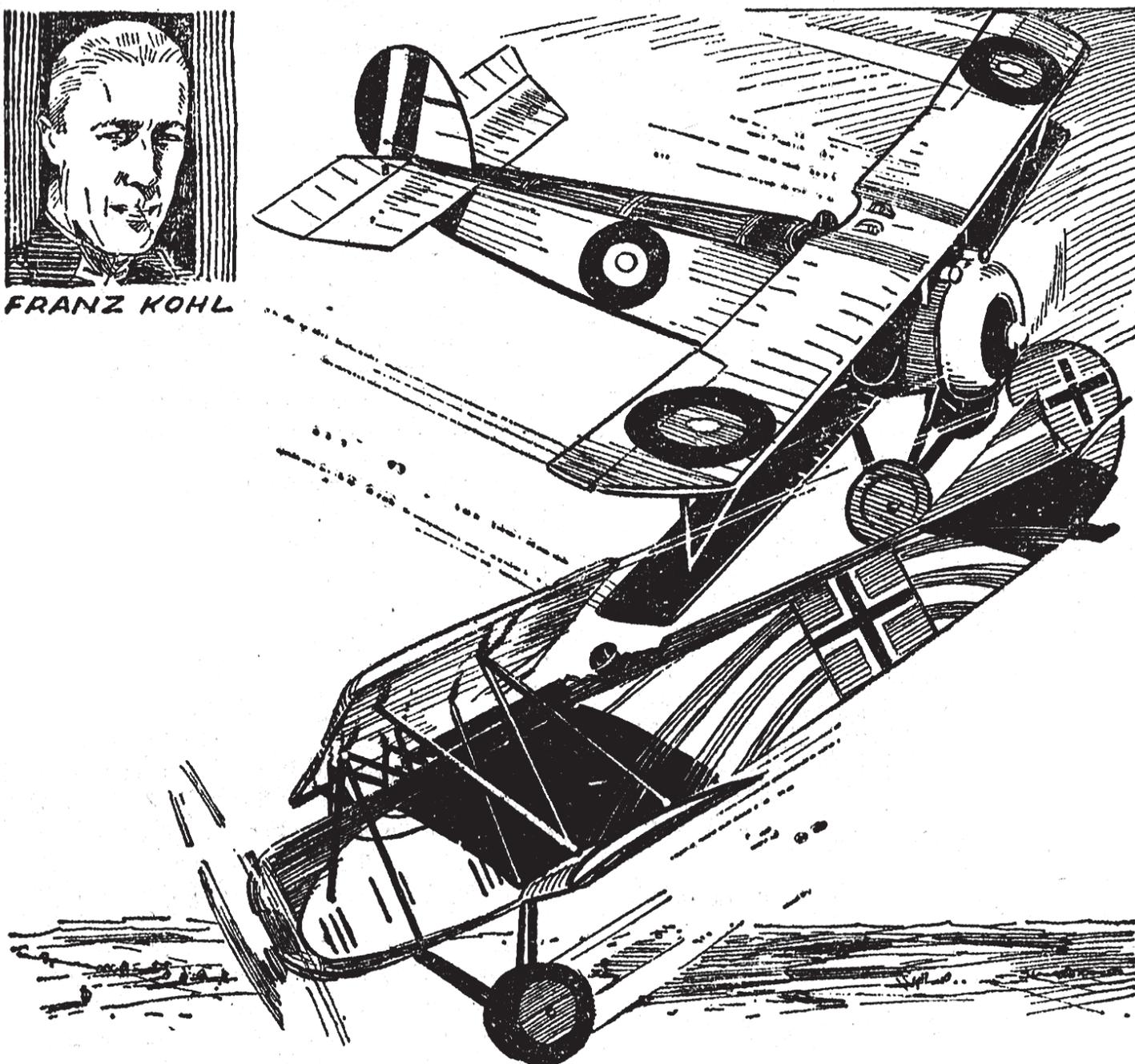




FRANZ KOHL



BLACKBIRD

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

Orth Was a Fighter that Just Wouldn't Stay Dead—Not While a Single Hun Still Rode the Sky!

SILENT ORTH, acclaimed the greatest of Allied fliers on both sides of the lines, had reached the end of his rope. The Germans knew it, all those who could see what was transpiring. And especially did Franz Kohl know it, as he sat on Orth's tail in a bullet-swift Albatros and hammered relentlessly away at the battered and broken Spad of the American ace.

