



# SKY GUILT

by **FREDERICK C. PAINTON**

A Gripping Story of Exciting Peril in the Air and a Pilot's Grim Determination!

LONE EAGLE (V1N2) NOVEMBER 1933

**M**IKE O'CONNOR had been away on detached service with the Second Corps for four days doing artillery observation, so he did not hear the terrible news until three days after the murder. He put his crate down on the Twenty-seventh's tarmac at two o'clock and strolled airily into the operations room to report.

"Jimmy the Ink" looked up from his patrol report; his long face lengthened even more, and you could see he dreaded to be the first to tell O'Connor.

"Good work you did up there, Irish," he offered.

O'Connor lit a cigarette and gripped it between brown, competent fingers. "I'm ready for some leave, too, Jimmy, my boy. The krauts are plenty active around this sector and a man needs a rest. Where's Jerry?"

There it was. The question that Jimmy feared.

HE LOOKED into Mike O'Connor's bronzed square face. It was cheerful, as O'Connor was always cheerful. This Irishman was made for war. Where nerve strain made moody, irritable hellions of other men, O'Connor seemed to have nerves of steel. He patrolled every day, either offensive or rechange, and no one ever saw him without the twisted grin and the careless slouching attitude toward life and war.

But how would he act when he learned what had happened? O'Connor had never made any secret of his devotion to young Jerry. He worshiped the ground the kid walked on. Jimmy the Ink felt like an executioner as he prepared to speak. "Where's Jerry?" O'Connor repeated.

"Irish," Jimmy's voice stuttered. "Something tough happened while you've been away."

You could see the blood drain from O'Connor's face. He stood poised like a statue, cigarette midway to his mouth. His blue eyes, smoky like peat, seemed to distend. "You don't mean—" he licked his lips—"You don't mean a kraut got him—that he's down—"

"No, nothing happened to him in the air," Jimmy said. "But—oh, my God, Irish—this is tough—"

In a stride O'Connor had reached the kiwi adjutant. His fingers bit into the youth's shoulder like steel tongs. "Out with it," cried O'Connor hoarsely. "What's happened to Jerry?"

"He's in the hoosegow—charged with murder!"

"Murder!" O'Connor stepped back, eyes wide with bewilderment. "Jerry charged with murder! What the hell are you talking about? Jerry—"

"He says he's innocent," returned Jimmy the Ink weakly.

"And if he says he is, then, by the powers, he is. Come on," O'Connor straightened, dominant eyes flashing. "What's it all about?"

"Chuck Perry was killed in the Cafe de l'Avion the night after you went away," replied Jimmy.

"Chuck Perry!" O'Connor nodded. "I get the idea now. Perry was dirty enough to warrant killing. I suppose it was some drunken fight over nothing at all."

"Yes," said Jimmy. "They were all feeling pretty high—Frank Harkness and Bing Calker. And the evidence pointed to Jerry."

O'Connor strode to the door. "I'll talk to Jerry for the rest. I can see him, I suppose?"

HE COULD, and five minutes later he was walking along the row of canvas hangars whose billowing sides flapped in the wind.

The hoosegow of the Twenty-seventh was the cellar of an old farmhouse that the Germans had pretty well battered down in the fall offensive. But it was tight enough, and two guards with bayoneted Springfields made it yet tighter. O'Connor approached these. "I want to see my brother." They led him into the cool depths. A shell hole at the far end let in sufficient light for O'Connor to see his brother seated on a wooden bench.

The lad came upright in a bound. His hand darted out and closed convulsively around O'Connor's. "Irish!" he cried hysterically. "Irish! God, man, it's good to see you."

"And you, lad," O'Connor gave the hand a quick pressure. Then to the guard: "Leave us alone, soldier; he won't run away."

O'Connor flung an affectionate arm around Jerry's slim shoulders. "Looks like they got you in a mess, lad, but we'll get you out. You didn't do it, of course."

"No," young Jerry turned a pale, drawn face to his brother. He was a smaller replica of the big brawny O'Connor, a figure more finely drawn.

