

SQUADRON OF THE SNOWS



*Somewhere
in the ice-covered
heights of the Alps that
deadly Snow Squadron had its
lair—and none could challenge
their invisible menace, until a yelling,
fighting Indian had a yen to paint the
town red.*

by **ALLAN R. BOSWORTH**

THE DAWN CAME UP like thunder over the Italian army post west of Treviso. High-powered ships rocketed through the sky far above. Deadly steel hurtled down, bit into the dust and flung it high. A frantic siren screamed belated warning. Anti-aircraft guns began to bark like deep-throated watchdogs aroused from slumber.

Part of a barracks went in a rending crash of timber, sending a shower of splinters through the long, low building. Flame licked out of the twisted ruin and began to spread. Excited, voluble men scurried in all directions.

Bart Mason, American pilot attached to the British squadron which had based at the field the day before, jerked upright in his bunk and sat tense. Black, straight hair tumbled over his eyes and color flared over the high cheekbones that told of his Indian blood. But the grin that split his face was pure Yank, inspired by the prospect of action. Air raid—just when he was thinking what a rotten deal was his, being shelved on the Italian Front!

Boom! Bart ducked instinctively as the bomb roared outside. The glass blew out of the window near his bunk in a tinkling shower. Gravel pelted on the floor,

and the acrid fumes of high explosive swirled in. There was hell to pay.

Bart glanced across the aisle. Jerry Trowbridge, beefy and phlegmatic flight leader, was yawning as he stepped from his bunk, pulling on his boots leisurely. Trowbridge had sixteen months on the Western Front; duty in Italy was a holiday.

"Beastly inconsiderate of the Boche!" he told Bart. "They might have let us sleep in, you know!"

Bart chuckled, peering through the shattered window. Mechanics were scattering the squadron's new, two-place Spads. One hangar was afire. It was time to get into the air.

"Let's go!" the Yank urged. "See you on the field!"

He dashed forth and was nearly knocked off his feet by the concussion of another bomb on the tarmac. Archie was rumbling in the heavens, and the American turned to look aloft. He stared in astonishment.

The Mercedes could be heard roaring overhead. Must be somewhere higher than that layer of white clouds. Lord, no! Those clouds were cirrus, and must be at least five miles up. And there wasn't the sign of a crate this side of them!

Bart forgot his danger as he gawked skyward. He saw archie puffs mushroom and spread, blending slowly against the higher vapor. He heard half a dozen engines in concert, but he saw no planes.

"Ye'll only put out your eyes, Yank!" a burring voice said at his shoulder. Bart whirled to see Scotty MacLeod, one of the British pilots. "It's Paul Katz and his Squadron of the Snows, and ye cannot see 'em against yon clouds. Look, there goes one of the white devils!"

Bart Mason looked lower, where Scotty pointed. A plane was silhouetted against the mists that wreathed the lower outline of the rugged Alps, a plane that was pure, glistening white. The Squadron of the Snows!

He drew a sharp breath. Who hadn't heard of the Katz outfit, that mysterious Austro-German flock that swooped out of the eternal whiteness of the Alps to bomb Italian towns and strafe troops? A thrill zoomed along Bart Mason's stiff spine. So, they were up against a real outfit! There was no doubt about action now.

HISSOS were breaking into stuttering songs. Another and another, clattering with deepening roar as they warmed. Down the field dirt spouted in an ugly fountain, while running men flung themselves flat. Jerry Trowbridge came nonchalantly from the shattered barracks, pulling on his helmet, Major

Wilkins, pompous and heavy of jaw, appeared to shout orders that were drowned in the din.

"Beg pardon, sir, but our crate is ready!" announced a Cockney voice at Bart's elbow. It was Pinckney, the little observer who always looked at Mason as though he expected to see war paint and feathers and was uneasy about his own scalp. Pinckney had read stories of the Wild West, and held the tall American with his quarter Indian blood in awe.

