



# GRIM RAPIERS AT RETREAT

by ARTHUR J. BURKS

*A Crimson Boche Ship of Flaming Doom Calls All the Fighting Spirit of Lieutenant Michael Kelly into Play!*

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE CATASTROPHE that the Second Pursuit Group, of which Lieutenant Michael Kelly was a part, knew that the German field across the way had worked out a new plan

of attack, harassment and morale destruction. It came in the shape of a blood-red plane that traveled almost with the speed of light. Its Spandaus were hammering, riveting machines which never ceased their clatter; yet

so swiftly did the blood-red plane pass, their clatter seemed little more than a brief burst of flame.

But when the crimson ship, in whose pit sat a flyer who carried out the color scheme by wearing a falcon's hood of red, had passed over the tree tops to the south of the field, two Spads were wrecks in the center of the tarmac of the Second.

One had been flown by Lyle Kirby. It went in on its nose, in flames, and Kirby didn't die at once. For brief seconds after the crash, and just before the flames flowed over Kirby, the greaseballs heard him scream:

"Get me out, for God's sake! Get me out! Get me out! Hurry! Get me out—"

AND then it ended, as the flames enveloped him.

Lieutenant Monk McBride went in nose first and at full speed, so that his motor buried itself in the tarmac, and McBride was flattened against its blistering surface as though he had been painted onto the almost white-hot metal of it.

And the crimson ship which had caused the tragedies was gone before the field could even guess at the identity of its pilot. One thing they did know: the man was new at the Front. He had been sprung on the Second by Baron Krieger as a complete surprise. Even Intelligence had had no word of him.

Major Aaronson stood beyond the blazing pyre of Kirby's Spad and stared moodily into the flames. It was just dusk. Darkness was beginning to enshroud the world. The light of the roaring flames turned the Major's white face to a ruddy pink, a pinkness which glowed and paled, glowed and paled as the fire rose, roaring, then sank down as winds from the war-torn fields swept over it.

Aaronson's eyes were somber, terrible.

Now and again he lifted his head and stared at the darkening sky whence the red ship had dropped. His right hand clenched at his sides. Almost, one expected him to lift it and shake it at the innocent sky.

His men had been coming home, jubilant. They had had good hunting. Kirby himself had just become an ace with his fifth plane, two of them today. McBride had downed his twelfth. Now both were dead, and the contemplated celebration was a hollow mockery, an impossibility.

"Steady, Major," said a firm, calm voice.

Aaronson whirled to look into the set white face of Lieutenant Michael Kelly. The major's lips writhed back from his teeth.

"They didn't have a chance," he muttered. "It was

cold-blooded murder. The fellow must have used incendiaries."

"No," said Kelly, "or McBride would have burned, too. What's to be done about it?"

"I have to think," said Aaronson, "and I can't think. The whole ghastly thing came so quickly."

"Yeah," said Kelly, "it did. I haven't started breathing again."

The flames of Kirby's crate were dying down. He could be seen, through the blackened ribs of his Spad, sitting there just as he had sat when he screamed, before the flames had got him. The two officers exchanged wan glances.

"WE HAVE to do something," said Aaronson. "Where do you suppose he came from?"

Kelly shrugged. It didn't matter, really. Now that the Second was warned, it could make dispositions tomorrow night. But how did they know the red one would come tomorrow night? Or that he wouldn't?

That night there was grim silence in the mess-shack of the Second. Next day seven Spads, led by Captain Lightner, took off for a patrol behind the lines. Lieutenant Kelly was a member of the flight. And he was busily thinking—

"It'll come today again, I'm sure. I'll be assigned to the job of getting that buzzard, as sure as hell. Maybe I'd better ask for the job, so I'll get it off my mind."

THE Second flew over the lines without paying even the slightest heed to the flowering black death of the Archies, whose concussions caused the Spads to rise and fall, to rock and roll. The Second was bent on retaliation. Once across the lines, all eyes searched the horizon for enemy crates, especially the crates flown by Krieger's *Flugstaffel*. Ten kilometers behind the lines, they found them.

Grimly, Lightner signaled for the attack. The seven crates headed straight for the ten-plane German formation—all Albatrosses. Grimly they held to their course as the Germans swerved to meet them. The two forces joined in battle. Kelly went crazy, as he usually did, in the maelstrom of fighting ships. But even as his Vickers grew hot under his hands, he was thinking of the pilot in the red falcon's hood.

