



THE BLACK BAT

by SYL MACDOWELL

Behind the curtain of night Weird wings hovered over the Yank tarmac. A ship crashed with no hand at the stick. . . . And the priceless eye of the army was missing.

SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE a siren sent a shivery, warning wail across the tarmac. Lights blinked out. The little group in headquarters hut shouldered unconsciously closer together as Lieutenant “Mugs” Magill cupped a hand over the candle stuck in a cognac bottle and blew it out.

They were in utter darkness now, for it was still a good half hour short of dawn—a darkness so intense that it seemed to beat on the ear drums like the ominous hum of that approaching plane.

“Just another smart young Heinie trying to get along, I guess,” growled Homebody. “Why in hell don’t he lay his eggs and beat it?”

“That’s no solo bomber,” contradicted Mugs Magill. “He’s flying too low, for one thing, . . . Von Kurtz’s outfit is always up to some infernal new trick. Listen!”

They listened. It was louder now. The high, insistent whine of the circling plane set every man’s nerves jangling with dread expectancy.

There were seven of them gathered there in headquarters hut. There was Mugs himself, the A Flight leader, and his four wing-peeling buddies—Kent, Billings, McCray and Wilson. There was Major Breen, the commandant, seated at the table around which the others stood. The seventh man, who stood shoulder to shoulder with the pilots, yet somehow seemed distinctly apart from them, was the aerial photographer up from Dijon.

There was something sinister about this fellow, Krumbac. There was a sort of nameless threat in the way his thick eyebrows grew together in a solid slash above his long nose. They gave him a permanent scowl, as though he wore level-topped German goggles.

Now, in the tense silence that gripped them, the words of this man Krumbac raced again through Mugs' brain.

"Dis looks like an ordinary Army Fairchild camera, does it not, my companions? Ah, but it is more'n dot! It is *der* most effective defensive weapon effer invented! It is a Fairchild, yes, but fitted with *der* new 500-millimeter focal length lens, *und* containing a new type of film!"

As he spoke with his peculiar, heavy accent, Krumbac had leaned over an object on the table—a black box which the others regarded with fascination. He leaned so close that his shadow threw half of the room into obscurity, darkening the circle of tense watching faces.

"Yes, my companions," he continued, "*der* film is called kryptocyanine hyper-sensitive." Odd how the man, for all his accented English, used scientific terms so glibly, Mugs thought. "It is used with a special red filter, which giffs it *der* higher haze penetration. So now we are equipped for oblique as well as *der* vertical photography. With dis film *und* filter, we can utilize longer waves of *der* spectrum, *und* penetrate maximum air distances."

"How far?" Mugs had asked the photographer.

"Two hundred, maybe two hundred *und* fifty miles! At *der* altitude of 7,000 meters, nothing shall stop us but *der* earth's curvature, my companions!"

"Good lord!" gasped Kent. "That means, from above Rheims you can map German territory from Bar-le-Duc to St. Quentin! From the Somme to the Meuse-Argonne!"

"Exactly!" cut in Major Breen. "Therefore, it is up to you men today to secure an aerial record on which GHQ expects to base the coming Grand Offensive! An almighty big job is ahead of you. In two hours I'll expect you back with an aerial map of the Western Front in that black box!"

THE major paused, to let the full import of his words sink in. "Now you, Magill, will carry Krumbac in that specially equipped DH transport that came down from Verdecourt yesterday. Her tanks hold 130 gallons, giving you petrol enough to outcruise

anything on this drome. You, Kent, Billings, McCray and Wilson, will convoy Magill and Krumbac. And remember this—for two years Krumbac has been perfecting this invention at the Dijon reconnaissance laboratory. So the enemy probably has wind of it. You may find Von Kurtz waiting for you. . . . That's all."

The click of a telephone instrument on its hook broke into Mugs' reverie. Major Breen was telephoning.

"Hello, defense station! Headquarters speaking ... !"

The major gave a rapid order. Almost immediately, out on the tarmac, a sudden finger of light stabbed the sky. Then another. Then a half-dozen more. The searchlight batteries were in action, sweeping great arcs of blinding brilliance across the heavens. Mugs heard Krumbac nervously drumming the table edge with his fingers as the major, speaking fast and low, poured orders into the transmitter.

