

DEATH TAKES OFF

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

With the Success of the Allies in the Balance, Streak Davis Roars into Enemy Territory on a Mission that Spells Doom—Casting all Thought of Failure into the Slipstream of His Pounding Crate!

CHAPTER I STREAK DAVIS' PROTÉGÉ

LIEUTENANT "STREAK" DAVIS, ace and hellion of the 25th United States Pursuit Squadron, stood on the tarmac—a broad-shouldered, lean-hipped figure, in khaki flying togs, whose weather-bronzed face was upturned toward the blue sky overhead.

Directly over the drome, a Spad was going through a series of flashing maneuvers, its wings catching the sheen of the sun as it gyrated. It was performing figure

eights, barrel-rolls, falling-leaves and Immelmans one after another, in almost breathless succession. It tumbled around the clear blue morning sky like a graceful fan-tailed fish in an immense tank. Pilots of the 25th who caught sight of the maneuvers watched with admiration and awe, words of praise leaping to their lips. To them it was a remarkable exhibition of flying.

But Streak Davis, who was more personally interested than anyone else in the maneuvers of the Spad, was frowning as if dissatisfied. One of the greatest flyers in the air force himself, Davis was satisfied with nothing less than perfection—and his eyes, keen and critical, were picking flaws in the convolutions of that Spad overhead.

He could see when there was just a little too much bank on a turn, or when a turn skidded. He could

tell when an Immelmann was not quite as tight as its German inventor, the late Captain Immelmann, had designed it to be.

Determinedly the Spad overhead continued its stunting, and at last Streak Davis was forced to admire the game effort the crate was making.

A dull, rumbling sound rolled from the east beneath the drone of the Hisso engine. Streak Davis, hearing it, found his mind straying momentarily from the plane above. A grim look came over his weather-beaten face, and his eyes narrowed.

"Papa Hindenburg's still at it!" he muttered darkly.

FOR three days the most stupendous German advance in the history of the war had swept across a thirty-mile width of sector, making a steady and incredible gain. Hindenburg, beloved idol of German soldier and civilian, had somehow rallied the tired grey-green divisions, had inspired the fresh, untrained reserves.

And then had been seen once more a spectacle that history would probably never see again: the machine which was Germany's army—a grey Juggernaut which rolled over the face of the earth, flattening the harassed Allied armies and driving them in retreat.

The helpless French and British were turning frantically to their newest ally. At the moment, Davis knew, all hope was being placed upon the square shoulders of General Pershing, commander of almost two million Yank soldiers. Would Pershing be able to stem the grey Juggernaut? Would he find a way to counter-attack?

THE situation was dark, critical. Streak Davis had seen it, flying over the cauldron of hell which was the front: he had seen the grey-green hordes sweeping like the Huns of old across No-Man's-Land; he had seen Yank divisions blasted from salients by the methodical Boche artillery. The 25th Squadron, in the thick of the battle-sector, had been doing double patrol duty—every pilot was haggard from lack of sleep.

Good men had been lost, for the Boche had moved their best *Jagdstaffel* into the sector—the deadly, green-striped Fokker circus of Karl von Lorner, greatest of all Hun sky-killers.

There was a shift in the wind, and the rumble that had drifted from the east died out, became scarcely audible. Streak Davis thrust off the grim thoughts of war, and once more gave his critical attention to the gyrating Spad overhead.

For several minutes the flashing crate continued its graceful maneuvers. Then it circled to the wind end of the drome, its nose dipped, and it was coming down with the whine of flying wires rising over the dying engine.

Streak Davis' keen eyes followed it as it came, and his ears listened to the engine-blip. He saw the wheels of the crate hit the far end of the turf, frowned as they bounced once, grinned as they finally held the earth and were rolling to a neat stop.

Davis swung on his lean hips, and ran to the idling ship. As he reached it, a slender, flying-togged figure climbed from the cockpit, pushed up his goggles, and revealed a freckled face which would have looked boyish save for the mature, quiet depths of the man's eyes.

"Well, Streak, how did I do this time?"

The slender pilot's voice was eager, hungry for praise.

Streak Davis shrugged his broad boulders.

"You're improving, Nelson," he said, grudgingly, and the other's face fell in disappointment.

"And I almost broke my neck trying to keep those rolls and Immelmanns tight, like you said! You make me feel that I ought to go back to anti-aircraft gunnery. At least I know my anti-aircraft guns." Davis tone softened.

"Don't take it that way, kid," he said, and put a big hand on Nelson's shoulder. "I guess I'm just a crab; you're head and shoulders above most of the other peelots in this outfit—and as for knowing the anti-aircraft guns, that comes in darn handy in the air. When it comes to dodging Archies, you're a magician! I always thought I was pretty good at it myself, but I'm a sucker in a real anti-aircraft barrage—while you fly right through 'em!"

Nelson's face brightened—only to fall again as Davis snapped once more into crisp harness.

"But that doesn't mean I'm satisfied with you! You've got to tighten up on your turns and rolls, and land without even bouncing. You're weak on combat maneuvers in general; that's why von Lorner's gang almost caught you napping in that dogfight yesterday."

"You certainly pulled me out of that, Streak," Nelson said with grateful remembrance. "You picked those two Fokkers off my tail like flies." He looked at Davis as a man looks at an idol. And Streak Davis grinned back at him. Streak Davis, the veteran hellion, had taken a paternal interest in Bert Nelson, the novice. It was an unusual thing for Streak to do, for he

was more or less of a lone wolf, friendly enough to all his squadron-mates, but seldom singling out any one as a buddy.

YET, somehow, he had taken a liking to the quiet, freckle-faced Nelson from the very start—he had admired Nelson for having the nerve to transfer from anti-aircraft gunnery to combat flying. And in Nelson's sheer, persistent determination to make good as a combat flyer, Streak Davis had recognized potential "ace-material." Davis was trying to develop that material, to instill in the new pilot some of his own consummate flying skill.

"I want to see you make the grade—all the way," Davis was saying now. "I want to see three-point landings, and turns so fast that no Jerry can beat you to them."

A look of fervent determination came over the freckle-faced Nelson.

"I'll try, Streak," he gritted. "I'll try until I bust an—"

He broke off, and both men turned abruptly—as the scream of a siren split the morning air. Swirling from the road in a cloud of dust came a long, sleek staff car—star-marked pennants fluttering from its mudguards. It jounced across the tarmac—then, with a squeal of tires, came to a stop directly before the rude wood Headquarters shack.

DAVIS and Nelson, as well as several other pilots and mechanics, looked at it in awe. It fairly glared with importance, with military authority. A tall khaki figure was alighting from it now, helped by the soldier chauffeur. The glint of the sun flashed from the stars on the tall figure's shoulders as he strode hurriedly into the Operations shack.

Streak Davis whistled. "Say, that looked like old 'Eat-'em-alive' General Thorpe himself! Must be something real big to bring him here!"

"May be it's the war," Nelson grinned. "They say there is one going on and— Hey, what's this!" He broke off, for now the trim figure of the C.O.'s orderly came bursting out of the shack, was making a beeline across the field. His hasty sprint brought him directly up to Streak Davis.

"The C.O.'s compliments. Lieutenant Davis, and—"

"Save your breath, I know the rest," Streak cut in. His air of ease had dropped from him like a cloak; his face was sober, alert. He turned hastily to Nelson.

"Better tell my grease-monkeys to roll out my bus,

Bert," he said grimly. "I've a hunch I'm going to be doing some flying."

And leaving both Nelson and the orderly behind, he ran to the Headquarters shack, passed the khaki chauffeur who was standing by the idling staff car, and then rapped sharply on the closed Headquarters door.

Major Johnson, wiry, grizzle-faced C.O. of the 25th, opened the door for him.

"Eat-'em-alive" General Thorpe, second to Pershing in command of the A.E.F., was standing behind the desk. He was a tall, square-shouldered figure with a granite face much like that of his great commander-in-chief. But just now he seemed to be in a state of agitation. Worrylines were deep around his steel-grey eyes, and the muscles in his face were taut.

Streak Davis drew up to respectful attention, snapped out a crisp salute. Major Johnson came back from the door.

"This is Lieutenant Davis, General," he said. "I think you'll find him a reliable—"

The granite-faced general waved an impatient hand.