Was he one of these ten Germans? Kelly studied each flyer who came into his range of vision, trying to make out some trick of maneuvering, some little dip or lift of wings, some little aerial mannerism which would stamp the flyer as the one who had got Kirby and McBride.

He thought he spotted one. He dived on the man with his Vickers ranting and raving. But the kill was too terribly easy. The German didn't have a chance. Even as he flung up his arms and started down the skyway, while his roaring motor sang the death song of falling ships, Kelly knew that he had not got the right one.

His man must be one of the ten, surely. And if Kelly couldn't pick out the right one, he would narrow the field appreciably by smashing down every German within reach. Hence, his mad flying.

He nosed up, found an Albatross in his ring-sight, its broad belly a certain target. His Vickers flamed. The Albatross seemed to falter, to hover in midair. Then it nosed up until it stood on its tail, and friendly ships and enemy ships slanted sharply away to escape its wings of danger as it fell.

But even when, with the wings of Spads and Albatrosses in ribbons, the guns white-hot, and both sides exhausted from the struggle, they drew apart, Kelly felt certain that he still had not downed the pilot of the red ship. It wasn't something he knew, but something he felt to the very depths of his being.

The Second landed. Two of them had been lost, only five coming home. Four Germans had gone down, two dead, two out of control. The honors had been fairly even. Neither the Allied side or the German side had reason whatever to feel ashamed of the day's luck.

AFTERNOON flight, a special patrol. Three ships flown by veterans led by Lightner, two flown by replacements for McBride and Kirby, were coming down to a landing. Aaronson and Kelly were watching from the side of the field. Their eyes were fixed on that side of the field whence, yesterday, the red crate had swooped down. They realized that the noise of his coming would not be heard, for the five ships which came down were roaring their motors full out. The red plane came from directly behind Aaronson and Kelly. One minute and there was nothing. Next minute and the red ship had come in, from the opposite side to yesterday's arrival, and one Spad was in flames, plunging down to the tarmac. It was the crate of Captain Lightner.

Aaronson and Kelly exchanged glances.

Kelly didn't say a word. He crossed the tarmac to the apron. And while the remaining four Spads came in, he had his crate rolled out of the hangar and serviced at top speed. In his mind he made a promise to himself:

"I'LL get two ships for every one that buzzard downs, no matter where or when he appears. I'm beginning right now."

He smashed down the field into the gathering dusk. He got his tail off with a brief run, and literally matched the Spad off the tarmac. He banked away, while his motor roared defiance, toward the Staffel of Baron Krieger.

His face was hard, savage. His eyes were deep wells of determination. His hand on the stick had white knuckles. He didn't realize that he overcontrolled. He paid no heed to the Archie bursts; they didn't matter. He had just one plan in mind—to duplicate, movement for movement, the killings of the man in the red crate.

The German field came under his wings. His eyes searched the skies for late comers, scouting Germans returning to their home field for the night.

He circled the field while the German Maxims hurled bullets into his wings. He calmly watched and waited. Now, when it seemed that his wait would be useless, an Albatross began scudding across the German field. Its flight was covered by a literal cone of fire intended to keep Kelly back until the man had got his crate off and wouldn't be at too great disadvantage.

Calmly disregarding danger to himself, Kelly dived on the moving crate.

But he held his fire until its wheels had lifted off the tarmac. Then, overlooking the pilot entirely, and yawing from right to left to make his fire more effective, Kelly let burst after burst smash straight into the enemy motor housing.

The Albatross was just lifting off the field, had no more than twenty feet altitude. It never rose higher. When it crashed back down, it was a flaming torch and Kelly was spiraling away.

Even as he swung about for the return home, an Aviatik, whose pilot apparently had not seen what was happening, perhaps because he was eager to get home, dived swiftly from the sky—and Mike Kelly caught him in midflight with a single long stuttering burst. The German did not pull out of his dive.

When he struck the ground, almost in the center of his own field, he was still diving.

Kelly flew calmly home. He had downed two crates to make up for Lightner.

He landed at the Second's field and reported what had happened.

"But we only proved how much the red one has got our goat," said Kelly grimly. "He'll be back tomorrow night."

THE telephone jangled. Aaronson took down the receiver, listened intently, hung up again.

"Intelligence gives us the identity of the red flyer," he said. "His name is Hans Birkel. Used to be a stunt flyer. One of his stunts was to fly through a huge white cloth screen, in flames. That must have given him this idea. He's Hell on Wheels!"

