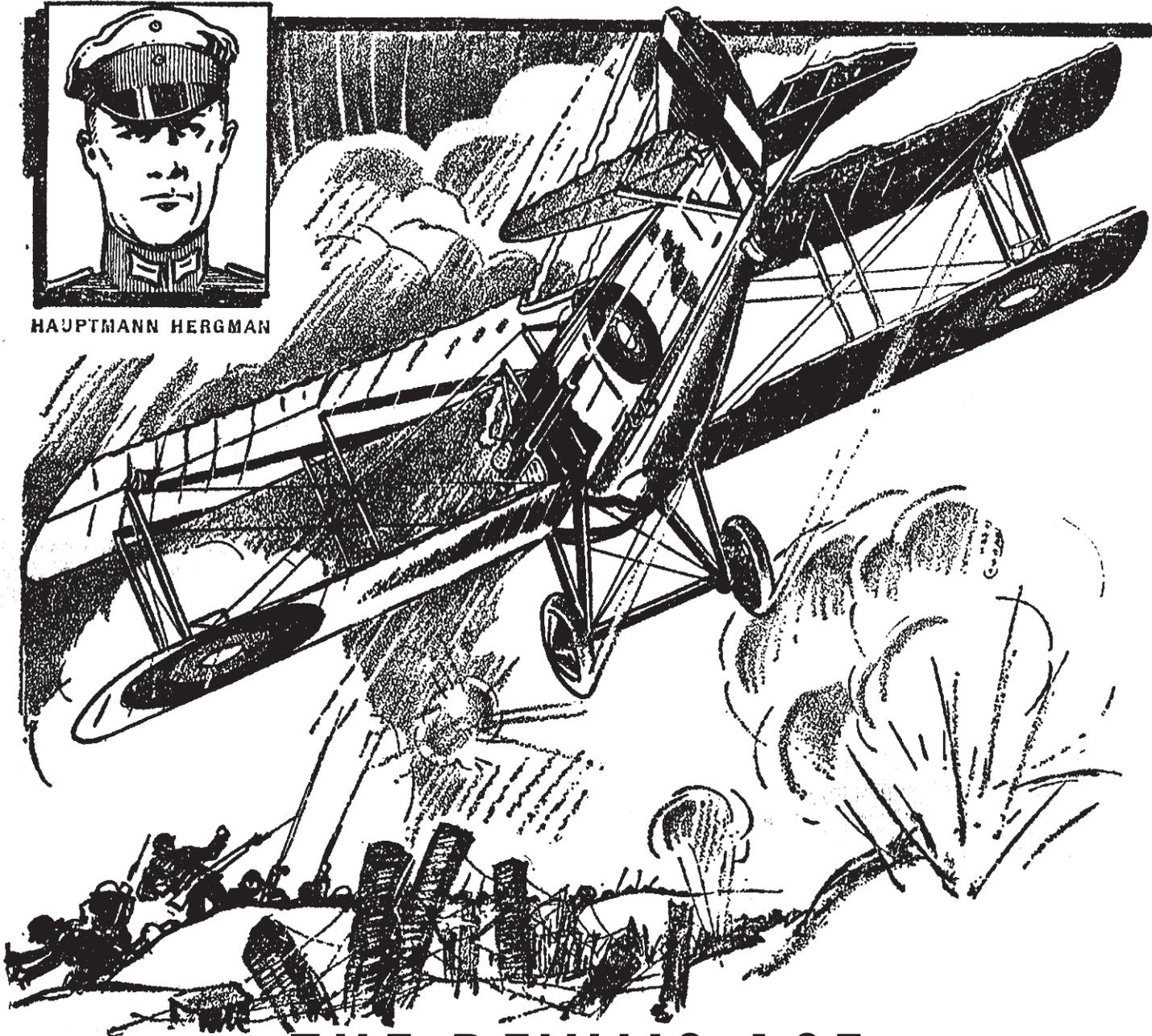




HAUPTMANN HERGMAN



# THE DEVIL'S ACE

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

*Silent Orth, Hellwinder of the Crimson Skies, Gets into a Whale of a Jam—  
and All Because He Asks for Extra Flying Time Without Giving Reasons!*

**T**HE FACE OF "SILENT" ORTH was grim and hard as he faced his squadron commander. His fists were knotted at his sides. His keen eyes were squinted as though he peered into the glare of the sun.

