



GHOST GUNS

by ACE WILLIAMS

*Lieutenant Tobey Taylor of the Roaring Hellcats Was Tired of Coming Out Second in Air Combat
With Baron von Grunz of the Red Circus!*

SIX TIMES, LIEUTENANT TOBEY TAYLOR, ranking ace of the Roaring Hellcats, had engaged In aerial combat with Baron Fritz von Grunz, leader of the famous German jagdstaffel, the Red Circus.

And six times he had come off second best.

The fact rankled him. It rankled the C.O., the sputtering, fuming “Wild Bill” Donovan, and it rankled his squadron mates.

Squadron morale was falling in an alarming degree. The Roaring Hellcats had established command of the air in the sector in which they were assigned to duty. But Baron von Grunz and his Red Circus flyers had come along to make a hollow mockery of that reputation so long held by Tobey Taylor and his flying mates.

MILE by mile the Red Circus had pushed the Hellcats back. The squadron was lucky now if they ever succeeded in getting one of their planes up to the front lines, let alone past them and into German territory where they could do some good.

“What’s the answer!” Wild Bill thundered at the pilots ringed around him at the breakfast table in the mess shack. “Are we going to let von Grunz blast us from the skies?”

A silence deeper than the silence of death fell upon the white faced, worried looking pilots. Their heads lowered and eyes rested on the untouched food before them.

There seemed to be no answer to the C.O.’s question, so Wild Bill answered it himself.

“No, by God!” he bellowed. “They’ve been licking us with brains, not lead. We’ve got to fight them with their own weapons. We got to match brains against brains. Is there any pilot here who thinks he can’t do it? If there is, let him speak up. I’ll replace him with another.”

Again there was silence, so thick and depressing that you could slice it with a knife.

Finally Lieutenant Tobey Taylor rose from his place at the table. His face was ashen, tense lined. His hands were balled into fists at his side. His lips quivered as he spoke.

“Sir, if you’ll give me twenty-four hours, I’ll figure out a method, and go out and try again.”

He waited on his feet to hear the C.O.’s answer.

It came with lightning suddenness. “Twenty-four hours? Hell, no!” the hot tempered C.O. thundered. “You’ve failed six times already, now you are begging

for time. No, we’re blasting von Grunz and his Red Circus from the skies before the sun sets this day. Out to your planes on the line! We’re going after them!” “Sorry, sir,” Tobey Taylor replied. “My ship is not ready to fly. I’ll have to stay on the ground.”

He sat down resignedly, his face flushing pink and red.

The other pilots looked at him peculiarly. The C.O. eyed him sternly.

Was Tobey Taylor, their ranking ace, getting the wind up? Had von Grunz and his Red Circus scared him from the skies?

THE Engineering Officer in charge of plane and motor repair spoke up.

“Your ship was not reported unfit for duty, Lieutenant,” he said coldly.

“I know it wasn’t,” Tobey Taylor replied, his eyes shifting about the little mess room. “I am having my sergeant do some special work on it. I planned to surprise—”

“Lieutenant Taylor is set on the ground for ten days for not reporting his ship ‘in work,’” the C.O. broke in. “Come on, let’s go!” Taylor remained fixed in his chair while the other pilots trooped out, the fiery Wild Bill at their head. He felt weak and sick all over. His heart was heavy as lead in his heaving chest.

He sat there silent and sombre while the motors of the waiting Spads were warmed up on the line. He heard them take off, one after another until the last one was in the air.

Then, with head hanging low and eyes downcast, he trudged outside to his hangar, where his sergeant was still busy working over his ship.

“Can’t hurry that job, can you. Sergeant?” he asked hopelessly, with something akin to prayer in the tone of his voice.

The sergeant noticed the pale, drawn look on his lieutenant’s strained features. He saw the worried look in his keen, deep set eyes.

“I can get you olf in a half hour, sir,” he replied, “if you want me to install only one gun. It’ll take me a whole day to rig in the other, and line it up for cross fire.”

A SLOW smile rippled across Tobey Taylor’s lips. Flaming light reflected from his worried eyes.

“I’ll fly with one gun,” he said. “But be sure and have the rear vision mirror set at the correct angle. If it isn’t, it’s my life. But that doesn’t matter much. It’s

von Grunz and his Red Circus that counts. If I can get them out of the picture I'm ready to die."

The sergeant looked up at Taylor with wet eyes.

"You won't die, sir," he replied in breaking voice. "There ain't a Hun in the sky good enough to beat you. Not you, sir. You got brains as well as grits."

Lieutenant Tobey Taylor turned away. His own eyes were wet, and he didn't want his devoted sergeant to see the reaction. Soldier heroes weren't supposed to weep.

"Hurry it up," he said, walking away. "I'll be back with my flying outfit in twenty minutes."

When Lieutenant Tobey Taylor caught up with his squadron mates a good hour afterwards, he found them hemmed in by von Grunz and his Red Circus flyers three kilometers inside the German lines, and two thousand meters above the ground. That is, he found what was left of them, only half of the original number that had taken off from the squadron drome just a short while before.

From his great height above them, flying at 5,000 meters, he could see that they didn't have a chance. Unless something happened, unless they got help from the outside, the once Roaring Hellcats would be nothing but a memory in the red dripping battle skies.

