

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

## HOT AIR

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

*The Boche was good and sore, tired of having his planes shot down one after another by the famous “Three Mosquitoes.” A special formation of Albatrosses, known as the “Avenging Yellow-Jackets,” was out to finish Kirby and his pals. Another of Oppenheim’s great flying yarns.*

**J**UST ACROSS THE LINES the enemy appeared—nine ominous black specks against the intense blue, cloudless sky. The flight commander of the American squadron, composed of eight silver Spads, saw them first, way off to the right, and waggled his wings to signal the rest. Instantly, moving as one in a graceful sweep, the American machines wheeled around, their wings flashing as the bright sunlight struck them. Those on the ground, the men in the front-line trenches, both German and Allied, looked up with squinting eyes at the tiny bird-like shapes a mile above. They saw both groups moving smoothly forward, on lines that must inevitably converge. A dog-fight, the cry ran! And, as was often customary on such occasions, hostilities between the front lines ceased temporarily to give the men a chance to enjoy the “show.” It was rarely that they had an opportunity to witness as spectacular and breathless an air clash as this promised to be. Artillery groups close enough to see the planes left their guns and lay down on their backs, a position they always assumed so they could

watch the fray above in comfort, without craning their necks.

Closer and closer, slowly but inexorably, the two squadrons drew toward one another as if magnetized. The drone of motors filled the air, the atmosphere grew tense and excitement ran high among the spectators, who discussed the chances of the respective squadrons and laid bets as to the outcome, as to how many planes would be “knocked out of the sky.” Others, cursed with vivid imaginations, thought of the poor “sky guys” who were doomed to go hurtling down in a gagging rush of air, or be burned, alive or dead, in their flaming planes.

The pilots themselves, however, hardly shared this thrill. They kept guiding their planes with the same coolness with which they had guided them before the enemy appeared, their goggled faces grim and earnest. Perhaps their hearts beat a little faster, but otherwise they were not excited. To them this was but the usual thing, the routine work they had been doing day after day. It was nerve-racking, fierce, dangerous, with certain death for some of them almost

every time, but weeks of it had hardened them until they could look upon it as merely an unpleasant job that had to be gone through with.

One of the pilots was even bored. This was Kirby, known throughout the air force as the young, impetuous leader of the "Three Mosquitoes." His Spad was in the center of the formation, and it flashed even brighter than usual today, for the insignia on its fuselage, with its symbolic picture of a very grim-looking mosquito, had been freshly painted. His two comrades, "Shorty" Carn and the mature and dignified Travis, flew on either side of him, and the three formed a sort of V within a V, with the other five planes spread out around them.

It was the presence of these other planes that was the cause of Kirby's boredom. As always, he hated to fly with the rest of the squadron. He could only feel that keen, exhilarating eagerness toward his work when he and his comrades went out alone, put on their own death-defying shows. There was no kick in this. Only once did he show any sign of interest in the squadron they were about to meet in combat. That was when the specks had grown enough to assume shape and color. Then he had looked them over keenly. But his interest had died as soon as he had ascertained, from the shape of their wings, that they were a squadron of Fokkers. They were not the group of bright yellow Albatross planes he was looking for.

It would be a hot fracas all right, but nothing compared to the fierce clashes he was used to. Since he was with the squadron here, he would have to play the cooperation game—stick to the formation and keep his position. That was nothing like zooming and diving all over the sky with his comrades, making the impudent assaults and lunges on an overwhelming enemy which had won them their nicknames.

NOT only was he bored, but he was good and sore. There was a scowl on his face, and now and then his eyes flashed angrily at the two pilots on either side of him, who were watching him closely, with mingled anxiety and irritation. He knew what was on their minds, knew that they were afraid he was going to attempt some reckless stunt, and it made him furious to feel that they were trying to chaperone him. He was furious at them, anyway, because it was really through their doings that the three of them had to fly with the squadron. If it hadn't been for them the C.O. would have allowed them to go out alone, as usual. Kirby's lips twisted into a contemptuous, scornful smile. He

never would have believed it of them! Why, Carn and Travis had never shied at any risk, had been as debonair as he was about flirting with death. Now they were talking that rot about being careful, about taking less chances. What had come over them? "Yellow!" His lips formed the word soundlessly.

The stigma was quite unjust, and something deep in Kirby reproached him for it, made him slightly ashamed for thinking of it. Still, he would not admit that they were right, would not admit that for the three of them to fly alone under present conditions would have been extremely dangerous and an act of folly. He didn't realize that what he called "yellowness" was just common sense, the very thing he seemed to have lost.