"I'm asking for something, sir," he said.  
The major looked up.  
"A bit of leave in Paris?"  
"No, sir. I want to double my flying time."  
The major gasped.

"Good grief, what a man, at a time like this! Other flyers want to stop flying altogether, take trips to Paris and go A.W.O.L. to keep out of the air. What's biting you?"

Orth's face didn't lighten. If anything, the jaw muscles became a bit tighter.

"Nothing, sir. I'm just hankering to paste the Germans a little harder, that's all. I've got to have more action."

The major shrugged.

"Go to it," he said, "and my best goes with you. You've *carte blanche* anyhow, to fly alone. More action! For the love of Heaven!"

When the lanky figure of Silent Orth—who hadn't always been silent, but had become so because his wing-mates rode him half to death for bragging—strode from headquarters office, the major called in Captain Mims, his adjutant.

"Orth's breaking," he said. "And when a tough egg like Orth goes, it means danger for the squadron. Tip off the flight commanders. I always knew a man couldn't be the hellwinder Orth is and still keep going indefinitely."

Captain Mims shrugged.

"When Orth goes bad," he said, "we'll be seeing pigs with wings. Not that there haven't been times when I thought I saw them, with no help whatever from Orth. But I'll tip off the flight commanders."

AND so the whisper went the rounds, and men began to nudge one another and whisper among themselves:

"There goes Silent Orth. He's cracking."

Orth saw the staring eyes, always quickly averted when he caught them at it, and wondered. There was something in the wind. He didn't know what it was, but it must have something to do with him. When he asked men pointblank, they evaded him. He dismissed it with a shrug of the shoulders because he was like that. He always crossed his bridges when he came to them.

Fifteen minutes after he had quit headquarters office, the major and the adjutant heard the roaring of a Hisso motor and stepped to the door. Silent Orth was scudding down the field in his cool grey Spad. The officers exchanged glances.

ORTH didn't look their way. He was one officer who didn't take off with a hand waving. He was concerned solely, when he flew, with flying. But inside

he was seething. He didn't know what ailed him. He seemed to be driven by a very devil of energy. He couldn't be still. When he sat his hands trembled, wanted to be doing things. When he slept he rolled on his bunk and muttered incoherences.

He dreamed—dreamed of men in khaki and horizon blue, pushing into Germany, being thrust back on the sawtooth bayonets of the Germans. The dream became so real to him that even while awake he could see it merely by closing his eyes.

Now, as he fled across the lines, and the black Archie flowers blossomed in the skies all about him, he looked down to see that his dream had become real. A long thin line of men in khaki were charging, with bayonets carried at high port until they were close enough to the enemy to engage. Then the bayonets would be lowered to bring their savage tips into position for thrust and parry—but mostly thrust, because fighters who stopped to parry almost always died, unless the enemy also stopped to parry.

The khaki wave, even as Orth looked down, smashed against an ocean of Germans suddenly risen out of the opposing trenches, and were hurled back, bleeding, dying, toward their own lines. Orth's lips tightened; he tilted the nose of his Spad down and dived, dived with his motor full out and his Vickers already blazing.

He dived straight into the faces of the counter-attacking Germans, dived at an angle which would carry him in a savage swoop squarely across their front. In his dream he had acted thus several times, so that now it seemed to be something he had done so often that there was no question as to the outcome. His bullets struck up dust ahead of the Germans. Americans in khaki, seeing the diversion caused by the lone Spad, hesitated on the point of retreat, looked back, singly and in squads.

Germans were being piled in rows by the guns of Silent Orth. The Americans turned. The Germans were wavering, pausing uncertainly, turning their backs on the Vickers of the Spad flyer. The khaki-clad infantry took heart again, returned to the fight—and Orth, giving his crate full gun, which he had cut to swoop along the face of the enemy, zoomed toward German skies.

In a few seconds he had forgotten what had happened, and was thinking of the eyes which watched him, of the whispers that were going the rounds within two minutes after he had left the major. What did they portend? Did they think he had ulterior motives for

doubling his flying time? Did they think, perhaps, that he was contacting the enemy somewhere? He stiffened in his pit.

BACK at his field, though he did not know it, the major had ordered "B" Flight into the air.

