



# DEATH TAKES THE STICK

by R. SIDNEY BOWEN

*Even after the Grim Reaper took over the controls, that Fokker obeyed its pilot  
—and showed a Yank how the dead repay chivalry.*

**C**HUNKY” TOWERS gunned back to the three-quarter notch and let the Bentley Camel loaf through the air. It was a perfect day for Jerry hunting. Chunky, however, was not a particularly good Jerry hunter. As a matter of fact he was just an ordinary product of Field No. 8 at Issoudun, with perhaps a better than the average portion of guts. He was always on the lookout for a possible scrap, which explains the reason for his

solo patrol. For an hour he had been buzzing over Hunland, but without sighting a single enemy ship.

“*Der Tag* for staying on the ground, I reckon,” grunted Chunky aloud. “Now if only Green Bird would show up, I might get a kick out of this man’s war.”

“Green Bird” was a nickname with which Chunky had stamped a certain German pilot who always flew a pale green Fokker. The real name of the pilot he did

not know, and he didn't care. Green Bird was not some great German ace who sent Allied pilots down like so many clay pigeons before his yammering guns. To tell the truth, Green Bird was a very ordinary pilot, and a rotten shot—just as rotten a shot as was Chunky. They had met several times and on each occasion both spewed costly ammunition at thin air. By some queer trick of fate neither could get in the fatal burst when opportunity offered, and opportunity had not been stingy by any manner of means. It just seemed as though each was immune to the other's bullets.

"A couple of jinxes to each other," Chunky once summed it up to his pals. "But I'll get that guy some day, and when I do I'll stand drinks for the whole damn air service! Reckon I owe that much in slugs I've popped away."

In somewhat that frame of mind Chunky spat over the cowl in the general direction of Berlin, and then slowly banked around toward his home field.

Had not his uninterrupted solo patrolling through perfect skies lulled his senses, he might have seen the tiny speck that came rushing down the rays of the sun. But he didn't, and right in the middle of a luxurious yawn the snarl of Spandau fire cracked against his eardrums. Simultaneously with the arrival of the sounds, a dozen or so neat little holes appeared in the center section of the top wing. Even as he glanced up he saw them trace a pattern off the trailing edge and down a strut. *Plop!* The compass dial melted into a piece of junk.

In one vicious movement he slammed open the throttle and booted the Camel around on a wing-tip. He looked back up and swore in surprise. A green Fokker with a white and black cross showing plainly on either side of the fuselage was swinging down toward him. The tracers that zipped from the blunt nose were missing the Camel by a good fifty yards.

"Ah there, sweetheart!" yelled Chunky into the prop-wash. "I've been dreaming about you!"

Slapping the Camel around. Chunky jerked the nose up and clamped, his thumbs against the trigger releases. The twin Vickers rattled perfectly and fifty-odd rounds of point three-zero-threes streaked harmlessly in the general direction of the Pearly Gates.

Then followed a dogfight that would have brought jeering laughter to the lips of the war's crack pilots. But to the pilot of the Camel and the pilot of the Fokker it was deadly serious, despite the fact that their guns spat fire in all directions except the one direction that would get results. Chunky cursed savagely at his

own poor marksmanship, and it is quite probable that Green Bird had similar thoughts about himself.

At any rate, they both slipped and did and skidded about the heavens until eventually Chunky was down to his last twenty-five rounds. The belt in his left gun had run completely through the feed block. But a hasty look showed twenty-five rounds in the right gun belt. The planes had unconsciously slipped into a tail-chase-tail maneuver, neither pilot being able to cut in sharp on the other. And neither of them dared to roll out of it. Consequently they both went skimming around and around with all guns silent.

The maneuver was making Chunky's head spin like a top and he shook himself vigorously for a moment's clearness. He couldn't keep it up indefinitely, nor could Green Bird for that matter. But Chunky vowed between clenched teeth that he would not be the first to try a break for home.

Suddenly through blurred eyes he saw the Fokker skid out from the tight turn. The German pilot, in error, had relaxed on the stick for a fleeting second. It was enough for the sensitive Fokker and it skidded outward. In that second Charlie pulled his own stick back the last inch and jammed on top rudder. Almost immediately he kicked the nose down again and brought the green Fokker square into his sights. His guns clattered and then went silent as the last bullet sped on its way.

A CHOKING sob burst from Chunky's lips. The Fokker was coming back into the tight circle. He had fired his last burst and had missed! Green Bird had only to bide his time now and then flip in for the kill. A seething, red rage boiled up in Chunky, and something seemed to snap in his head.

"Damn you!" he screamed wildly. "You'll go down with me!"

