



SKYROCKET

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

Just a Lone Yank Pilot Deep in Hunland—on the Flaming Trail of a Daring Allied Spy!

IT IS DEFINITELY KNOWN that an attempt will be made at that place to bring out a spy," said Major Messersmith grimly to Silent Orth. "The enemy doesn't know the identity of the spy. They've combed their own ranks, but our man is too well ensconced in his role as a German officer. For all that the Germans know, one of the very patrol officers who seek to guard against the rescue may be the man they wish to uncover.

"Every German plane within twenty kilometers will be on the watch at that place. It sounds like a job for an

armada. But one man must do it. You're that man, Orth."

"Yes, sir."

"You may not come back—"

"There's always that chance, sir."

"Well, good luck to you, Orth. Make your try at dawn tomorrow. It's forty kilometers straight west of Conflans."

"Okay. Meanwhile I'll be busy on my crate. I've got some ideas. I take it I have a free hand?"

"Right, but you're expected to bring back your man. The safety of thousands depends on it."

"I'll come back with my plane or on it," said Orth succinctly. Under his breath he added: "I hate spies! They're a sneaking nuisance!"

That conversation had preceded the toughest night's work Silent Orth had ever been called upon to perform. With the best rigger at the field, with the help of the chief ack emma—who was a master in his line—Orth had done things with his crate. He'd done things to motor, wings, and landing gear. He didn't know, of course, that in making his landing gear retractable that he was anticipating aeronautical science by two decades. He didn't care. He had a job to do.

His eyes were red-rimmed, his face wan and pale, as his Spad was wheeled out to the apron in the cool grey haze which preceded the dawn. Everything had been done that could be done. The rest was up to him.

"Will it work?" he asked the chief ack emma.

THE master technical sergeant shrugged weary shoulders.

"If it won't it can't be made to, sir," he said. "I think it will. I'd risk it myself."

"That's all I need, Sarge. Pull her through."

"Okay, Lieutenant. Contact!"

"Contact!"

"Switch on!"

"Switch on!"

The prop was pulled through. The savage roaring of the Hisso shook the grey morning silence, broke it into shreds of sound. The tarmac quivered with it. Orth's eyes were cold as he studied his instruments, noted how greatly the r.p.m.s. had been stepped up. His ears harkened to the sound of the Hisso with satisfaction. The Spad was right.

He signaled for the chocks to be yanked free.

HE FED the juice to the crate. It had required less warming up than was usual.

The tail came off almost at once as the Spad flashed down the field like a bullet. Orth's wingmates, roused by the strange sound of the refurbished motor, came out to stare. Orth lifted his crate straight into grey dawn.

It was still so dark that flares were visible against the ground where Allies and Germans faced each other across No-Man's-Land, bayonets clasped in the cold hands of men who had watched the night through, knowing that death lurked just across the way. They would see him, those friends and enemies, and enemy

telephones would jangle the news back into German-held territory.

In a matter of minutes the German sky would be filled with crates, out to investigate this early morning visitor.

"They'll find plenty," muttered Silent Orth.

He stiffened in his pit. His work began right now. His nerves, up to now, had been jangling. Now they relaxed. A prospective fight always left him calm and unafraid.

Orth knew exactly what he had to do. Down below were the German trenches. He had plenty of ammunition. He knew exactly where to look for the man he sought, what the signal would be—a red rocket at the edge of a secluded clearing.

Now he seemed to forget all that in his desire to get some action. He tilted his nose down, straight at the enemy trenches. No sooner had he done so than the Archies were raging at him, blossoming their black flowers of death all about him. The chances that he would be hit were a thousand or more to one.

His Spad rocked and shook with the concussion of the bursts. He held his fire. As he dived he looked into the east and nodded with satisfaction. The Germans were coming. It was almost as though they had been waiting.

There were half a dozen Fokkers, fast as hawks flying to the kill.

Orth grinned tightly to himself, and dived straight toward the muzzle of an anti-aircraft gun. It shrilled at him. Its protecting ring of Maxims spattered his wings with bullet holes. Orth laughed. His Vickers began to scream after he had taken a snap-glance at the oncoming Germans.

He saw the crew of the anti-aircraft gun fold up like human accordions as the gun ceased firing. He spun on down, swinging his guns as though they had been twin hoses of death. Through his ring-sights he saw the camouflaged nests of the Maxim gunners. His bullets laced into them.

