



THE BOOMERANG PILOT

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

With disaster staring him in the face, "Rusty" Wade hurls defiance at the high gods of the air.

ROLLING UP TO THE HANGAR, "Rusty" Wade's *Air Musher* stopped with a drunken lurch. The lanky pilot dropped to the ground and stretched himself.

"One tough trip," he observed. "Had to land on a river bar to pick up these furs." He indicated several bales of fox and beaver pelts lashed to his wings. "And besides that I've got a hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold dust from the Gold Creek country. Their landing field is a birch flat. But I'm not kicking.

This Alaska flying keeps a man from growing stale. Any mail?"

"Mail's just in," a mechanic answered. "I'll run over and get it if you say so."

"No, I'll go. I haven't had a decent walk in a month." Rusty grinned as he said this, recalling the several occasions when engine trouble had forced him to walk anywhere from fifty to two hundred miles in order to reach the nearest telegraph office.

As he entered the post office the atmosphere became tense. Some fifty men were lined up before the

general-delivery window waiting for the postmaster to finish distributing the mail. Heading the line was an alert man with a cruel, hawkish face—"Hawk" Breed.

Every man in the post office knew that Breed had on several occasions attempted to kill Rusty Wade and that on each occasion Rusty had been too clever for him. Every man knew also that Breed was an out-and-out crook who had had more than his share of luck in avoiding the bars if not the noose.

In the old days the meeting of two such men would have been the signal for gun play. But Rusty Wade and Hawk Breed were of a different school. Their final battle would probably take place thousands of feet in the air. Each pilot would call to the utmost on his courage and skill. The slightest weakening on the part of either would spell defeat. Thus it was that Rusty Wade kept both himself and his plane in perfect condition.

As he recognized Breed, Rusty nodded briefly. "Hello!" he said.

Perhaps it was memory of past defeats, or merely his unpleasant disposition that caused Hawk Breed to shoot a glance of hate at Rusty and then mutter something under his breath. In any event he did not return Rusty's greeting.

"Turned yuh down cold, Rusty!" a miner observed as Rusty took his place in line.

"Yeah!" Rusty admitted, "but you don't notice me breaking down and sobbing."

"You'll get him some time, Rusty," the miner predicted.

"Or he'll get me," Rusty answered.

An hour later he received a good-sized packet of mail. Hawk Breed had long since departed, deeply interested in a typewritten letter on plain white paper. Rusty had noted the flash in Breed's eyes as he read the letter and he had a deep hunch that the rival pilot had again been given an opportunity to engage in some deviltry.

Rusty quickly ran through his own mail. An envelope addressed in Bid McCord's cramped handwriting caught his eye. He hastily opened the letter and read:

DEAR RUSTY:

I know you will always help a friend and it's one reason why I hate to ask a favor of you. Here's the dope. The navy is in the market for a hundred or more motors for pursuit jobs. A series of tests are to be held in Seattle next week and the competition is going to be keen. P.&W. motors are a cinch for a lot

of this business. Some more of it will go to the other concerns. The Prigg Air Motor Company and Bid McCord are fighting for the rest of it.

You know Prigg. Well, he's up to his usual tricks. He almost broke me on a patent-infringement suit, but he lost. He knows if I don't get some of this business I'm licked and he's out to stop me. He bought my best pilot—the man I counted on to grab the solo nonstop record—and that leaves me going down for the third time, and you're the only man who can toss me a life belt.

I hate to trouble you, old kid, and if it's going to upset your plans, forget it. But, you've used a McCord motor on your Air Musher; you know them better than any man living, and if you can come down and put this over I'll be the happiest man alive. Some day I may be able to make it up to you.

—BID MCCORD.

EVERY word in the letter aroused Rusty Wade to a fighting pitch. He could see Bid McCord in his mind's eye now. Squinting too many hours at highspeed motors had ruined Bid's sight. Too much bending over his work had given him round shoulders. But, withal, he had not soured. His disposition was as sweet as ever.

Bid cared neither for wealth or glory. All he wanted was to create a motor that would keep a man up in the air as long as he wanted to stay—something that was light, fast and strong. And there was Prigg interested only in the profits a big contract would bring.