"This wye, sir!" he elaborated, pointing to the left rim of the tarmac. Bart clapped him on the back and started for the crate.

"Cheerio, Yank!" Trowbridge called. "See you upstairs!"

The squadron leader strode briskly to his own ship, laziness vanished. Bart Mason and Pinckney reached their two-seater and climbed in while mechanics stood by. Across the field the cadaverous Scotty MacLeod was boarding his own bus. There was no semblance of formation, nor could there be until the ships were in the air. Every man for himself; every man after the Huns.

Bart gunned the Hissos and found it responsive. He saw Trowbridge bumping down the field, his observer looking to the flexible gun. He waved the mechanics to pull the chocks.

Another roaring second, and his own ship shot forward, clearing a shell hole by scant margin, getting her tail up with increased speed as Bart swung her down the runway. He backsticked, and she climbed cleanly, clearing the barracks that rimmed the field. He kicked her around as soon as he dared and pointed her nose skyward where those mysterious white ships were riding, high and handsome.

Treviso, to the east, shot into his line of vision, then Venice, sixteen miles away. Bart swung the city around his right wing-tip, climbing in spirals. Eight new Spads were in the air now, roaring their challenge to the invaders. The archie fell silent with a parting growl; a last bomb made shambles of a supply shed.

Bart strained his eyes above. Across a single blue rift in the cloud formation he saw white wings streaking. The Squadron of the Snows was still there, waiting until the defenders' ships had climbed out of the range of ground guns. Then they would swoop for a last attack, strike, and run for their mysterious mountain lair that no Allied airman had been able to find.

"You're due for a surprise to-day!" the Yankee muttered. "Until yesterday there wasn't a ship here that was fast enough to smell your exhaust!"

The Spads swept upward in a steady climb, converging behind Trowbridge, engines gunned to the full. Now and then their pilots saw the white Albatrosses. There was not a marking on their wings or fuselages.

Bart Mason humped low over his Stick, ducking behind his cowling to escape the wintry blast hurled by the flashing prop. Mount Grappa's majestic peak loomed. Beyond it were the Dolomite Alps, slashed by deep and narrow passes and clothed in pines and snow. A wind shrieked down out of the defiles and set the sky ships lurching.

Frost formed on Bart's goggles. He dashed it away and turned to look at Pinckney, sitting hunched like a frozen mummy in the after cockpit. The little Englishman grinned; then the smile faded as suddenly as it had appeared and Pinckney jerked a gloved hand up to stab the air.

MASON whirled, the staccato of Spandau fire bursting on his ears. The Snow Squadron was diving behind flaming guns—six, eight, ten of them! And with the attack came a swirl of white flakes out of the heavens, as if Death were blowing his chill breath on the scene.

The snow hung a dim curtain over the attacking squadron, through which guns spat red and the dun tracer smoke streaked. Spads sideslipped and zoomed; Vickers burst into angry, metallic songs of defiance. Engines roared a chant of battle on the sky-high warpath.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat! Like the tomtoms Bart Mason's tribal ancestors had beaten around lonely campfires, they speeded up to modern tempo. He turned his face in profile to Pinckney for an instant, and the little Cockney shuddered. There was something of the eagle poised to strike in Mason's rugged features as he flipped the ship into a wingover and kicked it around to meet the attacking Albatross.

Bart jerked his Bowden wire, and the fixed gun on the upper wing spat tracer into the white curtain. It fell short by inches as the Albatross veered and banked tightly. The American bored in viciously, taking the offensive. A second white crate appeared on his tail, dotting the Spad's wings with lead.

Pinckney jerked the flexible gun around and set flame leaping from its ugly snout. There was a fighting snarl on the little Cockney's face that was not good to see. Bart Mason shot one swift glance to make sure his observer was all right, then whirled his gaze ahead,

watching the snaking path of the tracer from the fixed gun.