O'Connor was the fighting man, primitive and shrewd who had been a soldier of fortune before he was drawn into the big mess. But Gerald inherited from his mother a line, pensive face and a more sensitive brain. A fierce pride in his future gripped O'Connor. This lad had brains and genius and would go far. "When's the trial?" asked O'Connor.

"DAY after tomorrow," Jerry replied, "My God, Mike, they'll drum me out of the service—even if they don't put me against a wall."

“Don’t lose your nut,” soothed O’Connor. “They won’t do either. Two days is a lifetime to work in. Now, start at the beginning and tell me what happened. Don’t leave out a thing.”

“Simple to say,” replied Jerry. “God knows actually what did happen. You know the Cafe de l’Avion?”

“Aye, and nothing too good of it.”

“The night after you left we had gone to the bistro—it had been a tough day. We lost Anstrutliers in a tough scrap with Schlieffen’s Fokker tripes. We got a lot to drink. I didn’t have so much—I can’t stand it the way some of you fellows can. We stood at the bar and the barmaid, Colette, was serving the drinks. I was in the center, Perry on my right, Harkness on my left and Calker stood behind me. We were singing some songs and sort of going along as usual.

“You know that the whole place is lighted by that swinging lamp over the bar. Remember it, because it’s what makes this hell for me. Perry was pulling some fast ones; he and Harkness speak the lingo well.

“Well, it happened quicker than I can tell you. Perry said something very nasty to me. Damned bad, Mike. It made me furious. I said to him: ‘You could at least keep your filthy tongue between your teeth in front of a lady.’ He laughed and said, ‘Where is she? Or are you it?’

“PERRY started to boast, then—well, he said plenty. But Harkness and Calker were as sore as I. Before I had time even to open my mouth Calker lunged forward and swung a punch to Perry’s jaw.

“That was the beginning. Marsh came in to hit Calker. Perry smacked out at Harkness and hit me. Then we all began to throw punches. It was quite a fight while it lasted,” he grinned reflectively. “And I folded Perry’s nose against his face. One good belt.”

“That was the Irish coming out,” chuckled O’Connor. “Then what?”

“Nobody will ever know who had the gun,” said Jerry. “I never carry mine. It hung on the rack in my cubicle. But somebody had one and fired. It struck the light and the place was in darkness. It was a madhouse then, Mike, with everybody hitting and kicking. Colette was screaming like a crazy girl; and old man Pierre was howling for the M.P.’s. I was hitting straight out, trying to fight my way toward the door. The gun went off twice more.” He paused as if looking over memory pictures to leave out no detail. “Just as I was nearly to what I thought was the door, I heard a crash of breaking glass. About a minute later old man Pierre

came in with a lantern. The M.P.’s had heard the fight and they brought flashlights.”

He paused; and frowned grimly. “There was plenty of light then. And by it I saw Perry on the floor. His head lay open like a split egg. Somebody had smashed a bottle of cognac over it. I bent down to see more closely what had happened. The end of the cognac bottle lay there. I was just holding it in my hand, looking at it—when the M.P.’s grabbed me.”

HE SHRUGGED and looked away from O’Connor. “Perry died within fifteen minutes—never regained consciousness. They charged me with murder—and here I am!”

“Well, for one thing,” said O’Connor, after a moment’s silence, “it’s not murder. It was a free-for-all, and the worst it is for any one is manslaughter. For another, I don’t see how they could slate you for murder on the fact that you were examining the bottle.”

“That’s it,” cried Jerry bitterly. “They couldn’t—except Harkness and Calker—damn their yellow-bellied hides!—got scared they’d be blamed and told their stories, so I was the guy that did it.”

“What’d they say?”

“Well, Harkness said he saw me going behind the bar. Maybe I did, trying to fight out of that melee. Colette said some one rushed by her and grabbed a bottle. She reached out and grabbed at the man. Got hold of a shoulder strap and a first lieutenant’s bar came away. When they examined me I was minus a first lieutenant’s bar. My right shoulder.”

“Not so good,” said O’Connor. “Did you look on the floor?”