The Second was cagy when it landed next evening at dusk, and every pair of Vickers was loaded with incendiaries to smash down the crazy red flyer. Their efforts were in vain, for he did not come. Kelly was in the major's office in the next few seconds. The telephone jangled again. Aaronson listened.

"The red one has struck again, twelve miles to the north of here. He apparently operated out of a field commanded by *Oberst* Van Orden. But it's the same man.

"Get the idea? No field is safe from his sudden flashing attack. Hell's bells, in a week he can have every American, French and English field half crazy, because each will expect a visit from him, and he'll strike where least expected. Kelly, you've got to—"

KELLY grinned, rose. He wasn't afraid of anything. He liked assignments like this. He fought for the very love of fighting.

He flew away into the north just as the sun was vanishing behind the western horizon. He left instructions for lights to be shown on the field when he came back. He avoided combat, and both sides reported a plane flying north on some secret mission. Kelly didn't mind flying in the dark. He could find any spot on the map he sought.

He found the field of Van Orden. All planes, however, were safely home.

Kelly considered for a moment. He couldn't go back to report failure. He dived on the field, his eyes, calm now and sure, straining in the night for the pencil streaks of the mounted Maxims on the ground.

And his mind kept toying with certain words:

"Two for one! Two for one!"

The red flyer had downed two crates at another American field.

As the Germans began firing at the diving Spad, Kelly didn't do the expected thing. He didn't slant away, out of their line of sights. Instead, he gripped the stick with his knees, let his motor full out, and while his propeller aimed directly at the spot whence the Maxim bullets reached up to riddle his wings, he let his Vickers chatter their song of death.

The German gunners started clumsily to run. Kelly leaned slightly forward, moving the nose of his crate from side to side, yawing to cover as much of the enemy as possible.

He saw two men crash down to their faces, their coal-scuttle helmets flying across the black field. Two men had paid for one of those whom the red flyer had slain this same evening.

But there were others. His eyes picked them out and, next moment, his bullets played loyal to his eyes. Other grotesque figures sprawled on the German field.

By this time the whole field was aroused. Men with lights were pouring onto the tarmac from everywhere. Kelly corkscrewed around and swept down on them, over them, with his guns chattering.

Men broke and ran. Men fell, sprawled out, lay still.

Then Kelly, zooming, swung back, cut his motor and yelled, with little hope of being heard or understood:

"Hans Birkel!"

He knew that if they were able to pick out his words above the sound of his wings swishing at full speed through the air, the Germans would understand. They wouldn't know what field he came from, but that counted little.

He had issued a sort of challenge.

ON THE way home he looked back once. Two German crates were coming swiftly on behind him. He slowed down slightly, licking his lips. Here were two he could use in his plans.

He waited until, wing and wing, they were right behind him, ready to open. He hoped they would believe him "cold meat," unaware of their pursuit. At what he believed to be the very last moment of safety, he nosed down, slammed the juice to his motor, and dived hellbent.

He glanced back. They were following. He gave them time to straighten their dive, to get him in line again, then yanked his stick back into his belly. He smashed up the sky line like a rocket, on up, over in a loop, and then was crashing down straight toward the backs of the two Germans.

HIS eyes were glued to his ring-sight, which he wasn't sure he could see in the gloom. His knees hugged his stick. His Vickers began their chant the moment the two crates started crawling into view. His nose moved from right to left and back again, methodically, surely, inevitably.

One Fokker burst into flames. He watched it for a moment, saw a bundle step from the pit, dive over the side.

He concentrated on the second flyer. That one started to spiral down; but Kelly cut across the path of the spiral and laid down a cone of fire ahead of his nose.

The German flew into it, and out of it into eternity, exemplified for him by the black-green woods which received the broken ribs of his crate.

And Mike Kelly flew back to his own field to make his report.

Surely now the red flyer would make some acknowledgment, let the Second know that he understood the meaning of their reprisals. Surely now he would let Kelly know that he was ready for personal combat. German Intelligence would have the information, for German Intelligence was good, knew its business.

Kelly landed on the field of the Second without mishap, strode to the mess-shack. His wingmates looked up. Their faces were stony. Aaronson gulped and swallowed. Kelly looked from one face to the other.

“Well?” he said.

Aaronson hesitated, then shoved a note at Kelly.