The Americans on the ground who could see knew it and held their breaths, and their hearts were tight with sorrow. The Americans in the air who were held back from helping him by literal walls of wings, knew it.

Everybody knew that Orth was doomed—with one solitary exception. But that exception was an important one.

Silent Orth himself was the exception.

NONE but Silent Orth, in that dreadful ordeal, could have hoped for a satisfactory result. But Orth believed in himself. He believed in himself in spite of the fact that his right wing hung to his fuselage by the merest of shreds; that one of his struts had been blasted away; that his flying wires stood out behind him as though strung by some invisible machinery between solid, invisible posts; that smoke billowed from under his motor housing and that fire roasted at his feet, nibbling at them like hot-teethed mice at succulent cheese.

And that his guns were jammed!

Orth hadn't an earthly chance. Yet as he slid down to the blasted soil between the lines which was No-Man's-Land, he laughed grimly to himself.

"As long as there is life left in me, the head of Kohl rests loosely on his shoulders."

The great German had declared a Roman holiday. For weeks on end his men had been smashed into the ground with irritating regularity by this man who now seemed to be at the mercy of Kohl's guns.

And now Orth couldn't fire back. His altitude was still two thousand feet, and not once in a thousand times did a flier land successfully from such an altitude with his crate in flames. Smoke choked Orth's lungs, filled his eyes.

Yet with blind faith in his own ability, while slugs whined and snapped past his ears, he sat loosely in his pit as he had always done and maneuvered his crate. His hands were turning to a brick red from the ghastly heat. His clothing felt like steel armor fresh from the forge. His face seemed to be a peeling crisp.

Bullets which had already made a mess of his dash again smashed at the wreckage. Around his slipping crate dashed Kohl, unmarked, sending in his Spandau lead. Across the abyss between them Orth could see the satisfied smile on the face of the German—and knew for Kohl such a deadly hatred as he had never known for a living soul.

For there was a feud here, of sorts. Once Orth had had Kohl in this same sort of predicament—and he hadn't deliberately murdered the man. He had been criticized for giving Kohl a chance and had even criticized himself, but his conscience had been clear.

Kohl wasn't giving him any sort of chance. Kohl was out for murder and his wingmates, to give him his chance for fame, were keeping back Allied flyers who were risking their lives to come to the assistance of Orth.

"If I get out," said Orth to himself, "or rather, when I get out, I'll never let even the most helpless German get away from me."

Kohl was coming in closer now. He seemed to be toying with the Spad. He must have known that he could have withdrawn entirely, and that even then Orth was doomed. But he seemed to wish to play with him as a cat plays with a mouse. He didn't shoot to kill. He wanted his victim to perish in the flames.

ORTH, many times, when his bullets had started Germans down in flames, had slain the pilot to save him from roasting. Kohl was leaving Orth to the flames.

"And the day will come," Orth apostrophized the German, "when you'll wish to your *Gott* that you had pumped me full of lead to keep me from burning."

Orth studied the drift of the smoke and the flames. He could slice downward to his left and the wind would play the smoke and flames along his right wing; but already both wings were so weakened by bullets and flames, that any moment might see the end. When his wings were denuded of all fabric, he was lost.

HE COULDN'T tell anything by his altimeter now, but he could guess that at least six hundred feet still separated him from the ground. Somehow, anyhow, he must negotiate that remaining elevation, land and walk away from the mess. And when he tried to pull out, his wings were certain to go—no possible doubt about that. His whole life depended upon how he was thrown, and whether he survived the flames through those six hundred feet of ghastly space.

Carefully nursing his crate as though it had been a willful child, he slid down another hundred feet or so. His feet seemed to be immersed in the flames. They caused him to suffer the agonies of hell. Smoke curled up from between them to caress his cheeks, then to be blown away on the wind of his fall.

Orth corrected slightly to keep the smoke away from himself, but he had to turn his head aside, lean slightly over the cockpit coaming, to breathe at all. His lungs were near to bursting. He coughed and the sound of his own motor drowned out the ghastly sound, but the cough felt as though it had ripped out the very lining of his chest.

And then, his motor cut out. There were still five hundred feet to go. He had to maneuver now without his motor, with controls which had been all but shot away. He could have attempted trickery, pretended to be dead, but he knew that, to make sure, Kohl would probably fill his back full of lead. No, better if the Boche thought him sure of burning, for then he would hold his fire.

