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*Zeps stalked above; from below a flight of super-Fokkers zoomed, Spandaus snarling. But the Red Eagle led his devil's brood straight on; like monster bird killers they dived straight for the staffle of Death, determined to slash a gap through this hell trap—or meet their doom fighting!*

# THE RED EAGLE

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

**T**HE RED WINGS of two huge eagles painted on Captain Ted Blair's Spad fuselage seemed to flap defiantly. The painted bird symbols appeared to be taking animate form, beaks agape, talons bared, as the skipper's fighting plane ripped up under the belly of an Albatros.

Vickers slashed the sky. They slashed empty air, for the Albatros pilot was no greenhorn. No, the Baron von Blentz could never be called that. He had waved aside a flight of Albatros pursuits, that he might engage this lone American skyman on his own.

He breathed a strong contempt for any lone flyer, this pompous, highly-touted Prussian ace. But—that was before he glimpsed the eagle insignia on Blair's ship. Now it was different. *Lieber Gott!* Baron von Blentz faced one of America's most dangerous, most intrepid sky fighters—the "Red Eagle," leader of the Red Eagle's Brood, a flight that had scored a flaming arc across the French battle skies of late.

Ted Blair swore bitterly as he missed the flat of the Albatros belly. He might not get a chance like that in a hurry again. He swore for another reason. Leaving his parent drome—American 44th pursuit—he had left word with his deputy leader, Lieutenant Sam Martin that, in the event of his failing to return at a set time, the Brood would take the sky and hunt him up. That appointed time had passed. There was no sign of the Red Eagle Brood. Save for the lurking Albatros and the lone Spad, the battle sky was deserted.

Literally, Ted Blair was on the spot. But he hadn't failed in his assignment—the mission which had brought him up, solo. His plane equipped with a specially connected automatic camera, he had photographed an important Boche forward dump area—an area which the German ground guns and aerial defenses had held secure for weeks.

The big job now was to get home with the exposed negatives. Blair knew right well that the fate of this dump lay in his safe return; and the fate of thousands of Allied troops rested on his ability to get those negatives back to headquarters. The German command was ready to strike in a big way. It might mean the end of Allied chances on this important part of the Western Front. God! The Red Eagle's chances of escape seemed slim. On every hand, red devil ships of a famous German staffel hovered like hawks, ready to strike should their chief encounter defeat, or great difficulty.

If there was one trait in which the Yank Eagle

excelled more than another, it was his fighting guts, and his ability to maneuver in tight loops and slip-offs which amazed, baffled his opponents. His eye was quick, as quick as the flash of greased lightning, and his Vickers twins were deadly accurate. In the dive he was merciless; he struck like a hungry, angered eagle, hence his *nom de guerre*, Red Eagle. That, and because of his flaming red hair.

Now his freckled, scarred face twitched. The Prussian leader was zooming. Ted watched the move, ready on the rudder bar and stick trigger. There was no telling what this high-class Boche pilot would attempt. Ted figured an Immelmann. He was right. But as the Albatros turned on her side, the Yank shoved his Spad off in a screaming, oblique skid.

Wind whistled and bugled through his rigging like the screams of eagles in attack. Only for a split second did his ring-sights catch and hold the flashing red Boche. But in that split second, a pair of eager Vickers snarled.

*Ptf-r-rrp—rat tat—* A short burst of seven rounds slit through the gun snouts. Bullets pattered on the cockpit rim of the Boche ship. The Baron von Blentz gasped. His hand came off the stick to clutch madly at his left hand through which an American slug had slit.

As Blair zoomed for position, the Albatros hung in a stall. It peeled over. By God! It was going to tail spin.

The Red Eagle's slitted eyes shot flame. Now was his moment! He had position, altitude for his famous dive of death. Thumb ready on the trips, he tipped down on his nose. His prop whined a dirge as the Spad went over. But as his sights caught the spinning ship below, the mad chatter of four Spandaus cracked the rhythmic drone of sky motors. Two of the baron's *leutnants* had seen. They came down like two arrows converging on the lone American eagle.

*F-futt—f-futt—* Blair winced. A Spandau bullet had clipped a piece of flesh from the tip of his chin. Great heaven! They had him cold. His dash glass splintered; a strip was blasted from his cowl rim.

TAKING a long chance on a crack-up in the zoom, the Red Eagle back-sticked, his power almost full on.

*Ue-ooo-e-e—* His Spad protested in a long whine as he jerked her back. But it was his only chance. He made it, but he knew that he had called for too much. The Hisso motor was threatening, with spiteful coughs. Up—up—Ted had outwitted the two Boches. For the moment he was safe—if the damnable, snorting Hisso would hang on. Then another if

presented itself, in the shape of four more German ships which flashed to view above him.

The Red Eagle emitted a low groan—a sound that was quickly stifled, however, as he took hold of himself. He pressed his throttle in to the last notch and toyed with the gas feed.

Quick thinker that he was, he realized that he held but one move in the box—to continue on up and threaten collision with the foremost diving German. To batter his way through that wall of ships above was his only way out, that—or death; and the Red Eagle had no desire to die. He had a newly formed Brood, his old B Flight of 44, which had been chosen for semi-independent work.

