

THE CEILING ACE

by RAOUL WHITFIELD

Every time the ships of the black cross ripped their lead at him he ran to the ceiling. They called him yellow, but that day when the heavens shrieked at man-made fury he held the fate of the squadron on his wings.

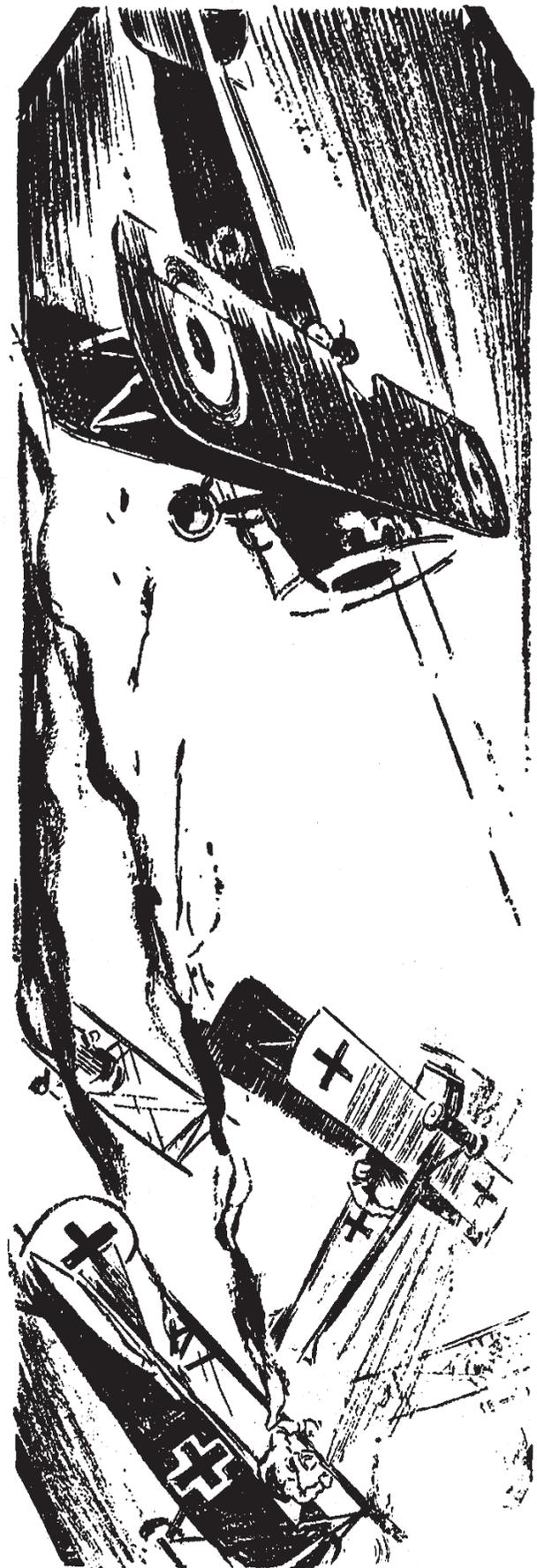
JOHNNY MONK WAS TELLING ME for the tenth time that he was fed up on Nieuports, that the squadron had gone stale, that the C.O. was too theoretical and that he was going to apply for a transfer to D.H.s—when “Barrel” McInnis kicked open the clapboard door of the barracks coop and entered.

McInnis was short and thickset; he had a chest that made his silver wings stand right out. I’d only seen one other human with a chest like Mac’s, and that gent had been a pug who couldn’t get his gloves up past the chest to protect his chin. Barrel could do that; he was a scrapper.

He stood near the foot of my cot, swore with feeling, tossed his helmet against the wall and held out his left hand. It was red. I got up and kicked a three month’s old copy of *La Vie Parisienne* from a spot on the board floor below his hand. Johnny grunted.

“What happened?” he muttered “Did a Heinie bite you?”

McInnis glared at Johnny. I went over and grabbed his left wrist. The fleshy part of the hand, above the thumb, was pretty badly ripped. There were some



splinters of what looked like wood digging into the back of the hand.

"Nasty, but not fatal," I said.

