in and out of the trees with increasing ferocity. Horror came over their faces.

“God!” Shorty exclaimed. “The Boche have set the whole woods ahead of us on fire! They want to stop us from getting through, want to make us turn back—so we’ll finally be stranded in Bocheland!”

Kirby cursed as he realized that his comrade spoke the truth. Even now the pungent smell of smoke seeped into the tank, despite the other odors of gas and oil and gunpowder. The Boche certainly must be

desperately anxious to keep this X tank! But the two Mosquitoes were just as desperately anxious that they would not keep it!

“Damn it to hell!” Kirby burst out, recklessly. “We can’t turn back now. There’s no other way to get back to our lines or even near them. We’ve got to get through here, even if we’re roasted. Are you game?”

“Let’s go!” Shorty bellowed, bravely. “I’ve always wondered what hell is like, and there it is right ahead of us now!”

Kirby’s jaw set in a hard firm line. Straight ahead he sent the tank crashing. The Jerries around them followed awhile, until the great forest fire was so close that they had to turn and retreat from it. But the X tank did not turn. It went on, on, into the mist of smoke which turned into a thick fog. The blinding, choking vapor seeped in through the tank, filling the men’s lungs and making them gasp for breath. Kirby, hardly able to see where he was going, doggedly trusted his flyer’s instinct to guide him straight ahead, as it often did when he had flown blind in the air. And now, above the clamor of the tank there rose a crackling roar! *Fire*—that deadly element of nature which withers and destroys!

Into the blazing inferno crashed the X tank. The two gasping Mosquitoes could see the livid outlines of burning trees through the dense clouds of smoke. The flaming barks toppled and crashed on all sides of them. And then there descended upon them a heat so terrific that they thought the skins would warp on their bodies. Flames were caressing the steel flanks of the tank, heating it until it became an oven, an oven in which two Yanks were slowly roasting. Sweat was dripping from them in torrents, they were half-stifled by the smoke. But still, grimly, they held on. Choking and cursing, Kirby kept guiding the lumbering tank through the blazing woods.

“Are you all right, Shorty?” he managed to shout hoarsely, for he could not see his comrade in the smoke.

“Okay!” Shorty’s choking but game voice came back. “I’m stripped to the waist.”

Kirby took the hint, and savagely ripped off his own upper clothing. His naked, shining skin was red and scorched. But he sat right where he was, driving, driving with his teeth gritted, his jaw still set firm and hard!

Crash! A flaming tree landed right on top of the tank, and was carried for several hundred yards before it finally toppled off. The heat in the interior became

more and more unendurable. The Mosquitoes felt their eyes popping out of their heads, while their throats seemed to dry up and grow parched and swollen. It was so hot that they marveled the very gasoline did not explode from the heat. But still they went on, yard by yard through that torturous hell.

And all the time von Metz lay serenely unconscious, mercifully spared from all this horror.

The hours which followed—for it was a matter of hours—were just one long, lurid nightmare to the two stifling Mosquitoes. The whole world became a crazy miasma of heat, a molten mass of incandescence which seethed and roared about them. They went half mad from it, and thought they were on fire themselves, for they were burning from head to foot as with a high tropic fever. Their faces were black and distorted, and even the sweat had stopped streaming from their withered skins. And then slowly they began to lose all sense of feeling and thought. They were no longer aware that they were inside of a lumbering, lurching tank which crawled and ploughed through the blazing trees, knocking down those which the flames had not already felled. And Kirby's arms and legs guided the controls of the tank as if they were automatons detached from his body.

On, on, on, with death in a livid red mask leering at them, roaring at them, caressing them with fingers of flame from all sides. On, on, on, and still the stout X tank crawled and climbed and lurched. An eternity went by, but they did not know it. Nor did they feel at first the sudden reviving coolness of fresh air, which was now dispelling the smoke. Not until the tank suddenly went crashing out into the open, right out of the forest, did they come dazedly to their senses. And then, through the clearing smoke, a hoarse, hysterical shout from Kirby.

