



100 MINUTES OF GAS

by O. B. MYERS

It took a crazy man to fly into that trap; but when he found that he was the bait, Speck had them singing, "—and we learned about flying from him"

FIRST THEY TOOK OFF THE GUNS, both of them. Then the gun-timing gear, housing, pipes, driving pinion and all. Next the dash-clock came out of the instrument board, to be laid carefully aside, followed by the rear-vision mirror from the trailing edge of the center section.

A mechanic slipped down into the cockpit, and unfastened the triggers and Bowden control from the stick; when he emerged he lifted out the seat cushion and tossed it to the ground. They even swept out the accumulation of dried mud on the floor, scraped in many hours of flight from the pilot's boot-soles by

the rudder bar. That Nieuport must carry not a single ounce of excess weight. By five o'clock, when Bill O'Connor spiraled down toward the field from three thousand, they were even unscrewing the ring-sight from the cowling.

He landed like a falling leaf, taxied gustily up to the hangars, and switched off into silence. The first person he saw as he jumped to the ground was Hal Bagwell, engineer officer, whose crash at Issoudun six months before had left him with a permanent limp, and an even more permanent thirst.

"What! Haven't they cashiered you to Blois yet?"

"Hi, Bill!" grinned Hal. "Have a good leave?"

"Swell. Paris is hotter than ever. What's new in the war, anyway? Anybody get the Baron yet?"

Hal shook his head. "B Flight tangled up with one of his patrols, yesterday afternoon, over by Bantheville."

"Well?"

"They lost Cass Jones."

"Hell," said Bill briefly. Then, after a pause, "That's Speck's ship they're messin' around with over there, isn't it? What'd he do, make one of his roundhouse landings again?"

"No, not this time. Couldn't tell you myself just what they're doing with it. Something special the major ordered."

"Something special?" Bill turned, and strode curiously toward the plane on the deadline. Already it had a lean, stripped look; on the ground beside it a little pile of discarded equipment caught his eye. The seat-cushion, mirror, Bowden control—and the guns.

"For the love of—say, what's comin' off here, anyway?"

Two mechanics, engaged in measuring out pink-tinged aviation gas from one container to another, using a ten-litre can as yardstick, looked up at his words, but did not reply. Another withdrew his head from beneath the motor cowling, and recognizing Bill instantly, grinned.

"Oh—g'd afternoon, lieutenant! Back with us again, sir?"

Bill paid no attention to the question. "What's the idea, Tom? Takin' off Speck's guns—is the war over, or something?"

"I don't rightly know, sir." The veteran mechanic, wiping his hands on his thighs, looked about him as if wary of listeners; Bill noticed that his glance stopped on headquarters shack. "There's been a colonel from Wing in there with the skipper, ever since this

morning," he confided in lower tones. "Speck—I mean Lieutenant Martin—was in with them a while; and then the major came out, and gave us a list of just what to take off the ship. So we're doin' what he said."

"But what for?" demanded Bill, intensely curious. "What's Speck goin' to do—with no guns aboard?"

"Search me," shrugged the grease-ball. "He hasn't said a word to anybody, far as I know. Maybe he'll tell you, sir."

"Maybe!" "snorted Bill. "I hope to spit in your mess-kit he'll tell me, the little runt! Wait till I find him!"

Bill's long legs carried him swiftly down toward the pilots' barracks. He thrust open the door, and let out a shout.

"Speck! Speck Martin! Come to life, and report, you—"

"Stow it!" said a voice by his elbow. "He's sleeping."

"Sleeping! This time of day? How come?"

Bat Sheldon stared at him without smiling, and his eyes flickered strangely, as if they tried to say something his words could not express.

"Maybe he don't expect to sleep much to-night."

The quiet words added the first shadow of foreboding to Bill's curiosity; but before he could speak again, a voice floated out from somewhere down the long tier of double-decked bunks.

"Is that you, Bill O'Connor? Come here, will you?"