He had played with, fought with, nursed, and built up those members of the Brood—Lieutenant Sam Martin, the tall, blond deputy leader; Lieutenant Pete Monty Rider, the hard-egg scrapper from America's ranch country; Lieutenant Frank "Spud" Fallon, the Irish-Yank, whose wit was no less appreciated than his fighting quality, and his flair for fixing things mechanical; and Lieutenant Dave "Babe" Deakin, the big-framed ex-fullback of Yale, a good-natured fighting hellcat, whose piano playing and singing, though of secondary importance, brought a big hand from his intrepid pals.

They were all men of guts. Each wore a single decoration. Each packed an unswerving brand of loyalty and a fighting heart. These were the Red Eagle's Brood—big-chested, rollicking sky scrappers, who feared nothing, save the tongue of their leader.

But now, where was this Brood! The leader was on the spot. He was doomed to die, for there seemed no hope, though he fought to the last round.

"Reckon they're sittin' in at a poker school," snapped the Eagle skipper. "Blast! I'll bet a nickel they don't realize just how thin a paper screen separates me from hell. Oh, well! No use whining. If they knew, they'd be here like shells out of hell. *Tcha!*"

A bullet, slicing the sleeve of his leathers, cut his words off short. He rolled his bus up for the Immelman.

*Chut—chut—chut*—Boche lead was spitting into his fuselage, aft. Blair was forced to slip off, and, as he did, his steel-gray eyes dilated. Coming up, Spandaus flaming, were the two Albatri he had previously outstunted. He was between two murderous fires. The gates of life were closed. Death stared him in the eyes; it stared into the back of his neck. But it had not penetrated to his fighting heart.

With a snarl of rage, he pulled his throttle back a notch and gave his Spad the head. She tipped down—nose down, prop slicing sky dead into the very jaws of death; and then his Vickers chattered. By God! The deadly Yank eagle was topside. He was in his famous plummeting dive; and he dove straight, and long, heedless of the menace at his back; heedless of the threat below. If die he must, then, by the seventeen gods of war, he would take a Boche along to Valhalla with him.

It was thus the Brood found him. They had scoured the northern skies in the search. At last they slit a gap in a thin veiling of cloud strata. Led by Sam Martin, the four eagles screamed to the rescue.

Tired, bleeding, and almost out of ammo, the gutty fighting eagle chief spotted two slicing Spads. He glimpsed the rampant eagles on the fuselage. His boys had come! God! They'd have found him even if the trail took them to hell's most uttermost depths.

And now, with a snarl of rage, the Yank skipper backsticked. His was the fight now. His would be the victory. He had watched the German baron limp homeward. There was no chance that he could get the Boche chief. But—the Albatros flight—*Ya-aa!*

Ten Vickers guns crashed in an ear-splitting concerto of death. A Boche ship rolled over on her back, then leaped into empty space, aflame, doomed. The Red Eagle Brood had struck!

CAPTAIN BILL MOND, squadron surgeon, snatched a pipe stem from his mouth and gasped in amazement as he watched the Brood slice sky to the field some half hour later.

"What a gang!" he jerked. "Gee! Lookit those damn fools spin 'em, not a hundred yards up. Ugh!" a sharp grunt escaped him as each Spad kissed the tarmac as gracefully as a lighting bird.

"Takes a lotta guts to come in like that, sir," said a voice at the doctor's elbow.

He turned to face the grinning senior sergeant mechanic, whose eyes were directed to the row of taxiing Spads.

"A lotta guts, sir. But lookit them Spads. Like sieves. The Red Eagles have been into another fracas. By gawd! An' the heck of it is, they're booked through for another show—something more hellish—" The sergeant was talking, scarcely conscious now that the surgeon was standing listening to him.

"What's that, Duffy?" jerked the medical officer. "You mean that order to raid the Boche staffel of death has been confirmed, and the Eagles have been chosen?"

The sergeant nodded, biting hard at his nether lip.

"Yep. That's it, sir. I got orders to overhaul the Spads as soon as they landed, load 'em with Cooper bombs an'—gosh! This Eagle flight don't get no breaks at all. It's a lousy deal, sir—a lousy—"

But the surgeon had strode off to greet the lounging form of Ted Blair, who was headed for the medical hut.

"Ted!"

"Hello, doc. Got a few of the barnacles knocked off me," grinned the Red Eagle. "Little bit sore, but don't look so all fired glum, brother. Shucks! They're only grazes an' listen, we took Baron von Blentz's outfit for a ride. Seven red something happened? C.O. fired? You Albatri! Say, what's the idea, doc? Has don't mean it's come! They haven't railroaded Bruce Grove out of—"

"No, Ted," interrupted the surgeon squeezing one of his buddy's shoulders. "Not that, though they're riding the major hard. It's something—something that concerns you, and your gang. The Staffel of Death, Ted. You're to make the raid."

Ted Blair had screwed up his smarting face. His steel-gray eyes were slitted almost shut. He feared neither man nor devil, but the surgeon's news brought a stab of something like misgiving to his hard, tough mind. For months this German staffel had been like a black cloud hovering over the Allied air service.