"What's Prigg ever done to advance aviation but steal other men's ideas?" muttered Rusty. "That's why old Bid left him and struck off alone. I'd like to see the man who can stop me from lending Bid a hand. Business can go to the deuce for a while—it'll be here when I get back." Then he hurried to the hangar to give his McCord motor an overhaul.

It was quite a hop from Alaska to Seattle. Landing fields were none too frequent along the coast. A pilot's motor must be in absolutely perfect condition.

"I wonder what the nonstop solo record is," Rusty mused, "things happen so fast in aviation these days. Well, anyway, a McCord motor will hold its own with any of 'em. All it needs is a chance to prove itself."

STANDING in the shadows of a log cabin, Hawk Breed watched Rusty Wade's departure. A smile of satisfaction played around Hawk's thin lips; his teeth flashed for a moment.

"Prigg's letter called the turn," he said and chuckled. "Bid McCord's desperate and he's sent for Rusty

Wade.” Again Hawk read the letter that had interested him so much when he left the post office. In a way it was not a complimentary letter, but it did give him a chance to even up old scores. And what was more, it would keep Rusty out of the air competition in Seattle. The last paragraph was the most important. It read:

Wade has beaten you at every turn, Breed, so don't try your own strategy, but use mine. Use the unwritten law of aviation—that a pilot will give his own life, if need be, to aid a helpless man. Fake a crash somewhere in Alaska.

Pick a spot that Wade will fly into but can't get out of—except by walking. If I lick McCord I can buy everything, patents and all, for a song. So go the limit, and I'll pay the bill—I can afford to. There's ten thousand dollars and all expense, for you if I win. Burn this up.

—PRIGG.

For once in his life Hawk Breed obeyed orders. He burned the letter, then returned his attention to carrying out details.

“It's all got to be worked out smoothly,” he mused, “but I'm the bird to do it. I know just the spot. Wade can do one of two things—land and walk out, or he can pass me by and brand himself as yellow. Something tells me he's too stuck on his reputation to do that. He'll junk old Bid McCord first.”

Breed paused briefly at Knudsen's general store. Here gathered various male gossips and anything said would be passed on.

“I want to borrow a cage of carrier pigeons,” Hawk informed Knudsen. The latter amused himself by raising and training pigeons.

“Where yuh headin' for now, Breed?”

“Pinnacle Peak country. Figure to bring out a load of fur and maybe a passenger,” Hawk Breed answered. “She's a tough trip and if I have trouble I'll want to send word out.”

“My birds will bring 'em,” the Swede said and chuckled. “No oil and gas to worry about—no landing fields.”

“That's right,” Hawk agreed, “the birds still have the edge, but they have to worry about hawks.”

“I've heard tell,” drawled a sour dough, “some humans have to worry about hawks, too.”

“But Rusty Wade ain't one of 'em,” cut in another pointedly.

Hawk Breed stalked down the street. He never enjoyed pointed remarks from some wise old-timer sitting by a stove puffing a pipe.

RUSTY WADE was putting the finishing touches on his McCord motor. It had seen, a lot of service and he expected it would see plenty more. A prospective passenger had been lined up for the trip and he expected to take off in the morning. With long days he could make it in a single hop unless head winds cut down his fuel too much. Weather reports indicated a slight following breeze.

“That'll give me time to make the trip, change motors, rest up and be ready for the nonstop solo,” he mused.

He roared over a twenty-mile course in record time, landed and shoved the Air Mustier into the hangar. “Chock!” he informed the mechanic.

“She's perfect, but don't be too sure you're done for the day,” the mechanic answered. “Here comes the Big Swede on the run.”

Knudsen puffed into the hangar a few moments later. “Here's a note one of my birds brought in,” he announced. “Hawk Breed's crashed.”

A curious sensation swept through Rusty Wade as he heard the news. His feeling of regret that a man had crashed was followed by suspicion. A lot of his hard luck had been caused by this same Hawk Breed.

“Let's see the note!” he said.

Knudsen handed him a scrawl that read:

Crashed—White Water Canyon—South Pinnacle Peak—paralyzed waist down—Breed.

The note appeared to have been written by a man in pain. Short dashes divided the phrases. No extra words had been used.