“Yes, and it wasn’t there. And, Mike,” Jerry turned to O’Connor, “the one she had wasn’t my bar. I know because my bar had a little groove across the top. That time von Hausner got on my tail and gave me a fistful of slugs, he shot through my leather coat and one of the slugs just nicked my bar.”

“Everybody else have their bars?”

“Sure, when the M.P.’s got around to examine them. By that time I was in the hooscow. One of them, Mike, either Harkness or Calker, found my bar and put it on.”

“And would take it off as soon as they saw it was identifiable,” said O’Connor grimly.

“And Calker said he was never near Perry, but some one went past him saying, ‘I’ll kill the dirty swine.’ He thought, though he wouldn’t swear for sure, that I was the one.”

"The devil!" muttered O'Connor. "Both of them scared to death and afraid to do anything but heave the blame somewhere else."

"That's what it looks like," Jerry said drearily. "They're going to court-martial on two specifications, murder and conduct unbecoming to an officer."

O'CONNOR looked sideways at his brother. The sensitive face was ashen with horror. O'Connor knew as well as he knew anything that if they ever cashiered Jerry for this crime, he was done. It would break his heart.

"Never mind, lad," he muttered gently. "Keep your dobber up. There are two days left and I'll find out who hit Perry if I have to take Harkness and Calker and Marsh apart to see what makes them tick." O'Connor, however, was not foolish enough to approach the other three men in the brawl. Such an encounter would mean merely that they would deny any connection with the fatal blow, and would be warned that O'Connor was actively seeking the real culprit.

"There's one single clue," O'Connor argued with himself, as he went to the skipper's quarters. "Some one of them has Jerry's silver bar. When I find that I've got the bird that swung the bottle."

Between O'Connor and Captain Stagg a real camaraderie existed. Each appreciated the fighting qualities of the other.

"Tough luck about Jerry, Irish," muttered Stagg, shaking hands. "If there'd been a Chinaman's chance to give him an out I'd have done it. Perry was bad joss, and it was a brawl and an accidental killing. But Major Arnold of the M.P.'s is a duty-struck fool, and he's taking the case to the Corps court-martial. I'm sorry as hell."

"Sure, I know it," replied O'Connor evenly. "Only, Skipper, Jerry didn't do that job. I'm going to find out who did."

IT WAS obvious that Stagg had no faith in Jerry's innocence, but he understood how O'Connor felt.

"Meaning you want what?" he asked.

"Meaning," grinned O'Connor, "that I want full swing. Both Harkness and Calker are observers. So's Marsh for that matter, but I'm counting him out until I learn more than I know now. Will you juggle the observer assignments when I want it, so that I have Harkness and Calker, and maybe Marsh, too, in the rear cockpit when I decide who did the job?"

"Sure," nodded Stagg. "That's easy. But I don't see what it will get you."

"Whoever grabbed that bottle dropped a silver bar," said O'Connor. "I'm looking for it."

"Slim clue—if any. Well, shoot the works, Irish, you used to be a detective."

O'Connor went next to the Cafe de l'Avion. Colette was behind the bar as usual. She was a stolid girl, but nervous and tearful now.

"*Bo' jour, M'sieu,*" she nodded. "What will you?"

"A tall beer for one thing," chuckled O'Connor. "Some information for another."

SHE poured the beer. O'Connor sipped at it, watched her from half-covered eyes. "Colette, you liked *M'sieu* Jerry O'Connor, is it not so?"

"He is very nice," she replied, a faint flush mounting her cheeks. "Do you think he killed Lieutenant Perry?" asked O'Connor.

"No, no," she cried vehemently. "Never! He would not strike so cowardly a blow."

"Good," said O'Connor dryly. "Now, then, Colette, you grabbed for the man who went by you to get the cognac bottle. You knocked off the insignia of rank—the silver bar. Could you see who it was?"

"*Non, m'sieu,* I could not say, it is a pity," she replied. "But, as for me, I think it was the despicable pig, Harkness. He was friend of the pig Perry. They were—what you call, two of a kind."

