

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

DOWN FROM THE CLOUDS

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

The C.O. of the flying field was sore—the Three Mosquitoes, dare-devils supreme were doing their “grand-stand stuff” again. But when the C.O. found himself in difficulties, with Boche planes swarming all around him—things were different. The best flying story of the month.

KIRBY wiped his goggles clear of the fine mist which was drifting through the early morning sky, and glanced with sullen resentment at the plane ahead of him, to his left. This plane led the formation, flying at the apex of a perfect V composed of seven Spads, fighting single-seaters. They were going out to do battle. Below them the ground lay shrouded in a heavy fog, a cold gray blanket which obscured it from view. Above them a dim sun struggled for prominence. They went on toward the lines, where they knew there would be plenty of Boche planes to greet them.

The pilot of the apex plane was none other than the new C.O. of the airdrome, who had come in yesterday to fill a wounded man's shoes. Kirby plainly saw his head protruding from the cockpit, and through his mind flashed a vivid picture of the man. The C.O. was seated at his desk, scowling up at Kirby and his two comrades, “Shorty” Carn and Travis, while the “Three Mosquitoes”—as this famous trio of aces was known throughout the air force—stood before him in helpless silence. A hard man, the C.O. Small and wiry, with a gigantic head, a mop of

iron gray hair, a grizzled face furrowed by hard lines, and two steely eyes which would flame up from time to time, revealing the volcano therein. He was banging his hairy fist on his desk now for emphasis:

“I don't care who you are!” he thundered. “This pampering and coddling of favorites has got to stop. You've been behaving like silly kids, spoiled darlings, and it's about time somebody took you in hand.”

Kirby's teeth clenched. Those words had cut deep. The supercilious tone of the C.O., the withering contempt of his glance, burned him yet. And, he thought, it must have hurt Travis even more. The third Mosquito had always been wise and dignified, a tall, lanky man with hair graying at the temples. To talk to him as if he were a child was a gross insult, all the more so because; the accusation was most unjust. Silly kids, when they had been throwing their heart and soul into their work, employing all the skill they possessed to combat the Huns! Spoiled darlings, when they had never failed to answer the call to flight, when they had gone up day after day, performing their duties unflinchingly regardless of whether they were

exhausted, freezing, or melting. Why, the C.O. talked as if they had accomplished nothing, as if, indeed, they had been whiling away their time instead of fighting! Well, there were records to support them, records which showed the long string of Boche planes, the excellent reconnaissance work, the raids and ground- Strafes to their credit.

Yet, Kirby knew inwardly, the C.O. had reasons for talking that way. After all, what the Three Mosquitoes did had been reckless and totally unnecessary.

It had been a rather uneventful day. The squadron was ordered up for the usual patrol, but Huns were scarce. The German aviators were home mapping out a big campaign for the morrow. Their staff was crying for information, and they were determined to get it. Allied Staff Headquarters had learned of their plan. It was simple. True to their custom of trying to overwhelm with numbers, they were going to send over swarms of planes, cross the lines, and pick up what they could. The seven Spads were out now to intercept any of them that came into sight.

ALWAYS tuned up for a fight, and expecting one, the Three Mosquitoes had returned to their 'drome yesterday afternoon full of disgust. They had spotted a lone two-seater, but the Boche pilot didn't want to fight and cleverly lost himself in some heavy clouds. And so they came back, their buoyant energy and enthusiasm unexpressed, and bursting within them. It was Kirby who started the thing. To relieve the dullness, he began to lead them through a series of stunts, above the field, and the stunts grew wilder each time. Before long the three of them, in a dangerously close V-shaped formation, their wings almost interlocked, were looping the loop as one, rolling out and then rolling together again. Little did they know that the new C.O. was down on the field, blazing mad, watching their maneuvers. Nor did they know that the new C.O.'s chief bug was on stunt flying. He hated it with a deadly hatred. He believed that only smooth, conventional flying could win the war in the air, and that pilots had absolutely no right to risk their necks and planes in senseless maneuvers. And when the colonel disapproved of a thing, he said so with emphatic vigor. He was that kind of a man.

Next Kirby led his men downwards. They came swooping over the end of the field, their engines thundering. But they weren't landing. Even as their wheels brushed the ground all three zoomed up again, did another loop, then swooped down once

more. They went dashing across the field, their wheels whisking the ground, but never settling. It was a most dangerous stunt—one slip and they would crash. But it seemed like child's play in comparison to what came next.