A strained voice, almost a bark, sounded at Mugs' ear.

"Listen! He's turned! He's headed dead for us now!"

The racing motor whipped the dark sky. It was so near now, the mysterious visitor, that echoes from it clamored between the hangars.

Mugs lunged away from the table and swung open the outer door. There was a scuffling of booted feet behind him as the others followed across the rough board floor, stumbling and bumping one another. They stood in the doorway—all of them except Major Breen, who was still at the telephone—and gazed up at the criss-cross of searchlights.

Into the tangle of light raced the plane—all at once it was visible to them. It was lower, even, than the sound had indicated, and its black-crossed wings rocked as though out of control.

"It's a Fokker!" shouted Mugs Magill. "Down, everybody! He's coming over!"

The six of them flopped ignominiously on their faces. For experience in other raids had taught them that a man lying prone is seldom hit by flying debris.

The Fokker roared past, the reverberations from its full-gunned Mercedes shaking their bodies. With teeth clenched, they waited. Still no thudding jar of high explosive! The prolonged moment of waiting was agony. It was almost as bad as the deafening impact of bombs.

The Fokker was past now. A machine gun, over by one of the searchlight mounts, chattered a brief greeting, then went silent. Lower and lower the Fokker flew on, its exhaust streak barely above the tree-tops that bordered the St. Etienne road.

Mugs got to his feet. In that instant that he came erect, there was a prolonged shock of sound. It was not the jar of TNT, but a sound even more racking to a flyer's nerves.

"The Heinie's crashed! He's down!" As he shouted, Mugs heard Krumbac mutter something that sounded like a German curse. But everyone was excited now, rushing about and chattering, so the wonder of it was swept momentarily out of Mugs' mind.

HE STARTED on a run across the drome towards the mysterious *descendu*. He passed the personnel buildings, scrambled over a fence, and as he raced across a turnip field towards the dim outline of the fringe of trees, he became aware of someone close behind him.

It was someone grunting odd, Teutonic phrases! Krumbac!

Krumbac gained on Mugs, so that they reached the wrecked Fokker almost together. Just as they arrived, breathless from running, a trickle of flame was eating the strewn wreckage.

"Scrambled Fokker for breakfast!" panted Mugs. "Come on, Krumbac! Let's pull the poor devil out of that!" They leaped over a shattered wing into the twisted mass that a little while before had been a trim fuselage. Mugs' eyes swept the debris for a body.

"By all the little stars!" he declared. "There's no Heinie here! Now what in the—!"

The blaze leaped higher, driving them back step by step. The light revealed the cockpit—an empty, yawning cockpit!

"By golly, you are right! Nobody home!" puffed Krumbac.

He climbed out of the debris and began looking on the ground around the plane for some sign of human remains. The leaking petrol gave off a roaring blaze now that lighted the surroundings for yards around. But the ground was bare, unmarked. The pilot had not fallen with his ship!

Mugs felt the skin tighten across his cheeks, and a nameless dread of ghostly things sent a chill along his spine. What manner of phantom was this Fokker? Was it a pilotless plane, a robot of the sky? There had been talk, estaminet talk, of such things. Had Germany perfected the aviators' dream, which somehow had gone out of control on reaching its objective?

"But there are no bomb racks on that ship!" he reasoned to himself. The hungry flames had devoured the fabric already, baring the Fokker's skeleton, and revealing—

Again that crinkly feeling returned to Mugs' face and scalp.

"Look, Krumbac! Inside the cockpit!"

"Vot is it? Tell me, I cannot see!" For the moment, Mugs had forgotten that Krumbac was not an airman. Of course he would not have noticed. But in that flaming cockpit, there was no sign of a rudder-bar! Nor was there even a stick! Instead, on a bent steering column, there was a small wheel mounted on the double axes of a Breuget-type control. That was all. Then the flames gulped up that.

A Breuget-controlled Fokker! Who ever had heard of such a freak?