O'Connor wondered whether this sort of information was important or not. He determined to act on even the little he had gleaned.

After further talk, he mounted the squadron motorcycle and raced back to the drome. He dropped in on Captain Stagg as he passed.

"Mark me up with Harkness tomorrow, will you?" he asked. "And, incidentally, if I remember right, Harkness hates a fight. He says an observer is an observer and not a dog-fighter."

"Right," growled Stagg. "He'll run miles from a fight. He's one of the reasons I hate this order for observers to be in control of a two-seater. But if Harkness hates fighting he fears fire more. He has a deathly fright of being burned down."

O'Connor nodded. He knew that an observer is technically in control of a two-seater. The pilot was responsible for motor and plane condition, but an observer commanded where to go and when to fight.

"Well, we'll see," he said, and returned to the motorcycle to make a friendly visit to an infantry

regiment resting two kilos away. He came back carrying a bulky package. "Buck up," he said to his brother. "It looks tough, but I've got an idea how to put the goods on the real guy."

O'CONNOR slept soundly until the orderly called him at three o'clock. A cool dawn breeze blew chill across the tarmac when he came out in the cold air, shrugging into his leather coat, adjusting his goggles on his helmet. Near his D.H., to which three greaseballs were putting the finishing touches, a tall man stood taking the last drag on a cigarette.

He looked at O'Connor without any pleasure. The man had a lean, hawk-nosed face, with small, narrow eyes and an uneasy, half insolent manner.

O'Connor had always avoided drawing Harkness as an observer because he did not trust the man. But he managed a cheerful smile this morning.

"Glad to draw you, Harkness," he smiled. "What's the job?"

"Spotting for the 105's on an ammo dump beyond Courtelle," replied Harkness nasally. "Dammit, and they don't give us any top protection. Von Schlieffen has Fokkers that can run rings around us, but Corps apparently never heard of it."

"We'll be jake," said O'Connor. "What say? Let's go."

O'CONNOR legged into the cockpit and started checking his twin Vickers, moving the controls. Harkness got in behind and looked over the Lewis gun mounted on the tourelle. "Too bad about your brother Jerry, Irish," he said suavely. "I never knew he was nuts about Colette, too."

"Was he?" asked O'Connor, fastening his safety belt. "Well, if he hit Perry he'll have to take the consequences. Do you think he did?"

"He went behind the bar for the cognac bottle," said Harkness, evenly. "I ran into him."

"How do you know it was he?"

Harkness was busy tying the little cords to O'Connor's arms, the cords with which he guided the pilot right or left as he was spotting shots. He waited until he was finished before he replied.

"I noticed earlier in the evening that Jerry hadn't taken off his gun holster. When I made a grab for the man who bumped into me I felt the empty holster—had a hold of it."

"Anybody else wear one?"

"Not that I noticed." Harkness shifted the talk. "All set? Go up to eight thousand meters over Dravigny and then head for Bercy. Follow the road."

"Right!" O'Connor suddenly swore, unfastened his safety belt and climbed down. "Dammit, I forgot my bottle. I'll be right back." He ran across the tarmac to his quarters and returned, stuffing what Harkness took to be a bottle into his pocket. He joked about it to Harkness, then, after belting himself in, called for a twist. The huge Liberty roared, and O'Connor goosed her out of line, flipped into the wind and poured the gun to her. Sweetly he took her off in a fast climbing turn and began to spiral for altitude.

With his eyes automatically checking his instrument board O'Connor had time to think. His lips flexed flatly, and his eyes were grim. It had been a stroke of luck which had made him choose Harkness first; but he had been right. And now to make Harkness confess. Not an easy task, he knew.

The ceiling was not so high and there were thick, cumulous clouds with holes in them. Holes through which a cagy Fokker could spy on them, and make a surprise attack. But O'Connor hugged close to them, and droned steadily on, working up to fourteen thousand feet. When a few Archy shells burst blackly below he cut his gun and yelled: "Wireless O.K.?"

HARKNESS had already called the Forty-fifth Field, the outfit to make the shoot, and he yelled back: "O.K. Put me over Courtelle."