ODDLY detached, feeling satisfied with himself so far, Orth saw two men come staggering forth from one nest, one with his hands at his throat, another with his hands at his stomach. The two men crashed down. But even as they started to fall Orth had slanted away to the left, to traverse the trenches of the Germans. Now the zigzag line of the trenches was right under him, under his retracted wheels. His fuselage was a bullet with wings. The enemy, seeing him, would think he

had lost his wheels. He intended that they should not come close enough to see for certain.

Again his Vickers were brought into play. They chattered a long shrill burst, straight into the faces of the Germans who stared whitely up at this dimly grey apparition which had come with the cold of the morning.

He glanced right. The Fokkers were flashing down at him, their guns already flaming. Orth studied them for a moment. In a few more seconds they would be blasting entirely too close to his pit. He swerved suddenly, straight into the middle of their formation.

HIS head was forward, his eye glued to his ring-sights. His knees hugged the stick, his hand was on his Bowden trips. His Vickers flamed their tracers through the grey murk.

Little more than a minute had elapsed. This must have looked to the Germans like a terrific, mad ground strafe.

He saw a German in his sights. The fellow was looking back and took half a dozen bullets of Orth's burst in the chest. Orth, without taking his thumb off his trips, kicked his Spad around, bringing another Fokker into line. The Fokker was very close. He couldn't miss. The enemy, not knowing to what lengths this madman might go, was trying wildly to escape.

But Orth knew exactly what he intended to do—and did it. Black smoke, inspired by the last of the burst which had killed the first flyer, blossomed from under the motor-housing of the second.

Two crates went down.

Orth zoomed, slanting away toward home.

Back over the lines he banked and headed straight into the north. The four Germans were after him. He watched them for a moment. Then, with five kilometers between himself and the Germans he banked right again, flashing with his motor full out into the east.

Forty kilometers to go. He had to make them. Nothing made in Germany could catch him. They could, of course, block his way back, but that was a bridge he would cross when he got to it.

He glanced to his right. The four German crates were still in pursuit, racing to cut him off. He studied the speed of their flight, compared it with his own.

"I'll be twenty kilometers inside the German lines when they reach me," he told himself. "Come ahead, Krauts, and see what it gets you!"

He didn't look back again. He knew that his keen sense of hearing would pick up the beat of Mercedes or Benzes by the time the enemy were close enough to fire, and he had enough to watch ahead.

Right in his line of flight, directly below and ahead, the thick grey columns of German troops, thinking themselves safe from observation, and the murderous projectiles of their enemies, were crowding a bridge across a sullen stream. Orth muttered to himself.

"Every one of 'em carries a rifle filled with enough bullets to kill plenty of my friends. Why should I have mercy?"

HE TILTED his nose downward and dived. The wind shrieked through his taut rigging. His knees gripped his stick again. His thumb went to the trips.

The Germans were fighting one another to get off the bridge which was certain to prove a death trap. Some of them paused to snap their Mausers at him. But they fired just once, no more, for then he was above them, his Vickers flaming savagely.

He saw men sprawl on the bridge, saw men break through the bridge railing to tumble into the river, fighting like madmen to free themselves of their packs which were sure to pull them down to death in the cold stream.

Then he was zooming again, looking back to see how close behind were the four crates. They were no closer, though he knew they had their motors full out, their hands on their trips; that their eyes were keen with the lust to kill, their jaws set in masks of determination.

He was away to the left, quitting the rivers of troops, which seemed to drop crazily away to his right, to vanish behind a wall of trees.

AGAIN he set his course. He looked at his watch, at his airspeed indicator, then studied the ground for landmarks.

"Thirteen kilometers to go," he muttered. "And no resistance in sight. I wonder when the fighting starts?"

Now, up from his right, came a single crate to dispute his progress. Orth studied it for a moment. It was an Albatross.

He banked right and went shrieking down, taking advantage of his greater altitude to get in the first blow. Wildly the German opened fire—at too great range. Orth's lips twisted into a smile. His Vickers flamed.

The Albatross seemed to hesitate in mid-climb. It hung by its invisible propeller for what seemed like

eons of time. It hung there until Orth, banking back on his course—because he had seen his tracers end in the midst of the propeller, beyond which was the white face of the German pilot—was beyond range. Then the Albatross' nose fell with a rush, its tail kited up—and the Albatross was gone, a dead hand tightly locked about the now useless stick.

The four flyers were closer now. He knew that the roaring of the four motors was being heard through all this section of Germany, that voices of authority were crackling out excitedly, bidding men rise on wings of vengeance to knock down this upstart who dared all the might of Germany.

Orth grinned again.

He eased his crate into greater speed. It was amazing how quickly it shot away from all pursuit.

