

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

AN ACE IN THE HOLE

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

*Once more the famous "Three Mosquitoes" go out on a dangerous and thrilling special flight—
but this time one of them led the way, alone, while the other two waited—
waited until human nerves could stand it no longer.*

THE C.O. SEEMED WORRIED, and a little haggard, he looked up at the "Three Mosquitoes," who stood before his desk in the headquarters shack, and his piercing grey eyes seemed to study each one of the three men carefully. First those eyes took in Kirby, the youthful and impetuous leader of the famous trio of aces. Then they went to "Shorty" Carn's mild and slightly round countenance; and lastly they rested on the lean, lanky Travis, who was the oldest, wisest, and least voluble of the trio.

"You all look up to it," the C.O. mused, at length. "There's not much choosing between you."

A look of mystification came over the faces of the trio. But they said nothing. Somehow they knew that something tense and big was coming, and they waited for it. Outside on the field rose the drone of engines. A flight was taking off for the early-morning patrol.

The C.O. spoke again, and now his tone was almost apologetic. He seemed reluctant to get down to the real, vital point.

"Staff headquarters has got an idea," he said. "And when staff headquarters gets an idea, it's up to me to

carry it out, I don't like to do it. I know you men won't like it either. But—" He paused once more. Then, abruptly, he pulled out a roll-map, unfurled it on the table, and as the three men leaned closer, stabbed a red, zig-zag line with his finger. "This," he said tersely, "is Road Eighteen. You men know about it. It's the famous road which the Boche use so much to bring their troops and supplies up, since most of it's under cover of heavy forests. Now—" His finger traced along a few inches of the red line, "here is a stretch that is out in the open. But," his voice became grim, "it's twenty miles in Hunland."

A light of understanding came into the eyes of the Three Mosquitoes. But their eyes did not flicker.

"Then," said Kirby, with a nod, "the idea is this: staff headquarters wants that open stretch of road reconnoitered, eh?"

The C.O. nodded slowly. "They want to know what's moving there, what troops, and so on. That means a plane will have to go way down on the carpet, close enough to spot the German uniforms. Yet that information is important. Our present drive depends

on it—we want to know if the Germans are sending any fresh troops up towards the Front. Also, whether there are supplies or anything else coming up on that road. It's a reconnoissance job, yes, but not for reconnoissance ships. A two-seater could never make it. Too slow. 44 sent six D.H. Nines to try it, but none of them returned."

He said those last words calmly and quietly enough, but their full significance was not lost. However, the Three Mosquitoes were hardened to such facts by months of grim experience, and so they still showed no signs of doubt or apprehension. In fact, an eager expression came over Kirby's face.

"When do we start?" he asked, cheerfully.

To his surprise, the C.O. shifted uncomfortably. The grizzled old colonel tried to laugh, but it was a strange, unnatural laugh.

"I'm afraid the 'we' in your question is incorrect, Kirby," he said slowly.

"You see—" He paused again. The drone outside was dying now, as more and more ships left the field. Suddenly the C.O. rasped out: "This is a one-man job."

And at that the Three Mosquitoes stiffened, and the expression on their faces changed. Now they were worried.

"I'd like very much to send all three of you," the C.O. went on, quickly. "I know you always like to do your work together, in your usual, three-plane formation. But I'm inclined to agree with staff headquarters that such a measure would be both foolish and futile. As you know, the Germans have supremacy of the air in that neighborhood, and the road is so well fortified that any plane which can get through will be damned lucky. Perhaps it all sounds a little queer, but the idea is that if one plane goes, alone, the very audacity of the thing might enable that plane to make the grade. It is harder to spot one ship than two or three, and it's hoped that by the time that one plane is spotted, and the Huns get after it, it will have already broken away. Is that clear?"

The men shifted, nodded slowly.

"As I said," the C.O. repeated, "there's not much choosing between you. Any one of you is suited for the job. I'm going to let you decide for yourselves."

There was a short silence. It was broken by Kirby.

"In that case, sir," he said, calmly and decisively, "I'll be off as soon as you give the word."

"The hell you will!" Shorty Carn exploded. "This is my show, so that's that."

Travis smiled tolerantly.

"You're both wrong," he drawled. "I'm going."

"Now listen here——" Kirby began, only to be interrupted by Carn, who was at once interrupted by Travis. Their voices grew more and more heated. For a while the C.O. listened with something akin to awe. It was strange to hear three men arguing like kids for a chance to go out and literally pull death's whiskers. However, when the argument showed no promise of being settled, the C.O. finally rapped on his desk.

"I'm afraid this won't get us very far," he said, shaking his head. "We'll have to settle it quickly, in the fairest way." He opened a drawer, pulled out a small package. It was a deck of cards. They were torn and begrimed, for the colonel, in his spare time, tried to forget his grim responsibilities in solitaire or games of bridge with the men. The C.O. shuffled the deck. "Each of you will draw a card," he explained. "The highest man goes. Agreed?"

THE Three Mosquitoes seemed to hesitate, dubiously. But finally they all gave their assent. The C.O. held out the deck. Again the trio paused, for a final second. Then, with a shrug which didn't look as indifferent as he had meant it to be, Kirby drew a card. A triumphant shout broke from him. It was the ace of diamonds.

"Well, no sense wasting any more time," he said gaily. "I'm ace to-day!"

"Wait a minute!" insisted Shorty, and drew his card. He grunted disgustedly. Four of hearts.

Silently Travis drew, glanced at his pick. The third mosquito's thin lips twisted into a tight little smile.

"Ace of cluhs," he drawled, and Kirby's face fell. "Now what?"

"You and Kirby," the C.O. said quietly.

Kirby started to protest resentfully, but then he drew once more. He picked the king of diamonds. Travis reached towards the deck. It was a tense moment. The room seemed very still, Kirby shifted, in suspense. Then——

With a satisfied grunt, Travis flipped his card on the table. A savage oath broke from Kirby. It was the ace of hearts.

