



THE SECRET OF QX-31

by JAMES PERLEY HUGHES

Up to the hangars of the Night Owls, that squadron whose history was as dark as the night skies through which they winged, came those two Yanks, leaving behind them the free reckless battles with the Boche in sun-flooded skies. For there, shadowy ships swept through the night to strange and unknown destinations, and the muffled figures in their cockpits sometimes did not return. There, men had numbers instead of names—and victory meant to a pilot only that he and his ship came back.

CHAPTER I A GAME OF CHANCE

SANDY PATTON had added a bright new star to the wings upon his breast and had been given leave to celebrate. He was an ace now, and that called for something special. George Bridges, his pal in peace and buddy in war, joined in the festivity and they hopped off for Paris, with the cheers of envious pilots

and admiring grease monkeys ringing in their ears.

They were winging for pleasure, but grim Mars had a joke in mind, and he allowed Sandy Patton to fly into a fog of intrigue and conspiracy that had him buzzing in frantic circles before the mists cleared away and he could pique down for a happy landing. In Paris, they zoomed for Montmartre, after gassing up at some of the American bars, with a few native establishments thrown in for good measure. Their revs were mounting rapidly when they touched trucks in the Red Mill, but a tachometer would have scored greater speed as the evening progressed.

“Let’s get out of here,” suggested Sandy. “We might have some luck at Le Ciel.”

He had just tried to dance with a general's girlish wife and had been thrown into a tailspin.

"There are two kinds of luck," George reminded him. "Good and bad."

Bridges' eyes were protruding and his cheeks were the color of a tomato softening in the August sun. Plainly he was away past the boiling point and his radiation was poor.

"It can't be any worse than I've had here," Sandy answered.

Reaching the out-of-doors, they leveled off and then nosed for a cafe whose decorations suggested its name—Heaven. George, however, paid small attention to the waiters, whose garb was intended to represent the robes of angels. He chided them for appearing in public, dressed in night shirts, when pajamas would have been more virile.

"Shush," whispered Sandy. He had been "shushing" George all evening, but Bridges had continued to bellow like a Gnome motor. A headwaiter, attired to represent Saint Peter, led them to a table in the rear of the cafe.

This was the opening of Mars' grim joke. Sandy Patton was flying into the fog, but he didn't know it.

"Low ceiling," Bridges muttered, as he appraised the eagles on the shoulders of a colonel seated at the table.

Around were crowds of lieutenants and captains and a sprinkling of majors, but the bearer of eagles dined in lonely state. If there had been another table available, Sandy Patton and George Bridges would have missed much trouble, but three chairs were vacant and the two piqued down for a landing.

"Hope we won't disturb you, sir," said Sandy, wing-wagging a signal to a near-by waiter. "Will you take on a little gas, sir?"

The colonel raised cool gray eyes to stare at them. His gaze rested on their wings for a moment and then made note of Sandy's bright, new star. Two aviators on a bit of a binge, he catalogued. One had just been made an ace. The only difference between pilots was that some were more mad than others, aces especially. Still, he had been looking for an ace.

"In Paris for the week-end, gentlemen?" he asked urbanely.

"No weak end for us, sir," George Bridges tittered. "We finish strong."

UNDER ordinary circumstances, George would have groveled in the presence of a colonel, but in his present state, he would have exchanged merry

badinage with Black Jack himself, if the commander-in-chief had been present.

"Always finish strong?" the colonel inquired, almost casually.

"Sandy does. See that star?" Bridges was ready to make ballyhoo for the newly created ace.

"Throttle down—throttle down, you're feeding too much sauce," Patton whispered hoarsely.

Then he caught a smile from something in skirts at a near-by table, and he hopped off, to leave George and the colonel. To Bridges' mind, Sandy Patton was a combination of Rickenbacker, Bishop, Guynemer and Richtofen, and only needed time and opportunity to score a hundred victories.

"And that boy sure knows his struts and braces," Bridges finished, after a lengthy description of Sandy's prowess.

"Good night flyer?" the colonel asked.

"Night flyer?" George beamed. "Say, colonel, he's the grand worthy master of the night hawks. He can bring a ship down to a dead-stick landing on a pocket handkerchief placed in the woods during the dark of the moon."

"H-h-m." The older man may have used a pinch of salt, but he was impressed. He took a note-book from his pocket, and his fountain pen poised over an unmarked page.

"What did you say his name was?"

"Alexander Patton, sir," George chortled, and then in a ghastly whisper, "but don't let him know I spilled the family beans. He's called Sandy by both white and colored."

"What's his outfit?"

"Skylarks, sir, 119th Pursuit Squadron—the Bearcats with wings."

Bridges was having a thoroughly good time. "We'd all be aces if we got a square deal, but those blind Toms they have for observation officers on our Front can't see across the lines."

Another note, and then an inquiry as to George's name.

"Oh, don't mind me, colonel," the young man gibbered on. "I'm just an old school friend helping the good work along. Of course, if there are any citations to be passed out, you can say that George Bridges has had three landscapes shot from under him and still can sit up to take his drinks."

Once more the colonel made notes. Then he closed his memorandum book and returned it to his pocket. For a moment he sipped a glass of light wine and then his cool gray eyes were turned to George's flushed face.

“Young man,” he began in measured tones, “I am Colonel Erasmus Holden, Intelligence Corps. You may be under the impression that you have been kidding me. Instead, you have done the A.E.F. a service. You may not know it now, but——”

HE STOPPED as a party of officers entered Le Ciel and were escorted to a freshly vacated table near by. In their center was a girl, a dazzlingly blonde creature, dressed in a revealing silver gown. George Strained to focus his eyes upon her, his mouth frankly gaping.

Then his rather fatuous gaze rested on a young man in the uniform of an American lieutenant. George Bridges Stiffened and growled like a dog. Although a tiny black moustache had been added to Peyton Thayer’s features since George last saw him, the man was recognized at first glance. Thayer had been a cadet at Kelly the same time Sandy Patton and Bridges had sprouted wings. They had all three done a hitch at Issoudun. Bridges merely disliked Peyton Thayer but Sandy—he could depend on Patton to toss up his tail and dive with his Vickers bellowing their heads off as soon as he sighted Thayer.

“Pretty, isn’t she?” George heard the colonel murmur.

He wrenched his eyes around to see that the officer was addressing Sandy, who had piqued down after dancing. Patton was all warmed up and ready to hop anywhere, George could tell. Just then his eyes were on the girl. In another moment he would catch sight of Peyton Thayer, and then somebody would go into a tailspin and crash on the ballroom floor.

“Peach,” Patton was answering the colonel, his eyes glowing.

Then George saw his glance harden and he knew a dogfight might start at any minute. The girl had half a dozen men around her, but Sandy Patton had won his star by barging into enemy formations. Numbers meant nothing in Sandy’s young life.

“What’s that crate-cracker doing here?” he demanded, as he continued to glare at Thayer and then, when no answer came to his question, “Here’s where I show that bird he’s a kiwi when it comes to women.”

Sandy Patton zoomed out of his chair and threw on the sauce. He was an ace and they don’t pass out the stars to the boys who hesitate.

They get crosses—wooden ones.

Sandy and Thayer had been parties to a two-man feud since the days at Kelly. It had started over a game

of cards and had reached its grand climax at Issoudun where Thayer had laid some of his own wrong doing at Sandy Patton’s door. Transfer to active service had come before a chance for reprisal, but now—Sandy was coming down in a full-powered dive. Disregarding the formation around the girl, he barged through and unleashed a burst of words before Thayer realized an attack was on.

“Pardon,” said Sandy. “I believe this is our dance.”

Blue eyes looked up into his, first in surprise and then with laughter.

“Is it?” she asked, half-banteringly, but the mane of curly red hair and earnest blue eyes held her gaze. Then she noted the bright new ace’s star. Few were the girls who could resist that insignia.

“Of course it’s ours,” Sandy was certain. “I’ve been looking forward to it ever since——”

“Look here, Patton,” Peyton Thayer had zoomed and was ready to trade tracer. “If you’re so drunk that——”

“I remember now,” the girl broke in. “It is our dance. I’m sorry I’d forgotten.”

She took Sandy’s proffered arm and they turned for the dance floor.

THE full-powered dive into the center of a party of which he was not a member had carried Sandy Patton deeper into the fogs of mystery. At that very moment he was flying blind, but did not know it. The dance over, he rescued George Bridges from the table where he sat in lonely wretchedness, nursing a dying jag. George’s revs were going lower and lower and he was going to conk and go out unless something were done about it. The colonel had hopped off for other tarmacs, but George stayed parked.

“Meet a girl from the old home state.” Sandy was bubbling as brightly as the fizz water he had consumed. “Miss—er—er——”

He threatened to go into a wing slip, but she saved the situation.

“Noslen—Atir Noslen. I don’t blame you for forgetting. It’s such an outlandish name,” she broke in. “And now I think I had better go back to my friends. Won’t you join us?”

Sandy Patton almost looped for joy. Now they were members of the party. He could see Peyton Thayer flinging one drag after another of what were intended to be murderous glances, but Sandy had been dodging Spandau fire too long to be bothered. He and George convoyed her back to the table. Their arrival was

marked by a general stir, several of the men pushing back their chairs after they had arisen. Their caps were in their hands.

"You're not going to hop off just because we've come?" Bridges had pancaked into a chair. "If you stick around a while, I'll do my imitation of a hog on roller skates."

"Let's leave this drunken brute and his intoxicated companion," Peyton Thayer whispered to the girl. "You've promised we could have a game at your place."

"How about another dance?" Sandy inquired, as she arose.

"I'm sorry, but I've invited these gentlemen to my apartment. They want a little game of cards. Won't you and Lieutenant Bridges join us?"

"Join you?" Sandy countered. "We've pulled our chocks and are rolling already."

The scowl on Peyton Thayer's dark face deepened, but his muttered objection was laughed aside.

A few moments later, they were entering taxicabs, to be rattled across the river to a fashionable hotel apartment. Sandy Patton cared little for gambling, but the crowd of officers and colorful women which passed through the attractively arranged rooms intrigued his thoroughly heated imagination. A brilliant haze settled over him and he saw life in a glow that was of both gold and silver. A snatch of song chandelled to his lips and George Bridges wheezed a plaintive tenor, nosing up into a falsetto whenever the going got bumpy.

Sandy had been toying with bubbles since their landing in Paris but he could see that George was softening. His friend had lost partial control of his stabilizers and his rudder wasn't working any too well. Besides, his revs were still mounting rapidly and he might burn out a main bearing any time.

New faces, both men's and women's, appeared. The women were even more vivid than those he had seen up on Montmartre and they swam through the haze before Sandy's eyes like exotic fish from tropic waters. But in spite of the foglike curtain around him, Patton began to realize that he was surrounded by hidden intrigues, dark whisperings and significant glances. Women with whom he drank asked questions which startled him. They were looking for information, important facts which belonged to war, rather than the fripperies of playtime.

HE EDGED away and wandered into the card room, where Peyton Thayer and a number of officers were playing poker. Large amounts were on the table

and Thayer was losing heavily. He was growing more flushed and angry, and the sight of Sandy Patton added to his choler.

"Trying to get something on me?" he snarled, as Patton stood, watching the play.

"That wouldn't be hard," Sandy rapped back.

A quick glance ran around the table, going from player to player. Thayer's flush deepened. His hand stole toward the automatic he carried, but a thick-set major on his right grasped his wrist. The man was attired in a French uniform, but he spoke like an Englishman.

"Don't be a silly ass," he whispered.

"I'll get him for that," Thayer snarled. "I'll—"

"Oh, I say, old top, you've been having a beastly run of luck," the major soothed. "Here, let me back your play—just a loan, you know, between gentlemen. Here are ten *mille* notes. Now win back your money, eh what?"

Mollified, Peyton Thayer returned to the game. His quarrel could wait, but the game—in another moment he was plunging harder than ever. Sandy continued to watch, staring through the rapidly gathering haze. The man who had aided Thayer wore a French uniform, but he was no Frenchman. Funny, that major—Sandy could not see him clearly, but—

Then he caught a glimpse of George Bridges weaving through the room, acting as though his rudder had been shot away and his ailerons completely conked. George was due to go into a spin at any moment and crash to a one-point landing on his nose. Sandy Patton did not hesitate. He sideslipped and locked wings with his buddy and they piqued down the stairs into the dawn.

Although the haze thickened, they went on and on. Somehow they returned to the Skylark's airdrome where they slept the clock around. They awoke to hear the thunder of the guns once more. The mighty orchestration found echo in their throbbing heads, and they stared into each other's pallid faces with dry, smarting eyes.