“It came ten minutes after you left,” said Aaronson. “The red one himself brought it.”

Kelly opened the note and read the carefully inscribed English.

*What does it matter to Hans Birkel if Lieutenant Kelly slays one or a dozen German flyers? Poor flyers deserve to be exterminated. What does it matter if he slays Maxim gunners? They should be agile enough to take cover. If the Second Pursuit Group thinks that reprisals will halt my flights, the Second is crazy. I strike nightly, at sundown, wherever I elect. And I always slay and get away. Nothing, no flyer, can stop me. I shall prove it.*

*Tomorrow evening, at exactly sundown, I shall revisit the Second once more—and I shall slay Lieutenant Morton.*

Hans Birkel had apparently signed the contemptuous missive. At least it bore a signature with that name.

Aaronson looked at Kelly.

“Well?” he said.

“I don’t promise anything at any given time,” said Kelly quietly, “but I’ll find a way to get this Birkel if it takes the rest of the war. Somebody may have to die before I can do it.

“His crate is faster than anything we have on the field. That’s one handicap. But if you could have my

crate rigged up for greater speed—never mind, I’ll do it myself.”

NEXT day Kelly did not go out at all. Near evening a five-plane patrol flew across the lines. In its very center, white of face but utterly determined, flew Lieutenant Frank Morton. Kelly was at the deadline when the crates lined up. He stood beside Morton’s crate as the young chap warmed his motor, then cut it to idle to lean over the coaming and grin at Kelly.

“Whatever you figure out, don’t worry about me,” he said. “If my number’s up, I’ll get it, and that’s all there is to it. I’ve been warned—Birkel is right. A guy who can’t take care of himself deserves to be killed.”

The period of waiting was a ghastly ordeal. Would the man keep his promise, or was it merely a bit of boasting he allowed himself as a reward for past successes? Kelly didn’t know. He knew that, as matters now stood, no flyer had a chance against the blood-red ship. But, Kelly figured, there must be a chink in the best armor somewhere through which a good enemy could thrust a knife. He would watch for the chink in Birkel’s armor of speed, surety and cleverness.

THE five came back, started slanting down for a landing.

Morton suddenly cut out of the formation as the red ship appeared. It was the last act in Morton’s life. A flame of Spandau bullets smashed him into eternity.

The red plane had struck, and was gone, and behind it a message, weighted with a bullet, came slowly to rest on the tarmac, a handkerchief serving for a parachute. The message said simply:

*Morton will waul to prove himself, I don’t know him from Adam; only, we know the names of your flyers. Like all fool Americans, he will cut out to attack me when he sees my ship. All I have to do is shoot down the man who cuts out of formation.*

So, Birkel was clever, too. He’d figured exactly right. His note had been written, naturally, before he had even flown to kill Morton.

Kelly’s eyes were hard, grim.

“Tomorrow night, Major,” he said later in the office, “I want to ask that the returning patrol maintain formation in spite of hell or high water. I’ve got my crate fixed. I want our men to come down as though to land, and fly across the field no higher than twenty feet. I’ll do my stuff then.”

“But how do you know Birkel will attack tomorrow night?”

"I know he will!" snapped Kelly. "He's that sort of an egomaniac."

Kelly then calmly took off and flew to Baron Krieger's field, where he dropped a note which was brief and to the point:

*I shall kill you tomorrow night if you dare to attack the Second Pursuit Group at the usual time. Kelly.*

Hans Birkel had proved himself a man of supreme self-confidence. He would not dare to avoid such a challenge. So far, so good. Kelly would await results. He flew back to his own field unopposed. It was as though Krieger were perfectly willing to leave the issue to be decided between Birkel and Kelly. Maybe there was another reason: ships which had pursued him in the past had been destroyed, their pilots slain. It wasn't healthy to follow the blue-eyed Irishman.

Kelly worked again on his crate. When he had finished with his labors none but greaseballs knew that anything had happened to it. It looked as it had always looked. Nothing appeared to have been added to it or taken from it. Some slight change in rigging may have been effected, but not enough to give the Spad the speed of the red flyer.

KELLY requested of Aaronson that, when the Second returned from afternoon patrol next day, they should not come down wing and wing to a landing, but should first fly low over the field, one after the other, each succeeding plane a little higher than the plane ahead of it. This would result in the planes stringing out over the field.

They were, moreover, to fly directly toward a certain hangar, regardless of wind direction. And that hangar held the crate of Mike Kelly.

