



# ZERO HOUR

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*While his wingmate, Lieutenant Gabriel, waits for death by firing squad in Boche land, Silent Orth faces the toughest problem in his career!*

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**T**HE ENTIRE 11TH PURSUIT GROUP poured onto the field, hugging the hangars and office buildings for protection, when the droning, high-pitched and defiant, of the Fokker hammered over the tarmac. It was coming like a bat out of hell.

Silent Orth stared moodily into the eastern skies, trying to pick out the fleeting wings of the enemy. Somehow he knew that a message was coming, and he dreaded its receipt. It came too soon after the departure of Lieutenant Gabriel for Paris.

Gabriel had departed considerably from regulations in the take-off for Paris, in that, due to the coolness of the morning, he had worn an ordinary civilian coat over his flying garments. He had been out of uniform. And somehow it hadn't seemed right. Yet Orth and the rest of Gabriel's wingmates had not protested. The high strung Gabriel had deserved a slight break. His nerves had been close to going. He had downed ten enemy crates in a period of two weeks—enough, surely, to make any man nervous. For the Germans were great on retaliation.

However, it couldn't have anything to do with Gabriel, Orth told himself, for Gabriel had headed straight for Paris. Orth had watched him fly over the horizon westward and vanish with a scudding of fast wings.

And yet—

Orth couldn't down the fact that Gabriel might have got into trouble. But how? And why from the direction of Germany?

NOW the entire 11th could see the roaring Fokker. It was spinning down from an immense height. The major in command had shouted to the gun crew. Tripoded Lewises were already swinging into line to cover the elusive target as it spun in, making many evolutions to throw off the aim of the American gunners. It was diving so that the wind through its superstructure was a mad paean of defiance as it headed for the end of the field. And while it was still spinning it dropped past the trees at the end of the tarmac. The Lewises were chattering. They were smashing bullets at the enemy as fast as lead could pour through the barrel of the swiveling gun. But the Fokker kept on diving. It leveled off with a smoothness and precision which argued a master at the stick, and flashed across the tarmac at full speed. Something dropped from the belly of the crate, to hit the ground and bounce.

Then the Fokker zoomed. It was fifteen hundred

feet up, already headed for Germany, by the time the Lewises' sights could be realigned. Then it was too late.

AN ORDERLY brought the message to the major, who tore it open, his face a mask of wonderment. His hand trembled when he had read the missive.

He looked around at the faces of his men. Orth's inner forebodings were realized.

"It's Gabriel," the major said. "The Germans have got him. This message says that he was forced down near Sonnenberg's field and captured unharmed. It also states that he was not in uniform. You all know what that means. Not to be in uniform when captured means to be a spy.

"Whatever possessed the hair-brained fool, anyhow? He must have cut back into Germany for a final fling at Sonnenberg's men before going on to Paris. Well, he'll never make Paris now. You all know what it means?"

Solemnly the 11th nodded.

To be taken in anything except one's own uniform spelled the firing squad—and the slimmest of excuses would suffice the Germans where a man who had downed ten of their best was concerned. Lieutenant Gabriel was doomed—and he was Silent Orth's best friend.

Orth stepped up to the major.

"I'd like permission to try to get Gabriel back, sir," he said. "I know how the Germans operate. They're as methodical as bookkeepers. This means that Gabriel is still alive, else they would have said that he had been executed. If I know Germans at all they'll put him in front of a firing squad at dawn tomorrow—after giving him a hell of a big party tonight."

The major shrugged.

"What can you do?" he asked. "You can't land and take him in with you. The first sight you'll get of him, to be able to identify him, will be when he actually faces the squad. Then it'll be too late."

"Still, sir," said Orth softly, "I'd like a try at it."

"It's hopeless, Orth, even for you," said the major. "But I can't allow them to rub Gabriel out without making some attempt to save him. Go to it."

Orth went to his hutment to make plans. His face was grim. He was earning his sobriquet, for not once during the day did he speak to one of his wingmates. He was harshly intent on what he believed he had to do. He ate with the others that night without taking part in talk. He went again to his hutment for a good night's sleep against the forthcoming ordeal.

HE HAD scarcely hit the pillow when the major sent for him.