"Three days in Paris, Barrel. Not bad."

His blue eyes narrowed on mine. He had a squarish face and a good jaw. There was a lot of anger in his eyes.

"Damned lucky it's my left," he stated in a tight tone. "I hit with the right."

Johnny Monk whistled softly. His eyes met mine. I grinned at Barrel.

"Better go around and let Doc have a look at the hand," I said. "Then come back and get it off your chest."

McInnis took my pack of pills from the blanket on the cot and helped himself. He inhaled a few times, let the cigarette between his lips, held out his hand and looked down at it.

"It wasn't that ceiling ace's fault that I didn't get sprayed all over," he muttered grimly. "What a pilot that bird is!"

He went out. Johnny Monk stared down at some red spots on the floor. His eyes met mine.

"Hallett," he breathed softly. "Again, eh?"

I sat down on the cot and listened to the distant rumble of guns. Listened to them without hearing them much. After twenty-four days I was getting used to the dull sound they made.

"Too bad," I said half to myself. "Hallett's not a bad guy."

Johnny Monk groaned. "He wasn't a bad guy," he corrected, "until he started fighting this mans' war by altitude."

We didn't talk much until Barrel came back again. That was in about twenty minutes. His humor wasn't improved. He was sore, and he was making no secret of it.

"Stand by to-morrow," he gritted. "Doc wanted to give me seventy-two hours out of the air. I told him to go to hell. I'll tell that high-climbing lieutenant a lot worse than that, and I'll bet any one present that he'll take it. I'll give good odds."

I found a five spot that hadn't been converted into francs and handed it to Johnny.

"You're wrong, Barrel," I told McInnis. "Two to one will suit me."

Barrel smiled grimly. He scribbled an I.O.U. for ten bucks, holding the paper down on the rough table in the coop with his bandaged left hand. He gave it to Johnny.

"Hallett isn't yellow, Joe," he told me quietly. "He's just—careful."

Johnny Monk swore softly. "It's a hell of a note when a couple of guys take a chance on demoralizing an outfit, just because they can't get any more kick out of gambling with cards," he stated.

Barrel laughed harshly. "It's a hell of a note when a combat pilot gets the high-flying complex," he said. "You lose the five, Joe. He'll be just as careful about his handsome face as he is about sky riding."

I smiled a little, but I didn't say much. Barrel sat down on the cot and bummed another pill. Johnny asked him what happened and he swore softly.

"Let's see what Lieutenant Hallett thinks happened," he replied.

"Maybe he won't come in," Johnny returned.

Barrel snorted. There was bitter amusement in his husky-toned voice.

"That guy'll be coming in when you and I are pushing up poppies, Johnny," he stated. "You can't get hurt when you've tricked up your crate's engine so that——"

He stopped. The coop door was half closed. Some one was knocking. I sang out, "Come in." The door opened all the way and Lieutenant Hallett stepped inside.

"All out of matches," he said. "Can I bum a——"

His eyes were on Barrel's left hand. They widened. Hallett was tall and well built. He had a browned, finely featured face. His teeth were good and his eyes were nice. Large and brown.

"What happened, Mac?" he asked cheerfully. "Reaching for one of the C.O.'s butts?"

McInnis narrowed his eyes on the face of the pilot who stood by the cot. There was little expression in them. He spoke softly—too softly. His voice had a nasty note in it.

"Sorry as hell I can't laugh at that one, lieutenant," he said. "I haven't been winging in that rarified air you like. My head doesn't feel that way."

Hallett looked a little puzzled, but he kept on smiling.

"I got twenty-two thousand this last patrol," he stated. "Getting a nice mixture of air and fuel. Bunny's been working on the ship. But I didn't see any Boche up there."

McInnis smiled with his lips pressed together. Then he made a clicking noise.

"I'll bet that made you sore," he said.

Hallett's smile faded. It went away slowly. Johnny

Monk was getting nervous. He stood up and yawned. Hallett's eyes dropped to Barrel's bandaged hand again.

"What happened, Mac?" he asked in a level tone.

And Barrel gave it to him. He spoke in an emotionless tone. It reminded me of one of Cap Schaefer's lectures on rigging—the ones we used to get back at Issoudoun—only it had more point.

