



ASK NO QUESTIONS

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Too much courage was Half-Pint's burden—then came the day when he softened the C.O.'s anger and showed that even feathers have wartime uses.

THE BRIGHT NEW SPAD whizzed toward the zenith in a flashing zoom and jumped over its own tail in six successive loops, like a bumblebee full of moonshine. It came spinning down like a rocket, whooshed around the operations hut, and then swooped to a landing. While it was still rolling, the pilot hopped out of its pit.

And what a pilot! He looked like a ten-year-old

dressed up in his big brother's flying togs, he was so small. As a matter of fact, he was just a half-portion of pilot. But what he lacked in size he seemed to make up in *joie de vivre*. He went trotting up to the C.O., grinning clear around to the back of his neck.

"Lieutenant William Ballentine reporting for duty, sir!" he chirped.

Captain Flint didn't say anything at first. He was

so mad he couldn't talk, and his face was purple as a plum. Flint was tough. His capacity for wrath was practically unlimited. And the thing that always made him maddest was stunting over his flying field. All at once he let out a blast like a howitzer.

"I don't care who you are! I don't care if you're Pop Pershing's favorite nephew—you can't stunt around here! What do you think this is, you lunatic, a circus?"

The little guy was startled into swallowing his grin. "Yes, sir," he gulped. "I mean, no, sir. I'm sorry, sir. I was just so glad to get here that I—"

"Never mind about that!" the C.O. snapped. "Don't try to show off again! Don't pull any more stunts! If you do any more stunting around this field or anywhere else I'll throw you in the jug! That's orders!"

"Yes, sir," said the little guy.

The C.O. snatched the papers out of his hand. He made an absurd effort to pull himself up another sixteenth of an inch, but it wasn't much use. He stood a good foot and a half below the C.O., and he certainly couldn't stretch enough to make up the difference. Captain Flint gave him another contemptuous look, then marched off toward the hut.

The little guy looked around, blinking. A minute ago he'd been grinning and full of a blithesome eagerness; now he was crestfallen and abashed. But as we gathered around him, he began to smile again.

"Well," he said, "they were good stunts while they lasted!"

This little fellow was a specimen. He wasn't exactly a midget, but he wasn't much more. By a prodigious effort he could pull himself up to his full height of about four feet ten. How he'd ever managed to get into the service at all was a puzzle, but there he was, the smallest parcel of pilot ever delivered through the works. And being small didn't keep him from being human, either.

We found that out after we'd introduced ourselves and begun to get acquainted with him. Even if he was a vest-pocket edition of a pilot, every cubic inch of him was packed with a grim determination to do something big.

"I guess you birds think I'm a freak," he told us. "Maybe I am, but it's not my fault I never grew much. Gee, if there was anything I could do to make myself taller, I'd do it! If you only knew it, it's hell, being this little. Girls never fall for me; they just laugh. Everybody asks me why I'm not in a side-show, and why I'm out so late without my mother? Damn it, I'll show 'em! You watch me!"

He couldn't wait to get into the air, but Captain Flint wasn't in any hurry to put him there. As a punishment for his stunting, the C.O. made him wait for his check flight. Finally, when he was allowed to get into his plane, he was shaking like a leaf. He revved his Hisso high and put some atmosphere under it, with Flint watching.

He performed to perfection. Flint acknowledged that with a grunt. But the little fellow wasn't ripe for a patrol yet. The C.O. had me give him all the instructions and signals until he knew 'em backwards and forwards. All the while, the little guy chafed under the restraint. Patrols went out and patrols came in, and he wasn't with 'em. To him that was bitter gall.

THEN Little Bill's chance came. The ground crew got to work, that bright morning, and wheeled the Spads to the deadline, preparatory to a flight. Among them was Little Bill's bright new crate. When he saw it in place, his eyes popped with eagerness. He raced out, made contact, and set his Hisso to humming. Then he came trotting back again, cheerful as a lark.

"Boy!" he exploded. "I've been waiting a long time for this! Lafayette, here I come! Aw, I don't blame you guys for smiling. I know I don't look like I can do much, but it doesn't make any difference how big a man is, does it, so long as he can work a pair of trips and shoot straight? I'm going to have my chance, and I'll show you."

The C.O. came striding toward him. Little Bill stretched up to his four feet ten while Captain Flint glared down at him like a Great Dane contemplating a new-born kitten.

"Now, listen, half-pint!" the C.O. said. "You're a cocky little guy, and you think you're pretty hot, but to me you're just another green replacement. So far as I know, the Germans haven't staged any retreats since you've come to the Front. This is going to be your first patrol along the line, so watch yourself. We may run into a flock of Jerries. If we do, don't break formation until I signal. Understand that?"