Suddenly Kirby waved a signal, the three planes swerved around and, still flying just a few inches above the ground, went racing toward the side of a hangar. Those who caught sight of the machines, among them the C.O., held their breaths. Were those pilots deliberately trying to commit suicide? Their planes were headed straight for the steel wall of that hangar. There was going to be a head-on crash! Even now they were only a few yards from the place, charging at it with break neck speed. In one more second—

But in that last second Kirby jerked back his joystick for a steep zoom and, followed by the others, ascended just clear of the wall. It was a stunt indeed. The wheels of the three planes ran right up along the slanting roof, they took off, zoomed again, and finally glided down for a landing.

No sooner had they jumped from their cockpits than the C.O.'s orderly extended that officer's invitation for an immediate interview. Then followed that awful scene in the field office, with the C.O. rasping out one barrage of words after another. He told them their stunting was the best exhibition of damn-foolishness he had ever seen. He said he had a good mind to send them back, that their breed wasn't wanted at the Front. Did they think they were heroes just because they didn't have the brains to refuse to stunt? Well, that wasn't his idea of heroism. It was plain idiocy.

"Grand-stand stuff!" he snorted, contemptuously. "Just want to exploit yourselves, show off. I suppose," he sneered, "you wouldn't go into a fight unless you had a nice big audience watching you!"

At this, Kirby, who was young and impetuous, bridled up to retort. But his companions stopped him with a few discreet kicks and nudges, and the C.O. went on uninterrupted, denouncing them, scolding them, sneering at them. And finally had come that unforgettable remark about their being like silly kids, spoiled darling's who ought to be taken in hand. Perhaps this wouldn't have hurt so much had the C.O. not proved, by fitting actions to words, that he meant it. He treated them like children, took them in hand himself. First of all, he explained, he didn't believe in three-plane formations, nor did he see why the three men should be privileged to have their own private

flight. That must end. And, since their effect on one another seemed to be so violent as to make them do rash deeds, he thought it would do them all good if they were placed in different flights, separated. If they were such wonderful flyers, well and good: their services would be appreciated.

This was too much. All three men argued, entreated. Even Travis lost his poise for the moment:

“Sir,” he drawled, “we don’t object to being—er—punished, if you see fit to punish us. But we have the good of the squadron in mind. We want to do our best. We can only do our best when we fly and fight together—”

“What!” the C.O. burst out. “And you call yourselves good pilots? I never heard of such a thing! Can’t fight—” He choked, unable to give coherence to his fury. “Of all the stuff and rubbish, this tops the list. Well, if you can’t do your best get out of the service. Believe me, you’ll get out anyway if I catch you stunting again! I’m giving you one more chance.”

And he carried out his decision to the letter. This morning Kirby had seen his two comrades take off, each with a different flight, and each flight taking a different route. His own flight was the last to leave, for the C.O. wanted to see the field cleared first. As the other two formations faded into tiny distant specks, a wave of bitter humiliation swept Kirby. Not merely because he and his comrades were going to do their fighting separately to-day. He might have swallowed that: they had been separated before, and after all they would soon see one another again. No, it was the fact that this was a punishment, that he and his comrades had been picked from the whole squadron, openly disgraced, as if the C.O. were making an example of them. Everyone knew what had happened. And Kirby felt like what the C.O. had called him—a silly kid. He had misbehaved and was being punished.

NOW, once more, he glanced ahead. There was that plane, leading *him* on, leading him, when he was used to being the leader himself. The C.O. was waving his arm for a left bank. Kirby banked around with perfect timing and precision. The C.O.’s bank was a little too wide. Kirby laughed scornfully. The old duffer! His flying wasn’t anything to boast of. Probably the reason he got mad about stunting was that he couldn’t do it himself. Look where he was now! Instead of being between Kirby and the other front plane, his wide bank had brought him directly in front of Kirby. Another scornful laugh broke from

the young pilot’s throat, and at the same time his eye fell on the two Vickers machine guns mounted in front of his cockpit. They were pointed directly on the tail of the colonel’s plane now. Kirby amused himself by imagining that he was pulling both triggers, pouring his sulphurous tracer, into the C.O.’s plane. How he hated the man! Not just because he had suffered at his hands, but because of his whole manner, his cock-sure attitude, his flagrant superiority, his contempt for all his subordinates. A fine way to build up the morale of the pilots!