"I was over Hill G7, easing along at about fourteen thousand. Clouds at about eighteen. Last twenty minutes of the patrol. A crate was getting altitude off to the south. She was an Allied ship. Got within about a half mile of me and kept on climbing. Two Boche dropped down out of the clouds. Albatross fighters. I high-balled for the climbing Allied crate. The Boche had altitude, and they looked like von Steur's pilots. Things got hot. I sent one Heinie down in a slow spin. Looked for the Allied ship, and got "a dose of lead from the second Boche. Dropped thirteen thousand with the beer drinker on my tail, and had to work like hell to hold him off. He quit when the Frog A.A. fire got going, back of Montmorency. I winged through it. The last I saw of the Allied ship she was still climbing."

Barrel smiled grimly at me. Johnny Monk looked at Lieutenant Hallett. That officer spoke.

"What type was the Allied plane?" he asked quietly.

Barrel swore softly. "Third squadron Nieuport," he said. "Nice to know you got that twenty-two thousand, Hallett."

Hallett narrowed his brown eyes. He got a half smile around his lips and shook his head.

"I didn't get it over Hill G7, Mac," he said steadily. "She wasn't my ship." Barrel took his back away from the clapboard wall. He leaned forward on the cot.

"If my eyes weren't pretty good, I wouldn't be here to tell you you're a liar, Hallett!" he snapped.

Johnny Monk started to protest. Hallett took a step forward, his face twisted. He reached out with his right hand, got a grip on the roll collar of the tunic Barrel wore for flying. He jerked Barrel up from the blanket. Then, suddenly, he released him.

"You've got a bum hand," he muttered. "I'll wait."

Barrel gritted out something that sounded like "The hell you will!" He slashed out with his right. Hallett slipped away, but the blow caught him glancingly. It knocked him off balance. Barrel stepped in close and struck again. Johnny Monk was swearing at both of them.

Hallett twisted to one side and brought up his right arm. I had a flashing glimpse of a browned, closed fist.

There was a sharp snap as it landed. Barrel grunted and rocked back, but he didn't go down. He lowered his head and went in, slashing out another right.

It never landed. Hallett put everything he had in the next blow. It came up through Barrel's guard and caught him squarely under the left side of the jaw. Barrel went down heavily. He rolled over on his right side and was motionless.

Johnny and I picked him up and laid him on the cot. There was the sound of footfalls along the narrow corridor. I told Johnny to go out and keep everyone else out. He went. Hallett stood frowning down at Barrel and rubbing the knuckles of his right hand. He was breathing hard.

"That wasn't—my ship, Joe," he muttered. "I don't have to—take that—sort—"

I told him to get out of the coop, but I managed a grin. He went. I got some water and used it on Barrel's face. After a few seconds he groaned weakly and sat up. He blinked at me. I swore softly.

"You owe me ten bucks," I told him. "He didn't take it."

Barrel touched his chin carefully and swore. There was a hard smile on his face.

"It proves he can sock," he said thickly. "But it doesn't prove anything else. It was his crate!"

MAJOR CRONIN was tall and lean. He could fly. His dark eyes went from Barrel's to mine, and then back to Lieutenant Hallett's again. He spoke in a clipped tone.

"They're coming damn close to shoving us out of the air on this sector. We're not getting anywhere. We can't hold 'em on their side of the lines—we can't seem to give the two-seater ships protection enough to stake out the lines. It's a mess. Von Steur must be chuckling over his beer every night. Staff's raising hell. The first thing I know I'll be back in Blois working for some quartermaster general."

It was a long speech for Mike Cronin. He didn't often say much.

"We're going to try some formation flying. You three pilots will be the A flight. McInnis, you'll lead. Stick close and take on everything that looks like Boche. Work up your own plans and signals. I want some enemy ships out of the sky. It'll help the squadron morale."

He stopped. Lieutenant Hallett was frowning. Barrel looked at me, then glanced at the tall lieutenant. He swore softly.

"My crate won't get over nineteen thousand," he

said slowly. "I've been using her so much my mechanic hasn't had time to invent things."

