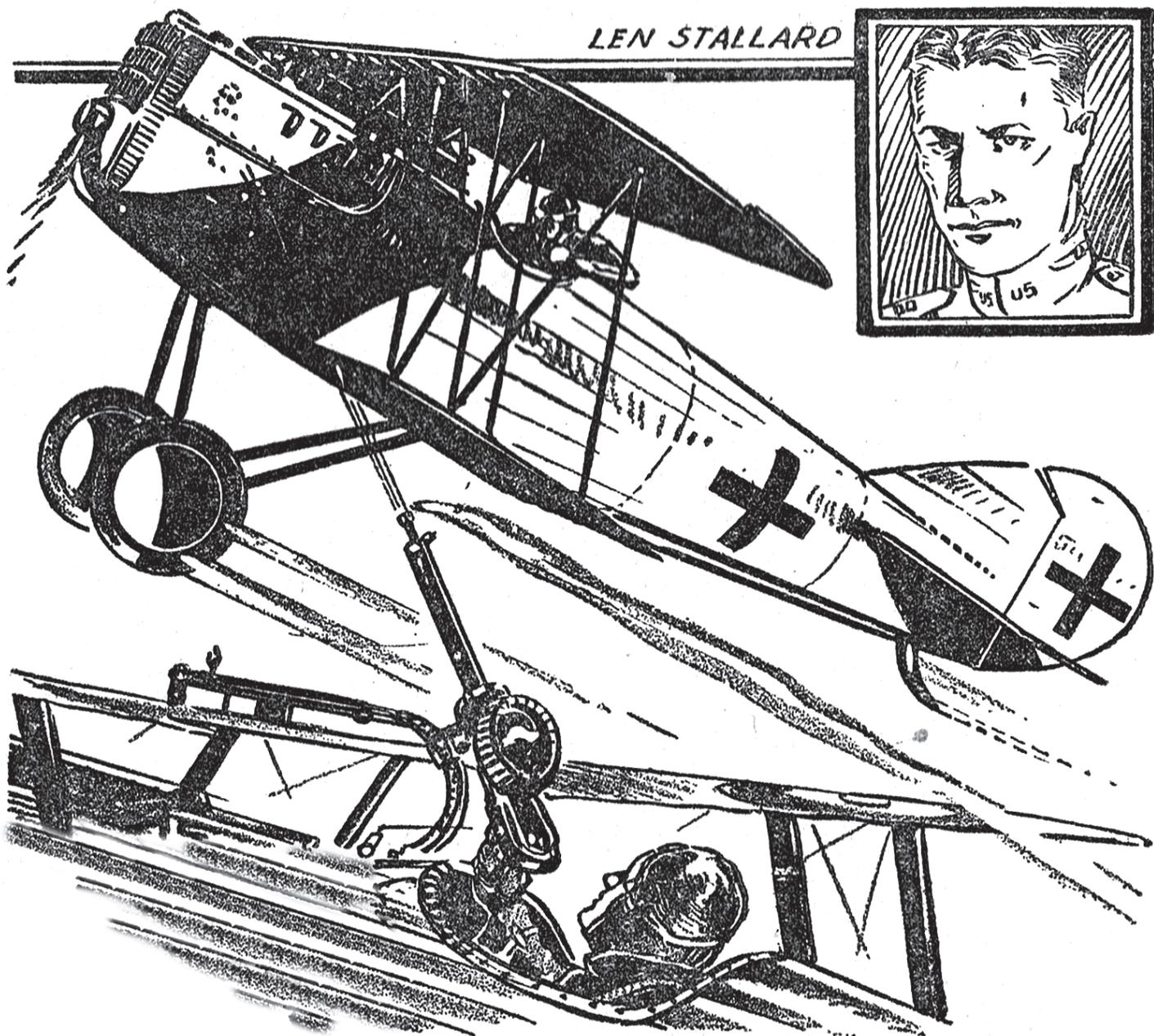


LEN STALLARD



THE HUN HUNTER

by ARCH WHITEHOUSE

Hated Alike by Friend and Foe, Len Stallard Lights Out for Boche Territory, to End It All!