"We must have had a pleasant evening," George began. "The revs in my head tell me so."

"My mouth tastes like the bottom of a hangar floor," Sandy answered. "And say, didn't we meet a blonde somewhere along the route?"

"I think so—right after we barged into the Intelligence colonel."

"Intelligence colonel—what Intelligence colonel?"

"Search me. I didn't look at his dog tag. Besides, I never could remember long numbers."

There was silence, as each circled mentally, trying to glimpse some of the scenery over which they had passed during that purple Parisian night. It was Sandy who caught the first dim flash.

“Didn’t we whang into a formation that Peyton Thayer was flying with?” he asked.

“Maybe so—only I heard he was in one of those night-flying outfits.”

FURTHER attempts to piece together the jumbled mass of their recollections proved fruitless. A heavy haze had settled over every event from the time they ascended Montmartre until they awoke in their own beds. But with their appearance before Major Thorndyke, commander of the Skylarks, they discovered that the colonel with whom George Bridges had talked was a person and not a chimera born of many glasses of bubbles.

“And he didn’t wait long,” said the major.

“Wait long? What do you mean—has he filed charges?” George Bridges gasped.

He was beginning to have a faint recollection of kidding a colonel, while Sandy was shaking his dogs on the dance floor.

“Not charges, but a transfer,” Thorndyke replied.

“A transfer? From this outfit?” Sandy Patton was outraged.

“Yes and he’s sent the papers through already. I tried to talk him out of it, but he outranked me. He says the Owls need a man who can bring a crate down in the dark of the moon on a pocket handkerchief spread in the midst of a forest—and that with a dead stick.”

A low moan came from George Bridges. He remembered peddling a line of hoovey similar to that and watching the colonel swallow it.

“Cripes and connecting rods!” he stammered. “I was just giving the old bird a good time.”

“Owls?” Sandy Patton’s eyes were held on his comrade. “Isn’t that the outfit that Peyton Thayer belongs to?”

“Yes. He’s second-in-command over there,” the major put in. “Sorry to lose you boys, but—happy landings.”

Sandy Patton kept silent until he and George were in their quarters, packing their kits. When the last buckle had been fastened, he turned to his companion, a wry smile holding his freckled face.

“By rights I ought to crash you,” he said, “but I have a hunch we’ll barge into some service with the Owls

that will make a pursuit squadron seem like an old kiwis’ home.”

“Gee, Sandy, I’m sorry, but—” Bridges’ words ended in a groan. His babbling tongue had sold them down the river and they were being transferred from a bang-up combat outfit to fly with a unit whose history was as dark as the nights through which they winged.

CHAPTER II THE NIGHT OWLS

TO SANDY PATTEN and George Bridges, service with the Owls was a new and strange type of warfare. Their introduction to their future companions-in-arms came at the flight mess. Colonel Erasmus Holden of the Intelligence Corps received them with a smile, as he reminded George Bridges of their conversation in Le Ciel.

“If you boys are just half as good as you say you are,” he told George soberly, “you will help us in a very difficult situation.”

“Gosh, colonel, I was just kidding,” George blurted.

“I wasn’t,” Holden retorted soberly.

In the mess hall, the rollicking chatter of the Skylarks was almost entirely missing. Here men told of penetrating deep into the lines of the enemy on night flights, strange and mysterious. Sandy and George had lived with the eagles, but now they were surrounded by silently flying night hawks. Patton could not but notice that their most vivid accounts told of escapes from superior forces of the enemy. There was none of the daring attacks with quick victory, such as he had heard about the Skylark board. Instead, their vaunts told of running fights in which they outstripped the foe.

“I was skimming the ceiling over Metz with a passenger,” Keith Goodman, one of the pilots said, as the men loitered over their cigarettes and toffee. “One of those new triplane Fokkers that can reach twenty-two thousand hopped me, and you can say in your letters home that I had some job to get away.”

“Why didn’t you blast hell out of him?” Sandy Patton asked.

A quiet smile went around the table. It was Captain Grissom, their commanding officer, who broke the silence.

“In this branch of the service, the winner is the man who gets back,” he told Sandy.

“Patton is one of those just-barely aces,” Lieutenant Peyton Thayer put in. “He’s always looking for trouble and generally finds it.”

The thrust was intended to take advantage of Sandy’s thoughtless question. If Thayer could put Patton and Bridges in a position where they would be unpopular with both commander and pilots, he would be making rapid progress in the plan he had in mind.

“Our branch of the service is quite different from that with which you have been flying,” Captain Grissom addressed the newcomers. “The objective of our flights is to penetrate as far as possible into enemy territory, and then—get back. A safe rein in is the most important thing. Although your passenger may have but little information, if he lands on our side of the lines, he can tell something. If he is captured or shot down, we learn nothing. It is, therefore, the first task of the pilot to get his passenger safely back.”

“Passenger?” George Bridges blurted. “You mean observer, don’t you, sir?”

“No.”

THERE was an exchange of glances between Sandy Patton and his buddy. A light of devastating brightness had come to them in that brief dialogue. For a moment both were silent, but Sandy Patton believed in fighting the war where he found it. He had been transferred to the aerial division of the Intelligence Corps and he was going to put the same dashing enthusiasm into its service as he had with a pursuit formation.

“We haven’t our bearings yet, captain,” Sandy addressed the man at the head of the table, “but we hope we’ll catch on quickly. Just at present we’re flying blind, but when we get leveled off and hitting on all cylinders, you’ll find we’ll do our damndest.”

“Angels can’t top that, skipper,” Bridges added.

A smile lighted Albert Grissom’s rather sober face and his eyes ran around the table.

“That’s what we’re all doing—our damndest,” he said. “In this outfit we don’t get our names in orders, and those entitled to stars have to wait until the show’s over or they are transferred. But you’ll find plenty of action in this outfit.”

“We’re ready for it,” Sandy answered. “That is—when you think we’re tuned up and revving without a miss.”

“That won’t be long.”

Sandy Patton glanced toward Peyton Thayer. The man’s lips were smiling, but his dark eyes flashed a

light more dangerous than a challenge. As second-in-command, he could make life miserable for them, and both were certain that he would not let the opportunity pass. Morning found them ready to take up their duties, and they were ordered to report to Thayer for instructions.

While the daily routine of the organization went on, Sandy and George found a preliminary course of training was necessary before they were sent out alone. They were turned over to Keith Goodman for an intensive course in night flying. Another feature new to them was the use of carrier pigeons.

“Why the poultry?” Sandy wanted to know, as his instructor appeared with a collapsible wicker cage. “Are we going to be gone so long that we’ll need a little squab before we get back?”

“The bird comes back—if you don’t,” Goodman answered grimly.

Lessons followed in the preparation of pigeons for flight, their proper launching from a plane in motion and the secret code in which all messages must be written.

Then came a series of night flights. Pilots were required to fly by map to lonely fields surrounded by woods, make landing and then return. Often they were ordered to bring certain strange objects that had been hidden in stranger places. A can would be placed in a hollow log. A stick, whose end had been rubbed with phosphorus to show its whereabouts, was designated as the article they should find and bring back to the airdrome. Pigeons were taken to wooded sections and released, sometimes from the ground; at others, from the plane.

SUCH was their training, but as they labored with their mock tasks, they saw other pilots depart on missions over the lines. Muffled figures were rushed from automobiles, and climbed into waiting ships to fly away into the darkness. Mysterious wings swept through the night to strange and unnamed destinations.

Sandy Patton watched these operation with canny eyes. He knew the shadowy figures being ferried across the lines were Intelligence Corps operatives, who were taking their lives lightly in an effort to learn the movements of the enemy. The greater part were Belgians or Alsatians, but the men at the sticks of the mystery ships were Americans, attired in the uniform of the flying corps. Unheralded and denied all public recognition of their bravery, they nightly swept across

the battle lines to land their passengers in the German back areas. Their dangers were greater than the combat pilots, who flew and fought by day.

That their own crossing was not far off became increasingly apparent by the actions of Peyton Thayer. He had allowed Keith Goodman to proceed with their training, but with the final tests, he took active hand. Then came the day when their names appeared upon the board in the orderly room. They had been posted for duty. The time had come.

They were in the Number 3 hangar, looking over the two-seater Nieuports which had been assigned to them, when Thayer approached them for the first time in days.

A pretense of friendliness marked his greeting—a show of enthusiasm, entirely foreign to his being.

“Fine work, boys,” he said with much display of hearty camaraderie, “Goodman tells me you’re all tuned up and dragging on the chock blocks.”

“Sure are,” George Bridges answered.

“That’s good. I’m going to ride with you tonight, just to see how you get along.”

“And come down with us?” Sandy Patton asked, his eyes held on the man’s dark face.

“Hardly that. It’ll be difficult enough for two ships to land at QX-31 without a third barging in.”

“I thought our orders were always secret,” Patton said, his glance still held on Thayer’s shifty eyes.

“They are,” was the smooth response, “but as it happens, I am the man who wrote the orders. Captain Grissom is away, but I thought that you, being an ace, would want a real test and—”

Thayer stopped as he saw Keith Goodman coming through the hangar, apparently searching for a tool or spare part. He loitered in the neighborhood, whistling softly as he searched. For a moment Thayer hesitated. Then he turned and walked away.

“Is that squirt sending you boys to QX-31?” he asked of Sandy in lowered voice.

A nod in reply.

“He’s sure grabbing his chance while the skipper’s away.”

“What makes you think so?” George Bridges asked.

“Only this. QX-31 is the toughest spot on the other side of the ditch. We’ve lost four men there, and none of them were quitters. You fellows are new to this game and it’s just like ordering you up before a firing squad and telling you to look pleasant. What are you going to do about it?”

“Go there—and come back,” Sandy answered.

“And then give Peyton the razz,” George added.

“If you do,” Goodman muttered, “you’ll be ready to go to Potsdam and drop a passenger down a chimney into the Kaiser’s bedroom—all in the dark of the moon.”

CHAPTER III TRICKED!

ALTHOUGH BOTH George and Sandy had served in a combat squadron and had faced the enemy daily, their prospect of a night visit into the land of the Boche brought a tenseness they had not felt since their first days at the Front. The detail would be no practice jaunt to some lonely French wood, there to snatch up a previously deposited object and scurry back to the field from which they had hopped.

Their lives, and those of the strange muffled men who would ride behind them, depended upon the skill of their maneuvering. A careless landing, a failure to throttle down and touch trucks with a dead stick between their knees, might lead to detection and capture. There would be no free, reckless battle in a sun-flooded sky in which they would trade tracer with the enemy amid the thundering melee of a dogfight.

Theirs would be the wings of mystery, flitting over the embattled armies. Other strange craft would be in the somber skies, winging through the darkness from both sides of the lines. The pomp and panoply of war were not for these. They moved in secret, flying only on the darkest nights, not knowing their orders until the day of their take-off.

Like all pilots detailed to make a landing with which they were unfamiliar, afternoon saw them take to the air to inspect the ground on which they would come down that night. Flying by the doubly co-ordinated maps of the Intelligence Corps, they circled over the spot known as QX-31. It was a park-like opening in the center of a forest of giant oaks. The tall trees surrounded it like towering walls, making entrance and exit hazardous.

Sandy Patton held his glasses to his eyes as he wheeled above that small open place. With a west wind, they would be able to take to the air after a short run, but with a blow from the east, their task would be

much more difficult.

"Gee, and I thought a pursuit pilot took his life in his hands," he mumbled. "Theirs is a cinch, compared to this job."

Another circle to fix every detail in his mind, and Sandy signalled to George that he was ready to return. As their ships raced through the afternoon air, Patton gauged the task Peyton Thayer had allotted them. He had given them an assignment which had resulted in the death or capture of four pilots, and he had done it—intentionally. An appeal to Captain Grissom would doubtlessly get them a less difficult detail.

"I'm damned if I'm going to whine," Sandy muttered, as they piqued for their landing field. "This is our chance and we're going to take it."

NIGHT found them ready. Their machines had been tuned to perfection and they were eager for the hour of the hop-off. Captain Grissom had returned, and they were ordered to appear before him for final instructions.

"I see you boys are down for QX-31," he said, referring to a sheet of paper upon his desk. "That's a bad spot—in fact, a sore one for this outfit. As this is your first trip over, I can give it to some of the others if you wish."

"Don't, please," Sandy answered.

"How about you, Bridges?" the captain asked.

"All tuned up and ready to hop, sir," was the cheerful reply.