"Yes, sir," said Little Bill, striving to look still bigger.

"You replacements," the C.O. declared, eyes glittering, "like to think you know all about sky-fighting. Hah! Why, you're not even through a combat-pilot's kindergarten yet. Your mind's cluttered up with a lot of fancy theory stuffed into you at Kelly and Issoudun. The sooner you forget all that truck, the better. Up here you're under my orders and you'll do as I tell you. First and last, remember this, you don't break formation until I signal."

"Yes, sir," said Little Bill. "But what if—"

"You don't ask questions, you follow orders!" the C.O. barked. "That's all!"

"Yes, sir," said Little Bill.

The C.O. barged out toward the line. Little Bill went trotting toward his Spad, all impatience. My plane was placed right next to his, so I had a good chance to watch him. Before he climbed into the pit he pulled a tremendous, fat pillow out of it and gave it a few hearty punches.

"In the name of all the seven prophets," I called over, "what's that thing?"

Little Bill flushed. "I've got to use it," he shouted back. "If I don't have a pillow behind me, I can't reach the rudder bars!"

"Wow!" I exploded. "Look out, Richthofen!"

Ignoring that, Little Bill threw the pillow into the pit and grimly climbed in after it. He sank down and became almost invisible behind the cowling. His eager eyes peered over at the C.O., while he waited for the signal. I felt sympathetically sorry for the little fellow. He was so afire with ambition, and his small stature was such a curse to him.

We were ready to hop. Captain Flint raised his arm, signaling for the take-off. Ack Emmas hopped about, pulling chocks. The Spads began to roll. First the C.O.'s crate rushed into the wind, and the others followed, a bending gray line moving across the field. Little Bill hunched to his controls grimly and sent his Spad speeding along with the others. How he must have been looking forward to this moment, his first patrol!

The eight Spads swooped above the crest of the hill and drove out toward No-Man's-Land, climbing. Flint led us through a smooth bank, and we turned our noses along the line. Little Bill peeked over the cowling, curiously inspecting the shell-torn terrain below. It was his first sight of the trenches, his first glimpse of the ragged edge of No-Man's-Land. And right away he began to peer grimly around the sky, looking for Jerries!

We shuttled down toward Avesnes and then banked to fly back. Little Bill kept his position and flew neatly. Every inch of the way he kept staring around, anxiously hunting a few Germans. And suddenly he jerked up, and signaled back to me, pointing upward excitedly.

He'd spotted a Jerry patrol! Up in the glare of the sun red wings were gliding! The enemy was lurking on the wing! At about the same instant that Little Bill spotted them, Captain Flint waggled his wings; he'd

seen them too. Little Bill hunched low, tightening to his controls, all set to fight. But Flint didn't do a thing. He kept the formation droning after him as he drove straight on.

THE Fokkers dropped. They were swerving toward us. Seven of them! They were outnumbered by one, but that wasn't stopping them. They knew the game of war in the air, those Jerries, and they were hunting for a fight. As they swung closer. Little Bill began popping up and down in the pit, itching to fling himself at them. But still Captain Flint wasn't signaling any break.

Down came those Fokkers, Mercedes drumming. The helmets of the pilots glistened in the sun as they hunched behind their sight rings. Grimly, Captain Flint was ignoring them. He wasn't going to stage a fight and lose some of his men unless it was unavoidable. It looked very much as if it were going to be unavoidable. The Jerries were dropping lower and closer every second Little Bill was almost frantic. His head swiveled like an owl's while he kept those red crates in sight. He shouted things into the roar of the motor. How he wanted to sling a few slugs at those Germans! But he wasn't getting the chance, not yet. Captain Flint was doggedly holding his formation together and heading straight on.

Then something happened! The leader of the Fokker squadron swung his nose directly down at us. His Spandaus opened with a long, rattling burst. His tracers spun out and streaked among the Spads. With the attack, the gray ships bobbed and teetered, but they kept formation. And the Fokker kept driving down, straight at us!

Another long burst! Slugs hailed down! A tracer pierced the left wing of Little Bill's crate. A line of slugs slapped into his tail. His Spad bucked, and weaved in and out of formation. He stared pleadingly at Captain Flint, who was staring back; but still the C.O. wasn't giving any signal to break.

Then another rain of slugs spattered all over Little Bill's Spad, and something else happened!

He tore into a Vertical wing bank with Hisso snarling! He shot into a zoom that pulled him directly at the Fokker! Instantly the other Fokkers scattered, swinging wide. Instantly the red ship that had peppered Little Bill spun through a bank that swung its nose toward the Spad. And the next instant the half-pint pilot was rocking across the sky with a Jerry on his tail!