THERE IS AN OLD SAYING that a prophet is never without honor except in his own country. In other words, you're hot all along the line, but no one in your own outfit gives a damn about you.

Len Stallard had pondered on that theory many a time, but seemed to have no answer for it. It was not his fault that he had scored seventeen victories in his short but blazing career with No. 76. He really didn't want that captaincy and two streamers on his flippers. It was

not his fault that his eye was keen and his tongue slow to respond. He was a natural pilot and a keen hunter. He had a one-track mind and, once mounted in an active service squadron, he went to work.

The result was inevitable.

Four Huns the first week, a citation and a lucky Croix de Guerre. The French had sent it up. They sent up one a month and Major Hartley flipped a deck of cards and they cut for it. Stallard had one after he had been on two patrols—just luck.

THEY didn't mind that much. Beginner's luck, they called it. But when, after three weeks of campaigning, the C.O. of the 4th Pursuit Group placed Stallard's name down for a D.S.C, they really began to get their backs up. It came through in orders a week later.

"Hell!" snarled Lefty Logan, one of Stallard's flight mates. "Did you hear the latest?"

"Another Hun?" Jess Myron asked half-heartedly.

"No. Stallard won't wear his ribbons! Even though the order on his D.S.C. came through okay."

"Whew! Now there's a real nut, boys," Myron explained, and drew on a cigarette.

"Major Hartley's sore as hell, too. Says it's an insult to Congress—the War Department—or somethin'. Had Stallard backed up to the squadron orders board, calling on his patriotism, service loyalty and *esprit de corps*."

"What did Stallard say to that?" Myron wanted to know.

"He told the major to go soak his head in brine—and walked off!"

"Cripes! He'll wind up in Blois!" Myron exclaimed.

"Not with seventeen Huns under his watch fob," Logan countered.

"I know, but can you imagine a guy with two decorations, who won't put them up? I'd like to get one." Myron swore softly.

"I can imagine anything where Len Stallard is concerned," said Logan. "There's a story behind that guy—somewhere."

Not even Porky Howland, Stallard's mechanic, had a kind word for his pilot. It was okay being on an ace's bus, and all that, but to hell with it!

"He's out here before seven every morning. A guy can't get his grub swilled down and the covers off the mags, before he's out here snooping around, getting in the way. He knows more about these Hissos than the guy who made 'em, to hear him talk," Porky complained.

"Yeah? Well, you ought to see him vet a wing, 'Stump' Clauson, the rigger, growled. "He spotted half a degree of washout on a wing yesterday morning. Half a turn on the flying wire took it out. But that guy actually spotted it with his eye! What a man!"

"He's averaged seven hours and twenty minutes a day for the last three weeks," Howland added to the evidence. "No two guys working in shifts can keep up with that. He needs a whole flight of greaseballs."

"It ain't the work," Clauson moaned. "It's the way he gets you to do it. He ain't swore once! Not one good 'damn'! He wants a motor tuned an' all he says is: 'Tune'. If he wants to go off again in an hour he just says: 'Again at three.' Now what the hell can you make out of a guy like that? If he'd only give a guy a good blasting now and then just for a change, I'd squawk and let it go at that."

"Yeah, and miss up on something," added Howland, "and all you get is a look that would curdle milk. It makes you jump like hell—and he ain't said anything!"

All of which gives an idea of Captain Leonard Stallard and his standing with No. 76.

It must not be presumed that it had all slipped off Stallard's shoulders without leaving its mark. He was a keen soul and doubly sensitive. The same characteristic had been his saving grace in the air, for no Hun ever caught him unawares. Something tensed within him, whenever danger snarled.

By the same strange intuition, it was impossible for him to mix. That was it: Stallard never really mixed with the rest of the gang. He did not play cards. He was usually too busy in the hangars. He took long walks alone when the others slammed into Toul for a binge. He had no timely topics of conversation.

He did play the piano, but only classical music; dirgelike compositions that got on men's nerves after the first ten minutes. Once discouraged, Stallard never touched the keys again.

