



*Hank Flynn
thought that a bag of ten gave
him the right to give the skipper a
few points, but he didn't know that the best
boomerangs always fly in a curve.*

HIGH BOOMERANG

by ARTHUR J. BURKS

HANK FLYNN, second lieutenant in the air service, was six feet two in his stocking feet and could whip any German that flew. His friends had told him so, and he modestly admitted when pressed, or even when not pressed, that they probably underestimated his abilities. He wasn't a braggart, a bluff or an ass; he was just too young for his job and too full of the spirits of life. To others the war might be an excuse to discuss deep questions of psychology; to Hank it was a grand chance to have a hell of a good time and be decorated for it.

Hank had been decorated. He hadn't been kissed on both cheeks because the French general hadn't been tall enough, and Hank had leaned backward a little. He liked his kisses without whiskers. He believed greatly in himself, as aforesaid, and had ten German planes, all fast pursuit ships, to his credit. He was a heller in the sky and loved to fight. His equals liked him. His superiors threatened courts-martial and grinned at his back when they knew he couldn't see them do it.

He had flaming red hair and a hawk nose smothered in freckles, and a grin that reached from here to there. But when, out of a clear sky, he was

ordered to join that peculiar outfit in the woods across the lines from Masmunster known as "The Boomerangs," something whispered to him that maybe there mightn't be so much to smile about after he reported.

However, he tooled his Spad in over the woods en route to the tarmac of his prospective wingmates with his wide grin on his face. Whatever else might be said for the Boomerangs they did their job. He wanted to prove right off the bat that he could fit in with them.

"Why," he had asked a comrade at Romorantin, "do they call 'em the Boomerangs? Sounds like a silly name to me."

"They call 'em Boomerangs," said his comrade mysteriously—the comrade having been surveyed out of the Boomerangs a month before because of wounds—with a strange twinkle in his eyes, "because none of 'em is from Australia."

Which struck Hank as being a hell of an answer.

He wished, when he came in sight of the field, that a couple of Fokkers or Pfalzes or something would attack him above the tarmac. It would be a swell way to introduce himself. He could dump 'em both on the tarmac in flames and thus report, without regard to the pun, in a blaze of glory.

But no Germans attacked him. The air above the field was peculiarly empty of Krauts, which might have told Hank something about the Boomerangs. But he wasn't good at reading signs. He had too good a time to be bothered about externals. He was only sorry there were no Krauts he could park in the backyard of his new commanding officer.

So he did the next best thing. He pulled a lot of stunts over the field, ending up by practically dragging his right wing in the dirt the full length of the tarmac, righting himself just in time to touch wheels, almost to the hangars at the end of the field. He traveled at full speed, the motor of his new Spad roaring out to all and sundry the glad tidings that Hank Flynn had duly arrived.

Funny, though, nobody came out onto the field to watch him. The place made him think of a funeral. So he banked in, somewhat subdued, touched wheels to the rough tarmac, rolled up to the deadline and cut the gun. A sergeant and a couple of grease-balls came forth leisurely to take his ship.

"Where," asked Hank, "is the skipper of this undertaking parlor?"

"Right over there!" said the sergeant shortly, pointing, and omitting the usual "sir" that in common politeness he should have given a new arrival.

"Yeah?" said Hank. "And why do they call this outfit the Boomerangs?"

"Captain Blythe will tell you," replied the sergeant.

IT BEGAN to dawn upon Hank that the sergeant and the greaseballs didn't regard him as being exactly what they'd have sent for in a pinch. They were plainly studying him.

"Where's the gang?" he asked. "I'm Lieutenant Henry Flynn."

"Everybody except those on patrol's asleep," said the sergeant. He didn't say whether he cared who the devil Flynn might be, or indicate by so much as a raised eyebrow that he'd ever heard of him. But Flynn grinned anyway. They'd all know him soon enough.

"Better have the ship in shape to take off at almost any time," he said. "I'm not long on goldbricking."

The sergeant didn't answer. Hank strode across the field to the office of the commanding officer, while behind him the grease-balls delivered themselves of their opinions.

"Big-headed shavetail!" said Private O'Mally. "Disgrace to the Irish! Thinks too danged well of himself."