It was at this secret staffel, this sinister tarmac, screened beyond the woods of hell—or to give it its former French name, Bois le Enfer—that the greatest of all arch-fiends took flight to scourge the battle skies with the very latest in scientific battle equipment.

Allied Intelligence had lost many a good operator in an effort to pierce the secret of the hidden drome. At last, at the cost of their most famous major, news had come back by carrier pigeon. The gallant spy's last act had been to attach a plan to the leg of the pigeon, before a dozen bullets had riddled his body.

"H'mmm—" The Red Eagle broke the silence. "Is this official, doc?" he grunted.

"I reckon so, Ted. Sergeant Duffy has orders to equip your machines with Coopers, and to make an immediate overhaul. But you'd better not say anything until the major informs you officially. Now I know just why he's looked so damn glum since I got back from brigade hospital. He feels it, Ted. By God! They've been trying to railroad him for some time, and now they present this assignment as his last hope. Ted, were it not for Bruce Grove's sake, I'd be damned upset at you getting this job. As it is, I—uh, well, blast it, I wish you weren't going."

Captain Mond blew his nose vigorously and coughed to hide the show of emotion in his voice. He liked no man better than he liked this hard-hitting Red Eagle, save perhaps Major Bruce Grove, the veteran commander of 44 squadron, whose command now hung in the balance at Wing.

Major Grove had taken the rap for a couple of bad moves executed by a former flight. To save a bunch of young pilots, he had shouldered the blame for a very serious offense. Wing was on his neck, and he was beginning to crumple under the pressure.

A fierce light burned in the Red Eagle's eyes. As the doctor darted here and there for his medical supplies, the intrepid sky skipper's mind was keenly active. He too had formed the deepest regard for his chief. By God! They mustn't be allowed to wolf Bruce Grove from command of 44.

"I'd like to blow them all to hell if they as much as—"

"What's that, Ted?" jerked the surgeon, drawing up.

"Oh, nothin', doc. I was just sayin' my prayers," grinned the flight leader. "Got a habit of sayin' 'em when ever any doc or dentist advances with his arms full of lances an' death gadgets."

"H'mm, I see. Well hold your face over here. Lord! What a map you're getting. Twenty-five years of age an' by gosh you've got more wrinkles than an old guy of ninety."

The surgeon only half breathed the last few words. The wrinkles in the Red Eagle's handsome face were scars—battle scars.

At a rap on the door, the doctor yelled a crisp "come in." The door swung wide to admit Major Bruce Grove. He walked with his head erect, but he had the appearance of a man who had suddenly aged. His striking face was drawn, almost haggard.

"Well, another couple of furrows plowed in that map, Ted?" he jerked. "Good God, man! What d'you do—lean out overside and offer it as a target?"

"Yeah, I guess so, major. But I have got room for a few more Boche ten strikes yet. Gee! What's that, doc—turpentine?"

"I'd like to see you in my office when the plastic surgery is finished, Ted," said the major. "There's an order in; rather important. I—blast it, I'd as soon be shot dead, I think, as have to give it to you, but—see me, huh?"

"No time like the present, major," grinned the Eagle chief. "Better spring it here. I might pass out, an' this would be a damn good place to take the drops—right

in the doctor's arms. It isn't by any chance that bit of a ride over to the staffel of—"

"Blair!" Major Bruce almost hurled himself forward. "You've heard, and you take it as lightly as all that? Good God! Is there no fibre in that hard carcass of yours which can register the element fear? Yes, it is the Staffel of Death, and you're to take off one hour before dawn. Damn it, Blair—Ted, you have the right to refuse this assignment. Do so, if you like. It won't hurt me a bit. Say the word and I'll wire through to Wing at once."

"Wire through to Wing and tell 'em to think up something real hot, chief," snapped the skipper, with characteristic grin. "Tell 'em to have a real job ready by about noon tomorrow. Hell! Everybody's been scared stiff by this Death Staffel yarn. Well, here's where we clean tip. I'll see you in half an hour, sir, at your office."

The major stared long into the freckled, battered face of his first flight leader. He stared until a light film of mist blotted out his vision. Then, with a grunt, he swung on his heel and stamped out of the hut.

"You should have been a stage actor, Ted," observed the surgeon, patting a piece of adhesive tape into place. "By God! You were swell, making light of that assignment, when I know it's got you. You realize its dangers, its traps, and its invitations to hell. But, you grin it off, blast you—you'd grin an hour after you were dead. It was a grand show, but—I believe he saw through it. Tell me, aren't you a little scared?"

"Scared! Great Caesar, no!" The Red Eagle shot forward in his chair. His hands rolled up into knotted fists, hard balls of bone and muscle. "That is, not for myself, doc. I'm never really scared, while I've a tune in the prop and a slug in the Vickers. But I'm often scared for my—for the boys. They're the best pals I ever had. I'm always scared one of 'em might—get—his."

IT LACKED a full hour to dawn! But the five Spads of the Red Eagle's Brood were already winging eastward like five lances slicing the murky sky.