The C.O. got back into position, and the whole squadron straightened out. Kirby gave his plane a little left rudder, and at the same moment a thunderous crash reverberated through the air, off to the right. He knew the sound A.A. guns! They had crossed the lines and the Archies were sending up their usual greeting. It didn’t bother Kirby. He had learned of their harmlessness; they barked but never bit. Once, in a reckless humor, he had flown right through a heavy barrage of Archie shells. Here was another one now. It also burst way off to the right, and this time he saw it break and mushroom out, blackening the sky. More followed, in swift succession. He glanced ahead, and his lips curled in a contemptuous smile. The C.O.’s plane was zig-zagging—the conventional manner of “dodging” the A.A. shells. The old fool! And he had told the Three Mosquitoes how to fly! Why, he was afraid of being hit! Yet, as Kirby remembered that grizzled face, he knew this wasn’t true. The C.O. was not the kind of man who’d be afraid of anything. He only wanted to play safe. Archie kept in their wake for awhile, the concussions making the planes wobble slightly, and darkening the air. But soon they got out of range of that battery, and went on. The C.O. started a climb. Kirby pulled back his stick and climbed with him, as did the rest. They went up through the fine mist, and emerged from it with startling suddenness. The air was clear up here, the sun bright, the sky a pale pure blue, with only a few stray wisps of cirrus clouds drifting about. They leveled off and went ahead. They were ready now, having gained a good altitude position. Let the Huns come on. Once more Kirby’s mind resumed the dismal train of thoughts. Perhaps if he spoke to Headquarters, something could be done about this. Yet, even as the idea came to him, he realized its utter futility. Headquarters would support the colonel. After all he was a C.O., and he could do as he saw fit. And, Kirby knew, there was no hope of making him reconsider his decision. No, it was useless. If——

HE STOPPED short. There was a familiar movement among the planes around him. They were spreading out, breaking formation. There could only be one reason. Instinctively he glanced down ahead of him. There they were, eight of them, moving smoothly on in two small flights. Where they had come from he did not know. They seemed to have appeared quite suddenly, and even now he and the rest were above them, in a position to dive. They were partially obscured by the mist, and he could only catch vague outlines of them. But he recognized their type. Fighting Fokkers, the greatest combat planes the Huns had!

The C.O.'s arm shot upwards, and the next second Kirby saw his plane plunge over into a dive. He pushed his stick forward abruptly, felt his machine dip, and then he was screaming down. And for just a moment, as he felt the old thrill of that breathless attacking dive, he forgot where he was, forgot what had happened. A strange, tingling sensation warmed him from head to foot, and his eyes shone with eager anticipation. Fight! Combat! He was going down to attack. And the other two Mosquitoes were by his side, diving with him, all of them ready to fight with their machine-like co-ordination. He felt them there: it couldn't be otherwise. They must warm up their guns now. He leaned forward to his sights, pulled both triggers vigorously. The two guns trembled as if trying to fire themselves off, and he saw the streaking flames bite into the air, heard the deafening clatter. He was ready. He glanced around to shout inaudible words of cheer to his comrades.

It came to him, then, like a strange shock, as he was coming into range of the Fokkers. For his glance had revealed several planes diving yards away, the usual formation attack. His comrades weren't here. They had all been punished——

A groan escaped him. In an instant all his eagerness left him, all his enthusiasm died. A wave of desolation swept him. He didn't feel like fighting, didn't care. Everything had gone wrong, and nothing could be repaired. What was the use? He——

A screaming, hissing sound along his lower wing broke in shrilly on his thoughts. Instinct helped him, he rolled and banked slightly. Then he looked behind him, saw the Fokker on his tail, spitting out flame. And he also caught a glimpse of the other planes, diving, zooming, racing out there. He took a second to make his decision, for he was not up to form to-day; then he performed a swift vertical bank which brought

him face to face with his attacker. The German fired a short burst which whistled past the Spad, then it was his turn to roll. Kirby rolled after him, following the black smoke from the Hun's exhaust. They began to maneuver for a position. Ordinarily, Kirby would have won such a battle in no time——this Boche pilot was rather slow. But Kirby was slow, too. Continual brooding and discontent had tired him out: he did not have much fight in him. The German soon got on his tail again, and the bullets started to rip holes through his fuselage. He might have been hit, but another American plane engaged the Fokker, drew it away.