"That settles it," snapped the C.O. "Travis, be ready to take off in fifteen minutes. I'm going to allow you an hour for the complete trip. That's plenty of time. If you don't come back——" He broke off, as if he had not meant to say those words. Hastily he added, "If you should be delayed, and you're not back within the scheduled time, I may send one of you others. We must have that information this morning."

Fifteen minutes later Kirby, Carn, and the C.O., together with a group of other pilots and mechanics,

stood on the tarmac and watched a trim Spad roar into the wind, take off with the grace of a swallow, and climb smoothly through the sunny morning haze. Kirby and Shorty kept following that ship with their eyes, and a strange gauntness came over their faces. Slowly, the Spad faded into a tiny, distant speck, which glinted in the sunlight. And then it was gone—swallowed in the hazy blue.

“Seven-thirty,” the C.O. announced, quietly. “We give him until eight-thirty.” And he turned on his heel and walked back towards his shack.

Kirby and Carn hadn’t seemed to hear him. Dumbly, they were still gazing at the sky, at the spot where they had last seen Travis. It was easy to perceive how disturbed they were, and some of their fellow pilots were quick to give them a cheering word.

“Don’t worry, boys!” boomed “Big Pete” Braddock, the biggest man in the air service, who looked upon all his colleagues as “boys.” He laid a big paw on either of the Mosquitoes’ backs. “He’ll do the job all right!”

“Sure he will,” conceded “Red” Peters, the squadron’s champion pessimist, despite his flaming red hair. For a moment all the others stared at him, amazed that such cheerful words should fall from his lips. But their amazement soon vanished, for Peters added, “That is, provided nothing happens to him. Of course there’s a bunch of Fokkers around that road and—”

Here he was drowned out by a chorus of angry voices: “Aw shut up, Red! Why in hell must you always throw a wet rag on everything? Cut it!”

Kirby and Carn walked off by themselves. They went over near the hangars to tinker with their planes—for when worried or forced to wait in suspense they always tried to forget themselves in work. True, their trusty mechanics had already done everything that was necessary to prepare the two Spads for flight, but the two Mosquitoes, with feverish industriousness, looked over motors, cleaned guns, and tightened flying wires. Kirby consumed cigarette after cigarette: Shorty puffed on his beloved briar pipe without his usual slow relish. They both talked, tried to discuss irrelevant subjects. But it did no good. Each knew just what the other was thinking. In both their minds was the clear and indelible picture of a lone Spad trying to go down on a road twenty miles within Hunland, with enemy aircraft soaring all about.

Minutes passed, seeming like hours. With nervous impatience, Kirby glanced at his wrist-watch.

“What time is it?” asked Shorty, though he had a watch of his own.

And Kirby had to look at the watch again to find out. “Quarter to eight.”

“That’s only fifteen minutes! Funny! Thought sure it was later.”

Thus it went on. Like a snail, the hands of Kirby’s wrist-watch crawled around to the hour of eight, began to pass it. Eight ten. The two men began to look haggard, as if they were going through all the strain they imagined their comrade to be going through. Eight fifteen. They began to watch the sky and field for signs of Travis. Every time they saw a plane coming in their hearts pounded, and a great hope burned within them. But always that hope was crushed. Planes came and went, but Travis was in none of them.

Several times the two Mosquitoes ran over to put a futile question to some returning pilot: “Seen anything of Travis?”

And invariably the answer would run something like: “Nope. Not that I know of.”

Eight twenty-five. They fumbled dismally at their work with the planes. They shifted, cursed. The hands of their wrist-watches moved sluggishly on. Eight twenty-eight. The suspense was getting unbearable. . . . Eight twenty-nine. Seconds now. They counted them.

Then——

The hour was up! It was eight-thirty. The two men stopped fidgeting with their Spads and stared at each other, and each saw his own anguish and suspense reflected in the other’s

“God,” Kirby groaned, “if he——”

“Wait!” Shorty broke in, tensely, and then both of them were staring skywards once more. Another plane was coming in. It was a lone Spad. It was gliding for the field, closer and closer. Then they saw its insignia. Their hearts sank. It was not Travis.

“DAMN it, we’ve waited long enough!” Kirby burst out, in furious anguish. “Something’s happened, and by God, I’m going up and find him if it’s the last thing I do!” And without waiting for Shorty’s response, he dashed over to the headquarters shack again. Carn followed, entered right behind him. The C.O. seemed to have expected them.

“The hour is up,” he stated, tersely, though he was far more agitated than he wished to appear. “Of course I’m sure Travis will get back soon enough. He has two and a half hours’ gas, and he’ll get through somehow. But staff headquarters wants that information. I know you two men both want to go up there now, in the hope of finding——”

He checked himself, went on, "in the hope of learning just what's delayed Travis. Well, I want one of you to go, but," his eyes narrowed, "I want him to go for the purpose of securing that information—above everything else. It's a tall order, I confess. But it must be done. Is that clear?"

They nodded, slowly, soberly.

"And this time," Kirby insisted, "there ought to be no funny business. You've asked one of us to go, sir. Well, as commander of my flight I appoint myself."

"Cut that damned bunk!" Shorty said furiously. "And since you are a captain, you're that much more valuable than Travis or me. Therefore, I'm going!"

The C.O. managed a faint smile. But his voice was stern. "Out of fairness to you both, I'm going to have you draw cards again." And once more the deck was held out. Kirby, realizing that he would only be wasting precious time by protesting, had to agree. Shorty chose first this time. He groaned aloud, in real despair. He had picked the three of spades. A sort of frenzied joy seized Kirby,

"Thank God, I go this time!" he said, drawing a card. But when he looked at that card his face went white, and he almost sobbed. It was a miserable deuce of diamonds!

And so Shorty Carn went, as Travis had gone before him.

And so, one hour later, Kirby, looking distracted and wild-eyed, burst into the C.O.'s office.