Rusty Wade began pacing back and forth, his head bowed in deep thought. Was this a trick? It looked like it, coming as it did just a day before he was to take off for Seattle. A trip to Pinnacle Peak meant just that much more wear and tear on man and motor.

Before Rusty's eyes came Hawks crafty, leering face, he could almost see his mocking laughter as he flew into the wild region. “I won't be tricked,” Rusty growled, “I won't go!”

Then came another picture. A crashed plane; a man lying helpless, unable to defend himself against the ring of wolves gathering about. A man laid low who looked hour after hour into the sky and failed to see the expected plane. Knudsen was the first to break the silence.

“Even your worst enemy, Rusty, would expect you to give him a hand if he needed it,” the Swede said.

“Coming just now,” Rusty muttered again, “it's

timed to stop me from helping McCord! There's something wrong; something crooked! I won't go!"

He started off and no man stopped him. The struggle was within him; the decision up to him. Those present knew Hawk Breed. They also knew Rusty Wade. They were not surprised when he suddenly turned to the mechanics and said: "Get the *Air Musher* out while I telephone Doctor Randolph that he's needed. If I've got to make a mistake I'd sooner make it in Breed's favor."

Ten minutes later the doctor arrived. Rusty was at the stick; the *Air Musher's* motor was turning over lazily. "Got everything, doc?" Rusty asked.

"Everything but an operating table," Doctor Randolph answered. "And I've put on a good pair of shoes and turked a gun in with the pills in case we have to walk back. That's a bad neck of the woods. I've mushed it with dog teams, It's all mountain peaks."

"I know it!" Rusty said grimly. "I've a parachute stowed under your seat—in case I have to drop you."

THERE was a drone of confidence in the motor as it lifted the plane into the air. Rusty headed northward at top speed. The mountains and lakes rolled under the *Air Musher's* wings with the swiftness of motion-picture film. As a man knows his home so Rusty seemed to know the Alaskan country through which he mushed on the air trail.

Sometimes he followed a river; again he would cut through a mountain pass and pick up the stream again. These passes, coated with ice, were often so narrow it seemed as if the wings must scrape.

Hours later, Pinnacle Peak rolled over the rim of the world. It stood twelve thousand feet in the air—a forbidding, beautiful object with hanging glaciers gleaming blue and white in the sunlight. All it needed was a pair of wings or some other article suggesting an airplane to represent some great shaft erected to fallen pilots. A lone eagle soared above a crag a thousand feet below them. Rusty nosed down and picked up a landmark. He swung slightly to the southwest, then pointed.

"White Water Canyon!" he cried.

From their altitude the canyon appeared to be choked with snow. But as they reached the lower levels the stream, water leaping over huge boulders, took form. Here and there were sketchy sand bars on which a bird might land at the risk of breaking a leg. Rusty saw a column of smoke rising ahead.

"Oil smoke!" he said. "Hawk's evidently spilled

some oil and gas on a pile of driftwood. Yeah! There he is! I guess this is the real thing. That plane's a write-off!"

The plane, with one wing sheared off, was visible. A prone figure was also visible near the fire. "I guess he's hurt and no fooling!" Rusty repeated.

"Did you doubt it?" Randolph inquired with surprise.

"Yes! This thing will probably ruin a good friend of mine, Doc, but he wouldn't have it otherwise! Have you ever jumped from a plane?"

"No, but it seems to be the only way I can get down. Minutes count. He may be bleeding inwardly or outwardly. I can manage it. I'll go now. Other wise I'll be thinking about it and——"

"Climb out on the wing and let the wind pull you off," Rusty answered. "It isn't so hard on the constitution. I'll tell you when."

His face set in grim lines, the doctor crawled onto the *Air Musher's* wing and waited while the air stream tugged at him with a thousand fingers.

The moment Rusty signaled, Randolph jerked the ring and an instant later he vanished. Rusty returned and saw him swinging downward. The doctor showed his stuff by waving.

It was fifteen minutes before Rusty returned. He had been searching for a landing field without success. As he looked down he could see the doctor at work cutting away a clump of brush.

"He's clearing a landing," the lanky pilot muttered and groaned; "that means I've got to land. What a tough break for old Bid McCord!"