A grin crossed the captain's face. Then he turned his attention to their final instructions. "You will hop off at twenty-two hours and thirty minutes," he began, "after taking on passengers who will arrive at twenty-two hours and twenty-eight minutes. You will proceed to the spot indicated as QX-31 and cruise at five thousand meters until twenty-three hours and forty-one minutes.

"Cruising until you receive a ground signal showing that all is clear, you will come down, cutting your engines at fifteen hundred meters. The clear signal will be three flashes of white, one of green and one of red. If delay is required, the flashes will be two red, one green, two red."

"Supposing we get no lights at all?" George Bridges inquired.

"After cruising until you have only enough fuel to take you across the lines, you will turn back and land your passengers at the first available field, first releasing a bird informing us that the operation has been unsuccessful. The code for this will be '*Unter den*

Linden.'"

"But if we get landing lights, sir?" Sandy asked.

"You will come down with idling engine and not touch trucks until twenty-three hours and forty-three minutes. I suggest that you enter the park from the east and drop down as near to that edge as possible. You will discharge your passengers as soon as possible and in their places take on two more. They will make themselves known by the following code identification numbers, R-247 and S-96. R-247 can be identified by his bulky figure, heavy bass voice and a missing index finger on the right hand. He will return in Bridges' ship. S-96 is a woman, about twenty-two years of age, with a small mole on the left wrist and a scar below the right ear. She will ride in Patton's machine."

He paused, raising his eyes to the two. "Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Recite your instructions," this to Sandy Patton.

The pilot rapidly repeated the orders which had been read to him. There was a similar test for George Bridges.

"Fine. I guess we don't need this any more."

Captain Grissom took the paper from which he had been reading and held it to a lighted match. In another moment it was a charred cinder in his ash tray.

"One thing to remember, boys," he told them in conclusion, "and that is—get back with your passengers. Everything else is secondary. If you are attacked, make no attempt to fight, unless there is no other way. Lieutenant Thayer will pilot your covering plane. Let him attend to the enemy."

"Covering plane?" George Bridges questioned.

"Yes, to draw the fire of the enemy. Under no circumstances are you to aid each other or him. Your paramount task is to return with your passengers—unwounded. If forced down, don't forget your bird. That's all."

SANDY PATTON and George Bridges nosed out onto the tarmac, their mental revs mounting as they considered the strange orders they had just received. Captain Grissom's announcement that Peyton Thayer would ride a covering plane had added an unexpected turn to the adventure. They had taken the man's announcement in the hangar as a gibe, but now they knew they would have to consider him, as well as the enemy.

"A lot of covering he'll do for us," Bandy muttered, as they neared their ships.

"He'll cover us with mud, not glory," George answered. "Still, I don't get him. Peyton's no coward, but he seems to be going to a lot of trouble to see that we get washed up."

"Wonder what the trick is," Patton mumbled.

"You tell me."

Darkness held the landing field. They could hear the roar of warming motors, and they glanced at the illuminated dials of their wrist-watches. A quarter after ten, twenty-two hours and fifteen minutes, according to the French time adopted by the A.E.F. In another quarter of an hour they would be off, flying through the night upon their mysterious mission.

Each turned to his own ship, listening to the response of their motors as they stepped up the revs. The few mechanics, who had hovered about, were ordered off the field by the hangar sergeant, who remained with two aides to jerk away the chocks. They saw Peyton Thayer examining his own crate. Then he walked to Sandy's plane to bellow through cupped hands.

"Nothing to be afraid of, Patton," the words came dimly through the sound of the motor. "I'll see that Fritz doesn't get you."

"See that he doesn't get you," the pilot barked in reply.

The Nieuports were warming up, the revs mounting rapidly as each fed his motor more sauce. The hands of their watches were creeping toward the hour named in their orders. Sandy Patton felt a new thrill tingling through him. It was different from the excitement marking the hop-off of a pursuit formation. Mystery gripped him, and ahead were new and strange adventures. Another glance at his watch—the time had come.

He looked around to see an automobile race across the field. It had no lights, but stopped just behind the bellowing airplanes, as though it had taken part in such scenes before. Captain Grissom appeared out of the darkness. Behind him was the bulky figure of Colonel Erasmus Holden. A muffled form slid from the tonneau of the automobile and climbed into the rear pit of Sandy's ship. Another took his place behind George Bridges, but Peyton Thayer's spare cubby was unoccupied.

A flashlight in Captain Grissom's hand was raised, then lowered. The hangar sergeant and his aides jerked away the chocks as the engines increased their roaring. In another moment the three planes had glided up into the night.

Although the field was bare except for those in immediate charge of the take-off, Sandy Patton knew their departure had been witnessed by a hundred eyes or more. He had watched similar dramas from his own quarters and had been thrilled by their mysterious rites. The adventure was on, and he was speeding through the night, flying by map and compass to a spot where the lines Q and 3 crossed on a large scale map and X and 1 intersected on a special tracing used by the Intelligence Corps. QX-31 was their haven, a small, bare field surrounded by high oak trees. Into that pocket he would descend.

"I have a hunch I'll find something there I'm not looking for," he mumbled.

ONWARD through the darkness. They had climbed until they were at five thousand meters, more than fifteen thousand feet above the earth. The bright ribbon of the trenches, marked by thousands of flares, told them they were crossing the lines. Half the journey was over. They were in German territory. The man riding behind Sandy Patton would meet a quick and none too merciful death if they were forced to the ground. Further on, S-96 was awaiting Sandy's coming. A woman, a little more than twenty years of age with a small brown mole upon her wrist. Was she pretty? Sandy wondered if he was flying to romance as well as adventure.

He looked over the edge of his tiny office to gauge his progress by the faint silver cord of a river, whose valley they were to follow, until a sudden widening told them they had reached a lake formed by a dam. A sharp turn to the right and they headed for the Rhine. Between the small lake and the larger river lay the forest into which Patton and George Bridges were to descend.

"Ought to be getting there toot sweet," the pilot told himself, glancing at his wrist-watch once more.

Thirty-five minutes past eleven. According to the Operation's time, it was twenty-three hours and thirty-five. Six minutes to cruise, watching for signals from below. Sandy glanced around. He caught a glimpse of a sweeping shadow against the star-light. George Bridges was getting close. Peyton Thayer and his covering plane must be somewhere, but he recognized George's short under wing.

He glanced over the cubby's edge through his night glasses. The velvet blackness of the forest covered the ground below. Sandy continued to circle, waiting for the flashes of light that would tell him his coming was

expected. He could feel the blood racing through his veins. Time dragged. Circle followed circle. Another glance at his watch. The time had passed.

Far below, there was a flick of light, hardly larger than a spark. The pilot's eyes strained as he waited for the second flash. If it was red, he would have to—no, it was white. Then another, red next, and then a green ball glowed against the black carpet far beneath his trucks.

Sandy gave his tail a toss and dropped down, choking his motor as he glided. He had been trained to come down in the pitchy darkness with a dead stick between his knees—no bellowing engine that would broadcast the coming of the wings of mystery.

Down, down, down. The revs decreased until the prop was barely turning. He could catch faint glimpses of the sable tree tops reaching up into the star-sprinkled sky. He reached out to cut the small light on his instrument board. Darkness encompassed him. He must feel his way, missing those up-reared branches, and then level for a pancake landing. His under struts and trucks had been built especially for maneuvers such as this.

He kept his eyes on the line marking the meeting of sky and trees. Now he was within the circle. He tipped the tail up a trifle more, fearing a stall. Then he came back suddenly with the stick. A bump as his trucks touched, and he dropped the empennage hurriedly. From the right came a sound that told of Bridges' landing.

Tiny lights flicked on the edge of the forest. He caught a faint sight of shadowy figures, racing like tormented ghosts.

"Bon soir, monsieur. Au revoir," a voice whispered behind him.

His passenger was wishing him good-night—until they met again. Sandy turned to see him sliding to the ground. Next he was swallowed up by the encompassing shadows. Another figure appeared beside his ship. He could only discern a faint, slender outline.

"Who is it?" Sandy whispered.

"S," was the soft reply.

"Nine," he countered, following the rule of identification in these mysterious ferryings.

"Six," he recognized it as a woman's voice this time.

"What mark?"

An arm was raised, the sleeve pulled up. A flash of a tiny electric torch, and he saw a brown mole upon the left wrist.

"All right. Get in. Don't forget to snap your straps."

S-96, his return passenger, had identified herself.

He could see nothing of the woman's face, but the voice was low and pleasing, unmarked by foreign accent. She clambered into the cubby with the agility of one thoroughly at home in an airplane.

"Ready," came the soft whisper.

SANDY had gauged his position in the tiny park by the heights of the trees, whose tall shadows were silhouetted against the sky. He would have to tail around for the take-off. A west wind was waving the higher branches. He waited for the sound of Bridges' motor. Neither must start until both were ready. They had arranged to flash a light just before giving the engine the gun. He had already shown the signal, but no answer had been received. Tinglingly he waited.

"He's slow," he heard the girl behind him whisper. "We can't wait long. They followed us this afternoon."

From overhead came a blinding burst of light, flooding the tiny park with the ghostly glare of burning magnesium. Sandy Patton caught a glimpse of racing figures, dashing for cover. He saw George Bridges' ship, its prop moving slowly. The crack of a rifle sounded from the left. A challenge was bawled.

Sandy Patton gave his motor the gun as a shriek sounded in his ears, the shriek of a woman. In another moment he had snatched up the tail and was racing across the ground at swiftly crescendoing speed. The tall, black wall of the forest seemed to be plunging at him. He must hop soon and swing around.

He eased back on the stick and the nose came up. A louder roar as he poured in the sauce. The trees were almost upon him. He would crash unless—the right wing dropped and he dragged the tail around. He must take the chance of a slip or barge into those towering oaks.

Another flare burst above them. George Bridges had managed to take off and was mounting in a tight chandelle. Sandy dropped his tail still more, shooting the hop until the throttle would go no farther.

He caught the stabbing lights of machine gun fire, while through the sound of his motor came the staccato rattle of Spandau guns. QX-31 was demanding new victims. The enemy was coming down on three sides, while high above, a ship dropped flares to light the target of the gunners.

Dodging and twisting, Sandy Patton stuck the nose of his Nieuport into the darkness, while cherry-colored streaks of tracer broke on every side. His eyes

searched the zenith. Peyton Thayer had been detailed to pilot a covering plane which would draw the fire of the Germans and permit the passenger-carrying machines to escape.

There was no sign to show the presence of a third American craft. A sensation of being betrayed swept through the pilot. He knew that in piloting a ferry ship, peril would dog him every moment inside the German lines. He was ready for that. It was part of the grim game he was playing, but Thayer—he had been the man who detailed them to this duty, and now he was leaving them to the mercies of those flailing whips of Spandau fire.

AS ANOTHER flare burst, Sandy glanced to the left to see George Bridges scudding off to the south. He banked steeply and veered to the west. Their separation would divide the enemy. Such were the tactics of the mystery ships. Their pilots were under strict orders to leash their fire except in extreme necessity. Victory lay in flight, rather than battle.

Another glance above. Peyton Thayer should have dropped down with the first signs of attack and engaged the enemy, drawing them away from the fleeing passenger planes. Instead—Sandy Patton glared up at another flare, which had dropped from a point almost above him. It was the delayed-fuse type, a kind that had been only recently introduced along the Western Front.

“Only one thing for me to do,” he growled, as another Fokker lunged at him. “Only one thing.”

The Nieuport had been climbing in short, mad leaps and then leveling off to twist and turn. Three charging night hawks were attacking it, while above rode a fourth, dropping its flares to guide their bullets.

B-b-b-r-r-r. Sandy twisted in the seat. The sound of the burst told him it was firing close at hand. The girl was standing in the observer’s pit, swinging the swiveled Lewis in awkward style, but the light of the parachute flare above disclosed a black nosed Albatross riding on the Nieuport’s tail. He could see that the line of her tracers were over-shooting, and he dropped the tail slightly. Now they were whanging into the pursuing craft, tearing its engine and barging through into the pilot’s cockpit.

“That stopped them,” Sandy yelled, as the Albatross fell away. “The motor’s conked, but the pilot’s going to have a tough landing unless he finds that park.”

His words were drowned by the sound of the motor, but the girl turned around. He could not see

her smile, but he sensed its presence. Then another flare burst near them, and Sandy Patton all but went over the edge from sheer surprise.