He narrowed his eyes at the Albatross. All white. Even the pilot's helmet and his gloves glistened like the snows for which the squadron was named. His coat was white, and only his reddened face, whipped by the wintry blast, contrasted the protective color scheme.

But Mason was staring at the ground carriage. Something was so obviously different, something that escaped his danger-excited mind for an instant. Then he had it!

The Albatrosses had no wheels—they were equipped with skis!

"Snow babies!" muttered the American. "They must have a base somewhere up where there's always snow, or they must operate only in winter."

He jerked his throttle wide and drove hard at the first Albatross, dun tracer wisps whipping out to clear a path. He saw the streaks lift and lash into the Austrian's tail assembly; he raised the nose of his ship an inch and watched the slugs spot the white fuselage.

Acrid fumes blazed his own cheek as heavy lead hurtled by and hammered into his instrument board. Too close for comfort. Pinckney was gallantly battling the Albatross behind, but it was hard to bring the flexible gun to bear low in the rear.

Bart kicked the Spad into a sideslip and dropped her to safety. Through the snow curtain he saw half a dozen roaring dogfights twisting and snarling. A Spad broke into crimson flame that leaped high and licked away the feathery flakes; it plunged earthward with a corpse at the controls and a doomed observer shielding his face with one hand while he loosened his safety strap with the other and made ready to jump.

BART MASON leveled off as the Albatross behind him hurtled overhead. For an instant he silenced the chattering Vickers and jerked the stick back against his belly. The Spad flung her nose high under the full gunned roar of the Hiss, flopping over on her back. Above the engine's thunder, Pinckney dimly heard a blood curdling Indian yell!

Mason came out of it in an Immelman, and before the straining ship had fully leveled off, he tossed her on her back once more and did a second half loop and turn. The first Albatross, banking tightly a hundred yards away, was riding swiftly back to the attack.

The Spad's nose came down behind a new burst of Vickers fire. Bart Mason let go another war whoop, and Pinckney clutched desperately at his Scarff ring

mount for support. Mason was a crazy savage, mad with the lust to kill! He was going to crash into the charging Albatross.

The gray ship slanted toward her foe, boring in viciously till her screaming prop seemed less than a yard away from the white wings. A terror-stricken Austrian peelot shoved forward on his stick in a frantic effort to dive clear. He stiffened and died in that position, his mouth agape with sudden fear and a tearing tracer slug in his heart. The Spad missed by inches and lifted away as the white ship twisted toward the earth.

Pinckney caught his breath again with a triumphant warcry ringing in his ears. He swung the flexible gun over to turn an uncertain blast on the second Albatross, but the white ship veered out of range. Bart Mason dashed the frost from his goggles again to see the Squadron of the Snows climbing, converging into formation, streaking for home.

They were masters of aerial maneuvers, those buzzards of Paul Katz' staffel. A few seconds before they had been scattered into twisting dogfights; now they fell into line with the precision of infantry and were roaring northwest. The British defenders gathered slowly. Scotty MacLeod's engine conked, picked up again, and then died with a feed line shot away. He glided for the field, waving assurance that he was safe.

Jerry Trowbridge waved the remaining six on for the chase. They shot out of the snow flurry into clear air, only to be rocked by twisting winds that swept down from the mountain passes.

Burt Mason's heart sank. In level flight, the single-seated Albatrosses were proving their speed superiority. Slowly they drew away from the Spads. Now they were etched sharply against some wooded section of the Alps, or against the bleak wall of a peak where snow could not find a hold; again they became invisible against the background of eternal snow.

Every Hisso was gunned to the full. Pilots strained forward, cursing, staring at the vanishing squadron until their eyes ached and their senses reeled. Rolle Pass, through which the Dolomite Road winds, slipped below them. The air grew rougher, the wind colder. Another swirl of snow came and passed before it had time to weight their wings. There was no landing place below, no sanctuary except the mysterious one toward which the Squadron of the Snows was heading.