"Damn it to hell!" he shouted at the colonel, in a shaking voice. "Why didn't you let me go? God!" A sob broke from him. "Neither of them back yet!" Then his eyes blazed. "Well, I'm going now! I don't care what anyone says! I'm going, damn it, and—"

"Steady!" Like a gag, the C.O.'s terse voice stopped that wild flood of speech. The colonel rose, put a hand on Kirby's shoulder. "Kirby, I guess I'm a damn fool, but I'm going to send you up too. I have a hunch you can do something about this business. Try to get that information, but if you see it's an impossible job give it up. Those are orders. Perhaps, if your comrades have been delayed, you will find them, and can help them out. I'd like to send a whole flight with you, but that would only be our own disaster. As I said, the Huns would easily spot a number of planes, and with their superior forces they could wipe us out. So you do the best you can. That will be all."

THERE is a strange solitude about flying alone at a high altitude. And Kirby, streaking for the lines in his Spad, straining the engine to the utmost in his

wild speed, felt an awful loneliness which grew to be something ominous and foreboding. Below him the earth swam in a blur of gray and brown, and not far distant the smoke of the battle Front hung over it like an ugly fog. Above him was golden sunshine, and only a few stray cirrus clouds against the translucent blue. But it was an unpleasantly empty sky he was streaking through. There were no signs of any other planes. Not yet, anyway.

Carefully, he kept checking up on his course by his compass and by the landmarks on the ground. That course must lead him to an open stretch of road, twenty miles in Hunland. It must lead him to the place where his comrades had gone. His comrades! Once more a pang of anguished fear went through him. What had befallen Travis and Carn? What could have delayed Travis for two hours or more, and Carn for one hour at least? Yes, he repeated, delayed. Stubbornly, blindly, he clung to the thought that they had merely been held up, that they were both either still in the air or had returned to the drome after he left. And the thought stirred his furious impatience all the more. He must get there fast, must find out! He must hurry, even though he did not know what lay in store for him. Perhaps—

There came a dull explosion somewhere behind him, and he looked back, untroubled, to see the antiaircraft shell mushrooming out with its black smoke and shrapnel. Archie! Mechanically, he changed his course to throw off the gunners' range. The second shell, and the third, were further away. Kirby was zig-zagging, and once in a while he dropped for twenty or thirty feet. He had crossed the lines. Below him the tiny narrow cuts which were German trenches became distinguishable. Slowly they receded, and soon he was leaving them behind. The antiaircraft shells continued to blotch the translucent sky with their black spew, but they were more and more erratic. And after a while, when Kirby passed most of the barriers of ground-defense which were near the front, Archie ceased barking at him altogether.

In Hunland now! Look out for Boche planes. Watch the sun to see that none of them drop out of its dazzling eye. Also, keep looking for Carn and Travis. Kirby skilfully managed to give himself to each of these tasks, while he continued mechanically to hold his course. Must turn a little to the right now. He banked over, and a tiny ribbon of silver suddenly appeared below. The Aisne river. That was his big landmark. Follow the river until he got to the Bois de Tarniers, then to the left and he would find the road.

The river was safe. No anti-aircraft batteries here, and not so many planes, they said. But over the road—

On rushed the Spad, its engine roaring mightily and its whirling propeller churning and cutting the slight haze which hung in the air. The river stayed below. Kirby kept it there. And presently, in the distance ahead, appeared a splotch of green. The Bois de Tarniers! The splotch of green began to grow, came into dearer focus. Soon he could see those tree-tops plainly. He was coming right to the woods, and he must turn. Keep watching for the enemy, and for signs of Carn or Travis! He kicked on left rudder, shoved the stick over gently. The Spad swerved around in a wide, graceful bank—a flash of silver. Over the woods now. Keenly, he scanned the landscape ahead. His eyes lit up. The road! It was just a tiny thread running along the other side of the woods, a short line, but he knew it was his objective. Getting there now. Getting there—

He stiffened, sat tense, rigid. His eyes peered sharply through their goggles, peered at the thing that had caught them. Off to the right, and forward, were three groups of tiny specks! There must have been three dozen of them in all, and they looked ominously black against the sunny blue. Kirby's lips drew into a tight, straight little line. Enemy planes! A Hun patrol, right near that road! And the size of that formidable force made him realize grimly just what might have delayed his comrades!

But then a feeling of intense relief swept him. Those planes were not headed his way. They were moving off in another direction, evidently towards the lines. They did not see him, though he saw them. One does not notice a solitary speck as readily as one notices a swarm of them. Kirby had to agree, for once in his life, with staff headquarters. It was safer to be alone in this neighborhood!

The specks were gradually fading now, and presently the sky seemed empty once more. But Kirby was too experienced a pilot to be deceived by that emptiness. He knew how quickly an empty sky can fill with Fokkers. However, cursing defiantly, he went on towards his objective. Closer and closer he came to that road. He saw that the stretch was about four miles long. At either end it curved into the woods. As he drew nearer he could vaguely distinguish what looked like a lot of tiny insects crawling along the highway down there. Yes, there was movement all right!

He looked all about, scanned the sky in every direction. Should he risk it? Should he dare to drop down on the carpet, to streak along that road? The

picture of that tremendous Boche formation was still in his mind, and it made him pause thoughtfully. Also, there was the thought of his comrades. If there was a trap here, a trap into which they had fallen, and into which he might be about to follow them—

His hand closed tightly about the stick. The sky was absolutely empty, as far as he could see. But there was that damned sun, where planes could hide so well. He put his thumb to his goggles, and looked up at the brilliant glare. Such was the method by which pilots spotted enemy planes in the sun. He saw nothing. But he noticed that there was a fairly large white cloud overhead. Yet, it didn't seem possible that there were Boche there. It looked too peaceful, too quiet. And—the new thought urged him on—perhaps the dangerous course would at least lead him to his comrades.

Abruptly, he reached his decision. The road lay ahead and below. Pausing only to take a final look about him, Kirby eased his stick forward. The nose of the Spad dropped. The plane was rushing downwards in a glide-dive, rushing down a steep hill of space.

Then it happened.