He circled nearly a half hour while the doctor worked furiously. Then Rusty dropped into the canyon. There was no opportunity to give the field a close inspection. He had to trust to luck and skill and make a landing.

GRAVEL, spray and sand flew as the wheels struck water six inches deep at the end of the bar. The *Air Musher* hit a rough spot and lurched violently, then rushed through grass and weeds to a stop five feet from a clump of brush and small trees. Rusty leaped to the ground and looked about.

"A fat chance I've got of getting out of here!" he muttered, "particularly with a load! What's the situation, doc?"

"Rusty." Randolph answered, "I'd like to have been able to talk this over with you, then let you decide before coming down, but I couldn't. The man is delirious. Come over here! Listen!"

Hawk Breed's lips were twisted into a snarl. His eyes were filled with a terrible light. "I'll stop Wade, Prigg," he repeated again and again. "I'll fake a crash in White Water Canyon. When we get out of there the Seattle contests will be ancient history. Ten thousand. Sure! I'll do it. I'd do it for nothing to beat Wade's gang. Old McCord! Hunchbacked and near-sighted. Always lookin' at motors. Look out! That bar isn't as long as I thought. Too much speed! There goes a wing! *Ohhhhh!* Yes, the pigeons. I'll send 'em! What's the matter with my legs?"

The doctor looked at Rusty. "Obviously you are the victim of a plot," he said. "I don't know how you look at such things, Rusty, but a doctor must do his utmost to save life, regardless of the surroundings, the reasons for the injury or the motive. That is why I brought you down."

Rusty nodded. "I had a hunch from the first, but— Well, Doc, it was the only thing to do. What's next?"

"A big order, Rusty! We've got to get him to a hospital. I haven't had a chance to go into the matter, but it's a spinal injury of some nature. He's paid high for this bit of villainy."

"That sure is a big order," Rusty admitted. "Huh! If I could get him to a hospital I could also reach Seattle in time to do McCord some good! Fix him up, Doc, and I'll see what I can do!" And Rusty headed up the bar to study the situation.

His present urge was to save a human life. And yet he realized that, even if he was successful in taking Breed to a hospital, it would still be a victory for Prigg and those fighting the old man whose life was devoted to making motors that would keep pilots in the air a maximum of time at a minimum of expense. Even if beaten, Bid McCord would go on. But he would work for somebody else. His dream of a laboratory where he could continue his designing, unhampered by either lack of funds or orders from superiors, would vanish.

"And right now he's beginning to look into the air for me," Rusty muttered. "This cussed sand is heavy, too. If it were hard and packed I might get off. But it'll act as a drag. Lower down on the bar there's a hundred feet of hard stuff. If I could hit that at good speed—but no! With a heavy load I'll bog down at the start. Even if I did get into the air I might hit that snag on the next bar before I got elevation enough to clear it. Breed sure picked a perfect spot. But it wasn't so perfect for him. His fake crash turned into the real thing."

Later he joined the doctor. "What luck?" he asked.

"I was about to ask you the same question," the doctor answered.

"Alone I'd have a slim chance of taking off," Rusty replied, "but with three I can't make it. We'd only crash against the snags on the lower bar."

"And with two?" the doctor inquired.

"Hmmm!" Rusty considered. "No, Doc, unless— say. I've got it! Doc! Will you walk out?"

"How far is it?"

"Two hundred and twenty-five miles—unless I can find a good landing field nearer. Or, if you find one you might build a fire and I'll send some one to get you!"

"I'll do it!"

"That's great, doc! I can put Breed in a hospital. And, with luck, make it to Seattle in time. You get your patient ready while I fix up for the take-off!"

RUSTY'S scheme was wild, but it was the only chance he had. It might land both himself and Breed in the river. That meant death in the white water. But it meant death for Breed to remain on the bar. The fact that he deserved it made no difference in Rusty's viewpoint.

He wheeled the *Air Musher* into position and watched the wheels sink into the sand. Then he cut brush and spread it over the runway. Lastly he cut the other wing from Breed's plane and ran the remains of the wreck to a point well in front of the *Air Musher*. The landing gear, motor and prop were in good shape. The wheels rested on hard sand. Lastly he ran a line from the *Air Musher* to Breed's plane. At this point the doctor arrived. "What in the deuce are you doing, Rusty?" he asked.