"You see," he told Aaronson, "this beggar has a field from which he operates. With only one plane, and that able to take off with a mighty brief run, he can change his base every night, every day, every hour, if he so elects. He has timed his attack almost to the second. He knows just when our crates will fly back, just how long it will take him to reach our field from his. We have to outguess him. That's what I'm going to do if it's humanly possible.

"MAJOR, if he lands a bullet in a certain place in my crate, it's curtains. But if he doesn't—well, the Germans will have to find something else to take the place of Hans Birkel as an agent of frightfulness."

"What are you planning?" asked Anronson.

"Even the walls have ears," said Kelly, shaking his head. "Besides, if you don't know you have less to worry about. But I think I can outsmart this fellow. I'm sure, moreover, that he hasn't any too much courage."

"What in the world makes you think that?"

"The frightful speed of his attack. He gets away so fast nobody has a chance to draw a bead on him. He doesn't want bullets flying about his ears. I'm using that against him, I won't tell you any more.

"But almost everything depends on the way you carry out my suggestions. Land at the right time, or at least come in for a landing. Swoop once over the field. Then, after that, leave everything to me—and if you feel like praying for me, maybe that will help, too."

Aaronson shook his head.

"I keep thinking how sure he was of getting Morton," he said, "and that he got him. Why, he was so sure he wrote a note beforehand, saying that Morton would cut out and that he would down him, and it happened just as he had said."

"Simple, after all," said Kelly. "Morton was in the middle of the group. If he had stayed there he'd be alive today, and somebody else would be dead, perhaps. But sure of being shot at, he wanted to get in a shot or two himself and felt he had to cut out to do it. Birkel knew he would do that, that was all. A matter of psychology."

"Yeah, and Morton's dead. Maybe this guy'll figure you to do something, too—maybe the very thing you're planning to do."

"That's the chance I have to take," said Kelly doggedly. "But I'd like to bet something that when tomorrow night comes around, the Germans will be offering alibis for Hans Birkel."

"I hope you're right, Kelly," said Aaronson dubiously.

"So," said Kelly quietly, "do I!"

And next afternoon, having flown not once, Kelly sat in the pit of his Spad, behind the door of the hangar. Two men stood on either side of the door, their hands clutching it. Their eyes were on Kelly. Standing at the propeller were three men, one with his left hands on the propeller, the other two gripping wrists in succession away from him, to yank him out of the way when the motor had caught.

Kelly gazed skyward then looked at his watch.

NO SOUND yet of returning motors. Only the incessant clatter of war to the east, where the men in trenches fought it out with bayonet and bomb, bullet and trench-knife. That never stopped. There came to

his ears the coughing of machine guns—of *chauchauts*, Brownings and Lewises. There came the shrieking of high speed projectiles out of Germany, the rocking explosions as they landed and burst, geysering the war-torn earth toward the blue sky that now was growing dark.

Kelly glanced at his watch again.

In half a minute he would be ready to go. He cocked his ears. From somewhere to the east sounded the roaring of Hissos. The Second was coming back. Somewhere else, at this identical moment, the red flyer was preparing to take off to answer Kelly's challenge, if Kelly had guessed his character correctly.

KELLY listened for a few seconds longer. He lifted his right hand. The men on the propeller stiffened. The men at the door became statues, their hands clutching more tightly, their eyes never leaving the face of Mike Kelly.

The roaring of the Hissos became louder. Kelly's motor was warm. He'd revved it up several times during the last hour, then stilled it. To anyone who listened, it was merely a motor being tested out.

"Now!" Kelly's right hand came down.

Even as he spoke and brought his hand down, he caught the roaring of a Mercedes coming through the composite roaring of several Spads. A shout of exultation rose from his throat.

"I've got the bloody son!" he yelled.

The men on the propeller carried the blade through. The Spad's motor caught with a roar. Kelly picked it up with the throttle and the propeller became invisible. He yelled at the men on the door. The door swung back—and just in time, for under the savage driving of the Hisso the Spad had already started to move.

Kelly could have shouted with glee when, blasting out into the growing dusk, he saw seven Spads, seemingly so close together in single file that they rode in one another's slipstream, aiming straight at his hangar. The first one was almost on top of it when Kelly smashed out onto the field—and the red German plane was coming in at an angle as though shot from a gun.