Captain Stallard pondered on it all, as he held his lonely vigil over Rembecourt. He knew he was unpopular and the black sheep of the outfit. It really did worry him, because he did want to mix and he did want to live up to the role his amazing career at the Front had carved for him.

"Why don't they like me?" he asked himself, peering into the rear-view mirror. "I keep position in formation and protect the quirks. I take my turn on volunteer shows and willingly sign confirmations. If I get Huns, more Huns than the others, it's because I—well, either I'm luckier or I shoot straighter. And," he added grimly, "I always come back."

Perhaps that was it. He always came back. Maybe if some day he didn't come back, they'd change—feel sorry about him, and the unfair criticism they had voiced.

He swung the S.E.5 over toward Gravelotte. The sky was clear, strangely blueish and decorated with dainty dabs of white clouds. He searched each dab carefully for lurking Huns and swung northward, miles inside the German lines. His motor purred contentedly and he played games with himself through the black blobs of Archie smoke that blossomed out around him. He smiled as he thought up a trick base-running gag, slipping his outer wing tip through the blobs and hurtling on to the next, like an exuberant schoolboy.

He tired of it after a while and then resumed his meditations.

"I wonder what they would do, if I didn't come back?" he asked himself again. "Who would be the first to say: 'Aw, hell, it's what he had coming, anyway! Always in the air, running up hours.'"

He thought about whether they would make an effort to find him—to try a rescue. It had been done, in cases of popular members of a squadron who had gone down with a conked engine inside the Jerry lines. But they would never think of it where Len Stallard was concerned. Besides, someone would get his bars—his streamers—his captaincy; promotion in rank and pay. Why risk anything crazy like that when there were other prizes?

Stallard snarled at the thought. An icy chill stabbed his shoulder blades. Huns!

HE STEADIED, peered up into his glass. There they were, three of them. Pfalz D-12s. He glanced down, checked the time and his position to fill in his report later. He gave no hint that he had seen them, but waited for them to make the first move.

It came, just as he had figured. The leader came dead on for his tail. The right-hand man went down in a steep dive to come up under him. The third climbed slightly and set the stage for the three-pronged pincer that was opened to grasp him.

Stallard waited another ten seconds. Ten seconds that seemed a year. This was the real nubbin of his skill—his nerve. He sat there, watching death race at him on wings of war. But he held his course, one hand on the throttle. The instant he saw tracers spit he jerked the throttle back sharply. The engine coughed. He fishtailed fast and cut his forward speed to a stall. The attacking Hun came on, but missed by ten feet, his

target slipping under him as he jerked the Pfalz up just in time to avoid a crash.

STALLARD watched the knock-kneed wheels go over his wing and reached up for the pivoted Lewis on the top plane. He jerked it down, snapped a quick, deadly burst and caught the climbing Hun dead to rights. There was no defense against this sort of thing. The Jerry pilot felt something slam into his back. He screamed and fell over on his stick.

The S.E. fell forward in a stall. Stallard waited until his nose drew toward the Hun below who was climbing up at him. Again his guns spoke. First the fixed Vickers spewed a death potion and, as the S.E. dropped steeper, the Lewis finished him off and added a black, funeral streamer to the tumbling D-12. The leader's ship bucketed after it, one wing streaming back, retained only by the control cables.

Stallard gave his bus the gun again and curled over to look for the Pfalz that had stayed upstairs. It was circling uncertainly, as if unable to comprehend what had happened. Stallard spanged a burst after him and then gave chase.

There was no hope of catching him, for the D-12 had streaked on from a greater height, but Stallard continued on, unmindful of the danger that lay so deep in enemy territory.

"What of it?" he argued with himself. "No one will care. They'll leave my chair empty for one meal and then divvy up my kit. No letters to write, no one to inform, and—well, a prison camp, perhaps, and something new to try. I'm flying on borrowed time, anyway. What the hell! Neck or nothing."

But he turned back. His conscience would not let him go on. He grinned at the retreating Jerry—and felt sorry for him. He turned back and instinctively stared at his instruments—and gasped!