Kirby must do better. He raced back into the thick of it, spotted a Hun who was waiting to swoop down on one of the Spads, and gave chase. Another series of maneuvers followed. Kirby finally got on the German's tail, and fired. The German rolled, and Kirby overshot for the first time in months, wasting ammunition. He tried again. This time he made a hit, though not the kind he could be proud of. The German's motor didn't stop, but began to miss, and he took his machine downwards for a landing.

There was a Hun diving for Kirby now. He rolled out of the way, and the Hun dived past, changing his object of attack, going for another Spad. Kirby was about to dive after him when something caught his eye. His heart stood still. It seemed that the whole German air force had arrived. There were so many planes up there that he couldn't count them. He saw Fokkers, Pfaltz scouts, Hannoveranner two-seaters, tri-planes and monoplanes. They were diving down, dropping from everywhere, like black pellets of hail. The American flight was in for it. Unless help came at once their goose was cooked.

Kirby wondered what the old C.O. would do now. He soon found out. Looking ahead, he saw the Spads following the front plane around, in loose formation. They were trying to get out, to retreat. He put on his throttle, dashed forward to join them. All of them headed back for their own lines, as fast as they could fly. The Germans came down behind and followed, creeping up on them, pumping out their tracer. A.A. guns added their bark to the deafening confusion. The American planes rolled to avoid the bullets, and at last the C.O. gave the signal to dive for it, get down on the carpet, where it was dangerous enough but safer than here. But the Germans were intent on getting their cold meat. The faster planes among them swooped down beneath the Americans, cut them off. Others got in front of them and intercepted them

there. Still others closed the path behind them. They were trapped, being shot at from all directions. They couldn't move forward: they could only stall, roll, and keep turning. Kirby's glance caught one of the Spads hurtling down in a tight spin, like a black streak. A wave of pity for the unlucky pilot swept him, and then he wondered if it could be the C.O. No, it wasn't. The latter's plane was over there, holding off three ambitious Germans.

Kirby rolled too now as the observer in a two-seater flanked around his machine gun and sprayed the mosquito's top wing. A few seconds more now, and the whole flight would be slaughtered.

BUT then something happened. Kirby, rolling and banking to shake off the rain of tracer, did not see it at first. But he was aware of it. He felt a sudden change in the atmosphere, felt his attackers breaking off in momentary confusion. And then he saw a dozen new planes dropping out of the sky. As they drew into range he was able to distinguish their type. S.E.s, those graceful and efficient little single-seaters. A British squadron had arrived, and was coming down to help. The Huns still had overwhelming numbers, but the new planes had a good position, and in that first sally, as the British guns stuttered into life, the American flight picked itself up and turned around to fight anew.

And before the Germans could trap them again, a third force of Allied planes had arrived, one flight coming close in the wake of another. Kirby, as he shook himself clear of a Pfaltz which had been sitting on his tail, saw them. His trained eye told him at once that they were from his own 'drome—the other two flights. Doubtless they too had been looking for Huns, and since most of the Huns had concentrated at this particular spot to-day, they had found their way here too. Now they came diving out of the sun, giving the Germans something really to worry about.

Kirby, with the danger past, tried to get back his old enthusiasm, his fighting spirit. He put on his throttle to give chase to a Fokker. As he glanced ahead, he caught a glimpse of one of the most spectacular sights he had ever seen. The whole sky was thick with planes: everywhere he looked he saw them. Like an enormous swarm of angry wasps, they were buzzing about, circling around one another, diving, zooming, flashing silver and gold in the sunlight, for the sun was bright by this time. Now and then he saw a plane hurtling downwards, a dark streak or else a mass of livid flame. But such things seemed insignificant. The whole fight

was on such a gigantic scale that one or two planes hardly counted. Indeed, of all the battles Kirby had been in this was by far the biggest. Never before had he seen so many planes together, or heard so much noise. The clatter of machine guns had risen to a roaring crescendo, the drone of engines was a mighty thunder, and through it all reverberated the crash of A.A. shells.

The Fokker he had been chasing had escaped him, and he turned around to look for another. And, at that moment, a sudden thought struck him, brought him up with a joyous start. Why, somewhere in that swarm of planes, fighting somewhere in here, were his two comrades! Instantly he felt an overwhelming desire to be with them, to search them out of that maze so they could all share this spectacle together, fight as they had never fought before. But how find them here? Where were they, what planes among that swarming horde were theirs? It was strange to think of them all being here together, and yet so far apart. He could never find them. Besides, the rules said he must remain down here with his flight, co-operate with them. He had not done so well. He must get a few Huns now.