All sane reason fled his mind. He could see nothing but that green Fokker banking around. Muttering broken curses he yanked the Camel up on a wing and went thundering straight for the other plane. A split second later, as though some unseen hand had dashed water in his face, Chunky stiffened in his seat and pulled the Camel aside. The green Fokker was no longer circling. It was staggering through the air like some broken bird. In one crashing moment the truth beat against Chunky's brain.

"Got him!" he shrilled. "By God, I got him!"

A cackling laugh spilled from his lips and in frenzied joy he banged a fist against the cowl rim.

His mind Started going berserk and it was with a terrific effort that he was able to pull himself back to normalcy. At that, it was only war-born instinct that caused his brain to register what was happening.

The green Fokker was going down, all right. The last burst of twenty-five rounds had found the mark. But the pilot was sluggishly guiding the plane in the direction of the German lines, less than a mile away.

"Oh no, you don't!" shouted Chunky as he dove after him. "You're going down on this side. I'm getting a strip of that green for a souvenir, see?"

Ruddering around so that his sights were in line with a point just ahead of the careening Fokker he pressed the trigger releases to let a warning burst tell Green Bird to nose down and land. For a split second Chunky could not Understand why no clattering sounds came from the guns. Automatically he pounded the crank handles to clear a possible jam. Then he remembered and cursed bitterly. He didn't have a shot left. The two guns were just so much junk up there on the cowling mountings. And like the fool that he was, he'd left his service automatic back in his hutment.

In raging agony he watched the green Fokker slither through the air toward the German lines. Then suddenly a joyous shout came to his lips. The Fokker prop had gone dead in horizontal position and the plane itself was virtually hanging motionless in mid-air. The pilot seemed to be making no effort to maintain flying speed. On the spur of the moment Chunky gunned his Camel and roared alongside the hovering Fokker. Leaning out of the cockpit he pointed toward a big clearing in some woods just ahead. It was well within the gliding range of the German plane. The pilot of the Fokker did not even turn his head as Chunky edged in close. He seemed to be completely engrossed with the utterly hopeless task of keeping his plane in the air and pointed east.

As Chunky flashed by he saw the darkish stain that ran down the side of Green Bird's jaw. The German pilot was too hunched over the controls to permit a clear view of his goggled face.

"Land, you damn fool!" cried Chunky, "You can't make it!"

Hardly had the words been whipped away from his lips by the rush of prop wash than he started in his seat and stared across the air space between the two planes. He gasped and brushed his goggles aside. There was no doubt about it. Green Bird was dead. The Grim Reaper was at the controls of the Fokker.

EVEN as the uncanny truth dawned upon Chunky he saw the Fokker fall sharply off on one wing and go plunging straight for the ground. When it seemed on the point of crashing into the earth it miraculously righted itself and mushed forward for some fifty yards or more. Then a wing-tip snubbed and the plane spun around in a great cloud of dust. When the dust cleared Chunky could see only a twisted and broken mass of wood and metal.

Gingerly Chunky landed in an adjoining field. As he leaped to the ground his knees buckled momentarily and he was forced to brace himself against the side of the fuselage. Then he rushed over toward the crashed plane, a strange sensation tingling up and down his spine. The Fokker was not in flames, but as Chunky neared it he stopped dead in his tracks and stared hard. The pilot was not in the wreckage. He was some fifteen or twenty feet clear of it, stretched out on his stomach, his face toward the east and both arms flung over his head.

HARDLY conscious of what he was doing, Chunky went over and knelt beside the still form. When he turned it over his heart seemed to stick in his throat. There was a neat bullet hole in the man's temple, signifying beyond all doubt that death had been instantaneous. Chunky licked his dry lips as he remembered that after he'd fired that last burst the Fokker had continued to circle for almost half a minute before it veered off toward the German lines. It seemed unbelievable! With a dead pilot at the stick the plane should have gone plunging earthward in a spin. But it hadn't done that, it had actually completed a maneuver and then headed east. And the pilot was clear of the wreckage! It was as though he had climbed clear and started walking and then collapsed.

Chunky closed his eyes and clenched his teeth hard as he battled with his ragged nerves. He had seen many strange things in his day, but nothing like this! A dead pilot flying a ship. God! He shook himself and got control. He mustn't let it get him. There was a war on, damn it! It was either Green Bird or he, wasn't it? And hadn't he vowed to get him? Well, he'd done it, hadn't he? And now he was letting a Hun death crack him. Hell!

Muttering to himself, Chunky began to search the body for any possible papers that would be of value to Wing. His search revealed nothing, however. Not even an identification disc suspended from the neck, or fastened about the wrist. A glance at the man's insignia showed him to be a lieutenant. The tunic was absolutely bare of decorations.

A momentary sense of shame swept over Chunky and he started hastily to button up the tunic he had opened at the throat. As he did so he caught sight of a bit of white protruding from an inner pocket. He pulled it out and found it to be a folded letter minus the envelope. The frayed edges of the paper indicated that it had been carried in the pocket for quite some time.