The others came panting up to the fire now, jabbering questions. Mugs pushed away from his buddies and came close to Krumbac's side, searching the fellow's dark face. Krumbac seemed as mystified as he, and even more shaken

"Come on. Let's go back to headquarters," Mugs proposed. Together they trudged across the turnip field, through the fence, past billets and mess-hall to the headquarters hut.

There was a decided gleam in the East now. It was almost flight time. Down at the hangars, the word had passed that the danger was over. Mechs were revving the big Liberty. The sputter of its warming twelve cylinders drowned out the lesser barks of the Spads, all in a row on the runway.

THE door of headquarters hut was still open. Inside, the candle gleamed feebly in the tallow-streaked cognac bottle. Somebody had relighted it. But the thing that caught Mugs' eye was the figure of Major Breen.

The major still sat at the telephone, the instrument beside him. But his head rested on the table now, on his folded arms. He was strangely still.

"Poor old devil, is napping! Plumb worn out!" thought Mugs. He sang out as he entered the doorway: "Oho, skipper! Something strange about this!"

The major remained motionless. Mugs shot around the table, gripped his superior by the shoulder.

That touch told him the astounding truth. The major's body sagged, slumped slowly sidewise, then slid into Mugs' arms. The head lolled to one side, revealing a great splotch of blood on the left shoulder. A red wound gaped in the side of the commandant's neck.

"Oh, *Mein Gott!* He's dead, dead! And *der* camera . . .!" Krumbac's voice raised to a scream. "Look, it is gone! *Stolen!*"

Gently Mugs laid the dead major's head back in his arms. He straightened and stared across the table at Krumbac. There was a suspicion in his eyes that amounted almost to open accusation. Krumbac read the meaning there.

"Do not forget, Lieutenant, dot you *und* I were not out of one anudder's sight. Was it not so?"

To himself Mugs was compelled to admit the truth of that.

"Besides!" Krumbac clutched his temples, and his voice rose again to a wail. "Besides, am I one to steal-my own great invention? *Ach, Gott!*" Mugs began wondering if Krumbac could have knifed Major Breen while all of them were together there in the darkness. But his next thought told him that the major was telephoning up until the moment the Fokker passed. Krumbac was in the doorway, then, with the rest of the Yellow-jackets. Men with cut throats do not telephone.

"He was killed—stabbed, sometime between the time we ran out toward the crash, and—now!"

Inside those three, or possibly four excited minutes, the commandant of the Yellow-jackets was foully, mysteriously murdered!

"My God, this is incredible!" Mugs groaned.

Krumbac was still moaning about the loss of the camera. Mugs' nerves snapped.

"Forget about that lousy box, won't you?" he rasped. "It started all this trouble, anyhow! Another thing, Krumbac, I don't like. And that is, you were talking German to yourself a bit ago!"

Krumbac stared at him from beneath the level slash of his brows.

"*Und* why not? *Wein, weib, und gesang*—perhaps you know der saying yourself, my friend. I speak several languages. I am an Alsatian. *Ach*, my poor camera!"

There came to them then the voices of Kent and the others. They were returning, unaware of the grim tragedy within headquarters hut. Their voices were minor blurs of sound against the revving motors down on the runway.

Mugs went to the open doorway to call to them. As he did so, there came a new event in the morning's incredible series of surprises.

MUGS saw a jet of flame leap like a rocket out of A hangar—out of the roof, above the part where nine yellow-nosed Spads were stored. The dancing light sent an unearthly glimmer across the drome.

Kent and the others saw the fire, heard the shout.

Instead of entering headquarters, they raced on towards the fated hangar. Their figures danced in that eerie glare that mingled with the growing gleam of dawn.

Mugs, usually a man of crackling, instant action, lingered in the doorway. All things considered, it was well he did so, perhaps, else the morning's mysteries would never have known a solution.

Standing there, numbed by the misfortunes that piled on the accursed drome, Mugs received the greatest shock of the whole train of spine-tingling thrills. Midway on the length of A hangar roof was a sky-light. And out of that sky-light there now crawled something misshapen and horrible.

It looked like a bat—a huge, black bat. Or again it might have been a monstrous spider. It rose on its two members—whether they were legs or arms or wings, Mugs could not tell in that wavering, uncertain light. And then, scampering down the slope of the roof, it hurled itself into space!