The sky all about him now showed the scudding wings of many crates. Most of them were coming back from the front. This was too far behind the lines for any fields save experimental ones, run by flyers who had served their time in actual war combat, or by professors of death who had grey hair and wore spectacles perched high on hooked noses. Orth did not fear them.

He deadheaded on. He looked at his watch.

"Ten kilometers to go," he muttered.

Then he looked back. Twelve planes were so close to him that they would be on his tail the minute he tried to shoot a landing. And he could try but once. If he failed the spy was doomed, his information lost.

"I can't get back into the air without a fight," he decided. "I wonder just how much crust the spy has."

ORTH didn't know the man. How would he know that it wasn't a German he was to pick up, that somehow the Germans hadn't uncovered the Allied spy, and were leaving a German in his place who would turn the tables by landing in Allied territory and finding out secrets of the Allies to take back to his own people?

Orth had a password which the spy was supposed to repeat to him. But it might have been tortured out of him by the Germans if they captured him.

"Hell," muttered Orth, "why should I worry? My job is to get the chap back, Intelligence's job to decide whether he's a hero or a German spy!"

He looked at his watch again.

"Six kilometers to go!"

Now there was no mistaking the spot. The clearing was plainly visible. There were grey troops all around

it. Somewhere among them was the man Orth sought. Over the clearing, wheeling like eagles or vultures, were a half dozen fast German pursuit planes.

Orth gritted his teeth. How could he hope to find the needle in the haystack here? How could the spy identify himself in the midst of a fight in which Orth must twist and turn and fight as he had never fought before to keep from being shot down?

"I GUESS he'll have to figure that out," thought Orth grimly. "I can't do it all. It looks like a hot reception."

Orth considered for a moment.

Then, as the Germans swung into formation to receive him above his objective, he suddenly dived. When he had all the speed his crate would stand, when any other Spad would have lost its wings on the pull-out, Orth dragged the stick back into his belly, and zoomed.

The Spad stood on her tail. Smoke belched from her exhausts. She hung on her propeller and clawed her way upward like a skyrocket shot from a cannon. She sped straight into the sky, straighter and swifter than any crate in which Orth had ever ridden—straighter and faster than any crate was destined to travel for years to come.

Up and up while the needle of his altimeter oscillated crazily. Up and still up. The German crates had shot away below him, as though all support had been dropped from beneath their wings, as he reached for the Spad's ceiling. His crate was slowing down, feeling the pull. His altimeter said eight thousand feet when he finally leveled off. He took a deep breath.

"Yes, Sarge," he apostrophized the distant master technical sergeant, "we're geniuses, you and me. And today we'll prove it. I only hope there'll be friends somewhere to know we've proved it. Now, let's go before they catch their breath!"

As he leveled off above the nest of Hell, out of which he must pluck a spy, Orth thought bitterly of the thing which had really been uppermost in his mind since Messersmith had given him this impossible mission. "I hate spies! They are sneaking, sniveling cowards! A decent man wouldn't be a spy for all the money in the world! There isn't a man among them, on either side of the lines."

He had the normal man's abhorrence of the spy who would wheedle his way into the confidence of an enemy, only to betray him. He supposed spies had their uses in war time, just as stool pigeons were used by the police for information of the underworld.

“Just the same,” he said, putting the nose of his crate down to begin the most dangerous and spectacular part of his mission, “I hate every last one of ‘em. This one will probably gum the works somehow.”

EIGHT thousand feet straight down, and few crates could pull out after a thirty-five hundred foot dive under power. But Orth set his teeth grimly.

“You’ll take it and like it,” he addressed his Spad. “Pull your blasted wings off if you want to. If we don’t do this job neither of us will need wings anyhow—at least you won’t, and I’m not sure Saint Peter would allow me to wear any. I’d be slipping out past the sentries to do battle with the dark angels and keep heaven and hell in an uproar!”

The conceit pleased him. Aiming at the center of the clearing below, he held his stick with his knees, made sure that his helmet was securely fastened as the Spad began to gather speed. His guns were ready. His crate was in the best possible condition. Nothing could hit him at the height of his dive. “Well, here goes!” he said to himself.

DOWN and down. Faster than a man would fall, faster than a rock would fall, as his propeller bit into the yawning abyss. Down, faster and faster.

Down the stairways of the sky, like something dropped from a high mountain, powered with a motor built for speed. Orth blessed the ingenuity of the master technical sergeant for many things—for the stepped up speed of the Hissso, for the new slant to the wings. It would stand a terrific dive. It was going down now like a bat out of hell, but had scarcely started, even yet, to dive.