For the facts in the case were in their favor. News had been received from Intelligence that the Germans were out to get the Three Mosquitoes. Incensed by this insolent trio which had become a real menace to their aircraft and struck a blow at the morale of their pilots, they were determined to bring to an abrupt end the colorful career of Kirby and his comrades. This part of the news wasn't startling. The Germans had been trying to get them for quite a while now, but they had always managed to slip through the enemy's hands. However, the report went on, there was a group of German aces who had made it their single, definite object to wipe out the trio, and had actually formed a squadron for this set purpose. There was no information to be had as to this squadron's size or strength. All that was known was that these aces called themselves the "Avenging Yellow-Jackets" and that their planes would be easy to recognize: they flew Albatrosses, painted a bright yellow, their tails ringed with brown to represent the stingers.

That news had come in yesterday, and its effect on Carn and Travis was to make them look quite thoughtful. They realized that the matter was a serious one, not to be taken lightly. They knew the Hun's methods: when the Germans decided to accomplish something, they went about it with an unyielding, relentless stubbornness which often had broken down all resistance. They moved like a steam-roller, slowly and deliberately, but crushing everything in its path. And since there was no telling how many planes were in this strange squadron, it was best to be careful.

But Kirby did not think of these things. On him the news had just the opposite effect. A feeling of pride surged through him at the thought that he and his men were so damned good that the Germans had to organize a special squadron to send after them.

Why, that was an honor, a recognition, that had only been accorded to airmen of such caliber as the great Richthofen. In fact, Kirby's head began to swell. And for an aviator, regardless of his merit, a swelled head was a dangerous ailment. It was all right for him to know his own value, to bank upon his superior skill; but when he got the idea that he could lick the whole German air force, that he himself was invincible, it meant, usually, that he was due for a hard fall. More than one ace had lost his life because of sheer conceit. And now Kirby was showing the familiar symptoms. At first his comrades were amazed, for while Kirby had never been modest, he had never been a braggart either.

Now he spoke with great bravado: "We've got 'em all licked!" he boasted. "They're scared—the sight of us frightens the wits out of them. I hope we meet that Yellow-Jacket circus; we'll spank them and send 'em home to their mothers!"

Travis, the lanky and wise Travis, gave Kirby a keen glance.

"That's all very well," he said, with his customary gravity. "But remember they might have big odds on us."

"Big enough odds to beat hell out of us," Shorty Carn added, puffing thoughtfully on his beloved briar. "You can't laugh that off."

But neither of them could bring Kirby down to earth again, and presently they realized with a shock just how extreme his conceit had become. For when it was suggested by some of the squadron's wisest veterans that the Three Mosquitoes temporarily wipe off their give-away insignias, so as to insure against being easily recognized and trapped, Kirby's reply was to have his Mosquito repainted, double size and bright enough to be seen a mile off. Then, of course, his comrades, though they had agreed with the others, left their insignias on, too. Such was the tacit code between the three. But before long the whole squadron was talking about the incident. Pilots shook their heads; it was a shame that Kirby, undoubtedly one of the finest and greatest flyers, could stoop to such petty vanity.

The next morning, which was this morning, the C.O. himself suggested that the Three Mosquitoes fly with one of the other flights, until some course could be worked out to remove the menace which threatened them. However, he would leave that to them. Kirby promptly said no, insisting that he and his comrades could take good care of themselves in any contingency, but Carn and Travis were both so earnestly in favor of

the suggestion that the C.O. took the reins in his hands and ordered them to go with the other planes.

Kirby was wild with rage. He burst into a furious denunciation of his comrades. Why had they spoiled his plans? If they were afraid to go with him alone, why the hell didn't they stay back, let him go by himself? They listened to him tolerantly, patiently, and refused to make a quarrel of it. Their friendship was too fine, too important to break on account of a petty disagreement. But Kirby was downright mad, and made no effort to conceal it.

SO NOW, while the men down on the ground were completely absorbed and very much concerned over the coming air clash, Kirby was hardly giving it a thought. He was thinking of how he would show them all that what he had claimed was true, if only the occasion would arise. He would prove he could more than hold his own against any Huns who dared to oppose him, and that he didn't need any nursemaids to take care of him. If only those Albatross planes—

He broke off hopelessly. Even if they did appear it wouldn't give him his opportunity. The squadron here would take them on.

Another movement among the planes around him forced him to put his mind on the task in hand at last. Again the flight commander was wagging his wings, and the slight rolling motion ran through the whole flight like a wave. Kirby looked ahead. The Fokkers were so close now that he could see them in every detail. They were higher than the Americans, and it would be up to them to open the scrap. In the clear, sunny sky they made a beautiful sight; trim little planes with checkered wings and black Maltese-cross insignias. They were spreading out slightly, getting ready to come in on a long glide-dive.