"He's a horse's neck with reverse English," said Private Olsen.

"He's a fighting man from way back," said the sergeant. "But bethinks too well of himself, all right, and the Boomerangs'll have to sort of initiate him into the why and where-fore of things."

Hank knocked at the door and entered at sound of a gruff voice.

"LIEUTENANT HENRY FLYNN reporting for duty, sir," he said. There was a mocking light in his eyes as he delivered himself of the ritual in which he could see no sense whatever. If he had his way he'd enter a new place and say, "You sent for Hank Flynn? Well, here I am, old-timer, what's next?"

But he knew the minute he looked at Blythe that you couldn't do that.

Blythe looked up at him. His jaw muscles tightened the least bit. His eyes were deep blue and there were lines a-plenty around them. His hair was sandy. He was a two-hundred pounder. Flynn could imagine the roaring voice that could come from that deep chest. But the opening and closing hands of the commander were Blythe's only indication of feeling.

"Oh, yes," he said, and Flynn almost fell over backward at the apologetic tone of the voice, "I've

been expecting you.” That sounded inane enough in all conscience. “You’ve done quite well since you got to the Front, haven’t you, Lieutenant Flynn?”

Flynn looked his skipper over. It seemed a shame for such a mild voice to issue from such a barrel chest. This guy looked as though a mouse could chase him up a rafter. He seemed likable enough, though. Flynn would get along with him all right. He’d be able to give Blythe a lot of pointers, too. Blythe hadn’t brought down ten planes. Flynn had.

“Call me Hank, Skipper,” said Flynn, grinning. “Yeah, I haven’t done so bad, considering that I’ve only been up for three months. Ten crates, all pursuits. Didn’t you see me come in?”

“Yes, Flynn, I heard you come in.”

“How’d you like my introduction? Can anybody in this outfit drag a wing on the ground and get away with it?”

Again the mild voice.

“Not while I’m in command, or whoever does it will be left on the ground. You acted like a horse’s neck, Flynn.”

Flynn backed up a little and looked at Blythe, but decided that Blythe had said that in order to carry out a show of being the boss when he probably really felt as apologetic as he looked.

“Look here, Skipper,” he said, “I hate rules. I want to fly independently. I don’t want to be held back by cautious flyers. I’m here to drag a wide loop across the Front. If you don’t appreciate my ability there are other skippers who will.”

“I appreciate it. Maybe it’ll be worth something when you get a little sense. When you learn what it’s all about maybe I’ll let you fly with the Boomerangs. I wouldn’t let you fly alone without experience.”

Then Flynn hit the ceiling. Him, Hank Flynn, without experience, and with ten planes to his credit?

“Experience?” he railed. “What the hell does anyone here know about experience? I’m—I’m—”

His smile was gone. He was speechless with anger. To be treated like a kid! Blythe was still mild.

“You’ve never had experience against the Prussian Redtails, Flynn. They’re different from anybody else.”

“They’re Krauts, aren’t they? I can lick—”

“Aw, shut up!” snapped Blythe. “Now I’ll tell you why we’re called the Boomerangs and then you can get out. They call us the Boomerangs because I issue just one order to my flyers: ‘Go out, do your job, and come back.’”

Flynn grinned mockingly.

“And I suppose that you punish direly those who don’t come back?”

Blythe’s face was slowly getting red, so slowly that Flynn hadn’t been conscious of the fact.

“Unfortunately,” said Blythe, his voice changing oddly, “there’s no punishment for suicide. I hate losing men. I insist that my men come back. That means they take only necessary chances.”

“Cautious!” ejaculated Flynn. “Careful as old maids at a sewing circle—”

But that’s as far as he got. For Blythe hit the ceiling in his turn. Now there came from his great chest the voice Flynn had expected in the first place. He ripped the splinters off the inside of the headquarters building. It made the floor shake. It brought the sweat pouring from the body of Hank Flynn. It made him feel as though he could crawl under a rug in a high hat. It blistered and burned like acid and it hurt because the words it spoke were so darned close to the truth. Flynn was glad to escape with his neck.

But, having been called all the non-fighting names in the lexicon of profanity, he had the audacity to turn at the door and grin at the skipper before he left.