O'Connor adjusted the little mirror in which he could watch his observer for signals, and after putting his nose over Courtelle settled down to watch Harkness. The man was nervous, afraid of being pounced upon. He was still nervous and upset when the Fokkers came.

It was after the fourth bracketing salvo. O'Connor, looking down, saw the mushroom of black smoke, and had just thrown the D.H. into a sharp bank when a black shadow fell athwart them. Down the sky, roaring like a banshee from hell, came a checkered Fokker. Behind it came still another.

O'CONNOR had been droning at half throttle. A smash of his palm drove the lever against the peg, and the gunned Liberty screamed out its song. He straightened the bank, zoomed and made a reverse bank.

At the same moment Harkness' Lewis began to chatter like an electric typewriter. Even as the golden tracers spat toward the oncoming Fokker, smoke tracer from the twin Spandaus on the German began to spatter the D.H. They pecked at the wings, ricocheted

bluely off the cocking handles of O'Connor's Vickers, and ripped through strut and linen. But the deadly Lewis shooting slugs like a mad thing forced the German to veer wide. The surprise had failed.

Then Harkness yanked at the cord attached to O'Connor's right arm. The signal to bank around and run for it. O'Connor grinned.

Instead of banking right, he wheeled and zoomed and drove the D.H. straight for a point midway between the two Fokkers that were converging to make a new attack.

Madly Harkness yanked at the cord. O'Connor ignored it, concentrated on the task of engaging two single-seater Fokkers as deadly as copperheads. He knew he was taking his life into his two hands. The Germans hesitated for a moment and banked away to keep out of range.

Then on a sudden one of them nosed down in a vertical dive. A half mile he dropped like a plummet, then turned and zoomed with Spandaus pointed straight to O'Connor's undercarriage. Instantly O'Connor went into a long glide, angling away to give Harkness a shot at the up-coming target.

The other German, appreciating the trick, instantly wheeled to attack the tail. With two attackers coming, Harkness could concentrate only on one and leave the other unharmed for a free burst.

O'CONNOR grinned, sharpened the bank and nosed down at the Fokker coming up like a skyrocket. His own fingers tightened on the stick trigger. "Take it," he muttered, and pressed the Bowden trip. At the same instant the uprushing German opened fire.

O'Connor's Vickers trembled on their mountings, a blue haze vomited from the black snouts. The golden tracer sprayed like sparks from an emery wheel. He never released the trips. Around his head, through the wings, into the whirl of his prop came the Spandau smoke tracer, little gray threads of death.

Behind the Lewis gun chattered like a mad monkey, and the Fokker, replying, filled the air with staccato hammering. It was a desperate case; the D.H. was caught between two fires.

O'Connor hung grimly to the man below. The whirling prop of the Fokker he kept in his ring-sights. The Fokker came up, splashed into the shower of slugs that O'Connor threw at him. The force of the zoom died. The kraut realized his dilemma, for O'Connor was descending like a comet. Desperately the kraut tried to fall away and out of range. But his control

surfaces were no longer sensitive. Fall away he did, but in a bad slip that left him for the moment helpless.

"Ah," yelled O'Connor. He paid no attention now to Harkness nor the rear Fokker. Like a devil from hell he howled down upon the helpless German. His slitted eyes, glued to his ring-sights, caught the knobbed head, found the range with two brief spattering bursts, corrected it and then tripped the trigger with the deadly assurance of a kill.

The German wriggled and tried to dodge as the tracer sprayed him. He raised up, turned and showed a face contorted with horror. At that second a seven-slug burst caught him square in the neck and practically sawed his head off. The gout of blood was caught by his thrashing prop and sprayed back, a crimson rain. And so close was O'Connor that it splattered on his goggles. With wide open gun, the Fokker hurled itself down across the five miles to smash to deadly ruin.

O'CONNOR laughed joyously. He had worked that trick before. But his happiness was short-lived. Harkness was missing fire. The remaining German, mad with fury over the death of a pal, came boldly in with guns hammering. A glance back showed O'Connor that Harkness, in a nervous frenzy of fear, was firing high. The tracer stream was flying over the Boche's center section.