He reported to headquarters. The major's face was white, grim, some-how relentless. There was a brass hat with the major whose face expressed nothing whatever. The major cleared his throat.

"It's all off, Orth," said the major. "Gabriel will have to be sacrificed."

A cold hand seemed to fasten itself at Orth's heart. He knew that the brass hat had something to do with the cancellation of his plans, which meant the sure death of Gabriel. But he waited to hear more.

"Colonel Manning," the major inclined his head, "has a job for a man like you. You understand, of course, that you're not ordered to do this job, but when you hear what it is I'm sure you'll volunteer. Wing has expressly requested that you do so."

Orth said nothing. The colonel's eyes were narrowed as he studied Orth, this silent man who had accounted for so many of the enemy.

"It will mean honor, Orth," he said, "and public decorations."

"Begging the Colonel's pardon, sir," said Orth. "I do not care for decorations."

NOT a good thing to say, when the colonel's own breast literally sprouted all the decorations possible for a desk soldier to collect.

The major went on:

"Somewhere around dawn tomorrow, perhaps a half to three quarters of an hour after, one of our spies will signal to a ship from a German clearing, probably with diminutive panels. The ship is to go down, land, take him on and bring him back. It calls for a cool head, sure airmanship, and a smart hand at guns and controls. I think you're the only flyer we have who can do it."

"Near dawn?" said Orth in a dead voice. "That means that it would be impossible to do anything for Gabriel without taking a chance on letting this spy down!"

"The life of one man is nothing when weighed against that of thousands of our troops," said the colonel tartly. "This spy has information which is of vital importance to all troops in this sector. He has risked his life to get it, is constantly risking his life—and the loss at the same time of the information—until we have landed him safely on Allied soil. The death of Gabriel—who went to his fate at a personal whim—is little compared to the life of this spy."

"The spy also knew what risks he was running," said Orth, knowing that his objection was weak and would be instantly spotted as such.

"Right!" snapped the colonel. "But he went anyhow. His courage will never be properly paid for. Spies get only such glory as may be given them in secret. Will you try to bring him back? Remember, it may save the lives of thousands of our men."

Orth considered for a split second. In his mind's eye he could see Gabriel facing that firing squad, refusing the blindfold, taking bullets in the heart without a whimper, without crying out. Orth himself had once commanded a firing squad which had executed German spies. He knew the commands, and all the heartache and brutality which went with them, as even Gabriel could not know them—as even these two puppets of war could not know them:

"Make Ready! At the Heart Take Aim! Fire!"

Then the crashing volley and the limp figure, knocked backward by the crashing impact of eight bullets, falling on its face to kick its life away. That's what Orth was arranging for Gabriel, when he nodded.

And his head, as he signified his willingness to take on the job, felt as though it had been weighted with lead. In his mind's eye he could see Gabriel so very plainly, could hear with the ears of his imagination the rattling of musketry, see his friend fall to the ground; still, perhaps, with the civilian coat around him which had spelled his death sentence.

ORTH didn't sleep that night. He walked the floor of his cubicle. When the orderly came to waken him, and found him, his face haggard and drawn, pacing the floor, his mind had been made up. His lips were white. But he was determined.

To carry out his determination meant that he must do the impossible, must fly better and faster than he had ever flown in his life before, be better with his guns—be twice the man that Orth was supposed to be; and all this after a sleepless night when he had finally refused to think of all the dread potentialities of failure. He was, if the colonel had told the truth, literally gambling with the lives of thousands of his own troops. But he was going through with it.

"And not all of Sonnenberg's flyers or his butchers will keep me from it," he told himself. He waved away the steaming mug of coffee. He didn't even think of a cigarette. His propeller was ticking over in the predawn coolness.

He looked at his watch. It was six in the morning.

IN HALF an hour at most Gabriel would be facing his Golgotha. The spy would be preparing right this moment for the arrival of the ship which was to bring him out with his information.

And that spy would be suffering the uncertain tortures of the literally damned. He would be surrounded by enemies. His plight would be even worse than Gabriel's, because for Gabriel there was no uncertainty. He would know that he faced the firing squad.

Orth stepped into his crate. The motor blasted. The propeller became invisible with speed. Orth had tested out his instruments. The Spad was ready for any emergency. He was as ready, today, as he ever would be. But his nerves were singing like taut bowstrings in a high wind.

