



NON-COMMISSIONED

Rank counted for little when officer and man glared at each other in the basket of that drifting Sausage. Then came fog and Fokker to prove that courage is owned by no man.

by **WILLIAM E. BARRETT**

THERE ARE TWO THINGS that the Britisher in the ranks learns to look up to his God and his officers. He isn't in very long either before he finds out that the mills of God grind very slowly, but that he'll get fast action out of the officers.

Jimmy Carr was neither British nor a private, but he was fast learning to be respectful. An officer and a non-com assigned to a balloon basket is a situation that doesn't give the non-com much latitude; especially when the officer is such a one as Cecil Granville Terence Dwight-DeLacey.

Cecil Granville had been hatched on a parade

ground. His buttons shone with a holy radiance and he saw no reason why the buttons of the world should not shine with equal luster. Nor did Cecil Granville take kindly to men who slouched or drank or forgot salutes or who assumed comfortable positions. In short, Cecil Granville was the type of officer best calculated to make any branch of the service unattractive to the poor devils he outranked. Jimmy Carr was his entire command and Jimmy got the grief which would have been heavy if distributed over a company.

"Some day I'm going to knock the big cake loose and jump on him with both feet, but, baby, I'm going to be near an exit when I do it."

Over and over, Jimmy promised himself that great treat and waited with the calm of an Indian while his nerves leapfrogged along his spine and his blood boiled. He had been told that the Sausage gang were hounds for leisure and that balloon service was the cushiest job in France. Then he had drawn Cecil and the trenches looked like an asylum of rest by comparison. The disappointment in Jimmy's breast was just one of the many things that he cherished up against the trim "leftenant."

Like a lumbering, uncouth monster the big Sausage sought the sky. Beneath it the protecting cordon of machine guns gaped at the sky while men of even lesser rank than Jimmy Carr toiled on the winch that played out the long steel cable. A curtain of mist hung along the whole Front, hiding the light artillery and the trenches in front of their position and the other two observation balloons that should have been taking the air at the same time down the line. Jimmy Carr shook his head dolefully. No visibility and a rotten morning for air work.

The cable was singing and Jimmy adjusted his head-set with leisurely care, his mind on the weather and on the general inefficiency of men with authority to send other men up in dod-blasted balloons. A voice snapped in his ear.

"Move sharp, man. You're not on a holiday, you know. And straighten up! You'd think this was a blasted mob instead of an army, the kind of men they send us."

Jimmy growled deep in his throat, but his voice said "Yes, sir." They would not be high enough for observation for several minutes yet and there was no hurry about the head-set. Nor did it make any difference how he sat as long as he did his work. He placed two more black marks on the mental score he was keeping and squinted at his charts. The lieutenant looked impatiently out at the gray mist as though it were an offense against military orders and the sacred rights of balloon officers.

Standing stiffly erect in the swaying basket, Cecil Granville was a splendid figure of a man and a soldier. Taller than Jimmy by several inches and slightly heavier across the shoulders, he looked like anything but what his name suggested.

"Got a mind like an old maid, though, the blasted grenadier." Jimmy kept singing his hymn of hate. "Only one nice thing about to-day. It's too bum for Fokkers to be cruising out and shooting hell out of balloons."

JIMMY rubbed a raw bruise on his hip reminiscently. The last Fokker he'd seen had sent him over the side and he'd skidded over the hard earth at the end of a perfect brute of a French parachute.

"Instruct the sergeant to let us have 2500. Respects to Lieutenant Moore and inform him that visibility is very poor but that I have hopes of clearing the mist with added altitude."

The lieutenant's voice was crisp and Jimmy transmitted the message over the phone that ran down the cable. On the other end an operator passed the word along to the sergeant presiding at the winch and to the maneuvering officer. The line continued to reel out and at 2500, Lieutenant Dwight-DeLacey requested an additional 500 feet.

Three thousand feet was pretty high for an observation balloon, but the fog was thinning at 2500 and the artillery needed the eyes of the air to-day. Rumor had it that the Germans were massing behind the Front and H.Q. needed information. The big guns were standing by for word that would send steel crashing on any point in German territory where smoke drifted to the sky.