The ceiling was low, but Ted Blair could see that it would improve. Their loads were heavy and the Spads droned along at less than maximum speed. Gas tanks were filled to capacity, and due to the mechanical yen of Lieutenant Spud Fallon, auxiliary tanks were rigged and piped to the main tanks. The Yank eagles needed this extra gas load, though it slowed them considerably. It was Blair's intention to take full advantage of the half light and streak well into German territory, coming in on the Death staffel from the east.

The Red Eagle had planned his move well. He knew that it was dangerous to carry an added load of gas, but Spud had so arranged the auxiliary tanks that they could be instantly detached by the jerking of a toggle trip.

Though his campaign was well-planned, Ted Blair's mind was not relieved of the tremendous responsibility which was his. He was alive to the possibilities. He was keenly alert, his head weaving from side to side like that of a hungry python. No mark or spot in the sky main passed his notice, and like a ferreting destroyer at sea, at the slightest suspicious mark he gunned his Hisso and roared ahead of his buddies. He climbed, circled, dived, hunted, like a parent eagle about his Brood.

The eastern skies were clearing. True dawn was breaking beyond the enemy horizon. Blair signaled to his pals to climb. They must try to force the ceiling. Twelve thousand feet of altitude was necessary, but the Spads groaned under their loads.

The *Bois le Enfer* was in sight, a dense patch of green timber which lay like a black smudge on the flat plain below. The Red Eagle's heart commenced to hammer hard. He banked left and swung a point to the north. He must get around this spot.

The sudden crackle of Vickers guns brought the Eagle's head up with a jerk. His attention had been focused on the woods below. Now a Spad shape shot across his bows. Sam Martin, the deputy, had fired the warning burst. He was pointing up, his doubled fist jerking madly.

Ted Blair gasped. A film of greenish-blue vapor was settling on them, a veritable sheet of poisonous substance, which, heavier than air, came down from some hellish trap above—perhaps in the vast nothingness of the stratosphere. Instantly the Eagle waved a signal. His prop went down. Each of his pilots nosed down, and the Red Eagle's flight seared sky like a wedge of monster bird killers.

But in a flash Blair realized that he had fallen into a devilish trap set by the meister of the Staffel of Death. This cunning scientist depended a lot on his science for the defense of his secret mystery tarmac. As the Eagle Brood shot through space, two grim, cigarlike shapes dipped down above them—two silent dirigibles which had hovered above airplane ceiling.

A sudden burst of bright blue flame, almost directly beneath the Red Eagle's plane, brought his stick back with a jerk. Great God! This was no ordinary archie burst, no crash of shrapnel burst.

A series of flashes split the half-dull skies of dawn—blue, brilliantly blue. They were hounding the Spads, forcing them to stunt, when they were too heavily loaded for such forced maneuvers.

Ted Blair's mind had been tuned for all possibilities. He had been keenly alert, but the master mind of the great Berlin scientist had outwitted him. His flight was on the spot. But the fighting Yank in the Red Eagle surged to the top. So far, there had been no physical damage done. He signaled to his boys to drain the auxiliary gas tanks and let go the empty cans. They must be ready to fight, to maneuver, as they had never worked before.

With a jerk on a toggle trip, Blair's empty cans hurtled through space. Instantly his lower jaw dropped as a bright flame shot from one of the auxiliary tanks. He grasped the meaning at once—electrical power was at work. Some strong radio ray was being exploited.

In spite of his iron nerve, the Red Eagle shuddered. At any moment, it was probable that contact would be made between this hellish ray, and one of his ships—perhaps his own.

He suddenly shot up his head. A sharp hiss escaped him as he glimpsed the menacing shapes of the grim blimps above. He caught the sparking and fusing of electrical apparatus. It brought a cold sweat out on his body, but parched his lips and throat.

For the moment the famous Yank was at a loss for the next move. By all the rights of logic, he had no move. He was in a tight jam for below lay the strongly defended Staffel of Death. He had glimpsed a row of super-Fokkers streak out of their screened hangars, to stand revved on their chocks. Above hovered the ships of the devil, sparking, fusing, shooting their beams of death at the darting Spads.

Mind in a chaos of swirling thought, the Yank skipper suddenly hit on his plan. His mission had been to strafe this dread staffel below. Death he had expected. It occurred to him, in a flash that the only hope left for neutralizing the power of the electrical menace above was in attack on the drome below. The closer he got in on the Staffel of Death, the less likelihood there was of further attack from above.

It was sound logic, this, for it was hardly likely that the dirigibles of death would risk wiping out their own special planes below on the tarmac, or of firing the hangars.

The Red Eagle drew his tongue across his lips and snarled a bitter oath. As he prepared for the dive, the Red Eagle's mind suddenly snapped at a stray thought.

"I'm beginning to wake up," he breathed. "Beginning to see a little light on a lot of things. There was 'Slim' Donovan's crash over Monchy. British ground guys claimed he was hit by archie. One pilot half bugs, swore there was no archie fire. Donovan's Nieuport was smacked by a blue flash of flame which came from nowhere. God! It's plain now that these devil's blimps were working in that area. I can see why all the reconnaissance ships' wireless sets have been washing out. They haven't been able to maintain proper communication for weeks.