He stared through his ring-sight at the circling enemy. They were undecided. He saw them scurry to right and left to escape his plunge. He was serving notice on them, with his squealing wires, that he wouldn’t turn aside for man, devil, or the fastest thing on German wings.

Down, faster and ever faster.

The wind ahead of his prop was a solid wall that screamed as he shot through it, a bullet with pinions.

The Germans were coming up. The Germans on the ground could see what he intended. They were running to safety. The German crates were getting ready to smash him as he pulled out. Then they were beginning to doubt that any ship could pull out of such a prolonged dive with its wings intact. Orth grinned.

He knew that his dive must be an ear-splitting shriek in the brains of the waiting Germans. There still was no way of knowing which of the grey-clad ones down there was the man he sought.

One of the enemy dared to shoot across the line of his dive, as though to frighten him into slowing his frightful descent. Orth merely touched his trips. Bullets ranted from his Vickers. He saw his tracers end at the cockpit of his enemy.

The Fokker spun down, trailing a comet-tail of sullen flames like a streamer behind it, until it crashed into the trees at the edge of the clearing. One gone.

Orth looked at his altimeter needle. No telling anything by that. It seemed to have gone entirely crazy. Orth grinned. He had to judge by the ground, and the ground was a blur, as though it spun on some crazy axis of its own.

Orth studied it longer. Two hundred feet above it, he brought his stick back into his belly. Over him hovered the German crates. He looked at them once as his crate climbed for the sky.

HE LET a burst go at a German belly.

Then he was on his back, coming over in a tight, lightning-swift loop, heading again for the ground. Down and down, fishtailing trying to cut his speed. He didn’t know which way the wind came from, but he thought from the west. He came into the clearing from the east then, fighting his crate, saying to himself:

“I hate spies! They’re a blasted bother! An infernal nuisance!”

The ground was under him. He dared to look ahead. A lone man in grey, apparently an officer, was racing out directly ahead of him, brandishing a Luger. Orth studied him for a moment.

“Melodramatic way to commit suicide,” he decided.

The eyes of all other Germans were on the fast descending crate. Nobody seemed to have noticed the lone German and his automatic.

RIFLES were hammering away at Orth, but it was like trying to hit a sunbeam. He could never stop in the clearing at this ghastly rate of speed. He’d save one bullet for that fool directly ahead, knock him down before his body could hit the entering edge of Orth’s wing and smash it by sheer force of the impact.

But then, all at once, he noticed something. Not only were the Germans firing at him, they were firing at the lone German in the center of the field!

“That’s my man,” decided Orth, “and he’s so scared

he doesn't know what he's doing. And his enemies are so excited they couldn't hit a bull in the tail with a wet sack "

He fought his crate as the wheels touched. He bounced fifty feet. He refused to pick her up with his motor. He was fishtailing to beat the band, sorry for once that his Spad was capable of such terrific speed.

Slower, slower, but never slow enough to pick a man off the field like that, and before he could circle and come back German bullets would nullify all he had done so far. It was up to the man in grey.

Orth was cutting speed all he could, driving his crate straight for the lone figure. He thought the man crumpled, thought a bullet had got him. But the German was merely stooping, his eyes fixed hard on the rushing wings of Orth's crate.

He flung his weapon aside now. No need for further subterfuge. If the spy missed he would be executed where he stood. "I'll bet his face is green!" thought Orth.

Closer, closer. The German had his left hand extended, fingers spread wide "He's going to try for a strut," thought Orth. "I'll yank his arm out of his shoulder. Then—"

He passed over the spot where the lone figure had stood. Over the entering wedge of his low-wing he saw fingers, white-knuckled with strain, bloodless at their tips, grasping the strut.

Under the wing he could see the feet of the spy swinging free. Then he saw a second hand come up and grasp the strut above the first.

"So scared he's got the strength of three men," thought Orth. "Well, it's up to him from here out."

Orth jammed juice to his crate, soared out of the clearing, a straight leap into space. He saw a face appear over the entering edge of his wing.

The face was bloody, but it grinned. The lips shaped a word, which Orth could plainly read.

"Argonne!"

IT WAS the password, and this was Orth's spy!

Faster and faster sped Silent Orth as the spy crawled into the wing, spread-eagling himself against the fuselage. Orth climbed to four thousand feet before the German flyers were on top of him. The spy was looking back. Orth slipped his hands off the stick long enough to hug himself with them.

The spy frowned, then nodded—and clutched the strut with the strength of desperation. At the same time he hooked his toes over the trailing edge of the

wing which was all that intervened between him and the earth below. Orth nosed down. In three seconds he was screaming down the sky, faster than any German crate could follow. One bullet would kill the spy, and the spy must not be killed. The spy, his face convulsed, stared at him.