He started the Spad down the field, shoving the stick forward for flying speed. Then he literally jumped the gray ship off the field, headed it into the east for the German lines. His watch told him that his time was short. German executioners waited neither for time, tide, nor man.

The Spad rose swiftly to two thousand feet. Orth looked down, with eyes that scarcely blinked. It was as though he feared that even to blink would lose him a trick in the great game he was already playing. Would the Germans be expecting an attempt at rescue? If they were, he hadn't a chance. On the other hand, the very audacity of his plan might give him a chance to succeed.

Early as it was the German Archies were ready. They filled the sky about him with their black flowers of death. His wings rocked and rolled with the concussions. His feet and hands corrected easily for each little disturbance of his wings caused by the explosions. His Hisso blasted skies asunder with the roaring of its might, let full out for this race with death.

Orth knew about where the spy would be awaiting him. Colonel Manning had been very explicit on this point. And that spy must be brought back. Cursing savagely, Orth gave his crate all the juice she would take, tried to shove the throttle wider when it already was full open. He was through the Archies. His oath had been for the fate which rose out of the woods ahead to thwart the impossible thing he had to do.

SPLIT seconds of time counted this morning. The field where the spy was to be taken on, or the clearing, rather, was fully four kilometers from where he

believed that Gabriel would face his fate. Impossible! And yet—

The two Fokkers, warned of his coming by telephones which had jangled at the lines, had never been closer to destruction than they were at this moment. For Orth had resolved that nothing should stop him.

Back and beyond, and below the two oncoming Fokkers, two other crates—one an Albatross, one an Aviatik—were lazily rising to follow the Fokkers, as though, in purely routine fashion, to back the play of the two which were plainly coming to attack.

Orth flew on. He had made a resolution. His jaw muscles were ridges of determination. He wouldn't stop or turn back or change his plans in one iota. He felt he had gone too far to turn back. His watch told him that not even a minute could be spared if he were to succeed.

THE Fokkers were very close now. They were spreading apart. He knew why. They planned on taking him from either side. They were coming on at top speed. He aimed at the space between them and let his Hisso rave. He cleared his guns with a single burst. They were in working order.

Orth held his nose down slightly. His eyes swiveled from one crate to the other. Now the crate to his left was swinging its nose around. In a second or two it would be in position to fire.

He waited for the blasting of its Spandaus. A row of holes appeared, in his wings. He yanked the stick back into his belly, counting. He had a minute to spare, no more. One—two—three—four—he was counting the seconds.

At the top of his flashing zoom he banked swiftly to his left, bringing the motor of the Fokker into his line of sight. He forced his crate around until the German was squarely in his line of sights, and already, frantically trying to roll out of them.

His Vickers ranted savagely in a long burst. He saw his tracers end at the side of the cockpit, just below the German pilot's shoulders. The pilot jumped and jerked in his pit.

Bullets whispered past Orth's ears as the other Fokker pilot let go with his Spandaus. Orth went up and over in a wingbuckling turn. He hadn't once stopped counting. He had got to twenty. That he had done the impossible and slain an enemy in less than twenty seconds meant nothing to him. A flyer often had to do the impossible.

The first Fokker was going down, wreathed in flames, when Orth spun around, bringing his nose into the line of fire from the second Fokker. Even as he spun, his knees held the stick and his thumbs were on the trips. His Vickers were raving in a long stuttering burst. It was wide. Frantically he swiveled to bring the Fokker cockpit into line. The German rolled out with ease.

Forty—forty-one—forty-two—

Orth tilted his nose, hurling his crate straight at the Fokker cockpit. The belly of the enemy crate, rolling away from him, was right in his sights. He let his guns go again. The Fokker seemed to hesitate.

It didn't roll back to an even keel. It slanted down the sky. Orth came on back around, into his original position, and his count had reached fifty-two. Two Fokkers in less than a minute! But he thought only of valuable time lost, and that eight fingers on as many triggers could blast a man into eternity in far less time than that.

THE Albatross and the Aviatik had speeded up. They were coming on with determination as Orth lifted his nose and climbed for the skies. His eyes were like two burned holes in a blanket. His lips were almost invisible, a mere slash in his face, so tightly were they compressed. He had resolved to take a desperate chance on his own speed and that of the two enemies to get him to where he was going.