Kirby waited, and in spite of himself felt a slight tensing of nerves which the pilot always feels in the breathless seconds just before the battle. His eyes were on the flight commander's plane. The men in the trenches watched in tense silence—watched for the furious clash that was to come in a few seconds.

Suddenly, the checkered Fokkers dipped slightly in graceful unison and then, with a roar, came shooting down a long hill of space, at the foot of which were the Spads. Instantly, the American flight commander's arm darted up from his cockpit, waved vigorously.

There was a thunderous roar from the Spads now, as each man opened his throttle wide. They, too, were going into a slight glide, so as to get the maximum

speed and avoid the full brunt of the Germans' attack. Kirby shot one glance at his two comrades, who waved to him in the hope of getting a cheerful response. But he merely scowled at them, and then eased his stick forward and savagely cut loose his motor.

The spectators a mile below held their breaths as the two groups of planes came roaring down at one another, head-on, at break-neck speed.

Black smoke poured from their exhausts, and the golden sunlight shone through it fantastically. Closer and closer they drew, and presently red streaks could be seen spitting from their noses, and seconds later the slower-traveling staccato *rat-tat-tat* reached the ears of the men below. The speed of the planes had become almost unbelievable; they seemed to come down like flashing streaks.

With a mad rush they slithered past each other, above and below. To the naked eye it seemed as if they merely rushed by one another, without yet clashing. It was therefore incongruous to see one of the five outside Spads burst into flames and fall out of the formation in a slow, fatal spin. The Germans had drawn first blood!

The two squadrons wheeled to face each other again. Planes drew up in abrupt stalls, whipped around in skid turns which almost seemed to raise dust. They all spread out, only to come together again in a confused mass where it was difficult to distinguish German from American. It was one of those fierce mix-ups, with each plane firing at any antagonist in sight. They were zooming, diving, gyrating all around each other, flashing in the sun. To those in the distance it looked as if a lot of specks were doing some weird dance in the sky—a senseless, furious dance.

The Three Mosquitoes were in the midst of it, but where Carn and Travis were fighting with their usual gusto, Kirby refused, really, to give himself to the fray. He felt like a big, powerful mastiff who doesn't care to lower himself to do battle with some insignificant pomeranian who has tried to provoke him. And he also felt that as soon as the Germans were thoroughly aware that the Three Mosquitoes were in their midst, the three aces who had actually been recognized by Imperial staff headquarters, they would be good and scared, perhaps scared enough even to retreat. Therefore, instead of putting all his effort into getting German planes, he concentrated on making himself very conspicuous—and, consequently, making his comrades conspicuous, too, for they followed wherever he led. They stuck to him so closely that, knowing they

were trying to watch out for him, his fury against them kept increasing. He went on, maneuvering all through the swarm of planes, firing whenever a Fokker crossed his sights. The fact that he would get a few Huns he took for granted. First he would get them scared, and then he would pick them off like flies.

The general mix-up lasted only a few seconds, but during those seconds the Allies on the ground were given a good opportunity to break into hoarse cheers. Out of that swarming, dancing mass, a Fokker suddenly came plunging, dropping like a stone in a tight spin until, with a crash, it buried its nose in the shell-torn earth and lay in a crumpled heap. The Americans had paid for that first victim.

Kirby had been firing at that unlucky German, but he had no way of telling whether it was his bullets which turned the trick. Several other pilots had been shooting at the Fokker, too, from every conceivable angle. The real victor would remain unknown, even to himself. That was what Kirby hated about this kind of scrap. You couldn't show your merit or marksmanship at all, couldn't win proper credit.

BUT now, suddenly, this strange dance began to change in form. Its rhythm became more regular, and it took on a more definite pattern. The dancers began to choose partners, planes paired off and waltzed around the sky with each other, in couples. The dog-fight had resolved itself into a series of duels, which are much more effective, since each man has a definite antagonist instead of having to take pot-shots at anything in sight.

Kirby's spirits rose considerably. This was more like it. Here was where the Three Mosquitoes could show their stuff. He signaled his comrades to split up and find Huns for themselves, then he began to look about for a partner. There were plenty of Huns to go around—in fact there was one extra one—and those who were not dueling were looking about for opponents just as Kirby was. In a short time Kirby ran into one of them, and was soon getting on his tail. The German pilot glanced back over his shoulder at the plane creeping up behind him. He evidently recognized Kirby's machine, for, to Kirby's vanity, a look of horror spread across his goggled face. Just as Kirby had boasted, the sight of one of the Mosquitoes threw terror into the Hun. His head swelled to even greater proportions, His conceit mounted, for now he had proof that he was right, Yes, indeed, this old Hun had a right to be scared.

