



BUCK MANLEY GOES HOME

by LLOYD LEONARD HOWARD

*His motor going bad, ground machine guns barking at him and enemy planes swooping down.
Buck had only headwork and grim courage to rely upon!*

PERCHED EIGHT THOUSAND FEET above, and a dozen miles within enemy territory, Buck Manley looked around. The sky was a clear expanse of emptiness. Not a sign—not even a tiny wisp of smoke—gave hint of the hot scrap of a few minutes before.

Buck wondered where the other four planes of his flight were.

“Looks like they’ve all gone home,” Buck muttered, “and right now that’s a good place for me. Wonder which is the best way?”

Checking his position from the dash chart, he noted Mangiennes far below, appearing no larger than a saucer. To his right he could just see the spires of

Damvillers; and a little farther, Reville. Off to his left, Spincourt and Domremy seemed like twin lumps on the landscape. Too roundabout—that way.

“Romagne lay between Mangiennes and the lines. His map indicated this to be his most direct route. Buck knew Archie batteries lay thickly spotted along this way, protecting the German sausage balloons operating on that sector.

“All we’ve got to do is keep high enough and sail on over,” Buck assured himself. “Let’s go.”

Heading the Spad’s nose for Romagne, Buck struck out on his first lap home. Dotted marks on his map close beside Romagne marked the Bois d’Hingry. He would watch closely for that wood. It would be on his

left just after passing Romagne. A good plan would be to skirt the Bois, then bear left till Abaucourt appeared. This seemed to him to be the logical place to cross the lines; at a high altitude, of course.

Romagne slipped away beneath him. He made out the dense Bois d'Hingry plainly enough.

Taka-taka-taka! Taka-taka-taka!

Buck threw the control stick hard over and back. The Spad wheeled on one wing tip. Tracer bullets streaked past.

As Buck came around in the vertical bank, a Fokker whizzed by, zoomed into an Immelman turn and roared down on him.

Buck joined in with enthusiasm. As the enemy swooped, Buck nosed up. Driving straight for the fuselage above, he gripped the trigger on the control stick with his thumb.

Pfut-pfut-pfut! Pfut-pfut-pfut!

Twin streams of lead jetted through the propeller, skimmed along the cockpit just above him, and raked through the black-crossed tail. Then he was past.

Swinging back into the fray, Buck cursed his poor marksmanship.

"The next time you sail by, you'll find me sitting on your tail," he promised. "Then we will have a merry little game of ring around the rosy!"

And this might have happened, only——

A second enemy plane, guns opened wide, came in, diving head-on for Buck. Bullets ripped through his fuselage.

During the next sixty seconds Buck stalled, slipped, dived, flipped and Immelmaned, resorting to all the tricks he knew to throw them off. Twice he got in short bursts, as black crosses flashed in front of his machine-gun sights. But he was gradually losing altitude. Maneuver as he would, one Heinie or the other sat on his tail.

Then Buck's hopes rose. Out of the corner of an eye, he glimpsed another plane bearing toward them. For a moment he was elated—till he caught sight of black crosses adorning the wings and tail of the newcomer.

Buck knew it was his move. And he did not hesitate on the manner of his going! Throwing the stick hard forward, he stood the Spad on its nose. Straight down he plunged—motor full out, wind screaming and wires strumming—down, down, down!

The earth fairly leaped at him! Down he rocketed— one thousand—two—three—five. Only a thousand feet up! Still down! Nine hundred—seven—five!

"Hope those Heinies think they've got me." His eyes squinted along the nose of his shooting plane. "Got to pull up, though. Easy, easy—now!"

Snap! A flying wire twanged. Buck prayed.

"Hang with us, wings!"

He coaxed the control stick back carefully to avoid the shock of leveling off too quickly. The Spad arched in a long curve, heading straight into the Bois d'Hingry looming ahead. With a final pull, the Spad zoomed up over the first line of trees. The wheels cleared their tops by inches.

"Nice judgment, Buck, old boy!" he congratulated himself.

With the momentum gained from the dive, the little ship fairly hurtled through the air: The wood below appeared as a blurred mass. Buck cast a quick glance to the rear. Nothing coming! Glancing up, he saw his three late adversaries winging far above.