The C.O. looked a little puzzled. Hallett got red, started to say something and changed his mind.

Major Cronin said: "You'll get plenty of action between fifteen and nineteen thousand, lieutenant. What's the point?"

Hallett spoke up. "It's a dig at me, sir," he stated. "I've had my mechanic work up a good mixture for the throttle at high altitudes. Some of the enemy ships have been winging high. Von Steur's outfit, I think. They always get the pique—thought I could fix that. Got twenty-two thousand this afternoon. Lieutenant McInnis thought I climbed up and deserted him. It wasn't my ship, sir."

The C.O. pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes on Barrel. He looked at his left hand.

"Nearly got you, eh, lieutenant? Think Hallett's eyes are going bad. Rather I pull him out of the formation? Give you a pilot from B flight?"

Hallett's face was set, but he didn't protest. Barrell shook his head.

"I'll be leading the flight," he stated. "We won't try for records in altitude, that's all."

Mike Cronin looked at me. "What do you think, Joe?" he asked. "Feel they'll get scrapping and let you down?"

I smiled grimly. "It'll take Mac's hand a couple of days to get right," I said. "We'll need some back-line formation work. We'll be all right."

The C.O. nodded. Lieutenant Hallett spoke.

"I can hold formation," he said simply.

The C.O. nodded again. He looked at Barrel.

"Keep the ring stuff until the show's over," he suggested. "The air fighting counts bigger."

I knew then that the C.O. had got wind of the coop scrap. It was hard to keep rumor down, in a front-line outfit. Hallett said nothing, but he smiled a little. Barrel spoke quietly.

"I didn't fight, sir," he stated. "I just tried."

Cronin grinned. So did I. That was like Barrel. He was a good loser. He didn't like it, but he was honest.

The major rustled some papers on his crude desk. The kerosene lamp spluttered. The major swore sharply.

"Get going on the signals and plans," he ordered. "I don't give a damn what happens on the ground, but in the air I want results. Boche. I'm patriotic—just patriotic enough to want to keep out of Blois. 'Night, gentlemen!"

We stood up, saluted and went out. The wind was singing down over Charleine Woods, from the north-eastward. The sound of the guns, nine or ten kilometers distant, was louder than it had been hours ago. It was cold, and getting colder.

"I'm turning in," Barrel announced. "After mess tomorrow we'll work up some signals."

I nodded. "I'm hitting the hay, myself," I said.

Hallett looked across the tarmac toward the darkened, camouflaged hangars.

"I'm going over and talk to Bunny," he said steadily. "If we can get another thousand feet I'll have a nice ceiling for the crate."

He walked away. Barrel stared after him. He muttered to himself.

"Damned ceiling ace! He'll let us down sure as—"

"Maybe you were wrong, Barrel," I cut in. "Maybe it wasn't his ship you saw climbing."

He grunted. "Think it wasn't?" he said grimly. "Well, you're riding formation, too, Joe. Don't think because he socked me down that he's any shiny-winged hero. We'll see."

That was one thing I was willing to agree on. We would certainly see.

We did two hours of formation the next day, back of the lines. The last thirty minutes we had the signals going well, and the V formation was tight on banks, piques and climbs. Hallett was a sweet pilot—he could handle a stick. His machine-gun work was a mystery. He wasn't credited with any Boche, officially or otherwise.

After we landed, Barrel went in and talked with the C.O. Before mess he told us that we were going up for patrol an hour before dusk the next day. I nodded. Hallett smiled a little. Barrel looked at him and said he'd take the bandages off his bum hand in the morning, leaving it taped up. He asked him if he thought his crate was good for the extra thousand feet of altitude. Hallett smiled and shook his head.

"Too bad," Barrel muttered. "But maybe it'll be alright, anyway. You'll still have a few thousand on us."

He went in to mess. Hallett narrowed his brown eyes on his back and set his lips firmly together. Mess was pretty quiet all around. Two of the boys hadn't come in.

We made one more formation flight in the morning. It went nicely. The little ships were tricky, and it wasn't like flying formation in D.H.s. A slip meant a crash, one way, or a quarter-mile separation the other. After mess we tuned up the ships, had a nap,

came out and lined up the guns. We got the crates out of the canvas hangars.