CAPTAIN FLINT swiftly waggled his wings and dashed out of formation. Spads began to scatter like leaves in a wind. While they whirled around to meet the Fokker attack, with machine guns spitting, the C.O. roared across the sky in the direction of Little Bill. In one second the sky became pandemonium of flashing wings and firespitting guns and snarling motors and Little Bill was in the thick of it!

A Jerry plunged down at me, and for a few minutes I was busy merry-go-rounding with him. He slashed in and sent a few slugs hissing past my head. An Immelman put him below me, and I dusted his tail, but he came lashing back. After another burst he swung his hands above his head frantically, signaling that his Spandaus were jammed I banked away, letting him go, and he went. Then, far out over No-Man's-Land, I spied Little Bill's new crate vainly trying to tear away from the other Fokker, and Captain Flint plunging headlong into the fray.

Little Bill was pulling through a terrific zoom, and the Fokker was tailing him like a red shadow, when the C.O.'s Vickers cut loose with a long burst. The tracers skeined out at the red ship, and the Jerry pilot twisted wildly around in his pit. As he strove to escape Flint's thrust, Little Bill swung back. The next moment those two Spads were hell-bent on chasing that Fokker clear back to Berlin!

That was a close call for Little Bill. If the C.O. hadn't cut in on the fight, he'd have gone down sure!

Hell was still popping all over the heavens. In another minute the C.O. came rushing back, Little Bill beside him; the Fokker had torn across into German territory. Flint raced into the melee like a madman. Rocking right and left, he threw slugs at every red wing he could glimpse. Little Bill followed suit, lashing the sky with a whip of lead. Taking the cue, I did a little general bullet throwing myself. Within a few minutes this had the effect of scaring the remaining five Jerries into a general exodus toward the North Sea.

Eight Spads swung into line and began sweeping those Fokkers out of the sky. We raced them back toward the German line, slapping at them with slugs, whipping them ahead. When the line passed below us, the sky began to boil with the black smoke of the ack-acks below. We gave the flock of Fokkers one last lacing; then, as Flint whirled back, we fell into formation and followed him.

Little Bill took his old position in the formation, with nothing showing above his cowling but the corner of a pillow!

FLINT made his Spad hop. He drove back toward the base of the 200th like the well-known bat from the nether regions. Every Hiss revved at its limit as we followed him. Once the base was in sight, he hove down to it like a roll of thunder. His trucks touched and he slid to a stop near the hangars. By the time the rest of us were down, he was charging toward Little Bill Ballentine with his neck drawn in and his fists clubbed.

"You broke formation!" he snarled at Little Bill.

The little guy's face turned red, then white, then the color of cheese.

"You broke formation without being signaled!" the C.O. bellowed. "You disobeyed orders!"

"Gee, didn't you see what happened?" Little Bill gulped. "That Jerry was plastering me with bullets. I couldn't stay there and let him knock me down and never do a thing to stop him!"

"Shut up!" Flint snarled. "I warned you before we went up! I told you to keep formation until you were signaled to break! You didn't do it! You crazy little runt, I could wring your neck! You couldn't have done anything worse! Half of us might've got knocked down because of what you did!"

"We chased 'em off, didn't we?" Little Bill ventured.

"Shut up!" Flint howled again. "You think you're too damned smart! You think you know too damned much! You insignificant little shrimp! You cocky little squirt! I could pull you onto the carpet for what you did! I could order you court-martialled for disobeying orders! You know that, don't you?"

Little Bill was too dismayed to answer.

Flint stabbed a stubby forefinger at him, a finger trembling with rage.

"Now, you listen to me, and listen hard, half-pint! The next time you disobey orders, you're going to get the works! I mean that! I'll break you in a minute! I'll have you kicked out of the service! I'll throw you into a lousy prison camp for the rest of the war! After this, you follow orders to the letter! You don't ask any questions, you follow orders! Get that? Answer me!"

"Yes, sir," said Little Bill. "I won't do it again, sir. No matter what happens, after this, I'll obey orders. You can depend on that absolutely, sir."

"Yah!" growled the C.O.

Flint strode toward the hut, his heels hammering hard, leaving Little Bill standing there, looking sick and pale. Poor little guy!

At noon next day, eight Spads swooped off the field on the regular patrol and went swinging out along

the line. The formation was droning into the smoky distance when another plane came humming from the rear. It was a big, awkward D.H.9 with a hole in its underside, a camera ship. It circled once, then nosed down to a landing on the field, and a pilot hopped out of it.

Captain Flint marched out to it, took the orders which the ferry pilot offered, and scowled at them. For a few minutes they talked together, and I caught this much of the conversation.

“Do you pilot this crate on the picture hop?” the C.O. asked.

“No, sir,” the pilot answered. “I’m ordered back at once, sir.”