"Follow Orth," he told the flight commander. "See that he doesn't get into trouble."

Orth headed straight into Germany. His eyes searched the skies constantly for the crates of the enemy. He didn't care how many of them there might be, nor how well they fought. He never waited for the enemy to come to him; he went to them. And now, off to his left, to the northeast, he spotted four Fokkers, racing to the lines as though on some definite, set mission.

He looked back. A flight of Spads was rising from the direction of his own field. He hadn't known of a flight scheduled for this time. But he shrugged as the Spads headed into Germany without swerving in his direction.

"WHAT'S wrong with 'em?" he asked himself. "Just because I asked to have my flying time doubled?"

He didn't look back again. He smashed full tilt for the four Fokkers whose pilots made no effort to evade the issue. Why should they, when they were four to one? Orth tripped his guns to make sure that the ground strafe through which he had just passed had not caused them to jam, settled back in his pit, and wished for a cigarette to drag on in the interval between now and the moment when Vickers and Spandaus would exchange lead across the abysses of the skies.

The Fokkers came on. They had formed one line, swiftly flying toward the west. He could see traces of smoke at their spinner caps as their Spandaus were tested out, tripped, and sped lead through the arcs of their propellers. They were ready. The Germans always were.

Orth tried to open his throttle a notch further. But already he was doing top speed. He put his nose down to bring gravity to his aid.

A quarter of a mile separated him from the four Fokkers. He kept his nose down for what seemed but a second or two. Then he came up with a rush, the nose of his Spad aimed directly at the Fokkers. Those Fokkers, knowing the pilot of the Spad, because his insignia was known all through this sector, wasted no time. They were diving to meet him. He grinned

tightly, feeling relaxed and happy for the first time that day.

His guns began shooting. But they didn't open until all four ships were within range, until four had started firing at him, until there were bullet holes in his wings. Then he went into action with savage ferocity. His grin vanished. His teeth showed in a snarl of hatred and determination. His knees hugged his stick.

In his ring-sight he saw the nearest Fokker's prop, and beyond it the huddled figure of the German, who seemed to be making himself small to escape the lead he must have known would be coming in a matter of split seconds.

Orth's guns hammered and ranted. He knew, because he always knew, exactly where his shots were going. His tracer pencils ended at the prop of the Fokker, near its center. Bullets came through that prop at him; he sent lead back through it. The Fokker swerved.

Orth dipped his nose to rake the motor, and black smoke poured from under the housing. The other three Fokkers banked away, to bring him into trilateral cross-fire.

ORTH studied them as the first Fokker dropped its nose and went under him. For this one he spared but a glance, to assure himself that the figure whose head rolled back and forth on the cockpit coaming was actually out of the fight, out of the war, and out of life forever. Then he concentrated on the other three who attacked with such grim, savage ferocity.

They seemed to be everywhere around him. They banked, zoomed, dived, and always their guns spat flame and bullets. His fuselage was ripped in a hundred places. His wings were patches of slatting fabric. He looked once toward the home field, saw his wingmates coming on. He banked, hurled himself at an enemy pit. Even as he banked, even as his hand went to his trips, he saw a third Fokker directly across the second, almost in line, but quickly sliding out of possible line of sights. Orth watched the arc curve away—even as his bullets hailed through the cockpit of the man directly ahead, causing his body to jump and jerk as though he had been a monkey on a string.

A SECOND Fokker went down. Orth leapfrogged the third, and blazed a pathway of lead through it from prop to tail-skid, pleasing himself as a child with a toy, but showing the German the skill of his aerial gunnery.

The fourth Fokker was diving, diving on a clearing a quarter of a mile away, running out of the fight, when Orth hadn't even fired at him once. Orth gritted his teeth, followed, his wings protesting, his flying wires screaming, his motor revving to the limit. The Fokker had touched wheels, bounced fifty feet, rolled to a stop.

Orth, forgetting his wingmates who now were quite close, forgetting everything but the thrill of the chase, set his crate down when sure that the woods were not packed with Boche. He was out of his crate before it stopped rolling, touching his feet to German soil, drawing his automatic as he raced to cut off the enemy. The German was also out, running for the woods, tugging at his Luger as he ran.