Ted Blair had it. The root of all this, and other trouble was centered in this hellish Staffel of Death, the tarmac of Berlin's greatest scientists and flyers.

A green flare spurted from the Red Eagle's pistol. It was the signal to dive. He was going to beard the Prussian science meisters in the den. It was a gutty gesture, a characteristic demonstration of the lighting heart of this famous American flight leader and his indomitable Brood.

But just as his Spad's nose dipped for the earthward plunge, Ted Blair's brows jerked up. A low cry escaped him. Off his starboard flank, hurtling down in a maze of blue flame, was Lieutenant Babe Deakin's Spad. By the great gods of war! The electrical wizards in the Blimps above had got contact with Deakin's engine area.

Ted blasted a burst from his Vickers. He must keep his other boys head on for the drome. He signaled them to carry on. Then, like a chip from the corner of some vagrant sun, he seared the sky in one of his famous power dives. He wanted to be in close to Deakin—Deakin, the great big ex-footballer, who furnished all the entertainment for the Brood and their pals, in off time.

As his Spad bugled through space, Blair breathed a sigh of gratification to find that his young eagle pal was apparently O.K. Babe was struggling with the controls, fighting the doomed ship to some form of control.

The Red Eagle swooped down, to come back in a hard zoom above the hurtling Spad. He circled, with throttle almost full in, like a racer ship taking a curve in the speedway. Babe's stick came back and the crippled ship rolled herself up in a ball, to settle, nose heavy on a level belly.

Instantly the Red Eagle signaled. He conveyed a message to Babe, which sent the youngster's fingers to the toggle trips. He had almost forgotten his bomb load. Land he must. It might have been fatal to have gone down with his bombs aboard.

Next, Blair pointed to the dense woods off to the right of the hidden drome. Deakin waved a balled fist in reply. He could see what Ted wanted, and was grateful. Now he commenced to ess his ship down. The stick was dead. That fusing beam had seared engine connection. His prop was lifeless; but, with the spirit of the Red Eagle pounding his mind, he was determined to make a bid for his life.

THE Eagle chief dashed a film from before his eyes, half-rolled off a leaping, crackling demon which leaped out of the sky to contact on his Spad metal; then he heeled over and went screaming down to join his pals in the kill.

*Karrumph! Kararash*—The sky rocked. Monty Rider, and Frank Fallon were the two first to unload their Coopers; and their aim was dead on. A bomb supply depot and magazine blasted up to the sky with a deafening, rending crash. A hangar split apart in a mad fantasy of flame.

Men darted this way and that, pilots, gutty Prussian hellcats, rushing to their ready Fokkers—but the Red Eagle was in on them. He had not pulled out his throttle until but a few meters above ground. He had his bomb load intact, yet; but he unleashed his Vickers devils.

Men fell, sprawled, pitched, or flopped. A Fokker burst into flame.

ONE of the Red Eagle's pals and pilots had gone down. The chief of the famous Brood was in his best fighting form. The welfare of his friend and squadron commander hung in the balance. There were a number of compelling reasons why the very last spark of his fighting guts should have been fanned to flame.

Not least of all was the fact that he and his Brood were between two fires—two devil traps, and it was up to him to either cut a gap out, or to go down to death fighting with all the force of his iron-hard soul and amazing ability.

But with the drome below partly at his mercy, Ted Blair suddenly was conscious of a newer threat from above. The dirigibles had abandoned the exploitation of poison gases and electricity. They had converted themselves into battle ships, whose guns were physical demons of hell. They came down cutting a wide swath in the sky—down with guns belching flame from central gondolas.

Like a streak of flame himself, the Red Eagle cracked a flare signal across the bows of his deputy's

streaking Spad. It was the signal to Sam Martin to carry on. Blair was going to change his plans.

He felt it incumbent upon himself to ward off the attack from above; and, like the gutty eagle he was, the parent of the Brood, he pressed his throttle home to the last notch and touched down on his stick. His bombs must go. He picked out his target—a long stone building. God! Was this the plant, from which all the fiendish devices and schemes of the scientist meisters emanated?

Snarling, half sobbing through his clenched teeth, the Red Eagle ripped down—down—A blast of fire from below streaked up to meet him—flaming onions. Their burst was wide by inches only. Blair's heart almost stopped beating. Great God! He was staring into the very gaping jaws of death!

Now! His fingers jerked on the trips. As he pulled the bomb release toggles, he was conscious of a sinister whistling sound at his back. He shot a glance to his dash mirror. God! A hellish shape was diving at him, a dark, grublike shape which seemed like a weird monster—

But until his bomb aim was dead certain, until he was set for the next move, the Red Eagle continued on his former tack. When death seemed so close, so certain of its power, the Yank was philosophical enough to oust panic from his mind.

"You can only die once," he assured himself. "Hang on—hang on." It was this philosophy which saved his every vestige of battle guts.