The pine-covered slopes of the lower Alps dropped past. At intervals the British peelots saw their fleeing foe. The snow grew thicker on the wild upheaval of

land below them. Planes dropped and bucked in the grip of swirling air currents.

WHILE every man in the six Spads strained eager eyes, the white squadron dropped down through a narrow pass with snow-shrouded peaks rearing high on either side, roared up through a valley that was dazzling white in the glare of the sun—and suddenly vanished entirely!

Jerry Trowbridge, leading the pursuit, signaled for the squadron to scatter and search. A few minutes later a gray cloud swept over the sun and snow began to fall. Bart Mason, veering dangerously near the sheer mountain walls, where echoes multiplied the Hisso's roar tenfold, saw Trowbridge wave his hand in disgust. The Spads climbed and turned back toward Treviso.

They came in to the tarmac, winging in the teeth of a new storm that was shrieking out of the Alps. It was a disgruntled half-dozen pilots who climbed from their pits, stiff with cold.

Bart Mason checked up hurriedly. It was Pete Rockford and an Italian observer who had ridden the flaming coffin out of the sky. Scotty MacLeod had landed his dead ship safely and was out to greet them.

"Mon, that was great work, shooting down that Boche!" he acclaimed Mason.

"Ye should have got his scalp, I'm thinking!"

Bart grinned as he stamped his feet and blew on numbed fingers. Pinckney crawled out of the ship and approached with awe and hero-worship in his eyes.

"E whupped two of 'em!" boasted the little observer. "Like a bloody savage 'e went after 'em, if you'll pardon my sayin' so, sir. And when 'e yelled, I fairly shivered in my boots, that I did!"

"Maybe you shivered," Bart chuckled "but it didn't seem to spoil your aim. Pink. I'll fly with you any day!"

The Cockney swelled with pride. "If I could learn to yell like you, sir—"

Bart waved his hand. "Don't keep on trying to make a savage out of me!" he said. "I left my war bonnet at home!"

Pinckney stared, mouth agape. "Did you really wear war paint in America, sir?"

Bart glanced at the observer. He was serious. The American winked surreptitiously at Scotty MacLeod and answered with gravity.

"Not for many moons!" he said. "But nose paint! Ah, that's different! You should see me in a fight, Pink, when I've about a gallon of nose paint to make me barbarous!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll tell you what you do!" Bart went on. "I'd like to see Venice, Verona and other places. You slip a couple of gallons of nose paint into the observer's pit to-morrow, and we'll go paint a couple of towns red!"

Pinckney did not smile. Instead he saluted smartly. "Yes, sir!"

"There's an observer for you!" Bart declared as he and Scotty started for the barracks, "We were in a couple of mighty tight spots to-day, but he didn't lose his nerve. He swung that flexible gun around and gave the Boche old billy-hell!"

"Brave, but what you Yanks call dumb!" nodded Scotty. "What we're needing is somebody with eyes like an eagle to find that base and mark it so it can be found when all the Boche are at home!"

THE day dragged into darkness with a monotony that was what the cloud crackers had expected would be typical of duty on the Italian Front. Bart Mason wanted to see Venice, but he found he was tired and stiff. The cold winds had made his face almost raw and his lips were chapped and cracked. He prepared to turn in, and looked up to see the unobtrusive Pinckney standing beside his bunk.

"Psst!" the Cockney whispered. "It's all ready, sir!"

"What's all ready?" demanded Bart, pausing with a boot half removed.

"The nose paint, sir. Two gallons. In the plane."

Bart chuckled. "Two gallons! What a capacity you think we have! Well, I must say you're a fast worker, Pink. We'll see about that trip to-morrow. In the meantime, you lay off the nose paint."

Pinckney stared incredulously. "Me touch it, sir?" he asked. "No, sir. I won't lay an 'and to it!"