He leveled off at seven thousand feet, where he could see Sonnenberg's field, dead ahead, and lashed for the enemy tarmac. The Albatross and the Aviatik, expecting him to attack, had sheered off. He laughed a little.

Precious time would be lost by the two Germans to get back on his tail. That time would be valuable to Silent Orth.

He gave his crate full gun, and now he was holding her nose down slightly to get all the speed he possibly could. His eyes searched the ground below for a sign. There were trails through the woods from the German field, now faintly seen, now invisible. On one of them, in the midst of the guards, Gabriel would be marching.

ORTH strained his eyes to pick up the firing squad, strained them until smarting tears rolled down his cheeks. Behind him now the Albatross and the Aviatik had started a devil's duet with twin guns on their nacelles.

Orth didn't look back. His taut back constantly

expected the smashing impact of bullets, more bullets than ever would be fired at Gabriel. But Gabriel would have no chance—Orth made his own chances as long as his crate held together and flew.

And now, with bullets whispering and spitting past his ears, oddly like the droning of mosquitoes and the buzzing of hornets combined, Orth made out the party which he knew would be executing Gabriel. They had debouched into a clearing about a kilometer from Sonnenberg's field. An officer was marching Gabriel to his place. It all stood out with startling clarity. Orth could even recognize Gabriel by the civilian coat which he still wore.

Orth looked back. Then he looked down again. The firing squad was being ordered into formation for the execution.

None of its members had, apparently, noticed Orth and his diving Spad, or maybe they also noticed the Albatross and the Aviatik on his tail. He started down. Hell's bells, the thing was wild, mad, impossible—but he was going to take a crack at it, come what might.

He started to spin when the going behind him became tough. Bullets hammered at his wings, ripped through his fuselage. But so far no bullet had touched himself. He flew as he had never flown before, to save his own life for Gabriel's sake.

He didn't stop to think now of failure; he didn't dare fail. For by this time the spy would be scanning the skies for rescue, his miniature panels in readiness to arrange the signal. If nobody answered, and his panels were seen, he would die as Gabriel was now preparing to die—and his information would die with him.

It couldn't be. Orth wished there were a few seconds left in which to turn on the two who followed him down. But already the officer in command of the firing squad was marching pompously to his place to give the fatal commands which hadn't ceased to ring in Orth's ears since he had agreed to undertake the colonel's mission.

THE firing squad was swimming up to meet him. The German officer had drawn his sword. Orth leveled off for a second to take a quick look through his ring-sights. The whole firing squad was visible in the crossed wires.

The elevation was twenty-five hundred feet. He didn't dare miss. He saw Gabriel's white face lifted toward him, knew that Gabriel felt he hadn't a chance to do what he was planning. Then his guns were going.

The German officer, his sword lifted to give the first command, fell in his tracks. His fall might well have signaled the squad to do its job, for their rifles spoke.

Gabriel toppled into the dirt!

Sick at heart, Orth went after the firing squad with the fury of despair. He raked them with lead from his guns, yawing right and left to cover them all. Some broke and tried to run, and he cut them down with ruthless savagery. They had destroyed Gabriel; they had downed him.

HE LOOKED over the side as he swooped over them. Not a man of the squad moved. That all were dead and therefore not to be protected by the flyers in the Albatross and Aviatik was proved by the spurt of dust where Spandau lead, missing the diving Spad, rocketed into the ground.

Orth glanced aside at the prone figure of Gabriel—and a shout rose in his throat!

Gabriel was rising to his feet. Gabriel was running. His left arm hung limp at his side. So much, then, had Orth's dive disconcerted the firing squad, or else Gabriel had flung himself down just in time for the volley to pass through the space where he had been standing.

Orth swiveled around. As long as he moved with all his speed the two behind him had no chance. The woods on either flank were vomiting German soldiers, firing now at Gabriel, who was running for the woods.

Orth swore, sliced down in a screaming sideslip, marveling that so many bullets had missed him thus far. He set his wheels on the ground, bounced fifty feet, caught his crate with stick and rudderbar, set her down again. He was trailing Gabriel, Gabriel was looking back, fighting to make some use of his dangling left arm. He was running at top speed, trying to match the speed of Orth.