O'Connor was helpless. There was no time to turn, and he had not the power to run away from the Fokker which roared at him. He could only twist and make sure that Harkness had free chance at the target.

Then death pecked at him. The German, guns hammering without let, smashed at them. Wing fabric shredded and ripped, strut splinters flew, the center section went out, three slugs put the altimeter and turn and bank bubble out of business. *Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!*

The Spandaus chattered more loudly than the Lewis and Harkness, standing up, seemed to try and shrink from the path of the flying bullets. Yet his guns continued to belch and if he had remained cool and ignored the bullets buzzing at him, he might have saved the day. But he could not find the range. He was high, low, and no sooner did his tracers lance like javelins of fire into the Fokker's prop than his nervousness and the gun's quivering worked the slugs again too high. O'Connor cursed. This thing had gone on long enough. With a sudden movement of his hand he thrust the stick against the instrument board. The D.H. fell down the sky like a cannon shell. Swiftly

O'Connor kicked it into a spin. Harkness nearly went over the side as the heavy crate began to shake and quiver to the unbalanced spin. Only his safety belt held him in. The Fokker figured he had a kill and raced around in a tight bank to come in for a new attack.

O'CONNOR waited for that, neutralled the controls and brought the D.H. out at the end of the fifth turn. In a flash he had banked around and, as the Fokker came howling in, O'Connor faced him and began to spray steel. His guns hammered without let. The German leap-frogged at the last second, and instantly Harkness opened up at him from the rear. But a few of O'Connor's slugs had gone home. The German swept down the sky in a long glide, banked around and started for home.

The instant O'Connor saw the fight was over, he made his move against Harkness. Deliberately he choked the Liberty. It began to stutter, backfire, and cast off terrible clouds of black smoke. This he did for a half minute. Then he cut the switch. The engine died, the wire scream mounted to a terrific ear-splitting shriek, and the D.H. started on a steep glide to earth. For just a moment O'Connor pretended to work desperately at the throttle. Then he kicked the D.H. into a tight spin.

"We're done," he howled. "She's lost control wires and the engine's out. We're going to crack up."

Harkness was pale as death in the reflection in the mirror.

"My God, my God!" he yelled.

O'Connor twiddled with the stick but held the rudder sharply over; whereupon the D.H. reversed the spin and the wings sagged to the strain. "She won't come out," he cried. "We're finished."

Alertly he watched Harkness in the mirror. The man tottered and fell down into the cockpit seat. He put his hands over his face.

"O'Connor," he screamed. "I don't want to die. I'm afraid—afraid. Do something—something."

He slavered at the mouth and his eyes rolled like a madman's. O'Connor nodded. His scheme had worked. The fear in the fight, plus this, had reduced the man to an incoherent idiot afraid to die. He would speak the truth now, or never.

"We're going to die, Harkness," he yelled above the wire scream and the thunder of the pounding fabric. "We're cashing in. What did you do with that silver bar you picked up from the floor?"

LIKE a hawk he watched Harkness' eyes as he put the sudden question. He depended upon the surprise of Harkness at such a moment to reveal guilt. The man's eyes walled, he fairly shivered from the sudden shock. Coming when he expected death, he displayed a ghastly horror. Then, as quickly as it had come it vanished.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" he screamed. "Frighten me into confessing? We're not going to die. We're not. You're kidding me, and you're wrong, O'Connor. I didn't do it—I didn't."

O'CONNOR crushed a curse against his teeth. On a sudden he centered the controls. Amiably enough the D.H. came out to level flight in another two hundred feet. Holding her so with his knees O'Connor drew his six-gun, stood up, still holding the D.H. level. He put the gun straight out.

"Listen, you rat," he said. "You killed Perry. You betrayed it in that second. You killed him accidentally, but you killed him! And because you aim to get command of a squadron so you won't have to risk your filthy hide up here, and because you fear the disgrace, you're trying to lay it on Jerry."

"It's a lie—a lie," screamed Harkness. "I didn't—you can't prove it."