He departed, leaving Bart Mason to crawl wearily between his blankets and lie puzzling over the mysterious problem of the Squadron of the Snows. The skis for landing gear proved the ships used a snow-covered valley or lake for their tarmac. Somewhere along one of the narrow gashes that split the rugged reaches of the Alps there was a base, a field as glistening as the wings of the Albatrosses that called it home.

Surely there was some way to find it, some manner in which the white squadron could be tracked down. But the Alps had hundreds and thousands of valleys, wind swept and snow covered, as trackless as the air above them.

The American pilot slept at last, soundly and dreamlessly. Then he awoke in the same manner as on

the previous day—to the rattle and growl of bombs from the sky, and the answering crack of anti-aircraft!

Bart sprang from his bunk. Trowbridge was arising, bored as ever. The Englishman cocked a practiced ear toward the din.

"Strafing the infantry post east of here!" he said. "Nervy buzzards'—they even give us a chance to get into the air! Let's go!"

They went, bundling into the last of their clothes as they raced over the field. Mechanics were trundling the Spads out. Engines broke into stuttering, uncertain song and then warmed to full-throated roars. Exhausts spat blue flame in the gray of dawn; the backwash of seven props flattened the dun grasses.

Trowbridge was shouting above the Hissos' concert as the pilots gathered around him.

"If we had some fast single-seaters we could follow those white devils!" he declared. "We'd overtake 'em. But the high and mighty know more about our problem than we do, and we've got the two-place machines. All right. Let's try and get between the Squadron of the Snows and its wintry home. Then we can see 'em. All right, men!"

That was the idea, Bart Mason told himself as he climbed to the forward cockpit of his Spad. Damn Pinckney, he was late. They were ready to go.

The little observer came running across the edge of the field, yanking on gloves and helmet en route. He yelled something unintelligible to Bart in the roar of the engine, and the Yankee pilot waved him impatiently into the observer's place. It was no time for excuses for tardiness. Trowbridge was taking the air.

He moved his stick forward and gunned the engine as Pinckney sat down. The Spad slithered ahead, a gray shadow in the gray light. White clouds overhead again, with racing, unseen wings against them. They'd lay a trap for wily Paul Katz and his Squadron of the Snows. They'd get between him and the Alps.

Trowbridge should have given Katz more credit. Bart realized that as he lifted his ship off the tarmac and saw the upflung earth from the first bomb. It struck seventy-five yards from his right wing-tip, and the blast nearly upset the sturdy Spad. Katz and his gleaming squadron were overhead once more, probably hurling a final defiance before turning back to their mountain nest!

Boom! One Spad failed to get off the ground. An anxious glance downward showed Bart it was Scotty MacLeod, who seemed jinxed. Smoke and earth blossomed at his tailskid; the gray ship went into a

violent ground loop and lay there with a shattered prop and a racing motor. Mechanics were running toward the washout; perhaps they would arrive in time to cut the switch or drag Scotty and his observer from the flames.

Bart shuddered and looked aloft. White cirrus hung high and motionless. There were few rifts of blue against which the Katz staffel could be sighted. Maybe they were already heading for the mountains. Yesterday's battle had taught them these new Spads, even though two-seaters, were almost as fast as the Albatrosses.

The Yankee pilot gritted his teeth and sat back hard on his stick, praying that the engine was fully warmed. It responded faithfully. Trowbridge and the rest were zooming for altitude. Another bomb splattered the air station's water reservoir into muddy destruction.

Then the roar came out of the sky with a rush of white wings and an ominous chatter of Spandaus. The Squadron of the Snows was diving to the attack again before they streaked into the northwest, diving behind snarling lead and the whip of tracer smoke!

Bart Mason glanced at his altimeter. Four thousand feet. He drew a sharp breath as the first of the smoking slugs ripped a bit of fabric off his starboard wing.