"Shorty! Shorty, we made it: We're out of the forest! We came through!" He was shifting excitedly in the driver's seat, though his body was racked with aches and burns. "Shorty, are you O.K.?"

"What the hell do you think?"

Shorty called back gamely. "Sure I'm O. K., although I feel like a well-done piece of roast beef." Both men were leaning to the openings in their turrets, gratefully gulping long draughts of the fresh, reviving air into their seared lungs.

But their relief was short-lived. For now, as they came out of the forest, which blazed behind them, they were brought face to face with a new peril.

Boche again! Boche, who seemed always to be

relentlessly on the scene. The alarm to stop the fugitive tank must have been spread all throughout Bocheland. For, waiting right here, having shrewdly gauged the spot where the steel craft would come out of the burning forest—if it ever did come out—was another mob of Jerry soldiers, who were blazing away with rifles and machine guns. Again came the hail of lead on the tank's sides, again the steel slugs found their way into the slits and whistled in the ears of the two Yanks. And then, to their horror, an even greater danger suddenly loomed in their path.

DRAWN by three horses which galloped furiously as their drivers spurred them on, a big field gun came rushing up to the scene. With lightning speed, its crew dismounted and were detaching the caisson and preparing to train the gun on the approaching tank!

"God!" Shorty yelled. "We're cooked! One shot from that gun will send us to hell."

"Probably will!" Kirby conceded grimly. "Even though they'll try only to disable the tank. And these Jerries are damn good shots!" And then again a reckless oath ripped from his dry, sore throat. The Germans were still busy setting up their weapon. Madly, Kirby steered the tank straight for them. The monstrous craft lumbered on, closer and closer to the cannon. Now the Jerries had the gun trained—were taking out a shell to shove it into the breech. Kirby opened his throttle wide, coaxed all the speed he could out of the creeping tank. The gaping muzzle of the gun loomed before his window, looked like a huge, deadly jaw waiting to swallow him. Another moment and red flame and smoke would belch from that dark muzzle!

But that moment never came. For by now the tank had gotten too close for the big gun to range it, and before the gunners could do anything, before they realized what was happening, the huge steel tractor was upon them. Straight into the cannon it plunged, and beneath its thirty-five ton weight the gun and half its crew were crushed to a pulp!

"Well, at least they won't use that on us!" Kirby shouted, as they went crashing on. The swarm of Jerries still followed, and again Shorty resumed the job of raking them with his turret gun.

Only for a while did the two Mosquitoes find progress comparatively easy—only for a while were they traversing over the rough but open ground. And then, to their sudden despair, there loomed straight across their path the silver sheen of a river—a river at least a quarter of a mile wide, a river which cut them

off from their lines, and through which there was no passage. The tank might go through fire, but it could not go through water.

And yet there was a note of frenzied joy in Kirby's voice as he exclaimed, "God, that's the Rois river! Why, we must be right near the Allied lines. We must have covered nearly ten miles in that forest." He glanced out across the water. The opposite shore of the river looked desolate, deserted. It was full of twisted rusting barbed-wire and dead tree stumps. A dead sector, with no signs of Jerries or Allies on it. But somewhere over there, quite close, must be Allied territory!

Shorty shook his head despairingly. "It's no use trying to go on like this. We can't get over that river, so the best thing to do is to leave this damn tank in gear, and jump for it, Boche or no Boche. The tank will go right into the river and sink in the mud at the bottom. The Jerries will never get it!"

"No, but they'd get us!" Kirby returned furiously. "And damn it, we can't give up like this, with the lines so close!" Madly he racked his brain. "I could swear I've seen a couple of bridges over this river from the air. If we could only find one——" He thought hard. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, he swung the lumbering tank hard to the right and began to drive parallel to the river. The Jerries still followed, and as the Mosquitoes went on, more Boche appeared. And now the enemy seemed to be finding a more effective method of combatting these stubborn Yanks in the X tank. To the Mosquitoes' amazed horror, they heard a shrill ripping of metal tearing through metal, and with a shriek a whole fusillade of bullets came whizzing right through the steel walls of the tank, missing the two men by scant inches!