Orth thought back to his trapping. He had been out on patrol when Kohl had struck from the glare of the sun, where Orth had least expected him. Hitherto, the Boche had always hunted in company with his “gentlemen.”

Orth didn't blame himself for being surprised and trapped by that first burst. It was an axiom that Germans never did the unexpected. Kohl had taken advantage of that Allied belief to spring his surprise, in the hope of knocking down this American who had become Anathema to the Germans wherever his name was known—which was everywhere throughout Germany.

“I may fool you yet, squarehead,” gritted Orth, looking up.

But now Kohl, with three hundred feet of altitude left in which Orth might die, was beginning to be afraid that he might have erred in his judgment. He swung around to send a burst into Orth's back. If he had tried that two minutes sooner, Orth would have been dead by this moment. The Yank hoped and believed it was now too late.

BUT he could not zoom, slip or slide out of danger. He had to sit, like a man manacled to a chair, and take it. But he would take it with his face to his enemy, while his hands still fought to bring his ship down to a comparatively safe landing.

Kohl came in close, the muzzles of his Spandaus

aligned in deadly earnest on the back of Silent Orth. Orth hesitated for a second. Then he slid his crate further to the left, so that it fell almost straight down, its left wing dropping like the head of a spent arrow. Kohl opened with his guns at the same time.

Orth could almost smell the hot lead which spewed over his right shoulder and smashed into the riddled motor-housing, into the forward part of his fuselage, into the flames and the smoke. He could hear the bullets smash at the motionless propeller. He could hear them smash at metal parts of the motor. His ears were filled with the crackling sound as they sped past him.

KOHL must have gone a little mad then, for he began to yaw wildly to right and left, keeping his guns going, trying to spray Orth with his lead as though it had been water from a hose.

Something that felt like a sledgehammer struck Orth in the right side. Another blow struck him in the left side. He felt that two whole bursts must have gone into him. He felt his blood slide down his legs—and felt it harden under the blistering heat of the flames. This must be the end. Orth's brain reeled. His head swam. The earth and sky spun crazily.

Bullets—bullets—bullets—would Kohl never exhaust the fodder of his guns? Would he never run out his cartridge belts so that his guns would fall silent? Would he never make a direct hit in Orth's back, or his head, and make an end of this hideous torture?

Orth had never been calmer. He snapped a look down.

This couldn't be happening to him! It was happening to someone else, and he, in a nightmare, was merely watching. It couldn't, didn't, effect him at all.

And then, there was the ground. Kohl was circling him tightly, his guns never for a moment still. The Spandaus chattered and ranted. Orth had to level off for an infinitesimal instant, brace himself for the shock—and perhaps meet death in the next trio of heartbeats.

The Spad struck. It was like the crack of doom, like the falling down a mountainside of, a thundering avalanche. There were flames and fire across a landscape. Sparks went everywhere. Orth felt himself going, spinning end over end. He could see sheets of flame as the gas-tanks let go. It seemed to him that he was thrown directly through those flames. He could

feel their blasting, searing heat. But he traveled like a bullet and held his breath on the passage through hell.

Then, feeling strangely, crazily calm, he relaxed his aching body and allowed himself to fall limply. He crashed against the ground and it seemed that all his bones were broken, their jagged ends driven through his quivering flesh in all directions. He felt his senses slipping away from him, felt the darkness of death swooping over him. But he gritted his teeth and looked up.

He heard, as though it came from a far distance, the droning of Kohl's motor. He heard the blasting of rifles as Americans on the ground tried to bring down the German with fire from the trenches—and the answering rifle fire of the German infantry who were trying to keep the Americans from a hit. It was a chaos around him, through which the darkness swooped, and Orth fought to retain consciousness.

"I WON'T pass out!" he told himself grimly. "I simply won't. I've got something to do yet, before I die. That German needs to be taught some manners. I'm the lad to teach him."

He was conscious that he had slid into a shellhole, with which all No-Man's-Land was pocked, and that flames from his burning crate were sheeting across the lip of the hole. If he hadn't fallen into the cavity, the flames would have shriveled the very flesh on his body. As it was he didn't even feel the heat—but he shrank back when the blasting of his own artillery, as it dropped shells into his Spad's wreckage brought death too close for comfort.

But he was almost indifferent to the near presence of death. He had been hearing the rustling of her wings too long now. They had been close, like each heartbeat, for what seemed like centuries. She could come no closer without taking him—but still he lived.