"Funny none of them followed me down!" he muttered. "They'll have to step on it some, if they catch me now."

Another watchful glance showed him that the distance was being cut down.

"Going to box me up on ahead, eh? Well, it can't be done, Jerry—not this time." He calculated that there was little chance of the enemy ships' cutting him off. He was over the wood now. A town appeared distantly ahead. Buck hastily traced his position on the chart.

"That's Etain there." He checked rapidly. "I'm off the course. Running almost parallel to the lines."

Swinging to the right, he struck for Abaucourt.

"Why in the devil don't they come down, or give it up?" Buck growled. A backward glance revealed his three pursuers trailing doggedly.

Abaucourt slipped away beneath him. It was only three miles to the lines. Once back on his own side——

Dammit! He'd have to work up a little altitude somehow!

He lifted the Spad's nose, held it for a moment, then leveled. Glancing above, everything seemed O.K. He slipped up another notch. All jake above again. Only five hundred feet up, but Buck knew it was all he could squeeze in.

Then, all too quickly. Buck knew why those three were content to follow along in watchful waiting. In front and above him, a black parcel of smoke opened. Black specks belched out. Another! The Spad jounced as one burst too close under! A flaming onion streaked upward beside the cockpit!

Little clouds were hanging in thick clusters. The

Archies were serving them up hot! Buck veered to the right. Smoking tracer bullets sang past his ears. The whole ground battery was out to get him. Onions, one-pounders, machine guns—they were giving him the works!

Buck scooted back toward Abaucourt. Out of range for the moment, he racked his brain for a way out.

“This is one hell of a fix!” he summed up the situation.

Above, poised like vultures, were three enemy craft. Five hundred feet above, lay territory peppered with ground batteries, barring his way across the lines.

Abaucourt appeared ahead.

“Can’t go on in this direction forever,” Buck thought grimly. “Fact is, there isn’t any way I can go.”

He decided to try it a little farther up the line. Swinging aloft, he flew on a course parallel to the lines.

And then it happened! One of those occurrences that at times enter into the best of regulated predicaments. It might have been a particle of dirt, a fleck of rubber, a bit of solder—anything—that fouled the carburetor’s high-speed jet!

The steady roar of Buck’s sturdy motor ceased. A throbbing “idle” kept the propeller blades turning lazily. The low-speed jet was still working, but it was useless for power!

Away went the altitude so carefully gained and held. And with it went Buck’s hopes. Visions of high stockades, topped with barbed wire, where he would spend the remainder of his war days, flashed through his mind.

Buck moved the control lever left, his left foot kicking the rudder bar. The Spad turned, prop whirling slowly, as though winging to a landing. Uneven, broken ground rose quickly—too quickly—to receive the hampered ship. Buck braced himself for the smash.

Then, without warning or hesitation, a deep, swelling roar broke from the engine. The tiny craft surged forward. The ground ceased its advance and began to slip backward!

While, there is life, there is hope. Headed toward the lines now, Buck kept a straight course. He must try and make it across. If the motor would only hold out!

Buck decided to trust to luck that it would—and also to some special act of Providence to get him through the Archies. He talked to his bus, as a jockey would plead with his mount.

“Good old crate! Hit ’em up, girl! Stick with us, motor, or there’ll be no more sailing for us. Atta girl!

Swell little zoom, then! Let’s shove up another notch. Knew you could do it. It all helps.

“Coming fine, kid. Now, let’s stretch out and make the old ’drome, hey? All right! Here we go—hang on! Never mind what’s just ahead. Hit, dammit, hit!”

Ahead, he could plainly make out the ground batteries, only two hundred feet below. His chances were one in a thousand to get through. But it was now or never!

He watched gray-green figures scurrying around their guns, ready for him as he sailed over. There would be onions, shrapnel, bullets—the whole damned mess! Another moment now, and they would cut loose.

Hit, motor—dammit, hit!

But it wouldn’t! Lazy blades cut through the air—not an ounce of energy in their thrust. The gray-green figures rose toward him. Buck, powerless to prevent, was nosing squarely into the battery.