"We'll wing for G.7," Barrel said. "Stick close."

He climbed inside, rolled her out on the tarmac and took off cross-wind. He winged straight for the Front, gaining altitude steadily. I got off next. When I was a half mile from the field I twisted around and saw Hallett taking off.

We picked up formation three kilometers from the front line near Chauttry. The altitude was eleven thousand, and Barrel throttled down and circled to let us come in. I got position behind, above and slightly to the right of his right wing-tip. Hallett nosed in on the left. Barrel twisted around, saw that we were right and opened up. We were doing a hundred and fourteen by my air-speed indicator as we roared for the Front. There was a wind to be crabbed into, and we had a mild climb.

We spotted a D.H., with a Sop as escort, near Hill G.7. English ships. The escort plane's pilot rocked her wing's. We went on back of the lines. The air speed dropped as Barrel climbed more steeply. We banked to the northward on signal, and near the French-held sector along Tomer Creek we had fourteen thousand. The air was fairly clear; visibility wasn't bad. There were clouds to the northward—gray-black. They looked to be about fifteen thousand in altitude.

I SPOTTED the reconnaissance ship first. She was heading back of the German lines at around seven thousand. She looked like a Fokker. Barrel rolled his crate's wings and signaled that he was going down. We were to stay up.

He dove. I glanced toward Hallett's ship. He was shaking his head, holding an arm up in the prop wash and pointing above. There were clouds above us, pretty high. We held our course until we reached an air spot over the Fokker and then broke formation.

I glanced down and saw the tracer color from Barrel's two prop-synchronized Vickers. He was in close to the Fokker, but he hadn't caught her crew by surprise. She was fighting back.

I swore softly, working my neck like an owl's. Barrel had figured the Fokker reconnaissance ship easy. He had two to his credit already. But he'd broken formation for the drop, and that wasn't what the C.O. had sent us out to do. We should have tackled the German two-seater in formation.

My eyes went toward the other Nieuport—Hallett's ship. She was climbing. Climbing at a pretty steep angle toward the gray-white clouds above!

I groaned. Banking vertically, I looked downward again. Barrel was having trouble with the Fokker. He was stunting all over the place, trying to get in at a blind angle. Tracer color—sparking a dull red—cut the air from the German ship's rear cockpit. The Nieuport was below the tracer stream. I saw her nose up. The two ships seemed to merge. Tracer color streaked out from the two-seater. There was an explosion. She went off on a wing.

"Got her!" I muttered.

He had. He was climbing the Nieuport now, climbing up toward my air spot. I searched the sky and saw two specks far to the eastward, another shape back of the German lines and low. I looked for Hallett's ship. He was still climbing her. She was almost in the clouds!

The Fokker was going down in a spin and flames. She crashed as Barrel's Nieuport was still five hundred feet below my crate. In the murk that was haze, smoke and brown mud, there was a red ball of fire.

I leveled off and looked for Hallett's Nieuport. She was out of sight. He had taken her into the clouds.

Then Barrel had his crate alongside of mine. I grinned at him and held one finger back. He raised a clenched fist, pointed off his left wing and shook his fist. I pointed up toward the clouds. I swore at Hallett.

Barrell winged his crate around in a mild bank. He had a circular course of about a half mile, and he held it for five minutes. He watched the clouds, and I could almost see his lips moving as he cursed Lieutenant Hallett.

Then a shape shot down through the clouds. She was a small shape—a chassé ship. She was in a tight spin and plunging straight toward our planes. Barrel raised his right arm and jerked it. We broke formation. I nosed up and gripped the stick trigger of the two guns. They fired as one—but I didn't squeeze the trigger.

The spinning plane had straightened out. She was a Nieuport—Hallett's ship. I could see her squadron marking. He winged her in close to Barrel's plane. He pointed up toward the clouds and gave the "all clear" signal.

I smiled grimly. That wasn't so bad, not so far as I was concerned. But I could figure how Barrel would feel. He had broken formation and had downed an enemy ship. But Hallett had used his altitude crate to look above the clouds. It was my guess that Barrell wouldn't like it much. It had left only one ship protecting his attack on the Fokker.