As it performed this incredible act, it turned. It was then, in the dancing firelight, that Mugs saw a human face. This frightful thing was human! The face was distorted by some tremendous emotion. Whether it was terror, or fiendish glee, or magnificent gloating, Mugs could not perceive. But as the figure fell, there came another development that eclipsed all that had gone before.

Out of the hurtling form, there sprouted wings. *Wings!* As they spread, like great sable fans, they checked the downward flight of the repulsive form, so that it struck the earth lightly.

Then the wings folded, and with a curious, shuffling gait, a sort of side-wise hop, this monstrosity of the dawn propelled itself by arms, legs or wings—whatever those members were—*towards the waiting DeHaviland!*

As it ran or scampered or hopped or crawled—there was no suitable designation for the progress of this loathsome thing along the ground—Mugs Magill glimpsed something else that rescued him from the growing suspicion that his reason had suddenly fled.

For this monster carried, slung by its leather carrying strap, the missing Fairchild camera!

Krumbac, at Mugs' shoulder, saw it too. He grunted a savage curse. He flung himself on Mugs.

"So, this is it, eh? You Americans steal my great invention! You trick me! This is all one thieving hoax! Damn you!"

The man's hands were at Mugs' throat like talons,

and behind them was the strength of a madman. He tried to shout at Krumbac, to fight free of him. But he could neither cry out nor escape. He was borne to the floor, and over him, livid with rage, was the beetle-browed face of the photographer up from Dijon.

TO ESCAPE the crazed Krumbac's clutch, and pursue that bat-like monster, was the motive that gave Mugs twice his usual strength. He twisted half around, Krumbac still astride of him, still trying to choke him.

He threw a hard fist into Krumbac's face. Krumbac answered with a heavy smash that Mugs half ducked—just enough so that instead of crashing his nose, it left a grazing welt along his right cheek.

They pounded at each other now with the ferocity of beasts, twisting and rolling about the floor of headquarters hut, until their bodies struck the table.

The cognac bottle toppled and fell. Krumbac reached out for it. His fingers closed on the candle, which came out as he raised the bottle over Mugs' head. The bottle dropped. Mugs seized it by the neck. He put every ounce of his waning energy into an upward blow. The bottle broke against Krumbac's dark slash of eyebrows and his heavy body crumpled on Mugs. The death grapple was over. Mugs tottered to his feet and staggered out the door. He ran across the tarmac as fast as his jaded legs would carry him.

The repulsive monster was in the DH now, leering at the oncoming Mugs from the rim of the cockpit. The big Liberty roared with a fresh impulse of power as the thing jazzed the throttle.

Mugs pursued the plane, the slipstream ripping furiously at his fluttering coveralls. The tail skid sent up spurts of earth that half blinded him. He was so close that he could almost touch the rudder's trailing edge. Just as the space between him and the ship began to widen, Mugs leaped!

Forward in the pilot's cockpit, the pallid face of the Black Bat looked back and cackled with maniacal glee. But the laugh ended in sudden, open-mouthed dismay. For, from time to time through life, university football training serves a man in good stead.

Mugs Magill had made his tackle!

He pulled himself onto the stabilizers.

The thing at the controls hunched forward and poured on more soup. A few yards down the runway and he tried to take off. But the DH was naturally tail-heavy, with Mugs hanging there. The plane bucked and verged closely on a ground-spin.

Mugs inched forward along the slippery, oil-

streaked fuselage and dropped into the rear pit just as the DH, in a final attempt to leave the ground, barely cleared the fence at the lower end of the field.

In the rear pit—the position which would have been Krumbac's—Mugs paused for a few gulps of air. The dark ground was rushing past close underneath. They circled, skimming close above that row of trees along the St. Etienne road, over the still-burning debris of the Fokker, then headed into the rosy rim of the eastern sky.

Then the Black Bat turned and faced him.

Mugs started to rise. But the thing in front of him was quicker. With a piercing shriek, it bounded out of the front pit and descended upon him.