There was a jar and the Sausage tugged at the cable. Once, twice, three times it sank and leaped back to the end of the leash. The basket jolted sickeningly and then settled down to the uneasy swaying that was normalcy for the "seasick squad." Cecil Granville swept his binoculars over the scarred and blistered Front, straight as a taut cable and wholly concentrated on his job.

Crisply, unemotionally, he reported conditions as visible behind the German lines. The map before him was laid out in lettered squares and he picked out the area which corresponded with each square and reported it painstakingly. Beyond a shadow of a doubt the Germans were massing. Thin wisps of smoke twenty-five miles behind the trenches betrayed the location of a town in which reserves were undoubtedly billeted. The cold voice of Cecil Granville Terence Dwight-DeLacey sounded the doom of that town and to him, it was a matter of routine.

Like a machine, Jimmy Carr transmitted the messages over the phone. At moments like this, Jimmy stood in awe of the stiff-necked lieutenant. The fellow had hell's own eyes and he was so blasted cool.

"Guess all his family ever did was breed soldiers. They had to get good at it." Jimmy shivered in the chill wind that had sprung up and went on with his work.

Below him, he knew, was a sea of fog which hid the ground and the men whose voices came to him

over the phones. He couldn't see that fog because the lieutenant kept him hunched at the little chart table, but he knew it was there. He also knew that the other two balloons down the line were not up and that nobody but a chill-blooded fool of a perfect soldier like Cecil Granville would be so damned conversational at 3000 feet on a day like this. In spite of himself, he was conscious of a bit of admiration welling through his hatred. The man was a whole lot of officer even if he was a damned old maid.

The wind was coming in short gusts now and the bag was leaping against the cable end. Jimmy felt a little sick and the whole world was in upheaval. The lieutenant swayed and jolted out of the vertical but his voice came through in the lulls between gusts.

Suddenly, like a vision of death itself, two tiny dots appeared away up there in infinity. Jimmy saw them as quickly as did the lieutenant. The Sausage had yawed over and the basket stood straight out so that Jimmy's staring eyes could see nothing else. He opened his mouth to speak and shut it again. Cecil Granville had a prejudice against non-coms speaking first.

"Tell them to reel us in." The crisp voice was as calm as though the speaker were on the parade ground. Jimmy's voice barked.

"Fokkers! Get us out of here."

The specks were rapidly becoming large dots; dots that would grow and grow until the men in the basket could see the guns. With a sense of relief, Jimmy felt the pull on the cable.

"Good old ground crew. Onto their jobs, those boys!"

THEY were going down and the Fokkers were coming down. It was a pretty race for the enfolding curtain of mist, and Jimmy crouched tense. In a pinch they could go over the side but it would be messy going over into that soupy atmosphere. Then, his eyes bulged. Cecil Granville had drawn his automatic and was standing straight to the oncoming menace. He was sticking to his post with that absurd pop gun, ready to shoot it out against twin Spandaus and ships that would be traveling at 140 miles per hour or more.

"Tell them to reel the line in more slowly. We're yawing badly and there's too much wind."

Jimmy cast an anxious glance at the sky and repeated the message into the phone. "Slower. Yes, slower." He didn't blame the ground crew for marveling. His own idea was that speed was the very essence of the situation.

Something flashed down past the bag and there was a sudden staccato bark as the Spandaus spat at the big Sausage, swallowed up almost immediately by the Mercedes roar as the pilot cut his engine in. Jimmy ducked and then straightened up, ashamed, as he saw the lieutenant standing at his post. "Damned fool, but something of a man."

The other German was somewhere on top and the men in the basket had no way of telling whether or not the bag had been hit. From their position, they could see only the underside and they might well be blazing merrily on top.

Ring-around-a-rosy! The German was coming around again but the mist was thick now and if they survived a few more seconds the Germans would have to leave them. Funny that the Germans should be out at all. Either they were hardy heroes of Das Vater-land or there was no ground fog in Germany.

Rat-tat-a-tat. There it was once more. Jimmy ducked again and looked to his officer. He could not jump till that grimly erect figure gave the word and, like the commander of a vessel, the officer would not leave until Jimmy was clear. Some consolation there, but not much.