"They're using armor-piercing guns on us!" Shorty burst out. "Damn them, they'll plug us sure this way!" And he started to use his own turret gun with renewed fury.

Thicker and thicker grew the Jerries' lead. They were carrying on their attack now with deadly system. Holes were literally perforating the steel walls which up to now had withstood everything so stoutly. But still Kirby drove on down along the river, his eyes searching frantically for signs of a bridge.

Both the Mosquitoes were so absorbed in their duties, Shorty firing his gun at the surrounding Boche, Kirby watching for a bridge, that at first they did not notice the thing that was taking place right under their noses.

On the floor of the tank von Metz had at last

recovered from the terrific blow Kirby had dealt him. Dazedly the spy had come to his senses, and was amazed to find his body aching with burns and his throat sore and swollen. But like all spies, he was quick to regain his wits. Instantly he became aware of his surroundings, realized that the two Yanks had the tank in their hands, but that his countrymen were still outside, firing away at it, piercing it with anti-tank machine guns!

The two Yanks were not noticing him, von Metz also realized. He did not have the strength to fight them even by foul means. But, furtively, he began to twist and roll across the floor. Unseen he worked his way straight to the pounding engine of the tank. His eyes were fixed on the distributor and its six connecting ignition wires. Slowly his hand reached up, seizing that bunch of wires. By ripping them out he could stop the tank, and the Yanks would never have time to repair it before the Germans outside, with their anti-tank weapons could get it back into their hands. Fiercely, his hands closed on the wires and——

It must have been some sixth sense which warned Kirby. For even as the German was in the act of ripping out those wires, the Mosquito happened to glance down from his seat. He saw, and acted more swiftly than he had ever acted before. With one lightning move, he whipped out his Luger and fired blindly. The report was drowned out by Shorty's clattering gun, the little Mosquito did not even see what had happened.

Von Metz, the master-spy, the betrayer of the tank, collapsed on the floor—the hand which was to have ripped out the wires dropping listlessly on his chest. This time, thought Kirby grimly, he would stay out.

But the Mosquito had no time to pay further attention to the prostrate Jerry. For now, peering out of his aperture again, his eyes caught a sight which filled him with inexpressible joy and hope. Down the river, looming slowly toward him, was a bridge. It was a wooden affair built on piles, and it didn't look any too strong, but it was a bridge nevertheless—a passage across this wide river. He turned to shout eagerly to Shorty.

"Look, Shorty! Look what we're coming to! If we can get across there we'll make our lines sure!"

Shorty was enthusiastic. "Gosh, that's the first break we've gotten! Let's go!"

THE tank lumbered on, Kirby heading for the bridge. God, if only he could make this creeping

monster dart forward, rush to that bridge. Impatiently, he went on driving toward it. But in the meantime the Jerries outside were getting more and more powerful. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* Another fusillade of armor-piercing bullets came ripping into the tank. Good Lord, they were making a sieve out of the steel walls! *Ping! Ping!* The bullets were ricocheting from the interior now. A hot searing slug grazed Kirby's neck, and when he brought his hand away from the place there was blood on it.

With growing fury, the Jerries kept blazing away—trying to ferret out the two Yanks in the X tank. And then a sudden gasp of pain came from Shorty, and he grabbed his shoulder and stood, slumped and hurt, his face contorting.

In alarm, Kirby saw him. "God, they've hit you—the skunks! Get you bad?"

"No, it's nothing!" Shorty insisted, but the peculiar harshness of his voice belied the words. "Just a scratch in the shoulder. I'll be okay in a jiffy—keep going! We'll make it."

Kirby, with a pang of anxiety for his comrade, turned reluctantly back to his controls. A moment later he heard Shorty's gun clattering again. Hell, but the little Mosquito was certainly game! He was still keeping up the fight, though wounded. But now his aim was no longer so accurate, a fact which was evidenced by the increasing ferocity of the Boche attack. The bullets kept coming, ripping through the tank. Surely the two Yanks would soon be fatally hit.