“Call me Hank, Skipper,” he said, “and watch your blood pressure!”

THEN Flynn slammed the door. Flynn imagined that his parting sally had left Blythe speechless. Blythe was actually grinning at the door. “How it kicks the feet from under ‘em to have a mild-mannered gent turn into an erupting volcano! I never tire of using it on fresh guys. That Flynn will be a fighter if I can knock his high hat off.”

The telephone rang and Blythe answered. His face went grave. He yelled orders at orderlies and clerks. Then he erupted from the office. Flynn was just being taken to his quarters. Blythe yelled at him.

“Stand by your crate for duty with all hands, Flynn!” he barked. “There’s something on.”

Flynn grinned and raced for his Spad. Other Spads were being swiftly trundled out. Six other flyers came leisurely but purposefully forth and took their places in their crates. Nobody seemed to pay any attention to Flynn. That got his goat, but he’d show ‘em if this flight went anywhere there happened to be something doing. Blythe came across to him and spoke mildly.

“Take it easy. No fool stunts. Do your job. You’ll know what it is when we get there. And get back. And make sure that your squadron gets back.”

Flynn nodded curtly and crawled into his Spad. It

needed no warming up. His Vickers were in A-I shape. He was ready to go. Of course he didn't know what it was all about, but it didn't matter. When they ran into Germans there was only one thing to do: blast 'em out of the sky. Simple enough. Blythe signaled and eight planes smashed down the field almost as one. These Boomerangs knew their rudders and sticks, no question about that. He could tell it the minute they started off. Blythe's wheels got free first. Then Flynn jerked his free. They all jumped off then, to rendezvous at six thousand. Seven planes formed the fighting V, while Blythe rode a couple of hundred feet above the formation, and he headed straight for Germany.

They were over the jagged lines, and rocking among the archie bursts, when Flynn saw the Redtails. There, were a dozen of them, flying in a' closely knit semicircle. They looked businesslike. Flynn wondered how Blythe had got word of their coming before they had passed the lines, and what they were setting out to do. Well, whatever it was, the job of the Boomerangs was to see that they didn't do it. And the Redtails were making no effort to avoid the issue. Flynn became a little excited. He looked right and left at his wingmates in their patched Spads. Nobody seemed much excited, as far as he could see and feel.

He was a little hurt that he was so near the center of the formation. As though some effort were being made to protect him! His grin was a little crooked now. The ends of that enemy semicircle began to flare out a little, to open up like the jaws of a trap. The Boomerangs were close enough to have opened fire, but they didn't. Neither did the Germans. It was as though both sides were waiting to come close enough to make fatal hits a certainty. Flynn watched the Germans. He should have been watching Blythe for signals. He was almost caught off base when Blythe signaled to break formation and engage.

Blythe had timed things to the second. When the German Spandaus started their savage chattering of death there was nobody in line with their guns to take the bullets—except Hank Flynn. Bullets smashed through his wings, snapped about his ears. A strut let go with a sound as of a ball hitting a pin in a bowling alley. A flying wire stood straight out behind as though frozen stiff. Automatically Flynn rolled out of line of fire, forgetting that he might roll into a wingmate. But as though they had expected him to do something of the kind, his wingmates had given him plenty of room.

Instantly the sky was a tumbling mess of planes, Spads and Fokkers all mixed up together in a noisy

hell's brew of death and destruction. Flynn laughed into the slipstream—and a burst of Spandau lead ripped through the floor of his pit and almost got his feet and the rudder. You couldn't even take time out to laugh it seemed. Maybe these Redtails had never heard of Hank Flynn! Well, after this battle they'd know. He got a Fokker in his sights and his Vickers let go with a long burst. He was so surprised at the ease with which the Fokker evaded him that he let a hundred go off into space uselessly before he realized that he was facing the best flyers he had ever seen.

FLYNN had to get down to business. He fought like a fiend. He saw a Fokker go down in flames before the savage fighting of Captain Blythe. He himself tried to count coup half a dozen times, but no sooner would he get a Fokker in his sights than bullets would begin whispering about his ears. The Germans were playing with him, handling him with ease. Such ease it was that he almost burst into tears, had there been time for tears. Hell's sweet bells! If he didn't get at least one Fokker he'd be disgraced forever.