Orth was following his impulses. He dashed after the German, followed him into the woods. Behind him his motor idled on. Orth pursued simply because he hated men who ran, and because he never wished to leave any job unfinished. He fired twice at the German, but missed, because he didn't stop to aim as he ran. Then the German was gone. He shouted as he ran, and from several places in the woods German voices, those of soldiers, answered excitedly. Rifles cracked.

Orth turned and raced back to his crate. He had been away from it no more than a couple of minutes. Overhead were the scudding wings, the blasting motors of six Spads, "B" Flight of his own squadron. Their flight leader was beckoning him up, an imperious gesture he could not disobey had he wished.

He climbed into his pit as soldiers raced from the woods, dropping to their knees, to fire their Mausers. Other bullets ploughed through his crate as he slammed down the field for the take-off. And as he rose into the air, safe from ground fire, a strange thing happened: the flight leader waved him home, and his wingmates squatted to his right and left, under and over him, to escort him back.

"That's blamed funny," Silent Orth said to himself. "What the devil have I done, anyhow?"

German planes came in close, studied the formation, sheered off again, and the flight flashed home without further contact with the enemy. On the ground, Orth and the flight commander faced each other. The captain spoke coldly.

"We'll have a talk with the major," he said.

ORTH shrugged, followed the captain to headquarters. Inside, with the senior, the captain at the right, the two faced the major, who looked up in surprise.

"Well, Kline?" he said. "What's on your mind?"

"I wish to report Orth for consorting with the enemy," he said. "He landed behind a German who went down to a clearing, without firing a shot. The German was *Hauptmann* Hergman, recognized by several of us, from the insignia on his crate; and Hergman is the best German spy in this sector. Orth followed him into the woods, and was gone just long enough to have exchanged a few words with the man."

The major stared.

"I don't believe it. Not Orth!" he snapped.

Kline's face was grim.

"I saw the whole thing. So did the rest of the flight. With his record I didn't believe it—couldn't. But it's so!"

"SO," said the major, his eyes narrow, "that's why you wanted your flying time doubled! Record, eh? Better records have gone by the board for the sake of Germany—and German money."

"The captain," Orth said slowly, "neglects to mention the three Germans I knocked down before I followed Hergman into the ground."

"Hergman would protect an American of your standing and reputation, even to the extent of allowing you to knock down three decoys to make it look good to your wingmates. The three might even have volunteered, if the matter were of grave importance to the Fatherland. It wouldn't be the first time."

Captain Kline's voice was waspish. Orth, stunned by the turn events had taken, stared at Kline in amazement, then at his major.

"I rest on my record, sir," he said quietly.

"Which may well have been built up to the very end that you do a great stroke for Germany," said the major heavily. "I order you in close arrest in quarters, pending an investigation."

Orth's face went hard as granite. His jaw muscles stood out, as he forced himself to hold his peace. Both the major and Kline noted this, took it into consideration against the time when they might be called upon to testify before a court-martial. Orth turned and strode from the office, followed by Kline. The major snapped at the captain:

"Escort him!"

Orth heard and his heart went cold. He had been actuated by just one thing when he had asked to fly more: the desire to do his share to end the war. Feeling as he did that the Germans were breaking, he was sure that if everybody bore down, did a little more than his

bit, the horrible strife would end at almost any time now. The two officers had put the iron into his soul.

Striding across the tarmac he glanced at the apron where his Spad's motor still idled. The ship was riddled with bullets, but that apparently didn't mean anything. Those bullets hadn't touched him. A court-martial might look at that fact with suspicion—as though the Germans deliberately missed him because he was one of their own.

It was all a horrible, ghastly nightmare, and yet he could scarcely blame Kline or the major. The major had started the ball rolling. The captain had believed he thought things he didn't say and had drawn his own inferences—and Orth's following Hergman down had clinched the seeds of suspicion the major had sown. Kline's report, based on what he believed, colored violently by that belief, had convinced the major; though the captain must think he had been convinced from the beginning that something was wrong.

ORTH made up his mind as a name flashed into his head: Hergman. Orth had enough gasoline in his tanks to last him for three hours and a half. He'd been up little more than half an hour. He suddenly whirled. His fist lashed out, connected with the jaw of Kline with pile driver force.

With a sigh, and a look of surprise on his face, the captain went down, measuring his length on the ground. And Orth raced for his Spad. His teeth showed with the strain of his desperate running.