Stubbornly, Kirby kept on driving for that bridge. And at last it was looming before him. Amid the crackling roar of Boche lead he headed for it, was swinging the tank around. His hopes sank even lower as he saw the bridge close up, now. God, how could that rude wooden structure ever support the thirty-five tons of steel which made up the tank? But there being on other alternative, they would have to take the chance.

"Hold on, Shorty!" he shouted. "We're getting there, and we'll get across somehow! Are you all right?"

"Okay." Shorty repeated, but this time his voice was quite weak.

The huge tank veered, as Kirby released one of the clutch pedals. Carefully, ignoring the molesting Boche fire, he steered for the planked surface of the bridge. Fortunately the bridge was quite wide, though there was no protecting railing of any kind on its side. With a prayer on his lips, Kirby went on toward it.

Clumpety-clump-clump! With a lurch, the

lumbering steel monster was clattering onto the bridge, and already Kirby could feel the planks straining and shivering beneath it. The crowd of Germans, instead of following, stood transfixed with incredulity on the shore. They alone knew how rickety that bridge really was, and when they saw the huge, massive tank deliberately starting across it they shook their heads. They no longer fired at the steel monster now—and it was fortunate that they didn't, for Shorty was suffering so frightfully from his wound that he couldn't have fired back at them any more. The Germans had decided that the X tank was doomed to destruction now, doomed to plunge into the river. It was no use their trying to disable it, if was too late!

Clumpety-clump-clump! Out, out on the wooden bridge crept the tank, with Kirby holding it grimly to the center of the planks, and driving slowly, painstakingly, so as not to make the big machine jerk—which would be fatal. But now the whole bridge was trembling. The boards beneath them began to splinter and crack. By the time they reached the center of the bridge it was actually beginning to sway and rock on its foundations. The two Mosquitoes with Shorty holding his wounded shoulder, peered fearfully down into the shining calm waters below them. Those waters were deep.

Kirby slowed down even more. He kept in low speed, and fed the engine so little gas that the tractors hardly moved. Snail-like, inch by inexorable inch, the tank moved on over the bridge. And on the receding shore the crowd of Jerries watched in grim fascination. The bridge was rocking and swaying more and more violently. Suddenly, one of the piles supporting it was seen to snap in its place and go tumbling down. Behind the creeping tank the planks were split and broken. And though the opposite shore was near now, the Mosquitoes knew the situation was getting more and more hopeless. The bridge was beginning to give way. The strain was too much. Now, near the shore they had left behind, the whole wooden structure was swinging outward like a sail in the wind. It was starting to fall.

"God, if only she holds out a little longer!" Shorty groaned. "We haven't far to go now."

It was true. They were just a few hundred feet from the opposite shore now. But even at that moment it came—an ominous crash, a mighty splintering of wood—and to their cold horror they saw a big portion of the bridge behind them topple right over into the water. Everywhere the piles were snapping now, and

the whole bridge was breaking down faster than they could ever hope to move along it. It was no use. In a frenzy of panic Kirby yelled out, "We'll have to leave the tank—the bridge is breaking! We've got to get out and run ahead of it, off this damn bridge—or we're cooked! Can you make it, Shorty?"

"Hell, yes! But hurry, this bridge is gonna go in another second!"

Kirby jumped right out of the driver's seat, still letting the tank creep on in low gear. Why stop it? He met Shorty at the ladder. The little man was glancing wonderingly at the prostrate figure of von Metz. He had not known of the drama which Kirby and the spy had enacted.

"Don't worry about him!" Kirby was saying with feverish haste. "I had to plug him awhile ago. Let him go down with the tank he betrayed! Come on now, up that ladder!" Shorty started to climb, using his free arm. Kirby, behind him, gave him a helping hand. Even as they ascended, the tank shook violently and they knew the bridge was crumbling. With frantic fingers Kirby unlocked the manhole cover, flung it open. The two climbed out. They leaped off the tank, which was still crawling straight over the splintering planks. They had just alighted on the bridge when the final, ear-splitting crash came. They felt the flooring give way beneath their feet, and then they were thrown out into space. The bridge had fallen.