Spandaus chanted their hymn of heavenly hate, to the accompaniment of the mighty organ of a dozen droning motors! He shot a glance aloft. The white wings were visible now, gleaming, menacing, very near.

Mason kicked his bus into a sideslip, and the white crate roared over his upturned wing-tip. Tracer wisps streaked empty air. The Spad lurched in the backwash of the Albatross. There was the white devil, skidding around in a flat turn, coming back at them.

He threw the Spad into a desperate climb, trying hard for top position. He felt, rather than saw, that the other five ships had been singled out by the attackers. His laboring Hisso drowned out the staccato of machine-gun bursts.

The Albatross was upon him again, flinging a deadly stream of lead. It caromed off the engine cowling. Acrid fumes choked him and he coughed. Sweat was trickling down into his collar. A bullet clipped a brace wire, and the Spad lurched sickeningly. Bart jerked his Bowden trip; already Pinckney had the flexible gun spitting.

The Yank narrowed his eyes down the ring sights as he flung the nose of the Spad down. The Albatross was charging head on. Its head would lift to go over the gray ship.

Bart gauged the distance warily as the two speeding crates cut it down. Suddenly he jerked the stick back far, with the engine under full gun. The Spad jerked her flashing prop aloft and strained every strut in the sharp climb.

He had beaten the Boche to it. The Albatross flashed underneath, banking tightly, trying to bore in from below, out of the range of the flexible gun that Pink was operating so effectively.

Bart Mason stilled his own Vickers. Floorboards shivered under his boots as the Spandau slugs streamed upward. Pinckney was jumping around in the stern pit like a frog on a hot rock, trying to get the white ship in his line of fire.

MASON kept the stick back and flopped the Spad over. Another Immelman—it had worked perfectly the day before. He had a dim realization of something hurtling from the observer's pit and he gasped with horror. Pinckney—maybe he had neglected to buckle his safety strap!

Then a quick glance reassured him. The little observer was clinging desperately to his flexible gun mount, and the weapon was belching flame. The falling object shot downward—there were two of them.

Bart Mason gasped with relief as he saw what they were. Two buckets. They twisted in mid air. The lids came off, and a crimson stream poured out as both struck the white wing of the Albatross!

Paint! Good God, the Cockney was dumber than Bart had ever dreamed! Nose paint—to do the town red—and Pink had stowed two gallons of red lead in the plane!

Mason wanted to laugh as he came out of the Immelman and saw the crimson color drench the Albatross pilot and splotch the white plane with messy brilliance. He could picture the pilot's surprise at being bombed by such a method.

Then he had his hands full again. A second Albatross was swooping on him. Tracer hammered at the engine cowling and stabbed wing fabric. The Yank banked tightly and saw the attacker flash past behind his flaming gun. Things were hot again over the quiet Italian Front—two to one.

Jerry Trowbridge swept to his aid, riding hard down the smoke-streaked sky. Mason caught a quick glimpse of the flight leader's calm face; saw his synchronized gun blaze in a deadly burst, and watched the Boche in the second Albatross throw writhing hands up and collapse over his pit coaming. Another white ship,

dropping into a death spin with flame licking from cowl to tail assembly.

"Good ol' beef-eater!" breathed Bart Mason. He turned for a look at the paint-splattered ship and found it in full flight, climbing, streaking away. The peelot raised a crimson-dipped glove, signaling the Squadron of the Snows into formation.

"Good God!" Bart gasped. "Katz himself! Talk about war paint!"

He set his jaw with a click and swung the Spad into pursuit. Once more the white ships were falling into line with admirable precision. Once more the twisting dogfights broke up and the Squadron of the Snows headed for home like white geese winging north in the Spring.

The Spads straggled into a semblance of formation, following after. Six and six now. The Albatross staffel swung toward the white reaches of the mountains, climbing a little.

Bart Mason gasped. Now the glistening squadron was no longer invisible! That crimson-spattered plane could be seen against the snow miles away!