He knew that girl. He had seen her—where? For the moment his mind was gripped with clinging, cloudy memories that would not clarify. They had met since his coming to France. She was an American. He was sure of that. Where had he seen her? Vague recollections of smoke-filled rooms, dancing feet and the popping of corks came to him. Paris? Issoudun? Or could it be that—

B-b-b-r-r-r. B-b-b-r-r-r. Pursuing Fokkers were charging from either side. He rolled, slowing his speed, and the Germans shot down in front of him. His hand flew to the gun trip. A long drag, and the dying magnesium flare disclosed a tumbling enemy. Blackness closed down. Then came a flash and swiftly spreading flames. His tracer had ignited a gasoline tank, and the second of their foes had been eliminated.

“May be against orders,” Sandy Patton muttered, “but I’m not the only one forgetting teacher’s lessons this evening.”

Going into a sharp chandelle, he mounted once more. If he could get above the ship which had been dropping flares, escape would not be so difficult. But the Fokkers struck again, lunging at him with Spandaus flaming. The air seemed to dance with the flickering lines of their long-drawn drags. Once more he heard the guns behind him stammering, and he whirled around.

A NEW parachute light was burning and he glimpsed the starred insignia of the American flying forces. Peyton Thayer had appeared at last. The flicker of Vickers fire shone at the Nieuport’s nose.

“Hey—don’t!” Patton yelled, as he saw the ship at which the girl was firing. “He’s one of our gang.”

Then he caught the flash of another Fokker charging down. Thayer’s guns were sputtering, but their fire was not directed at the enemy. For a moment Sandy thought the man was holding his guns on him. The dancing sparks of the American’s bullets were coming nearer and nearer.

“For cripes’ sake,” Sandy yelled, “can’t you see where you’re shooting?”

He had tossed up the tail, spoiling the girl’s aim, but Peyton Thayer’s guns kept ripping out a prolonged blast. A curse sprang from Sandy’s lip. Then he shoved his stick still her forward and dove with a swift rush that brought a scream from his passenger. The attacking Fokker had sped past and the Nieuport dove

after it with a savage howl.

“To hell with regulations! Nobody pays any attention to them,” yelled the pilot.

His hand was on the gun trips. In the ghostly glare of the still-burning parachute light he saw the black cross of his enemy. A touch on the lever and his guns broke loose. He held until the belts had all but reached their ends. A twist and a turn, and the Fokker wriggled out of the way, but its maneuvering was awkward and uncertain.

“I bet I stung him anyhow,” Sandy muttered.

He glanced below. Across the dark surface of the earth a fiery ribbon stretched. They had reached the lines. The girl had sunk one Fokker, and so had he. The third had been pinked. His mission was nearing its end. In spite of the trap into which he had been forced, he was going to get through. A cheer came to his lips, but the stammering fire of another pair of Spandaus choked it back. The enemy still remained in air and, instead of being drawn to one side by Peyton Thayer, the Fokkers continued to assail Sandy Patton.

He glanced aloft in the direction where he had last seen Thayer’s ship, but only darkness met his eyes. The Boche, however, gave him small time for gazing. The fury of their attack increased as they realized that he was above Allied territory. They could not be satisfied with driving him down now. His ship and passenger must be destroyed.

They came in closer and shots were whipping the wings and fuselage. He could hear the woman blasting away with her swiveled guns. She was fighting desperately, knowing the fate that would be hers unless they escaped these furies of the night.

“I’ll never get this crate back, the way things are going,” Sandy told himself. “The Lord helps those who help themselves, and here’s where I start something.”

Instead of running from the sleeting sheets of Spandau fire, Sandy threw the Nieuport’s tail around and lunged at the nearest of his enemies. He could see the light of the exhaust pipes, in addition to the flaming machine guns. He tripped his Vickers and dove.

The belts were nearly empty, but he gave them all he had. The girl was burning ammunition as fast as her weapons could pump. He saw one Fokker tip over on its side and then disappear in the darkness.

Then he glimpsed the flicking flames of another pair of guns coming down upon them. The enemy was so near that for a moment Sandy believed they would crash in mid-air.

The German fired a short burst that barged into the Nieuport’s motor. At the same instant, the girl blazed out with a drag that raked the enemy ship from one end to the other. An instant later, two crates were tumbling through the sky, the Fokker blazing like a torch of warning.

CHAPTER IV COURT MARSHAL

HURLING THROUGH THE AIR, an unknown terrain below him, Sandy Patton worked the controls until he had the Nieuport on even keel. Behind them was the path of ghastly light marking the front line trenches. A glance at his map told him they must be over French territory, between the second and third zones of defense. The ground would be shell-pitted and dangerous, but he had no recourse but to bring his damaged crate to earth.

He held the tail up sufficiently to give them head speed, for a stall would prove dangerous. Silence had come with the conking of the motor, but he saw no signs of other enemies. At least he would be able to come down without dodging fiery blasts of Spandau tracer. They were inside the lines. He had returned from QX-31 with his passenger.

Then his thoughts returned to the girl. Who was she? He wriggled around to stare at her, but could only see the dim white of her lower face where the goggles did not cover it.

“Lucky, weren’t we?” he heard her say.

“Not down yet,” he reminded her.

A moment of silence as he gazed over the side. They would soon be on the ground. He took a landing flare from the tool pocket and held it ready for use.

“Aren’t you Mr. Patton?” the question came from the rear cubby.

“Yes. Who are you?”

“S-96,” was the tantalizing reply.

“But you have a name.”

“So I have—several. Do you remember—any of them?”

“No, but I’ve met you somewhere.”

“Yes—somewhere, but I doubt if you remember.”

“Tell me where I—”

“Look out, Mr. Patton. We’re almost—”

He glanced over the side and then tossed out his landing flare. The light burst and he saw the pitted ground rushing up to meet them. He dropped the tail, but the ground was still too far away. A stall and then they dropped to a crash landing. A pitch and a leap. The nose shot ahead as the trucks were sheared off. Then a wing tip raked the ground, and they half whirled and whanged into a partially destroyed stretch of wire. A ripping crash, and Sandy Patton knew that another Nieuport was all washed up.

Hardly had the motion ceased when

Patton disengaged his straps and crawled from the wreckage. He was not injured.

"Hurt?" he called. "N-n-n-n-not—much, but—" Patton burrowed into the wreckage. It was dark, but he could hear her trying to extricate herself from the splintered fuselage. Fortunately no fire had followed their crash and he could work carefully in spite of the encompassing darkness. At last he was able to drag her out and for a moment they stood, peering into the night.

"If we can find one of their communication trenches," Sandy began, "maybe we can—"

He stopped as he heard the thud of booted feet. He gazed in the direction from which the sounds came and soon could see a group of shadowy figures coming toward them. A star-shell went up, off to the right, and he caught its reflection on high-crowned steel helmets. They had landed among the French.

"Who goes there?" The challenge came in French, as the soldiers neared.

"Gosh, I don't know if we should—"

"Who goes there?" The question was repeated in German, and the star-shell light flashed on lowered bayonets.

"*Nous sommes Americains*," the girl's voice answered the *poilus*.

A hush as they recognized her tone as feminine. An electric torch flashed, to fall on one face, then another. A murmur ran through the little group of squat Frenchmen and the pair were quickly surrounded.

"Spies—spies," the word traveled rapidly around the circle.

"Why didn't I release that bird?" A sudden recollection came to Sandy Patton.

"Poor thing was killed," he heard the girl whisper.

"Spies—spies," The word was being spoken in louder, bolder tones.

A FRENCH sub-lieutenant turned his light on

the girl's face and held it there. Then he barked an order. Rough hands grasped both Patton and his passenger and they were hurried toward the trenches. After a short dash across pitted fields, they entered a winding ditch leading to the rear. After a brief stop at regimental headquarters, they were taken still further from the zone of combat.

"This is a devil of a way to treat an ally," Sandy Patton complained, as they continued.

Dawn had come when they entered the grounds of the stately chateau in which Major General Enrique Soreille made his headquarters. A buzz of excitement marked their arrival, and a few minutes later they were facing a dried-up little divisional commander, who broke his fast with hard rolls and coffee as he questioned them.

"Do you speak German?" he asked them in that language.

"I am an American," Sandy Patton rasped in reply, gesturing to his uniform.

A shrug of the general's narrow shoulders.

"And you also an American, are you not?" The officer turned to the girl, but continued to speak in the language of the enemy.

"Of course," snapped S-96.

A catlike smile came across the Frenchman's face. He had used nothing but the Boche tongue, yet both of these suspects had understood him readily. He had trapped them—with ease.

"Of course, eef you prefair ze Angleesh language, we can spik eet," the general went on, "but I weel say zat you might as well confess to ze espionage. We have captured you in ze war zone. You come from ze other size of ze lines. Eef you confess and geef us news of importance, perhaps ze life will be spare, but—"

"You can identify us without trouble," Sandy Patton broke in with sudden anger. "I am a pilot from the American Intelligence flying unit at Chantilly. My name is Alexander Patton. A word on the telephone will identify me, if you do not wish to bring witnesses that far. Regarding the young lady, I am sure you can get information regarding her from the same source."

General Enrique Soreille's smile broadened, but he called an aide and whispered an order in his native tongue. Then he turned to the prisoners once more.

"Of course it would be easy for *monsieur*, the enemy, to get the uniform of an American aviator," he went on easily. "I understand many of them had come down within the German lines. Engine trouble was ze reason geeven, but—"

“That’s a damn lie,” Sandy Patton barked.

“You spik again to me like zat and I have you shot without ze trial,” Sorreille threatened.

“Hop to it,” snarled Sandy.

A flush spread over the little general’s face and his manicured finger drummed upon the desk at which he was breakfasting. Then the aide whom he had sent upon an errand returned and whispered in the commander’s ear. A smile quirked up the stiffly waxed mustache and he turned on Sandy.

“*Monsieur’s* confederate has betrayed heem,” he said.

“What does that mean?” Patton retorted.

“Only zees—we are inform by ze American Intelligence office zat Lieutenant Patton was shot down early zees morning on ze ozer side of ze lines. Both he an’ hees passengaire are meesing.”

“Of course we’re missing—we’re here.”

“You aire, but Lieutenant Patton and hees companion fell wizin ze German line.”

“Who made such a fool statement as that?” the young man demanded with growing heat.

General Soreille turned to his aide and snapped a question. A murmured sentence came in reply.

“He say zat Lieutenant Peyton Thayer answer ze telephone. He saw ze fall and give ze detail.”

“Peyton Thayer!” It was the girl, S-96, whose words rang out in that deadly silence. “Why, he’s the man, Mr. Patton, who—”

“Silence,” roared the little general. “You weel have one chance to spik at ze court martial. I weel call eet as soon as I have feenish my breakfas’. Take zem away, Captain Thibault. I am ‘ongry.”

A SQUAD of hairy *poilus* escorted Sandy Patton to a stone outhouse that had once been a stable, but now was used as a prison. As he paced back and forth upon the stone floor of his cell, the aviator tried to find some solution to the predicament in which he and his passenger were placed. Peyton Thayer had had an opportunity to free them both. Instead he had spoken the words that would destroy them.

Then his thoughts returned to the girl. Gradually his memory of their meeting returned. He had seen her with Thayer, in Paris. He had gone with George Bridges to Montmartre. They were putting on a binge to celebrate his acedom and had seen her in Le Ciel. He had left George with Colonel Holden and had danced with her. After that they had gone somewhere, and he had more words with Thayer. The whole course

of his life had been changed by that chance meeting, and now they were facing a French court martial, a machine as merciless as the war which gave it being.

A dozen wild ideas surged through Sandy’s milling thoughts. He should have small difficulty in establishing his own identity. But who was this girl? For whom was she working? Her name—Atir Noslen—that was it. It didn’t sound like a name. It was more like—

He looked out to see a squad of *poilus* crossing the yard, a sub-lieutenant in command. They stopped before the stable and the officer opened the door.

“Come. Ze court—eet ees waiting,” he announced.

Sandy Patton stared in surprise. He had not been confined more than two or three hours. He had heard the French were swift in their handling of spies, but this haste would rob him of a chance to get in touch with Captain Grissom, Colonel Holden or anyone who might testify in his favor.

As they crossed the stable yard, Sandy saw another squad of enlisted men marching toward the chateau. In their center was the girl.

“Didn’t lose any time, did they?” he called to her.

She turned and smiled, but a word from her captors caused her to face around again. Next they entered the chateau, to be ushered into a room where the court martial had assembled. Sandy glanced at the row of uniformed figures, in the center of which was Major General Enrique Soreille.

They guards melted away, leaving them standing immediately in front of the divisional commander. An aide stepped forward to act as official interpreter.

“Your name, *monsieur*?” the man asked of Sandy.