"Heard all about him, and even met him a couple of times," he remarked. He spoke frankly, and right to the point.

"LIEUTENANT DAVIS, we're in a jam! There's a flying job to be done, and the tide of the war depends on it! Your C.O. here nominated you for the job, and I've selected you. The rest is up to you."

Streak Davis met the piercing gaze unflinchingly, nodded, and then waited for details.

The general stood tapping nervous fingers on the C.O.'s desk.

"I don't have to tell you what the Hindenburg push has been doing," he said then, his voice grim. "Yesterday the enemy managed to gain thirty miles headway, and the only reason they've slowed up now is that they need a breathing spell! One of the first salients they took yesterday was the town of Villairs. And it was on the outskirts of Villairs that we had our brigade headquarters—Brigadier-General Sampson and his staff occupying a chateau there."

He paused, the lines deepening in his face and a look of grief coming into his eyes.

"THE chateau was shelled in the preliminary German bombardment. The brigadier-general himself, as well as most of his staff, never had a chance to escape. They perished while attempting to evacuate.

That was late yesterday. It was only today that the handful of officers who had escaped from the shelled chateau brought us some news which—I must confess—threw us all into a turmoil.

“Perhaps you know something about Brigadier-General Sampson. He was Pershing’s most valuable expert on military strategy. When this Hindenburg advance began, Pershing put faith in Sampson to work out a counter-attack plan which was to be known as the Brigade Plan. Sampson had picked the brigade sector where he felt the counter-blow could be struck. He and his staff went to work and drew up the plan, promising to turn it over to G.H.Q. as soon as it was ready. It was completed yesterday—” He broke off, significantly.

Major Johnson was nodding tensely. And Streak Davis, eyes narrowed, spoke with grim understanding.

“And when the chateau was shelled, the plan was destroyed—is that the idea, General?”

The general’s voice snapped impatiently, making him feel like a fool.

“Do you think I’d have rushed here if the plan was destroyed?” he asked. “No—the plan, as far as we know, is still intact in that chateau. In evacuating, Sampson and his staff had no time to destroy it. Moreover, that plan was the only copy—and all those who knew of its contents perished among the shells. Can you see the situation we’re in now? The fact that the plan is intact is at once a blessing and a curse. If we can possibly get it, we shall know where to launch our counterattack—it is our only hope for immediate action. On the other hand, if the Germans get it, you can imagine what a weapon it would be in their hands!”

Streak Davis’ lips tightened. He saw too clearly the truth of the general’s words. Containing as it must the complete disposition of Allied troops and artillery positions, the plan could be turned by the Boche back against the Yanks like a deadly boomerang.

“But from what you say the Germans haven’t gotten the plan, General,” he said then, hopefully.

“FORTUNATELY, no. According to the escaped officers from the chateau the plan had been left in a closed steel safe, located in the only chamber of the building which had remained quite intact from the devastating shells. As yet, we’re reasonably certain that the Germans haven’t discovered that safe. This we learned from Allied Intelligence operatives. Our agents there were unable to get near Villairs itself because of

a vigilant guard of Boche counter-espionage men, but they picked up enough from Hun officers here and there to learn that the Germans haven’t yet sent a party to search the shelled chateau.

“The Boche evidently do not know that the building was a brigade headquarters. But before the day is over, they’ll surely be sending a searching party there just as routine. And the safe and its contents will surely be discovered. The Boche will get that plan, unless—” Once more his steel-grey eyes went to Streak Davis.

“UNLESS I go over there and get that plan first?” Streak Davis finished for him. “Is that right, General?” The general’s smile was grim.

“That,” he said in an even voice, “is quite right.”

A fighting gleam came into Streak Davis’ eyes. His big, broad-shouldered frame straightened, as if stirring itself toward reckless action.

“I won’t waste a minute, General,” he clipped. “Just give me the location of the chateau, and the combination of the safe—”

The general shook his head.

“We haven’t got the combination. Brigadier-General Sampson and his staff were the only ones who knew it. You’ll have to take dynamite—fuse and drill. Ordnance corps are sending them here and they’ll arrive in a few minutes. The safe will have to be blown. Lieutenant—” Then, as he saw Davis’ face tense, “Oh, I realize the risk of it. A delicate business—with the Germans right in Villairs. It will require fast work, and a quick getaway. General Pershing himself won’t rest until those plans are somehow recovered. But still, it’s a volunteer job, and if you don’t feel up to it—”

But Streak Davis’ jaw was firm and resolute.

“Give me the dope, General,” he gritted. “And as soon as the dynamite comes, I’ll be off.”

“And I’ll be with you!” The new voice made all three men whirl with surprise.

In the doorway, his freckled face sheepish but nevertheless determined, stood Lieutenant Bert Nelson, ex-anti-aircraft gunner.

He saluted the staring general.

“I couldn’t really help hearing, General,” he said, somewhat guiltily. “The door was open, and I was sort of hanging around outside, waiting for Lieutenant Davis—”

The general’s face crimsoned. Now the men in the room saw the “Eat-’em-alive” expression which had been dubbed by frightened subordinates upon this

granite-faced martinet.

"The door open?" he roared. "What ass left it open when we were discussing such confidential matters?"

A very red-faced Major Johnson moved meekly to the door and closed it tightly.

"I'm so in the habit of leaving it open that—" He broke off, sought refuge in anger.

"But here. Nelson, what do you mean by barging in here?"

NELSON stood his ground gamely. "I heard that Lieutenant Davis has to go to Villairs—thirty miles in Hunland. Now I happen to know there are several dangerous anti-aircraft batteries between our lines and all those miles of German terrain. Lieutenant Davis will agree that I—being an ex-gunner myself—know a bit about getting safely through anti-aircrafts. I wish to volunteer to accompany Lieutenant Davis—see that he gets safely through."

Streak Davis spoke sharply. "Nothing doing, Nelson. The anti-aircrafts aren't so bad that I can't get through. And I can see that this is a one-man job."

"A fool could see that!" snapped General Thorpe. "One plane is all we dare send. It must get through unspotted—so the Huns can't see where it goes or discover its mission. Even if the mission fails, it must be kept secret."

"It won't fail," Davis promised. "I'll manage to slip through and—"

He broke off abruptly. The others were astonished to see him stiffen, go suddenly rigid. Their ears, not as keen as his, had not detected a barely audible sound—outside the door. A slight, scuffling sound.

Streak Davis, apprehension in his eyes, leaped suddenly across the room to that door. He seized it and jerked it wide open.

amazed incredulous exclamation.

For the man who had snarled out in the guttural foreign tongue was the chauffeur of the staff car.

Even as Streak Davis' powerful right arm shot out in an effort to seize him, the chauffeur leaped backward. He whirled half around and then went off like a bolt, dashing across the turf.

Cursing, Streak Davis drew out the Colt .45 he always wore at his hip, Believing that the chauffeur was going to head for the idling staff car, the Yank ace hurled around to intercept him. But the chauffeur had already changed his course as if anticipating this. He was darting toward the copse of trees at the fringe of the tarmac.

Madly, Streak Davis was galloping after the fleeing figure of the chauffeur, gun in hand.

The chauffeur was darting in among the trees then. Davis was right after him—he could glimpse his quarry ahead through foliage and between trunks. Unable to draw a bead on him because of the trees, the Yank pilot was madly trying to get to him.

Suddenly the chauffeur stooped—he had reached a small clearing, out beneath the brilliant open sunlight. Davis, still rushing through the trees, saw the man stoop down—saw him pull a small flat object from his tunic and begin to manipulate it with desperate haste.

At first Davis couldn't understand—then he saw that the flat thing was giving off flashes from the sun.

A mirror—with a hinged cover over its surface which the chauffeur lifted and dropped, caused the timed flashes. An improvised heliograph! The chauffeur was using it to send up sun flashes toward the sky.

Streak Davis, still running-toward the scene, jerked up his eyes. And then a cry of full, enraged realization broke from his throat.

High in the clear blue overhead, a lone plane was circling like a furtive hawk. It was a Fokker, that plane—a taper-winged coffin-nosed D-7. And save for its black crosses, it was all green in color, from nose to tail!

It was Karl von Lorner—himself!

THE deadliest of all German flyers, leader of Hunland's crack *Jagdstaffel*, was wheeling his green crate up there in the sky—and no doubt he was catching the flashes from the improvised heliograph on the clearing below.