"Straighten up, man, and don't jump like a kitten. Mind your phones and tell the sergeant that I said slow down our descent."

Like a room gone dark the curtains of mist settled about them and Jimmy talked hoarsely into the phone. Now that he could no longer see the Fokkers, he was conscious of the fact that there really was a dangerous wind and that the lieutenant's orderly mind had been functioning while his had been intent on the enemy. The elements could kill them as surely as Fokkers and the command to slow the descent had been wise.

They were bouncing now and the wind was building up under them; tossing them against the end of the cable again and again, shaking their teeth together like castanets and agitating their stomachs to the point of revolt.

Snap! There was a sudden release of the awful pressure and the air seemed miraculously calmed as though some giant hand had reached out and quieted things. For a long moment, Jimmy sat stunned and uncomprehending. The lieutenant swayed in the basket, half-turned about and with his usually rigid features relaxed into something very much resembling surprise. Suddenly, Jimmy knew, and the realization brought him to his feet, his charts scattered about his feet.

The cable had parted and they were floating free.

SLOWLY, steadily, the big Sausage rose above the mist. Behind them spread a blanket of fog that reached out to the channel; before them lay German territory, sunlit a few miles back of the lines. Jimmy stared wondering at the efficient lieutenant and waited for orders; orders that were not forthcoming. Cecil Granville, for once, was lacking in assurance. Nothing in the book ordained the proper conduct for an officer in a captive balloon set free, and without the rules and regulations he was lost.

Idly, Jimmy Carr made his guess on the wind. They were driving ahead of a mighty stiff air current that would sweep them over the battlefield to the north and thence into German territory. His eyes shot a question at the paralyzed lieutenant and the man shook himself.

"They were reeling in too fast. I was afraid of that. I'll have that man up on charges and—"

Jimmy wiped his hand across his mouth. Habit was strong and he'd been used to doing all the listening and no talking in this basket. However, a great truth was coming home to him strong. Lieutenant Dwight-DeLacey was just a military machine and the present circumstances demanded the courage and the initiative of a man.

"You won't have anybody up," he growled, "if we land in Germany. We gotta get down."

Without waiting for the startled lieutenant's reply, he reached for the hand-valve rope and tugged grimly. Almost immediately, their speed of ascent slackened. The gas was going out. Pretty soon they should begin to settle down and Jimmy hoped that the gods would steer them rightly, into the lap of their own territory.

Something had happened to Cecil Granville. He had been born to command and he had always been in situations where his right to command was beyond question. Now, in one split second, his authority had been swept right out of his hands and he was confronted with a situation that he had not been trained to meet. In his emergency, he went back to the only thing that he had, his Godlike right to blast enlisted men in the name of the King.

"Sergeant Thornton shall hear from this," he said. "That line should never have been reeled so fast in such a wind. It was—"

"Aw, pipe down! The reeling in probably had nothing to do with it. I've got a hunch that those Fokkers softened us up a bit when they strafed us and—"

Jimmy was pulling hard on the valve rope and they were settling steadily. A hole showed through the fog

and Jimmy whistled. "Look at that, will you. What a break we got."

Below them was a veritable hell. The German barrage had started and there was a red curtain of shell fire across the Front. Massed batteries roared and destruction literally poured through the sky. Although still behind their own lines, the men in the basket had no chance in the world of getting down. An attempt to land the big Sausage through that shrieking line of death would be sheer suicide. Jimmy relaxed his grip on the valve rope and raised startled eyes to his companion's face.

THE lieutenant wet his lips. In the whole course of an orderly and pre-arranged existence he had never been called upon to face a situation which called, not for those things he had inherited, but for qualities he had acquired. Cecil Granville had acquired nothing except a blind devotion to the things he had been born to and a profound intolerance for all those not born to the same thing. Now, in his resentment of Jimmy Carr, he lost his head.

"Land at once," he said. "We have important papers in our possession and the Germans must not get possession of the balloon. It is a new type. Why did you release that valve?"

His voice was pitched high and Jimmy had one of those flashes of understanding that come to men who have had to fight for every break in life.

"Be reasonable, lieutenant," he said quietly. "We're in this thing together and we may not come out. This balloon can't be landed. Not down there."