"I'm counting on Breed's plane to drag me out of the soft stuff so I can hit the crown of the bar at fast speed. If it works it will be easy."

"How do you expect to get rid of Breed's plane when you are through with it?"

"Give this line a jerk. That'll untie the tow line and it'll go fast enough. But you stand by, Doc, to render first aid."

"Rusty!" The doctor spoke solemnly. "I'm wondering if Breed is worth it?"

"No!" Rusty snorted without a moment's hesitation. "But it's the only decent thing to do."

Together they placed Breed in the *Air Musher's* cabin. "Any orders, Doc?"

"None, except he must have no shocks. A rough landing might be fatal."

“Very well, I’ll treat him gentle!” Rusty replied. He warmed up the two motors, then opened Breed’s wide. The *Air Musher* started forward. Rusty whirled suddenly on the doctor. “If she’ll do that with the *Air Musher*’s motor idling, there’s a chance we can get up enough speed to handle the extra weight. Want to take a chance, Doc?”

“Yes, but not at the risk of added danger to yourself and the patient,” Randolph answered.

“I’m going to secure the *Air Musher* to that birch and then open Breed’s motor wide. Then I’m going to climb into my seat and open the *Air Musher*’s motor wide. If the two motors will break the line you’ve a chance. Stand in the cabin door. I’ll know when we hit the crown if we’ve speed enough to clear. If I say jump, you jump. If I say nothing, stick.”

A minute later the air was filled with sand kicked up by the two props. A small-sized gale of wind was roaring up the canyon. Two motors were wide open. Suddenly the plane leaped forward. With a lurch the plane cleared the crown of the bar and struck the hard sand.

Rusty jerked the rope and the remains of Breed’s plane went snarling into the river. At the water’s edge the *Air Musher* cleared by an inch. Then it sagged until the wheels touched the water.

“I should have jumped,” the doctor said grimly. “Ah! We’re clear!” But he had spoken too soon. A crash sent him sprawling. He struggled to his knees and grew tense. Rusty’s face was grim as he fought to right the plane.

“Struck the snag!” Rusty yelled, “Something gave way! Only thing that saved us was a fifty-foot waterfall just beyond. We’re climbing now. We’re safe—if—we can get out of this cursed canyon.”

Spray-wet banks towered on either side. During the next five minutes the doctor saw the most amazing flying he was ever to see. Fighting air pockets, Rusty gained elevation by inches. Again and again the wing tips skimmed the grim walls. Then slowly the walls dropped away. They were out of the canyon!

“Our troubles are over!” Randolph yelled.

“Sorry,” Rusty answered, “but they’re just beginning. I think our landing gear carried away! Take a look, will you?”

The doctor opened the door and peered down. Both wheels had vanished! “They’re gone, Rusty!” he said.

“Both of ‘em?”

“Both!”

A period of silence followed. “Of course,” Rusty said at last, “we could take to the ‘chutes, but how about Breed?”

“Spinal injury, the shock of landing in a parachute would be fatal.”

“And landing without wheels would be fatal for him and probably us,” Rusty answered. “It looks like we’re in the same position as the pilot who was supposed to have run out of gasoline and couldn’t get down. Can you get him in shape for a parachute drop?”

“In time, Rusty!”

“Then start in! I’ll devote myself to seeing how long we can stay in the air!”

THE following morning the newspapers carried a brief item that was to grow by degrees into columns and photographs. It read:

COLD DECK, ALASKA.—Rusty Wade, famous Alaskan pilot, flew over this camp late tonight and asked to be refueled from the air, as he was unable to land. His landing gear is missing. Aboard the plane are Doctor Randolph, Alaskan surgeon, and a patient, Hawk Breed, also a pilot.

The item was read with interest by millions. “When would he come down and how?” was the query on a thousand lips. The presence of an injured man made parachute escape impossible, the editorial writers pointed out—

A man with thick-lensed glasses paused in his labors and read the dispatch. “So that’s why Rusty didn’t come,” he muttered. “And Hawk Breed, too. Hmmmm! Prigg’s work, I’ll wager. But, Rusty—” His eyes lighted. “There’s a lad to be proud of. After all, what does old Bid McCord’s success amount to compared with a human life! I’ll go on improving motors, working for somebody else. And, after all, what’s the difference, just so the boys get motors that’ll keep ‘em in the air.” he struggled bravely to view the matter unselfishly. “But I did want to get a little start and work my problems unhampered.”