BILL walked quickly half the length of the room, and turned into a narrow bay. Here, propped on an elbow on the lower bunk, lay a man whom Bill could have lifted with one hand, without exerting himself. Speck's nickname explained itself; he could not have weighed more than a hundred and five, and how he ever got into the army in the first place would have been a mystery had he not often related how he had filled his pockets with twenty dollars in pennies before stepping on the weighing machine. Which, in itself, rather spoke for the man-sized portion of guts within that slender frame. He rubbed his eyes drowsily, and redistributed his freckles with a wry grin.

"Buzzard, ahoy!" was his greeting. "Paris still there?"

"Of course, you sap. But look here— I'll tell you about that later. What I want to know is, what's going on here tonight? Who's the brass hat from Wing, and why are the nut-twisters removing all the comforts of home from your crate? Come on, spill the secret."

Slowly Speck Martin swung his feet to the floor,

and sent a glance down the length of the room. Then, shrugging into his coat, "Let's go take a little walk, Bill."

Bill, plainly mystified, followed the other through the door; not until they were well out of earshot of the barracks did Speck turn to ask, "Bill, you remember that stunt we were talking about, that scheme to stage a tryout bout against the new Pfalz?"

"Y-yes," admitted Bill, blankly.

"Well, I told the major about the idea, while you were away. He suggested it to Colonel Stokes, up at Wing; the colonel thinks it's a pip—and we're going to pull it off to-night."

Bill halted in his tracks, and stared at his companion with mingled amazement and horror. That crazy stunt—that drunkard's pipe-dream—to-night? He seemed almost unable to grasp the significance of Speck's calm words. Of course he remembered discussing the new Pfalz—the whole Front had been discussing little else for the past month. It was fast; it was slow; it could climb to twenty thousand in ten minutes; it could not climb at all; it could out-manuever a Fokker triplane, and dive like an Albatross. Rumor after rumor had come from nowhere, to heighten the tense expectancy.

Every one knew that the Germans were bringing out a new pursuit ship; that much, at least, was solid fact. But as to how it flew, what were its strong points, and more important still, its weak points—those vital questions on which hung uncounted lives—these were still shrouded in mystery. Not a single Pfalz had yet appeared over the Front; would the Boche use them to gradually replace the Fokker D-VIIs, or would they throw a great number of them into action at once, to overwhelm the Allied flyers before their weaknesses could be learned? No one knew.

It had been almost jestingly that Bill had broached his thought. Wouldn't it be great, he had mused aloud, if a fellow could somehow find himself over the field where the new Pfalz were being assembled and tested, and get himself into a trial combat against one of them? A sort of stunting exhibition, like the instructors used to put on at Field 8, at Issoudun, with each man making his ship show the best that was in it; kind of a dress rehearsal of a fight to the death.

Even if it ended up in a draw, the experiment itself was the thing. The man could then come back—still assuming the fantastic possibility to be real—and report just exactly what was what. Of inestimable value to the Allied pilots, such a report; worth a thousand speculations, or a hundred purloined plans

or specifications. The secrets of maneuverability, revealed in ten minutes of such a mock battle, would save a hundred lives. A great idea, of course—but so was perpetual motion.

"SPECK, are you crazy?" Bill's question was more than half serious. "Why, you didn't think I was really proposing an attempt like that did you? Why, it's impossible, it's absurd! I didn't mean—I was only dreaming out loud—I had no idea anybody would—"

"Listen," interrupted Speck coolly. "It's not so fantastic as you think. It seems that Wing knows, through intelligence reports, that the new Pfalz is being assembled and tested on a field at Sarrebourg. That's just over the border of Lorraine, in Germany, and well within the flying radius of a Nieuport, from here. The ships, his report says, are not quite ready for the Front yet, which means, of course, that they won't have any guns mounted on them. So I won't need any guns, either. If I catch one of them in the air, it'll be a fake battle all the time, but the poor Jerry won't know it. He'll think I've got guns, and will be flying his damndest every minute. Get it?"

"But how about getting there, and getting back? You'll have to cross the lines, won't you? And right through von Barzug's sector, too. How do you expect to get past our friend, the Baron, without any guns, in case—"

"Altitude," replied Speck briefly. "The colonel's idea; that's why they're stripping my bus. With a minimum of excess weight, and a measured load of gas, I ought to be able to reach better than twenty thousand feet. No Fokker, with guns and pilot, can touch that and besides, see those clouds? They look to be just under twenty thousand; Jerry will probably never even see me, on the way over."