There was an uproar at No. 76.

A balloon report had come through. Myron barked it into the mess room: "Stallard's down—down in the Jerry lines! The balloon at Julny just reported it."

"How do they know?"

"He's marked with a big 'M,' isn't he?"

"Yeah. That's his ship!" Logan explained.

"Cracked up?"

"No. Sitting pretty in a field. Run out of gas, probably."

Jess Myron tossed his magazine away and started for the door.

"Where you going?" asked Logan.

"Don't answer, Jess! I'm with you," yelled Albie Blaine, a pink-cheeked kid of eighteen.

"You—you're going over after him?" Logan gasped.

"Where's my helmet?" roared Poke Pyle. "They'll rip his belly out if they ever get their hands on him!"

They charged out of the mess and down the steps, smack into the arms of two bleary-eyed greaseballs. They were both blubbering like kids.

"Okay, Howland. We're going!" Logan shouted. "Get the rest out, Clauson!"

"Sure, Mister Logan! We only came over to see if you'd—you'd make sure he wasn't killed. He was a heller—but, cripes, what would we do without him, sir?"

"Shake a leg! We'll go and have a look-see," Logan growled.

"You'll be a captain tonight, Logan," reminded Myron, "if he doesn't come back."

"To hell with it! I don't want streamers on my tail, leading kids like you to their finish. He can have it. The sucker ain't gonner get out of it, that way. He can duck decorations, but he can't duck us that way!"

Three minutes later five S.E.5s streamed off into the dull late afternoon and headed northeast.

STALLARD came down with empty tanks four miles east of Rembecourt. There was nothing he could do about it. He had shot for the salient that offered the most chance, but he had overdone it this time.

"This is what I get for mooning about those bums back there," he told himself during the last long glide. "Wondering whether they cared, or what they would do if I went West. Well, here I am, and I'll find out just what they will do."

He could see his own balloons ahead, and he whipped out his Aldis signaling lamp and shot a quick message toward them. He hoped they were awake up there in those baskets. Not that it mattered much.

"Out of fuel. Uninjured. Advise No. 76 Squadron. Stallard."

He jammed the Aldis lamp back in its prongs and settled himself for the forced landing.

The field he had selected seven minutes before was clear and open. It was part of an estate. About three-quarters of a mile away, a shell-torn pile of Gothic masonry frowned across the countryside. Stallard could hardly keep his eyes off it as he slithered down to a fishtail landing and dropped his tail skid and wheels gently on green sod. Stallard wondered about that, too.

He came to a rumbling halt and stared about

him. No one came out of hedges with bayonets and Mausers as they did in the yarns he had heard. For several minutes he sat there and waited, pondering. Nothing happened.

"Well," he grinned as he climbed clear of the bucket seat, "the first rule in such an emergency is to open the Vickers, throw away the lock and damage the feed block."

He did that, strangely comfortable and serene.

"Next," he quoted from memory, "remove bolt, return spring, bend the feed arm of the Lewis and throw it away."

He did that, unhurried and unhampered.

"Next," he recalled, "open the three-way pet-cock of the fuel system and allow about a quart of petrol to seep into the cockpit. Then fire a number of Very pistol cartridges into the cockpit to ignite the petrol. This will destroy the plane."

But there was no petrol—not a spot of volatile fuel aboard. Something would have to be done quickly. He climbed out, peered around and saw a wheat field with stacks of shining sheaves nearby. That would do; stuff the cockpit with dry straw. A pocket match would complete the job.

Serene and undaunted, Stallard wandered across the open field and clambered through the hedge. He collected three heavy sheaves of wheat-straw and hurried back to carry out the third item in "Rules of Procedure Upon Landing in Enemy Territory." He found himself whistling a tune. He did not know he could whistle before. It was a ribald song, played nightly on the squadron phonograph. He wondered how he had picked up such a jazzy tune.

"Now, then, Jerry," he laughed. "Come and get it. But you'll have to come soon. I'm burning the lot in ten seconds."