Flint strode toward the tent in which Little Bill and I were sitting. He stopped, looked over the little guy critically, and then shoved the orders under Little Bill’s nose.

“Read that!” he ordered.

We read it together:

From: the commanding general, divisional headquarters.
To: Captain Flint, C.O., 200th Pursuit.
Subject: Orders.

1. These orders will be handed to Captain Flint by the pilot of a photo-plane detailed to the field of the 200th.

2. Immediately on receipt of these orders, Captain Flint will escort the camera plane across the enemy line to the positions marked on the attached map, for the purpose of taking a series of highly important photographs of enemy territory.

3. Two pursuit planes of the 200th will escort the camera ship on its mission.

4. These photographs are needed most urgently. They must be taken with all possible haste, and the film must be returned to D.H.Q. at the soonest possible moment. Artillery units along this Front are in immediate need of the maps which will be made from the negatives; they are helpless to begin a highly important attack until the new maps are in their hands.

5. Successful fulfillment of this order is extremely imperative. Failure to bring back the necessary films may be disastrous.

By: H. J. Barlow, Commanding Xth Division.

Captain Flint burst out, “Divisional gives me every dirty job they can lay their hands on! They give me orders by the bale and they don’t give me any replacements! I’m short of men, and look what they’ve sent me, one replacement, a midget! Sweet hell! There’re only three of us left on the field, and we have to take that detail right now!”

THE C.O. looked hard at Little Bill. “Listen to what I’m telling you, half-pint. You’ve got to handle one of the three crates that’re going up. Davis and I are going to battle the escorts; there’s no other way around it. You’ll pilot the camera crate, Ballentine. All you’ll have to do is keep that ship flying smooth and even. Do you think you’ll be able to do that?”

“Yes, sir!” said Little Bill eagerly.

“The crate’s got a new type of camera in it, run by a spring,” the C.O. explained. “It doesn’t carry any observer. You start the camera by pulling a lever when we’re in position, and stop it the same way. That much isn’t hard, but the job’s dangerous, and it’s up to you. In case any Jerries start hopping us, your move is to turn around and beat it for this field as fast as you can make it, and leave the fighting to Davis and me. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Little Bill.

“But so long as no Jerries show up,” the C.O. continued, “all you’ve got to do is keep your crate flying straight and level. I’ve got the map and I’ll lead you. I’ll signal you when to start the camera and when to stop it. You stick right beside me, see? So long as no Jerries hop us, you keep right by my side. That’s orders!”

“Yes, sir,” said Little Bill. “But what if—”

“Don’t ask questions!” the C.O. flared up. “You keep your crate right beside me, and that’s all! You read what the orders said—‘highly important, urgent, extremely imperative’—and all that. You follow my orders, and we’ll get those pictures. If you don’t, if you mess things up, you’ll get it in the neck! Let’s go!”

We went. Flint bawled out orders, and the monkeys rolled our two Spads alongside the awkward D.H. In a moment the engines were blasting. Little Bill trotted into his hangar and back again, carrying that fat pillow of his. He crammed it into the pit of the camera crate, and climbed in after it. The expression on his face was grim and hard. This time he was going to follow the C.O.’s orders in spite of all hell.

All set! Motors hot! We were ready to hop! Flint signaled to Little Bill, and the small pilot sent the big D.H. scurrying off over the field. As he rushed into the take-off, the C.O. and I followed. We lifted smartly over the hill, and drove straight out toward No-Man’s-Land, climbing. We shot up steadily to about twelve thousand, then swung over the enemy line, Little Bill keeping his eyes on Flint every inch of the way.

The trenches passed below. We kept driving deeper into the Jerry sky, and still deeper. The checkerboard

pattern of the earth teetered beneath us. We were getting farther, and farther away from home. It was a dangerous and ticklish business, but so far we were all right. Flint wagged an arm, signaling that we were almost over our objective.

We banked smoothly, and went droning along. Flint signaled again, to Little Bill. Very promptly the half-pint pilot got busy. He pulled the lever that started the automatic camera working. The big lens-eye, peering downward through the fuselage, began to blink and blink again. The big roll of film inside the camera was moving now, a section at a time. We'd begun to get the pictures.

Captain Flint buzzed alongside the D.H., guiding it. Little Bill watched him like a miniature hawk. For several miles he hummed along; then Flint signaled again. Little Bill promptly stopped the camera, swung through a bank that took us still deeper into the enemy sky, then started the camera to working when Flint signaled again. So far, okay. The little guy was performing to perfection.

All the while I kept swiveling my head around, on the alert for any possible Jerry attack. There wasn't a plane in sight; the sky was all ours. We drove on for another stretch, and then Flint gave another signal. Once more he banked, and once more we began to shuttle back, still farther behind the line. Little Bill was keeping that big D.H. steady as a rock, and sticking right behind Flint all the way.