The next thing Kirby knew he was struggling to his feet in water which had proved surprisingly shallow. He was soaked and covered with mud. He saw Shorty then, also standing up, still holding his wounded shoulder, while agony twisted every line of his features.

All this had happened in a breathless second. And now there came a dull, crashing thud whose terrific concussion flung both Mosquitoes off their balance again. The tank, too, had evidently plunged into the river. Somehow, and they never knew afterward where they got the strength to do it, the two Yanks waded to the shore. They reached the bank and there, utterly exhausted by the whole ghastly experience, they just dropped down and relaxed, wet and miserable, their bodies full of burns and pains, and Shorty's shoulder numb and throbbing.

But as they sat there, a sound suddenly reached their ears—a sound which they had already learned to hate and would hate forever afterward. *Clackety-clack! Clackety-clack!* For a moment both men thought surely they were insane, were hearing things. And then, incredulously, they saw—and their eyes grew wide with awe.

Right out of the muddy, shallow water, looking for all the world like some monstrous, grotesque turtle, crawled a massive thing of steel—all covered with mud and seaweed. Straight and true it kept to its course. Its huge tractors dug into the muddy banks of the river, and it pulled itself right up the incline.

The X tank. By some miracle of miracles, it had landed on even keel in the shallow bed of the river, and had kept on going just as Kirby had left it.

The two Mosquitoes kept staring at it, gaping in wonderment, watching it climb the bank of its own accord. And at that same moment something else caught their attention.

STREAKING across the river, cutting the waters with its knifelike bow, was a speedy patrol boat. It was headed right this way, right toward the bank where the two exhausted Mosquitoes squatted. The Boche, who could not use their rifles or machine guns from across the wide river, were coming over. And they were coming over, no doubt, to capture the tank as it crept through this dead and deserted area.

Both Mosquitoes knew that the thing to do was to go after that tank—which had already reached the top of the bank and was toppling onto the level ground. The only way they could prevent these Jerries from getting the X tank was to climb back into it and resume the infernal battle. But though both tried to stir themselves, neither could find the strength. They were absolutely exhausted. They looked at each other dismally and without hope. The patrol boat was coming closer and closer. Soon the Boche would be here, would capture not only the tank, but the Mosquitoes, too! Kirby began to sob convulsively, like a frustrated child. All their gruelling hardships, all their reckless fighting, had been useless—utterly useless! The Germans were going to get the X tank after all.

The patrol boat kept sweeping in. Crazy, in a sort of futile rage against the Jerries, Kirby whipped out his Luger and pulled its trigger. There was a dull, hopeless click. The gun was soaking wet and would not fire. But unfortunately the Jerries saw the Yank pointing a gun at them. They assumed that the gun would go off in a second, and they acted accordingly.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat! In the bow of the oncoming patrol boat a machine gun stuttered into life. Jagged streaks of flame leaped from its muzzle. The two horrified Mosquitoes hugged the bank, while the bullets dug into the dirt right above them and sent

it flying. The Jerry gunner was swinging his weapon around now. He was going to cut them to ribbons while they stayed helpless on the bank. And yet the idea of throwing up their hands and surrendering never occurred to either of the despairing Yanks. They had suffered enough humiliation without surrendering. With their mission unaccomplished, an utter failure, they hardly cared that they were going to die. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* The machine gun on the patrol boat was starting again. Now, as it swung around, they could see its bullets creeping toward them along the bank—closer, closer. It was all over. The two defeated Yanks shot one last glance at one another, a glance which said, “So long, we’ll meet in hell.” And then——

Down from the blue dropped a streaking winged shape, its twin forward guns spitting two steady streams of tracer. Straight for the speeding patrol boat it swooped like an avenging hawk. It was a scout plane, a Spad. And at the sight of it Shorty and Kirby became delirious with wild joy. For at once they saw its insignia, and they knew. The pilot of that plane was Travis. Travis, their comrade, the third of the Three Mosquitoes!