It was then that Mugs saw that the members of this curious pod-like form—arms, legs or wings—ended in hands. They were arms, then. One of the hands gripped a long, thin-bladed knife, its bright steel gleaming with blood, not yet dried!

AS THE knife flashed down, Mugs dodged. But the cramped space about him was insufficient. The blade slashed his wool-lined flying clothes and grated across his shoulder blade. It stung like fire.

The glancing blow sent the Black Bat out of balance. Mugs clutched his fluttering black garment and jerked him down into the cockpit.

In the second that he touched the mysterious monster, he knew that he was matched against gorilla-like strength. The legless raider, like so many war *mutilés*, had developed superhuman strength in his arms and back!

They fought for the possession of the knife. Mugs' hands were lacerated when he finally wrested it away from his assailant. Even then, it was knocked from his own hand, and it dropped over the side, melting into the sweep of flashing landscape beneath them.

How the DH flew, unguided, in those frantic moments, was something that Mugs laid to a watchful Providence. It was not until the *mutilé*, grunting a jumble of Teutonic oaths, lashed his ape-like arms around Mugs and bent him back over the cockpit coaming that Mugs realized that the big plane was wing-slipping, teetering perilously low.

They were going to crash!

With his final iota of strength, Mugs got a twist-hold of the black cloth that loosely swathed the Bat. He lifted and straightened. The right wing dipped just then, and over the edge the legless one plunged. The prop blast whipped an eerie, wailing shriek from his

lips as he fell, the torn black cloth fluttering. For an instant Mugs watched. The wings that had magically saved the murderous *mutilé* in his leap from the hangar roof did not unfold this time. Down, down, the misshapen thing plunged to the earth 500 feet below.

The nose was down now, enough so that Mugs fairly slid into the front cockpit, seized the controls, and brought the DH out of its spinning plunge, just as the wheels grazed the ground. He turned back and gunned towards the Yellow-jacket drome, a fragment of the Black Bat's torn flying suit still gripped in his hand!

Mugs set the DH down and taxied up to the line of slightly-scorched fighters. He saw his buddies rush toward him. He snapped off the juice, without waiting to cool the big Liberty and leaped to the ground.

He tried to run.

His legs crumpled under him. It was loss of blood, he did not realize that his flying suit was blood soaked. Just before things went black before his eyes, Kent and the others heard him gasp:

"Get Krumbac! . . . Hear me? . . . Get Krumbac, he tried to stop me . . . ! Krumbac . . . dirty spy!"

TWO days later they got Krumbac.

But he wasn't a spy. He was wandering around, in a demented state, in the woods back of Verdecourt.

"Too damn' bad," said Kent, "that the camera crashed with that legless German observer. It might have turned out better than the parachute suit he wore!"

"The Black Bat's parachute suit worked okey," said

Mugs, from his cot in the dressing station, "until I tore it half off of him in our fight in the DeHaviland! Poor devil!"

"They tried out a parachute suit when I was at Issoudun," put in Billings, "but it didn't work on a full-weight man. But I guess Von Kurtz found out that the idea was adapted to a legless *mutilé*, eh?"

"Now I get it, at last!" exclaimed Mugs. "That's why there was no rudder bar in that crashed Fokker! It was rigged for a legless man!"

"That's it," put in McCray, "the Black Bat flew low, jumped, deliberately; crashing his Fokker to draw us away from the field, he busted into headquarters after the camera—Von Kurtz had wind of it, all right—killed the major in his getaway, then fired A hangar to prevent a pursuit!"

At that moment, a motorcycle sounded outside. It stopped by the door of the dressing station with a final sputter, and a messenger came in.

"Lieutenant Magill here?" he inquired.

Kent grabbed the envelope with the seal of GHQ on it that the messenger carried. He ripped it open, read a few lines of the dispatch, then gave a shout.

"Here's news for you, Mugs!" Kent yelled, waving the dispatch over his head. "Soon as you get those bandages off of your shoulders, you'll have something new to pin on 'em!"

"I'll bite," grinned Mugs.

"Oak leaves!" shouted Kent. "C'mon, men! All hands change to their falling-down clothes! Let's go drink to our new skipper—Major Mugs Magill!"