He applied a match—a second, a third, and stood back to watch developments. As the flames flecked out after the first curling plume of white smoke, Len Stallard realized he had cut himself off completely. He was down in hostile territory—a prisoner of war!

He wanted a cigarette, although he had never smoked one before. He wanted to snap a match with his thumbnail the way he had seen Logan do it. He wished he could sign a chit and get a drink at the squadron bar. He had never tasted liquor before. But most of all, he wanted to speak to someone. To pour out his whole heart.

He wished now he had been able to stretch his glide and scramble into Allied territory. He knew he would

have hurried to the squadron and greeted everyone, in a manner he had never done before. He wondered if they would have slapped his back the way they did young Albie Blaine the day he cracked up behind Thaiucourt.

CRACKLE of musketry, the snap of bullets jerked him out of his reverie. He ducked and raced for the hedgerow and then realized that he had not removed the belt from the ammo box. It was his own ammunition that was going up!

Then as he huddled in the thicket, waiting for the night to fall, he caught a new sound. He sat tense and listened, caught the low angry beat of Hisso motors. His throat was dry and constricted. Night flying show? S.E.s on a night bombing patrol? Not for No. 76. They had been in the air for hours already.

But the air was tense and electric; and Len Stallard, clutching at the stems of two alder bushes, felt himself trembling from head to foot. The motors were beating out the call of the clans, the tom-tom beat of his tribe. His tribe, his mob, his outfit, his pals!

With a low muffled cry, something between a sob and a scream, Len Stallard charged out of the thicket. His arms waved and he stumbled, choking and blubbing, toward the burning pile in the middle of the field. It was Logan who came in and landed, while the rest circled and fought off the Pfalz fighters. It was Logan who slapped him on the back as he crawled up the wing and huddled against the root. It was Logan who screamed. "You old son-of-a-gun! You tried to duck us. Let's go!"

They went—through a hurricane of Pfalz lead—and got away with it!

"Stow it, Stallard," boomed Logan. "You would have done it, too. You wanted to go after Albie that day he was down—only he was on our side."

"I know, I know," Stallard said. "You see, I knew he was down on our side, but I was grandstanding. I've always grandstanded. I never held up my end."

"You got Huns, Stallard!" someone yelled.

"I know. I got them because they were more frightened than I. I had better luck, too. No more, though. I'm a member of the 76th. Flight commander, too, with two streamers—if you guys will have me. I

never before thought much about the men behind me. I always wanted to be a good guy, but didn't know how to do it. I got Huns and thought that was enough, but it wasn't. I didn't hold my end up in the outfit. I was a misfit cog that was gumming the works—till I landed out there tonight."

"You were a bum, Stallard!" Poke Pyle snapped, "but when you didn't come back, something happened to us. We didn't know what to do until we got that tip from the balloon. War does funny things to guys like us."

"Will you guys have a drink with me?" Stallard asked faintly.

"On one condition, Stallard," Albie Blaine replied with a grin. "We will drink to you and with you any time, provided, you respect that decoration they gave you. Remember, it belongs as much to the squadron as it does to you—and you've got to wear it!"

Stallard went white. He fumbled with his pocket flaps and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I—I can't!"

"Why not? You won it honestly, didn't you?"

"No!" Stallard blurted out.

"No? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You see—you see, that D.S.C. was awarded to Captain Leonard Stallard. It will be engraved that way—and—and—"

"Well?"

"You see, I'm not Leonard Stallard! I'm really Aubrey Allen." He flushed like a schoolboy.

"Aubrey Allen? The actor—the great female impersonator?—My Gawd!"

"Yes—the female impersonator. I started in a college show and it grew on me, and they wouldn't let me stop. Big money on Broadway, and all that. And then the war," Stallard muttered pathetically.

"But—but we don't get it."

"I—I thought everyone would kid the pants off me when they knew. You wouldn't have kidded me about wearing women's clothes—and a tenor voice?" Allen stuttered.

"For cripe's sake!" stormed Lefty Logan. "Give this guy a drink—a stiff hooker, while I go and send a message to Wing and get that damned name changed!"

And that was all there was to it.