Something flamed in the lieutenant's eyes and for the first time in his life he felt the urge to overpower another man, not by pressure of rank but by sheer force of arms. In one lunge, he was across the basket and his fist had smashed against the surprised non-com's jaw. Jimmy reeled and the other's voice cracked like a whip.

"I'm giving the orders, damn you, and we land!"

The left fist came up after the right and Jimmy partially blocked it, struggling to free himself from the encumbrance of broken telephone lines. Left to itself, the balloon raced for altitude in the lighter air high above the flaming barrage.

Jimmy's right snapped out and Cecil Granville ducked, losing his balance and plunging to the side of the basket. With a snapping crack, his parachute opened; the speed of ascent forcing the air into it. In a trice the lieutenant was pinioned over the side, the

chute flowering in reverse and the cords pressing him down and slipping along his chest toward his throat.

Brushing his hand across his eyes as though to clear away the fogging effects of that jaw punch, Jimmy took in every horrifying detail of the situation. Only seconds separated the lieutenant from either one of two awful deaths. The cord would tighten across his throat and decapitate him or he would be dragged over the side in a fouled chute.

With a frantic leap, Jimmy reached the valve rope. He knew without attempting it that his strength would not avail against the pull of that inverted chute at the rate of ascent which was theirs. He had only one chance. Grimly, he tugged down on the valve rope and held on.

The chute pulled hard and the lieutenant's eyes popped with horror as the line gave a convulsive twist and snaked tight across his throat; then the escaping gas braked their ascent and the Sausage sagged.

For a split second the taut chute line held, then the rush of air from the other direction turned the chute inside out and the line leaped away. Like a limp sack, the lieutenant slumped inside the basket and Jimmy leaped across to him, slashing swiftly and surely through the chute cords and releasing the silk to the vagrant wind. Then, with his companion still gasping for air on the floor, he went back to the valve rope and they slipped farther down the sky.

In a short while, Cecil Granville was again on his feet. In his hot eyes there was no gratitude for the saving of his life; nor was there any of the cold hauteur of a commissioned officer. Cecil Granville had become a man and he had had his first taste of the thrill that lies in physical combat. Like liquor going to the head of a youngster, the lust for physical dominance swept him and dominated him.

"There isn't room in a balloon basket for two men with different ideas," he said savagely. "Are you taking orders or aren't you?"

THE lieutenant's jaw was set menacingly and his fists were clenched. Those fists had swept Jimmy Carr back once already and Cecil Granville liked the heavy feel of them as he poised them for another attack. Jimmy Carr released the valve cord and set himself against the wild lurching of the balloon. His lips curled back over his teeth and he forgot the last few hours, remembering only the prayer for vengeance he had so often uttered.

He had said, hadn't he, that all he wanted was a handy exit? Well, he had it now. The balloon had

cleared the lines and was heading out across German territory.

"You triple-distilled bunch of blank-blasted nerve," he snarled. "You've been making me like it for months. Been rubbing it in, haven't you. Bigger'n me, aren't you? Socked me a while ago, didn't you? Well, I'm going to clean hell out of you."

His hard, wiry body lunged with the words and Cecil Granville's fists had a charging target to slap down; something different from a surprised man wrapped in telephone cord.

Left. Right. Left. The Yankee non-com swept a devastating volley of blows through the clumsy defense of his superior officer. Eyes squinted and jaw laid against his deep chest, he was fury incarnate and Cecil Granville simply melted before him.

That melting taught the son of officers and gentlemen something else that life should have whispered in his ear long years before. It taught him that there is a balance in things that makes it unwise for officers to forsake rank and slug it out with enlisted men. It taught him that, because they have it harder, enlisted men are harder men than officers. In the teaching it broke him up more than a little.

Less than half of a regulation three-minute round sufficed. With the basket swaying and lurching and yawing in the wind, Jimmy Carr beat his opponent to the floor and stood swaying over him.

"Got enough, you blasted tin soldier, you, or do I have to drop down there and mop up this blankety-blank-dash balloon with you?"

Slowly, dazedly, Cecil Granville pushed himself up, pressing hard with his back against the side walls of the basket. There was blood on his face and his eyes wouldn't focus, but he forced his bruised lips to obey him.