Less than a half mile away, Prigg’s breakfast was served to him in bed. There was a story and photographs of the Prigg motor that was making such a strong bid for its place. It would take off that noon for a solo nonstop flight. He turned the pages and presently let out a yell of joy.

“Wow! Here’s a good one! Rusty Wade’s up in the air and can’t get down. I’ll bet old McCord’s shedding tears right now. For days he’s been saying, ‘Rusty

Wade's going to handle my job!' Hawk Breed injured, eh? Clever lad! He's putting it over, big!"

But for the interested parties there was no breakfast in bed and no morning newspaper. Rusty sat at the controls. His mood was thoughtful. Presently he brightened, then he chuckled, and then he howled with laughter. "By heck! We'll lick 'em yet!" he cried.

"What's up now?" Randolph asked.

"On rare occasions, Doc, my brain sparks—it just sparked! Hid you ever hear of a boomerang?"

"Sure!"

"Well, I'm flying one." Rusty said and grinned cheerfully. "How's the patient?"

"I'm going to operate! I got the needed stuff when you refueled in the air at Cold Deck. You can't stay up forever and we might as well settle the Hawk Breed problem one way or another!"

While the mountain peaks and valleys rolled under the *Air Musher's* wings her lanky pilot frequently glanced back and noted the progress of the operation. Now and then the odor of ether reached Rusty's nose. It was some time later that Randolph joined the pilot.

"I've done all I can!" The doctor announced. "In a hospital his recovery would be certain, but I don't see how he has a chance up here. You can't land without a crack-up and you can't drop him in a parachute. The instant his feet hit the ground—— You see a vertebra was chipped and was pressing against the spinal cord. That back can't stand any shocks for some time."

"My motor's good for a few days," Rusty said, "and maybe I can figure some way of easing him down without a shock to the old back."

"Where are we now?"

"Over Alaska, but heading south with a following wind. Luck seems to be coming our way!"

"Look here, Rusty," the doctor said, "for a man who has been cheated of his chance to fly a plane equipped with a friend's motor; for a man who has the problems ahead of him that you have, you're mighty optimistic!"

"Doc," Rusty said with feeling, "I've got to be optimistic! I've got to believe this old motor of mine will keep shooting until Hawk Breed is in better shape. I've dropped messages to be telegraphed ahead. Everything we need—except landing gear—can be sent down from a plane. The rest, doc, is up to me."

Hundreds of thousands of people in the northwest looked upward as they heard the steady boom of the *Air Musher's* motor. In strained voices they cried out: "That's her! See! Her landing gear's gone. That's the *Air Musher!*"

From Boeing Field leaped newspaper planes, news-reel planes and sight-seeing planes as the big Alaskan plane came out of the northern sky. Rusty could see the camera men at work and he could sense if not hear the cheers of the thousands.

Then the sky cleared except for a plane hovering overhead. A hose came down and Randolph caught the end. A moment later gas was gushing into the *Air Musher's* tanks. Then came cases of lubricating oil; other cases with food and the things the doctor needed for his patient. A mighty sigh of relief lifted from the ground as it was seen that the transfer had been safely completed.

Rusty pointed ahead. Three planes were moving over a designated course—the planes were engaged in the nonstop solo flight. As Rusty swung into position, and maintained their place an angry exclamation came from Prigg on the ground below. He turned to the referee.

"Do you consider him a contestant?" he asked. "Government observers neither witnessed his start, nor are they checking on him. Does his performance go into the record?"

"No! Wade was not here to regularly enter. His record, therefore, will have no official standing!"

"Thanks!" Prigg appeared to be relieved. The referee gave him a curious look.

"He should be chased off the course," Prigg went on. "He's no right to follow my planes around— attracting attention from them."

"I think," the referee crisply observed, "he's keeping close to his only source of supply. A sick man, such as Breed, is liable to need most anything in a hurry."