"But you'll have to come down at Sarrebourg, to find the Pfalz. How about the trip back, then?"

"The idea," explained Speck, "is for me to shove off at six-thirty. We've got the times all figures out. Four minutes to the lines; another thirty-six minutes to cover the sixty miles to Sarrebourg. That brings me there at ten after seven. Sunset is at seven-twenty; I have ten minutes to find a Pfalz, and, do my scrapping. When I break off, it's dusk; and the whole of the return trip is in the dark. I won't need altitude on the way back. See the idea?"

Bill saw the idea, all right; but he also saw the perils and risks which surrounded it. To send a man sixty long miles into Germany, alone, with no guns

on his ship, and expect him to find his way out after dark—what a mad mission! Only a lunatic would have conceived it in the beginning, and only the most reckless intrepidity would induce a man to attempt it. Suddenly he seized Speck's elbow.

"So," he demanded brusquely, "you think you're goin' to try this fool stunt, eh?"

"It's all settled," grinned Speck, imperturbably.

"Wait here," commanded Bill.

COLONEL STOKES was with the major when Bill was admitted. The interview was not long. They listened while he told them how he had had training in night flying, while Speck had had none. How he was Speck's senior in rank, as well as flight leader. How it had been his idea in the first place, and therefore devolved naturally upon him. Since he was willing to make the attempt, he presumed that they would sanction the change. Would it be all right to tell the mechanics immediately to start stripping his Nieuport, instead of Speck's. The colonel eyed him for a moment, keenly.

"Lieutenant Martin sent you in to tell us this, did he?"

"No, no!" cried Bill. "It isn't that; he's ready to go. Only I thought, since he never flew after dark, and—and—"

"How much do you weigh?" inquired the colonel curtly.

"Weigh? Why, around two hundred, I guess. But—"

"Just about a hundred pounds too much," said the colonel, with a faint smile. "You seem to forget, O'Connor, that this whole thing hinges on the altitude our man can get on the way over, and that that is governed by the weight carried. Why do you suppose we are removing every ounce of superfluous equipment? No, Martin is the only man on the Front who is light enough to have a chance. So he goes."

Bill argued, cajoled, pleaded. But it was no use. The colonel was firm. He emerged finally onto the tarmac, dejected, gloomy. Speck was inspecting the Nieuport. "What the devil were you talking about in there, Bill?"

"I was telling 'em they couldn't have picked a better man for the job," lied Bill. But to the comrade who knew him so well his face gave him away. Speck grinned understandingly.

"Don't be a fool, Bill. I'll make it all right. Why, it's a cinch. I go over so high nobody can touch me; I play

at battle without using bullets; and I fly back in the dark, when the Jerries can't even see me. What could be easier?"

"Oh, yeah? And what if you have a forced landing, in that same dark? Or what if the Baron, or his friends, spot you going in, and follow along until you drop down, at Sarrebourg?"

"In that case," replied Speck, grinning more broadly than before, "maybe I won't drop down. I might give up and come home."

"Huh!" grunted Bill, in sarcastic disbelief. "I see you doing that—yes, I do." He shrugged hopelessly, and turned away.

An hour later he was one of the group of four standing by the cockpit of the stripped Nieuport. The motor had not yet been started, since a Gnome needs no warming; but a mechanic stood ready, one hand on the prop. Speck sweated in fur-lined helmet and coverall; the colonel was giving his last advice, asking his last questions.

"That a Colt you've got there, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. I always—"

"Best leave it here. Unnecessary weight."

Obediently Speck handed it over. Bill objected at once. What if Speck were forced to land in Germany; he might need it to defend himself with. The colonel paid no more attention than if Bill had not spoken, but handed Speck a Very pistol, and one cartridge flare.

"You'll have to have this, to signal us for the field lights, when you return to land," he explained.

"He ought to carry more than one cartridge," interposed Bill angrily.

"They don't always work—"

The colonel's look froze him to silence. "When we want your advice, O'Connor, we'll ask for it." Bill subsided sullenly.

