



F.O.B. BERLIN

by ROBERT J. HOGAN

One D.H., complete with brand-new Liberty motor, and one American major in good condition—delivered by hand at Germany's door! Who says there isn't such a thing as being too generous?

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CAPTAIN Scotty MacRay, commander of the hundred and sixty-first squadron, stared in the dim light of dawn and counted aloud as the Spads of C flight romped in from their early patrol.

“One—two—three—four—” he counted. His face suddenly clouded as he listened for the fifth. The four crates tore out of the low clouds and roared down. One ship was not there—the particular one he was watching for. Mickey Flinn, now leader of C flight, was not present.

Scotty cursed low. The four Spads were whipping into the wind and their motors blurred for the landing. But his eyes were strained toward the north. Second after second plunged him deeper into despair.

As Scotty waited, he cursed the whole German air force, and particularly von Strohm, the king of egotists, the ace supreme, who not only ruled that sector in the air but took even greater pleasure in demonstrating the fact—when he had enough of his buzzards along for protection. That black-and-red-checked Fokker was an almost daily sight on the Allied side of the lines, with the rest of the circus hanging protectingly above in case they were needed.

And now Mickey had gone to feed the vanity of von Strohm. Scotty’s fists clenched until the nails bit into his palms and he mouthed his hatred of von Strohm again.

“Colonel Brant wishes to see you, sir, at once.”

Scotty hardly heard the voice of the orderly behind him. Another sound had come to his ears at that instant. It was the whine of a motor and it came from the north. That might be von Strohm or one of his men, already come to announce Mickey’s death.

He froze motionless while he listened more intently. Then he drew in a deep breath and his face wrinkled in a grin. It was not the throbbing drone of a Mercedes, but rather the higher-pitched scream of a Hiss. Scotty strained his eyes. He could see it now. The Spad shot into view from under the cloud bank and dived. It was Mickey!

“COLONEL BRANT—” the orderly was telling him again. Scotty turned with a chuckle that told of his relief. “Huh? What’s that? Oh, sure. Heard you the first time,” he answered. A quick glance at his watch and he grinned broadly. “The Old Man’s up early this morning,” he observed as he answered the salute of the orderly. His entire manner was changed now, with the suspense over. “Brant must have been mighty hungry, to get up at five-thirty.”

The orderly grinned back at him. “He said at once, sir.”

“Sure,” said Scotty. “Just as soon as this little wild Irish friend of mine lands and I find out what’s been keeping him.”

“You’re late,” grinned Scotty as Mickey climbed from his cockpit and dropped to the ground. “What’s been keeping you? Thought I’d have to eat breakfast alone this morning.”

There was a jaunty note in Scotty’s voice that gave no hint of his worry only a moment before.

“Got tangling prop wash with a couple of von Strohm’s Fokkers,” Mickey grinned nonchalantly. “Guess they were trying to send me an invitation to breakfast with them, but I told ‘em I already had a date.”

He forgot to mention that one of the two Fokker pilots would never eat another breakfast—but that was like Mickey.

“Wait a minute till I see what the Old Man wants,” Scotty told him, “and we’ll go into town and have a real feed.”

He was off toward Colonel Brant’s office.

“Yes, sir, you sent for me?” Scotty met the stern eyes of the old warrior as he saluted before his desk.

Colonel Brant looked up quickly. Already he was placing papers in his brief case.

“Oh, yes, Captain MacRay,” he nodded. “I’m leaving for the rear. Don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Major Jones isn’t about as yet, so I’m giving you the orders while I’m gone. The major will be in command, of course, in my absence. It’s about those new Liberty D.H.s that are ready to go, MacRay. Tell Major Jones when he arrives that under no circumstances must those ships leave the field until further orders from me. It’s vitally important, captain.”

“Yes, sir.” Scotty’s face was clouded in a frown as he saluted and turned to the door.

The one bane of Scotty’s existence at the field was Major Jones. The major’s enlistment papers had asked for “Name in full,” so he had truthfully written, “Nelson Wellington Van Parker Jones,” on the line. The second-in-command didn’t have to be in sight for his image to appear before Scotty’s narrowed eyes. Here was a kiwi among kiwis to be hated more than any others.