“Alexander Patton, second lieutenant, A.E.F.”

“I mean your real name, *monsieur*.”

“That’s the only one I ever had.”

“*Bien*. We weel try heem by zat name,” snapped the voice of General Soreille. “And now, *mademoiselle*, what ees your name?”

“S-96,” she answered quietly.

“And then *mademoiselle* has a number known in Wilhelmstrasse,” Soreille leaned across the table, smiling broadly.

“I told you I am an American,” she retorted. “If you get in touch with Chaumont—”

“We weel not trouble Chaumont wiz no small a theeng,” the officer answered. “Come—ze witnesses. We have plenty.”

SMALL time had been lost by the French in

preparing their case against Sandy Patton and the girl known as S-96. The *poilus* who had captured them had been brought to the rear, and swore to their landing within the lines of combat. An observation officer testified that they had come from the German side of the line. He had seen an American airplane engaging them by the light of a parachute flare that had been dropped from above. This was held to be the deciding factor and was stressed by the major who acted as judge advocate.

"If an American plane fired on us, it was piloted by the same man who said we were shot down on the other side," Sandy Patton retorted.

Although he could understand the French spoken by his captors, he replied in his own tongue.

"Zen one of your own comrade he shoot at you?" General Soreille asked in high sarcasm.

"I didn't think he would go that far, but—"

"None of us thenk he go zat far," the officer broke in. "Eet ees ridiculous."

More witnesses were called. Each added to the testimony against them. The French major assigned to the task of defense made small effort to ask anything but the most perfunctory questions.

"Now what have you to say?" General Soreille turned to Sandy Patton, when the prosecution had rested.

"Only this," Sandy's blue eyes were dashing. "As a youngster, I was taught to admire the French motto, 'Justice, Equality and Fraternity.' I find them as meaningless as your unfelt terms of courtesy. I have told you who I am. This young lady has said where you can find her identification, but you give us a drum head trial.

"We both have been working for the Allied cause—beyond the front lines, not behind them, like you who live in a fine old chateau when you ought to be—"

"Enough talk," General Soreille broke in. "I weel not be insult by one spy." Next he turned to the girl, his eyes flashing. "And you—what have you to say?"

"Nothing to you except to make your inquiries at Chaumont. What secrets I have cannot be revealed unless permission is given by the highest command," was her unhurried answer. "If I can reach the ears of—"

"Best you reach the ears of *le bon Dieu* wiz your prayers," Soreille broke in.

Sandy Patton needed no interpreter to understand the appeal the general next made to the members of the court martial. It was more than an appeal—it was a

command for an immediate verdict of guilty. Nods of affirmation greeted his words, and in another moment he had shoved back his chair and was facing the prisoners, his dark eyes flashing. Then he addressed them in French.

"It is ze judgment of ze court, mees and meester, that you are guilty of ze espionage," were the general's words, "and ze sentence ees zat you be taken by ze officer in charge of ze guard and executed according to—"

"Wait a minute—wait a minute," Sandy yelled. "Listen!"

The sound of airplanes piquing down came through the open windows of the old chateau. He looked out to see two Nieuports make a landing on the wide lawns surrounding the building. From them leaped four American officers. In the van, racing towards the building, was Peyton Thayer. He was throwing on the sauce as though an imp rode his tail. Behind him came George Bridges, and the thing he held in his hand looked more like a pistol than a bouquet of roses.

The second plane had carried Colonel Erasmus Holden and Captain Grissom. They, too, were running toward the chateau.

Then the door opened, and the American officers dashed across the room to where General Enrique Soreille was standing, his upper plate plainly visible to all who might stare into his gaping mouth.

WHILE the release of Sandy Patton was easily arranged, even to a formal but grudging apology from General Soreille, the case of the girl proved more difficult. Although no testimony had been given at the trial by the French Intelligence Corps, it was evident that much secret information was in the hands of the divisional commander.

"I am certain that she is known to have associated with persons connected with the enemy," a precise officer told Colonel Erasmus Holden. "Besides—we are looking for one' Mina von Unworth."

"Even so," the American countered, "this girl is our operative—not yours."

A whispered conference was held between General Soreille and several of his staff. Then he turned to Colonel Holden once more.

"How do you identify her as your agent?" he asked.

The American reached into an inner pocket and took out a thin sheet of paper.

"This is our confidential circular," he whispered

to the French commander. "It said: S-96. Tall, blonde, speaks German, French and English. A small mole on the left wrist. A tiny scar below the right ear."

"She has these marks?" Soreille demanded of his aide.
"Oui, monsieur."

A shrug of the shoulders and the general gestured the guards to step from the girl's side.

"*Bien*—she is yours, my colonel, but eef I were you, I would not be satisfied. Theengs are not as they look, not so?"

With the prisoners released, French aviators offered to fly Atir Noslen and Sandy Patton back to the airdrome of the American Intelligence unit, and within less than an hour of the time set for his execution, Sandy was in his own quarters again. When George Bridges arrived, Sandy put his friend through a cross-examination far more penetrating than that given him when he was on trial for his life.

"But how did you happen to do it just in time?" he demanded.

"Well, it was like this," his buddy answered. "The orderly sergeant told me that he heard Thayer saying over the telephone that you and your passenger had been shot down on the German side of the lines. Then our observation crowd heard of a plane landing in French territory with a woman spy in it. Two and two made five, so I got busy and gave your friend Peyton the works with a gat nestling right against his throbbing little heart. He admitted that he might have been mistaken in the dark, and after that I threw on the sauce and showed some speed."

"I am glad you did," Sandy answered. "If you had gone into a stall or lost revs for any reason, I sure would be planted by this time and be giving the poppies a lift. Thayer may have made a mistake. He may have made a lot, but—"

A knock on the door leading into the hall brought his words to an end. There was a barked command to enter, and they saw Peyton Thayer come in. His dark face was pale and the forced smile upon his face twisted it into a rather grotesque grimace.

"I'm mighty sorry, Patton," he began, extending his hand. "I thought it was you who went down. I wouldn't let a man from my own outfit go before a firing squad on purpose—you know that."

Sandy Patton ignored both the words and the hand. "Who tossed those flares down on us just before we took off from QX-31?" he demanded.

"Why—why, the enemy I suppose."

"Are they using delayed fuses like that new issue of

ours?"

"They—they must be."

"You know a damned sight better. You dropped those lights. I can't prove it, but—"

"Don't be a fool, Patton," Peyton Thayer broke in. "No matter what may be between you and me, I'm no traitor."

"Personally, I think you are," Sandy rapped back.

An angry flush came to the other's cheeks, and he turned on his heel and strode toward the door. "That's up to you to prove," he snarled, "and an American court martial asks more evidence than the French."

HE STRODE out, and they heard his steps going down the hallway. For a moment Sandy and George looked into each other's eyes. Then Bridges crossed the room and softly closed the door.

"You sure had him right in the cross wires when you shot that burst," he muttered.

"I didn't crash him, but I had him working his controls mighty fast," was the grave answer. "I'm going to keep on that baby's tail, and the next time I toss a drag at him, he's going down in flames. It's tough enough to be fighting Fritz all the time without having to shake the snakes out of your cubby every time you snap your straps."

Sandy had a well-defined program arranged in his mind, but he had to await the move of his enemy. A week drifted by with the usual routine of the night-flying ferrymen. No more extra-dangerous missions were assigned him, although he crossed the lines several times in daylight flights with an Intelligence officer in the rear cubby. The great drive through the Chemin des Dames sector was in full swing, but the Americans were beginning to check it in the Chateau Thierry salient. The world rocked with the repercussions of the Thor-like blows of the enemy. Paris reeled and the French morale was at its lowest ebb.

Then came a stiffening in the defense, and the high tension was relieved for the moment. Sandy Patton had been watching Peyton Thayer, but the man's actions gave no hint of anything of a sinister nature. He took his turn in the duty of the organization, but never selected either Sandy or George Bridges for his formation flights. Then came a night when an enlisted man in the orderly room whispered to Patton that Thayer had received a telephone call from Paris. Sandy was on his toes in an instant. Inquiry at the hangars brought the information that Thayer had taken a single-seater and had hopped for Le Bourget, the

airport of the capital.

With this information in hand, Sandy stepped up his revs and winged to Captain Grissom. Patton was no tale-bearer. He was looking for leave. Neither his name nor Bridges' appeared on the bulletin board, and the skipper consented to a dash to the capital for purely social reasons.

"Give my regards to St. Peter at Le Ciel," was his parting shot.

"What makes you think we're going there?" Sandy paused long enough to ask.

"Because," the skipper answered solemnly, "I've heard that one of the classiest little jobs ever turned out in the U.S.A. is generally parked in that hangar."

"Right, sir, but wrong." The pilot grinned as he replied. "The classiest is in Akron, Ohio, according to her last letter. I like to shake a foot once in a while, but as a Romeo, I'm all cracked up."

Then he dashed to his room to drag George Bridges toward the tarmac. A few moments later, they were on the wing, with George in the passenger's cubby, wondering what it was all about. They were grinding up the hill leading to Montmartre before Bridges had figured it out, and they had entered Le Ciel by the time the first dim light of understanding came to his puzzled brain.

"Why here?" he demanded, as he followed St. Peter toward the back of the main dining room. "Haven't we had enough bad luck in this place without touching trucks here again?"

George was still flying in the fog, but Sandy had begun to see the blue sky beyond.

"That's the reason," Patton's eyes gestured to a table at which were a circle of officers and a girl—a girl with blue eyes and dazzling blonde hair.

"When did he get leave?" George was looking at Peyton Thayer, whose head was bent low as he whispered to Atir Noslen.

"He didn't. That's one reason why we got ours," Sandy answered. "Better put your goggles on, George, my boy. We're going fast from now on. And don't forget the trick buckle. We're liable to loop at any minute."

CHAPTER V THE GIRL CALLED S-96

ONCE MORE SANDY PATTON tossed his tail into the air and dove into an alien formation in a full-powered slide. Atir Noslen held out a welcoming hand, but the dark frowns which gathered on the faces of Peyton Thayer and some of the other men told George Bridges that his friend was just as safe as though he were surrounded by a flight of peevish Fokkers. The girl, however, gave no heed to the scowls of her male companions. She was attired in a daring evening gown that would cause even the Rue de la Paix to stare. Of the worldly women gathered in Le Ciel, she was the most sophisticated.

"Mr. Thayer has just been telling me how he made that terrible mistake that almost cost you and me our lives," she said, when Sandy had found a chair.

"Good thing that George here heard of a ship cracking up back of the French lines," Patton answered. "As soon as he learned of it, he slapped on the power and hustled."

"Then it was you who saved our lives," Miss S-96 extended a jeweled hand to Bridges. "Just for that, I'm going to ask you to my party tonight. We're all going over to the apartment, and some other friends will join us there. Meantime—happy landings." She raised her wine glass in her left hand, as she offered the toast. Sandy had taken up his own when his eyes fell upon the girl's wrist. The tiny mole by which he had identified her was missing. Then his glance flashed to the white column of her throat, seeking a spot just below the ear. The small scar was no longer there.

To Sandy, it seemed as though the brilliantly lighted room were swinging around like the spinning sky and earth when an airplane is falling. He had made a discovery which staggered him for a moment. Then he gripped his wine glass, and his smile was frank and engaging.

"Happy landings," he echoed, meeting her blue eyes with a steady gaze.

Events moved swiftly in the wake of Sandy's discovery. He saw the bulky figure of Colonel Erasmus

Holden on the other side of the room. The officer's cool, gray eyes were fastened on the party. Others around the table also glimpsed the colonel, and a whisper went around the circle. Then the gathering began to break up, as though by pre-arrangement. Men excused themselves on suddenly discovered business. Others pleaded headaches which had struck without warning.

"We'll meet you at thirty-seven," Sandy heard a man in the uniform of a French major whisper to Atir Noslen. She nodded and smiled.

Within a few minutes, only Thayer, Sandy and George Bridges remained. Colonel Holden still remained, seated alone on the other side of the room.

Then he arose with elaborate carelessness and strode toward the door. Peyton Thayer watched his departure, a supercilious smile crossing his face.

"Taking a mole's-eye view of life," he sneered, as the Intelligence officer disappeared through the door.

"Don't you worry about the colonel," George Bridges countered. "He sees a lot more than you think he does."

"It would still leave him nothing net," Thayer answered. "This Gum Shoe Corps gives me a pain. They snoop around looking wise, but the Boche agents do what they please."

"Do they?" Atir Noslen flashed a smile at the lieutenant. "Tell me if you see a Boche agent, will you? I'm so interested in the work of—er—my contemporaries."