RUSTY WADE looked back at the doctor. Randolph and his patient were sleeping. Eighty hours lay behind them—eighty hours with Rusty at the controls and no relief. His eyes were like two burned holes in a blanket; his face was flushed, feverish. He started to call the doctor, then changed his mind. He could hang on a little while longer.

There was inspiration in his enemy's face. Hawk Breed had passed the crisis and was on the mend. The fever had left his cheeks; his color was normal. His eyes opened. He studied Rusty for a long time. If the lanky pilot hoped for a different Breed he was disappointed. It was the same old Hawk. He had blocked Rusty from entering the nonstop solo contest. Victory was his. He had earned the ten thousand dollars. Then Hawk remembered the landing gear was gone. A feeling of

helplessness gripped him. Rusty and the doctor had a chance. He had none.

“Doc!”

It was Rusty’s voice breaking in sharply.

“Yes, Rusty!” The doctor was rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Twice in the last two days I’ve let you take the stick. The weather is perfect and I’ve got to have some sleep. Keep her as she is. Call me if anything goes wrong. If the motor begins to miss—I’ll hear it!”

The doctor slid into Rusty’s seat. Rusty dropped onto the blankets Randolph had just left and was asleep instantly. Randolph did as Rusty had done—trailed the Prigg planes on their endless course over the circuit. On the ground Prigg scowled at the *Air Musher* and swore. “Stealin’ all the thunder,” he roared. “The papers are giving that wreck up there columns and I’m getting lines. It’s a dirty trick.”

Four hours passed and Rusty hardly stirred. Only when the gasoline began to get low did the doctor call the exhausted pilot. Rusty washed his face and stretched. His was a calling that demanded perfect physical condition. Nature, given a period of rest, now responded with a new flow of energy. It was like refueling the plane. “How’s everything, Doc?” he asked.

“Great!” Randolph answered. “I hit a couple of bumps that scared me, but nothing happened.”

“We’ll take on fuel, grub and water,” Rusty said, “and keep at it. What a motor! Hello, where’s the second Prigg job?”

“Made a forced landing an hour ago,” Randolph answered. “One plane is still up.”

IT WAS twenty-four hours later that the *Air Musher’s* McCord motor began missing. The hour that the doctor and Hawk had feared had come at last, but they were ready for it! Hawk Breed’s back was covered with a plaster cast. Now the doctor braced him from every angle with tape and straps. Rusty dropped a note and a few minutes later three seaplanes and a score of fast motor boats were scattered over Lake Washington.

Rusty wobbled his wings to indicate they were about to drop Hawk Breed. Slowly the doctor lowered the man through the cabin door. The air stream caught him and swung him backward. When he was well below the plane, the doctor signaled, Hawk Breed’s face was ashen. He had dropped before, but never under such conditions. For a moment he hesitated, then pulled the ring. As his chute opened, the doctor dropped the line. Almost gently Hawk Breed swung into space.

“You’re next, Doc!” Rusty announced.

“And you?”

Rusty sighed. “I’m hoping to keep her up a while longer. She’ll be several hundred pounds lighter now. In time—I’ll jump.” His face was serious, like that of a man in great trouble. “I’ll jump and—the old *Air Musher* will—go.”

The doctor jumped over the Sand Point Field and Rusty swung back over Lake Washington. Hawk Breed had struck the water with hardly a shock. A life belt supported him until the nearest motor boat could come up. Rusty Wade was alone in his *Air Musher*. The motor still missed—a valve was stuck, no doubt. Others would follow. But she could still climb.

With a dangerous light in his eyes he began trailing the lone Prigg plane. Night came! Day! Then another night! Rusty was taking on half fuel loads now, but he was still in the air. The Prigg, he noticed, was refueling oftener.

“I’m betting my McCord will outlast his Prigg,” Rusty muttered. At times he was light-headed. While he had slept nearly six hours during the period in the air, he had also entered this curious contest twenty-four hours ahead of the others and had been without sleep some time previous to that while engaged in rescuing his enemy. The desire for sleep was now a gnawing hunger that manifested itself in every part and grew with the hours.

Again he took on a half load of fuel. With it came a note:

DEAR RUSTY: Come down, kid. No plane, motor or man is worth what you are going through. Come down! I’ll buy you a new *Air Musher*.