Two more Fokkers went down and the opposing forces were on equal terms. Finally, when one Spad had limped out of the fight, heading for home while the Boomerangs kept the Germans tied to the sky, in the fight, to give the wingmate a chance to win free, the Germans started to fight their way home.

Flynn finally got on one Fokker's tail—and at the very first burst the Fokker hesitated. Black smoke burst from under her motor housing. She rolled off down the sky, singing the death song of falling ships. Hell, this was easy after all. Redtails got killed as well as nondescripts, and Flynn had fought some good men in his time. Anyway, he wouldn't be disgraced to-day. He noted the insignia on the side of the Fokker for inclusion in his combat report, which would bring his count to eleven.

The Germans suddenly drew together and started for home.

Instantly Blythe signaled for the Boomerangs to draw out of the fight. But Flynn had other ideas.

"Hell, we can drop every last one of 'em! Run out, you old maids, but I'm going after those Krauts!"

He banked and started for Germany and two Spads drifted up ahead of him, barring his way. One of them was flown by Blythe, the other by his second in command. Flynn joined the squadron for the flight home.

Back on the tarmac Flynn lost his temper as Blythe

gathered the flyers around him to introduce them to Flynn.

“Hell’s bells!” he railed. “We could have got every last Kraut plane, and we drew off instead. Boomerangs, eh? Take no chances, eh? Well, if I were in command of this outfit—”

“You’d lead ‘em into Germany on the trail of those Redtails and would have a hundred planes wrapped around your neck before you’d got two miles into German sky. Flynn, you’re still a fool,” it was Blythe talking. “You didn’t watch my signal. You rolled out of line of fire without looking. Your fought like a dunce.”

“But I knocked a Fokker down, didn’t I?”

“No,” said Lieutenant Cunningham, “if you’re talking of the Fokker you were just opening on, I got him myself. Petersen saw it. So did Hawkins.”

The two officers named agreed. Flynn remembered that he had counted coup with amazing swiftness, but he was perfectly sure that he deserved credit for that plane, and said so. His new wingmates were noncommittal. They were studying him. Blythe spoke again.

“If you question the wisdom of the way this outfit is handled again, Flynn,” he said, “I’ll knock your block off!”

“You and who else?” cried Flynn. “I say you’re too careful, and—”

Blythe peeled off his flying togs. So did Flynn. The flyers formed the inevitable circle. Grease-balls, in defiance of regulations and the proper respect due to officers, watched gleefully.

It took Blythe eighteen minutes to knock Flynn out. When the fight was over Flynn was a mess. His eyes were swollen shut. His fists were covered with blood. His stomach felt as though it had been pounded raw. His jaw felt like the mumps mixed with sour pickles. But there was one satisfaction: the last time he had seen Blythe, the skipper hadn’t looked much better. His wingmates left him where he fell. Grease-balls studiously avoided him. He finally revived on his own account and rose to his feet. He pried his eyes open.

His smile was entirely gone. In his heart was a hatred for the whole gang of Boomerangs, and the intention to show them. Next time he went into action he would knock down some Redtails so decisively that there’d be no doubt who’d done it, no chance for Blythe and his cautious brethren to steal the credit from him. He went to the galley and demanded beefsteak. The cook told him where to get it, and when he got peevish, told him where to go in three short

words. It was a fine day for hurt feelings. But his time would come.

HIS chance came next day. Flynn had two of the most beautiful black eyes he had ever seen on anybody and he was as peeved as a bear with a sore paw. That his wingmates ignored him when the whole squadron lined up at the deadline didn’t improve his temper any. And Blythe, well Blythe treated him exactly as though he didn’t have two black eyes which Blythe had given him, or as though he had forgotten the two black eyes which Flynn had given him in return.

If Blythe had been nasty with him, or had bawled him out it wouldn’t have been quite so bad, perhaps. But this being indifferent got under his skin. As Blythe turned away from him Flynn spoke softly to his skipper:

“One of these days I’m going to whip hell outa you!”