SANDY PATTON took no part in this exchange. His eyes were fixed upon a snowy wrist where a tiny mole should appear. At first he wondered if he should follow Colonel Holden and tell him what he had discovered. Then he determined to stay with the party and see what more might be revealed.

With the colonel's departure, several of the officers who had been seated at the table returned, and they all left Le Ciel for their hostess's apartment. The air of gaiety which had marked the gathering when Sandy Patton was there before seemed strangely missing this time. A tense, taut atmosphere pervaded the rooms, and instead of laughter and dancing, whispered words and watchful eyes marked the coming of each new arrival.

"What have we got into?" George Bridges asked, when he caught Sandy alone for a moment.

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Listen, kiddo," George retorted, "you're a pilot, not

a gum shoe artist. Let's kick our chocks and hop. I'd rather fly upside down in a London fog than cruise in this atmosphere."

"So would I, only—"

Sandy stopped as he saw Peyton Thayer advancing toward them, a sneering smile upon his lips. He was accompanied by two of the French officers who had been with them in Le Ciel. One was the major Sandy had seen before, the man whose English had a pronounced British accent. The other was a tall, broad-shouldered captain, whose thick neck and barrel-like body were in direct contrast to the bulk of the thin-waisted junior officers usually seen in horizon blue.

"I have just heard, Patton," Thayer's lips were trembling as he spoke, "that you are here for a purpose."

"Of course," Sandy answered. "For a good time—the same as you."

"Yes," in sneering tone, "but your idea of a good time differs from mine. You are trying to get me, and you are stooping to a method that—"

"Hold on there, Thayer. You'd better be careful," Sandy warned, his fist tightening.

"Step in here just a minute." Peyton Thayer held aside a curtain leading into a small alcove. "We can talk here without making a show of ourselves. Major Danault and Captain Chartes have given me some interesting information. Perhaps you and Bridges would like to hear what they have to say."

"They haven't anything that would cause me to worry," Patton answered, "but still—"

The curtain dropped behind him as he followed George Bridges into the small alcove. Then he caught a flash of the French major lunging at George. At the same instant, the powerful arm of the man called Chartes was thrown about him. Another man came through the curtains to aid the Herculean captain. At the same time, Peyton Thayer joined the major in subduing George.

Sandy Patton struggled against the two men who had attacked him so savagely from the rear. They had made no attempt to shoot or stab him, but he realized that unless he soon shook off those powerful arms, he would be a prisoner. He caught glimpses of George Bridges striking out, his one free hand inflicting a blow that sent Peyton Thayer reeling across the tiny room.

"Go it, George," he called. "I'll—"

A heavy arm closed over his mouth, smothering his words. A wriggle and a twist, and one hand was free.

His fist doubled to drive with savage force into the stomach of the giant who was assailing him. The man grunted and half relaxed his hold. Another smashing blow, and Chartes sank to one knee. His aide, however, reached out to snatch a small statuette from a near-by table. Sandy dodged, but the heavy impact struck his shoulder with a force that numbed his arm.

"Gag him—gag him," he heard Peyton Thayer whispering. "Here—let me have that."

Sandy twisted around. He saw George Bridges go limp as Thayer struck him on top of the head with the bronze statuette.

"You dirty traitor, I'll—"

His enemy had whirled and was raising his weapon again. The man with whom Patton had been battling had succeeded in grasping both arms, and he could not fend off the blow. Sandy saw a flash of hate come into Thayer's dark eyes. Then he struck. There was a blaze of white, as though a magnesium flare had burst within that tiny room. He felt himself falling, as though into some dark, bottomless pit. Then darkness swept down and he neither saw nor heard.

"HERE they are, both of them—sleeping like babes." The bellowing voice of Colonel Erasmus Holden came dimly to Sandy Patton's ears. Then he felt the gag which had been forced into his mouth being removed.

"Here—a long deep swallow." A burning stream coursed down his throat and he sat up to stare around with eyes still partially glazed. With the colonel were several military policemen, who were releasing George Bridges' bonds. In another moment, he, too, was staring at the scene about them.

Morning had come and sunlight streamed through the windows. The apartment was deserted except for Colonel Holden and the military police. Even the servants had departed.

"Gosh, colonel," Sandy stammered, as the meaning of the scene came to him, "I thought—"

"Just a moment, Patton." Something near to laughter came into Erasmus Holden's eyes, although his lips were grim. "Don't think anything, and say less than you think—to anybody."

"But, sir—" George Bridges was beginning to take on life.

"And you—think and say less than Patton," the colonel broke in. "You boys are pilots, but when it comes to spy-catching and counter-espionage work, you are two of the best night flyers in the outfit."

"What are our orders, sir?" Sandy came to attention.

"Fly back to your airdrome and tell the greaseballs to tune up your ships for the most hazardous flight you have ever made. Then go to bed and sleep until you're called."

"Yes, sir."

"For your own information, I'll say that you're going to visit a place with which you are familiar."

"QX-31?" Bridges wanted to know.

"I don't carry all the co-ordinates in my head, but it sounds familiar," was the officer's reply. "Good-bye, boys—see you later."

Sandy Patton and George Bridges buzzed back to the Owls' airdrome, their minds filled with strange, milling thoughts that crowded one upon the other. Back in their joint room, they stared at each other for long minutes before the silence was broken. They were surrounded by a dark, sinister mystery, as dark as the Strange flights they made across the lines. In some manner, these unexplained happenings were associated with their flights, but in what manner, neither could guess.

"There's something so damned crooked being cooked up that it makes a corkscrew look like the shortest distance between two points," George grumbled.

"I wonder just how deep Thayer is in it," he added a moment later, when Sandy had made no reply.

"Not as deep as it looks," Patton retorted. "He's a crook and a louse, but it looks to me as though he were more of a fly than a spider."

"How about the dame?" George asked.

Sandy looked up quickly. "What do you think of her?" he asked in reply.

"Smooth, very smooth," Bridges answered. "Cylinder oil is just so much emery compared to that girl. She makes the rest of them look like correspondence-school detectives. Look at those birds in French uniforms. They were just about as much Frog as I am."

"Say, you're no fool, George," Sandy blurted.

"Thank God somebody's found that out. I had almost given up in despair," Bridges answered with a grin. "We'd better get a little shut-eye, buddy. We're going to have to be wide awake if we touch trucks at QX-31 tonight."

THEY stretched themselves upon their beds, but each found himself gripped with thoughts that staved off sleep. Night would see them descend into the darkness of the tree-lined park, far behind the German

lines. Danger and death might both be there.

To Sandy's mind came a picture of Peyton Thayer, playing with men and women he might have known were suspicious characters. He wondered if the man had been caught in the grip of those sinister characters so strongly that he had betrayed his own country. What part did the girl have in those dark traffickings? She had posed as an American agent, showing marks that identified her as S-96, but Sandy had seen both wrist and throat without a sign of mole or scar. They could have been painted on and then removed.

He drifted off to sleep as questions formed in his mind, and did not awake until George Bridges shook him roughly, bawling that night had come and all good Owls must come out of the hay and play war until sunrise.

Sandy arose and stepped to the window. Darkness had settled over the landing field, but he could see three Nieuports drawn up before the Number 1 hangar. In front of Captain Grissom's quarters was an automobile bearing the flag of a general officer.

"Something big's coming off," he told George Bridges.

"I know there is—you and I are going to QX-31. Outside of that, I'm not interested."

But George shed his blasé manner a few minutes later. They were summoned to the orderly room, and there were presented to a grave-eyed officer upon whose shoulders rested the twin stars of a major general. With him was Colonel Erasmus Holden.

"I want to impress upon you gentlemen the grave necessity of making tonight's operation a success in every detail," the general told the two. "Colonel Holden is sending his star operative to a place with which I understand you are both familiar. It will be necessary for one ship to land and await the passenger's return. Three planes will take part in the maneuver. Lieutenant Patton will carry the passenger, while Lieutenant Thayer and Lieutenant Bridges will pilot the covering detail."

"Thayer?" the name exploded from Sandy's surprised lips.

"Yes—Lieutenant Peyton Thayer." Colonel Holden's sober gray eyes were fixed on Sandy's.

For a moment a torrent of words threatened to bubble up. Then he read the expression in the colonel's glance, and his lips closed with a snap. Erasmus Holden knew the game he was playing and could read both sides of the cards.

"What time do we hop?" George Bridges asked.

"Twenty-two hours and thirty minutes," the general told him. "See that your ships are ready—for anything."

They started for the hangars. They had seen nothing of Peyton Thayer, but found his plane lined with theirs on the tarmac. Sandy glanced into the cockpits as they passed it. A soft whistle came to his lips as he saw that the rear cubby had been equipped with a set of controls.

"Something is in the wind besides the sock," he told himself.

THEN he turned his attention to his own ship. All three motors had been started and were well warmed. As he went from one part of his crate to another, Patton could not help feeling increasing tension around him. Activity was especially noticeable around the headquarters building. Messengers arrived on motorcycles and departed at roaring speed. The excitement spread to the hangars, and the sergeant in charge rushed from one group of loitering greaseballs to another, herding them toward the barracks.

"Only got five minutes more," George Bridges shouted in Sandy's ear. "Guess I'll look up the guy who's going to ride with me. If he's a machine-gunner, I want to have a talk with him."

He wandered away, but returned almost immediately, shaking his head.

"Find out who's going?" Sandy asked.

"No. All anybody can say is shush."

"I have a hunch you'll know his face," Patton said.

"Who? Come on, old Gum Shoe, tell a pal."

"Can't. Colonel's orders. He said to think nothing and say less. Now show me you're clever at repartée and tell me to go to hell."

"You guessed wrong," George answered, "but get this. You may have guessed who's riding with me. I know who your fare's going to be."

"So do I," retorted Sandy.

The hour was at hand. Sandy glanced across the field. The door of the orderly room was being opened. Three figures attired in flying togs came out. In the center was Peyton Thayer, his slender figure identifying him at a glance. He walked between two bulky men, looking neither to right nor left. Patton watched him climb into his ship, without a backward glance into the rear compartment. A grin crossed the young man's face as he saw Colonel Holden clamber awkwardly into the after cubby. The plane had just been equipped with dual controls, and it was evident Thayer did not know

of the change.

“Didn’t know the old boy could fly,” Sandy mumbled, “but still, Erasmus isn’t the kind that tells all he knows. That’s why he’s in the Gum Shoe Corps.”

Next he turned his eyes to George’s ship. Captain Grissom was taking the seat behind his friend. He knew their commander was a machine gunner of exceptional skill. The German who tried to ride George’s tail was due for a lot of trouble.

“Here comes my customer. Now I’ll find how good a guesser I am.”

An automobile had swept out of darkness, driving without lights. It drew up behind the three roaring airplanes and a slender figure leaped from the back seat and raced to where Sandy was increasing the revs with swiftly widening throttle. The young man sat, staring straight ahead, until his passenger was seated. Then he turned and grasped a gauntleted hand and shoved back the sleeve of a leather flying jacket.

A slender white wrist was exposed and, by the dim light of his instrument board lamp, he could see a small brown mole.

CHAPTER VI WINGS OF DARKNESS

SWINGING IN A TIGHT CIRCLE over the little park in the forest, Sandy Patton waited until he saw the tiny specks of signal lights, fifteen thousand feet below. Then he dropped the Nieuport’s nose and started earthward, cutting his motor as he piqued. Down, down through the darkness. He skimmed the up-reaching branches of the oaks and came to a noiseless landing, taxiing around until he was in a position for a swift take-off. The experience of his first visit to QX-31 was still fresh in his mind.

“I’ll wait,” he whispered, as his passenger climbed out of the rear cubby.

“I’m coming back as soon as I can,” he heard S-96 reply. “Don’t release the bird until you hear something.”

She was swallowed in the darkness, even before her sentence was finished. Sandy had forgotten the second of his passengers. At his feet was a small wicker cage containing a carrier pigeon. He had carried one on every flight over the lines, but had never thought of

using it.

Leaden minutes of waiting. He was in the heart of enemy territory, surrounded by tall trees from which a quick hop was difficult. He might be attacked at any moment, from the ground or from the sky.

He glanced at the illumined dial of his wrist watch. She had been gone more than half an hour. He wondered if she had fallen into the hands of the enemy. Or was she an enemy? His thoughts went to the scar and mole which had come and gone and come again. Had he seen two girls, looking alike, but one with mole and scar and the other unmarked? He had sought to tell Colonel Holden of his discovery, but the sharp words of the officer had closed his lips. He had been reminded that he was a pilot, not an Intelligence officer.