All in that instant, Streak Davis grasped the full import of the business. All the machinery of Germany's

CHAPTER II SPY TROUBLE

A FIGURE IN KHAKI ALMOST FELL into the room—a figure who must have been leaning right against the door when it was closed. A snarl of guttural rage burst from his lips as he regained his balance, and at the same time General Thorpe gave an

Intelligence system must have been bent toward watching the movements of Yank H.Q.—to see if any plan for a counter-attack against Hindenburg was formed. Somehow this spy with the heliograph had gotten himself into the excellent position of chauffeur to General Thorpe.

Von Lorner, evidently playing the air-contact part, must have followed the general's staff car when, driven by a spy, it came here to the 25th drome.

The spy-chauffeur had eavesdropped on the scene in the Headquarters Shack when the C.O. had left the door open. But the Boche probably would have heard that scene anyway, door open or not, for when Davis had surprised him he had been leaning right against the door to catch further information—and the door was not soundproof.

And now—

EVEN as Streak Davis was reaching the clearing, his keen eyes were catching those heliograph flashes. They were in Morse—long flashes and short—and they were spelling German words. Streak Davis understood both Morse and German, had no trouble translating the words:

"J 2 signaling, J 2 signaling— Have anti-aircraft batteries all concentrate zone between here Villairs—"

Swift as lightning flashes the words were spelled out, as the chauffeur flipped the cover on and off his mirror. "They are sending flyer to Villairs to get—"

All this the spy managed to signal in the seconds while Streak Davis was charging towards the clearing. Another instant and the vital information would be flashed to von Lorner's crate! And von Lorner would go back to tell the Germans about that safe at the Villairs chateau—about the Brigade plans! Streak Davis gained the clearing at last. Madly, was rushing towards the crouched chauffeur.

"Stop!" the Yank ace yelled, leveling his Colt. "Stop or I'll drill you, you Boche skunk!"

The crouching man half-whirled. Davis had not seen that his right hand was holding a Luger. But he saw the long-barreled gun now, as its black muzzle poked out towards him with yawning menace. Even as he aimed with his right hand, the spy was beginning to manipulate his heliograph again with his left, trying to get through the vital letters while his fingers tightened on the trigger.

Crack! Crack!

The two reports blended almost into one. But not quite, for the Colt in Davis' hand spat flame a split-

second before the Luger. And the Luger's slug went wild, whizzing safe over Davis' head as the chauffeur's whole body jerked upwards like a jack-in-a-box, then sprawled to the ground—a bullet in his heart.

Breathing hard, Streak Davis once more lifted his eyes up toward the sky. He saw the green plane of von Lorner wheel in two more lazy circles—then suddenly it turned its nose toward the east and went hurling off like a missile, black smoke trailing from its exhausts.

It was shrinking towards Hun-land! Von Lorner was racing back with what information he had! And that was plenty—even if it did not include the most vital fact—did not reveal that the Brigade plans were in a chateau at Villairs.

Von Lorner had learned, however, that a Yank plane was going to fly to Villairs—and that an anti-aircraft zone should be arranged to prevent any plane from getting through!

General Thorpe, the C.O., and Nelson, followed by other pilots and mechanics, came bursting onto the scene now. Streak Davis turned to them hastily.

"I killed the spy—called himself J 2!" he clipped, nodding toward the body of the chauffeur. And then, without delaying further he dashed back madly upon the 25th's tarmac.

Thanks to Nelson, his plane had been rolled from its hangar. The trim khaki Spad squatted on the deadline, its famous insignia bright in the sunlight, a painted, silver streak of lightning on either side of the fuselage. Mechanics were tightening up wires. Streak Davis rushed toward the crate, buttoning up his flying, fur-lined collar.

"Start her up!" he clipped. "And make it fast!"

His mechanics were accustomed to these emergency orders from their hellion master. One of them leaped instantly to the propeller, was tugging the blade through compression. Streak Davis hoisted his big frame into the cockpit with one agile swing.

He found helmet and goggles, jammed them over his head even as he reached for the ignition switch.

CHAPTER III
ACE MEETS ACE

CONTACT!"

"Switch on!"

The Hiss burst into a series of deafening detonations.

Streak Davis did not wait for it to warm thoroughly. He used the choke until the roar steadied in its tone. Then, recklessly, he waved an arm—the mechanics jerked the chocks from the wheels, and the Spad leaped forward like an unleashed whippet.

As he soared into the sky, his eyes peered keenly from behind their goggles. A cry of hope broke from him. Way off in the east he could see a glinting green shape. Von Lerner—still in sight!

Grim-faced, Streak Davis bent towards his controls. He must stop that Hun from reaching the lines! He slammed the throttle-lever all the way forward across the arc. The roar of the Hiss split the very heavens, as the Spad cleaved the air like a dart. The fastest Yank in the air service was burning up the very sky, hurling after his quarry.

And he was gaining! The green-winged shape ahead was growing larger before him. He was gaining on that Fokker—but far too slowly! For von Lerner had gotten a good headstart on him, and was even now nearing the battle-lines.

Below and ahead loomed the seething, hellish expanse of pock-marked earth which was the front. The German shells were pounding at the zigzag cuts which were Yank trenches—the German trenches were choked with grey-green troops of Hindenburg's armies which had paused in their advance only to gain fresh wind and impetus.

The green Fokker of von Lerner was starting to pass over those Hun trenches even now.

Cursing, Streak Davis flung all his skill and strength into an effort to coax still more speed out of his racing plane. In one mad, rushing spurt, the Spad was closing the gap between itself and the Fokker. The tail-fins of the green plane loomed before Davis. He knew he was not yet in range, but desperately he resorted to an old trick of air combat. His fingers closed on his stick-triggers, pressed them.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

THE twin forward Vickers of the Spad stuttered into blazing life. Long, smoky tracer streams cascaded from them, falling hopelessly short of the tail of the green plane ahead.

The helmeted head of the German pilot jerked back from the cockpit, and Davis caught a glimpse of von Lerner's hard, goggled face. And then, as Davis fired another out-of-range burst, the green Fokker began to zigzag and half-roll in its course. The trick was working.

The German, seeing tracers, hearing the Spad's guns, was instinctively going through the maneuvers to throw off his adversary's sights. This caused him to make slower headway.

And Streak Davis' Spad caught right up to the green tail in another instant. But in that instant, even as he was preparing to range the Fokker at last, Davis saw to his fury that von Lerner was now over the lines—in Hun skies! Unless he surely bagged the German ace now, the latter would deliver the information he had gotten from the spy heliograph message!

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! His hopes rose grimly as he saw his tracers making bits of wood and fabric leap from the Fokker's tail-fins. Von Lerner veered, but Davis was after him furiously.

And then—

AFRESH oath of alarm ripped from Streak Davis' throat. For in that instant he saw the German's arm rise from the cockpit of the Fokker—saw it hurl a small cylindrical object into space. Down went the cylinder—then its fall was slackened as a tiny white parachute umbrella'd over it.

It drifted down right amid the Hun terrain while Davis watched helpless, in despairing realization! Von Lerner had dropped his information in a dispatch tube!

During this moment, while Davis' attention was distracted by that falling dispatch tube, von Lerner once more straightened out his green Fokker. Once more he was speeding toward the Hun interior. Streak Davis cursed as he saw this. There was a chance, a fleeting chance at least, that the dispatch tube would not land among Boche troops—it might go unfound. That was why he must still stop von Lerner from landing to deliver the information verbally.

Furiously, Davis hurled his Spad once more after the green Fokker, was pounding madly behind it.

"Turn around and fight, von Lerner!" he gritted beneath the roar of his Hiss, "Come on, you Boche!"

But von Lorner had no inclination to fight just now. He evidently wanted to make sure that his information got through. He kept heading stubbornly for the interior.

Streak Davis taxed his Spad in a last effort. And to his savage joy he was once more gaining, closing the gap between himself and the Fokker. He leaned to his sights. He was drawing a bead on von Lorner. This time he would plug the Jerry ace, plug him and—

Grumpf! G-r-rumpf!