Blythe shrugged his shoulders. He did it absent-mindedly, as though he really were not interested, and Flynn didn’t hit him in the back of the neck simply because, after all, one doesn’t smack the commanding officer unless one desires more or less permanent incarceration behind iron bars.

Flynn could have whipped the entire German Air Force in that moment. With difficulty he held himself in, awaiting the routine orders. He knew in a general way that something was up, that they were to go out and mix with the Redtails again. He knew little beyond that, for Blythe didn’t give orders to his squadron until they were aloft, when he gave it by signal.

All he’d said to them had been:

“The usual stuff, you birds!” That meant: “Go out, do your job, and come back.” And old maid’s policy of caution. To-day he’d show all and sundry what was wrong with that, even if he got his can knocked off doing it. If that happened to him—well, might as well be dead as merely to wish you were dead. He was suffering from a bad case of wounded vanity, knew it himself, but wouldn’t have admitted it to a soul.

A dozen Spads, all patched up from yesterday, jumped into the blue vault of the sky. There was a tenseness about the whole outfit to-day, as though the Boomerangs all knew that something unforeseen was due to happen, something out of the ordinary. Half of them looked at Flynn as they swung into formation at seven thousand. Flynn wondered if the stiff-necked old maids were blaming him for something, or were expecting him to place them all in jeopardy, or something.

However, things would work themselves out. They always did.

Flynn had a hard time keeping in formation on the trip over the lines. He was gnashing at the bit. He wanted to smash away into Germany, smacking down everything that stood in his way. Not even the Redtails who had played with him yesterday could do anything to him to-day.

And in the fight which suddenly developed two miles behind the German lines, he was by way of proving that he wasn't just a blustering braggart who couldn't produce. He fought like a man inspired, and as the first Fokker, in a flight of fifteen, went down before his chattering Vickers, which grew hot under his hands, he waved his hands and yelled soundlessly into the slipstream.

"Play with me, will you? Watch me, you birds, I'll show you how Germans should be fought."

Maybe some of his recklessness entered into the Boomerangs. Maybe—but whatever the reason, the Boomerangs fought like two men each; they were everywhere. They had eyes in the back of their heads. They poured lead into Fokkers they caught in their sights, and watched that they themselves didn't get caught in Spandau ringsights. In addition to which each man kept a sharp watch on his buddies, for all had the same orders—to get back themselves and see that all the rest got back. It was a good order to assure teamwork—only Flynn had learned to believe in a one-man team.

TWO Spads limped out as soon as hit enough to partially disable them. Flynn understood that with the usual outfit, those Spads would have stayed in, limping through a hopeless fight, until some German ace had added them to his list of kills. But when a Boomerang got it, he ducked out, if he were alive, and his friends covered his retreat. Thus he returned to fight another day.

Two more Spads had to quit. Four Fokkers were throwing up four sheets of flame from the wilderness twelve thousand feet below. Two other Fokkers were making tough going of it, but sticking to the fight. Under Blythe's system those two Fokkers would have ducked for home, their retreat covered by their buddies. But the Redtails were not commanded by Blythe. So Blythe got one of the limpers and Flynn got the other one.

That both were more or less helpless made no difference. Chivalry, the waving of an opponent out

of a fight just because he was hurt, wasn't part of the Boomerang code; story-book stuff.

In fifteen minutes it became plain that the Redtails were on the losing end again. Flynn wondered why they didn't increase the fury of their attack, why they didn't go mad to avenge their fallen comrades, why they were so careful to start crawling when they knew themselves losing. That would have been his way. But the Redtails cut out, and Blythe signaled for the return formation which would let them go free.

Only, Hank Flynn deliberately failed to see that signal. His wingmates might cut for home, for fear of following the Germans so deeply into German territory they would be in danger—how else could the Germans see it?—but Hank Flynn was going to show 'em that he was different. He pressed his advantages. When he got anybody on the run he chased his tail off him.

And he got such a good start that Blythe and the second-in-command didn't head him off this time. He knew he could outfly his enemies. He'd take 'em from the rear, picking off the last one, steadily eating his way into the formation, like a mouse digging a tunnel through a piece of cheese, until he finally was forced to run for it, or had wiped out what he considered his due portion for the day.