As the Spad approached closer the German tried frantically to shake it off by swift turns, zig-zags, and dives. But Kirby clung to his tail like a leech, kept creeping closer. He was not using much effort either: he was almost playing at the business, refusing to take his antagonist seriously. On he went, every now and then firing a short burst. His bullets must soon be whistling about the German's ears.

He had become interested enough in the chase now not to notice what was taking place around him. The men on the ground noticed it, however.

A dog-fight of this kind is usually of short though fierce duration, and its result is not always determined by the number of planes, shot down. Wind, supply of ammunition and gas, often decide the battle. Now, while only one plane on each side had been shot down, the Germans were winning. The wind was in their favor; it was strong, and it was causing all the planes to drift further and further into German territory—much to the regret of the Allied spectators on the ground.

The American flight commander, evidently figuring that it would be too serious a risk to go on much further, decided to retreat. The Germans were pushing them hard, cutting them off from their own lines, and if any more Huns showed up out of the sky their goose would be cooked. So the commander flashed out his Very pistol, held it in the air, and fired. Those on the ground saw three red rockets shoot up from the Spad.

Kirby saw the rockets, too, saw them just as he was getting his sights dead on the German's cockpit. They made him pause involuntarily, gave the German a chance to throw him off once more, though he continued mechanically to follow the Fokker. Blank amazement gripped him. Why, it was impossible that the flight commander could be so crazy! Kirby couldn't believe it. His methods of determining victory or defeat were different. He wouldn't call a battle lost until it was lost, until he and his men were so badly beaten they had to withdraw. Now, with only one casualty, with the Spads holding their own in their little duels, he couldn't see where the Germans got off. And—what burned him most—the flight commander had ordered the retreat with the knowledge that the Three Mosquitoes were in the fight. Kirby had been certain that their mere presence would be enough to determine victory for the Americans. His pride had received a cruel blow. And, worst of all, he had not even had a chance to get a Hun yet!

Nevertheless, the Americans began retreating. One

after another Spads broke off and zoomed upwards. Kirby looked for his comrades. In spite of all his bitter accusations he felt that they, at least, would be willing to stick it out, and the three of them could teach this squadron a lesson. But then, with a shock, he saw them zooming out, too, way off ahead. In the general confusion, they had doubtless assumed that he had already left, or else they would be looking for him—but this fact never occurred to Kirby. Once more a feeling of contempt passed through him.

"Yellow!" he reiterated, this time loudly, and with intense conviction.

His lips set stubbornly. Retreat hell! He was going to get a few Huns first. Maybe they would think he was crazy, sticking in the midst of eight fighting Fokkers, with all help rapidly disappearing—but other aces had done it, and he could, too. He'd knock down a few of these Boche, and then call it a day.

THE men on the ground had already considered the fight over. They saw the Spads zooming out and fading into specks. But then they began to point and shout anew. Not all the Spads had left. One was still there, clinging doggedly to the Fokker it had been following. He was creeping on the Boche's tail again, and he seemed oblivious that the other German planes, as soon as they were free of their antagonists, were swooping down on him like monstrous hawks. Men clenched their teeth in futile suspense: they wished they could warn that pilot, tell him he was going to be shot to bits.

But Kirby didn't need any warnings. He saw all the Fokkers coming for him, too, but he had figured on that. He was playing a little trick, a trick he had heard that the great British ace, Captain Ball, had often performed. He had fixed himself so close on the German's tail that he knew the others would be unable really to shoot at him because, in so doing, they would be taking a chance of hitting the German he was after. They were firing at him from above, it was true, but these shots seldom scored, and held no terror for him. As long as they could not shoot from behind his tail he was safe.

But in his folly, his ludicrous conceit about his ability to lick any Huns in the sky, he did not realize the cold, mathematical sagacity of the Germans. There were four of them on his tail, and they had their sights dead on him. They could not shoot now, it was true, without the danger of hitting their own man, but they were waiting. If one of Kirby's bullets hit the mark, they would open up, and since they had perfect range,

they could not miss. Kirby would surely be killed if he killed his prey.

But so intent was he on getting his Hun that he did not realize this extreme peril. He was pulling his triggers now, and his two guns spat another stream of lead. The plane ahead of him began to flounder awkwardly, began to sink. Its pilot was wounded. Kirby clung to its tail, fired again. The Germans remained behind him, leaning to their sights, their fingers on their triggers. They were ready to shoot him to bits if their comrade fell. But Kirby was laughing at them, just as he laughed at the planes which kept making short swoops above him in a futile effort to hit him.