Nevertheless, guided by instinct, he began to climb upwards, zig-zagging his way through the ships, shooting at those which crossed his sights, dodging those which got their sights on him. He went up through there, and was nearing the very top of the battle. He had forgotten about staying with his flight. He could not help himself; it was a habit with him to make for altitude.

Now he was above the rest—they were swarming beneath him—and he was chasing a two-seater which had followed him up. And as he raced after the Hun's tail, another plane suddenly joined him, flew up alongside of him. He saw it before he bent over his sights, and a whoop of joy broke from his throat. It was Travis; he knew him by the insignia of the Spad. The Third Mosquito, doubtless guided by the same fighting instinct, had also worked his way up here. He was waving to Kirby now. Kirby waved back vigorously. With their natural coordination, they were fighting together already. Kirby, following his custom, sped ahead, got beneath the two-seater to hold it in position, at the same time pulling up his nose and firing. Travis came down on the Boche's tail, his guns spitting short bursts. It was over in a second. The two-seater stopped still, then burst into flames, crumpling as it fell slowly down. The two Mosquitoes joined each other again, and gave chase to a Pfaltz. They were over the other end of the fight now, so high that the horde

of planes looked like a lot of tiny flies. And it was here that another Spad suddenly zoomed up and took a position on the other side of Kirby.

“Shorty!” he shouted, though he could not hear his own voice in the roar of motors and guns.

AND from that moment he forgot all about the C.O., forgot about his duties, about his flight. He was leading his two comrades once more, leading them in battle. The Three Mosquitoes were flying and fighting together as always. And the old spirit of fight warmed Kirby’s blood again, and his muscles fairly burst with exhilaration. He waved his arm, and they all went thundering down to pick Huns off the top. Two machines were sent crashing down, and they were maneuvering after others.

In a short time they had sucked half a dozen Boche planes off to another part of the sky, away from the big strafe, and they were holding a private battle of their own. It was a rather silly and unnecessary stunt; they did not have to make odds for themselves when the planes were all so evenly matched. But their old, insatiable appetite for reckless adventure, for “grandstand stuff,” as the C.O. had called it, was getting the better of them. They dived and zoomed after those Boche, lunging at them insistently in the fashion which had won them their nicknames. And before long they were doing loops, shooting even as they flew upside down, performing dangerous Immelmann turns and swift rolls. The Germans, unused to such a strange attack, became momentarily confused. Two of them locked wings and pulled each other down for a crash. The Three Mosquitoes went after the remaining four.

They were so intent on their work that they did not see the abrupt ending of the big fight, off to their side. Another squadron of British planes had arrived on the scene, and the Germans, now out-numbered, decided to call it a day. Very pistols shot out rockets signaling the men to retreat. The German planes banked around, worked their way out, and made a bee-line for home. The Allies began to reshape squadrons, one flight after another leaving for the lines. A few minutes and the sky, which had been thick with planes, was cleared, and the space looked surprisingly empty. A few of the pilots, however, remaining near the scene, had caught sight of the little battle in the distance, in which the Three Mosquitoes were busily engaged. Six of them went over to investigate.

The stunting of the Three Mosquitoes had reached its height. With only three Germans left, they were

employing every trick of the game, outwitting the enemy pilots at every turn. Kirby was rolling to get on a Hun’s tail when he saw the six Allied planes arrive. He looked them over. They were S.E.s, British planes, and——

He sat rigid, his heart pounding, the eagerness crushed out of him as if by a heavy blow. Those planes weren’t all S.E.s. There was a Spad there, too. He wished his eyes were deceiving him, yet knew they weren’t. There was the insignia, plainly marked on the fuselage. It was the C.O.’s plane!

A groan rose from Kirby’s throat. He felt more than ever like a silly kid, a child who had been caught doing forbidden deeds on the sly. The C.O. had seen the Three Mosquitoes, and worse yet, had seen them stunting! Their goose was cooked. The C.O. was a man who wouldn’t budge an inch. He had told them he would send them back if he caught them stunting. He would stick to his word.