At last, after a dozen or so eternities, Flint gave another signal, which said, "That's all; head back for the field!" At the same time, the C.O. banked and began to drive toward the line. We droned along smoothly until the line was in sight and then, gradually, the C.O. began to nose downward.

LITTLE BILL adhered to the C.O.'s wing-tip, and I hung close to the D.H. Flint kept going down. He was hunched in his pit, doing something to his controls. Suddenly he jerked up, gave us a wild look, and shouted something. His voice didn't carry through the roar of the props. Neither of us understood what was wrong; but Little Bill had had his orders to stick close, and he was sticking. Down the C.O. glided, and down we went with him.

Lower! As we sailed across the lines, the ack-acks began to bark. Black smoke boiled in the sky and shrapnel spattered. We rocked from wing to wing, but the C.O. continued downward. Twisting back again, he waved his arms frantically. Something was wrong, but

what? Little Bill shot me a curious glance, but he didn't swerve away from Flint's Spad. He wasn't taking any chances; he was staying where he was.

Still lower! Swinging out across No-Man's-Land, we dropped. Now I realized that Flint's motor was balking, and that he was being forced down. He yelled at us, and waved, and yelled again. Suddenly I tore away from the side of the D.H., signaling Little Bill to follow me. Puzzled, he watched me go, but he didn't follow. He had orders to stay alongside Flint, and he was staying.

Going down! Flint no longer shouted and waved; he had to give all his attention to his controls. He was fighting to keep his Spad out of a spin. Crazy, I whisked low above Little Bill and waved at him again to come on and follow me! He wouldn't budge. He shook his head stubbornly, and continued to accompany the C.O. toward the mud!

The C.O. was driving down toward a dangerous landing, into a region dotted with shell-pits and heaped with up-thrown earth. He was fighting desperately to keep his nose up, but it was no use! He was heading into a crack-up, sure, and Little Bill was going right with him, all the way!

"Back to the field!" I screeched at the little guy. "Cut loose and head back to the field!"

He didn't hear. He didn't budge. Grimly he stayed right beside Flint, dropping into the chaos below!

And then Flint struck! His Spad sliced low over a shell-hole, and his trucks slashed into the mud. The crate spun half around, and then slapped into the side of a mound of piled dirt. Instantly one wing wiped off and crumpled; the plane turned on its side, a complete wreck, and Flint sprawled out of the pit into the ooze!

And the crazy midget in the D.H. went with him! He pulled up in a short zoom, banked, and then drove back toward the C.O.! He was going down! He was going to make a landing! He dropped his trucks toward a spread of smoother ground, feeling his way. His trucks touched and then he skidded! The greasy mud sucked at his wheels; he slipped over on one wing, and spun half around! The next instant the D.H. was lying in the slime with a shattered wing!

Great grief! There were two crates cracked up in the mud, two pilots stranded in the middle of No-Man's-Land, and with them a roll of films for which D.H.Q. was impatiently waiting! What to do? I decided quickly that I'd better try to land, grab the films, and hurry them back to headquarters with all possible haste, leaving the C.O. and Little Bill to take care of

themselves. Accordingly, I slid downward, hunting for a landing.

Very carefully I dropped the Spad's trucks onto a stretch of grass. I stopped breathing, shut my eyes, and prayed for mercy. The trucks hit. The Spad bounced. Then it slithered along, smearing to a stop. I opened my eyes to find the Spad still whole and in a position from which it might, with luck, manage a take-off. Hopping out of the pit, I trotted toward the two wrecks.

Captain Flint was dragging himself up, plastered with mud. Little Bill was extricating himself from the ooze. Neither of them got very far. Nor did I. For an excellent reason.

Brrrrrrt! The stuttering report of a machine gun broke out! We flopped. We lay breathless against the damp earth, while bullets slashed over us. The slugs slapped into the mud, sweeping the ground. Then, abruptly, the fusillade ended. I twisted my head around just in time to see a helmet moving over the rim of a shell hole a few rods away.

Over there was a Jerry m.g. nest! We'd landed almost on top of it!

FOR a minute we hugged the earth, knowing that if we rose, we'd stop a parade of bullets. Then Flint began to wiggle through the slime. He crawled along, flat out, for a few yards, and suddenly disappeared. He'd slid into another shell-hole. Very promptly, I wriggled in the same direction. By the time I reached the rim of the crater, Little Bill was slithering along beside me.

No sooner had we tumbled down the soft slope of earth than Captain Flint grabbed Little Bill's shoulders and shook him savagely.