Orth fishtailed to cut his express train dash across the clearing. The Spad slowed down. The Albatross swept over Orth, its Spandaus trying to cut down Gabriel. Gabriel went down again, rolled to his feet when the Albatross had passed.

Orth couldn't fire on the Albatross.

Gabriel was close now, and the Spad was going far too fast. If Gabriel missed—

But he dare not miss. Orth cut his speed to almost nothing as he came directly up to Gabriel. Gabriel clutched at the entering edge of the Spad's lower wing. When the crate moved on, Gabriel did not appear. Orth saw his right hand hooked over an inner bay

strut. Could Gabriel ever pull himself up with only one good arm to help him?

Then Gabriel's head appeared. His face was set in a mask of agony—an agony of effort. But necessity seemed to make him strong. Somehow, anyhow, he got his stomach over the entering edge of the wing, managed to hook his left arm around the strut, to draw himself up.

At the same time he jerked his head at Orth, bidding him take off.

Orth didn't wait. He couldn't. He spun around as the two crates came over again, looking at his watch as he did so. So far, he was still in time. He slammed down the clearing, praying that its sparse crop of grass and weeds didn't hide stumps which would destroy him, took his crate off the second he felt he had flying speed.

HE DIDN'T wait for altitude. With Gabriel clinging to his strut for dear life, and the two Germans harassing Orth, there was no time for anything. Orth slanted for a break in the trees at the edge of the field. His dropped left wings went through the opening. His own weight rolled Gabriel against the fuselage, where he clung like a leech with both legs and one good arm. Nothing short of an aerial earthquake—if there could be any such—would shake Gabriel off that wing.

Now above the trees, with his hisso roaring full out, Orth dared to level off. Gabriel was looking at him, jerking his head at the pursuing crates. He nodded, moving closer against the fuselage.

If the motor took fire, Gabriel wouldn't have a chance. But heroic measures were necessary. At least, now, Gabriel had a chance he hadn't had when he had faced that firing squad. Orth swiveled, favoring the wing on which Gabriel crouched.

His teeth had bitten his tight lips through. Blood ran down his chin. Precious seconds were being used up.

ORTH swung on the nearer of the two crates—the Aviatik, and sent it down with a long savage burst of flame. Then he decided to outrun the Albatross, taking advantage of the momentary discomfiture of the German who had just witnessed the killing of his comrade, and who had seen Silent Orth knock down three of his wingmates. Certainly he had reason to pause for thought.

Then Orth was away, setting a beeline for the spot where he was to pick up the spy. He refused to think

what it would be like, trying to lift two men on his wings, when one already made the crate loggy. And over and beyond that, he must get both of them home! They would be attacked from all sides. It was hopeless, couldn't be done. Yet Orth never thought of not trying. Without the spy to consider he had already worked a miracle. Was he capable of still another?

Grimly he nodded his head.

Now his eyes were searching for the clearing where he was to locate and take off the spy. The whole countryside seemed to be pockmarked by clearings. What was to prevent the spy from shifting to a clearing whose location he hadn't got back to Manning? What was to prevent his being forced to do that by circumstances?

Orth had to take the chance. The Spad had never behaved more bravely. But the sky now seemed full of crates. None of them, as yet, was trying for Orth, but some of the Germans must certainly have seen the fall of the Aviatik. Yes, two crates were cutting out of two different formations and racing to the scene.

Orth gritted his teeth. This was to be a close thing, then.

Then all at once he saw a German, a small, slender German, race into the center of a clearing and spread two white strips of cloth on the ground in the shape of a cross. The cross indicated wind direction, but Orth didn't consider that. For Germans in the woods were firing at the slender man—who had flung himself to the ground and was frantically waving at Orth.

Orth caught Gabriel's eyes again, pointed down. Gabriel eased to the edge of the wing, looked over. His face was thoughtful when he looked back at Orth. He made a signal with his free hand for a second. The signal said:

"Nod, old man, and over I go. I get it all—and that guy is more important than I am."

BUT Orth didn't nod. He merely set his teeth more firmly and dived straight for the clearing, running a race with death—against the soldiers of the Fatherland, and the flyers who were closing in on his fleeing Spad.