The discipline of the Second was admirably proved. For though every man in that flight knew that the red Boche wouldn't leave until he had downed one flyer—and that might be any one of the Second—they held to their formation as per orders without wavering in the slightest.

"If they can do that," thought Kelly, getting his tail off the field, "they certainly deserve everything I can give them."

The planes were almost over Kelly's head as he yanked his crate off the field. Kelly went almost straight up, relying entirely on the power of his motor. The field fell away under him as though it had been dropped from some vast height. His nose was going up and up. As he rose, he looked over the fleeing Spads which had covered his leap into space.

One of them was going down in flames, but Kelly thought—

"Better to be that one, and him the last, than for Birkel to get a man or two every evening at retreat."

HE COULDN'T tell which one had fallen. He'd find out when he came back. He knew, though, that if the red one had even the slightest inkling of what was afoot, the result would not be so easy for Kelly. But even so, if worst came to the worst, he would fight the red one on fairly even terms—and he didn't even think of balking at that.

Now he put his nose down, dived with a shrieking motor and a whistling of wires. He nosed up with a rush when he had all the speed he could get in the split seconds of time allotted him, looped madly, half-rolled out, and smashed back on the tail of the Second.

The red flyer had struck and was away, flying like a red bat straight into the east.

Kelly laughed into the slipstream and pointed his nose directly at the enemy flyer. He gave his crate full gun. His speed was almost as great as that of the German.

But not quite. The enemy turned and saw him, and quickened a bit. Kelly laughed. The fellow was avoiding direct combat. But Kelly hammered doggedly on after the red crate. They flew into Germany.

WOULD the flyer keep going until his gasoline gave out? If he didn't, he would have to go down—and no matter if he were a bit faster than Kelly, he couldn't cut his motor and make a landing before Kelly would be on him. He couldn't land without a fight, that was a sure thing.

Now they were fully ten kilometers behind the lines. The red one started to circle to the north—and Kelly grinned again.

"He doesn't want his people to know he's running. They'd laugh the pants off him. And did I have you figured out, *du blatdeutscher Schnappsfresser!*"

The German was cutting a wide circle. Kelly deliberately cut across the circle to head him off. The German waited until Kelly was almost upon him, then doubled into the south. He waggled his wings in signal when they passed over a German drome, and Kelly, glancing down, saw two Aviatiks taking off swiftly. But he would be far to the south before they had flying speed behind him. He didn't worry about them in the least.

On and on the chase continued. Kelly crept up on his enemy slightly now. He followed the man by the exhaust flames of his Mercedes when the dusk deepened into dark, and found them as good targets as the wings of the German plane itself. Both planes were still flying full out.

Kelly glanced at his watch. The flight, during which Kelly and the German had played the craziest game of tag ever invented even by airmen, had lasted over three hours.

"It won't be long now!" said Kelly to himself. He was suddenly acutely conscious of his taut muscles, of the fact that his eyes ached from the constant straining to keep Birkel's exhaust flames in sight. "Any minute now and he'll have to do something. We're fifteen kilometers behind the lines. He can't get back to his field near the Front—and it must be near the Front—which means that he has to start hunting for some other field."

As though in answer to Kelly's thought, Birkel soon changed course again, heading straight for the field of Baron Krieger, twelve kilometers behind the lines. Three hours and forty-five minutes had elapsed on the chase, which had covered most of the sector hereabouts, while Kelly had clung doggedly to the German's tail, and Birkel hadn't once turned to bare his fangs.

NOW the Aviatiks—just when the crates, pursued and pursuer, were coming into Krieger's airport—dived on Kelly's crate. It was a matter of touch and go, of hit and run. Kelly gritted his teeth. He had to take a chance on bullets slaying him. If he dropped Birkel for even a moment, the man would have time in which to land and roll to a stop.

The Aviatiks were coming down to sit on Kelly's tail.

Kelly deliberately dived straight for the ground, gluing his eyes to the black-green woods below. The Aviatiks came after him. One swept past his nose as though to head him off. Kelly didn't hesitate. If the

man got in his way, he would crash him. He wasn't to be stopped by anything. But he knew the German wouldn't risk a collision. Birkel had probably made plenty of enemies among his own people because of his arrogance. He couldn't expect those home enemies to risk their lives for him unnecessarily.