"You lunatic!" he bellowed. "You runt of a half-wit! You crazy midget! What did you do that for? What did you come down here for? You crazy little—"

Little Bill let out a sob. "You told me to stick right beside you, no matter what happened. I followed orders, that's all!"

"You damn little imp!" the C.O. gasped. "I had motor trouble, that's why I had to come down here! Look what you've done! Headquarters is waiting for those films and where are they? Out in the middle of No-Man's-Land in a cracked-up crate!"

Little Bill's face was white under the smear of dirt. "You told me to follow you and I did!" he protested. "You told me not to ask any questions, and I didn't!"

"Yah!" the C.O. snarled. "You'll get the works for

this, you scatter-brained shrimp! You're through! I'm going to pull you onto the carpet! I'm going to court-martial you! I'm going to kick you out of the service in disgrace! Soon as we get out of here, I'll break you till there's nothing left of you!"

Little Bill looked utterly heartsick. "Yeah, and how soon do you think we're going to get out of here, cap?" I asked bitterly. "That m.g. nest has got us covered. We don't stand a chance. First thing you know they'll be sending a squad of Heinies out for us, and we'll spend the rest of this war in one of the Jerries' lousy prison camps!"

That calmed the C.O. down. He looked around. Over there were the two wrecked crates and, farther beyond, my Spad with its Hisso still popping over. It was sheltered from the m.g. nest by a heap of mud, but everything else was open. Flint raised his head cautiously to take a peek around and instantly slugs slapped into the mud. Flint ducked down like lightning. His face was tomato-red with rage. Little Bill crouched low, still white as death. All I could do was hug a lump of mud and feel miserable.

"God, we're sunk!" the C.O. groaned. "We can't get out of here! Those damn Jerries will hold us in this hole until we starve to death. We'll be lucky if we ever get as far as one of their dirty prison camps. Headquarters never will get their films now. It's your fault, you crazy little runt! Stay out of my reach or I'll choke you!"

Little Bill looked grim. There was an air of desperation about him. Suddenly he scrambled over to the other side of the pit, and crawled up toward the edge.

"Come back here, half-pint!" I snapped. "If you show yourself they'll turn you into a sieve!"

Little Bill looked back, white-eyed. "What have I got to lose?" he demanded stiffly. "I'd rather get mine right now than get kicked out of the service! I'd rather get killed than spend the rest of this war in a German prison camp. I'm littler than you are; there's a chance that I can get over to that Spad, and I'm going to take it!"

Flint and I made a grab for him at the same instant, but he was too quick. He slid out over the edge of the crater. At the same instant the Maxim in the other hole let out a long, spattering burst. We ducked low while the slugs slapped into the mud all around us. Flint and I eyed each other, aghast.

"He's done for!" I said.

The bullets stopped raining. I ventured to look up. Little Bill was gone! He was stretched flat as a pancake,

and he was wriggling out toward my Spad. He was so little that he could completely disappear in depressions in the ground that would have left Flint or me sticking up as prominently as a camel's hump! Breathing hard, digging his toes and fingers into the ooze, he was dragging himself along.

ANOTHER charge ripped across the ground. Flint and I ducked down again. Little Bill was certainly a casualty this time. But no! When we peeked up again, he was still wriggling on. Now he was behind a heap of mud. He came to his knees, and poised for a rush. Suddenly he darted toward his wrecked D.H.

Brrrrrrt! He made a snatch at the pit. He grabbed his pillow out of it and fell flat. The Maxim bullets slammed into the side of the wreck. For a minute after the attack subsided, Little Bill didn't move. Then, again, he began crawling toward my Spad. Dragging that crazy pillow of his along with him, he fought his way inch by inch.

Now he was near the other Spad. Peering back, he saw that another heap of mud covered him. Instantly he sprang up and raced to the pit, slinging his pillow in ahead of him. He clambered over and fell to the controls. Quickly he thrust open the throttle—and the Spad began to roll!

Another blast from the Maxim! Black holes peppered the side of the Spad! Little Bill kicked the rudders crazily, swinging the Spad's nose around. Ducked low behind the pit, he drew his Vickers into line with the m.g. nest. Suddenly his guns kicked open, and he sent a long burst over the heads of the gunners. While they were still huddling down away from the onslaught, he kicked around again, and threw the Spad into the take-off!

Up he went, slashing. Now the Maxim was clattering again, following him with a swarm of slugs. More black dots appeared on the fuselage as he whirled. He threw the Spad through a bank while it was still only a few yards up. Death was raining through that sky when he dropped the nose of his Spad toward the m.g. nest. Then again his Vickers unleashed a terrific blast.