There was not the least atom of fight in Kirby now. He didn’t care what happened, didn’t even notice the Germans. But he knew that the British planes were chasing them away, racing after them. He glanced around. His two comrades were flying up to him, doubtless as confused as he was. And there was the C.O.’s plane, coming up alongside of him. It passed so close he could see the man’s goggled face. And if he had any hope of making things up, it left him now. The C.O.’s face was livid with rage. He waved his arm, signaled Kirby to take his men back to the ‘drome, as if to say, “And then I’ll settle you!”

Kirby obeyed at once, got his men beside him, and started for the lines. The C.O. was following them, several yards behind. Doubtless he had ordered his flight to go ahead, while he came over here to get the goods on the Three Mosquitoes. Rage swept Kirby. Yes, probably the old man was delighted. For some reason he hated the three, and had just been waiting for this opportunity to break them. And now he was following them, keeping them under his eyes as if he feared they would run away, desert. . . . Kirby’s lips set grimly. And he hated the C.O. as he had never hated before. He felt like going back there and shooting that plane down.

He glanced around, saw the Spad flying in their wake. And as he looked, something happened. The C.O.’s plane seemed to wobble, then fell into a sideslip. Kirby slowed up his own motor instinctively, and so did the men at his side. Looking around again, he saw the C.O.’s plane flying along jerkily, going constantly into more stalling sideslips. And its exhausts were

belching black smoke and fire. There was something wrong. Perhaps the old fool didn't know how to handle his machine. Kirby resolved to find out. He signaled his men, they banked around, and went to the C.O.'s plane. It was floundering now, jerking clumsily.

Kirby went ahead and passed close to it, waved his arm. The C.O. waved back and pointed over his cockpit, signified that he had engine trouble. At the same time his plane did another sideslip, and Kirby had to maneuver to get alongside of it again. He went up and they began signaling to one another, using the squadron's agreed series of signs. The C.O. made it clear that his engine was "missing," that unless he could land to cool off and fix it, it was likely to conk, stop, any moment. Kirby pointed towards the lines, gestured interrogatively. The C.O. wobbled his wings in a negative. Kirby remembered then that the lines were twenty miles away, and that a plane with an incapacitated engine could never make it. The C.O. had to land. Kirby signaled him: "Wait! Keep flying!"

THROUGHOUT the course of this excited interchange of signals, he had entirely forgotten his hatred, his resentment. He was an aviator, and here was a problem which called for all his skill. It didn't matter that the pilot of the plane was the C.O. All he realized was that the pilot was having trouble, needed expert help and advice.

He signaled the other two Mosquitoes to go up and keep in touch with the C.O., then nosed his own ship down and circled to look over the ground. The blanket of fog had rolled away, leaving the earth unusually clear in the brilliant morning sun. This was German territory all right, it was a field of battle, charred and ruined, and full of Germans, who were mobilizing men and supplies, digging trenches, preparing to meet the Allied offensive planned for the immediate future. The ground was rough down there too. There had been woods here, and though every tree had been razed, stumps and underbrush were everywhere. No chance for a landing here. He smiled grimly. Even if there were a chance for a landing, it wouldn't do the C.O. much good. If he managed to get down there, it would mean sure capture, and perhaps death. The Germans had made up their minds to shoot on sight any pilots they caught with phosphorus bullets—though they themselves used them. The C.O., like everyone else, had several rounds of these bullets for balloon strafing.

Again he smiled grimly. And at that moment the

past flashed through his mind once more, and he remembered all he had suffered and was about to suffer at the C.O.'s hands. If the C.O. were captured, he and his comrades could go unpunished, could continue their work together. After all, it would serve the old duffer right!

But the feeling passed almost instantly. Kirby's sense of duty was strong: he couldn't ignore it. It was a serious thing for a C.O. to be captured, a big step for the Huns. It must be prevented. It was up to Kirby and his men to do all they could to prevent it. And, to his own surprise, he wanted to do so, had an overwhelming desire to get the C.O. out of this mess. It wasn't just duty after all. Somehow, he felt it would bring him keen satisfaction. Perhaps it was that he wanted to prove his worth to the C.O., make the old colonel depend on him for help. Well, he'd show him!

He went down lower, and they started to shoot up at him. Machine guns and pom-poms and A.A. guns thundered at him in unison. Shells burst around him. He swept down over the ground. Then he glanced up at the sky, saw the three Spads up there. The C.O.'s plane had made little headway towards the lines. It was floundering, and the side-slips were getting more precipitous.