He threw back his head and roared a war whoop that chilled little Pinckney to the marrow of his bones. He was a savage again, an Indian on the warpath, and the trail was blazed with red nose paint!

Then the Yank deliberately broke formation and climbed higher. Maybe Trowbridge hadn't realized what the red paint meant to the pursuers. He had to keep that ship in sight, had to watch it to its hidden mountain lair—

The lower reaches of the Alps broke beneath them in a carelessly flung upheaval of tumbling rocks and high-piled snow. Raw wind sprang up and shrieked about their ears, tossing the planes. Ahead lay the eternal whiteness of the higher mountains, and against their blanket of snow the painted Albatross of Paul Katz stood out like a bloody thumb.

"Wah-hooo-yah-yah-yah!"

Bart Mason beat his icy glove against bleeding lips as he strained his lungs in the warcry of his ancestors. Pinckney shivered and huddled low out of the icy blast.

THE Squadron of the Snows swung west, streaking along a narrow defile between snow-clad, rocky spires. The wind that tossed Bart Mason's Spad sent swirling blasts of snow off the exposed peaks, as though loosened by the roar of a dozen engines. For an anxious minute the white ships were blotted from view, then the pursuers swept past the canyon walls

and once more Mason could see that single marker, the red paint congealed on Paul Katz' wings!

Slowly the Albatrosses drew away, increasing the distance that intervened. Mason cursed and yanked at a throttle that was already pulled wide open. He sacrificed altitude in a slanting power dive, roaring down at speed that put him ahead of Trowbridge and the rest of the flight. He was on the warpath alone—and Paul Katz' scalp belonged to him and the dumb Cockney who was responsible for marking the white crate.

Another swirl of snow, this time from the gray heavens. A mountain peak loomed ahead, its bulk suddenly menacing in the white curtain. Bart Mason kicked right rudder and pulled his ship into a climb. The Hisso roared in a narrow pass that echoed its clattering and flung it back, multiplied a hundred times.

The snow flurry passed and Mason dashed frost from his goggles and peered ahead. His heart sank. The Squadron of the Snows had vanished!

He flung a quick glance behind. Trowbridge and the rest were not in sight. The Yank had guessed wrong at that turn past the mountain; he should have gone left. Now it meant losing precious minutes in swinging about to retrace his course.

Once more he peered into the blinding stretch of white that lay ahead. The Spad was over a valley that widened slightly, then ended against a sheer wall of white. There was no way out except by turning, unless he risked the swirling whirlpool of air that would be shrieking around the tops of the mountains, thousands of feet above. And if the Hisso conked—

Faintly he heard the yell from Pinckney's feeble lungs. He turned inquiringly. The little observer was pointing excitedly.

And there, to the right and below, the red-splotched Albatross had settled on the snow! Even as Bart Mason strained his watering eyes toward her, the ship mysteriously vanished, as though sucked out of sight in the deep drifts.

The Yankee gasped as he kicked the Spad around. He kept his eyes transfixed on that certain spot in the dazzling white sameness. There was no time to go back and lead the other ships to the place. He would never be able to find its exact location again. The Spad's flashing propeller was pointed straight for the place where the Albatross had vanished. She roared unwaveringly down in a steep slant, like an avenging gray eagle.

"Wah-hoo-yah-yah-yah!"

The speeding ship cut down the distance and before Bart Mason fully realized it, the mystery was solved.

Suddenly, as the white surface shot up at him, he saw the wide stretch of white canvas, a veritable sea of taut-drawn, dazzling fabric, itself weighted with snow!

Under it were the hangars, the camp itself. Under it would be the paint-splattered plane and its five white mates!

Bart Mason, still yelling madly, jerked the Bowden wire. Vicious tracers whined through the cold air and sprinkled tiny dots against the canvas camouflage.