Greaseballs stared at him.

"Quickly!" he yelled at them. "There's a Gotha starting over. Emergency!"

THEY acted almost without thinking, and Orth was in his pit, motor revving up, before the major could come out of the office. His wingmates were racing from their hutments, shouting and brandishing their arms as several helped Kline to his feet, heard whatever he said, and shouted what they had learned to the others. The officers boiled across the parade as Orth slammed the gun to his crate.

The greaseballs grabbed at his wings just too late. He flashed down the field and was away, lifting into the blue on the wildest mission he had ever set for himself; fleeing into Germany, a fugitive from justice, to get the best spy Germany had—a spy who at present seemed to be a flyer.

Orth tried to remember Hergman. Oh, yes, he had been in Imperial Air in the beginning, where he

had served with distinction because he had seemed a natural born flyer. But he had been a better spy. Now, evidently, he was a-wing again.

Orth gritted his teeth and made his resolve—to land on German soil and comb the field of Baron Manfred Huffnung from end to end. And when he found Hergman and destroyed him, he must do it in such a way that he could bring the word back to his wingmates and prove the actuality of his deed. He glanced back. "B" Flight was rising into the air again, and he knew why. They were after him, to shoot him down if he refused to return and land.

He swung back to the front. He would not, he resolved, ever fire on his friends to save his own life, nor would he turn back until he had completed his mission. He was in a tough spot. His battered crate might not hold up for an hour, for even fifteen minutes; yet it must hold, and he must fly and fight with it, until he had freed himself of a stigma he did not deserve—a stigma which had dropped on his shoulders purely by chance. Never again would Silent Orth disbelieve that chance played a great part in the lives of men—especially the lives of flyers on the Western Front.

Over the lines the Archies started their fanfare. For a moment he hoped a direct hit would register on him; then he thrust the idea away as unworthy. He would never go out that way. Besides, the Archies were never known to have bagged a swift-flying Spad. His wings rose and fell on the drafts of air caused by the explosions of shrapnel. But nothing came even close. When an Archie burst smashed the air behind him, it was always in a spot he had just passed through.

Then he had evaded the Archies, was out of range. He looked back just once, shrugged, opened his throttle wide, and smashed for the drome of Baron Huffnung.

THERE could be no turning back now. He would become, literally, a devil of destruction in order to prove himself to his wingmates—men too prone, he thought bitterly, to believe evil of a wingmate. But even then he did not blame anyone.

"I asked for action," he thought to himself, "and I'm getting it."

Doggedly he settled down to the task he had set himself. He flashed toward the German drome at top speed. On the way he penciled three words on a piece of paper, which he weighted with a bullet. He studied the three words grimly. If they did not produce

results, he was lost. They had to produce results, he told himself. It would be a grim jest, a horrible thing, to lose out to a court-martial with such a long list of descendus to his credit. It could not happen!

GERMAN planes swung in toward him. There seemed to be a general movement of Fokkers, Albatrosses and Aviatiks toward the front, probably because of some careful maneuvering by Hergman. He knew that he, Orth, would be blamed if anything untoward happened. His own people would think he had a hand in it somewhere. And as the Germans veered off when he showed himself eager to come to handgrips with any and all of them, he knew that the flyers of the Spads who followed would think it was because they recognized one of their own.

He smashed on. Hergman might be up with the others, he might be at the drome, or he might have left for some other part of the front. His field was probably empty of German crates. But no, when Orth started down toward the field, it was to see a dozen Albatrosses lined up at the apron, their props ticking over, their pilots all ready to start the slam down the field and the rocketing take-off.

He put his nose down grimly. Let them have it! He aligned his nose on the row of planes, ignored the hail of lead which came at him from bracketed Maxims on tripods set in among the hangars, and sprayed the line of ships and men with lead. One Albatross burst into flames. Three men fell under his bullets.

He dropped his weighted piece of paper which said:  
*I want Hergman!*

That messages would go to the commandant of this drome, would be read aloud in the presence of Hergman's comrades. If the Boche spy were any man at all, he would not be able to refuse to meet this Yankee who dared all the airplanes of Germany to drop his message.