Major Nelson Wellington Van Parker Jones was one of the misfits that the sudden plunge of the United States into the war had bred. He might have been a ribbon clerk or a lingerie salesman, for all anyone

knew before the war. But it seemed they didn't know, and it mattered little. When first heard of at the Front, he was a major, and second-in-command of a very important field, without the slightest knowledge of the air and less interest in learning. Advancement seemed his only ambition.

Vanity stuck out all over his important, fussy little figure. Ego flared from the beady little eyes that pried about like those of an efficiency expert through the large, heavy glasses. And conceit fairly sparked from the needlelike points of the waxed moustache which he pampered constantly.

SCOTTY and Mickey, were on their way to the little town, a short mile from the field, when Mickey asked. "Going to order nails for breakfast? You look as though you could sure chew 'em."

Scotty growled. "It's that damned major friend of yours. The Old Man's leaving for the rear. Doesn't know how long he's going to be gone, and of course, Major Nelson Wellington Van Parker Jones, himself in person, and none other, will be in command of the field in his absence."

"Hey," snapped Mickey, "what's the idea of that friend stuff? I've been hanging around and being decent to him, but not because I like him, that's a cinch. He's slated to take command of that new field up toward Verdun, and I've got a good chance of being appointed squadron commander under him, if he doesn't get sore at me—and if that guy Ruggles doesn't horn me out for himself."

They turned in at the entrance of La Cuillere Graissée, where Madame Bourdon bustled about her establishment to satisfy the cravings of the hungry and thirsty.

"That major's in command right now," Scotty growled as he and Mickey seated themselves at a table.

"I just saw the Old Man coming down the street right now in his car, bound for the rear."

He studied the bar table before him for a long time. "Mickey," he said at length, and there was a wicked glint in his eye, "I'd give a lot to put a crimp in that swelled-headed major's style just once."

"Hey," barked Mickey, "lay off my major, will you, Scotty? He knows we're thick, and if you start anything, he'll suspect I'm in on it. Then where'll I fit for the new job?"

"Well," conceded Scotty, "the only reason I'm not starting something is because I can't think what to start. And get this, fella—I'd a damn sight rather be a

buck private all my life than know that I had to thank that little squirt Jones for anything. You might get the command of the new squadron at the new field, Mickey, but if you follow that guy Jones around, you'll end up in a mess."

There was much argument over the matter in the hour and a half that followed—argument spiced with liquid refreshment from Madame Bourdon's fine cellar. And time slipped by unnoticed.

"Sufferin' mackerel!" cried Scotty suddenly as he happened to let his eyes rest for a moment on his watch. "I mighty near forgot about giving the orders to this guy Jones we've been talking about."

As the two approached the field, the angry bark of motors reached their ears. Scotty leaped ahead at a faster gait. Those motors weren't Hissos. They weren't Rolls Royces, either, or Clergets or Gnomes or Salmsons. There was a definite, sharp-bitten crack to every explosion that differentiated the sound from any motor he had yet heard.

Scotty broke into a wild dash for the field. The sound was that of Liberties preparing for flight—the Liberties in the five D.H.s that were supposed to remain on the ground!

Suddenly the throbbing of the five motors blasted into a din of thunder. Scotty leaped ahead faster. Then he stopped short with a growl of dismay. A flight of five Liberty-motored D.H. ships—the first five with Liberties to arrive at the Front—were already in the air, droning toward the Front in a wide V.

SCOTTY leaped, through the gates and on toward the main hangar, where the D.H. planes had been stored and where his Spad was also kept.

"Hey, you!" he roared to the hangar sergeant. "Who in hell ordered those D.H.s with Liberties out in the air?"

"It—it was Major Jones, sir," stammered the startled sergeant.

"What? What's Jones got to do with it? He can't fly," Scotty bellowed.

Then the corners of the sergeant's lips curled upward in a grin. "I heard him say something about wanting to be the first to cross the lines in a Liberty D.H., sir," he told Scotty.

"Hey, what's that? You—you mean Major Jones is in that flight?"

The sergeant nodded.

"Get my ship out," ordered Scotty. "Where are my helmet and goggles?" He glanced at the hook where

they usually hung inside the hangar office. "Who's flying that little swell-headed shrimp?"