Waiting, still waiting. Above him, two convoy ships were circling, waiting to protect his homeward flight. If he stayed below much longer, they would have to leave. An airplane without gasoline in its tanks was far more helpless than a fish stranded on the shore. Its only chance lay in surrender. His own supply was not being drained rapidly. The prop was barely turning, but above him, the Nieuports were consuming the sauce at cruising speed.

AN HOUR passed, each minute slower than the last. Dawn would be coming before long and the rise of his star-marked ship would be visible for miles. Waspish Fokkers would lunge through the gray of early morning and crash him through sheer weight of gun fire.

Another hour. His covering ships had gone by this time. They could not remain aloft until the last of their fuel was exhausted. Faint streaks of light were beginning to show. He peered down into the cockpit. His pigeon was still sleeping, its head covered by one wing.

“Maybe I ought to get you started,” he mumbled, as though speaking to the bird. “They’ll be getting anxious back there.”

Then he remembered the girl’s last words.

The dawn was breaking now. He could see the tree trunks on the edge of the park. Off to the left he saw a flash of fire. Then came the sound of a rifle shot—another and another.

Sandy jerked open his throttle. The engine roared, showing his position in the gray gloom. His wheels started to turn and he choked the revs down once more.

A dark figure darted from the trees, racing across the open ground towards him as fast as slender legs could travel. Another burst of rifle fire from the woods. The racing figure stumbled, then fell.

He unsnapped his buckle and leaped from the pit. He could see the girl struggling to regain her feet. Another shot from the woods and she slumped forward.

Sandy lunged across the open ground to where she lay, still trying to get to her feet. His pistol flamed and he heard a howl from the woods. Then he stooped and swung her to his shoulder.

More shots from behind, and the high whine of bullets sounded overhead. The faint light of breaking day made them a difficult target, but a yell behind caused him to whirl. He turned to see several bulky figures charging after him.

Still holding the girl on his shoulder, he raised his automatic and blazed at the leading man. Two sharp cracks and the German pitched upon his face.

His shots were speeding toward the second of their pursuers. The automatic blazed, one bullet whizzing on the heels of another. Four sharp explosions and another foe was on the ground. The third man had disappeared in the forest.

Shots were coming from the woods as Sandy lifted the girl into the plane. Snapping her straps, he climbed into his own cubby and then fitted a new clip into his automatic. A burst of fire checked another rush from the woods. Next he hurriedly applied a first-aid bandage to the blonde head. Her scalp had been creased.

The sounds of firing from the woods were swelling. Bullets were ripping into the plane. With the spreading light of morning, the enemy marksmanship would improve. Sandy stepped up the motor and then glanced back at his passenger. She was slumped in her seat, breathing heavily, but consciousness was returning. Her left hand was resting on the edge of the nacelle. A glance at the wrist. The mole that should have been there had gone.

"I wonder if—" Sandy's eyes narrowed as he looked for a scar below the ear. "I wonder if——"

B-b-b-r-r-r-r. He glanced aloft to see a narrow-winged Fokker plunging over the tree tops. Sandy Patton jerked his throttle open and the Nieuport started across the level park. In another moment he was zooming over the tree tops, racing for the lines.

ROARING up into the breaking day, Sandy Patton

found a formation of Fokkers already in the air. There was no sign of the Nieuports that were to aid his return. He had not expected to see them. The long wait in the darkness had sapped their supply of gasoline. Perhaps they would return, but in the meantime he would have to fly for his life.

The chase was already on. Fokkers were diving at him from three sides, flinging long drags as they came down. Instead of hunting the carpet, Sandy nosed up as rapidly as his strong-hearted engine could work its way through the spreading dawn.

He was surrounded by a swarm of angry hornets, each bearing the black cross of the Kaiser upon its wings. He twisted and turned as they plunged at him, graying the air with their long-drawn blasts. The savage fury of their attacks told Sandy that the enemy realized the nature of his ship and passenger.

As he climbed above the forest, the Germans launched a co-ordinated attack, diving one after the other. They were not slow to see that the slender figure slumped in the rear cubby could not operate a machine gun. Operating with a skillful display of team work, they struck in rapid succession, forcing Sandy into a series of sideslips, half-virages and tight renversements. Unless he could straighten out and speed on his way homeward, the very nature of their attack would force him down through lack of fuel.

"They'll just ride me ragged if I keep this up," the young man mumbled, as he gauged their tactics.

"There's only one thing I can do in this sort of game."

Instead of dodging the rush of the next Fokker, Sandy tossed his tail around and rushed at his darting foe. He tripped his guns as the black plane came into the line of his sights and flung a drag that barged into the nose of his enemy.

The ship slid off and then nosed down, tumbling toward the wide stretch of tree tops below them. Sandy looked down, but a second Boche plunged at him and he flipped out of the way as twin Spandaus spat. But as he straightened out again, two more dropped down.

Hotter, more desperate, became the attacks. The enemy plunged in, riding tail and wing tips at the same time. Their bullets were ripping around on every side. Although the Nieuport was twisting and dodging, the concentrated attack of half a dozen planes made the task one which Sandy knew would be impossible. His own guns flamed in a hope to beat off the onslaught, but the Germans had received orders that the Nieuport must be crashed, regardless of sacrifice. Nearer, still

nearer, they came.

Patton glanced around to see the girl struggling to raise her head. Consciousness was returning, and her hands were already touching the swiveled guns with which her cubby was provided.

B-b-b-r-r-r! A Fokker came down, as his eyes were held on her. *B-b-b-r-r-r!* Another shot drag and Sandy's engine coughed, then stuttered. An oath whistled through the pilot's lips and he nosed down, seeking to step up the revs. A spitting sound told him of a cut in the fuel line—and then a silent motor.

Quick appraisal of the catastrophe went through his mind. He was alone, without covering planes. He would have to come down. Capture would be his portion, but the girl—safe landing would be death to her. She would face a firing squad.

"Only one chance for us and I've got to make it look good," Sandy told himself, as he glanced below.

HE SHOVED the Nieuport over on the right wing tip and kicked the rudder in the opposite direction. In another moment they were plunging toward the forests, spinning as they fell. Crazy swirls and gliding sideslips followed, one after another. The tall tree tops were reaching up to grasp them, coming closer and closer.

The woods extended for miles, but they offered him his only chance. If he managed to survive, they would offer a protection the open territory could not give. As he tumbled down, he glanced at the territory where they would strike. He had not gone far from QX-31. The dodging, twisting flight had robbed him of distance. But a few miles intervened between his present position and the little park from which he had hopped.

Lower, still lower. The Nieuport was fluttering toward earth like an autumn leaf tossed by the playful winds of October. Although to all appearances he was falling entirely out of control, Sandy was working his stick and rudder bar with canny care. A wide sweep to the east, and they were almost over the little park known as QX-31. Then the Nieuport slithered off in another direction.

The tree tops all but touched his left wing. A tip in the opposite direction and they slid off to the right. A crash and ripping sound as the trucks were shorn off by an up-jutting branch.

Patton thrust the stick well forward, nosing toward a huge tree whose widespread limbs formed a giant "Y."

C-c-r-r-ash! There was a splintering of wing structure, the high "ping" of snapping wires and then—with a twist and a lurch, the plane plunged in between the outspread branches. For a moment Sandy thought it would lunge through and tumble to the ground. But the sturdy oak had trapped them and held, fast. They were in the midst of the woods, high in a tree top where the washed-up Nieuport would stay until a score of winter storms had whipped its fragments to pieces.

All around them was the forest, but Sandy's mind had been working rapidly since his engine was conked. He knew the return of the girl, S-96, was of the highest importance to the American cause, regardless of moles, scars or other identifying marks. If she was an enemy agent, she must not be allowed to escape. If she was an American—all the more reason.

He took out his pad and scrawled a note addressed to Colonel Holden. Taking the message capsule from the pigeon's leg, he fitted his note into it. Then he removed the bird from its cage and held it, back down in his left hand, forcing the little metal container into its clip on the wildly struggling leg. Next the bird was in his right hand, poised for flight.

"Hurry, buddy, they're expecting you," he called, as he launched his dumb aide into the air.

A flash of wings and the carrier mounted swiftly. A circle and then he straightened out, rushing through the early morning for the American lines. An appeal for help was on its way.

Patton turned to find the blue eyes of S-96 fixed upon him.

"Sandy?" she murmured, almost in surprise.

"Yes—still Sandy."

"Where are we?"

"Up a tree in the middle of the Moritz forest."

He heard her catch her breath? He knew what prompted that sudden gasp. Capture to her meant death.

"We must hurry," she began, suddenly alive to the situation. "First we will send the pigeon."

"He's already gone."

"Gone?"

"Sure. On his way to get us some help. He was our only chance."

"What difference does it make what happens to us?" she demanded, almost angrily. "The word has to get through, no matter what happens to us. The lives of thousands of Americans depend upon it. You use the only chance to save our necks, when—"

“Say, listen here,” Sandy broke in. “Save those kind words for the time when we line up in front of a firing squad. As long as we’re free, we have a chance. The first thing to do is to get out of here. After that, let me handle things. Each one to his own game—and mine is fighting.”

CHAPTER VII DOGFIGHT DEATH

SANDY PATTON HURRIED his preparations for their descent from the tree top. Strips of fabric were ripped from the broken wings and tied into a rope.

At last their feet touched the ground and they struck off through the forest, following a dim path leading to the northeast. They knew a search would be made for the Nieuport and they hurried to leave the neighborhood.

“All I hope is that the pigeon doesn’t run out of gas before he crosses the lines,” Patton said, as he aided the girl to ford a stream running through the gloomy woods.

She was weak from the effects of the head wound she had sustained, but continued gamely by his side.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Back to where we started from.”

“But they’ll capture us there. They almost got me last night.”

“They’ll capture us anywhere, if they find us, but I think QX-31 will be the last place they’ll look.”

A pale smile was her only answer, but she quickened her steps. Sandy looked at his wrist-watch. They had been away from the wreck for more than two hours. If the homing pigeon had reached the Owls’ airdrome, their friends should be coming before long. His message had told Colonel Holden that they would be waiting in the forest on the edge of the park known as QX-31. He glanced aloft at the sound of motors above them, but the massed branches of the black oaks screened all sight of the sky.

The sun had neared its noontide course when they reached their destination. He glanced through the brush on the edge of the tiny park, but saw no signs of outstretched wings. He had ventured his last chance on sending the carrier. What if the bird had been shot down before it reached its loft? A strained, taut expression came to Sandy’s usually smiling face as the minutes dragged. His friends had had plenty of time to

receive his message and return to the rendezvous.

“I wonder if they’re away upstairs, looking for some sign from me,” he muttered, after another wait. “I’ll take a peek and see if they’re—”

“You must be careful, Sandy. If we’re seen—” he heard S-96 whisper. “We’ve got to take the chance.” He edged his way into the open space, his eyes upon the sky. A shout came to his lips, but he choked it back. Far above them he could see a formation of planes circling. He rushed into the park, waving his helmet. There was a waggle of wings, high above, and then—

Crack! The bark of a rifle came from the other side of the park. *Ping!* A bullet whistled over his head. He dodged back into the brush, but the firing continued. He could hear the shouts of men, calling from one to another. The swelling sound told him they were drawing nearer to his retreat.

Another glance above. The planes he had sighted were coming down. They had seen his signal, but—he had drawn the fire of the enemy at the very moment rescue was at hand.

“Listen, Sandy,” he heard the girl whisper, as he dodged back into the brush. “If you get back and I don’t—”

“If you don’t, I won’t,” he broke in.

“One of us must,” she countered. “Now remember this—burn it in your mind. Pershing is going to attack, but he had planned on Rheims. The Germans know that and are massing guns and troops on that side. They are weak at Soissons. A blow there will break through. Tell him that Rita Nelson—”

“Rita Nelson? You said Atir Noslen—”

“They’re the same—turned around. My father is General Horatio Nelson. They wouldn’t let him come to France. Too old. I have no brothers, but I—” A burst of shots from the bushes to their right. The Germans were forming a circle around them. The rifle fire was mounting and the bullets were cutting the twigs of the trees around their retreat.

“Keep flat,” Sandy barked. “When the first of our ships touches, make a run for it. I’ll hold off these—”

“But I’m not going to let you—”

“You’re going to do what I say. If you’re a general’s daughter, obey orders.”

HE EDGED forward toward where the shots were coming from, his automatic in his hand. A glimpse of *Feldgrau* and he let fly. There was a bellowed oath and another burst of rifle fire. The bullets sounded like hail stones falling in the forest.