A SUDDEN, ominous shadow overhead. An unearthly staccato clatter, which rose shriller and shriller. *Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!* Something whistled past Kirby's left, and simultaneously a line of perforations appeared, as if by magic, in the wing surface above him. Confusedly, before he had time thoroughly to grasp the situation, he was trying to pull his ship up, to get out of his disadvantageous position. And as he pulled up he discovered, to his horror, that the air around him was full of Fokkers! Five of them! Five gray, black-crossed scouts of the latest and deadliest design! They were swarming all about him, like maddened hornets, and jagged streaks of flame bit from their noses. The yellowish streams of tracer bullets were ripping towards him from every side.

He was trapped! Sure enough, some Fokkers had been watching from that cloud. They had waited until he started to descend, until they saw they had him cold, and then they had come down to finish him. Now they were closing in on him from all sides, whipping at him in turn to blaze away with their machine guns. And their bullets were scoring. Tracer was tearing through the Spad's fuselage and wings, whistling about Kirby's head. Frantically, he started to roll, twist, and zigzag in an effort to throw off their sights. It was the only thing he could do. If he straightened out and tried to fight they'd get him at once.

Nevertheless, he was leaning forwards to his sights, and his fingers pressed the stick-triggers whenever a Fokkerlike shape streaked in front of him. His two machine guns responded faithfully, blazed their defiance. But he could not score; it was impossible in all this confusion.

With grim precision, the Germans were continuing to tighten their net, seeking to wall the lone Spad in a prison of criss-crossing tracer. The bullets grew thicker and thicker: the air was filled with flying, screaming lead. Everywhere Kirby looked he saw Fokkers swooping towards him, looming up with their guns blazing. Still he continued to maneuver for all he was worth, struggling always to throw their sights off. But he knew he was done for. The Spad was beginning to shake now, as the bullets pumped it unmercifully. It was incredible that he had held out as long as this. Well, it wouldn't be much longer now! In a second they must hit some vital spot, or hit him, and then it would be over. A sense of utter helplessness seized him. He was being shot to hell, and there was nothing he could do about it. Well, he began to relax in hopeless resignation, what was the use? Perhaps his comrades had met the same fate. There was a Fokker diving from above now. Its bullets were already ripping down. The Spad shook again, and Kirby was ready to fall.

Then, all at once, everything changed. Kirby did not know what was happening at first, but he was aware that his attackers were pulling away confusedly. And in the next second, to his amazement, a Fokker went hurtling down to his right. It was enveloped in livid flames! Down it plunged, twisting and curving, and leaving a trail of oily black smoke behind it. The rest of the Germans seemed even more confused and bewildered. They—

A cry of frenzied joy broke from Kirby's dry throat, and then he was pulling back his stick, climbing upwards, ignoring the hail of bullets. For, right above him, hurling themselves against the four remaining Fokkers with roaring fury, were two more Spads! And they were his two comrades! Carn and Travis! He knew, knew beyond all doubt, for he had seen their insignias. Where they had come from he could not guess; though he surmised that they must have been back at the drome, for certainly Travis would have needed more fuel. But they had gotten here somehow, and had dived to his rescue. Already they had scored, and they were fighting like winged furies, whipping at the other Boche planes.

Now Kirby had climbed to their level, and was pulling up beside Travis. He waved frantically,

excitedly. Travis waved back at once, an unusually gay smile on his goggled countenance. And then, automatically, Kirby became the leader of his men. He got them beside him, waved them their signals, and led them against the Huns. And perhaps the frenzied joy of this reunion, after all the suspense and anguish, gave him a new enthusiasm, enabled them to fight as they had never fought before. Guns blazing, eyes glued to sights, they attacked those Fokkers with a vengeance, lunging at them in the insistent Mosquitolike fashion which had won them their nicknames.

In a second the Germans had been changed from the hunters to the hunted. In a second another of them had crumpled beneath Kirby's guns, to flutter earthward like a dead bird. A third, badly crippled by Shorty Carn's bullets, side-slipped away and staggered into Hunland. The fourth and fifth, however, were stout pilots. They continued to fight furiously and stubbornly. But the Mosquitoes' bullets were beginning to tell. Especially the bullets of Travis, who seemed to be chasing after both ships!

Kirby suddenly found himself alongside of Carn, as the two of them were racing to join Travis. And then, at last, Kirby remembered once more about that road, that information—which he had forgotten entirely in all the confusion. Staff headquarters had ordered that road to be reconnoitered. And staff headquarters must be obeyed.

LASTILY, even while he and Carn were pulling into range, Kirby began to signal Shorty, using their wonderful set of waving gestures, through which they could converse on almost any subject. He was asking Carn if the latter or Travis had secured the information. Shorty at once shook his head. It took Kirby just a split second, then, to work out a course of action. Shorty was already firing short bursts at one of the Fokkers which flashed ahead, when Kirby signaled that he himself was going down on that road, and that Carn and Travis should stay here to handle these Fokkers, keep them from going down on top of Kirby—and, in general, play lookout. But to Kirby's surprise Carn shook his head again, in a firm negative. Then the little man was signaling Kirby not to bother about that information, because the job couldn't be done. Too much ground-fire, and more Boche ships around here. Kirby should help finish these two tough Fokkers and then come home. And Kirby was able to gather that those were the C.O.'s orders.

But he knew that the C.O. had not given them because he wanted to. No, it was only because the

colonel could not stand risking his best men any further. And so, without the slightest hesitation, Kirby was determined to disobey those orders. It was too good a chance now to miss; he could streak down there and get the stuff quickly—then rejoin his comrades. And there was something about the very breathlessness of it that warmed his blood, roused his lust for daredevil adventure. Gaily, he signaled Shorty that he was going. Carn, forgetting the Fokker he was after, tapped his helmet with a gloved finger, indicating that Kirby was clean nutty, and then, grimly, performed a pantomime of slitting his throat to explain just what chance Kirby had.

“Horse collar!” Kirby shouted defiantly, wishing Carn could hear. “We’ll see! Now shut up and get after those tough squareheaded babies! S’long!” And, waving aside Shorty’s repeated protests, he banked to the left, swerving away from the little dog-fight. Looking back, he saw Carn and Travis each dueling with one of the Fokkers. But he had no time to watch them. For now, once more, he had to devote his entire attention to the road below.