He didn't even look back. Somebody would be signaling, but if he didn't look back he could say truthfully he hadn't seen any signal, and had been so excited he hadn't looked for one, or realized what he was doing.

He crawled up on the German formation which was dead-heading home. He crawled up on it with ridiculous ease. How could he know that the Redtails would have given ten of their number just to bring down a Boomeranger? The Boomerangs always got back and that fact wasn't too good for German morale. How did the Boomerangs get back? The Germans hadn't figured it out. They were classy flyers, the Boomerangs, but so were the Redtails—who had been ordered to knock down a Boomeranger if it took the lives of ten flyers to do it.

The very name "Boomerang" had become a challenge to the Germans. But Flynn didn't know this. He didn't know that to the Redtails one Boomeranger was just like another. He didn't even realize that he was crawling up so fast. Just behind the last Fokker he started his Vickers to singing. He held his stick between his knees. He'd go through that formation like phthisis through the vocabulary of a professor of English. Once in its middle they couldn't smack him

for fear of smacking their own. Then he'd turn around and come smashing back—while behind him the Fokkers would be falling, one by one.

ORDINARILY his reasoning might not have been so bad, but the future morale of the Redtails depended upon downing just one Boomeranger to prove it could be done. This, if Flynn had but known it, was why they always cut for home when the going got tough, hoping to draw the Boomerangs after them.

That trailing German must have had a rear-vision mirror, for Flynn didn't get him. The fellow got out of the line of sights without half trying, and under full gun, his Vickers flaming, yawing from right to left to knock 'em all down if possible, Flynn smashed full and true into the midst of the Redtails.

And he got the surprise of his life. They crowded him so close that he could see the grins of ghoulish glee on their faces below their devilish flying helmets. They looked him over, several of them, while boxing him in, as though making up their minds just where to plant the lethal pills so that he could hold the greatest possible quantity.

Then they separated with a whooming mixture of climbing turns, spinning falls and whatnot, until they had a clear field of fire occupied by nothing but Flynn and his lovely Spad. Then they started. Their Spandaus streaked a crisscross network of smoke all about him, showing they were using tracers to show them where their bullets were going.

Flynn knew that he had approximately five seconds yet to live and cursed himself for a fool, fully realizing that it wouldn't do a cussed bit of good. There was only one thing left to do and he started out to do it: take as many with him when he went as was humanly possible. He turned that Spad of his into a pinwheel of action, and while it spun and dived and did everything in the lexicon of aerobatics, his Vickers continued their deathly chanting.

A FOKKER pilot went to the German heaven which was provided only for Germans during the Great War—but the Redtails didn't mind. They'd been ordered to die to the tune of ten if need be, so what was one, when they had a Boomerang dead to rights? Flynn hadn't even looked to find his comrades. They'd gone home, and rightly, too, obeying the orders of Blythe. He'd got himself in; he could get himself out. Wouldn't they sit up and take notice when, and if, he came back after all?

But he knew that was a false hope. His flying wires were almost nonexistent. His struts were kindling wood. His fabric was a ragbag, his plane merely a prayer. But such as it was he stuck with it. His face was bloody and the blood dripped into his eyes. His hands looked like the hands of a butcher after a neat slaughterhouse job.

Then all hell broke loose. Down from the heights came the Boomerangs, diving in formation like Niagara going over the Falls. Their Vickers sounded out the sweetest music ever heard by mortal ears. They dived in with everything they had, and that everything attuned to the song and the whistle and the shriek of death.

How those Boomerangs fought! Lord how they did fight, and Blythe was a superhuman fool who flew like an angel, dealing it out, taking it, and going back for more. Hawkins and Olsen and Petersen, the whole kit and kaboodle of them. They flew not like two men each, but like a small squadron, for they knew, if Flynn didn't, that no matter how hard they fought, no matter how many of these particular Redtails they knocked down, the Germans at last had the Boomerangs exactly where they wanted them.

The Germans, too, fought as Flynn had never seen Germans fight, and he'd always had plenty of respect. He'd been through too many tough fights against Germans not to know they were fighters. The Germans fought like fiends out of hell and Flynn, surprised that they didn't cut out of the fight as they had done before, couldn't understand it.