"Now don't forget your time allowance," continued the colonel, turning to Speck. "Forty minutes over, forty minutes back, and ten minutes for combat. Your gas is measured exactly, to a hundred minutes. That gives you an extra ten minutes, to allow for climbing, and any other emergency. But don't try to stretch it."

Again Bill opened his mouth, a strenuous objection on the tip of his tongue. But again he perceived that the colonel would only over-ride his protest, might even order him off the field. He shook his head in pessimistic disapproval, but held his tongue.

The colonel looked at his watch. "One minute," he said.

Speck climbed into the cockpit. His head ducked

under the cowl; the flapping of ailerons and tail surfaces told that he was testing the movement of the stick. There was a moment of silence; the mechanic fidgeted in front of the prop.

"Switch off," said Speck. His voice seemed strangely small and far away. Then almost immediately, it seemed to Bill, he had spoken again, and the motor started with a blast of sound, hurling a cloud of dust back into the gaping mouth of the hangar. Speck dropped his goggles into place, and extended a hand over the side. Bill dashed up, seized it, and wrung it violently, mumbling incoherent words which were lost in the rush of the slipstream. But he saw that Speck's eyes barely came up to the edge of the cockpit. God, how could a man fly sitting so low that he could hardly see out above the cowl? He remembered the discarded cushion, turned, ran a few steps, and picked it from the ground. But a hand gripped his arm, and the colonel was glaring at him.

"Excess weight!" Bill heard faintly through the roar.

BILL jerked to free himself from the colonel but at that instant the roar redoubled in volume, and the Nieuport began to move. Bill tore his arm from the colonel's grasp, and ran after it, waving the cushion above his head, shouting frantically. The choking hurricane of the propeller blast blinded him, bringing tears to his eyes. Through a wavering mist he saw the plane rise, at first slowly, then in a stiff zoom. Speck was off on his cock-eyed mission—in a gunless plane.

Speck set his manettes, turned his nose into the north, and watched his altimeter needle. He was astonished at the rate of climb, even though prepared for the unusual. He had a thousand feet before completing his first turn, and five thousand by the time he reached the first crossroads. At this rate, he thought, it might not be necessary to do anything before crossing the lines. But after he passed fifteen thousand—he was just west of Verdun then—the needle didn't move so rapidly, and for something over a minute he turned to parallel the trenches toward the east.

Then he swung once more onto a straight northeast course, and almost before he realized it found cloud vapor swirling past his wing-tips. He leveled off for speed, then zoomed long and hard, into a dense, blanketing grayness. When the controls began to quiver in his hands he again leveled off for a moment, and pulled up into another zoom. The mist began to condense on his goggles when his controls again

went shaky. Was this cloud layer going to be too thick; thicker than the upper limit of his climb? But at the top of the third zoom he uttered a cry of relief. For he shot out suddenly into a clear and shining daylight, and the fog disappeared from his lenses as if by magic. Just below his wheels rolled an immense and turbulent floor of snowy cotton, glaringly white in the rays of the afternoon sun. It stretched as far as the eye could reach. His altimeter said exactly twenty-one thousand feet.

Suddenly the whole thing struck him as being ridiculously easy. Everything was going so well; here he was, invisible above a cloud blanket, at an altitude which no enemy could reach. Utterly alone in the vast void of the sky, exceedingly cold but quite safe. All he had to do was to follow a straight compass course for a certain calculated length of time, and even that was further simplified by the occasional holes in the cloud layer, through which he could check his position. Through one of these he saw, first, the railroad junction at Conflans, easily recognized; then, a little later, the winding ribbon of the Moselle, and knew that he was drifting just the least bit toward the east. He corrected his course, and droned on.

There were no more holes now, so he consulted the wrist watch strapped outside the sleeve of his coverall. When it said nine minutes after seven, he tipped up into a vertical sideslip, and let the clouds engulf him. He came out below, and was at once surprised by the lessened light. Up above it had been broad day, brilliant sunshine; down here dusk was already approaching. He changed the sideslip to a wide, falling circle, and studied the ground far beneath him.