"Move sharp, man. Mop up the balloon," he said groggily, then he pitched forward on his face. Jimmy Carr stared and the rage died out of his face. "Out on his feet and talking goofy, but game as hell," he said wonderingly. "Now what d'ye think of that?"

A sudden lurch threw him across the basket and he snapped back to the more important thing; the thing that had been forgotten in the red rage of personal combat. A bigger quarrel than that of two men in a balloon was being fought all around them and they were a part of it. Jimmy swore.

So much gas had been let out of the big bag that they were settling fast now and visions of a prison camp loomed. Jimmy shook his head.

"I've seen the kind of grub that the captured Jerries

get,” he said mournfully, “and we’re white people. I hate to think of what prisoners get over here.”

JIMMY looked over the side and rubbed his eyes before taking another look. Something was haywire somewhere. Just before the fight started he had taken their position and they had already cleared the trenches and were drifting straight back over Germany. Now they were over the trenches again and headed once more for German territory.

“How’d that happen?” With an effort, Jimmy reconstructed in his mind a map of the entire line through this sector. A pronounced dip in the line would be a possible explanation, but there were no dips. How, then, could a balloon travel back against the wind which blew from the ocean clean into Germany?

The answer came to him in a flash and he scrambled wildly in a frantic endeavor to get rid of as much weight as possible in the shortest conceivable time. The only chance they had of ever rising again lay in lightening the load—and rising was their one chance.

Over in mad confusion went glasses, thermos bottles, head-sets and every other conceivable thing that could be lifted and heaved over the side. Sweat poured from Jimmy but he didn’t let down. Little by little the big bag started once more to climb.

It was a heart-breakingly slow ascent but the flags of hope were fluttering once more. Somewhere up above was a crosscurrent of air that blew back toward the Allied lines. There had to be. No other thing could explain their shift backward. They had passed through that lane and Jimmy had to find it again—and quickly.

The big craft was rising more swiftly now. They had reached ten thousand and the clouds had drifted back. The warm rays of the sun were expanding the hydrogen in the bag and there was fight in the old balloon yet.

Lieutenant Cecil Granville Dwight-DeLacey stirred and moaned. Jimmy looked at him doubtfully. Thinking about him made this desperate fight for altitude seem like dumb play. Landing gracefully as prisoners of war in Germany would level all rank between them and they would stay level for the duration of the war. Going back now meant complications for Jimmy Carr. He shook his head.

“Socking an officer is a tough offense in this crazy army,” he said mournfully. “A thousand years in the brig and no tobacco. God knows what else.” He looked again at the groaning figure. “Socked him hard, too. He don’t look so tough now, but put him back on the ground,

especially where those bars mean something. Huh! He’ll be all twelve apostles in one pair of pants again.”

The balloon rocked and yawed. Jimmy clutched for support and his heart leaped. Slowly and surely they were being swept around. He had hit the crosscurrent.

For five minutes he maneuvered in that stream of crosswind and hoped and prayed and cursed. No temptation pulled him toward Germany now. Whether hell was waiting for him or not, the colors he served were down there across from the German lines and he was going back if he were able.

Dazedly, the lieutenant struggled to his feet and Jimmy’s jaw hardened. Any resumption of hostilities would be too bad now. In sharp, terse phrase he outlined the situation. Cecil Granville passed a hand across his eyes.

“I see,” he said. “I see. Good work. It’s cleared up. Good visibility. Be plenty of Fokkers out and——”

He was talking jerkily as a man talks in his sleep, but Jimmy stiffened. He had forgotten that factor. They had been dipping and yawing all over the sky and there must be a whole raft of ground observer reports out on them. The Germans would be sending scouts out to blast them down and—

He looked toward Allied territory. There was still a gray blanket hugging the earth down low. Very few Allied ships would be taking off in that. Very few Allied observers would be picking them up, either. Down a good part of the German Front, there was a gray blanket, too. It was lifting off that side first, though. Tough! And there had been Fokkers out before when the fog was at its worst.

THEY had crossed the trenches and were well back now, but Jimmy didn’t dare go down. He wasn’t far enough back yet. The wind below him would swiftly bear him back the way he had come.