At first Streak Davis ignored the familiar, rasping bark of anti-aircrafts even when two shells mushroomed out amazingly close to his right wing, staining the sky with their black spew. But then— *Grumpf! B-r-oom! B-rooom!* The Spad pitched crazily in its course, and with a cry of incredulous horror, Davis saw a whole brace of shells bursting all around him, threatening to engulf him with their smoke and shrapnel! At the same time, through the growing A.A. barrage, he glimpsed the green Fokker of von Lorner zooming safely into the clear—getting away.

MADLY he tried to pursue it—but now the inferno of anti-aircraft shells grew so black and dense that his Spad was literally blasted from its course, cut off entirely from its quarry.

One after another, scores of Archies were blazing from the terrain below. And as he looked down, Streak Davis glimpsed a sight which brought full, horrified realization.

He could see mobile batteries of A.A.s moving closer to one another on trucks. Along a tremendous, wide stretch of terrain the various batteries were concentrating, forming a gun-studded girdle!

Von Lorner's dispatch! Boche below must have got the message after all! They had gotten it, and acted upon it at once—followed the order to concentrate the anti-aircrafts so that no Allied crate could get through!

And now they were closing the way to Villairs! They were creating a barrage-wall which grew thicker and thicker. Madly, even as the shells burst ever closer to his Spad, Streak Davis fought with his controls.

HIS first wild impulse was to try to break through this wall to Villairs before it could become so solid that it would stop anything that flew. But then, with a curse of frustration, he realized he didn't even know where the Villairs chateau was located—he didn't have the route, and worse yet, he didn't have the dynamite equipment to blow that safe!

And at the same time, as if to complete the crushing of his hopes, he realized that the barrage ahead of him had already closed up—he couldn't get through even now!

Cursing, he was banking back towards the west. Luckily, his plane had not yet been caught in the thick of the barrage—and he slipped out of it by the skin of his teeth.

He headed back for the 25th's drome, and minutes later he swept in for a perfect three-point landing.

Major Johnson, and the freckle-faced Bert Nelson, came out to meet him as he climbed from his crate. Their eyes were tense with inquiry.

"What happened, Lieutenant?" the C.O. demanded. "We're still in a state of near confusion here." He went on to explain that General "Eat-'em-alive" Thorpe had already left. J 2, the dead spy-chauffeur, had been checked up through Intelligence. They had worked fast, in their usual, smoothly efficient way. General Thorpe was to have gotten a new chauffeur yesterday, his own having been promoted to other work.

A trusted, reliable man had been picked for the job. After hearing what had happened. Intelligence, getting quickly on the trail, dredged up the man's body from the Marne River. J 2, the spy, had killed him and taken his place.

General Thorpe, worried to distraction, had rushed off from the 25th's drome to report all this to G.H.Q. But he had left a map with the route to the chateau Villairs, and had given full instructions as to how to reach the place. The dynamite and drill had by this time arrived from Ordnance Corps.

"Let's see the route-map," Davis demanded, as they walked into the Operations Office—Nelson following unnoticed behind. The C.O. unrolled it on the desk. Davis looked at the route-line to Villairs.

"The idea is to land on this marked clearing in the woods in front of the chateau," the major explained. "Then do the rest on foot."

Streak Davis shook his head grimly. "Frankly, I don't see how it can be done now, Major," he said, lines of frustration in his face. Then he related all that had happened.

"I TRIED to stop von Lorner," he concluded "But he got away with what information he had. And while that didn't pertain to the safe or chateau, it caused the Jerries to put up an A.A. zone between here and Villairs. They've put a belt of guns miles wide and clear across the sector, between their lines and Villairs." He

took a pencil, and on the map marked off his rough idea of the girdle of guns—bisecting the route-line.

"It was bad enough when I pulled out of it: by now not even a fly could get through it. It's no use trying to skirt around it; that would take me through so much Boche back area that I'd stand an even greater chance of being stopped!" The C.O.'s grizzled face was grim. "Lord, what will G.H.Q. do? Without those plans Hindenburg will never be stopped—Pershing will fail!"

"Don't worry, sir—" Quiet but firm rose the voice of Bert Nelson, the ex-anti-aircraft gunner who was standing behind the two men. "You will have those plans."

AND he met the questioning gaze of Davis and the major as they turned toward him in surprise. There was a stubborn determination on his freckled face, a fighting gleam in his eyes.

"I know all about anti-aircraft barrages," said Nelson. "And I know how to get through them. You've seen me go right through some pretty tough ones, Streak."

Streak Davis' eyes lighted.

"By God, I have!" he admitted. "But you don't think you could buck one like this, do you?"

"Why not? I'm not even worried about the trip over. With luck I'll be able to slip by without drawing their fire. It's the trip back I've got to watch; by then they'll be sure to spot me. But I'll find a way to get through." Despite the firm calmness of his voice, a flush of excitement was mounting in his freckled face.

"Von Lorner, you say, has no idea about the mission itself. I can get to that safe, get the papers and—"

"Hold on there!" Streak Davis held up a big hand. "That will be my end! All you'll do is lead me through the barrage—"

It was the C.O. who vetoed this idea, at once.

"You're forgetting what the General said. We can't take a chance of sending two planes—they're sure to be spotted and followed to their destination!" His eyes went from Davis to Nelson, grimly.

"It's a one-man job."

"Then I'll go it alone!" Streak Davis gritted, stubbornly. "I'll find some way—"

"And be blasted out of the skies by those anti-aircrafts?" Nelson argued. "You don't know the guns the way I do, Streak—you yourself said you were a sucker for them. And as for the rest of the job—well, you've taught me enough about combat flying to hold my own." He turned pleadingly to the C.O.

"Can't you see, sir, that I'm equipped for the mission? We're only wasting precious time by arguing. Let me get going, please."

The C.O. considered a moment, brows furrowed. Then his voice came with decision.

"He's right, Davis. The way things are now, he's the only one who would seem to have a chance to get to Villairs and back. Nelson," his eyes flashed at the freckle-faced young pilot, "the job is yours!"

And though Streak Davis protested vehemently, stubbornly, there was nothing to do to change this official command from his C.O.

IN TEN minutes Nelson's khaki Spad was fueled and set revving. A box containing dynamite, a fuse and a drill, capable of boring through steel, was installed into the ship. Nelson hastily went over the route-map and the instructions with Davis while the C.O. fastened on a helmet, and was ready to go.

Streak Davis' face did not mask its brooding worry as he walked with the ex-anti-aircraft gunner to the waiting plane.

"Listen, kid," he was saying to his protege. "Remember all I've been telling you—about landings and the rest. This is a devil of a job you're undertaking. I hate to let you go—but since you think you can buck those A.A.s, go to it!" They stopped beside the revving Spad, and Davis put a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Be careful, will you, Bert?"

"I won't forget a thing," Nelson promised, smiling up at the flyer who was his idol and teacher. He was game as could be, but Davis, the veteran, detected the keyed-up note in the firm voice. "I'll be back with the bacon, and Papa Hindenburg will still get his surprise!"