He scanned the ground, and his eye finally came to rest on a spot down there. It seemed there was a comparatively level field in the midst of this razed forest—perhaps it had once been a small flying field. A landing could be made there. Yet, he asked himself grimly, could it? At one end of the field he saw about a hundred Germans, engaged in digging a trench. Infantry. Even now a group of them were shooting up at him with machine guns. He took careful note of the spot. It was, he noticed, isolated from the other placements: except for that company of soldiers there were no other Germans hereabouts. Perhaps if the C.O. landed at the other end—— He broke off the thought with an impatient oath. No, those men could get any plane that came there. And, on the other hand, this was the only landing place in sight. The rest of the ground was rough, fatal to a Spad, which was difficult enough to land under ordinary conditions.

No, it couldn't be done. Unless the C.O.'s engine came miraculously back to life, things were hopeless. He glanced up once more at the group of planes, and the glance confirmed his worst apprehensions. The C.O.'s plane was nose-heavy, which meant his motor was practically dead. The Spad was dropping constantly, losing many feet with each drop, and the

pilot could hardly keep it in the air. He had to land at once. But how?

THEN, suddenly, as Kirby was zooming up there to join the others, it came to him. Impossible, perhaps, but it was the only way. He would try it. The others would be glad to try it with him. And perhaps—there was a fleeting chance—they might manage it.

He put on full throttle, reached the other planes, and worked with all the speed of which he was capable. He signaled the C.O. to go and land on that field, go straight down from here and land on this end, which was opposite the end where the Germans were working. The wind fortunately was right: the C.O. could fly directly into it for a short landing.

A wave of triumph swept over Kirby as he saw the C.O. nose his ship down. He was obeying Kirby's instructions now, obeying them precisely and to the point. Yes, Kirby could order the old duffer around all he wanted. But there was no time to gloat. Stirring him self back into action, he flashed his signals to Carn and Travis, who responded with cheerful affirmatives. The three raced ahead, passed over the C.O.'s plane, which was going down slowly, reluctantly. If he could hold out now, make this landing——

Kirby's arm shot upwards, and he pushed his stick forward. The three Spads plunged over as one, and once more they were all thundering down in a dive. Down they swooped, with perfect timing, coming over the field.

The Germans saw them coming, saw them looming into largeness over their heads. And in the sky another plane was slowly making its way down over the opposite end of the field. The Germans aimed their machine guns, and the men stopped digging and rushed for rifles. Ground-strafting! As the Three Mosquitoes drew into range overhead, the Huns opened up, their guns blazing in unison. A hail of streaking tracer answered from the Spads, and some of the soldiers dropped in their tracks. The others instinctively made for the partially completed trench, a poor shelter, only knee-deep. They shot desperately, frantically, with everything they had. But the planes ignored the barrage. They came down several yards in front of the Huns and, their wheels whisking the ground in their old, dangerous stunt, came charging at the soldiers, firing as they came. The men were terror-stricken, thrown into momentary confusion. But they kept on shooting, determined to stick to their posts as long as they could.

Kirby led his comrades on. They kept close to the ground, racing side by side, headed straight for the trench and shooting into it. Kirby saw the gray-clad men jump out and run, fleeing from the planes which charged on them like great monsters. He swerved around to head them off, keep them from dashing across the field. Doubtless they would get him soon with those machine guns, for the bullets were tearing through his fuselage and wings, but his trick might succeed. It was a stunt all right, a stunt indeed. He remembered the C.O. then, and jerked his head around, glanced toward the other end of the field. The C.O.'s plane had landed, and he caught a glimpse of the pilot at the engine, working on the other side of it, using the plane as a shield. But this was hardly necessary. The Germans weren't bothering him now; they were well-occupied with the Three Mosquitoes. Kirby's scheme was working. He had gotten between the Huns and the CO., and was protecting the plane on the ground.

Never before had the Three Mosquitoes worked more effectively. They were rounding up the Germans like cattle, driving them off only to pursue them again. Before long they ran off the field, behind their trench, and sought shelter in the underbrush and tree-stumps of the ruined forest. But the Three Mosquitoes kept right after them. Though it was extremely dangerous, they kept flying low, even over that rough ground. The slightest slip, or perhaps a tree-stump higher than the rest, would mean a fatal crash. Kirby laughed cheerfully, as the irony of the thing struck him. He was stunting, doing the very thing the C.O. had condemned, and doing it to save the C.O.'s hide!