The sergeant whirled to bark orders to the mechanics, then turned to answer the other questions that had come at him in one of Scotty's long breaths.

"The major took your helmet and goggles, sir. Saw them hanging there in the office where you keep them handy."

Scotty groaned. "And a brand-new helmet at that."

"Ruggles is flying the D.H. that's leading, sir," the sergeant went on. "That's the one the major's in, sir."

Mickey groaned now. "That guy Ruggles is going to push me out on my ear. I'd like to—"

"Hurry that ship," bellowed Scotty again.

"No use," shouted Mickey. He had been watching from the door. Scotty whirled and stared at the murky sky into which the five ships had disappeared.

"Look, Mickey," he cried suddenly, "they're coming back!"

"Not all of 'em," Mickey corrected. "All but that leading plane with that halfwit Ruggles and His Highness, the major. Guess they're going on. Can't see anything of 'em."

"Sure," one of the four pilots who had returned with their Liberty D.H.s—explained later. "We don't look crazy, do we? Can't see your hand in front of your face when you get up over a thousand. And with these new jobs we've never flown before, too."

"What the devil did you start out for, in the first place?" snapped Scotty. But he knew the answer, even before the words had left his lips.

"Had to," came the answer. "Orders from squirt Jones himself. He wanted to be the first across the lines in a Liberty D.H., and he didn't hesitate to tell us that he was in complete command of the field, now that Colonel Brandt's gone. We just went up behind, and when we got far enough back to make it look good, we dropped out. If he squawks, we'll tell him we lost him in the fog."

Scotty grinned for the first time. "Not so dumb, at that," he recommended. Then the smile left his face as he thought of Colonel Brant. If he had ever been in a jam, he was in one right now, unless that one D.H. returned and no word reached the colonel about the hop.

THE sky settled lower and lower over the earth. Each time that Scotty surveyed the upper regions, there was more concern in his leathery face. An hour slipped by—and no sign of the one D.H. with Major Jones. The sky began to clear.

Then a sound from the north froze him rigid. He could hear distantly the roar of a motor coming that way.

"Maybe that's the D.H. coming back now," ventured Mickey.

"Yeah," drawled Scotty sourly, "and maybe it isn't, either. I never heard a Liberty barking before this morning, but if that motor we hear is a Liberty, I'm a Dutchman."

They listened again, tense, quiet. Scotty cursed in a low growl. He had recognized the throbbing drone as that of a Mercedes. And what was worse, there was more than one.

The Fokkers dived out of the gray mist that was clearing slowly—five altogether, flying in a perfect, tight V. And at point flew the most hated of all foes in that sector, von Strohm, in his red-and-black-checked Fokker.

Down low over the tarmac they thundered. Then, when von Strohm came opposite the main hangar, a white something dashed madly back toward the tail group of his Fokker and fluttered toward the ground.

Scotty leaped from his cover, and was first to reach the note. As Mickey and others stared over his shoulder, he read,

"Thanks for the new Liberty D.H., but what in hell will we do with your major?"

Von Strohm."

At that instant the five Fokkers wheeled at the end of the field, and in a long line, strung out for some distance, they roared away.

Scotty glanced at the note once more, and the rage left his face for a grin. He couldn't help it. That last phrase about the major—if he'd worked all his life to figure out a jam for the man, he couldn't have planned better.

"That damn fool Ruggles would do something like that," Mickey was chuckling mirthlessly. "Bet he got lost and landed right at von Strohm's field, thinking he was back of his own lines. And now the major's over there with him, and where do I fit?"

"What's going on here?" It was Colonel Brant, returned unexpectedly. "A note? Damn von Strohm! Let me see it, MacRay."

Scotty tried to control himself as he handed the note to his superior. It wouldn't be long now. It wasn't.

"What's the meaning of this, MacRay?" the colonel demanded angrily. "I gave you orders this morning

about those Liberty D.H.s. Did you give my message to Major Jones?"

Scotty squared his shoulders and began to speak.

There was no use hedging. And as the words left his tight lips, the colonel's face grew apoplectic.

"Damn it, MacRay," he bellowed, "do you realize what you've done? Don't you know that the Germans would have risked a whole squadron of ships to get just one of our Liberty motors? The first at the Front—and now they have one. I'll have you court-martialed for this, MacRay. I'll—I'll have you busted."