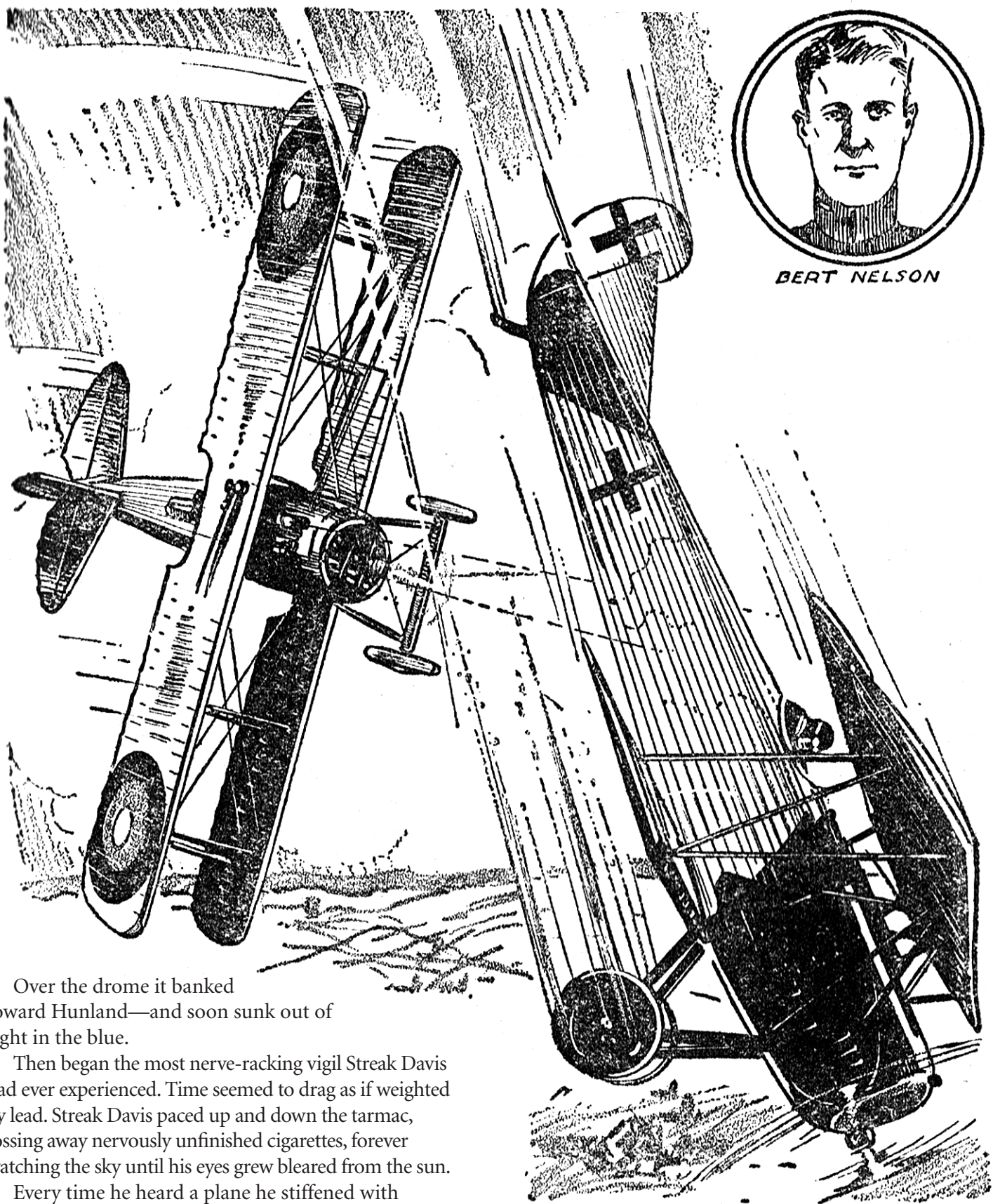
"Luck," Davis said, a trifle huskily. They clasped hands warmly.

CHAPTER IV ANTI-AIRCRAFT MAN'S FLIGHT

IN ANOTHER MOMENT, Streak Davis stood watching Nelson's Spad take off. He saw it skim smoothly down the tarmac, saw it get into the air with the straightaway speed which emulated his own manner of flying.



BERT NELSON



Over the drome it banked toward Hunland—and soon sunk out of sight in the blue.

Then began the most nerve-racking vigil Streak Davis had ever experienced. Time seemed to drag as if weighted by lead. Streak Davis paced up and down the tarmac, tossing away nervously unfinished cigarettes, forever watching the sky until his eyes grew bleared from the sun.

Every time he heard a plane he stiffened with hope—only to be doomed, for many planes came in or took off. “B” Flight returned from an uneventful morning patrol. “A” Flight went out.

Streak Davis did not go into the mess to lunch with

the rest. He had no appetite. He felt a cold dread in his heart, and realized how much he had come to like the youngster he had tried to teach the more advanced tricks of flying.

Nelson had been gone almost two hours—which can be an eternity in the air—when Streak Davis could restrain himself no longer.

He burst into the C.O.'s office, eyes blazing.

"I can't stand this waiting!" he gritted. "I've got to go and find out what happened."

Major Johnson, whose own eyes showed the worry he felt, spoke soothingly. "It's no use doing that, Davis. You can't do anything except fly into those anti-aircrafts, and bawl up whatever Nelson might have accomplished by now."

"But, confound it," Streak Davis cried, "I tell you he's just a kid! He should never have been sent. He probably didn't even get through the A.A.s, didn't—"

He broke off, his frame stiffening, his ears acutely alert. From the east came the sound of a droning Hisso engine. Steadily it rose closer, louder.

Davis leaped to the door, was out on the tarmac with the C.O. behind. The eyes of both went up to the blue.

A khaki Spad was coming in. And this time, as Davis saw its insignia, he gave a cry of glad, frenzied relief.

"IT'S NELSON!" he whooped. "He must have made it—the old son of a gun! He's back!" He turned eagerly to the C.O., almost embracing him. "Can't you see, he's come through, Major! He's—" His voice trailed off abruptly, as he saw the frozen, deep-lined expression on the C.O.'s features. The major's eyes had not left the incoming plane. Bewilderedly, Davis once more glanced up at the Spad.

And then an icy band seemed to tighten around his heart, and the blood went cold within him. For now he saw what, in his eagerness, he had not seen at first.

Nelson's crate was shot to pieces. It was yawing and staggering as it came on, like a crippled, agonized bird. Its Hisso engine was knocking like a bunch of loose tin cans. Fabric from wings and fuselage hung in shredded rags waving in the wind, and flying-wires trailed grotesquely into space.

THE C.O. and Davis had both seen enough planes come in from the front to know the signs. They both knew then and there, that Nelson was done for.

The C.O. was running across the tarmac, barking orders. The crash-car came careening out of Hangar 3, siren screaming. Streak Davis stood transfixed, watching the yawing, lurching Spad as it staggered out of the sky.

The agonized shrill of the loose flying-wires and struts rose to a piercing scream. The Spad loomed, a yawing wreck on broken wings, headed for what seemed a certain pile-up crash. But at the last moment, over the far end of the tarmac, its nose lifted in a valiant final effort and it glided in, miraculously settling on even keel.

Streak Davis almost beat the crash-wagon to the scene. It was he who helped lift out of the cockpit what was left of Bert Nelson—a riddled, bleeding mass of flesh that, by sheer will, was still breathing and conscious.

The Red Cross men put him on a stretcher, started to carry him to the infirmary shack. But the squadron doc shook his head slowly.

They laid the stretcher on the turf.

"Streak—"

The lips of the dying man moved, his voice pain-racked and hardly audible above the death rattle in his throat.

The C. O. and the Red Cross men saw Streak Davis, hard-boiled hellion of the sky, kneel over the stretcher, fumble for the man's hand. They saw tears coming from Streak Davis' eyes.

"Take it easy, kid. I'm right here—" It seemed that something was stuck in Davis' throat, making his voice choke.

"Couldn't get—to safe—" Nelson gasped out. "Got through anti-aircrafts—but then he got me—"

"Who, kid? Who got you?"

"Von Lornier! I—didn't have a chance with him—"

The gasping voice was growing weaker now, and the light was fast fading from the ex-anti-aircraft gunner's eyes. He rallied his ebbing breath desperately.

"Villairs—Boche probably don't know yet—about safe. Go—" His voice trailed off, then his right hand pulled something from his tunic. It was the route-map—and luckily it had not been stained by blood or destroyed. Nelson proffered it weakly, and Davis took it.

NELSON'S voice went on, but it was so weak now that even by bending close Davis could not hear what the man was trying to say. He nodded, though, as if he heard and understood. The dying man looked relieved—his voice now rose again as he seemed to gather it for a last effort:

"—Streak—that landing I just made. Three points—did you see?"

"Sure," Streak choked. "It was perfect, kid. Best landing I ever saw."

"I—knew—I'd get it!" Nelson gasped, and with a smile of peaceful contentment on his face, he lay back—still.

The C.O. had to lead Streak Davis like a blind man into the Headquarters office. Davis' face was grey, bleak. The C.O.'s own eyes were misted as he faced his ace flyer.

"I know it's hard, Davis," he said gently. "I know just how you feel. I feel the same way. After all, I sent him out."

"I taught him how to fly," Streak Davis said, his voice hoarse and shaking. "If I hadn't done that we'd never have let him go, even if he did know the anti-aircrafts, I taught him—but he wasn't good enough for von Lorner." Suddenly a terrible rage flamed in his face, his eyes narrowed to murderous slits. "If I can only get a crack at that Boche skunk, I'll make him pay for this!"