He shook as his plane rocked above a quaking, thunderous upheaval of rock, glass, equipment, gas, and human bodies. One of his bombs had crashed a sky light in the roof of the devil plant below. Secondary explosions were no less in their thunder as gases and other fiendish combustibles caught fire, to reverberate long through this isolated valley.

Blair's heart smacked hard against his ribs. It was time to zoom. But the blimp devil above was close, its Spandaus now raking the eagle Spad fore and aft.

A bullet slit the leather of the Yank's shoulder. He felt a searing, stinging pain in the muscle of his left arm. Black flashes sought to blot off his vision, but he fought them off.

Suddenly he glimpsed a move below, beyond the woods. It was a form darting from the side of a burning Spad. Babe Deakin had made a landing. God! This brought a thrill of ecstasy to the Red Eagle's mind. It revived him. He shot a glance to his dash, and gasped.

The front of the gondola below the Blimp's belly had suddenly dropped. Two men were running toward a machine, and in a flash Ted Blair realized that their intention was to cut him down with electricity.

His hand quickly touched gas feed, throttle, stick, and other gadgets. Then his stick went forward. He was apparently diving for earth. The Spandaus fire at his back had ceased. Machine guns had been replaced by this infernal machine which had sent Deakin down.

*"Ya-ah!"*

Ripping the defiant cry through his cracked lips, the Yank skipper suddenly backsticked. The red eagles on his fuselage seemed to come alive. As the Spad soared up in a mad zoom, the eagle symbols seemed to stand on their tails, talons bared, wings ready to strike, beaks agape.

*Br-r-rpp—Tat—tat—Prprrrp—* A grin split Blair's face. He had executed an extraordinary Immelmann, half rolling on the back of the big blimp. His fire was sure, deadly. Tracer slit space, smoking devils, which putt—putted through the dirigible's thin, aluminum hide.

The Red Eagle had got his favorite battle position. He had risked his life to get it; and, when he got it, he sat tight, his guns wide open, until his victim burst into flame or broke apart.

A horrible cough of flame marked the blimp's end. Two of her crew screamed and flung themselves overside. The Red Eagle's eyes closed. He clenched his teeth hard. Those jumpers were likely German flight sergeants. It was possible that they had families at home. God! The demons of war had no heart.

Snapping back to the alert, the skipper of the eagles swirled his bus around in a vertical bank. His three pilots in the fight were tearing the tarmac apart with savage bursts of Vickers fire—zooming up, to come swooping down again like flaming arrows of death.

"Staffel of Death was a hoodoo name for this spot," breathed the skipper with a touch of irony, as he dived on the shattered, smoldering wreckage below.

But he wished he had had more bombs. Two hangars still remained untouched, and now, gutty mechanics were busy wheeling out a trim two-seater Fokker.

An idea struck the Red Eagle. He signaled to his deputy and banked around, his nose to the east. There wasn't a second to lose, if he was to carry out the venturesome plan which had flashed to his mind.

Backed against a huge elm, automatic drawn, stood Babe Deakin. Blood streamed from the downed eagle's

face. He was at bay, a snarl on his lips, ready to blast it out with a party of Boche searchers who crowded toward him. Ted Blair was going to the rescue.

He shot a glance back over his shoulder. The second blimp was droning eastward at a height of about eleven thousand feet. She had turned out of the fight for some sinister purpose.

"Bet a dime she's going for assistance" breathed the Yank skipper. "She'll pick up a flight of fast Boche pursuits by wireless. God! I must get Babe out of the jam before they—"

He gasped. Deakin's automatic was spurting flame. The Red Eagle saw. His teeth gritted hard, he shoved forward on the stick. Like a whining devil, he dived, his Vickers blasting a gap ahead of the prop.

*Br-r-rp—Prpr-r-r-r—rat-tat-tat!*

The Spad's tires kissed the turf. Like an end-swapping outlaw bronc, the eagle ship whirled around, and as he taxied toward his sagging buddy, Blair continued to fire. He brought his Spad to a halt, one of her wheels chocked hard on the body of a fallen *feldwebel*. Quickly, he unbuckled his belt and leaped overside to catch the sagging frame of Babe Deakin in his powerful arms.

"BETTER, Deak?" The Red Eagle was helping his big pilot to his feet.

"Feel that you could hit the sky, brother?"

"Sure—skipper." Deakin shook his huge frame and shot a swift glance about him. "Gosh! We're down. I remember now. Must have passed out of the scenery for a while huh? Yep. I'm O. K., Ted. Head's buzzin' a bit, but it'll clear when I get topside, but—how!"

It suddenly occurred to Deakin that his own plane was washed out. There was only one Spad down, and two big husky Yanks needing transportation.

"Ted, what's on your mind?" he gasped, wiping a clot of matted blood from his face.

"Put a clip in your gun and let me have it," snapped the skipper. "Hustle, then climb aboard. I'll head the Spad up wind for a take-off."

"But skipper—you don't mean. By God, sir, I won't take it. Not by a damn sight. You—"

"You'll do as you're told, Deak. Quick. I want your gun. Get aboard. It's our one hope of escape. You see that Fokker two-seater? Well, I've an idea. That crew is short handed. Don't you see that the big chief of this Death Staffel is going to take the sky? Our boys are engaged with those three single seaters. Hell! Come alive, Deak. I want protection. I want you skyside.