—BID MCCORD.

A new *Air Musher*? Rusty shook his head. There could only be one *Air Musher*. Man and plane had been through too much together. No other plane could take its place. Rusty could understand why Lindy had included his plane in his famous “We.”

Toward noon the rival plane began losing elevation rapidly. Rusty circled and saw the Prigg pilot land in a pasture. The *Air Musher* was alone in the air. He scribbled a note and dropped the information to the watchers at Seattle.

“And now for the *Air Musher’s* grave!” he muttered. “Old bus,” he said softly, “I can’t understand the feeling, but I’d like to crash with you!”

It was the same feeling that prompts a captain to go down with his ship. It is the code of the sea taken to

the air. Lake Washington seemed as good a spot as any. The plane could crash with little danger to others. And yet he hesitated.

Hour after hour he circled—undecided. A hundred times he was ready to jump, then an invisible hand stopped him. Another plane came from below and swung along with him. Rusty peered a moment with his bloodshot eyes.

“Old Bid McCord!” he cried. “He knows how I feel! He’s come up to sort of keep me company. Good old Bid. The enemy kept us out of the nonstop solo contest, but they can’t stop old Bid from making motors that’ll keep the boys in the air.”

Dark clouds gathered! The day grew dreary and gray—the gray one associates with funerals. Rusty shuddered. For a moment the *Air Musher* flew herself.

Another hour of darkness, then it became a sort of afternoon dawn. The clouds rolled back and the sun came out. To the south, Mount Rainier gleamed white and clear—a snow-capped peak that reminded Rusty of Alaska. With a rush of new strength his head seemed to clear. Once again he was the swift-thinking Rusty Wade of the North. With spluttering motor wide open he headed for the mountain. There amid the glacial crevices and snow fields was the fitting spot for the *Air Musher* to crash.

HIGH above a wind-swept plateau Rusty stepped to the door and poised for the leap. Again the invisible hand stopped him. “I’ll take a chance for a worthless human like Hawk Breed,” he snarled, “why not take a chance for something I love? Old bus! We sink or swim!”

He dropped down lower. The snow field came up to meet him. He could see a fresh fall had covered hidden dangers. Twice he circled, then came down. For a hundred yards the wings skimmed the snow, then the plane settled.

Snow flew in great clouds, the prop snapped and the whole craft groaned in mortal anguish! With a shudder the *Air Musher* stopped.

Rusty Wade forced the door open and stepped into snow waist-deep. “She didn’t crack up!” he cried. A

lump filled his throat and a mist seemed to fill his eyes. He could say no more.

A half mile away, two planes were swinging over a wind-swept stretch of table rock. Slowly they landed and men sprang out. Rusty’s tired eyes closed until they reached him. Old Bid McCord was the first. He could not speak for a moment, but his handclasp was sufficient.

Behind came Prigg, his face flushed with fury. He gripped the referee’s arm. “But I say,” he protested, “you can’t consider this plane as entered in the nonstop flight.”

“And I’m saying,” the referee snapped, “that you are dead right! The *Air Musher*’s performance can’t be considered in the flight.”

Rusty Wade’s heart skipped a beat. He had hoped——

“But,” continued the referee, “there’s nothing to keep me from officially inspecting a motor that has done what this one has. It’s a standard job that had flown thousands of miles before it started on this grind. It’s the sort of motor the department wants because it keeps the boys up in the air without any special preparations. Now stop annoying me.”

“Do you mean to say, Bid,” Rusty exclaimed, “you got part of that contract?”

“I mean to say just that, Rusty. The whole country is talking about you, but technical men are talking about my motor. Orders are pouring in. I’ll have my own laboratory and the time and money to continue my work. And you, Rusty, have my undying gratitude, a block of stock when we finance the company and anything else you want. Hawk Breed has his life and——”

“All of which I had in mind when I tried to fly a boomerang,” Rusty cut in. “But what’s more important to me, I still have the old *Air Musher*. While you’re flying mechanics and spare parts up here to put her in shape I’m going to get a wink of sleep.” And Rusty Wade turned his back on fame and the newspaper plane that was just landing, entered the *Air Musher*’s cabin, sprawled on the floor and went to sleep.