"YOU can never make him pay for the damage done—for the loss of that plan at the Chateau Villairs," the C.O. said grimly.

Streak Davis cursed.

"He was trying to tell me about that. Said the Boche probably didn't know about the plan—then he gave me this map and said something else I couldn't catch." He unfurled the map, glanced at it. Suddenly his eyes sharpened.

In one margin of the chart, scrawled in pencil, was some writing. For a moment Streak Davis stared at it, trying to clear his brain of the grief that overwhelmed him so he could read it. And then, suddenly, a cry of understanding broke from him.

"The safe combination! Why, that's what it is!"

He showed it to the C.O. There, in the margin, was a group of numbers and figures:

R 6, L 10, R 14, L 6, R 8, L 11, R 3.

A hard, fierce pride came into Streak Davis' voice.

"By God, even if he didn't get to the safe, Nelson must have found the combination somewhere in that chateau. And he brought it back for me—he came all the way back with it! Probably he spotted Boche near the chateau before he could try to open the safe and was afraid to go on for fear of giving the whole business away." He straightened, a fierce, gripping determination coming into his face. "That makes the job of opening the safe a cinch! And I'll see that Nelson didn't do all this for nothing. I'll finish the job for the kid and see that the credit goes down to his name." Again the grief was on his face. "Not that it can do him any good where he is now—"

Major Johnson was staring up at the broad-shouldered, grim-faced ace.

"But, Lord, Davis—are you forgetting that anti-aircraft zone? How do you intend to get through that—you haven't Nelson's experience!"

"I'll get through somehow!" Davis gritted, stubbornly. "This should have been my job in the first place. And by now, the A.A.s probably won't be quite so much on guard. If I can get enough altitude I may be able to slip over them. And as for von Lorner—he won't get me the way he got Nelson, I can promise you that!"

The C.O. sat back, dubious but half-convinced by Davis' sheer determination. He had been worrying all this time about what he could tell G.H.Q.—how he could call "Eat-'em-alive" Thorpe and say that the Brigade plan could not be recovered!

"I HATE to let you go, Davis," he said somberly. "Bad enough to lose Nelson, but if anything happened to you—" He broke off, seemed to steel himself. "If you do go, you'd better take some dynamite just to make sure of getting into that safe."

"Why do that? I don't want any extra load on my ship when I try for altitude. I've got the combination now—and from the trouble the kid went to give it to me I'm sure it must be the right dope. Don't worry. Major! You can tell H.Q. they'll have those plans back—I'll get to 'em somehow."

The C.O.'s eyes gleamed their admiration. He straightened.

"When are you leaving, Lieutenant?"

Streak Davis picked up the route-map with the figures in its margin, and his eyes were grim, resolute.

"Right now!" he clipped.

CHAPTER V CHATEAU VILLIARS

TEN MINUTES LATER Davis' streak-marked Spad once more rocketed off the tarmac of the 25th's drome—zoomed thunderously into the afternoon sky, leaving a worried but hopeful C.O. staring after it.

The route-map was pinned to the dashboard before him. He had his joy-stick back, and was heading for Hunland in a steep zoom. He was once more crossing

the seething cauldron which was the battlefield, his altimeter needle trembling at ten thousand feet. Still he held the nose of the Spad pointed toward the blue heights

The air grew thin, cold—clear as crystal. Streak Davis watched the map, and the earth which was shrinking into roundness below. Not yet at the fringe of the anti-aircraft zone—but soon he would be over it. He held the stick back, and soared on upward until his Hisso engine began to cough, and his head grew light with the lack of oxygen.

Then, almost three miles above the earth, he was straightening. Way up here in the high, cold regions, as if held aloft by forward speed alone, the Spad was coursing straight toward the Hun back areas. Davis peered from the cockpit.

He was flying over the very center of the girdle of guns which the Huns had concentrated down there. With bated breath, he was trying to sneak over those guns unseen—slipping high above them like a furtive bird.

“If only they don’t spot me,” he gritted beneath the shrill clamor of his engine in this high altitude. Already he had throttled down to three-quarters, to minimize that noise as much as possible. Over the terrible zone of guns he flitted. He was trying not to think of the lurking menace below—he was thinking only of Nelson who had died, and of the unfinished mission that must be performed at Villairs—ahead.

Slowly, with painful slowness, the landscape three miles below passed by. Long, tense minutes, in which Streak Davis, for all his reckless courage, felt a coldness that did not come from the icy regions alone.

If those guns should spot him now—he’d never have a ghost of a chance! He’d be blasted out of the sky! His nerves were taut as springs, his heart tripping like a sledgehammer.

And then—

A sudden glad cry of relief burst from his lips, the cry of a man who has crossed a perilous bridge and is at last on the other side, without mishap.

“I made it, by God!” he gritted. “I’ve gotten through!”

FROM the map, and the terrain below, he could see that he was safely on the other side of the girdle of guns. He had left the massed zone of anti-aircrafts behind his tail. Yet, he knew that he would have to cross it again on his way back—that now it stood between him and the safety of the Allied lines. But for the time being, anyway, there was no danger.

Gratefully he eased his stick forward, went down in

piquing dips to lower and more comfortable altitude. His hand slammed the throttle-lever all the way across the arc—and now his Spad was whizzing forward as if to translate into action the pictured streak of lightning on its fuselage.

Deeper into Hun skies he went hurtling, with black smoke trailing from his exhausts. He had picked up the route-line again, where the Moselle River curved southwest like a glistening snake.

PRESENTLY, a mass of clustered green was looming toward him below and ahead—tree tops of a dense forest. And beyond the forest, in a cluster of broken roof-tops and half-toppled spires, lay the ruins of the town, Villairs!

Streak Davis reached down into the cockpit, lifted a pair of binoculars. Putting them to his goggles, he could just make out the ruins of a single, isolated building which stood on the outskirts of the town—a sprawling, crumpled pile of stones, with broken walls.

The Chateau Villairs!

He brought the binoculars lower-back over the dense forest. Another moment and he had picked the marked clearing, a gap in the trees. That was where he must land.

Once more he became cautious. He must not be spotted going down—must not let his plane be seen by the Boche who occupied the ruined village ahead. He reached for the throttle-lever, to cut into a soft glide and—

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! The sudden staccato clatter, deafeningly close, almost made him jump out of his skin. With mad instinct, he was pulling up his Spad as tracer streams drew smoky lines on all sides of him, as bullets drilled his wings. He glanced up then, and saw them.

Two coffin-nosed, green-striped Fokkers, diving on his tail, with jagged streaks of flame spitting from their forward Spandaus. Fokkers from von Lörner’s Staffel—though neither was the all-green crate of the ace himself. They must have spotted the Spad from above—and now they had come down to take Davis by complete surprise.

And even as he half-rolled instinctively in sheer reflex action, dodging to throw off the lethal, descending hail of tracer, Streak Davis cursed himself for his negligence. So confident had he been after safely running through the A.A. zone that he had not even been on the lookout for enemy planes when he had passed beyond the A.A. area.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat! The Spad lurched as a whole fusillade of slugs went ticking and racking through its fuselage. Perforations were stenciling the wing-tip above Streak Davis. The two Fokkers, flattening from their dives, were buzzing around him like maddened hornets whose sting would be death.

THEY had cut him off from the Allied lines already, and now they were forcing him further into Hunland—over the forest, toward the town of Villairs. And Davis realized with a sense of panic that if they pushed him much further his Spad would surely be sighted by the Boche army of occupation. And then, even if he got away, his mission would be ruined—he'd never be able to land unseen and sneak to the chateau.

A light of blazing defiance flamed in his goggled eyes. He must whip these two Huns—he must get them both, so that neither could betray him. And he must get them here out of sight of Villairs.

Cursing, he pulled back his joystick, leaned to his sights, and hurled straight into the midst of his two attackers. Now he was truly living up to his nickname. Like a winged streak indeed, he came out of the defensive, was lunging at the two green-striped Fokkers, his fingers closing on his stick-triggers.

His twin Vickers vibrated on their mounts, belching flame—sending two streams of nickel cupro-steel cascading before him. The two Fokkers wheeled like startled birds—surprised by the sudden unexpected ferocity of the crate they had already considered their quarry. One of the green-striped ships banked in front of Davis, flitting from right to left. Cursing, he kicked left rudder, banked—was whipping after it with guns blazing.