AND it came to him that he would continue to live.

There, with bullets meeting above him as Germans and Americans exchanged lead, with Kohl flying low and trying to find him through the smoke and flames, so that several times bullets smashed into the walls of the shellhole, Orth calmly decided on a course of action.

"If I get back to the field," he told himself, "I'll have to report to the medico. He'll chain me to a hospital cot for the next six weeks. In that length of time too many things may happen—and it's especially possible that someone else will knock down Kohl. I'm going to do that myself.

"But to do it I've got to keep going. I've got to get out of this jam, get a plane, get back over the lines and spill Kohl around over the sky—after letting him know exactly who I am."

He was setting himself an impossible mission.

"Impossible for anyone else," he told himself, "but, what with the way I hate Kohl, certainly not impossible for me."

He tried to make himself comfortable until the storm should pass. But his whole body was one burn, it seemed, and no way he sat or sprawled could he find comfort. His legs and arms were stiffening as Nature fought to counteract the torture. He fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes and matches. But when the match flamed, the heat of it against his burned hand almost drove him mad anew. And when he put the burning cigarette between his lips its tiny fire seemed to scorch his heat-blasted cheeks.

But he set his jaw grimly and smoked on.

He smoked his cigarette to the stub and cast it aside, grimly satisfied that he hadn't allowed torture to divert him from his course, however trivial this—the smoking of a cigarette—might be. It was a symbol, somehow, of his determination to live where no other man would have lived—and to settle scores with Kohl.

Finally the firing died down slightly. The Albatross of Kohl vanished into the blue, homeward bound. The wings of other crates scudded past Orth's blurred vision as friend and enemy alike withdrew from the sky territory where he had passed through a horrible kind of Gethsemane.

He knew that the second he thrust up his head all Germany would blaze away at him. He should wait for darkness, but he was afraid that he would not live that long; that he would either die or go mad with pain before that time came. He had to get out now, take a chance on the bullets. At the very least, they would give him surcease from his suffering.

CLEAR in the eye of his mind was the last view he had had of Kohl—wearing that supercilious smile which had said so plainly:

"This marks the end, Orth, of the fellow who has shot down so many good Germans."

But Silent Orth knew it wasn't the end.

He listened to the firing to fix in his mind the direction of friend and of foe. Then he rose to his feet, swaying, sick with pain, and backed up the side of the shellhole toward the enemy, bending his head forward so that it wouldn't show above the crest of the pit.

The dirt slid under his feet. He was planning to run down into the hole, giving himself momentum for the race up the other side, out and across No-Man's-Land to his own trenches. Nothing was impossible now.

"Well," he told himself, taking a deep breath which tortured his lungs until he almost cried out with the pain, "here goes nothing!"

HE HURLED himself downward toward the bottom of the pit, throwing all his strength into the charge. His feet bit into the bottom of the hole, bit into the sliding dirt on the other side. He scrambled for the upper edge with fingers which were black from the smoke and flames of his crate.

He was out, running crazily, for his own side of the lines.

There was what seemed to be a stunned silence when he appeared.

Then the Germans began firing. A thin cheer rose from the American lines and Springfields and Enfields began to answer the German challenge. Out of the American lines, like a football wedge, came a dozen infantrymen, fanning out to catch him in their semi-circle, to protect him with their very bodies against the German threat. He tried to wave them back, but they came on.

One man fell and was left where he had fallen, while bullets thudded into his body. The others came on, undaunted. They were willing to die that this crazy flyer might live and work out his vengeance.

And then they were around him, hustling him forward. Their solicitous hands, fumbling at him, pulling him forward to safety, were like hands of fire against his flesh. He almost cried out with the agony which they could not know.

Whipped forward by the last bullets of the Germans, he gained his own trenches and rolled into them.

Hands slapped his scarred back.

He gritted his teeth and bore it. He mumbled through black lips:

"I've got to have a crate, right away, to go back after Kohl."

"Yes, yes, of course," they said, humoring the man. "But who would give you a crate? You're black as the ace of spades. Come on feller, back you go."

"Must have a crate," he insisted. "I've got to get back at Kohl before I cave in and wake up on a hospital cot."

They hurried him into the communication trenches, bearing him toward safety.

"Not my own field," he mumbled. "They'll put me in a straight-jacket, and I may pass out before I get back into the race."