This time, he decided, he was going to hit the mark. He began to oscillate the joy-stick to enable himself to spray the other plane from tail to nose. He had the other right in his sights. This burst would get him cold, surely. He reached for his triggers again, started to pull them.

But he did not fire. A movement above him made him pause. Then a furious oath broke from him. Carn and Travis were plunging down, plunging through the three planes above Kirby and making for the Fokkers they saw on his tail. One glance told him they were in sore plight. Each had a Boche on his tail, and the smoking tracer was whipping all around them. But, nevertheless, they hurled themselves recklessly at the four planes which were threatening Kirby.

And in that moment Kirby actually hated them. The pause had enabled the Fokker in front of him to shake him off again. Those fools had spoiled his whole game! Not because they had come into the fight again. That was just what he had hoped for. But because, instead of fighting with their usual precision and skill, performing tricks like Kirby had performed, they had foolishly gotten themselves into a hole. Little did he realize that he owed his life to them.

But he had no choice except to turn and help them. Everything was broken up now. There was no use trying to prolong the fight. He must get to them and they must blaze a path out of this mess!

Cursing, scowling, he banked vertically and went rushing over to them. They were waving to him, not cheerfully, but reproachfully. They thought he was a damn fool! And he hadn't been given a chance to prove that he was right.

Hastily, frantically, they got into a confused formation. The Germans closed in on them eagerly, hopeful of making the great coup of bagging the Three Mosquitoes. Tracer came streaming down on them

from all sides. There was nothing to do but to turn and twist to avoid it. They began to circle, one behind the other, with furious speed. It was their only means of defense; by staying on one another's tails they could protect them from the Fokkers.

It was a strange sight, and the men below stared at it in wonder, stared at the strange, flying carousel of Spads which went wheeling around, while all over Fokkers kept attacking, spitting lead.

Kirby knew their chances were slim, for, in spite of their maneuver, bullets were tearing through his top wing. It looked like their goose was cooked, but he was so sore now he didn't care. To all appearances he had made a fool of himself. What the hell did he care what happened now?

Slowly the Germans continued to close their trap, seeking out new angles through which they could make their bullets score. It looked like the end. The men below groaned.

But then, with dramatic suddenness, the other four Spads of the flight reappeared. By the same token that Carn and Travis, missing Kirby, had dashed off to find him, so these pilots, noting the disappearance of the other two Mosquitoes, had come rushing back.

They plunged down on the Fokkers and the dog-fight began all over again. Kirby and his comrades pulled up, and they signaled him to fight with them in formation, in their usual coordinating style.

"Go to hell!" he bellowed savagely, wishing they could hear. He broke away, and dashed off by himself. His mood was even blacker. He would get the very devil from the C.O. for making those Spads come back to this losing fight.

And it would have been a losing fight again, had not another Allied flight of planes fortunately arrived on the scene. They were five British Camels, and they came swooping down in wonderful formation. The men on the ground hardly had any breath left; they were unable to follow all the thrilling, unexpected developments of this battle. Now the sky overhead was almost darkened by the number of planes which specked it. It was some fight! And the Fokkers were getting a beating now—one after another they came down, sometimes in pieces, sometimes in flames, sometimes in perfect shape but with dead hands at their controls.

As for Kirby, he could not even fight. True, he zoomed and dived and banked with the rest, firing his guns, but he did not care whether he scored or not. His humiliation was all the more intense because he felt he

was bound to suffer a cruel injustice. Though the fight was won now, to all appearances he had done a damn-fool thing, and he would get hell for it.

Indifferently, he banked and zoomed up after one of the few remaining Germans. And as he looked up, squinting in the sun, to get a glimpse of his foe, he stiffened involuntarily.

Were his eyes playing a trick on him? He could have sworn he had seen a familiar series of flashes, way up in the sun. He put his thumb to his eye; the method by which a pilot can look into the sun and see what's there.

THEN he sat tense, rigid, the blood tingling through him. For he saw four tiny planes coming out of Germany, coming toward this fight, at an extreme altitude. Though they were far away, he could see their wings clearly, clearly enough to ascertain that they were, beyond any doubt, Albatross planes. And he could have sworn that when the sun flashed on them, they glinted a bright yellow.

The Yellow-Jackets! He was sure of it, some deep intuition told him it must-be so. They had learned that the Three Mosquitoes had been seen in this vicinity, and were coming to find them.