From his altitude, still great, it looked exactly like a map, reproduced, line for line, the one he had studied in the major's office. There was the river, the Sarre this time; there the city, and south of it the field. As quickly as that he picked out his goal, and altered his glide accordingly. As he descended in long sweeps, his eye ran over the surrounding country. One great, rolling plain spread toward the south, barren of trees, and crossed by few roads. An ideal location, he thought, for flying; the victim of a forced landing could come down anywhere, and be sure of finding smooth footing for his wheels.

Lower and lower he dropped; now his gaze searched the sky on all sides, and especially below, for signs of other planes. Not one could he find. A pang of disappointment assailed him. Had they all, in their optimism, taken too much for granted? They

had assumed that he would find at least one of the Pfalz test ships in the air. What if they were all on the ground, and chose simply to remain there? A close look at the field showed him several planes standing there, but no signs of activity; then he flattened out and swept a long and careful look around the empty sky. It must have been just then, while his eyes were raised, that the ship took off the ground below. Speck never saw it at all.

AGAIN Speck went into a sideslip, threw away his remaining altitude, and came out just above the field itself. Three huge hangars yawned openly along its western edge. Speck dove until he was within fifty feet of the ground, and leveled off to roar wide open straight across the middle of the drome. In swift succession they flashed by; the first, the second, the third. Behind his goggles his eyes opened wide with amazement, and for several seconds his hand seemed to freeze on the stick. What he saw, in those three momentary glimpses, was so utterly unexpected, and yet so momentous in its meaning, that he almost forgot the prime reason for his presence here. But in another instant he was sharply reminded of it.

He rose into a zooming turn; a shadow flicked across his wing. His head snapped around, and he saw the other plane. It was ahead of him, to one side, pointed toward him and at the same time toward the field. Ah—the gods of chance were good to him—he was to have his stunt combat after all. By the V-Strut and the sharply tapered spinner he guessed it at once for a Pfalz. Quickly he twisted about on a wing-tip, not to avoid what might have looked like an attack on the part of the Pfalz, but to prevent the other from reaching the safety of the field. His bank cut off the German's line of flight, and the Pfalz zoomed brusquely to shun a collision. Speck followed like lightning, and grinned as the struggle began.

At first his chief worry was that the Pfalz would attempt to avoid the issue, break off the contest, and land to escape. Speck therefore pressed his attack with the greatest vigor, forcing the other from one turn into another, and clinging to his flanks like a leech. Without permitting that Pfalz pilot a moment in which to elude him, he managed skilfully to draw the action bit by bit away from the field, toward the south. Up and down, and round and round each other they buzzed, like two angry hornets; the only thing missing was the chatter of machine guns.

But after a minute it struck Speck that the other

was apparently making no attempt to escape. Whoever the pilot who sat in the cockpit of that brand new plane, he seemed as anxious as Speck himself to engage in a test of maneuverability. Twice, now, he slipped by a lightning twist from Speck's charge, and could easily have plunged to a landing. But each time the Pfalz returned eagerly to the bloodless fray. And the second time it returned with such a prodigious zoom that it snatched the advantage of altitude away from the Nieuport.

Good enough, thought Speck. He had tried out the other's defensive maneuvers; now he would discover how it fought on the offense. He would, he decided, let the Pfalz get a position on his tail, and then see if he could throw it off. He emerged from a right-hand turn, to start one to the left. But purposely he made the change slowly, flopping from one bank into the other as if he had a weight tied to his tail. He glanced back; the Pfalz twisted over like lightning. It settled into position behind him, steadied its turn. Then suddenly Speck felt an icy hand grip his heart, and squeeze it. For he saw, through distended eyes, a rushing stream of gray streaks vomit from the cowl of that Pfalz, to stab a dozen tiny holes in his left wing!

THE Pfalz was armed! The Pfalz had guns—and he had none! Worse still, the Pfalz had the advantage of altitude, and a perfect position on his tail. From a kind of ridiculous sham battle, his situation at once resolved itself into a fight for his life.

No wonder that German had not seized his chance to land! He was up here, not to give a stunt exhibition, but to destroy that Nieuport—to protect the secrets which Speck had discovered by his look into the hangars. He was there to kill! And Speck had no means of defending himself.