Carefully, while he sought to work out a complete course of action, he began to maneuver into a position directly above that open highway. And then the fun started.

Up from the ground came such a spew of anti-aircraft fire as Kirby had never before experienced. The earth seemed to erupt it from several quarters, and the shells burst unhealthily close to the Spad, causing the plane to wobble by their concussions and blackening the air. Quickly, Kirby side-slipped, while the shrapnel shrieked past him, some of it tearing into his ship. Again his lips drew up in the tight little line which usually came when he was in a perilous predicament.

He realized that, if he wanted to perform his mission, he must do it swiftly. His comrades would be waiting for him, and the danger of more Boche planes coming was a great one. Also, unless he hurried, the ground-fire would surely get him. He decided, finally, that the only thing to do was to drop straight down on that road, streak over it, and then zoom away. It was a reckless and unorthodox thing to do, but there was a chance—a fleeting chance at least—that it might work.

With the anti-aircraft shells filling the air around him, bumping his ship about, he peered down through that smoky space to gauge that road. Almost directly beneath him. He paused for one final second, like a high-diver pauses before taking the great plunge. During that second he glanced back to look for his

comrades. He did not see them. That worried him, but he assured himself that he’d find them around when he came up.

“Hell!” he burst out, recklessly. “Here goes!” And, with a savage gesture, he pushed the stick all the way forward. The Spad plunged like a plummet, and Kirby dove her wide open. Down he went, through Archie’s coughing filth, with the wind shrilling through his flying wires, and the Spad trembling, straining as if it must break to pieces from the frenzied speed of the dive. Now the ground was looming closer—the road was coming into focus. He leaned forward, for he must absorb everything in swift glances. No painstaking scrutiny of the objective on this job, no taking notes, but just a mental check-up of the general situation, it all depended on his eyes.

Suddenly Archie ceased barking. The Spad was too low. But now the peculiar cough of the anti-aircrafts was supplanted by another and more ominous sound, a shrill clatter of Maxims and pom-poms and rifles. They were opening up on the descending plane from every quarter. And where Archie, though dangerous enough, held little terror for the pursuit pilot, this close-range small-arms fire was a different matter! More than one plane had been bagged by machine gunners on the ground. As the bullets began to whiz up through the air at Kirby, he knew he was in for it. It was a hot reception they were giving him, and the closer he came the hotter it grew. *Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!* He heard it clearly above his roaring ship. And with the staccato clatter came the shrill *crack! crack!* of rifles.

There was a hail of bullets coming up at him, but he kept right on, and the wild speed of his dive prevented the Germans from taking good aim. The road loomed below him. He caught a vague glimpse of trucks, and a mass of moving gray. Then he saw scurrying figures, confused, bewildered soldiers running in terror from the monster which descended on them. They did not know whether this was to be a ground-strafe or a reconnaissance. Kirby decided to make it both. His fingers closed on the stick-triggers, pressed them. Two streams of tracer poured from his guns to answer that hail of ground-fire. But he had no time to look for their results. He was right overhead of the road now. Closer and closer, coming straight down. He strained his eyes, studying the gray uniforms. His keen training and experience helped him. Prussian Guards! Crack troops of the Imperial Army. The kaiser was throwing his very best against the doughboys.

AT TWENTY-FIVE feet from the ground, in a veritable maelstrom of lead, with fabric and splinters of wood leaping from his plane, he jerked back the stick. The Spad lurched, groaning and shrieking in shrill protest. It was a sturdy ship, but it had not been built for flying like this! Its powerful engine, taxed to the utmost, gave a few ominous coughs. Kirby did not like the sound of those coughs. But he had to keep that engine speeded if he was to get out of here alive, and if he was to rejoin his comrades before some more Boche planes came along. He did. He had managed to level off now, and was streaking right along that road, and looking down over the side of the cockpit. He saw wagons, transports, artillery. He noted everything he could as they all rushed past in a blurred streak. Prussian Guards—all of them. Damn this ground-fire! Once in awhile he lowered the Spad's nose to rake the men below with a few rounds of tracer—for moral effect. But it did not help. The farther he went on that four-mile stretch, the worse grew that ground-fire.

Hell-bent, roaring and swaying, the Spad fairly shot over that road, chewing it up in seconds. On, on, on—with Kirby still leaning over the side of the fuselage to take snap-shots of the road with his keen eyes. He must hurry, must get finished and return to his comrades. He opened his throttle to the highest notch, used every trick he knew to get more speed out of his engine. But now the oil that was flung back in his goggled face by the furious slip stream had a strange, painful sting to it. It was boiling! And the radiator thermometer on the dashboard was rising, rising steadily towards the danger mark. 80 degrees centigrade! The strain was overheating his engine! If the radiator got to boiling—

The threat of this new and extreme peril made him desperate. He must slow down, before that engine got too hot. Hastily, he closed the throttle to three-quarters. The Spad at once began to lose speed. But the moment it lost speed the gunners on the ground, given a chance to take even better aim, gleefully blazed away, contesting their marksmanship. Bullets whizzed all over the place. With a crash, a strut splintered, and the wing which it was supporting, weakened, began to shiver. Kirby ducked back into his cockpit as he saw a Maxim spit from directly below. A bullet ricocheted from the cockpit cowling beside him. Another tore through a sleeve of his flying togs. Splinters flew at him, grazing his face, scratching him painfully. He would surely be plugged if he didn't go at the highest speed, and he was forced to open his throttle once more.

God, would this road never end? Streaking along

now, making a new speed record for the Spad, going beyond the wildest dreams of the French firm which manufactured the swift pursuit plane. But with that thermometer rising again! 90 degrees—94 degrees! The engine had a queer sound. It was growling and coughing as it roared.

Then, to his intense relief, he saw that he was coming to the end of the road at last, to the place where the highway curved into the forest. He had secured his information. A possible division of Prussian Guards was being sent up to the Front to resist the steadily advancing Yanks. And that was encouraging news for the Americans. It meant they had the Huns worried.