Instantly, all Kirby's conceit and vain pride rose to the surface again. He laughed outright. Only four of them! And with that small number they expected to wipe out the Three Mosquitoes! It was a huge joke. Why, he could easily take on that number single-handed and beat hell out of them.

He paused, considering. What he should do, he knew, was to get together with his comrades, so the three of them could take on the little group when it arrived. If, by some fluke, they should fail, then these other planes could come in. After all, those four ships might be a decoy; there might be twenty others somewhere about—though Kirby scorned this thought, for it was too clear a day for planes really to conceal themselves. Yet, still suffering from his first failure, he realized that there would be extreme consequences if he made another misstep. There were the C.O.'s orders.

But if the bitterness of his failure made him hesitate, it also spurred him on. He had not shot down one Hun; he had not proved anything except that he was a damn fool. And here was a chance to redeem himself.

He glanced around, looking for his comrades. The two of them were together, helping to close a

trap around one of the surviving Fokkers. They were completely absorbed in their task. They did not see the enemy planes, and Kirby could easily get away without their seeing him.

Abruptly, he reached his decision. Whipping around, he sped out of the fray, unnoticed. Then, when he had gone enough distance to be safe, he pulled back his stick, opened his throttle, and was shooting up, shooting straight for those four planes.

Up he went, at all the speed he could make. Those on the ground saw his plane get smaller and smaller as it climbed into the sun, a lonely speck. They did not see the Hun formation. The Germans were too high.

Already he was in those thin, high regions where the sky is bluer, the air colder. But the cold which stung him was like a bracer: it filled him with exhilaration and eagerness. He could hardly wait until he got to those other planes, hardly wait until he could bust into them and teach them a lesson.

They stood out clearly above and ahead now, as he drew up. And he had been right in his hunch. They were yellow planes, their tails ringed with brown. They were the Yellow-Jackets. He leaned forward to his guns, wishing he could hurl his plane up like a missile. Closer and closer he drew, and now he knew they had seen him. They spread out slightly, but they did not dive for him as he had expected. Perhaps they did not recognize him. Well, they would, soon enough!

They were getting ready to go into a long glide-dive, obviously to go down into the fight and rescue their comrades. Kirby was almost in range now. He was coming straight up toward them, head-on. This was his plan of attack. He was going to make one of those impudent, head-on assaults, so surprising and swift that his foes would be confused. Then he would get them.

Now, as he approached, he could see the four tiny helmeted heads of the pilots. They were leaning forward to their guns, spreading out slightly.

Up he shot, right for them. Their guns blazed at him, but he laughed at them. He leaned forward, started to pull his triggers. All the guns clattered in shrill unison.

THEN it happened.

A great red blaze burst right in front of Kirby. The Spad seemed to stop in its tracks, and vibrate from nose to tail. Then he realized, confusedly, incredulously.

His engine was in flames!

At first it was sheer amazement that gripped him. He could not believe it.

But then, as the flames spread, until they had enveloped the whole nose of his ship, he grasped the full significance of it all, and he froze with horror and terror. Their first burst had got him, their incendiary tracer had set fire to his motor. Fire! He knew what it meant, almost three miles above the earth, and over the German lines. Once before he had gone through the torture of being caught in a burning plane. That time he had escaped through a sheer miracle. It wasn't likely that a miracle would come now!

In those first confused seconds he had let the plane flounder along on its own, for the burning engine continued to run. Now, dimly, he saw the four other planes swarming around him, red spitting from them. Fool, he must cut the motor before it "cracked," and get out of her at all costs. He switched off the ignition, kicked the plane into a spin. Down he plunged, but the Albatrosses, evidently intent on making sure of him, plunged after him, shooting.

And as he went rushing down through space, with those flames spreading constantly, whipping back toward him with withering heat, a hideous awakening came over him. He saw things as they really were, saw himself as a conceited idiot trying to take head-on four skilled and expert airmen. Yes, he had been a fool throughout the morning. He saw now that he wasn't invincible, that he couldn't lick the whole German air force. He had laughed at such a danger as this, scorned it, but now the terrificness of it was brought home to him. If by nothing else, it was brought home by the noise of his plunging plane, the noise a plane always makes when it hurtles down without its engine, in flames, with the wind rushing through flying wires. It was a horrible sound, like a prolonged, weird shriek of inhuman agony.

The flames rose higher and higher, kept sweeping back along the fuselage. Kirby knew what was bound to happen. In a few seconds the whole plane would "crack," go up in a shattering burst of smoke and fire—and he'd go with it!