Martin and the others won't know who's in the rear pit of that Fokker. I—"

"Good God, Ted. Not that, skipper. You'd never make it. Look! There's a big officer climbing aboard. Ted—"

But the Red Eagle's patience was exhausted. He admired his buddy for his loyalty, but his plan was the only way out. He swung the Spad around into wind, and beckoned to Deakin.

"Aboard. She's warm. Hustle!"

Reluctantly, Deakin pulled himself into the pit. He reached out a hand, which Blair grasped eagerly. Deep in his heart, the gutty skipper knew that the odds would be against him as he rushed the Fokker; but he would be sure that his buddies had a fighting chance. If this were to be his last gesture, then he could go out knowing that he had not sacrificed a single member of his Brood.

The Hisso coughed wide open. Blair flattened and kicked the human chock from in front of the Spad's right wheel. The trim eagle ship bounded forward, and like a flash the skipper was on his feet. With two handfuls of guns, he bent forward and trotted toward the battered tarmac. Few men were left to the crew of the Staffel of Death.

But one plane remained below, one plane capable of flight. This was the two-seater, and already a flight sergeant was buckling on his helmet. It was he would take the controls at the rear seat, while the great meister scientist would direct from the front.

There was a grim smile on the Baron von Liedstrat's face as he settled himself in a crouch. He had given final instructions to the flight sergeant. True, he would sooner have had a tested *Leutnant* pilot at the controls, but Sergeant Stultz was good. Now the baron's fingers spun the dial on a black instrument case attached to the cowl. His large teeth gleamed.

"This is your end, Red Eagle swine," he grunted, thickly. "The end of—"

Two automatics burst wide open. Ted Blair was trotting forward, firing into the bodies of two mechanics who stood by the wing-tips. The right foot of sergeant Stultz was in the stirrup, when a slug ripped through his leathers. He yelled to his chief, the baron, as his hand leaped for his Luger.

A rifle cracked. One of Blair's automatics shot from his fingers. It was his left hand which was grazed. Snarling an oath, he wheeled and supped a shot into a trotting guard. The man pitched to his face. Now Blair darted around a wrecked Fokker, coming out firing on the other side.

Stultz clutched at his chest. His Luger had exploded, but the bullet sang out into empty space, as the sergeant crumpled.

Now the German meister swung about in his seat. He met his arch-opponent face to face. The American Eagle faced the Prussian tiger. Luger against Yank Colt.

The Luger spat, but the baron had missed. He raised himself in the pit, his gun arm sweeping down in a long arc, to come to a stop as a burst of flame ripped through its muzzle. Ted Blair was slower; that is, he was seemingly slower on the draw. But the Red Eagle was short of ammo. He must be sure of his shots. Only two remained.

A Luger slug pulled blood from his right forearm. Like a streak, the Colt came up. Von Liedstrat's small eyes glinted. He was taking careful aim. Suddenly the Eagle leaped to one side. Instantly his gun cracked. With a howl of pain, the Boche meister dropped his pistol and clutched at a battered right hand.

Ted Blair covered a trembling youngster at the chock chains. He waved to the chocks. The greaseball nodded. He understood.

Aboard, Blair faced the irate scientist chief, who cursed and raved like a madman. The Yank leaned forward, threateningly, the muzzle of his gun no more than a foot from the purple face.

"You speak English, I know damn well you must," snarled the Yank. "Disconnect that box of tricks forward there, then set yourself down comfortably. Move—or I'll slug you cold. I'm not in any mood to play with you."

With a deep snarl, the Boche chief swung to face the front.

"Ach!"

There were tears in the baron's eyes, and his voice was cracked as he jerked out connecting leads and tossed them overside. One of his greatest inventions was doomed. A lifetime of the study of the science of warfare had gone up in smoke. Crushed, the tall old frame settled in a slumped heap in the forward pit.

TED BLAIR shot a glance about him and upward. His buddies were engaged in a fierce mill.

Suddenly a Fokker heeled over, four Vickers belching flame and lead into her. Now the eagles had the odds in their favor. They—but Blair suddenly gasped. He was staring to the east, where, before the blazing sun there came a cigarlike shape. The Blimp! It led in a flight of fast Albatri.

Blair opened the Mercedes wide. He waved to the

man at the chocks. His work was done; now, he must get home—home with the biggest prize of the war.

But, even with the thought of conquest in mind, with the von in the bag, Ted Blair never ceased his vigilance for a split second. Though flesh wounds stabbed him, threatening to weaken him, he fought hard to retain his every ounce of alertness and craft.

As he pulled up into the blue, the Red Eagle grinned at a Spad that swooped down over him. Babe Deakin had made it. Blair signaled, calling attention to the approaching Boche flight. Deakin struck hard for the ceiling. He must warn his buddies. Then, talons bared, the young eagles of the Brood would sit back on the tail of their chief—a screaming, tearing flight, meeting the cream of the German air service with Vickers aflame.