But in the end he had to fight out at them to keep them from escorting him back to his own field at Avocourt. They couldn't see that it was more important for him to meet Kohl again than to go to a hospital, to be ministered to by a medico. He'd rather die as he stood than be strapped to a cot before he was ready. They finally left him, returning to the lines.

AND Orth, looking once toward Avocourt, turned his head—from which the hair had almost been burned, so that the ends which showed under his helmet were crisply singed—toward where he knew the nearest field to be, that of the French.

There, somehow, he would get another Spad. But he had to work fast, and none knew it better than he did himself.

His body had become a numb ball of aching horror, but he fought against it as he strode through the shell-blasted woods. Now and again limbs touched him and he screamed—always silently, deep down inside him—as though hot bayonets had touched his quivering flesh. He swore roundly at himself that he couldn't stand it without flinching.

Had Franz Kohl, back behind the German lines receiving the praise of his fellows for ridding German air of Orth, been aware of how Orth drove himself, his grin would have faded, given way to a look of fear. But the Boche couldn't know that fate was striding through the woods behind the Allied lines, keeping pace with Silent Orth as he marched to his vengeance, a tortured step at a time.

IT SEEMED ages before Silent Orth came to the French field. For minutes he had been staggering, babbling to himself as in delirium. But at the edge of the woods he straightened, trying to get a grasp on himself. If a medico took a look at him now he wouldn't have a chance of getting off any field, except in an ambulance or on a stretcher.

He was walking as straight as any soldier when he encountered an officer and asked the way to headquarters. He knew the emotionalism of the French, knew that if he could make his language understood he would make his intentions and feelings understood. He knocked on the door, was bidden to enter.

A French high ranker looked up at him as he leaned his back against the door.

“Talk English,” mumbled Orth. “I can’t speak or understand French. I am Orth.”

The officer sprang around his desk, arms reaching for Silent Orth. He opened his mouth to shout for help. Orth straightened then, holding out his right hand for silence.

“No,” he said, “don’t call anyone. My business is with you, sir.”

“All Allied Air,” said the Frenchman, “believes that you are dead. Germany is delighted. How is it, then, that you are here, and alive? But you look like a ghost from the flames—”

“I’ve got bullets in me,” said Orth. “I don’t know how many, but so far they haven’t killed me—and they won’t until I’ve settled things with Kohl. Will you trust me with a ship which I may crash behind the lines, and take my word for it that if it’s humanly possible I’ll bring it back?”

“It’s irregular, but—ah, I understand! It is a feud which must be wiped out in blood—”

“Something like that. Before I take off, if you give me a ship, I want the word to get into Germany, somehow, that I’m alive and flying back to get Kohl.”

“The difficulty is not in getting word into Germany,” said the Frenchman quietly, “but in keeping word from getting into Germany—especially when the word is secret and important. It will be easy. A word telephoned to our front lines will reach our listening posts, and will be somehow transmitted across. Sounding devices, listening devices—there are plenty of ways. Yes, the word shall go.”

“Good! When I come back I shall land at my own field, where you will find the plane.”

“What a glorious thing it is!” exclaimed the French officer. “Our American friend flies out on vengeance in one of our planes, defying death, fighting back death, to strike a lethal blow for France! It is magnificent! It is superb!”

“Get that word into Germany, sir—and let me get away. I haven’t too much time left.”

FIVE minutes later Silent Orth sat in a cockpit, though he ached in every bone and muscle. Where his clothing touched his body, it felt as though all his skin were being grated off, exposing the raw flesh underneath to the savage, merciless rubbing of the cloth. Pain almost blinded him, so that red and black spots of it danced before his eyes. He sobbed inwardly.

THE motor of the Nieuport revved up under his trembling hands. Those hands, which he could

with difficulty control, seemed scarcely to belong to him. But with a savage effort of will he stilled their trembling. He signaled for the chocks to be pulled free, and slammed down the field for the take-off before pain could make him change his mind. He was off, headed for Germany.

And now his haggard, terrible face was set in a mask of grim determination. He was a death-masked man, a travesty of a man, a being who should have been dead yet who insisted on going ahead. He was going to smash back at the man who had driven him down, firing into him without mercy on the plunge to the earth.

The motor hummed. He tested his guns with a brief burst. The crate was in perfect working order.