He was trying frantically to keep the ship headed for his own lines, but so many horrors confronted him that he could not piece his thoughts together. He saw the other Albatross planes now, hovering right above him like real, maddened Yellow-Jackets. One after another they would swoop down on him, trying their marksmanship on him, firing away. A futile, anguished rage choked him. Didn't they have any sportsmanship?

"Hell," he cried out, beseechingly. "Can't you let a man die? Got to fill him with holes, too?"

But he saw then that even had they heard there would be no mercy. One of the Albatross planes was whipping past him now, very close, and he recognized it as the leader of the group—the one who been in front of the formation. One glimpse of the pilot's goggled face showed Kirby just how things stood. It was a grim, hard face, and in it was marked the relentless determination to kill!

Never before had death stared at Kirby in so many different guises. He was a gonner, anyway he looked at it. If the fire spread a little further, he'd be blown up; if he managed to crash to earth he'd bury himself in his own ruins; if one of those German guns hit their mark, he'd get a bullet through his head. There was absolutely no escape. One of these things must happen, and it was more than likely that all three of them would. He would have to pay the extreme penalty for his asinine conceit. He had not realized his folly until it was too late.

Yet, impelled by that stubborn instinct of self-preservation, he could not give up. He must do something. He was falling lower and lower now, and he saw that a ruined French village, now in the hands of the Germans, lay beneath him. Unless he could get out of this mess, that village would be the scene of his final, fatal landing.

The fire was still spreading, slowly engulfing the fuselage. The smoke grew blacker, choked him. In a second or so the plane must crack. He had to hurry, do anything to prevent it.

Guided by sheer desperation, he pulled up abruptly, began to roll, twist, and side-slip—like a man who suddenly finds his clothes ignited and rolls around on the ground to try to extinguish the flames. He was hoping to get his plane in such a position that the rush of wind would blow the fire out from it.

The Albatross planes actually paused, as if in incredulous amazement. It was a strange sight, this burning plane starting to do stunt flying! The men down in that village stared up, too, in speechless wonder. Was that pilot insane?

But soon the Albatross planes, their pilots recovering from the shock, took advantage of Kirby's new positions and attacked afresh. Cursing, he plunged into another spin. A new idea came to him. He changed the spin to a dive, let the plane go shooting down like a stone. When it had attained maximum speed, he pulled back his stick with a great jerk. There was an awful ripping

and groaning of fabric, struts shrilled protestingly, and it seemed the plane must jerk itself to pieces. But the efficient little Spad reared like a sensitive steed, stood right up on its tail. Kirby, fighting to keep it in this position, let it go down backwards. This brought the full strength of the wind up past the fuselage and nose. The flames rose higher for a moment, like a fire responding to bellows, but then Kirby saw they were rushing straight upwards, away from the plane.

Meanwhile, the Germans had caught up with him again, and their bullets were getting closer. Tracers ripped through Kirby's wings, tore through his fuselage. His instrument board was completely shattered by the bullets already. One would surely get him.

He could not keep dropping on his tail very long, for already the weight of the engine was pulling the nose down again. He struggled frantically, employing every atom of strength to stay in his position a little longer. The flames were roaring loudly now, fighting back at the furious rush of wind. Slowly the plane started to nose back into a spin.

But before it did, Kirby saw, with blessed relief, that the wind had won. The fire was no longer there! It had been blown out.

HIS relief was short-lived. Suddenly the flames broke out anew. He began to sob wildly, helplessly. Frustrated, beaten in every conceivable way, it was useless for him to struggle further. He would resign, let death come. . . .

But it was as if the frustrated man and the keen aviator remained two distinct individuals, thinking and acting independently. For even while he was deciding to give up, he was preparing to try the trick again.

He looked down. There were only about fifteen hundred feet left. He could see the ruined houses clearly, see the crowds of men looking skyward. Could he make it without crashing?

He dived recklessly, and again the Albatross planes followed. Then, with only a thousand feet to spare, he pulled up once more. This time he managed to drop on his tail with such speed and fury that the wind came up with overwhelming force. It swept right up along the fuselage and, hurling itself against those flames with a roar, blew them out like one blows out a candle. The fire was gone for sure.

But there was no time to feel relief now. He was only five hundred feet above the ground, and he must

get his motor back. If he didn't get it back he would have to land, alive or dead, in Boche territory. Dead, most certainly, for the Albatross planes were still popping at him from above;

He got into a glide-dive, went rushing down on a gradual slope so as to get the maximum amount of room and avoid a fatal crash. The houses loomed up below him, closer and closer. But he waited until he was gliding at full speed, waited until the wind got the propeller turning furiously. Then he switched on the ignition. If the engine didn't take at once, if it was too badly damaged to pick up—

The house-tops seemed to be right under him now. The Germans below stood rooted to the spot, continued to stare, unable to understand the astonishing maneuvers of this plane. They saw the little Spad rushing down to what looked like a certain crash, with four bright yellow planes of their own swooping after it as low as they dared.