THE RED EAGLE forced his big Mercedes engine for her every ounce of power. He took stock of his captured plane; filled with admiration at her make-up. Never before had a two-seater Fokker been seen. She was equipped with the very latest equipment—two lean Spandaus aft, and twin Spandaus forward. Her body was of metal and all streamlined to perfection.

There was a sudden movement forward. Like a flash, the big German baron flung himself around. A spare control stick swished through space, and Blair, though he shot his head to one side with the speed of a rattler, could not dodge, fully, the blow which scraped the right side of his head and face.

Liedstrat's arm was raised again. But, through the blinding fog which threatened to put the Yank out, he saw the mad features of his enemy in the front cockpit. It was the face of a deadly killer, a maniac now, which leered at him.

*Cr-ack!* By a split second, the Red Eagle had beaten the killer. The Colt socked in hard across the other's temple. Face distorted, the German science meister slumped backward to hang sagging on the belting.

For a moment, Ted Blair was forced to fight hard to ward off the claiming mantle of unconsciousness. He shook his broad shoulders. Now he shoved the super Fokker into a dive. His head was overside. He wanted the slap of the slipstream in his face. But it was the mad clatter of crackling Spandaus which finally pulled him out of the fog.

Bullets were slicing past his head. He jerked himself erect, a snarl on his lips. A red devil Albatros had broken through the protective wall of Spads. This ship must have gotten a signal from the Boche drome.

Alert, with his reserve of guts sizzling on the surface, the Red Eagle came around for battle. By the gods! If this single-seater wanted a run for her money, she'd get it. Ted Blair was going into action.

He dived, his hand trembling on the stick. How would this heavy ship respond to the zoom! How would she take herself up into the Immelmann!

These questions were answered a second later, as the Eagle chief backsticked hard. The sudden jolt brought the limp body of the baron down hard in his seat. Now there was no danger of his slipping out. Blair came up. He struck up as though to Immelmann, but in a flash winged over in a loop. His quick timing had saved his life, for the Albatros pilot had his hand on the stick trigger, ready for the strike, anticipating an Immelman.

Blair double-looped. Hell! His Fokker maneuvered with a grace that completely outclassed his own single-seater Spad. And now, his ring-sights caught and held a red flash.

*Pr-r-rpp—rat-tat—* Blair knew, instinctively, that his burst had registered. But he was at the peak of his fighting trim, nerve fibers throbbing, urging.

Snarling defiantly, he zoomed, then came over under the belly of the wabbling Albatros. As he slashed sky upward again, the rear Spandaus crashed—a twin duo of certain death. A burst of flame! A pair of arms flung out overside. The Red Eagle's talons had again taken toll.

The strain on Blair's frame and mind had been tremendous. As he squared his ship about, he shot a glance over his shoulder. His boys were still ripping sheets of fire at attacking Boches. Blair grinned. He knew that he could depend on his Brood now. He must get his prize capture home.

As he neared his lines, scarcely seeing fully, through the fog before his vision, Blair was suddenly startled by a new battle song, the crash of Vickers guns. A flight of Camels was bearing down on him from above. God! Of course they took him for a Boche.

Bullets were sleeting down, like hail from a broken summer cloud. Blair gasped. God! This was a terrible way to go out!

Suddenly, out of the blue, in almost full power, a Spad streaked down. Babe Deakin!

As he flattened out, he waved to his chief then whirled in his seat to pour a torrent of imprecations into the face of the astonished Camel leader—imprecations which, of course, the British captain never heard. Now Babe pointed aft. He was calling

attention to the gutty trio of eagles who fought off the pursuing Albatri. The Britisher waved. He gunned his engine all out, and signaled to his flight. By God! A mistake had been made, but they would soon square themselves.

THE Fokker's tires bumped hard into the turf of 44's tarmac. Pilots and mechanics dashed across the field, at their head, Major Bruce Grove.

"Ted—Good God! It's you. I—what in hell! You mean to say this—this is a German colonel. You—"

"Little present from the Eagle's Brood major," Blair replied. "His head's sort of cracked up, but I reckon he'll pull round enough to cuss you all to—all to—hell! I—uh, here comes the—God!"

Captain Bill Mond, the surgeon, pushed his way through the throng. He caught the sagging form in his arms. But a thin smile played with his mouth. You couldn't kill this eagle skipper, unless you blew him clean apart with dynamite.

Signing to a medical sergeant, the doctor lifted Blair's body down to the turf.

"There, major," he breathed, "is a damn good reason why 44 is going to be the most popular and most dreaded squadron in France. Ted's the main reason; here comes the rest of it."

Four tumbling Spads hurtled down to the drome. The Brood of the Red Eagle had come home with no more gas in their tanks than would taxi them to the hangars.

A litter carried Blair to the hospital hut. Waving aside congratulations, four stern-faced pilots followed the litter.

Lieutenants Sam Martin, Monty Rider, Spud Fallon, and Babe Deakin, blood-matted, battle weary—the Eagle's Brood. Soon they would take the sky again. They were convinced now, more than ever, of their chief's sheer guts and ability. They had set a mark to shoot at. They were ready, at any time, to shoot.