The only chance for failure rested with Silent Orth himself—and he refused to think of that element. As long as his mighty will could drive his body, he would deadhead into Germany, waiting for a second contact with Franz Kohl. Now, though, he rather imagined that Kohl would fly again with his gentlemen, that he wouldn’t be caught anywhere alone. He wondered how Kohl would take the news that he still lived—news which the Boche must have at this very moment.

He gritted his teeth savagely with the vow that the account must be balanced. Silent Orth must return to that reputation which he had made for himself, of reversing every defeat—even every semblance of defeat.

Now the lines were under him, and Archies were hurling their projectiles upward. He didn’t even look down, though he couldn’t help seeing the blossoming flowers of death where shells burst ahead and above him.

He saw Allied crates to the north and south when he was well into German skies. By this time Kohl and his men would have the news that he was living. Kohl, white of face perhaps, realizing that he had toyed too long with the enemy now coming back to destroy him, would be making his dispositions.

“But whatever they are,” Orth told himself, “they won’t, can’t, be enough!”

He was determined on that. Only death to himself could keep him, this time, from slaying Franz Kohl. And he wouldn’t die before he had done his task.

“Kohl has flown his last flight, or will have when he meets me,” said Orth to himself. “I won’t give him any more chance than he gave me, no matter what happens.”

Now, dead ahead, he could see the German’s field.

Planes were taking off there like birds flushed from brush. Their pilots must have seen him, but they veered off. He knew by their behavior that they knew of him, that the French officer had made sure that the news had been “planted” in Germany.

ORTH slanted down toward the field, after studying all the crates which were taking off, making sure that Kohl was not among them. His eyes, red-rimmed and terrible, searched the ground, picked out a Fokker which was like a beetle crawling across the German field. He knew the crate instantly, though it wasn't the one in which Kohl had attacked him.

Kohl was taking off to fight him again. The German must have realized that Orth couldn't do much damage, that he should really have been on a hospital cot, or on a slab in a morgue somewhere.

Knowledge of this only made Orth grit his teeth more grimly, shut his lips down hard upon the pain which gnawed at him. He was able, by superhuman effort, so to control his body that it seemed he had almost banished pain—but he knew that he was numb with the agony.

HE TESTED his guns again, just as Kohl lifted into the air with a rush of wings. The German didn't hesitate. Orth studied the sky. There was no need for Kohl to worry, for German crates—the same which had taken off ahead of Kohl—were circling the field, so that their pilots could watch the end. Orth thought of jockeying Kohl back to the lines, to knock him down where the Yank himself had fallen, but gave up that idea. If he killed Kohl, the Allies would have the word just as soon, no matter where it happened.

He'd do his job as quickly as possible, right where he was.

Kohl came up with a rush. The other German flyers did not come close. The Boche, then, was going to finish the fight himself. Orth had a little more respect for him. After all, only a fool spared a vanquished fighter just because he was in flames with his guns jammed. He should have realized that Kohl had merely done his duty.

But Kohl, on the other hand, was a menace to Allied air. Knowing that the man had downed Silent Orth, other Allied flyers would be afraid of him, and he would be able to knock down men who were beaten already by the grim knowledge. No, Orth had to get Kohl, and it wasn't a personal thing really. It was part of his job.

Kohl swept past him. There was no mistaking his identity. Maybe he wanted Orth to see. Orth knew him, would never forget that white, grim face—which now was not smiling.

He had to end this thing quickly.

Now Kohl swooped down. Orth gritted his teeth. He had to take it from something besides the bullets of Kohl—from his bruised, battered and wounded body which suffered excruciating agony with every motion of the crate. “I might as well start now,” he told himself.

He came back on his stick. The Nieuport arched up with a rush, pinning Orth against the back of his pit, solidly. He had the feeling that when he leveled off and his back pulled away from the pit, some of his very soul would be impaled against the solid wood.

A spray of lead went past him, the bullets snapping as though they went through the taut tough paper on a target range. Orth grinned to himself. Now he had forgotten the immediate past, was again the Silent Orth who had spread terror and destruction through German air. The German had missed with his first burst, which wouldn't add to his confidence. With the joining of battle, Orth's own confidence went higher than it had ever gone before.

He looked back. Kohl had slid under him. The Boche would nose up now, trying to spray Orth's belly with lead.

ORTH slanted his right wing down, corkscrewing right at Kohl's cockpit. He didn't care if he smashed into that pit, either, for then would come oblivion: death for Kohl, and surcease from suffering for Orth. His guns began to chatter almost without command from his brain as his hands went to the trips.