Suddenly a thunderous roar broke from the Spad, as its engine burst into life. Kirby, dazed by his success, hardly managed to pull up, almost went on down into a roof. But then he saw those Albatross planes, still after him. Wild fury seized him. They had tried to pump him like a rat, when he was in such danger! With a savage oath, he pulled back his stick, went zooming right up for them.

The leader of the Yellow-Jackets was right above him. As Kirby came closer that pilot showed that he did have sportsmanship in him after all. He held his fire for a few seconds, and Kirby saw his hard, ruthless face break into a warm grin. The German waved, congratulating his foe on his astonishing success.

But Kirby did not wave back. On his face was the look which had been on the German's face, and which presently returned to the Yellow-Jacket's.

Guided solely by rage, Kirby hurled himself at his antagonist. The German tried to Immelmann, but Kirby caught him half over. His guns spat. The Albatross plane hung stock still, like a wounded bird, then nosed over and was hurtling down.

Kirby pulled up, hurled himself into the midst of the three others. He was flying and fighting as he had never done before, and now, to the onlookers on the ground, he certainly seemed invincible. He was everywhere up in that sky, chasing those three planes all over. They did not have time to defend themselves; they were confused, and all they could do was to turn and twist in a vain effort to shake off the roaring Spad.

The second of them went down in flames, and he

did not escape. His plane crashed into a ruined house, and a pillar of black smoke rose where it had fallen.

Then, suddenly, the spectators saw two other flashing Spads drop down and join Kirby. His comrades had found him again! This time. Kirby waved to them eagerly, got them right into formation, and the three gave chase to the two remaining Yellow-Jackets. They were fighting as they had always fought, together, with their wonderful coordination.

IT WAS over in a flash. The third Yellow-Jacket fell to pieces in midair, came down in scattered debris. The fourth, sorely hit, made a mad dive for escape. The Three Mosquitoes did not follow; they let him get away. If he could land safely, he deserved to live.

Then the three got back into formation and Kirby led them home. All through that flight he did not glance around at them; he was thoroughly ashamed of himself. And he was worried and frightened, too. There was one thing that he couldn't stand. That was when his comrades bawled him out, reprimanded him, when he knew they were right.

The thought of this frightened him so that when he landed he decided he'd have to do something to avoid it. So, when he had been helped from his plane, he stood there, tottering, his eyes staring into space. A look of alarm spread over his comrades' faces.

"Gosh, what's the matter?" Carn asked. "Did a bullet hit you? Hell, man, pull out of it!"

"I'm—done in," Kirby gasped.

"You'll be all right," Travis said knowingly, and Kirby winced slightly. The eldest Mosquito smiled, but it was not one of his withering ironic smiles. It was cheerful.

Just then the C.O. approached and Kirby's fear increased. Oh, what a bawling out these three would

give him! He made a weak salute, making sure that his hand trembled.

"Well," said the grizzled old colonel, and his voice didn't seem angry at all, "you've had a day of it, haven't you? By the way, Kirby, I want to commend you for insisting on continuing that dogfight with the Fokkers. That was what I call good foresight and strategy. By so doing you enabled the rest to return and hold out until fresh help came. It was a fine victory."

Kirby stared at him dumbly.

"You know, colonel," Travis was saying now, "Shorty and I thought this fellow's head was getting rather big. But we were wrong. He was right."

"Damn right!" Carn broke in, stressing the adjective though he was speaking to a colonel. "Gosh, we found him beating the stuffings out of those four Yellow-Jackets. What he said was true! He can lick the whole German air force, even if I do hate to admit it."

Slowly, through the nebulous regions of Kirby's bewildered brain, realization dawned.

His comrades had not seen him in flames, had not seen that first foolish assault. They thought he was great stuff.

"Say, you seem to have recovered rather suddenly," Travis observed shrewdly, for Kirby was looking as strong and robust as ever. In his surprise he had forgotten to continue playing the part.

He grinned.

"Oh, I'm all right. . . ." Then he laughed heartily. "Hell, just when I'm getting over that swelled-head business, you tell me I'm great stuff. Well,"—his tone grew more serious—"praise away—it won't go to my head this time. I thought I was the greatest wonder who ever flew a plane, but I've found out I'm not. Still," he added, thoughtfully, "I guess I'm not exactly rotten either."