Singing steel tracer paths hemmed them in, above, below and on all sides. The cold, methodical leader of the Red Circus, von Grunz, picked them off one by one, as his mates singled out each Hellcat and herded him to the kill.

TOBEY TAYLOR lost no time in contemplation of the gory, heartrending sight. His own method he had figured out in sleepless nights now past. It only remained for him to prove it.

With prop whining a roaring threnody and motor pounding, he jammed the stick forward, arrowing down into the midst of that flying death, with a song in his heart.

Straight for Baron von Grunz's brilliantly daubed scarlet Foltkr he headed in a vertical power dive. The flying wires thrummed. The wing struts shrieked. The motor pounded in cataclysmic cadence.

Down, down, and down, for the red Fokker's tail, just as von Grunz was diving on Wild Bill Donovan himself.

At 200 yards, Tobey Taylor pressed the triggers of his Vickers guns, mounted forward, to send out a burst of singing slugs, just to let von Grunz know he was there. Yes, Tobey Taylor wanted to give the Hun leader

warning in advance. He wanted the German baron to know that he was on his tail.

The German looked back over his shoulder when Taylor's burst crackled through center section. He saw the oncoming Spad, juggled his controls, let Wild Bill slip out of his range, while he whirled to attack the greater menace at his rear.

Tobey Taylor laughed.

"Come on," he yelled out in the howling slipstream, in happy challenge. "It's you and I in a battle of brains. Let's see who is the winner!"

Baron von Grunz couldn't hear that seething challenge, but he read it in the confident lines of Taylor's face, in the keen glint reflecting through his goggle glasses.

AND he answered it with a blinding fast maneuver that transposed positions in an instant. His screaming red Fokker was thundering down now on the tail of Taylor's green Spad. But Tobey Taylor only glanced back and laughed, waving one hand in deprecatory gesture.

Von Grunz snarled, showing white teeth like the fangs of a wolf, at the direct insult. He narrowed his eyes on the ring-sights, pressed the triggers of his Spandaus and sent in a devastating burst of tracer stitching along the turtleback of the Spad.

It looked like a dead sure shot! But still Tobey Taylor laughed. He thumbed his nose when he looked back over his shoulder again.

The raging von Grunz jammed on more throttle, got his Fokker's nose almost gnawing at the tail of the Spad, sending out another package of leaden death.

Then he flopped forward on his stick. Blood streamed from a terrible hole in his head, made by a hidden stream of Vickers' tracer seeming to come from nowhere. The Fokker went over on its nose, plunged to earth, hit with a terrific smash to burst into crimson flame.

Tobey Taylor lost no time in watching the fluttering fall. He wheeled and banked, went roaring in on the tail of a second Red Circus flyer who was riding one of the Roaring Hellcats down to earth.

A single burst from his forward Vickers whined through the Fokker's tanks, igniting the gas on their way. The Fokker exploded in mid-air, went tumbling down in little pieces of linen, wood, metal, human bones and blood-red flesh!

But a second Hun in a roaring crate had whirled to dive on Taylor's tail. And already the death-marked

tracer was stitching down his fuselage to be swallowed up at the stream line bulge behind Taylor's head.

The Yank pilot only looked back and laughed, meanwhile pressing the auxiliary trigger on his stick.

The second Hun Fokker whined off in an abrupt spin, nose downwards, with the pilot leaning limp and helpless in death over the gun-whales of the pit.

Ten minutes was enough for Tobey Taylor to clean up on the two more of the Hun flight. Spurred by his accomplishments with von Grunz and the second and third Hun he knocked down, the other Hellcats leaped in with added vim.

TOGETHER Tobey Taylor and his mates washed the Hun menace from the battle skies. They kited back to their home drome with a song of victory in their hearts. Even Wild Bill Donovan had decided to overlook Tobey's breach of orders. But, despite the fact that he had seen the Huns go down with his own eyes, he hadn't been able to figure out just how Tobey Taylor had managed to knock them down.

When they landed and taxied up to the deadline he rushed over to find out.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant," he said, wringing Tobey's stick hand warmly. "But damned if I see how you did it yet!"

Lieutenant Tobey Taylor smiled triumphantly.

"I decided I would try a new trick," he replied. "If you'll climb up on the stirrup here I'll show you how I did it."

FIRST, Tobey showed him the two stove lids his sergeant had wired in place behind his back to absorb the Boche tracer aimed at his head.

"See," he explained, "that stopped their slugs." The C.O. was wide-eyed, but made no comment.

"Now come around to the tail and I'll show you how I got them," Tobey said, jumping out of the pit.

In the rear end of the tail assembly he showed the C.O. the single Vicker's gun which his sergeant had mounted there, fixed in a position so that it fired directly backwards, when the pilot pressed an extra Bowden trigger on the stick.

"That's how I got them, von Grunz and the rest," Tobey said. "I had my twin Vickers up front, but they were not expecting that extra gun in the tail. I had intended to have two of them there for cross fire—but didn't get time to have the second one installed."

"Not exactly standard equipment," the C.O. mumbled weakly, as he walked toward the Nest with the ranting Ace. "Brain, yes, that's what it took to get von Grunz. You were smart, Tobey."

"No," Tobey Taylor grinned. "Just tired of coming out second best."