Also, Kirby had spotted other important things. There were several strange-looking tanks, of a new design he had never seen before. They seemed to go faster than most of the tanks in use, and it would be good to know about them, so that plans for combating them could be formed. Then, finally, there was the usual traffic and materials of war—artillery, ammunition trucks, supply lorries, ambulances, etc. Kirby had done a hasty job, but it was a good job. Staff headquarters would be satisfied.

As he came to the end of the road, a tremendous fusillade of bullets greeted him. Men were nested in the trees, and were shooting away with deadly precision. The radiator thermometer was still rising, but he had no time to notice it now. He must get out of here fast! Defiantly, he jerked back his stick, to zoom away. Again the Spad groaned, lurched, and its motor coughed and sputtered. Painfully, it went into the zoom. Up—up. At forty feet above the ground it was slowing down instead of speeding up. It was panting and gasping. At fifty feet—

There came a terrific hiss in front of Kirby, a hiss which rose to a shrill, piercing scream. At first he did not understand. Then, to his horror, he saw. Steam was spouting from his radiator! A veritable geyser was shooting up from his engine! The radiator was boiling—and the thermometer had burst. And the engine, overheated, was missing frightfully. The strain had been too much!

Desperately, despite the danger, he tried to keep climbing away from that inferno of ground-fire. But the Spad couldn't make the grade. With its engine rattling like a bunch of tin cans, it started to lose altitude. The steam was whipping back at Kirby now in great clouds, and he could hardly see. He had to throttle down; if he let the engine get any hotter the bearings must melt and

the ship would go up in a shattering burst of flames—and he'd go with it! And so, since he couldn't climb, he had to level off scarcely fifty feet from the earth. His blood froze at the full realization of his predicament. He was twenty miles in Hunland, almost down on the earth, with an engine which, if he couldn't cool it off somehow, would explode!

THE bullets from the ground flew thick and fast again, but he scarcely was aware of them. However, instinctively he had headed away from that road, and had his nose pointed west—towards the allied lines. Dumbly, stubbornly, he was trying to get back.

But the steam continued to hiss, and the engine became more and more spasmodic. In a second it must crack! With frenzied haste, Kirby throttled down more, kept barely enough power to hold him in the air. But it did not help. Another idea came to him then. He shut off the motor, tried to glide for awhile to give the engine time to cool off. However, as a result he only lost altitude, and the earth loomed closer. He was over the Bois de Tarniers now, and the tree-tops seemed to be right beneath his undercarriage. He would crash if he didn't use that motor. He summoned all his skill, all his wonderful experience as an aviator, to find some way out. Still heading for the lines, he tried another trick. He used the motor for awhile, then glided until he had to put on power again. But it was useless. For every time he turned on that motor the steam shot up with renewed gusto. A sob of helplessness broke from him. He could never get back! He didn't have a chance. Either he would have to crash or be burned to cinders!

Then, suddenly, the Aisne river appeared right ahead, and he decided to fly over it to have more room. And as the Spad, steaming like a locomotive, dragged itself on to that river, a wild, crazy idea began to take shape in Kirby's mind. He had to laugh at its utter recklessness, but nevertheless he could not dismiss it.

Banking and going down over the stream, between the two banks, he scanned both sides of the river furtively, hastily. At first he groaned, hopelessly. The ground was rough there, and there were Boche all over the place. Even now some of them were firing at him. But then, as he went on further, his hopes suddenly rose.

On the left side of the river was a big wheat-field. It was surrounded, on its other three sides, by trees. And he did not see any signs of men on it. Shrewdly, his eyes took in the surrounding landscape. Nobody in sight. If he could land there unseen—

He shook his head. Land here, way in Hunland?

He would surely be taken prisoner, and—again a sob choked him—he didn't want to be taken prisoner!

But at that very moment he saw that something besides steam was rising from his engine! Smoke! A few black wisps of it curled insidiously through the white vapor. The machine was starting to burn. In a split second—

Guided by sheer desperation, he banked carefully to the left, and was heading for that field. It was closer now, looming up ahead and below. He scanned it keenly.

Then his heart stopped. For he saw six gray-clad figures, with spiked helmets, running out from a camouflaged shelter right near the river's edge. They were looking up at the steaming Spad in mingled awe and excitement. Then they were drawing revolvers, and firing upwards. Kirby now saw what the shelter was. It was a canvas-topped field telephone station. Those men were evidently officers of the German signal corps, in charge of the station. But there was nobody else to be seen. He would have to take the extreme chance. He would.

He circled to get to an end of the field, and faced the wind. Then, carefully, he eased the stick forward. He was half-gliding downwards, gliding straight for that group of men. Too late did they sense his purport, and start to run confusedly. In a second he was right on top of them, and he was pressing his triggers, shooting as he had never shot before. The lurching of the Spad made aiming extremely difficult, for to aim his fixed, forward guns he had to aim the whole ship. But somehow he managed, managed to pour two streams of deadly tracer right down on those six figures.

The first burst got two of them. They leaped into the air like jack-in-the-boxes, then sprawled, inert. The others hurled themselves on the ground, and two of them never rose again. Then Kirby, forcing his Spad's nose a little to the right, raked the canvas-topped telephone station as thoroughly as he could. Dimly, he saw a seventh German run out, to collapse at the doorway. Then he was past them, and could not turn to finish them. The ground fairly jumped up at him. Quickly, with wonderful skill, he pulled back the stick for a short landing. And he landed, parallel to the river, some hundred feet from that station.

In a flash he had jumped from his cockpit, and had his Colt revolver in hand. Back near the station the two Germans who had not been hit were just getting to their feet, a dazed and terrified expression on their faces. They were trying to whip out their Lugers. But Kirby gave them no chance to do so. In a few

seconds he had dashed over to them, and had them covered. They were both officers, he saw—lieutenants, doubtless: tall, slightly haughty Prussians. The dazed terror in their faces seemed strangely incongruous to the rest of their make-up. And when they saw the American flyer confronting them in his heavy teddy-bear suit and covering them with his Colt, their expression became even more incongruous. Both looked as if they couldn't believe what they saw, couldn't believe that an insolent Yank was holding them up so far within their own lines!