"You're going to confess to me, and give me that silver bar," said O'Connor levelly, "or I'm going to blow your brains out and dump you over the side. They'll think you got nicked with a slug and fell."

But the threat failed to work. For a second Harkness shrank from that menacing black muzzle. But then as his frantic brain got to working, a sickly smile swept his features.

"You dare not, you dare not," he yelped. "If you kill me they'll never know anything about anything, and Jerry will go to the can. You can't prove anything."

O'Connor cursed. On a sudden he took the six-gun by the trigger guard between his teeth and started back over the paneling. The D.H. left to itself began to fall away and veer toward a flat spin.

"I haven't got it," screamed Harkness, seeing the movement. "Go back, you swine. You'll kill us both." As soon as he had spoken he bit at his tongue, and O'Connor could have cried out with joy.

"Haven't got it," meant one thing, the silver bar. If Harkness didn't have it, then why did he surmise the reason for O'Connor's belying back?

But what to do about it?

O'Connor went on back and when Harkness

sought to swing at him with the end of the cartridge belt, he flung his six-gun straight and struck the man in the face. Blood spurted and Harkness screamed with pain. O'Connor went on then and took away the man's .45 automatic. Then as best he could he searched him. He found nothing.

The D.H. was in a flat spin now, and not over four thousand feet up. Rapidly O'Connor bellied over the panels, slid into the pit and strapped himself tight. A five-minute struggle with the D.H. brought it out to level flight. In the mirror he could see Harkness watching him, cunning fear in his eyes.

O'Connor nodded, and made his decision. He turned. "I'm going to kill you, Harkness. If Jerry has to go to jail, you'll have to go to hell." He pulled out a French cigarette lighter with a yard or so of yellow cord attached. "Watch this, you dirty swine."

He spun the flint until the punklike end of the cord glowed redly. "Watch," he laughed mockingly.

"Oh, my God! No—no—no!" screamed Harkness.

O'CONNOR bent down in his pit. A second later a flood of black greasy smoke mushroomed back, nearly choking them.

One despairing yell came from Harkness. "Fire—fire!" he screamed. "We're afire. We'll burn—burn."

"You'll burn—you'll burn to a crisp if you don't tell," yelled O'Connor.

The Irishman saw that they were but fifteen hundred feet or so up, and he began to sideslip rapidly as if to keep the flames away from the gas tank. Deliberately he crossed the controls to swish from side to side. The two men were nearly suffocated by the smoke.

Harkness was livid with terror.

"Where's the shoulder bar?" demanded O'Connor inexorably.

"You're trying to sc-scare me," yelled Harkness. "I don't know—I didn't—I won't die!"

"You will. If Jerry's got to go to jail, you'll burn here and now, Harkness. Talk!"

HARKNESS was enveloped in a cloud of black smoke; when O'Connor could see him again he was in an hysterical ecstasy that made him resemble a man in a fit.

He had to forget the contorted face of Harkness for a while as he fought the D.H. into a semblance of a shallow dive to cany him to the Yank side of the lines. The earth was coming up at him rapidly now,

and the thick cloud of black smoke made his job one of real peril. Goosing the ship with the gun would have helped, but this he refused to do. And Harkness, reduced to little dog-like barks of fear, screamed as the reeling earth seemed to swirl up to engulf them.

Swifter and swifter it seemed to move. Objects had depth now, trees cast shadows, were trees instead of green blobs. A road was no longer a white chalk-mark, but a road; and houses had dimensions.

O'Connor figured it was the second line trench system over there with the sun gleaming on the barbed wire. He hoisted the D.H. over that obstacle and saw sweeping at him like a brown flood, a field that was flat enough to set down in.

A road flashed beneath the skimming wheels; white faces stared up from some Yank fatigue details.

Two battered houses nearly scraped their under carriage. And there was the field, brown molten molasses flowing at tremendous speed.