Colonel Brant was trembling with rage and he shook his fist before big Scotty MacRay's face.

"I'll give you one chance," he roared. "Just one chance. You're the cause of that Liberty motor's being in Germany. I'll give you the next five hours to get it back, blow it up, destroy it. And if you don't—"

Scotty wanted to ask if he didn't want him to bring the Kaiser back in the rear seat. There was just about as much chance. But instead he saluted and said, "Yes, sir."

Then, as the infuriated colonel stamped away, a sudden idea came to Scotty. It might work. The sound of von Strohm's flight had not entirely died away in the distance. That had helped to remind him, to make him think of the plan.

Scotty leaped inside the hanger, hunted frantically for a pencil and paper, and wrote,

"That's a damn lie about the Liberty D.H. It arrived safely behind our own lines. You're handing out your usual line, von Strohm, but you can't kid us this time. We know you haven't got either the major or the D.H."

"There," he said as he scanned it and handed it to Mickey. "Take a look at that, kid. If that doesn't burn up von Strohm, I'm crazy."

Mickey agreed when he had read the note. "You're crazy, all right. So what now?"

"Just a hunch," grinned Scotty. "You know there isn't a bigger swelled head on the Front than von Strohm, and don't forget, these Heinies think he's a tin god. It's a lot to expect, but if there's one guy in Germany, outside of the Kaiser and his family, who would be allowed to take the D.H. over the lines again, just to show that they've got it, von Strohm's the guy."

"Yeah," agreed Mickey, "like so much prop wash, he is. I still think you're nuts, Scotty, but go ahead. I'm for you, anyway."

"O.K.," grinned Scotty. "I'm going over now and

play postman myself for a change. I want you in the air in an hour, see. Meet me here over the field, and tell your flight and some of the rest of the gang to be ready to go."

LUCK was with Scotty when he reached von Strohm's field. The Fokker flight had just landed when he romped down on them. His heart leaped as he saw the Liberty D.H. sticking out of one of the almost hidden hangars, Mechanics were already at work on the motor, tearing it out. He saw the pilots racing about under him. Von Strohm was below. Scotty aimed for him and let the note drop.

Then, as Scotty roared toward the south boundary of the enemy field, he saw von Strohm running toward the spot where he had chanced to recognize the part of the D.H. that showed. If it was possible, von Strohm would furnish proof.

Mickey was waiting for him, high above the field, as Scotty stormed back. And below he could see Spads warming on the line, ready to take the air at a moment's notice. Then they climbed one thousand feet after another to reach the high-hung clouds up in the sun, where they could watch without being seen.

Minutes slipped into a half-hour. Then a full hour passed. Hope began to fade in Scotty's heart. Maybe he should have tried to bomb the D.H. as it stood there on the ground, at the German drome, but that would have been only partially satisfactory. Even if it was blown up, there might be enough left of the Liberty motor to give the Germans what they sought.

It seemed the hundredth time that he had flown to the edge of his cloud to peer down that he stiffened. For there, far below, coming from the north, was a big flight of Fokkers. He counted them. Nine altogether. And there was another plane, flying at point. The Liberty D.H. was leading that flight of Fokkers. Von Strohm's vanity had led him into the trick. He was showing the Allies now.

Scotty waved wildly to Mickey. He nodded. He, too, had seen. A minute passed while the flight thundered its way toward the field below. Scotty gave the signal. The sun was high. They could cast a shadow that almost cut the enemy flight below as they dived.

Down, down they hurled. And still the enemy flight below and whoever might be flying that D.H. hadn't seen them yet. The sun kept them blinded in that direction.

The line of flight of the snarling Spad that Scotty rode never wavered an inch. He peered anxiously

through his sights. The first burst would have to do the trick—either his or Mickey’s. He was centering the twin Vickers on the cockpits of the two figures in the D.H., even before he came within range. He must get both men, for there had been dual controls in the plane. Either might fly it.

Suddenly he lifted slightly and strained above the sights. He had recognized something in that rear cockpit. The helmet that the figure there wore was strangely familiar. He knew now. It was his own helmet. Von Strohm wasn’t satisfied with merely showing the ship. He was bringing the major over as an exhibit, also.