Orth looked back. His wingmates were fully two miles behind him, far enough not to be there before Orth had taken some toll of the Germans. But he knew that however much toll he might take, it would count as nothing if Hergman were still flying when he had finished.

He swung over the field, started down in a screaming swoop again. He saw an orderly grab up the paper, take it to a fat officer, as the Spad slashed the length of the field at top speed, one hundred feet off the ground. The fat officer had his hand uplifted in a signal.

That signal meant the Yank was not to fire until his communication had been read.

Orth twisted his lips tightly into a grimace and held his fire. His hands did not even reach for his trips. He zoomed, banked, standing on his left wing at the field's extremity. He saw an officer climb into a crate. There was that about him which was familiar. Orth didn't need to be told that this was the same officer he had followed to the ground a short time before, the spy who had eluded him!

HE ZOOMED for the clouds again as an Albatross flashed out into the field, taxiing with the wind to the end of the tarmac, to come back for the take-off. Orth could have dived on Hergman and downed him before he could take off. But that wasn't the way Orth played the grim game of war, though he was justified in doing exactly that.

Instead, he leveled off at five thousand feet and began a lazy circling to await the coming of Hergman. Now his wingmates were close enough to the field to see what was transpiring, and Captain Kline used discretion.

He began to send his flyers about in a slow, lazy circle, while every pilot kept one eye on Orth and the other on the Albatrosses at the deadline. If those ships got off to a bloody battle this far behind the lines, it might spell disaster for the Americans.

HERGMAN was coming up in lazy spirals. Orth saw smoke at his spinner cap and knew that the spy was testing out his Spandaus. Orth tested out his Vickers to find them ready for action. He was set to go.

Hergman kept coming. The Albatrosses on the apron were moving onto the field. The situation was becoming tense. If Orth's wingmates stayed to see the finish they might be beset by Germans on all sides and lose most of their number, so greatly were the odds against them. But they had orders where Orth was concerned and must obey them.

Now Hergman tried to sneak over a death wallop. He tilted his nose up suddenly and sped bullets through his propeller arc at the belly of Orth's crate. Orth saw what was coming, because in a fight he never overlooked any possibilities, and slid out of line of sights. The pencil smoke of the tracers slid past his cockpit, no more than a yard away. If he hadn't moved, he would surely have been riddled from below. He grinned thinly, his lips moving:

"So, you want to play that way, eh?"

Now he corkscrewed down. He no longer was bound by any fancied code of honor to wait until Hergman reached his elevation. Hergman had nullified all that by opening fire. The spy was a thousand feet down yet. Orth put his ship into a screaming dive. He settled himself in his pit. His knees gripped his stick. His thumbs went to his trips. Hergman began circling, a tight circle into which it was almost impossible to probe with any great degree of accuracy.

Orth watched the gyrations of his enemy for a moment or two, then deliberately maneuvered his plane to keep his nose aimed at the German cockpit. But even as he did this, he knew he fought against a master; for try as he might, he could not get further forward with his ring-sight than about two feet back of Hergman's pit.

He held his fire. His wires shrilled high protest. His wings seemed ready to bend around his neck with the strain of the dive. The Spad had not been too well prepared against this fight, and might fall to pieces around him. Orth didn't give that a thought. Let him get Hergman, and the ship could crumble around him without his caring. It was better to go out that way than to suffer court-martial and disgrace. Anything was better than that.

He let his Vickers scream to put Hergman wise to the fact that he had actually joined battle. Hergman couldn't escape him, in that circle at least, without cutting out of the circle or reversing it—and the latter was impossible. Orth knew that his bullets, by the line of tracers, were going into Hergman's camelback behind the pilot. Hergman looked up and waved airily. There was contempt in the gesture. Orth's eyes narrowed.

HE WAS five hundred feet above Hergman when the spy made his next move, even as Orth started his guns to racketing again. Hergman suddenly slipped out of the circle, and headed straight into Germany. Orth gasped at this. If he followed, and the spy escaped him, Orth's wingmates would think it a put-up job, a stunt between Hergman and himself which would make the fight look real, yet which would merely obscure the issue. Perhaps they would suspect another meeting between the two, and a swapping of secrets which might cause the Allies the loss of thousands of men.

Orth gritted his teeth. Was Hergman yellow? Or just wily? Orth still had sufficient altitude to maneuver successfully with Hergman. Flying at the

same elevation, Hergman had the advantage because he had the faster crate—and Orth's had been severely damaged.