As a matter of fact, the lanky Travis had spent an anguished day. By sheer luck he had eluded the three Fokkers which had attacked him while he protected the D.H. over Souelly. He had brought his bullet-ridden S.E.5 back to his own drome, where it had cracked up in landing. Then, immediately, he had taken off in his own Spad. And all through these hours he had flown one lone patrol after another, searching throughout Bochelant—refusing to believe what every one told him, that his comrades must have been killed or captured. He had looked for them everywhere—but while he had been looking they were inside a tank, crawling through a flaming forest.

But now, as he had started out on still another search, Travis had suddenly sighted a strange scene below. He had seen a patrol boat full of Jerries streaking across the river, and firing away at the opposite bank. And on that bank, he had seen two huddled figures, naked to the waist. Recognition was instantaneous—the comparative sizes of the two Mosquitoes had helped Travis identify them at once, the huge Kirby and the corpulent little Shorty.

Thanking God that he had arrived at such an opportune moment, Travis had come plunging down like a plummet. And now, leaning fiercely to his sights, he was right on top of that patrol boat. His twin guns were blazing out burst after burst, sending a hail of

lead upon the Jerry craft. The Boche soldiers dropped like flies, several of them falling out into the river. Again and still a third time Travis Immelmanned overhead, to come roaring down anew. Even when every one of the Boche was dead or wounded he did not stop. Not until one of his incendiary tracers had found the launch’s gas tank, and the whole craft went up a burst of flame and smoke, did he finally end his furious attack.

A moment later, he came streaking down in a glide, setting his ship in a perfect landing right on the level ground above the bank where his two comrades huddled.

“God!” the lanky Travis exclaimed. “You two guys look like you’ve been through hell!”

“We have,” Kirby croaked hoarsely. “Literally!” Then his face became anxious. “But look here, Trav—you shouldn’t have landed here. The Jerries have spread the alarm all throughout Bochelant. They’ll probably be coming up here.”

Travis laughed out loud. “You must be cuckoo!” he mocked them. “The Jerries won’t dare to come to this side of the river—except in sneaking patrols like the one I ruined. Don’t you know you’re in Allied territory? Why, I saw a big detachment of British troops just a mile or so from here. They’re moving here to dig in for the coming German offensive.” He glanced out at the wrecked bridge, and his eyes lighted. “Say, that’s funny—that bridge there breaking down! Only to-day I heard them talking at the drome about it—said they’d have to destroy that bridge somehow, to prevent the Jerries from crossing the river when they start their push. Lucky accident——”

And his comrades smiled at him with good-natured tolerance.

On the following morning the three stood before the desk occupied by a stern-faced British brigadier general. But just now his face did not look so stern, because it was beaming with frank admiration.

“It was extraordinary!” he was praising them. “Quite extraordinary! A true example of Yankee ‘guts,’ as they call it. And now I suppose you are all curious to learn what finally happened to our precious X tank. Well, let me read you a report from another brigade headquarters.” He picked up a paper.

“The —th infantry battalion, engaged in digging new trenches, were startled when a large tank came toward them and continued to crawl along of its own accord. They hailed it, shouting, but there was no response from the tank, which kept on. The

curious men followed, and at last the tank stopped. It was found later that the machine had run out of gas. Upon entering the tank, it was discovered that its sole occupant was a dead German colonel—”

“Yeah,” Kirby broke in grimly. “I had to plug that von Metz guy! He had it coming to him!”

The general smiled tightly. “I’m afraid he had just a little more coming to him. It wasn’t your shot which killed him—that was just a scalp wound which could have done no more than render him unconscious. No, fate had a far more horrible death in store for him.”

“What happened?” Kirby asked, grimly. “Was he killed when the tank went down with that bridge?”

“No,” the general smiled even more tightly. “A little worse than that even. He—but I’ll read the rest of it from this report.”

“Upon close examination it was found that some armor-piercing bullet had torn a hole right at the foot of the exhaust pipe, near which the German lay with his face turned. This confirmed the doctor’s diagnosis that the man had died from asphyxiation by carbon monoxide gas.”