That is, he couldn't understand it, until the final blow came and the sky rained a flock of fresh Fokkers, Pfalzes, Albatrosses, everything the Germans made. Ground troops had notified the staffel that the Boomerangs had finally not "boomeranged," and now the Germans were gathering, as gleeful as a treeful of ghouls, to smack the Boomerangs to hell and gone.

Then realization came to Hank Flynn; by being a continental damn fool he had endangered the entire squadron of the Boomerangs. By being a sap, a big-headed boob, a fool, and a lot of names nobody would print if they could, he had practically thrown away a dozen crack Spads and the lives of their pilots.

The realization drove him crazy. He went wild through the Germans. He tried his best to crash head-on into half a dozen of them, one after the other. So unexpected was the behavior of this madman, the Germans had an awful time keeping away from him, such a time in fact that two Fokkers smacked into each

other and went down fastened together. Flynn yelled. If he could make 'em collide it was surer than bullets. And for himself he didn't care. His hide would be nailed to the hangars if he ever got home anyway.

THE Boomerangs realized that, outnumbered four to one, with the sky still spewing forth fresh contingents of German planes, only maniacs could win free; so they became the things that were needed for the job, and all went crazy. But they did it as calmly and coldly, and in as deadly a fashion, as man could conceive. They took their cue from Hank Flynn. Even Blythe did.

And they fought the Germans to a whisper, and every time there was an opening toward home, they edged into it, bringing the Germans after them.

The fight rolled along the sky like a ball of yarn chased by a monster cat and probably nobody, except the Boomerangs, realized that they were over the lines.

At that point the Allied skies began to start spilling things, things like Spads and Nieupoorts and Salmsons; the Boomerangs, true to their traditions, started for home. When they all landed it was discovered that a miracle had happened and that nobody had been killed, quite.

And nobody looked at Flynn. They studiously avoided looking at him. Blythe walked away to the office. Grease-balls came forth and swore at planes which were more like sieves. They all looked at Flynn, too, instinctively realizing that he was the indirect cause of all those holes, just as Flynn realized it.

Flynn's shoulders sagged, for he knew they all hated him. Next would follow court-martial and disgrace. A fellow might as well commit suicide. But he had something to say first, and he intended to say it. They'd never be able to say he wasn't a man. A fool maybe; an ass, sure; a braggart, yes; but by glory, a man anyway.

So he followed the Skipper to the office, opened the door and stepped inside.

Blythe looked up at him, as mild as at the first meeting.

"You whipped me yesterday, captain," said Flynn.

"You should have killed me. I'm a fool. I'm an ass. I'm all the names you called me and all the dirty ones you didn't. And I'm a lot I've invented in my own mind for myself, I'm not good enough to tie the shoes of the meanest grease-ball in the Allied armies. I'm a louse, a corn-hammed some of a which."

And while Flynn told himself off, laying his whole soul bare before the blue eyes of Blythe, who didn't even blink, Blythe didn't say a word.

And Flynn's heart kept sinking. Blythe didn't answer. That meant he regarded Flynn as being too low to notice. His silence was more damning than all the accusations in the world.

When Flynn had cursed himself out, in both meanings of the expression, and had dropped to a whisper because he'd nothing left to say, he felt that the world had ended. Blythe wasn't answering anything. There wasn't anything to say. All the names in the world, all the penitence, nothing could make anybody forget that Flynn, the fool, had placed the lives of twelve wingmates in jeopardy.

He sank into himself like a punctured toy-balloon. The end. He turned away, groped for the door. He opened it, stared blindly out upon a world that was nothing but ashes. He had all but closed the door behind him when he heard that mild voice behind him.

"You really believe you're the louse you've called yourself?"

"Yes, multiplied from now till hell freezes over."

"Okay. Then that makes you a real member of the Boomerangs—Hank!"

And Hank Flynn found something rising into his throat and choking him. He strode across the tarmac like a drunken man, tears streaking the mask of blood on his cheeks. Somehow he found that it felt good to be a cry-baby, even if one were a grown man, for this grown man had come back from the brink of hell, dragged back by the simple words of a Skipper who knew when a man had been thoroughly scrubbed clean.