Again he must set his wheels down and this time he must save Gabriel all over again. The tug and pull, the savage drive of necessity, made Orth feel like a superman—as though he could outwit and outfly the best in Germany. He set his wheels down. The Albatross went over him.

Bullet holes appeared in the wing so close to

Gabriel that Gabriel made a face at the Albatross, would have shaken a fist at it had he been in position to release his deathlike clutch on the strut. The wind of Orth's passage literally held Gabriel pinned to the fuselage, which must have been hotter than a furnace at his back. But Gabriel wasn't one to complain. Now, perhaps, he was glad of that civilian coat which had caused all the trouble, since it provided an extra bit of padding against his back.

THE ground was right under Orth's wheels. There was a stump in his path which he must hurdle. He did, fishtailing as he reached for the ground beyond it.

Then his wheels touched. Dead ahead, turning to come back, the Albatross was getting set to blast bullets into his very prop as he tried to take off.

Orth considered as the crate lost speed. The spy—who, after all, might not be the man he sought—was racing for the slowing Spad, arms outstretched. The "German" saw Gabriel on the right lower, changed his course to clutch at the left wings.

Then, even as he rolled onto the wing, grabbing with both hands, bullets hammered at his lower limbs. His legs seemed almost to rip from their sockets. The man's face was a mask of agony, as Gabriel's had been. But he clung, face down against the wing. Orth saw blood on the wing beside him. But the spy, suffering veritable torture clung with all his power.

Orth blasted down the clearing, swinging at right angles when he had sufficient speed, to miss the bullets of the diving Albatross which would surely have got him if he hadn't swerved.

Bullets ripped through his tail surfaces. The Spad shuddered. Viciously Orth gave his Hiss the gun. It could never lift such a load, yet lift it it must. And it did. Orth put the nose down in the very face of the trees, to get all the flying speed he could possibly manage, then literally jumped his Spad out of the clearing. His wheels touched the tops of the trees. His speed was little more than half that of which the Spad was capable without its triple load.

AND now the sky seemed to be filled with enemy crates. The Germans were at last alive to the situation. They must have known that a spy was being taken back, even as all Germany by this time must have known of the rescue of Gabriel.

If Orth got away with this—well, Germany would have plenty of cause to remember him. Both sides of the lines would ring with his name. The Allies would

make a legend of him; the Germans would array their very best against him. But he would welcome all this, if only he could get his passengers home.

The Albatross came for him, Spandaus raving. And he saw at once that the Albatross pilot was deliberately concentrating on the two figures on the wings, especially on the slender man in German uniform. Bullets hammered at this one, missing by fractions of inches. The spy looked at Orth beseechingly. Orth cursed to himself.

He suddenly banked left, when the Albatross slanted away after a particularly vicious thrust at the gray figure on Orth's wing—and tried to bring the German crate into his line of sights. But the German was too wary, had seen quite too much of this man's flying and fighting ability.

The German was holding Orth there, until help should arrive. But the second Orth swung back toward him, the Albatross came back. Orth could have looped and had a fair chance of getting him. But neither Gabriel nor the spy could remain on the wing in a loop. Or could they? Orth signaled to Gabriel. Gabriel nodded and literally hugged the strut, which a stream of bullets could rip away from him to let him fall the fifteen hundred feet which now separated the Spad from the ground.

Gabriel was game. Orth looked at the spy. The spy had fastened on as Gabriel had done. Orth noticed that a growing smear of crimson marked the wings where the man was sprawling. He gritted his teeth. The two would have to look out for themselves. The German would never expect him to loop with those two on his wings.

The surprise was complete, as Orth, almost shutting his eyes when he thought of all the gruesome possibilities, yanked the stick back into his belly. The crate responded with a rush. It's nose came over. On his back, Orth glued his eyes to his ring-sight. Coming over he tried to bring the German into his crossed wires. The German was firing frantically, trying to get him with a fatal burst before Orth could get into position to retaliate.

THE German took desperate chances to make his bullets good, knowing that he faced death if he failed. Perhaps he depended much on his greater maneuverability because he was more lightly loaded, to take him free when Orth's bullets began to hammer at his cockpit.