ORTH instantly changed course to send his Spad plummeting down to drop in front of Hergman's nose. With altitude to help him he could cut the man off. That was his objective. And he forgot the Germans at the apron, forgot his own wing-mates who watched the fight with suspicious eyes, and concentrated on Hergman.

He started his Vickers going again, spasmodic bursts which sped his tracers ahead of Hergman's nose as a warning. And he had to show himself that he still held the advantage.

Hergman must have known that he stood an excellent chance of flying straight into that barrage of fire, but he continued on, hoping perhaps to slip through it. Orth steepened his dive. He knew he had his man. He dropped lower and lower, aiming for Hergman's cockpit, fully intending to crash the German if he couldn't get him any other way.

But Hergman, balked in his effort to escape into deeper Germany, suddenly banked around, heading back for the field and the doubtful support of his friends. Orth corkscrewed around to follow him—and now, two hundred feet above Hergman, and behind him, he effectually blocked the spy's chances of getting deeper into German-held skies.

Orth settled grimly to the conclusion of this tragic fiasco. Beyond Hergman he could see the Germans from the field, rising into the air like a flock of geese, flying straight and fast toward Kline's formation. Orth gritted his teeth. Hergman had to go fast, so that Orth could do his bit to help his fellows get home. His guns began to chatter. He resolved that he wouldn't stop until he had driven Hergman into the ground, so effectually and surely that there could be no question but that he had killed the man.

Hergman was on the point of a wing-turn to the right when Orth's Vickers let go, hurling bullets ahead of the turning Albatross. Hergman instantly barged back. He was drawing away, ahead of Orth. Orth screwed his eyes to the ring-sight, fighting his wobbling crate to bring it to bear on the German's back. But when his guns chattered, he knew he had missed, his bullets passing Hergman to the right. And Hergman was fast drawing away, flying to join his fellows who were after Kline.

Orth had to try for him at an ever-increasing range,

which called for shooting of the highest caliber, and would be impossible of success in another minute or less. He forced his ship by sheer effort of will to hold her nose steady on the Albatross.

HERGMAN, concentrating on getting away, had his back squarely to Orth now, intent on flying out of range before bullets got him. There—Orth could see his back in the ring-sight. His Vickers chanted their death-knell; but even then Hergman was slipping to the right. But his left hand suddenly clapped against his shoulder, and he swayed in his seat.

Orth knew that his burst had smashed the shoulder of the Boche spy. The German crate wobbled. Orth gave his Spad all the gun she would take. The wobbling of the Albatross meant the loss of precious time, requiring a new alignment of his crate for Hergman. Orth would never give him that time. He slid his own ship to the left to offset the slipping of Hergman's crate.

THEN he fired again—but Hergman had slipped back to the right in a split second, and Orth knew he had missed again. Another miss and he had lost his man. But he had noticed something; his tracers had ended against the left side of Hergman's instrument board and must have smashed on through to the motor. Orth watched the forward part of the Albatross intently, waiting for the telltale black smudge which would tell of a burning crate.

But he didn't cease his firing while he waited. He laid down a literal cone of fire about the Albatross. And then the black smoke came and Orth, as Hergman seemed to be stunned by impending catastrophe, pounced on the German like a great cat.

Hergman started for the ground, putting his nose down and diving under full power, straight for the German tarmac. Orth's guns flamed as he followed, pressing closer and closer to the German who, realizing the mistake of speed while afire—speed which would sweep the flames, when they came, back over his cockpit—tried to slow down. But to slow down brought him closer and closer under the merciless guns of Silent Orth.

Orth had his man. Nearer and nearer he pressed. His bullets were now eating along Hergman's camel-back, approaching the pilot in the doomed pit. At that moment flames burst from under the motor housing of the Albatross! Orth's lips writhed back from his white teeth.

Now Hergman held up his left hand. His right flopped uselessly over the cockpit coaming. Orth started to hold his fire, until he remembered that, the activities of this man had cost the Allies the lives of thousands of men—that this super-spy had been almost always right in his information carried back from stealthy visits behind the Allied lines. There could be no mercy for him, even though he but did his duty for his Fatherland—for if even a modicum were shown, he might somehow eel out of this difficulty and escape the wreckage of his crate when he landed.