The letter was in German and penned by a feminine hand. As the result of having specialized in languages at college Chunky had no difficulty in translating. As he read, the color slowly faded from his face and the fingers that held the letter shook violently.

Dearest,

It is only two hours since I waved good-by to you there at the station, but it seems a lifetime. But I will be brave as I promised. I know that like your brother Franz you, too, want to serve the Fatherland.

No, I am not afraid, for you see I have your promise to come back. Yes, even in death you will come back to the Fatherland. It was the thought of you out there in some unknown grave that chilled my heart, dying in the enemy's hands! It seemed to crush me up inside. But now I know you will come home, no matter what happens. God will help you keep your promise. Yes, He will be that kind to me, I know. Until we meet again. Always.

Frieda.

As Chunky finished reading, the letter slipped from his fingers to the ground. He stared stupidly down at it and the words blurred before his eyes. A million, and one wild thoughts clashed through his brain but he was unable to snare a single one and concentrate on its meaning. His whole body seemed suddenly steeped in the dregs of a bitter cup. Something altogether apart from the world in which he lived had transpired, and he was helpless to grasp its significance. Here before him on the ground was a man who in the very claws of death had somehow battled on to fulfill a promise made in the glow of life. It was impossible, yet it was true! An ethereal phenomenon? But good God, he had actually seen this man die, pass out of this world, and then seemingly come back to life again. The eeriness of the last half hour shook Chunky to the very core.

Weakly he struggled to his feet and stood there staring down at the dead German pilot. His lips moved, and he hardly knew his own voice.

"You tried to go home. Green Bird—and—and—"

Chunky didn't finish. A wild light of mad resolution suddenly blazed up in his glassy eyes. Stooping, he gathered the limp form in his arms. He

turned and suddenly the earth seemed to explode at his feet. With a supreme effort he kept from falling. Then through his numbed brain seeped the realization that he was in unoccupied territory, and that a German barrage was screaming down upon him. Gritting his teeth he sobbed a curse and staggered forward to his Camel.

PANTING from the effort Chunky finally succeeded in placing the dead German face-down across the cockpit cowling.

Straight toward the eastern horizon he flew, not daring to bank for fear of the German's sliding off. With the extra load, the Camel labored for altitude and by the time the lines were crossed Chunky had only a bare two thousand feet of height.

Suddenly he sighted a field and was reaching forward to gun back the engine when the air about him became filled with the sharp penetrating yammer of Spandau fire. One look back was enough. Five Fokkers were boring down on him, and already the tracers from the leading plane were slicing between his wings.

The fury of the attack jerked his mind back to a sense of realities. Open-mouthed he stared at the form across the cowling. Good God! What the hell was he trying to do? Had he gone screwy? And he without a shot!

As quickly as the Spandau fire had sprung into life it died. Chunky jerked his head to the side and blinked at the black shadow that hovered close to his right wing. It was a Fokker and the pilot was making motions with his hands. Then he understood and gulped with relief. The Fokker pilot was motioning for him to land in a field up ahead.

Suddenly the blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins. God! Did they think he was going to dump Green Bird down on some field like the Turks had once done with a captured English pilot. He'd heard of that terrible bloodthirsty episode in Mesopotamia. If they believed that they'd stand him up against a wall two seconds after he landed.

The Fokker on the right closed in and the pilot signaled. Chunky groaned and eased back his throttle and slid down through the air. As he leveled off a small group in front of the dirty canvas hangars came running out on the field. Chunky climbed to the ground. And as the Germans crowded close he lifted the dead Green Bird down. The tall major made a queer sound in his throat, and leaped forward to the body. He knelt down and pulled off the goggles.

*“Mein Gott! Karl!”*

He straightened in a flash and his eyes bored into Chunky’s face. Rage, perplexity, and blank astonishment were all mingled together. He started to raise his gun as Chunky pointed to the letter in Green Bird’s tunic pocket.

“That’s why,” Chunky heard himself say in German.

The German stooped and snatched out the letter. As he read it the five Fokker pilots, who had boxed Chunky, landed and came running over. When the major finished he looked up and stared his incredulity.

“You——”

Chunky nodded hastily.

“Yes. God, it was awful. He kept on flying after my burst had got him. I landed, read the letter. It got me—went crazy, I guess. Well, anyway—he came home!”

Suddenly the German major stiffened and saluted smartly. He barked out five names and followed with a crisp order.

Chunky gulped, afraid to believe his ears.

“You mean?” he stammered.

The German major bowed stiffly.

“Yes! It is the least a grateful brother can do for a gentleman.”

Ten minutes later a strange V formation winged toward the German lines. When the Front was reached, five of the six-plane formation, Fokkers, turned back to the east. The sixth plane, a Camel that had led the formation continued on to the west.