But he delayed too long, and for a moment, as his

Vickers ranted and raved, Orth forgot the two who clung to his wings for dear life. His one purpose in life was to get that Albatross. His tracers hammered into the cockpit, seeming to end there.

A great sobbing shout came into Orth's throat as he saw the German jump and jerk in the cockpit of the Albatross. The hand on the trips of the Spandaus fell away as though smashed down by a sledgehammer weight. The German slid out of sight, and Orth had to roll—which he did with his heart in his mouth—to escape the final upward lunge of the Boche crate in its death throes.

He leveled off, to find Gabriel and the spy still in place, but with faces white as death, and hands almost ready to release their grips on the struts. But they were still on the plane.

Orth now settled down for the race home.

OTHER crates were coming in. He looked toward Allied skies, where a flight of Nieuports were deadheading into Germany. He gritted his teeth anew and headed his Spad directly at that formation. The Germans were all around him now and he was racing against time and death as he had never raced before.

He dared to put his nose down and give his crate full gun. The last of his original four enemies had scarcely had time to crash in, trailing its fatal comet-tail of smoke, shot through and through with orange flames, when he was too far away to see what had happened. His wings were in shreds, threatening to bow back or upward with the speed of his mad flight.

The Nieuports were coming on, speeding up as though their skipper sensed the necessity which drove this Spad out of Germany in such an erratic flight to meet them. They were coming on, bulking larger and larger with the combined speed of their flight and that of Silent Orth—who was praying for perhaps the first time in his life, at least in this war, for the strength of wing and motor to see him through.

Bullets hammered at his wings.

He dived. He spun. He yawed right and left. But now he didn't take time out to fire. He didn't dare. Gabriel and the spy were clinging like grim death to their struts. Once a stream of bullets almost chewed Gabriel's strut through at the middle. Orth could see Gabriel literally glue himself to the wing as he sought to favor the weakened strut.

Orth's tail surfaces were blasted to hell and gone.

His crate was almost a wreck. Two Fokkers were coming in on his tail for a final burst. He dived. He

rolled. His passengers clung. And then, with a roaring Niagara of sound, with guns chattering and raving, the Nieuports rolled over his head and the Germans were fighting for their lives, with the sole objective of getting home with all their crates intact.

Orth settled back with a sigh of relief. Now, for the first time, he realized what a ghastly chance he had taken. He had gambled with the lives of thousands to make good on the task he had assigned himself. He had disobeyed orders. He might well be cashiered, sent to Leavenworth for twenty years, for what he had done, quite regardless of the fact that he had brought the spy back.

And he knew that the major would know all about it, even before he landed.

AND yet—he was happy. What did he care about a prison sentence, the disgrace of court-martial, as long as he had done what he had set out to do?

His crate rolled to a stop.

Strong, willing hands took the spy and Gabriel from the wing. The spy was carried to a staff car at the headquarters office. Gabriel was taken to the drome hospital. The major looked at Orth, white faced and grim.

“Orth,” he said, “you’ve done a glorious thing; but it’s my painful duty to place you under arrest in quarters, pending trial by court-martial for disobedience of orders! But I wish I had done it myself.”

“Yes, sir,” said Orth, facing smartly about, moving directly to his quarters.

In headquarters the major snapped at his adjutant:

“Make out a recommendation for court-martial in the case of Lieutenant Orth. Charges, disobedience of orders. Specification—well, you know the rigamarole. We’ll have to satisfy Manning.”

But the major almost looked a hole into the face of his adjutant. The adjutant nodded stiffly, went to his own cubby of an office, looked at his clerk.

“You heard?” he asked the clerk.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then listen carefully. If something happened to the recommendation for several days—up here where so many things happen that today’s mistakes are forgotten tomorrow—and the papers got ‘inadvertently filed’——”

He left it there. The clerk got busy. The typewriter clattered. But when the papers were ready the clerk took something on himself. He put the papers on the very edge of the captain’s desk. Then, somehow, his elbow slid them off into the wastebasket.

After all, a mere enlisted man, and a clerk at that, could only get thirty days in the guardhouse on bread and water, with full ration every third day, for negligence in the case of important papers—and the heavy firing of big guns so disturbed the stomach of the clerk, usually, that he was never very hungry anyhow.

The war went on as though nothing had happened.