A full realization of his plight came to Speck as he careened into a desperate spiral. Hotly the tracers pursued him; one burst after another clawed at his wings, his fuselage, even his cockpit. He threw himself into a spin, straightened out of it, and plunged at once into a full roll to the right. The Pfalz was like his own shadow, except that now it seemed closer than before. An invisible bullet bit a tiny chunk of steel out of the upper edge of his windshield. Had he been two inches higher in the seat, it would have drilled his skull. He yanked into a curving zoom.

He remembered, suddenly, his weight, or rather his lack of it. That, perhaps, would be his salvation. He followed one zoom with another; he pointed his nose

high above the horizon, and prayed for the powerful Gnome to lift him out of his dilemma. Up and up he climbed, until the motor shook against its retaining bolts, and he hung on the verge of a stall. He cast a glance over his shoulder; the Pfalz poised, still above him, and dipped to spray him with steel.

He turned turtle and plunged into a dive. His motor roared full out, multiplying the pull of gravity; his velocity became terrific. The wind rose to an eerie shriek in his wires, the earth rushed up into his center section. The gale tore with brutal fingers at his goggles, seemed to be trying to force the stick from his grasp. He looked back; the Pfalz was appallingly close, feeling for his flesh with long, silvery lines of smoking tracer.

He kicked into a roll, again to the right. His tremendous speed made the maneuver almost instantaneous; the convulsive jerk was enough to tear the wings out by the roots. No sooner was he again in straight flight than his eyes turned to the rear. His pursuer was just emerging from his duplicate maneuver, having lost not a second of time, nor a single foot of distance.

In despair Speck groaned aloud, and called on his motor for every ounce of speed it possessed. He was pointed toward the south; could he but outrun this enemy by so much as one yard in a hundred, he might yet escape. With a terrible fascination he watched the distance between his rudder post and that pointed nose. Did it lengthen; was the gap growing wider? On the contrary, it was less! The Pfalz was gaining on him, slowly but surely. Just in time he jerked into a turn; the burst which would have finished him properly slashed the fabric at his elbow.

With the desperate courage of a forlorn hope he hurled himself from one maneuver into another, aware all the time that all he was doing was to postpone the inevitable end. He did not need to look at his watch to know that his allotted ten minutes was drawing to a close; the gathering dusk told him that.

The time had come for him to break off the combat, and start back, if he hoped to arrive within the limit of his hundred minutes gas. And only too glad would he be to break off, but how? There were only two ways of ending an air duel; either you ran away from the foe, or you shot him down. And to Speck both were impossible. No guns to shoot with, and not enough speed to run.

It came to him with ironic significance that he had accomplished what he set out to do. He had discovered the maneuvering characteristics of the new Pfalz to a T.

In a dive, a climb, or a straight run, it was the equal of the Nieuport. In a roll or turn to the right, it was a trifle faster. To the left? Come to think of it, he had not tried a left-hand roll; such was the force of habit. As if the thought were father to the action, his hand moved the stick, and his foot slammed down upon the rudder.

WHEN the horizon stopped spinning Speck looked back. The Pfalz was still there, but did it lag a trifle? Speck kicked into another roll, likewise to the left. Yes, now there was no doubt about it. The Pfalz had lost ground enough to indicate that its weakness was discovered. What would not the Allied flyers give to know that vital fact! But what a slim chance of their learning it from him!

Had he been armed, it would have meant the difference between victory and defeat. But as it was, the knowledge did him no good. In no way could it aid him to escape. Even if he used that slender margin of superiority to get on his opponent's tail, what then? No machine guns, not even a Colt. Nothing but a Very pistol—with one flare! At the thought of the Very pistol, his left hand slipped down inside the cockpit, and grasped its butt. And with the touch of the cold metal against his palm, he knew what he must do. The last, desperate resort, the gambler's chance. The final test of eye and hand. One Very flare, against a pair of hammering Spandaus.

He executed a renversement to the left, to give himself time to get set. Coming out, his eye estimated carefully the exact position and direction of the Pfalz. Then he swerved right; not sharply, but gently, as if forsaking all hope of further struggle. The German pilot lost no time. He cut swiftly in, closer and closer to Speck's flank. Speck twisted about in his seat, and the hand which held the Very pistol came up, to steady itself on the fairing behind the cockpit. His eye squinted along its barrel of brass, but still he did not fire. His first shot would be his last; his aim must be perfect. He could not afford to risk the calculations of deflection and speed; only when the target was directly behind his tail, in line with his line of flight, would he dare to press the trigger with any chance of success. The next second seemed an hour.