A Spandau was answering. More canvas was thrown aside to reveal a machine-gun emplacement. Men in white that was soiled, mechanics dashing forth to man the gun, to jerk the covering from another one. Bullets bit at the Spad which had traced the Squadron of the Snows to its lair.

Mason yanked back on the stick and the Spad climbed away in a spiral, wheeling to dive once more to the attack. Now he saw a crimson-splotched Albatross being trundled out of the camouflage. Her engine was warm; she would be able to take the air at once.

AGAIN Mason dived, roaring for the snow-covered earth until Pinckney gasped and covered his eyes. The Vickers was rattling; a stream of hot lead bored down and ripped into the grounded ship. A mechanic sprawled in the snow, face upturned. Other men fled.

Rat-tat-tat-tat!

In the cockpit a man suddenly flung aloft a crimson hand, as he had done a short time before in signaling the Squadron of the Snows homeward. This time the hand fell grotesquely, and crimson splotches appeared on the white helmet. Paul Katz was dead.

Bart Mason whirled his Spad into another twisting climb. The roar of other engines echoed from the mountain walls. More Albatrosses were out from under their white shelter; he could look down into their cockpits to see that even the interior glistened.

One of them slithered forward over the hard-packed snow. Bart swooped on it with a blood-chilling wacry. The Vickers flamed. As if in answer, a blaze burst from the engine cowl of the Mercedes, and the white-clad peelot leaped from his burning ship. Oily smoke towered aloft on the frosty air. Mason swung about and drove the Spad through the black plume to strafe the hangars again.

Rat-tat-tat-tat!

Spandaus on the ground answered him. A wire pinged; the Spad wobbled nearly out of control. He fought her back.

An Albatross was taking the air before Mason had

fairly seen it. Another and another. White wings lifting from the white field where a ship burned. He could hardly see them. His eyes smarted and his head ached with the glare.

He yelled again through bleeding lips and kicked right rudder to meet the attack. The Spad roared again through a blast of ground fire and Pinckney answered with the flexible gun. If they only had a bomb—

Mason swept by a rising ship, spraying it with tracer. Beyond he saw another crate, plunging toward him. He reached for the trigger trip again, then gasped. It wasn't a white Albatross—it was a gray ship, and a Spad! Trowbridge and the rest of the flight had seen the smoke from the burning plane and were on hand.

Rat-tat-tat-tat!

The chatter of guns was terrible in that narrow mountain valley. Roaring engines thundered in mighty concert from the blank walls. An Albatross that had been white turned yellow and crimson in a blast of flame and twisted down to strike soft snow and hiss of death. Men fled the hangars and their white camouflage.

Jerry Trowbridge shot over the canvas structure and his observer flung something down. Another, and then the canvas was split and wrecked by high explosive.

One Albatross, forced down by a withering burst of tracer that wounded its peelot, wrecked the skis beneath it and plunged on its nose in the snow. Another, with two Spads on its tail, crashed into the blank wall of the mountain and fell in twisted wreckage. More bombs roared at the hangars. The battle was over.

Jerry Trowbridge climbed, wagging his wings. Not too much gasoline was left in their tanks. The Spads streaked after him, weary, snow-blinded birds.

They came down at the base near Treviso, men with frost-bitten cheeks and bleeding, swollen lips, to smile at each other despite the effort it cost. Trowbridge was first out of his ship; he ran stiffly to Bart Mason's Spad as it settled in a bad landing and lurched to a stop.

"What the bloody hell, Yank?" demanded the flight leader, yelling because his ears were deafened by roaring engines. "What happened to Katz to turn his white ship a bleeding crimson?"

Bart Mason grinned as he threw a long leg over the pit coaming.

"Ask Pink!" he answered. "It was nose paint—or rather Pink's idea of nose paint. Pink left our bombs out and took the buckets instead. We intended to paint the town red. Instead, we painted Katz. Now that it's over, I am going to paint the town red—and show Pink just what nose paint really is!"