Yells and screams came from the other pit as Little Bill stabbed down with his Vickers. The Maxim kept rattling. Little Bill wrenched his Spad around and raced back, diving at the nest, his guns again rocking. Tracers sped down while balls of fire played around the snouts of his guns. Destruction poured down on the Jerries in that pit. Their Maxim went silent.

Little Bill whipped around again. He drove back

toward the grassy space where I had landed. Down he came, slashing, rolling to a stop. Flint and I had ventured up out of our hole. As Little Bill, trotted our way he shouted:

"I got 'em! Come on!"

Up we came. And then—A rifle-report cracked through the air. We whirled around like so many tops. Damnation and hell! Over across a stretch of mud, half a dozen gray-green figures were deploying our way! All of them were carrying rifles leveled in our direction. The officers over in the trenches had seen us coming down in the Spads, and these Heinies had been sent out to capture us!

Spat-spat! Down we went again! None of us had any kind of a gun. We couldn't fight back at those Heinies! Again visions of prison camps, of barbed wire and hard bread and water, rose before us. Little Bill had made a valiant effort, wiping out that machine-gun nest, but no sooner had it been eliminated than this new threat had risen. And there we were, again plastered in the mud!

But Little Bill didn't stay there. He was recklessly springing up. He sped toward the wrecked D.H. this time, while bullets hissed around him. Once behind the wreck he dropped flat again. It was turned on its side; he was behind it. Flint and I were huddled behind a heap of earth scarcely large enough to cover us. And all the while the Heinies came running closer, making ready to take us prisoners.

Suddenly Little Bill came crawling away from the wreckage of the D.H. He had something under his arm, something round and fat—the roll of films! He'd taken them out of the camera in the D.H.'s rear pit! He came to his toes, huddling behind the wreckage, getting ready to spring.

"Come on!" he yelled at us. "Make a run for it! It's our only chance!"

LITTLE BILL raced toward the Spad with all the speed his short legs could give him. Bullets snapped through the air. He darted from left to right, zigzagging with that roll of film like a football player dodging interference and plunging toward the goal line. And the crazy little runt was making it!

Madly he pulled himself into the pit of the Spad. Swiftly he kicked at the rudders and swung its nose around, toward the on-coming Heinies. Instantly he pressed his trips, and the Vickers crashed open. Very promptly the Heinies flopped down, out of sight, while Little Bill's tracers slashed through the air above them.

He was yelling at us. Now was our chance! Flint and I bobbed up, whirled, and raced toward the Spad. At the same time Little Bill kicked it around so that it could run into the take-off. There were three of us, and there was only that one plane, but now wasn't the time to be too particular about Pullman accommodations. The Heinies' rifles were spitting at us again.

"Hang onto the wings!" Little Bill yelled.

We did just that. The C.O. ducked across the left wing, close to the fuselage, and grabbed the entering edge with one hand and the cowling with the other. I flattened out on the opposite side just as the Spad began to race. It picked up speed swiftly as Little Bill jammed the throttle wide. Bullets clicked through the air past the plane. But we were moving now. Rushing crazily, the Spad began to wobble up off the ground.

Up we went, the C.O. and I hanging to the wings for dear life! Hot oil splashed into our faces. The wind tore at us fiendishly, trying to throw us off. The wings teetered and rocked, making us roll! One slip, and we'd go plummeting down to earth and destruction! We held on. We held on as we'd never held on to anything before in our lives! And bullets kept ping-ponging about us.

Little Bill banked the ship carefully. We were still far from our base. He turned his nose in the direction of the field of the 200th and began going there fast. But, as we plunged on, a chill of dread passed through me. An ominous quiver of the nerves warned me of renewed danger. As much as I could, I peered around. And then I saw!

In the sky behind us, three Fokkers were racing after our tail!

Mother of Moses! Those Fokkers were coming like the wind! They'd probably been out on reconnaissance, and they'd spotted us. We were cold meat for them! A lone Spad, with a man on each wing! Overweighted, teetering, plowing along heavily, it wasn't even a match for one Fokker. And there were three plunging down on us to wipe us out of the sky!

Flint saw them too. I saw him peering over the cowling, white as death! Good Lord, we'd run into worse danger than we'd been facing down on the ground! Even if a man is taken prisoner and kept in a dismal prison camp, at least he's alive and has a chance of getting out some day, but I couldn't see half a chance of getting away from those Fokkers. It looked very much like curtains for one commanding officer and two combat pilots!

The Spandaus of the foremost Fokker flamed open! The tracers spun close above the Spad. Bullets slashed

through the wings. Little Bill went rocking from wing to wing madly, while Flint and I tried to hold on. This was hopeless! Little Bill had his guns, but he didn't dare try to maneuver so as to get a shot at those Fokkers. If he did, he'd throw Flint or me, or both of us, off. If we managed to stay on, he wouldn't be able to use any more fighting tactics than an ice-wagon! Good-by, world! Hello, hell!