So Silent Orth became the executioner, the devil's ace, and pressed in close to give Hergman a final, fatal burst. But Hergman made that unnecessary. The flames would have him in another second. He stepped to the cockpit coaming, his right arm dangling, touched his forehead to Orth in salute, and stepped over the side.

Orth looked at his altimeter. Hergman had two thousand feet to fall. He was already below his crate, somersaulting. No human power could save him now.

Yet Orth followed him, close behind the somersaulting body, to the very ground, by which time his speed was terrific, and his chances of losing a wing perfect.

TWO hundred feet from the ground Orth looked up at his wingmates. They were, having a tough go of it. The Germans, who had witnessed the fall of Hergman, were fighting like madmen to even the score and surpass it. The loss of their comrade had rendered them berserk. Orth came back on his stick, taking a chance on losing his wings, knowing he had to get to his wingmates right now if he were to be of any use to them. And while his wings shrieked with protest, while he was sure that his crate would go to pieces in the air, she began to change direction.

Her nose came up with a rush. The ground fell away as though dropped from some vast height, and the circling maelstrom of the dogfight to the west rushed at him as though hurled from a catapult. He hoped he had enough ammunition left to make his presence felt. If he did not—

HE gritted his teeth. If he didn't have the ammunition, he would use the crate to crash with. The devil's ace could brook no defeat now, now that he had proven himself before the eyes of his fellows. He made sure that none of his own was in line of sights and let his Vickers rave. A short burst. Then a long one.

Or rather, he intended it to be a long one; but in the middle of it his guns suddenly went silent, dead, empty of ammunition.

But his short burst and his long one had counted coup again, and an Albatross was going down the sky, tumbling over and over, losing its pilot on the second roll. Then Orth was in the midst of the fight, allowing friend and enemy to take their chances as he plowed through them, back and forth, back and forth. His wings missed the wings of his friends by inches, the wings of his enemies by less than that, while he flew like a madman.

Lacking his inspiration, they couldn't stand the tension for many minutes, and Orth seemed intent on keeping it up for hours if need be. He cut the fight to ribbons, separated friend from friend, friend from foe, foe from foe. He scattered the fight over the face of the heavens. Then he swooped past Kline and signaled:

"Line 'em up. Let's go home."

Kline nodded, grinned sheepishly, and signaled.

The Germans had had enough, for the Yanks, inspired by Orth's madness, were firing again, blasting away at crates and the bodies of their pilots. The Germans drew off at signal, and the Americans let them go.

The Americans fell into line.

They darted back for home, having lost not one man. They had scored four times against the Germans, and all of their tallies were due to the sure fighting of Silent Orth, for this day at least, the very devil's ace.

They landed, rolled to a stop. Kline was waiting for Orth.

"Come on, Orth," he said.

They walked to the major's office, stood stiffly at attention before their commander. The major looked

up, eyes narrowed as he studied Orth.

"Well?" he said.

"I was wrong, sir," said Kline sturdily. "Orth just got Hergman in one of the toughest fights I have ever seen. He couldn't very well have done that if they had been friends or co-workers."

The major swore softly.

"But if you had no ulterior motive, Orth," he said, "why in the name of the devil and Tom Walker didn't you tell us why you wanted to double your flying time? You must realize how it looked. Why? Answer that. When most pilots get their nerves shot to pieces by constant fighting, you asked for more of it. It doesn't sound reasonable. Explain yourself!"

Orth grinned tightly.

"Well, sir, I've always been different from other flyers, I guess. You see, I discovered something—that fighting quiets my nerves, that I get shaky and restless when I'm on the ground. So why, I figured, be nervous half the time when by fighting every possible minute I wouldn't need to be nervous at all? Silly, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the major, letting out his breath explosively, "confoundedly silly. It almost got you court-martialed. Beat it now; I'm busy."

Orth leaned across the desk, his face serious, "And how about my flying? Don't forget my nerves. I've got to keep going."

The major banged his fist on the desk top.

"Go ahead. Get yourself killed. Fly the wings off half the Spads in the field. But forget, next time, that 'Silent' business that has become part of your name, and help an old man to keep from making a fool of himself with talks of court-martial and firing squads. I get nervous sometimes, too!"