O'Connor cursed, saw the shell-holes, but it was too late to do anything now. He kept the nose down until it seemed to hit. Then with a heave he tucked the stick knob in his stomach. The D.H. squatted like an overtired duck. She three-pointed neatly enough and O'Connor, peering through blinding smoke, thought he might make it. He tilted the wings, kicked the rudder to avoid one shell-hole. And then she rammed head-on into another.

The landing gear went with a splintering smash that brought a yell from Harkness. For a space she coasted on her guts, and then bounced, ducked, and her nose came down; the prop dug in and she went over on her back in a cartwheel. O'Connor's safety belt tore loose and he went flying spread-eagled out of the pit.

Half-senseless, he landed in a shell-hole partly filled with watery mud. And this saved his life. He came out of it blowing, gasping, giddy, and felt himself over to see if he was whole. "Man alive," he muttered.

Then he thought of Harkness. And as he did so he heard an ominous sound. A crackling sound, and the sullen roar of flames!

He looked around and there, less than seventy feet off, the D.H. was burning like a pile of tinder. The flames had spread to the grass and the whole thing made a splendid bonfire. "She caught after all," he muttered. "Gasoline on the—"

HE GAVE a little gasp of dismay. Not ten feet from the smashed D.H. a black body lay on the grass, face down. Already the flames, spreading through the grass, were smoldering around the black coat. Harkness!

If he were dead, then O'Connor had failed. And as he stared at the body O'Connor feared just that. As he struggled upright a German 77, evidently firing on the fire, came howling down out of the sky and blew itself apart a hundred yards to the right. Another followed.

Nonetheless, O'Connor got to his feet and began to run. The flames were blowing and roaring in a murderous onslaught. But O'Connor charged boldly in, an arm bent over to protect his face. He held his breath, felt the fetid heat, the licking flames that ate at his flesh like acid. He ducked in, grabbed the smoldering body, and raced on. How he got out, he never knew.

But presently when he could hold his breath no more, he dropped his burning arm, gasped air, rolled into a shell-hole to souse himself up to the helmet. He came out dripping, and pulled Harkness out after him.

He examined the man and found him still breathing. The awkward angle of the arm told him it was broken; and there was blood seeping from the chest where a longeron had dug home. But O'Connor knew the man would live.

THE soaking in the cold water had brought about some measure of consciousness in Harkness.

As he opened seared eyelids, O'Connor had an inspiration. One last gamble with this man.

"Harkness!" his voice bit in. Anxiously he glanced over his shoulder to where doughboys were working from shell-hole to shell-hole toward them.

A German 77 blasted near them, aiming for the plane.

"Harkness," called O'Connor again.

"Oh, my God, I'm dying—dying," moaned the man.

"Yes, you're dying," rasped O'Connor. "That is, you will die unless you get to the hospital right away. I can get you there before your chest wound kills you. I'll take you—if you'll confess you killed Perry!"

As he spoke O'Connor began to rip burned and seared clothing from Harkness. The observer screamed at the touch of his hands, but O'Connor did not stop. He searched every stitch of the uniform.

"Quick," he glanced at the doughboys coming closer. They would put a stop to his plan. "Quick, tell me or I'll leave you here to die."

HE YANKED off Harkness' boots, "Tell me, by God," he yelled. "Don't leave me—take me—quick —hospital," moaned Harkness. "I did it; I'll confess. Bar is—in—hollow heel—right boot."

O'Connor was carrying Harkness' naked body in his arms when the doughboys came up and made a stretcher of two rifles and a blanket. Later, after hearing the story, Stagg said: "That use of a smoke pot was a swell idea, Irish, and it worked. But what I don't get is how you suspected Harkness in the beginning. There were two other suspects, Calker and Marsh."

"Sure," said Irish easily, and grinned at Jerry. "I didn't know. Not at first. I just started with Harkness. But as we were getting ready to take off, he said he recognized Jerry by the fact that he saw Jerry had been wearing a gun holster, and he felt it in the dark, Jerry's gun holster was home. Nobody knew who had been carrying a gun, but that, to me, anyway, identified Harkness. So I gave him the works."

"Leave it to the Irish to do that," grinned Stagg, and they all had a drink on that.