Now Little Bill stopped trying to zigzag away from the Fokkers. That was no go. They were bearing in closer with every passing second. He began to fly steadily at top throttle, but he didn't stand a chance of tearing away. Pulling up, I stared across the cowling at him.

He'd pulled his pillow around in front of him, and he was perched on the edge of the seat. And he was biting at that pillow savagely. Yes, biting at it! Digging in his teeth, and tearing it away and snatching again.

"He's gone nuts!" I yelled wildly.

Bullets kept swarming. Tracers were weaving closer. And still Little Bill did nothing but tear at that pillow with his teeth! He had his stick between his knees now and he was using both hands with that pillow! I gave out a resigned groan, and sank back. There was no use hoping any more. We were going down.

THE Fokkers were driving in for the kill. I stared—and then stared again. Something was happening. Something white and fluffy was spilling through the air, spreading out like a cloud. The white stuff grew thicker and thicker, swirling back with the slipstream. The Fokkers were dancing crazily to escape it, but it was no use. The fluffy material was coming like a snowstorm and so long as they followed us they had to fly in the thick of it.

Jerking up again, I saw that Little Bill had torn his pillow open and was shaking the feathers into the air!

What the hell? Wondering, I watched. We kept plunging ahead, and Little Bill kept shaking the pillow frantically, filling the sky with its down. Torn on the backwash, it spread out to a prodigious volume. The sky was full of feathers! The Fokkers were still plunging through the white maze, but now they were dropping back.

Suddenly one of them swerved aside, and began to glide downward. Almost immediately the other two dropped their noses, and went spiraling down. The beating of their motors grew duller. Their Mercedes choked and sneezed. One of them went out altogether, then another. They were letting us go, and spilling down into the mud of No-Man's-Land!

Then I got it. Those feathers had gummed up their motors. The fluffy stuff had been drawn by the rushing air of the intakes, and the oxygen supply of the engines was cut off, or lessened so much that the planes couldn't fly! Before they'd been able to draw away, they'd picked up enough of the down in their intakes to conk their motors!

Three Fokkers had been knocked off our tails with goose down!

Now we were speeding along the line. The base of the 200th wasn't far ahead. Little Bill sent the Spad gliding down to it under full gun. Once he sailed over the hill he cut the throttle, and we slid in. Very carefully Little Bill handled the controls, and came in level. The Hisso revved off, the Spad trundled to a stop—and Flint and I spilled off the wings.

Little Bill was out of the pit in a flash, still holding onto that roll of films.

"Here're the pictures, sir!" he gasped.

The C.O. was too flabbergasted for a minute to do anything. He was still alive, and that was too much of a surprise. Then he grabbed the roll of films away from Little Bill, and went scrambling toward the hut. The patrol had been back some time, and there were flyers about. The C.O. pushed the films at one of them and snapped an order to the effect that they be taken to D.H.Q. as fast as possible. As the films got under way, Flint came trotting back. He stopped and surveyed Little Bill quizzically.

"Say, listen!" he exploded. "I'm still dizzy. The way you got those Fokkers off our tail, Little Bill, was a marvel and a revelation. How the devil did you ever think of it?"

"I don't know," Little Bill answered breathlessly. "I

just had to think fast. That looked like a chance to stop 'em and it worked."

"It worked!" Flint exclaimed. "I'll say it worked! It saved us from being knocked down. We'd all three have been killed if you hadn't done that. Little fella, you've got a head on you. Your body may be undersized, but not your brain. I've got to hand it to you, you've got brains and guts, and you pulled us out of one tight hole. Not only that, but you got those films back." "Yes, sir," said Little Bill.

"I said I was going to break you," the C.O. went on, "but I can't do that. Not now. I owe you my life, damn it, and I can't forget that. You must think I'm a hell of a guy, Ballentine. I've done nothing but bawl you out and call you names. I think I owe you an apology." The C.O. grinned for the first time in months. "Just give me a sock in the nose," he said, "and we'll call it square, eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Little Bill.

At which he promptly drew back his arm and planted his clubbed fist squarely on the commanding officer's proboscis! The blow knocked Flint's smile completely off his face. It startled and shocked him so that he flopped backward and sat down with a violent thud. For an instant he glared murderously at Little Bill; then he jumped up, snarling with rage.

"Wait a minute, cap!" I gulped. "You can't do anything to him for hitting you! You told him to do it, and he only followed instructions!"

Captain Flint hesitated, rubbed his throbbing nose, and blinked.

Little Bill Ballentine solemnly drew himself up to his full height of four feet ten and asked crisply, "Any further orders, sir?"