Scotty wavered slightly. His foot pressed the rudder bar and the screaming Spad swerved toward the Liberty motor. And at that same instant he saw the Fokkers spurt ahead, saw the pilot of the D.H. shoot a quick glance upward at the oncoming terror and then try to veer away.

BUT he acted an instant too late. Scotty was upon him with terrific speed. And his guns staccatoed their challenge. Tracers fluffed out before him and darted past the engine cowling of the great Liberty. That would be a better way, at that. Much as he hated the major, he could hardly bring himself to take a chance of killing him. And this way there was a chance, a good chance, of forcing the D.H. to the field, more or less intact.

A slight movement of the controls brought the nose of the Spad full on the engine where the tracers showed Scotty he had been wrong. He grinned as he saw them tear into the engine cowling. Laughed as he saw the puff of black smoke belch from the exhausts and knew that the engine was slowing.

Then he had to zoom sharply to keep from colliding with the injured D.H. And as he swerved in a steep vertical, Mickey slammed down on the observation plane and finished the job.

As Scotty whirled and tore at the nearest Fokker, he saw the prop of the Liberty stop with a jerk. There was nothing for that pilot to do but land now. He had no other choice.

Wham! Wham! Ships whirled and snarled about him. Scotty saw the flight below getting into the air, saw four of the Fokkers turn to dive.

He saw men with guns on the ground, running to the spot where the D.H. was landing—saw more ships taking the air—Spads! And he roared down at the Fokkers that imperiled their take-off, and gave them all he had.

It lasted but a short minute. The Fokkers didn’t care much for air fighting over an Allied field. They were cutting out and racing for home, with Spads chasing them in hot pursuit.

Scotty motioned Mickey down and cut to land. He rolled close to where the D.H. had stopped its roll and leaped out. Then he stared, wide-eyed, and for an instant, unbelieving. A slow grin spread across his face. For beside Major Nelson Wellington Van Parker Jones stood von Strohm. Guards had him covered and the major was sputtering.

“Take him away,” barked the major importantly, as though he had done the whole thing himself. Von Strohm moved with bowed head across the field.

“I’ll have those other pilots court-martialed,” sputtered the major, waving his arms angrily. “Those pilots who left us after the start of the flight. I’ll—” His eye singled out Mickey Flinn and Scotty MacRay from the others, and he forced a smile upon them.

“Ah, very noble work, men,” he exploded. “Very noble indeed. And, Flinn, when I receive my appointment to the new field, I’ll have you for squadron commander, if possible, sir. Yes, indeed, of course. And you, Captain MacRay, noble work on your part!”

Scotty did not answer. He simply stepped forward and lifted the helmet and goggles from the head of the major.

“It wasn’t you, sir,” he barked, “that I was concerned with. Just wanted to be sure that I got my new helmet and goggles back safe.”

A crimson flush rose in the major’s face. He twirled his moustache and was cut off by the colonel’s voice.

“You’ll do nothing to those men who left your crazy flight, major,” he roared. “Thank the Lord some one around here has some sense. And when the report of this gets to headquarters, I don’t expect there’ll be any post waiting for you, Jones.”

Then the colonel turned to Scotty.

“MacRay,” he said, and his voice hinted his change of feeling, “I still ought to court-martial you—” he stopped to let it sink in—”but I won’t. Clever work, I’d say, captain. And in a few days I expect Major Jones’ position will be open. As soon as that takes place, you’ll be raised to second-in-command here at the field, MacRay.

“And Flinn,” he went on. He was smiling now, “I’ll need some one to take MacRay’s place. It’s yours, if you like, Flinn.”

IT WAS a few minutes later, when Scotty and Mickey were alone, that Scotty was trying to write a note on the side of his Spad.

“Sort of lied in that note I sent across,” he grinned, “and I figure the Heinies are entitled to a full note of truthful explanation. Take a slant at that, Mickey, and see if I covered everything.”

He handed it to his pal while he climbed into his Spad and fastened the belt, and Mickey was laughing so he could hardly read.

“Thanks for returning Liberty D.H. complete, but what in hell will we do with von Strohm?”