Then the stream of tracers was gushing from the muzzles of the German's guns. By the fact that the other was firing, Speck knew that the Pfalz was in line. The time had come. His eye was directly behind his thumb. He could see the Boche tracers pouring into his tail surfaces, raking their way up the fuselage. He

held his breath, and squeezed the clumsy trigger. He heard, faintly, a weak pop.

From directly behind, the flare did not seem to move, only to dwindle from a brilliant glare to a spot of scarlet. But Speck's fascinated gaze saw that spot of flame strike the upper wing of the Pfalz, and cling there, as a burr clings to a shaggy fabric. Then the wind caught it, and in the twinkling of an eye had fanned it to a blaze, which spread across the doped fabric like wildfire. For a moment the glare was strong in his eyes; then the Pfalz ducked into a sideslip, and went out of sight below his tail.

Speck seized his controls, and tipped up into a bank. His sensation of triumph was at once swallowed up in a feeling of admiration. The Boche was certainly putting up a plucky fight for life. He was sideslipping desperately, trying thus to blow out the flames, or to blow them off the wing-tip, a trick that sometimes worked. But the ground was coming up fast; Speck held his breath, and watched. The flickering scarlet sank to a glow, flared up again and then suddenly was gone. Hastily the German righted his controls, but too late. The ground caught him before he could flatten out. The Pfalz melted instantly into a mangled heap, a mere speck in the midst of the broad and deserted plain.

Where a moment before there had been two planes in the darkening sky, in hectic struggle, there was now nothing. Instead of the roar of two motors, not a sound. Flattened against the earth lay the silent wreck of one; descending in slow and even spirals came the other, its motor silent as death, its prop as still as carved stone. Down, down it sank, shadowy as a ghost in the shrouding gloom, and left upon the thin air naught but the faintest aroma of burned oil to tell of its presence, and its futile victory.

THE major's office was small, scarcely larger than a one-car garage, and held but two chairs, so Bill stood up. He would have been too restless to sit still, anyway; a scattering of half-smoked cigarette butts across the end of the room marked the trail of his paces back and forth. Colonel Stokes and the major talked in low tones, but Bill's mind was far away; he could not remember, afterwards, a single word of their conversation. More and more frequently his eyes turned to the small, black-faced clock, a relic of a crashed Nieuport, which ticked faintly in the middle of the table.

As the hands passed the hour of seven, and drew on

toward the quarter, it began to grow darker and darker. The major and the colonel talked no longer. Unable to keep still, Bill stepped to the door and opened it, to look out across the dusky field. As he did so, a gentle gust of wind entered, to ruffle the papers on the table. At the sound Bill turned; he saw the cause, and then suddenly an expression of consternation crossed his features.

"The wind!" he gasped. "From the west!"

"What?" said the colonel. "What's that?"

"There's a crosswind! It makes a difference; did you figure that when you calculated the hundred minutes' gas?"

The colonel shook his head slowly; Bill's heart sank. Was that crosswind strong enough to make a difference of ten minutes? He did not know; there was no way of telling. He clenched his fists, and glared at the colonel. A voice spoke from without.

"Lights all set up, sir." It was the field sergeant.

"Generator running?" demanded Bill anxiously.

"Not yet, sir. I thought there'd be time to—"

"Well, start it right away, and keep it going.

And then wait with your hand on the switch.

Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant disappeared toward the trailer which held the electrical apparatus; Bill turned back into the room, closing the door behind him. Again his eye fell on the clock; it seemed scarcely to have moved.

With leaden tread the minutes crept by. Slowly the minute hand passed the bottom of the dial, and began to climb the left-hand side. So slowly that twice Bill leaned over to listen, thinking the clock must surely have stopped. No; it still ticked; with deliberate languor the hand neared the hour of eight. Bill seized a sheet of paper and pencil; he had already made the calculation a dozen times in his head, but must do it once more, in writing. Six-thirty, plus ninety minutes—eight o'clock. Six-thirty, plus one hundred minutes—eight-ten. Between those two limits Speck must return, or never.