FROM the corner of his eye he saw the second Fokker immediately leaping after him, closing behind his own tail. Lead spat from its Spandau—whining unhealthily close over Davis' cockpit.

But, with a glance back to estimate the speed of the approaching Hun crate, he hurled his Spad right on after the first Hun in front of him—until it grew huge in his sights, blotting out all else. Then, with the crackle of bullets behind him marching ever closer, he fired—fired a long, uninterrupted burst. The Fokker in front of him was literally impaled on the twin streams of Vickers tracer. It was sliced apart—its fuselage buckling, its pilot sprawling over the stick in a convulsive jerk. A mass of twisted junk, it fluttered earthward like a broken kite, crashing into the woods.

But at the same instant the second Hun, with vengeance in his heart, was closing right on Streak Davis' tail for the kill burst—was starting that burst even now with his gibbering Spandaus. But just as the bullets were marching up the turtle-back of the Spad toward Davis' cockpit, the Yank stood on his rudder bar, and sent his crate slewing around within the black smoke of its exhaust stacks. He had turned on a dime—turned to confront the amazed Hun who had been riding his tail.

And before that Hun recovered from his surprise, again the rapierlike tracer streams of Streak Davis went straight to their mark. The Fokker skidded crazily, reared like a wounded steed in the sky. For an instant it hung pendant from its slowing propeller. Then, with the Jerry pilot lolling against the safety strap, the crate nosed over and plunged earthward like the stick of a spent rocket, also crashing in the deserted wood.

BREATHING hard, grim-faced, Streak Davis pulled up in the sky he had cleared in mere seconds. He glanced up toward the sun, squinting against its dazzle—holding a thumb to his goggles. No more Fokkers seemed to be lurking there; these other two must have merely been passing on patrol, and they had spotted him accidentally. His glance went back to the town of Villairs. The Boche there shouldn't have seen or heard—the village was still miles away.

Reassured, Streak Davis banked around, and once more picked out the clearing in the deserted wood below. He cut his engine, shoved forward his stick, and went swooping down in a long glide—a silent, descending bird save for the low shrill of wind through flying-wires.

He killed his engine altogether even before the clearing rose to meet his wheels. The patch of stubble field loomed up in a rush. The Spad settled, bounced only slightly, and then rolled to a stop in a perfect three-point landing.

In the silence that followed the last slowing creak of the dead-engined Spad, Streak Davis could hear his own hard breathing. He glanced from the cockpit, peering furtively at the surrounding trees. The forest was as still as death.

With quick fingers he opened his safety belt, leaped to the ground. He reached into the cockpit, pulling the map from the dashboard. Then, shoving the chart within his teddy-bear and patting the butt of his Colt side-arm to make sure it was there, he moved off from the ship—into the trees.

Stealthily, his heart beating hard, he stole through the silent, desolate wood, keeping his innate sense of direction. Eastward he moved, in the direction of Villairs.

And in minutes, he was emerging from the trees into sunlight again.

There, a silent mass of crumpled stone, stood the Chateau Villairs. It had been a big building and probably a beautiful one. Now it was just a cracked shell, a few vine-covered walls standing with the leaves rotting on them. Windows with just jagged teeth for glass.

CHAPTER VI A DESPERATE PLAN

FEELINGS OF DEATH AND LONELINESS surged through Streak Davis as he scanned the desolate sight before him.

And as he stole softly across the grounds toward the ruined building, this feeling was borne out by a sight which chilled him. Sprawled about the grounds, which themselves were ripped up by shellholes, were mangled heaps in tattered khaki. They had little semblance to human form—but Streak Davis knew, with a sense of grief, that they were all that was left of a Yank brigadier-general and his staff. Strange, how different it was just hearing that “the general had been killed during the shelling”—and actually seeing this hideous sight of death!

He was approaching the crumpled building now. He found the entrance—a broken doorway leading into a twisted, virtually ceilingless corridor. He pushed through and gingerly made his way along cracked flooring, past broken, gaping walls, fearful that at any moment the ruins would collapse on top of him, burying him alive.

Then, as he followed remembered instructions concerning the layout of the shelled building, he found his way to a large, oaken, steel-plated door which had remained intact, and stood slightly ajar. It creaked shrilly as he opened it. He moved through the doorway.

He had entered a large chamber which, incongruously, was little damaged.

Plaster had fallen from walls and ceiling, revealing heavy stone and concrete.

And over in one corner, a formidable shining bulk, stood a steel safe.

Eagerly, Streak Davis moved to the safe, was stooping down at its knobbed door. From his teddy-bear he drew out the map, with Nelson’s scrawled figures in the margin:

R 6, L 10, R 14, L 6, R 8, L 11, R 3.

HE TOOK hold of the safe-dial with careful fingers. R 6— His fingers turned the dial to zero, then, delicately, around to the right until it came to six. L 10— To the left now, to the number ten. R 14— L6— R8— Carefully he followed the figures, moving the dial right and left.

Then, his eyes eager, he seized the handle of the safe door, pulled on it.

A grunt of dismay came from his lips. For the door of steel did not budge! Thinking it might just be tight, he pulled harder on the handle. But the door still didn’t open: it remained as if a solid part of the steel safe.

“I must have turned one of the numbers wrong,” Streak Davis gritted under his breath, a sense of cold apprehension gripping him. Once more he began to twirl the dial—this time even more carefully than before.

FINISHED, he again tried to open the safe door. And again it would not budge. With a growing sense of panic now, Streak Davis held the scrawled figures on the map closer to his eyes. Had he misread them? But no, there was no mistaking them: they were all clear, even if scrawled.

Still unable to believe that they could be wrong, he tried them yet again. Lord, the combination didn’t work at all! Nelson must have put down the wrong dope, the poor kid had made a frightful mistake.

For the combination was not the correct one to this safe. And Streak Davis, who had been so sure it was correct, had scorned the C.O.’s advice to bring dynamite and safeblowing apparatus.

He groaned aloud, cursing his lack of precaution. He was stuck now—absolutely checkmated. There stood the safe, a formidable bulk of steel which, with all his strength, he could not hope to move. He had never felt more frustrated, more bitterly defeated in his whole reckless career.

Madly, hopelessly, he tried the dial again, and when the combination of course failed once more, he tried combinations of his own. He had heard how thieves

sometimes opened safes by listening for the click of tumblers. He listened, heard slight clicks—but all to no avail.

Sweat broke out on his face as he thought of G.H.Q. waiting for the papers. They'd never get them now—it would be too late to return here with dynamite, and by that time the Boche would have searched the place. Utterly desperate, he moved out of the big stone room, out amid the ruins of the hall. He found a huge square stone which had formerly been part of the chateau's outer wall—but had tumbled down into the pile of ruins.

With a mighty effort, Streak Davis managed to lift it between his arms. He staggered back into the other room. Then, desperately, swinging the stone as if it were a sledge-hammer and his two arms the handle, he heaved it against the door of the safe, hoping to crack the hinges.

Bam! The terrific ringing crash of steel seemed loud enough even to rouse the dead of this shelled chateau. The safe seemed to shiver with the impact, which Davis felt all through his arms. But when he looked to see the result, his hopes drained like water from a bottle. For all the blow had done was to make a slight, harmless dent in the outer surface of the steel. But the door was as secure as ever.

MADLY, Streak Davis swung the stone again and again. The ringing crashes resounded in the lonely chateau. Davis' arms ached, and he was gasping for breath. He let the stone roll to the floor. It was hopeless. Two more little dents in the safe was all that his Herculean effort had accomplished. The door was as unyielding as ever. What to do?

Suddenly he stiffened, his nerves jerking taut with icy alarm, his ears acutely alert. Through the grilled window he heard a clattering rumble, a squeak as of heavy wheels stopping. And then, to his cold horror, the clink of rifles, the rasp of guttural voices.

Hand whipping down instinctively to the butt of his Colt automatic,

Streak Davis darted furtively to the window. He raised his head cautiously—just enough to peer through the small square opening.