Barrel was signaling us to pick up formation. I got in all right, but Hallett's work was a little ragged. He had to zoom, bank out, and then come in again. Barrell twisted his head in my direction, raised his left hand, pointed toward the ceiling chaser, and formed something that looked like a zero with his taped fingers. I grinned down at him.

We winged northward, edging farther back of the German lines. Far below there were puffs of smoke. They looked like barrage, but they didn't matter. There were shapes in the sky, all distant.

We roared at fourteen thousand, and were nearing the darker, lower-moving clouds now. I stared through the goggle glass, back of the lines. There was, a formation winging our way, and climbing. I counted six ships—small ones. It was my guess that they were German.

Barrell saw them and banked mildly. He watched them for several seconds. They changed the course of their formation as we changed ours. I swore softly. We had altitude—but three to six was pretty tough.

We banked more sharply, but as I twisted my head I saw that the German formation was banking, too. They were gaining altitude, coming in fast. The wind was on the tails of the ships.

Our flight was winging southward now, perhaps a half mile back of the German lines. I figured that the flight in pursuit were Albatross. There was such a squadron on the sector. But they hadn't flown formation very much. They were supposed to be newly organized.

Barrel was losing air-speed now—climbing. We were going up toward the clouds from which Hallett had dropped. I smiled. McInnis was going to try and get altitude and lose the formation of Albatross planes. That was my guess. Then we'd go back along the former air course again.

He signaled loose-spread formation for the clouds. We winged wide and went through. I gave my Hisso a new mixture of fuel and air. She was roaring smoothly, and the r.p.m.s were turning up, all right. Again and again I wiped the fog from my goggle glass, flying by the level gauge and my air sense.

We were out into gray air at eighteen thousand. But there was another cloud formation above. It was cold. Barrel signaled for us to pick up formation.

We circled, and I could see him watching the ragged crests of the clouds below.

And then, suddenly, Lieutenant Hallett was breaking loose from the formation, climbing his ship

again! He was roaring her toward the cloud formation above!

I saw Barrell rock the wings of his Nieuport and wave his right arm. I saw Hallett twist his head and look back from the tiny cockpit. Barrel was signaling for him to come back. Hallett shook his head.

McInnis nosed up his plane and got her into a climb. I followed suit. My engine wasn't doing so well now. She spluttered as I fed her more air and thinned out the gas. Barrel's plane nosed down. He banked her around. I leveled off and winged in close. Hallett's Nieuport was nearing the cloud stratum above. She was a climber.

She went through as Barrel shook a clenched fist toward her. We circled, watching the cloud crests below. If the formation of enemy planes were coming up we'd have to tackle them. We couldn't do much better, in altitude. I thought about Hallett. Was McInnis right? Was Hallett winging out of a possible scrap against odds, using an excuse? Or did he really think he was protecting us by taking a look above?

I swore softly. It was a tough one to figure. There were only two of us, and if the Albatross formation came up, even though we had altitude, our chances were slim. Very slim.

THERE were Nieuport squadrons, perhaps, whose Hisso engines were fixed to do better than nineteen or twenty thousand, but ours wasn't one of them. We circled in the air between cloud formations. I looked downward, saw no sign of the Albatross formation, turned my eyes upward. And as I stared at the clouds above, a ship came through. She wasn't spinning. She was coming down in a mild dive. And she wasn't a Nieuport!

She was Boche. Her pilot changed her course as he spotted us. Another shape shot out from the clouds. Another German ship! Fokkers. Fighting ships!

I glanced toward Barrel, shouting hoarsely against the beat of the Nieuport's engine. He was nosing his plane upward. A third shape shot downward. She was Boche, too. I got a glimpse of a dark shape painted on the fuselage of the nearest ship—a bird with wings spread. An arrow slanted through the bird's body.

"Von Steur's outfit!" I muttered.

The nearest ship was piquing now—diving on Barrel's plane. He went wide, and I caught a glimpse of one of the other two planes diving toward my crate. I zoomed, used a short burst in an attempt to hold the pilot off, and went over on a wing.