KELLY, however, decided to waste just a few split seconds. He nosed up and raked the darting Aviatik with a single hurst of lead from his Vickers. To his amazement—and in what he regarded as a swell omen for the immediate future—the Aviatik burst into flames immediately afterward. Kelly was far beyond it when it crashed in. He didn't look back to see it go. He only knew that he had killed again—and without losing time, or sight of the exhaust flames of Hans Birkel. Those exhaust flames were going down now.

Kelly himself was hedgehopping. He was aiming straight for the area of sky through which the enemy plane must drop to land. The other Aviatik was behind him, but its bullets were going wide of their mark. Kelly didn't even yaw to avoid the Spandau lead.

Birkel was just above the treetops. He was trying to land far too fast. As he burst over the German field, Kelly was right behind him. Kelly's knees hugged the stick, his hands were on his Vickers trips, and streaks of flame penciled out through the arc of his propeller as he probed for the life of Hans Birkel.

Birkel elected to land in the face of this fire. Kelly knew exactly why. Birkel had to land. He couldn't even circle the field. Kelly had figured things to a T. Birkel had been hoisted on his own petard. Kelly's guns flamed—flamed again. Birkel, with his wheels almost touching, must have realized that he would be slain while his crate was rolling.

He zoomed. Kelly zoomed with him. Grimly the Irishman clung to his enemy's tail. Birkel was going over in a loop, intent on smashing lead into Kelly's cockpit from aloft. But Kelly had plenty of flying speed. He had saved it for just this emergency. He zoomed with Birkel, went up directly behind him.

The Boche started down the back of his loop with Kelly still riding his tail.

Birkel leveled off. He was flying straight across the German field. Lights showed below, running lights carried by running men. The whole field was out to watch this strange fight in the dark. Over the middle of the field, Birkel's motor suddenly died. Kelly knew it had died by the fact that the exhaust flames were no longer visible.

The speed of the German crate was cut almost at once.

Birkel could no longer delay the landing. It was now or never.

He started down. It wasn't a question of landing into the wind, but merely of landing—and Kelly, his face grim, his eyes popping from his skull as he concentrated on the kill, was all over the slowing ship. Bullets slammed into Birkel's motor.

BIRKEL had now cut his switch to avoid fire. It was plain to the German that he had to take a chance with bullets. He seemed to have courage enough when he couldn't avoid combat, for he went down to the landing with great care and precision.

But Kelly wouldn't have it that way. He went down with the Fokker, and as the wheels of Birkel's crate touched the ground and started rolling, Kelly dived low over him almost close enough for Birkel to have grabbed his landing gear, and filled the German's cockpit with a hail of hot lead.

Then, directly ahead of Birkel's slowing crate, Kelly zoomed, corkscrewed around, came back. He sent bullets into the motionless propeller, into the crate which had ceased rolling, into the camelback—and sprayed the cockpit again.

Nothing moved in the pit. Kelly went on over, came back once more, traveling at breakneck speed. Again, his Vickers spoke. Still nothing moved in the enemy crate. Satisfied at last that he had made his kill, Kelly climbed, then began to circle the field.

He looked down at bobbing lights and saw Birkel lifted from his pit—to sprawl on the field. He saw

someone kneel over the stunt flyer and then everybody walked away and left Birkel. Kelly sighed. That was ended. If Birkel had merely been wounded, they would have carried him off the field at once. They hadn't.

Fifteen minutes later Kelly stood in the mess-shack, telling Aaronson and his wingmates what had happened. His eyes were deep sunken from the strain of his hours of watching. His face was drawn and haggard.

"I understand," said Aaronson at last, "that you planned to chase him until his gasoline gave out, and then tag him when he was forced to land. But how did you figure to get back yourself, if he happened to lead you so far into German territory that you wouldn't have enough gas left in your own crate to get back?"

Kelly grinned tightly.

"I knew I had more gas, because I had full tanks. Birkel didn't have, because he had to fly here, using a certain amount of gasoline, while I took off after him with tanks full up. It was a matter of seconds. And if he had led me into the heart of Germany—well, I figured on that, too, knowing the Germans would treat a prisoner very well who had knocked down one of their pets. So I had the greaseballs install auxiliary tanks inside the fuselage."

Kelly hesitated, took a deep breath, went on.

"I had to cut in the reserve tanks just as I came back across the lines. It was lucky I installed them. I'd, have been several hundred yards short of here, hanging by my ears from a tree, if I hadn't had the tanks. And now, let's wait and see what the Germans substitute for Hans Birkel!"