"SNAP out of it!" Kirby commanded, tersely. "Up with your hands, you krauts! Hurry up—I'm feeling nervous as hell, and my finger might pull this damn trigger!"

And it was surprising how those Germans, who did not know a word of English, understood the language perfectly when it was spoken at the point of an automatic. Both of them, looking a little more astonished, threw their hands high over their heads. Kirby at once disarmed them; then, keeping them covered, looked about furtively. The other officers were all dead. The station was a wreck—no sense bothering to pull down any more wires. But if the man in that shelter had already buzzed the news to other Germans—

He suppressed the thought with a shrug. Then he glanced back at his plane, which squatted on the field, its motor shut off. The steam was still rising, but it had lessened considerably, and there was no more smoke. His hopes mounted. He had a chance, anyway.

Then his eyes narrowed to mere slits, as he faced the two Germans again. He had two revolvers now, one in each hand—the Colt and a Luger captured from the Germans. Each automatic was trained on one of the two officers.

"You guys hustle and get me some water!" he ordered grimly. Then, struggling to recall the shred of German he knew, he blurted: "*Wasser—wasser!*" and added, "*Schnell!*"

The German officers stared at him. They did not understand. One of them spoke meekly, in guttural tones. Kirby shook his revolvers. The man stopped speaking, and made a pantomime of taking a drink of water. They were asking Kirby if he wanted a drink!

"*Nein! Nein!*" he blazed at the man. "*Dumkopf!*" He began to make-motions then, indicating the radiator of the Spad. His eyes fell on an old bucket, right near the wrecked telephone station. A stroke of luck! He

pointed to the bucket, thence to the river. Still the officers did not seem to understand. An expression of naive ignorance was on their gaunt faces now. Suddenly Kirby realized that they were trying to fool him. They had not understood at first, but they knew very well what he meant now! They were wasting time, in the hope that some of their fellow-soldiers would appear on the scene! And every second was precious. The Mosquito's eyes blazed.

"Damn you!" he bellowed, "I'll blow your square heads off if you don't get that water. Pick up that pail." He leveled both revolvers carefully. "I'll count three—*drei. Ein.*" The Germans began to shift, betraying the fact that they understood. "*Zwei—*" Kirby's fingers closed on the triggers. He didn't relish this unpleasant business at all, but it was war, and there was no time for sentiment. "*Dre—*"

Like frightened rabbits, the two officers jumped for the pail. Kirby kept right after them, watching to see that they didn't make a false move. One of the Germans picked up the bucket, and Kirby marched them to the river. The American's heart was pounding. Furtively, his eyes kept watching the surrounding landscape.

The pail filled, Kirby made them carry it to the Spad. The two officers, both aristocrats, looked humiliated and furious at having to perform this menial labor for a swine American. Both of them carried that pail of water, though one could have done the job. Then Kirby directed them, by gestures, as to how to pour the cool water into the radiator. A close inspection showed that the engine was still in good shape, that no serious damage had been done. The officers, prodded by the Mosquito's revolvers, climbed up on the wing and did what they were told. Once or twice they deliberately fumbled, trying to spill the water, but Kirby would let out such a roar and press the revolvers against them with such violence that they went on working obediently.

It was only a matter of minutes, but it seemed like hours to Kirby. He was furiously impatient, yet he had to give the machine time to cool off. When the radiator was replenished, and fairly cool, he decided not to wait any longer.

But now came the most risky stunt of all. Hastily, Kirby instructed the two officers how to spin the propeller. Again they pretended not to understand, but again he scared them into submission. He showed them how to join hands and swing the big prop. Then he backed away from them, and climbed up into the

cockpit to operate the ignition. But he was leaning out so he could cover them, leveling the Colt with his free hand.

Then the real trouble started. One of the officers, desperate and enraged, started to duck in front of the plane where Kirby couldn't get him. Instantly Kirby fired. A cry of pain broke from the German's throat, and he reeled backwards, falling with a wound in his side. Kirby jumped to the ground at once, ran around to the front of the plane. The German on the ground was not seriously hurt, but he would be helpless for awhile. The other man was much more submissive now. The grim incident had given him an object lesson. Kirby's voice was sharp and unrelenting.

"You're going to spin that prop," he told the remaining officer, "if it's the last thing you do. Remember I've got you covered, and the next time I shoot, I'll shoot to kill."

THE German stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. The man on the ground groaned, and Kirby felt a strange nausea in the pit of his stomach as he heard him. But his eyes did not flicker, and he went back and again got half into the cockpit, his revolver leveled at the head of the man at the propeller.

With a grunt, the German swung the big prop. Kirby switched on the ignition.

"Schnell! Schnell!"

The German was swinging it again, but so damned slowly! Kirby cursed at him, yelled at him savagely. The man became confused in his fear, and panted from the exertion of the task. Again he started to turn over the propeller. Then—

The blood drained from Kirby's face. For, as his eyes peered ahead, peered past the German at the prop, they caught a glimpse of what was coming. Sweeping down a wooded slope which led to this field, pouring down through the trees in a great mass, were some twenty-five figures on horseback! They were galloping straight this way, headed for the plane! And as Kirby dimly made out their trim gray uniforms, their glistening helmets, he knew that they were Uhlans—the renowned crack cavalry of the Imperial Army. The man in the shelter must have telephoned after all. Kirby was going to be caught!

The officer was swinging the propeller again. His back was turned to the on-rushing Uhlans, and he had not seen them as yet. Kirby knew that if he did see them he might very well risk his life to insure the American's capture. Frantically, the Mosquito yelled to

the German at the top of his lungs, repeating: "*Schnell! Schnell!*" over and over again. The beat of horses' hoofs suddenly sounded against the hard earth on the slope. Carbines were being leveled towards the plane. They were just a few hundred yards away now, coming, coming! Suddenly the German officer, as he was bringing the propeller over for the fourth time, heard the noise, started to turn. Desperately Kirby fired, sent a bullet whizzing past the officer's face. The German mechanically continued to turn over the propeller, but then a shout of recognition broke from him as he spotted the Uhlans.