When I got out of it tracer fire streaked past the ship's tail assembly, missing it by only a few feet. I got a flashing glimpse of a Fokker zooming to hold altitude.

I zoomed and stared above. One Fokker was still sitting up under the clouds, circling. Her pilot was waiting for a chance—and that chance would come pretty quick. I went over in a half loop before my eyes picked up the German combating me. He did a nice roll, went off on a wing, dove for me again. I squeezed the stick trigger—the right gun jammed. He was out of range, but a long burst almost reached me before he banked off again.

I looked for Barrel and saw him zoom over the tracer stream of a Fokker coming at him from an angle. When I raised my eyes again the Boche above was nosing downward. He was piquing on Barrel's ship!

I groaned, took my eyes away. The Fokker whose pilot had picked me out for combat was roaring in from the southward. He zoomed over a short burst, nosed downward again. I shoved the stick forward and roared the plane downward. Back of me a strut crackled. The ship shivered under a hail of machine-gun bullets. The German's Spandau guns were scoring!

Pulling back on the stick, I held it against my flying overalls. At the top of the loop I swore grimly. A Fokker was streaking past on the left, flames trailing back of her!

As my crate went over on her back I saw the Nieuport—Hallett's Nieuport! She was plunging off at an angle, toward the air spot where I'd last seen Barrel's plane!

I let my crate fall out of the loop and looked desperately for the Fokker whose pilot had tackled me. She was zooming, cutting across my flight path from below. Her pilot hadn't figured on the loop. I kicked left rudder, gave the Nieuport left stick. For three seconds, as her pilot banked her vertically, she was in the ring-sights of my one gun. And she got a long burst. It raked her from cockpit to tail assembly. Less than forty feet of air separated the two ships.

Her nose dropped. I saw the pilot slump forward. She plunged for the clouds, not far below.

I leveled off, banked around. The remaining Fokker was diving on Barrel's ship. He rolled in an attempt to get clear. And then, from somewhere above, out of my range of vision, came the tracer color. It streaked a path toward the tail assembly of the diving Fokker. At first it missed the tail assembly. But in another second I could see the fabric spurting, twisting!

"Hallett—again!" I breathed.

The remaining Fokker nosed up. She seemed to shoot off at an angle—and then, as her broken tail assembly crumpled, she went over on a wing, started to twist. Barrel's ship came out of the roll and I saw Hallett's Nieuport come out of her dive. The Fokker went down through the clouds in an uncontrolled spin.

Seconds later Barrel signaled us to pick up formation. I pointed back of me to a splintered strut. He nodded and pointed toward his right wing. Two wires—flying wires—were dangling back in the prop wash. I couldn't see bullet holes in the wings, but I guessed there were plenty present. Throttled down, we held a widespread formation and dropped down through the clouds. There were two flaming spots, far below. The third Fokker had dropped, but hadn't burned.

The formation of Albatross was out of sight. I smiled grimly. Probably their leader had had more important work on hand. We tightened the formation a little and winged for home.

Back at the drome, Major Cronin smiled at us. His eyes went from Hallett's to mine, then to Lieutenant McInnis'.

"One reconnaissance Fokker for Lieutenant McInnis," he stated slowly. "One chasse Fokker for Lieutenant Joseph Smith. Two chasse Fokkers for Lieutenant Hallett. Not bad, eh?"

I didn't say anything. Mike Cronin looked at Hallett, then at Barrel again.

"Any suggestions, Mac?" he asked.

Barrel smiled faintly. "I was wrong about Hallett being the pilot of a ship that apparently deserted me, sir," he stated. "I'm sorry. Lieutenant Hallett went up above, twice during the late patrol—and the second time it counted big. It saved our necks. Right, Joe?"

I nodded. "Right," I said.

"I suggest that the mechanics try to get us a bit more altitude, sir," Barrel said slowly. "I think we should have a chance to become ceiling aces."

Mike Cronin grinned. "It's an order," he returned. "Perhaps Lieutenant Hallett will sort of—boss the job."

I looked at Hallett. He was grinning, too.

"Very good, sir," he said.