He saw his tracers end at the Fokker's turtleback—just a few inches behind the German's back. But they missed the pilot!

Orth didn't try to slide away from possible collision. He slanted on down. Wildly the German tried to escape—

AND then Orth was suffering the torments of the damned, for his Nieuport had suddenly gone crazy. The tip of his right wing had touched the camelback of the Fokker. Orth looked back, to see the German spinning crazily—or seem to be spinning crazily, because Orth himself was out of control—and saw a gaping hole in the side of the German's fuselage.

He didn't know the extent of his own damage, until

he finally leveled off, preparatory to attacking again. He saw part of his fabric flying free.

All even, so far. If he had injured the German, he had injured himself as much. Fair enough. Now he spun about, bringing his nose up as quickly as he could—and his guns began to chatter, stitching holes in Kohl's belly, reaching along the bottom of the German's writhing fuselage for the body of the pilot.

But Kohl rolled clear with a masterly bit of maneuvering, and Orth swung back to cover him again. Now Kohl took the initiative. He pointed his prop at Orth, held his trips down—and at top speed the two crates rushed head-on to meet each other. The guns of both were spitting savagely.

Orth, stooped forward in his pit, held his trips down and promised himself grimly that he would smash head-on into Kohl, though both their motors blended into white-hot metal and both pilots were inextricably mixed up with the falling wreckage, before he would give in the slightest to the German.

"After all," thought Orth, "nothing could hurt me any now. I've already been done to a turn!"

But Kohl wouldn't have it that way. At the very last moment, while Orth watched to see which way he would go, the German did the orthodox thing and dived. Instantly Orth's nose reached for the sky. His left wing came down.

He spun around like a top, until his brain was dizzy with the speed of the spin, trying to twist his nose into position to get the diving Fokker before his guns. He put all his will, all his remaining effort, into it.

Slowly, bit by bit, his guns came into line until they covered the back of Kohl. But Orth wanted a center shot. Kohl was trying desperately to get out of line, and his Fokker was responding—but with what dreadful slowness! Fast to Orth, it was, but dreadful in its slowness to the desperate Boche. And then—

Orth staked all on this burst. He held his nose on Kohl, with his knees gripping the stick. He stared with blurred eyes through his ring-sights. The German seemed to be wearing a red uniform, the color of blood—

Yes, the uniform was red, because the bullets of Silent Orth, smashing into his back, were making it red. The German slumped into his pit as though to escape the merciless pellets which were blasting his back to a crimson froth. The Fokker started down. Orth tilted after it, smashing away at the fuselage, hammering at the cockpit.

And though all his body cried out for rest, he

followed Kohl into the ground. Then he swooped away and didn't even look back. If the Germans followed, he did not know. He held his motor full out, and without a backward glance hedgehopped through the trees for home.

HE SAW his home tarmac, at the last, swim under his wings. On just such a sunny spot, he remembered, Kohl had crashed in flames. Flames! Flames! They would always be with him.

And then he landed, rolled to a stop. He saw the white faces of his wingmates, and the major commanding the squadron, pushing toward him as he slid out of his pit on his own power.

Then he saw the medico, and the stretcher bearers.

"I never thought," he mumbled, "that I'd live to want to kiss a medico on both cheeks—but you'll pardon me, won't you, Doc, if I do a little fainting first?"

The ground flew up to meet him.

The medico caught him before the ground got there. These men, knew everything about the matter because telephones reached everywhere from the front. The medico looked at the major.

"The only way we can keep this flying, singed, black fool from taking off again," he grunted, "is to cover him so deeply with oil that he won't be able to sit in a pit without sliding. That's what we're going to do—and look, Major, for you may never see the like of this again:

"Here's a man who should have been dead when he went to meet Kohl, but is still alive because he refuses to die. And if I know anything about him, he'll be back in a month; no more, looking for more Germans—" He was interrupted by the delirious mumbling of Orth.

"Oil! Olive oil to put out fires. Why aren't all fighting crates equipped with tanks of olive oil?— There goes Kohl! Now, if he had a sprinkling system of olive oil on his Fokker—but I did it with bullets, didn't I, not with flames? And that's a sprinkling system that even olive oil won't put out—"

The medico grinned.

"Yes," he said, "I give him a month. You can't kill a guy like that. Here, you chaps, lend a hand—and do yourself unforgettable honor!"