For weary minutes, while the lieutenant rubbed his eyes and talked disconnectedly, Jimmy alternately watched the balloon and the sky. If they could only squeeze out a little more time!

Then he saw them; black specks in the distant sky. He had no time to lose now and the last act was at hand. It was one big play and win or lose on one flip of the card.

“Hang on and pray!”

His hand pulled down hard on the valve cord and they started to drop. Their rate of descent now was rapid, far more rapid than before. There was not as much gas in the bag and when they started down, it was at a dizzy clip.

The crosscurrent of wind pulled and tugged at them but they kept dropping. Out of the sky came the destroyers on their trail; bigger with each passing second, gaining, gaining, gaining.

There would be no leap from this bag. The lieutenant didn't have a parachute and one man never left another. The mist rushed up to them, thin stuff now with no consistency to it.

A horrible roar filled the sky as a Fokker, more daring than the rest, came down in a power dive, the big Mercedes roaring up the scale. Bullets spattered about them and the bag was hit beyond a doubt. Still they fell and there was no flame.

The earth was coming up to them now andarchie was coughing. Jimmy gave a shout of triumph. The Fokkers were pulling off. Too far from home and too close to the ground. Some break!

They were going too fast for a landing and Jimmy checked it with the valve. Only a little. Then a spurt and another check. Details became vivid down there and there was a broad pasture. Beyond that was a gnarled and twisted wood. The pasture looked good; the wood looked dangerous. Jimmy took a chance.

"Pray, lieutenant, pray. Then hang on."

He was within seventy-five feet of the ground and being swept toward the wood. His fingers gripped on the rip panel which caused immediate deflation, and then he pulled.

Like a shot bird, the big Sausage floundered and dropped, the basket hitting on edge and bouncing in wild carnival across the ground. Ropes and cable twisted and squirmed like a circus of snakes let loose and then the lights went out in Jimmy's mind and everything rushed into utter darkness.

PROPPED up in a cot at the field hospital, Jimmy Carr read his mail with a grin on his broad, homely face. He had been in the cot a week and he was getting used to having a few broken ribs and miscellaneous injuries. A fellow ate better, he found, than he did outside, and that helped greatly in a big war.

The mail was just one slip of paper; a copy from the general orders.

AWARD OF THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER

Lieutenant Granville Terence Dwight-DeLacey, late Ross Highlanders, etc., etc.

For conspicuous gallantry in connection with his safe landing of an observation balloon which had broken loose from its moorings.

With rare courage and presence of mind, Lieutenant Dwight-DeLacey succeeded in bringing the balloon to earth behind our lines after a cable had broken and cast him adrift in a fog. Menaced by enemy airmen, Lieutenant Dwight-DeLacey refused to abandon his craft and take to the parachute lest the balloon, a new type, fall into enemy hands. The rapid descent necessary to escape hostile enemy aircraft resulted in several minor wounds from which the lieutenant is happily recovering.

Lieutenant Dwight-DeLacey was accompanied by a non-commissioned man.

Jimmy Carr chuckled and looked up as a shadow fell across the cot. Tall and straight, the lieutenant stood before him, his arm in a sling and his regular features marred by numerous bruises and cuts. A crisp voice came from some chilly depth.

"I sent you that. It's quite rotten and I'm upset about it. I turned in an honest report, Carr, and I want you to believe me. I fought them to get the decoration for you. Makes me feel a rotter to take it."

Cecil Granville's eyes were bleak. "I couldn't break through the infernal system. It seems they can't comprehend courage in an enlisted man."

Jimmy Carr grinned again, then his face sobered at the other's earnestness. Impulsively, he reached out his hand. "They're right, lieutenant," he said. "All I did was carry out your orders. You said to land 'er and I did."

Cecil Granville extended his hand and for a long second he looked into the other man's eyes, something strange coming into his own. Then he nodded his head.

"Very good, sergeant," he said. "I thank you for that. It makes me feel a whole lot better."

With a click of his heels he was gone. For the first time in his life, Cecil Granville Terence Dwight-DeLacey really understood another human being.

Jimmy Carr stretched. "I'm beginning to like this war," he said contentedly.