With a hundred feet under his fuselage, above the ground, Orth came back on his stick again. It was as though he had hit a place on the ground and bounced. Again he was hanging by his prop to the roof of the sky, scrabbling his way back up.

The spy clung, his face close against the wing fabric.

"He's never had a ride like this," opined Orth, as he smashed back up through the German formation, slanting slightly toward home. "I'll bet he'll never forget it."

THE Germans were slanting up, their Spandaus raging. But they might as well have tried to hit a Big Bertha shell in transit. Up and up to seven thousand Orth gunned the crate—up until the weight of the spy on the wing started pulling down the right one.

"If I gain a few thousand with each dive," thought Orth, "I'll be up to her ceiling in ten minutes, and then I can dive straight for home." Now, taking advantage of the weight on his wing, Orth swung his crate in that direction, never slacking the motor's pull on the bullet-swift crate. Only now he spun a little, to get her headed for home. A few yards at a time, a kilometer here, a kilometer there.

And behind him the Germans raged, not understanding the scheme of this man who alternately dived to destruction and hung his propeller against a drifting cloud, all so swift that not even the fast Fokkers could bring their Spandaus within range. Again the Spad screamed downward. The Germans stubbornly refused this time to give way, so Orth sped straight into them with his Vickers ranting and raving. The spy held his face close against the wing. His legs were wide spread, hooked under the wing. His head was downward. His shoulder was hard against the strut.

"I'll bet," thought Orth, "that if he pulled the strut out and swung free, his feet would hold him on—those and his teeth! If he isn't using his teeth, they're the only things he's not using. It takes more courage

to fly a crate like this than to face a dozen firing squads."

Down and down. This time Orth started up when

there were three thousand feet under his wings, leveling off at ten thousand elevation. This time he flew straight into the west until once again the German crates rode close enough behind him to open fire. The spy hadn't moved.

Now Orth slanted straight for the home field and gave his crate the gun.

NOTHING a-wing could have caught him. No need now to worry about losing wings on the pull-out. He could simply level off. He could almost shoot a landing from here. Dim with distance to the east, he could see the snake-trace of the trenches. He looked back. The Germans were being hopelessly left behind.

Orth grinned tightly as the spy dared to lift his head—and almost had it jerked off by the wind.

"I'll bet that lopped ten years off the guy's life," thought Orth. "Why the devil does a he-man turn spy, anyhow? Sneaking cowards!"

Once more Orth was compelled to scabble for elevation. Once again he dived to get speed for the mighty climb into the sky. Twice he was on his back, keeping his eyes on the spy, who never seemed, even when upside down, to show a bit of space between his body and the wing of the Spad.

"He's glued there with terror," thought Orth. "Well, I'm going to deliver him back home, anyhow."

Now the lines were close.

Two crates shot up, straight into Orth's pathway. One went down in flames before the savage thrust of his chattering Vickers. The other was hopelessly out of the running before its pilot could think of a good way to avenge the fall of his comrade.

Then Orth saw his own field, dead ahead. His altimeter had steadied at last—at five hundred feet.

Archies blasted at Orth in vain.

His field was dead ahead. He slanted down for it, fishtailing. He wouldn't, he decided, even bother to exchange words with his passenger. Let Intelligence do that. The field's edge came under his wings. His passenger was signaling, pointing.

Orth caught his breath. He had forgotten that his wheels were still folded up against his fuselage. If he had landed like that—

But the wheels went down.

A few seconds later Orth touched them to his own tarmac, and drew a deep breath for the first time. He taxied to a halt. The spy was sitting on the wing, his back to Orth.

Orth jumped from his crate.

He hadn't meant to look at the spy, but he couldn't help it. The fellow now stood on solid earth, nonchalantly producing a cigarette which he thrust between his lips. He found a match and struck fire to the white pellet. Then he looked at Orth through narrowed eyes. His hands hadn't trembled with the cigarette or the light, and his knees weren't trembling now.

"By the way, Lieutenant," he said, "the next time you pick me out of Germany, will you be good enough to remember something?"

Orth opened his mouth to say something, amazed at the spy's coolness.

"Whaaaat?" he finally managed.

"I'm just a humble, sneaking spy, not a wing-walker or a circus stunt-man!"

Orth gasped and grinned. The spy grinned back. Involuntarily Silent Orth, who hated spies, advanced on this one. Their eyes locked steadily, without wavering. They didn't say anything else.

Each shot forth a gnarled fist.

Each shook hands with a man!