Some of the Germans ran off now, and started to go around the field, through the underbrush. Kirby rushed to head them off. He was just in time. The Germans, desperate and bent on getting some kind of vengeance, had spied the C.O.'s plane, and were setting up a machine gun, aiming at it. Kirby swooped down, drove them back, and almost tore off one of his wheels on some brush.

Thus they went on, their whole purpose being to keep the Germans away from the C.O. Kirby was nearly exhausted. The dogfight had been hard enough, but this work used every bit of his energy. If the C.O. didn't hurry he couldn't go on much farther. And the bullets were whizzing at him, threatening to tear his plane to pieces any moment.

Time dragged, and then Kirby made an alarming discovery. His ammunition was almost gone. And he

knew the same must be true of his comrades, because they had all been fighting the same length of time. He had only enough for three short bursts. He glanced back. The C.O. was still fixing his engine. If he didn't hurry——!

Kirby swept down on a cluster of Germans, fired one of his bursts, saw he had scored. Two more left now. He tried to save those bullets, tried to use his plane as a weapon, and fool the men with feints and lunges. But when he didn't shoot, they simply dropped on the ground, too low for him, and aimed their rifles. He glanced to his side. Travis' plane was there, driving after the Germans too. But no flames were streaking from the plane's nose. Travis was out of ammunition. Kirby glanced swiftly towards Carn's plane. He was still shooting, but he only fired short bursts, in slow succession. They could not hold out much longer. The C.O. *must* hurry. Kirby jerked his head around, and his heart sank. The C.O. was still at his engine. Would he never be ready?

Kirby used up his last round of tracer when the Germans rallied themselves and tried to get back to the field. Carn's ammunition had given out a few seconds before. The Germans grasped the situation at once, saw that the guns weren't shooting, and became active, their spirits revived. They lay down behind their machine guns and pumped out a steady stream of tracer. In that first sally, Kirby saw a piece of Travis' rudder fall off, and as the plane wobbled he feared it would crash. But Travis took it upwards safely; he couldn't stay down here any longer with his machine side-slipping like that. Nor could the others stay much longer, without being slaughtered. And the Germans were crossing the field, working their way over there, intending most likely, to capture the C.O. Everything had failed after all. There was no hope. But then, at that very moment, the roar of another motor broke through the air, audible because of the loud explosions with which an engine comes to life. Kirby jerked his head around again. The C.O.'s plane had taken off, and was zooming upwards! He pulled back his own stick, even as a bullet split one of his struts, weakening his

wings. He climbed too, and so did his comrades. They came out of that maelstrom of bullets, left the little field beneath them, and found safety in the sky. There was still some danger— Boche planes might meet them, and the three were without ammunition. But this was soon eliminated, for a flight from the squadron which had been out looking for them came along, and proved an efficient escort. All went back to the 'drome, the C.O.'s engine running smoothly.

"SIR," Kirby was saying, as he and his two comrades stood before the C.O.'s desk later, "we're all anxious to get this thing over with. We realize that we've disobeyed orders, and we're ready to pay the penalty. We are well aware," his voice was a trifle husky, "that what happened out on that field has nothing to do with the case. We were simply doing our duty. And we neither expect nor want that to color your decision."

The C.O. tapped his desk, then looked up at the three. He had not spoken to them when they landed, but had gone off, summoning them later. Now Kirby saw a strange look in those steely eyes, in that hard face. Indeed, it seemed that the C.O. was actually trying to look pleasant.

"I see," rasped the little man, and again he tapped his desk. Kirby saw then that he was ill at ease. It was strange, a grizzled, hard-boiled veteran like him being ill at ease. But it was true. "Well," the colonel coughed, "I want you to hear part of my report." He picked up a sheet of paper and began to read without expression: "The squadron proved to be most efficient in every respect and excellently organized. All the flights did well, and I want to put in a special citation for D Flight, which——"

"D Flight!" echoed Kirby incredulously, and Carn and Travis started with him. "Isn't there some mistake, sir? That's our old flight, our three-plane formation——"

"I said D Flight," rasped the C.O. ominously, his eyes flashing, "otherwise known as the Three Mosquitoes, and" he banged his fist on the table, "the best blankety blank flight in the whole blank squadron!"