But in that same split second, there came a thunderous roar from the Spad's engine. The motor had picked up! There was no time to rev it now. In one move, Kirby plopped himself into his seat, and was opening his throttle again. The propeller, having gathered up speed, was now almost invisible as it whirled furiously around. The German officer was running towards the horsemen, who were looming up right before Kirby. Slowly, the Spad began to move. A fusillade of bullets whined through the air, and a sharp pain stabbed Kirby's right shoulder. *Hit!* The pain was running down his arm, threatening to paralyze it, but he used that arm anyway. The plane was gathering up speed, rolling across the field. He was taking off the wrong way—with, instead of against the wind, but there was no time to head in the right direction now. Vaguely, he saw the Uhlans breaking rank, as the plane rushed straight towards them. Horses reared frightenedly, neighed in protest. The plane was going faster and faster now, but not fast enough. They were trying to flank Kirby, closing in around him. The Spad clung tenaciously to the ground. The bullets whistled closer and closer, as the expert riders kept dashing to surround the plane.

Then a new peril faced Kirby. There were trees looming up ahead! And the plane was still on the ground. He opened his throttle full, despite the risk of overheating the motor again. The trees rushed towards him, and those bullets kept coming.

But then, with startling abruptness, Kirby felt the sudden lift which comes when a plane's wheels leave the ground. The Spad was taking off at last! Carefully, Kirby pulled back the stick, and just managed to spurn the tree-tops with his undercarriage. Then he was climbing, leaving that field below and behind him. Looking down, he saw the Uhlans prancing around confusedly. He had escaped! He pulled down his goggles, fastened his safety-belt. Then he drew his first real breath.

The engine was running nicely again—its smooth purr made Kirby's heart rejoice. The pain in his arm was terrific, but he managed to guide his plane with his left hand, and thus was able to stand it.

Up in the sky again—five thousand feet. Suddenly a pang of alarm went through him, and he looked around anxiously. His comrades—where were they?

FATE was kind enough to answer that question almost immediately. Over the Bois de Tarniers, circling like searching eagles, were the two Spads of Carn and Travis. They were alone. They had licked those two Fokkers, and were still looking for Kirby! Eagerly, Kirby flew to them, and again there was a joyous reunion, with lots of excited waving.

Then the Three Mosquitoes, flying in their usual three-plane formation, with Kirby leading, set out for the line. But their troubles were not quite over yet. In order to safeguard his engine, Kirby was setting a rather slow pace. And, looking back, he suddenly noticed, once more, a group of tiny black specks sweeping out of the eastern sky. He knew at once that he and his comrades, since they were three planes and not one, had been spotted, and those Germans were after them. There was only one thing to do, and he did it—risky though it was. He put on full throttle, and his comrades followed suit.

And the Germans never came within a mile of them. Kirby's engine fortunately held out this time, and the Three Mosquitoes all arrived safely at the drome.

Later, after the Doc had bandaged up Kirby's shoulder, the famous trio stood before a very relieved C.O. Kirby had given in his information and everything had been explained. The adventures which had befallen Travis and Carn, before they had met Kirby, were simple but thrilling enough.

Travis, when he had gone out, had just neared that road when those same five Fokkers—which seemed to have the job of patrolling that spot—had dived for him. The third Mosquito saw them just in time, however, and fled desperately. But they intercepted him from the lines, and he was forced further into Hunland, where they chased him all over the sky. At last he managed to elude them, but only after they had shot away most of his instruments, including his compass, and consequently he found himself lost. He forgot whether the sun which shone so brilliantly above him was in the east, west, north or south at this hour, and he followed a little creek only to find that it was taking him into even stranger territory. His supply of gas was

steadily ebbing, and he was getting good and scared. Then, by circumstances which were not just luck, Carn had found him.

Shorty had also been chased around by those five Fokkers, who, like the methodical Huns usually did, chased him to exactly the same place they had chased Travis. Carn, eluding them by going up above the stray clouds, had spotted Travis wandering around, and had led the third Mosquito back to the drome. But they had to take a very roundabout course, to avoid several German formations which were filling the sky at that time. They had gone southwest, and then had to steer straight north to come into the drome. And Kirby, because he had gone east, had not met them.

They had landed a few minutes after their leader's departure, and had gone straight to the C.O., to whom they both explained that reconnoitering that road was a physical impossibility. Then, knowing Kirby's reckless nature, they were afraid that he would break his neck trying to go down on that road, or, perhaps, trying to find them. Doubtless, he would get caught in the same trap, which the Germans would spring with even greater accuracy this third time. And so both of them had insisted on going out there again, Huns or no Huns. The C.O. had been reluctant, but at last he had decided that two planes might manage to get through without being spotted, and had authorized them to go—ordering them not to bother with that road.

"But," the grizzled old colonel was saying now, in the gruff tone that always came into his voice when he gave praise, "I'm damn glad you did bother with it, Kirby! I would have caught the very devil from staff headquarters." He smiled. "Well, you've all had quite a day of it. And now I'd suggest that you get some lunch and then trot down to Papa Renier's *estaminet* to celebrate a bit." His eyes twinkled. "They say the ginger ale there is excellent."

Kirby grinned. "Right! And since I'm the lucky guy to-day, I'll buy the drinks."

"The hell you will!" Shorty burst out. "I've got to buy drinks for you and Travis for both your lucky breaks."

"Both wrong, as usual," drawled the lanky Travis. "The drinks are on me."

The C.O. chuckled. "Well, it's the same story." And he took out the deck of cards. The Three Mosquitoes drew. And a strange thing came to pass. All three picked aces!

"Well, you've all drawn the right cards this time," the C.O. said, and dug in his pocket. "And that means the drinks are on me!"