The three sat in tense, uneasy silence, straining their ears for the sound of a motor. Bill listened so intently that he could hear the generator running in the trailer twenty yards away. But no motor.

At five minutes after the hour Bill could stand it no longer; again he rose and threw the door open. His gaze turned toward the north.

"My God!" he cried. "Look at that!"

The colonel and the major were instantly at his

elbow. They saw the darkness of the northern sky crisscrossed by a score of restless, searching beams.

"He—he must be coming through!" exclaimed Bill.

"Through that?" The colonel shook his head dubiously, and his thought was easily guessed.

The Boche must have discovered Speck's presence, calculated his direction of escape, and were putting up an impenetrable screen of lights and archie to cut him off.

THE next ten minutes were ten hells of suspense. A dozen times Bill heard a motor; a dozen times found that his straining ears were deceiving him. He muttered curses; then clamped his lips into a thin straight line of silent suffering. One by one the searchlights began to blink out. The colonel and the major re-entered the room; the colonel looked at the clock. "Might as well give up," he said sadly. "No use keeping that generator running any longer; better shut it off—"

"No, no!" cried Bill, in anguish. "Wait a little longer; give him a chance. He might—he might—"

The two officers sat down inside; Bill remained, tense and hopeful against hope, in the doorway. Eight-twenty, eight-twenty-five, eight-thirty. Not a sound from the northern sky. The searchlights were now all gone but one; the archie fire had ceased.

The colonel shrugged, and drew toward him a piece of paper.

"A hundred minutes," he murmured. "Six-thirty. It is now twenty minutes of nine. Impossible. Impossible."

At that moment a wild cry burst from Bill's lips. "Listen!"

The two officers sprang to his side. At first they heard nothing; then—yes, something—a motor—it grew louder.

"The lights!" howled Bill. "Turn on the lights!"

"No, wait!" exclaimed the colonel. "How do you know it's Martin? It might be a Boche—wait for his signal."

"To hell with the signal! It's Speck. I know it's Speck!"

At that instant the lights went on, flooding the field with their brilliant glare, and the drone of the motor

ceased abruptly, either cut off, or run completely out of gas. In the ensuing silence they could hear the wind whistle through the wires of a gliding ship. A few moments of excruciating suspense—if that was a German, a bomb might be expected in their midst. Then a Nieuport swept from upper blackness, to land and roll toward the group. Five minutes later Speck was grinning in the office, answering eager questions. He described the combat briefly, telling what he had learned.

"But then? How in hell did you keep that ship up over two hours, on a hundred minutes' gas?"

"I didn't keep it up. I landed. The whole country there is one big flying field, empty and deserted. I knew I'd been seen. And I knew the Jerries could calculate my time to the lines just as well as we could. They'd figure that I'd have to cross about eight o'clock, and would be waiting for me with an archie barrage. So I just cut my motor, squatted down for half an hour, and then came on. I guess it fooled 'em all right; there was only one searchlight awake when I crossed."

"It fooled us, too," admitted the colonel. "We thought you were a goner, all but O'Connor, here. He wouldn't give up."

"Wait, you haven't heard it all yet. When I ducked down across the field, the first time, I got a good look into their hangars. Full of Pfalzes, colonel, new ones, and all set to go. If that one had guns on it, the others must have, too. They're probably just going to be delivered to the Front, unless something stops them."

The colonel's jaw dropped; this was news indeed. "Unless something stops them?" he repeated blankly.

"They're there right now," continued Speck. "But the chances are they won't be to-morrow. The Boche will guess that I saw them, and—"

"The night bombers!" erupted Bill, grabbing the colonel by the arm. "Get 'em over there now, quick; blow hell out of those hangars before the Jerries have a chance to move. Don't you see—"

A light dawned on the colonel's face. He turned to reach for the telephone, but the major already had the receiver to his ear, and was speaking sharply into the mouthpiece. "I want Hexador, the Handley-Page squadron at Virzeau, and I want it right away, quick—understand? Snap into it!"