From above came the swelling noise of motors. The

rescue planes were coming down.

Sandy's pistol spat rapidly as a little group of Germans appeared through the foliage. Then he heard more shots coming from the right. He whirled to see a hulking Prussian charging through the brush.

The pistol in his hand jerked convulsively and the huge gray-green form plunged forward on its face. A second enemy was behind him and Sandy snapped his weapon. There was a faint click. His magazine was empty.

"Try that!" He hurled the weapon full in the face of his onrushing opponent. The man staggered, then fell. But others were coming.

"Take mine—it's loaded." A small pistol was thrust into Sandy's hand. S-96 was giving him her weapon. He whirled around to see two planes tipping the tree tops on the other side of the park.

"Run for it," he commanded. "They're here. I'll hold these birds off."

"But, Sandy—"

"Do as I tell you," he snarled. He turned to meet a new rush by the Germans. The little pistol flamed and more men tumbled to the earth. "Surrender, pig dog!" he heard a close voice bawl.

He whirled to see a huge figure lunge at him with a saw-toothed bayonet. Sandy fired until his magazine was empty, as one man came in the wake of another. He dodged the next rush, tripping his opponent as he charged. His hands snatched the bayoneted rifle from the falling man's hands and he sank the murderous blade into the next onrushing foe. Then he turned and dashed into the open.

"We're off. Climb in with Thayer!" he heard George Bridges shout.

A roar as George gunned his ship and took off, with a screaming volley of rifle bullets breaking around him. Sandy Patton dashed for the second Nieuport. The Germans followed, but he ran in short zigzag dashes. He could see Thayer firing from the cockpit at the men who were pursuing. Thayer—Peyton Thayer, his enemy—was saving him.

"Give her the gun," he yelled, as he clambered into the rear cubby. "Tail around and I'll smear them with a burst of Vickers."

He snapped his buckles as the wheels began to move. Then he drove the charging guards back with a deadly drag from the swiveled guns in the rear cockpit. A moment later they were in the air, but as they zoomed over the tree tops, Sandy Patton saw the narrow wings of his ancient enemies, the Fokkers.

DOWN from the ceiling came the Americans, ripping into the German formations that sought to strike George Bridges and then Sandy Patton. George's Nieuport did not pause to send a single whiff of tracer towards its foes. It straightened out, racing for the lines, and the Americans formed a hasty rear guard to protect its flight.

But while George Bridges flew under orders to reach safety as soon as possible, Peyton Thayer handled his ship with far different tactics in mind. Instead of streaking in the wake of the machine carrying S-96, he lunged at the first of the enemy planes that came within striking distance.

"What's got into you?" Sandy yelled, as he noted the pilot's maneuver. "Who are you trying to get killed off—yourself or me?"

Suspicion gripped Patton for the moment. Peyton Thayer had come down out of the clouds to QX-31 to rescue him, and now he was rushing into the enemy formation when the other members of the flight were forming a rear guard around George Bridges' ship. Was it possible that Thayer had reached the end of his string and was seeking not only his own death, but that of Sandy Patton as well?

"Well—you've got the stick," the young man mumbled. "About all I can do is to tag along and bag me a few Boche while we're at it."

He uncoupled the twin Vickers in the rear cockpit and swung them around. Thayer was flinging a long drag into a Fokker with a bright yellow nose. As the Nieuport zipped by Patton's guns shuddered with the burst he released. As his tracers barged into the German, he saw the ship burst into flames. A moment later it was a blazing wreck. Thayer's head came around and Sandy saw a mirthless smile upon the man's lips. It was a death's-head grimace, the macabre smile of the doomed.

Sandy looked down at the dual controls which Colonel Holden had had installed in the rear cockpit. He could take over the plane if things got too bad. A blow on the back of Thayer's head would be all he would need.

"Still, I can't do that—until I'm sure," Patton reflected.

The Nieuport was ripping into another group of Fokkers. Thayer was carrying the battle to the enemy with a madness that told he had tossed all caution from the cockpit. He charged into groups of three or four black-crossed ships, filling the air with his

sweeping sheets of tracer.

Meantime, Sandy kept his own end of the crate glowing like a red-hot coal. His guns seldom paused in their stammering note as Thayer wove in and out among the enemy. As they flicked around to hunt new foes, Patton saw the Nieuport piloted by George Bridges streaking for the lines. It had left the main body of Fokkers behind and was running almost alone. Then a yell of apprehension came to Sandy's lips. A new formation of Boche in silver-tinted Albatross two-seaters were piquing down upon his friend.

But as he glimpsed the new peril threatening S-96, his eyes encountered a double flight of cloud-dusting Spads dropping down on the tails of the Germans, scattering those they did not crash. Other Boche barged in, but new American formations swelled the ranks of the defenders.

The battle which followed marked a new development in aerial combat on the Western Front. Planes continued to arrive from both sides until more than one hundred were fighting a running combat extending from QX-31 to No-Man's-Land.

MEANTIME, Peyton Thayer was sweeping from one dogfight to another, flying with frenzied speed. More than once Sandy Patton gauged the berserk madness with which the man was fighting, wondering what had prompted it. Plainly he was seeking death at the hands of the enemy—and with it, the destruction of his enemy, whom he had rescued.

But in the interim, he was scourging the Germans with deadly fire. Sandy's hand went to the secondary controls. Thayer was diving into an unbroken formation of Pfalz pursuit planes. His guns began firing before he was in effective range. The German leader veered, dodging the Nieuport's charge, and in another moment they were in the midst of the Germans.

Patton released his grip of the secondary stick and swung his guns around. A short blast and he crashed a bright green ship. Then he saw a Pfalz with a brilliant red empennage plunging toward them. He swerved his Vickers toward it, but as he sought to catch it in his sights, the Nieuport staggered and then fell off. Sandy twisted around to glance at Peyton Thayer. The man was clawing at his breast as he swayed from side to side.

The stick in the back cubby was whanging. Patton grasped it with his knees as he made the guns fast. Then he leveled off. He was surrounded by savagely attacking Pfalz scouts. Thayer had made a brave

attempt, but——

"I don't care what he was trying to do to me," Sandy muttered. "He sure raised hell with the Germans."

He brought the Nieuport around and headed toward where the Americans were reforming. A single glance told him the peril of his position. He was circled by fast, well-piloted combat planes, each seeking to send him crashing to earth. He could fly his ship from the rear seat with small trouble, but with the pilot unable to trip his guns and with his own hands occupied, the Germans could attack from any angle without danger of return fire. The enemy had been quick to see his quarry, and they were lunging at him from every side.

Slapping on all the power his engine could develop, he careened through the air at dizzy speed. As one Boche dove at him, Sandy gripped the stick with his knees. Making a corkscrew twist, he was able to fling a short drag with the after guns. He saw the German wobble, but another was upon him before he could straighten out.

B-b-b-r-r-r. He wriggled around to see a third riding his tail. Once more he went into a twist, but the Boche hung on. For the moment the entire Pfalz formation seemed to be concentrating upon his destruction. Like a swarm of enraged hornets, they circled around him, lashing him with their whiplike streams of Spandau fire. The wings were ripped and torn. Pieces of fabric were scaling off. In another moment a burst might enter his cubby or silence the bravely roaring motor.

Twisting and dodging, sideslipping and rolling, he flew as he had never flown before. He saw two Germans come down together, their guns flashing as they dove. A prolonged rattle behind, and he shot up into a half loop, whip-stalled and then fell away. As the nose dropped down, he looked over Peyton's sagging shoulders to see a German full in his sights. Leaping to his feet, he reached over and tripped the cowl guns. The belts leaped through the breachlocks, sending out a steady stream.

The Pfalz staggered in mid-air and burst into flames. Other Boche were coming to the aid of their comrade. They were crowding closer and closer, but Sandy Patton fought on, dodging one, firing at another whenever he could reach either forward or after guns.

THEN his cowl guns were silent, their ammunition exhausted. He tried to work the after ones, but a jam stopped their clattering noise. He was defenseless,

flying amid a swarm of enemies—and unable to return their fire. Peyton Thayer was rolling in his seat, still alive, but unable to do more than raise his head occasionally.

More desperate attempts by the Pfalz scouts. The Nieuport was crossing No-Man's-Land. Soon he would be able to come down in friendly territory, and the Boche renewed their efforts to destroy him. Plane after plane dove down, but Sandy kept the Nieuport twisting and turning. He knew his plane would not keep up much longer. The wings were all but bare and the empennage was battered and torn.

B-b-b-r-r-r. Three of the foe were attacking him at once. He saw a flash of glass and splinters as a burst struck the instrument board in front of Peyton Thayer's huddled body. Another tore into the fuselage immediately behind them. Then he saw the man in front of him half rise and then drop back quivering.

A frantic glance around, and Sandy's eyes opened wide with surprise. Down from the ceiling dove a perfect formation of American Spads. They ripped into the Pfalz crates with a roar of engines and guns, and a moment later Sandy Patton was winging his way homeward—alone.

He glanced at Thayer's limp body. The man was still breathing. He must be gotten into a surgeon's hands as soon as possible. Sandy could see his lips moving. He cut the engine for a moment and snatched off his helmet, but he could not hear the man's words. Then he slapped on the power and raced for the Owls' airdrome.

As he settled down to a gentle landing, Sandy saw Colonel Holden racing across the field. He cut the gun and rolled to an easy stop.

"Great work, Patton, great work," the colonel was shouting, as the young man climbed out. "I knew I hadn't made a mistake when I picked an ace for this work. Now I'm going to—"

"Just a minute, sir, just a minute. I think we have a chance to save—"

He lifted the limp figure of Peyton Thayer from the cockpit and laid him upon the field. The man's gray face told them he had not long to live. His hand beckoned weakly to Colonel Holden.

"Thanks for giving me my chance, sir," Sandy heard him whisper. "I hope I have cleaned the slate."

"You have, my boy."

"Then you'll write my folks that I died—died game?"

The older officer nodded, gripping the man's weak

hand. A long sigh and Peyton Thayer sank back. The colonel released his hold of the dead soldier's hand and closed the staring eyes. Then he turned to Sandy Patton.

"Thayer got involved with a gang of enemy agents in Paris," Holden explained. "He confessed to me and aided in their arrest. Then he asked for a chance to die fighting and—I gave it to him."

"He more than made good, sir," the young man answered. "Colonel, you ought to have seen—"

"I did," the commander broke in. "I also saw what you have done, which was a whole lot more."

CHAPTER VIII BACK TO THE SKYLARKS

HONORS COME to those who fly on wings of mystery only at the end of their turn of duty. Likewise with those whose efforts are in even more shadowed realms. Thus it was that a quiet ceremony was held in the office of Colonel Erasmus Holden, without the attendant marshalling of troops, the blare of bands and the reading of citations.

Three figures lined up before the colonel's desk, and the one standing beside Sandy Patton was a woman. Her blue eyes smiled into the young man's, as Erasmus Holden cleared his throat and took up a bronze cross to which was attached a colorful ribbon. "For distinguished service in the face of the enemy," the colonel said simply, as he pinned the decoration on Rita Nelson's breast. "I have given citations to many soldier's sons, but none have been more worthy than you, the daughter of my old friend and comrade, General Horatio Nelson. Your ability to pass for Mina von Unworth, the star operative of Wilhelmstrasse, solved a serious problem for, the American Intelligence Service."

"I'm glad the job is over," Colonel Holden went on, "I don't think I've had a good night's sleep since you started this work."

"But can't—can't I have another detail?" she inquired.

"Hardly," was the grave response. "By this time, you are known to every German agent on both sides of the lines. The place for you, my dear, is America. You've done your bit."

Then the colonel took up another cross and turned

to Sandy Patton.

“This is a sort of farewell party,” he began. “I had hoped to keep you and Bridges, but General Thompson tells me that he needs both a squadron and flight commander for the Skylarks, and he’s put in a draft for—”

His words were drowned by a two-voiced cheer. Sandy and George were going back to the Skylarks, one to command the squadron, while the other would lead a flight. Now the war was going to be worth the fighting. No more wings of mystery.

The colonel pinned on two more Distinguished Service Crosses without the formality of comment, and there was just a little hint of envy in his kindly eyes as Sandy and George went out, with Rita Nelson between them.

“I hope you’ll let us call—when we get home,” George was saying.

“Of course. I know my father will be glad to see you. He’s a soldier, but they won’t let him fight.”

“We’ll take care of the fighting,” Sandy Patton told her. “Just leave it to us.”