“Going to land right in ’em—fair and clean!” The prison-camp picture he had just pictured to himself seemed very real.

Through the wings he watched the gunners below. They looked back at him just as intently, withholding their fire. They even stepped back from their gun standards, preparing to get out of his way, as he crashed.

Suddenly Buck felt himself whipped forward. A roar broke. He fairly leaped at those batteries! And with his motor full on, there came to his ears the *pfut-pfut-pfut* of machine guns in full action. They were his own!

Tensing himself for the crash, he had closed his thumb on the trigger of his own twin guns!

Pfut-pfut-pfut! Pfut-pfut-pfut!

Round after round streamed through the synchronized propeller, raking into and through those batteries twenty feet below!

Buck fairly sowed lead into that ground.

He was past them now, and his work had been good. Quite a few of the pot-helmeted forms lay sprawled. The unmanned gun standards could do him no harm now.

And now to go up again to get the altitude for the hop over the lines. Buck nosed up, and immediately leveled.

He had forgotten his three enemies in the air in the stress of facing those on the ground. But the vultures were not overlooking him. Having watched proceedings from their grand-stand advantage, they were now about to show their hands.

As one, they dived.

“Go to hell, will you!” Buck fairly shouted in his exasperation.

He’d have to fly low now. That’s all there was to do—follow the contour of the ground, dip into the valleys and rise up the slopes. Altitude be damned! If he had to, he’d stay down.

Infantry fire crackled directly below him. He was over the German trenches. Buck laughed in glee.

“Bang away and be hanged!” he exulted. “You don’t mean a thing to me.

If the motor would only keep it up for ten—even five—minutes more. Hang on, motor!

He was over his own trenches now.

Khaki-clad men behind mud-parapets witnessed a strange chase. A speeding plane bearing American insignia roared across No-Man’s-Land, eluding three black-crossed specters in pursuit.

A lookout dashed for the signal phone. He worked the buzzer frantically.

“Position No. 58? American plane low—hard pressed—three Boches on tail—headed due over——”

In position 58 an ear set slammed down. A figure leaped through a dug-out door to camouflaged thickets.

“Hey, youse! American plane coming—throw up barrage fight behind it—three Heinies hot on tail!”

Taka-taka-taka!

Faintly, to the rear and above, machine guns rattled. Tracers skipped along just ahead of the Spad. Buck looked back. Only two hundred yards off!

Ahead rose a shelled wood, the broken twisted poles of gaunt trees outlined in jagged formation against the sky line. He must zoom to clear it!

And when he zoomed—forty yards would be a beautifully accurate range to—

He was up—over! The wheels of his plane barely missed the slivered tops.

Taka-taka-taka!

A strut splintered.

From behind, came thunder—deep, heavy, rolling. Different from machine guns it made, a most welcome sound—a whole swelling wall of sound—pleasant to hear.

Buck turned his head and surveyed the happenings. White, bursting clouds of smoke were springing up in profusion. The anti-aircraft guns were going strong.

Through the white puffs he caught glimpses of Hack crosses maneuvering out of that patch of onions and shrapnel. Buck knew he was out of it now—and he drew a good long breath.

“Good-by, boys! Hope to see you again some day.” Buck flung a farewell wave backwards

“Three more minutes. Hang on, motor! Well soon be home.”

In the distance, a white sock floated above a hangar. Home! Gosh, but it looked good!

The motor couldn’t—or wouldn’t—wait. And only a mile more!

Again Buck peered at the rising ground. Rough ground, broken places, but friendly. It was too bad, to be so near, but then——

The Spad jack-rabbit, as the front wheels struck a cross ridge. There came a sound of splintering wood; a jolting bounce; and the tail flung upward and over.

Buck wormed free from beneath the cockpit, crawled through a crumpled wing, and stood upright. It had been a clean spill. He wasn’t even braised.

Ruefully he surveyed his steed, flat on its back, broken wheels sticking skyward in a pitiful gesture. Buck’s goggles suddenly clouded.

Snapping the goggles on his helmet, he wiped a grimy sleeve across misty eyes.

“Dammit! You’re a good old hack! Dammit!”