A huge open lorry had just come to a stop on the grounds outside. And even now, a whole mob of Boche soldiers with coal-scuttle helmets and bayonet-tipped Mausers were leaping out of that truck, leaping to the ground where a sternfaced, arrogant Prussian officer—an *Oberst*, Davis saw, stood issuing orders in a rasping, carrying bark:

"SURROUND the chateau!" Streak heard and understood the German words, for he knew the language thoroughly. "I too am sure I heard a noise within. Perhaps his *Exzellenz*, von Lorner, was right in telling us to send out searching parties in this vicinity earlier than we had planned. Did he not shoot up a Yankee pilot flying low here, as if to land?"

Stunned, horrified realization came to Streak Davis then. Why, Nelson had never even reached this chateau! He had been spotted by von Lorner on the way down. But what about those figures on the map—why had Nelson scrawled them, what did they mean?

But there was no time even to think about it now. At the arrogant *Oberst's* command, the Boche soldiers outside, deploying from the truck, were spreading to encircle the ruined house. And Davis knew that he had utterly failed then. Those Boche would find the safe he could not open—would blow it open themselves.

They'd have the documents—have a weapon that would crush the Allies completely. And he was helpless to stop them.

He must flee! He had failed in his mission, and now the only thing he could try to do was get back and report his failure—so the Allies at least knew what to expect. He must get out of this place somehow, before he was surrounded.

He ducked from the window, whipping out his Colt now as he stole swiftly across the room. With a last backward glance at the safe, a glance of despair and helplessness, he was reaching the doorway and—

He halted in his tracks, eyes going wide with alarmed surprise. For even as he was moving to the doorway a Boche *Uberleutnant* came bursting through it into the room, Luger in hand. He had already seen the khaki-clad Yank and now, his face mottled with fury, his mouth opening to give the alarm, he was leveling his long-barreled revolver, its muzzle gaped black in front of Davis' face, looking large as a cannon-mouth.

Eyes blazing defiance, the Yank had his own Colt up, but then realized, all in that split second, that a shot would summon the whole horde of Boche outside. At the same instant the *Uberleutnant's* finger was starting to tighten on the Luger trigger.

Streak Davis' left fist, doubled into a ball of iron, catapulted from his very waist, with his whole husky body behind it. Flush to the *Uberleutnant's* jaw the blow landed and the man went down and out like a light, his visor-cap fluttering from his head.

BUT at the same time Davis could hear, from the sound of gutturals and clinking rifles outside, that the Boche had entirely surrounded the ruined building. No matter how he tried to slip out now, he was certain to be spotted in his telltale khaki uniform.

His brain raced. A desperate light leaped into his eyes. He stooped hastily over the unconscious *Überleutnant* and he started to strip off the grey uniform. If he could get into it, slip out masquerading as a Boche himself—

CHAPTER VII NELSON, THE "BOCHE"

HIS WILD PLAN WAS CUT SHORT before he could even begin to put it into execution. Before he could unbutton the unconscious *Überleutnant's* tight grey tunic, a clump of running, oncoming hob-nailed boots right outside the door made him jerk up, rigid. And, with cold horror, he saw a whole crowd of coal-scuttle helmeted Boche soldiers charge for the doorway with bayonet-tipped Mausers leveled.

His precaution to make no sound had been futile. A searching party, already in the house, doubtless following close after the *Überleutnant*, had stumbled right upon Davis. And now they had spotted the khaki-clad aviator as he was standing over their unconscious officer. With growls of guttural rage, they started to burst through the doorway, to get him.

Reckless abandon came over Streak Davis as he saw that the jig was up. He whipped up the Colt in his right hand, held it close to his body, and jerked the trigger.

Crack! Crack!

Flame spurted from the automatic, the shot resounding from the stone walls. Like a grey wave, the Boche just outside the threshold of the doorway fell back—two of them toppling among the rest like ten-pins. A Mauser barked, but because it shot over the heads of some of the Boche the bullet went high, ricocheting from the ceiling above Davis.

And before the wave of Boche could come back, Streak Davis managed to get hold of the huge oaken door—was swinging it shut. A Boche arm thrust through to stop him. He brought his Colt down on it, hard and savagely. There was a yell of pain as the arm

was snatched away and Davis, hurling his whole body against the door, got it shut, found the huge bolt, and clicked it into place.

The Boche outside pounded on the door, at first with fists and boots, then with Mauser-butts. The door shivered with each crashing impact, but the strong oak and the steel bolt held.

At the same instant, some sixth sense made Streak Davis whirl from the closed door, toward the small window across the room.

He cursed in fresh alarm. Two Boche heads showed outside the little window. It was not big enough for a man to get in, but the two Jerries were poking their Mauser rifles through it, aiming them point-blank at the Yank within the room.

Crack! Crack!

It was Davis' Colt automatic which spoke again in that instant, as he aimed with the skill that comes with desperation. The two Boche heads disappeared as if by magic from the window.

The two rifles went sliding out with a clatter.

AT THE same time Davis ducked wildly, flung himself prone to the floor as a whole fusillade of rifleshots came hailing through the window. Slugs ricocheted and whined all around the room like a bunch of loosened hornets. Meanwhile, the bolted door was shivering with more and more violent impacts from the Boche outside, who were battering at it methodically.

Cursing, panting. Streak Davis had wriggled across the floor toward the window, through which slugs were coming from closer range. Furtively the Yank raised his eyes and his gun to the window at the same time. He caught a glimpse of several Hun soldiers, moving toward the window in attack formation, aiming their guns, while beyond them the Prussian *Oberst* barked commands. They were closing in.

Madly, Davis fired through the window as fast as he could pull the trigger—fired until a dull click told him the automatic was emptied. Three of the advancing Boche dropped in their tracks like felled trees; the rest turned and scampered back to safety. Davis quickly got out another clip of cartridges, jammed them into the reservoir of the Colt.

RECKLESS, desperate, the lone Yank was trying to hold the Boche at bay, even though he knew that sooner or later they'd get him, that he had no chance against this horde of Jerries.

Suddenly he noticed that the pounding on the bolted door had momentarily ceased. He heard the Germans on the other side retreating. Even as he wondered tensely at this, something came sailing through the air from across the grounds. He ducked wildly as it came whistling right through the window.

With icy horror he glimpsed what it was. A hand grenade—of the potato-masher type.

He heard the deadly missile clatter to the stone floor of the room, and with all the strength of his body he lunged away from the direction of the sound.

Holding his breath, he was lying flat on his stomach, hugging the floor and—

B-r-r-oom!

The terrific explosion, reverberating in the confines of the stonewalled room, almost split his eardrums. The concussion shook every bone in his body, rattled his very teeth. Plaster and debris rained from the ceiling and walls. The whole chamber trembled. Acrid smoke filled the room, choking his lungs.

Shaken but unhurt, Davis raised his head. A sense of chill horror widened his eyes as he saw that the grenade had exploded close to the head of the unconscious *Uberleutnant*, who lay where Davis had knocked him out. The *Uberleutnant's* whole face was just a bloody pulp now. The Germans had unwittingly killed one of their own officers. They had probably thought him dead already when they had first spotted Davis standing over him.

There was a silence outside, a lull, while the acrid smoke from the grenade swirled like a fog in the chamber. Then, dimly from where he still huddled on the floor, Streak Davis saw a Boche face peering cautiously in the window. The Yank choked an impulse to fire at it with his Colt, instead, realizing that the Boche couldn't see him lying here in the smoke, he remained still, motionless. The face disappeared from the window. There were guttural voices.

Then the heavy pounding began once more on the bolted door. They thought the Yank dead now, thought they had bombed him, and were methodically trying to break into the room. And now Davis saw that the door had been weakened by the explosion—one hinge was cracked, broken. Battering at the door as they were with their Mauser-butts, the Boche were bound to break in in minutes.

A WILD hope flamed in Streak Davis' desperate eyes. He moved, half-crouched across the room, keeping in the smoke so that the Boche would not see

him if they looked through the window. He reached the body of the *Uberleutnant*. Fortunately the blood of the dead man had not stained the grey tunic very much. And the Boche's visor-cap was also intact, lying several feet away from where it had fallen from the man's head.

In seconds, while the door shivered more and more, Davis made a lightning transformation. Hidden in a screen of drifting smoke which hung like a pall in the room, he got out of his own teddy-bear, was putting on the grey uniform he had stripped from the Jerry corpse. It fitted tightly, but he managed to get his big frame into it, managed to put on the high black boots.

HE JAMMED the visor-cap over his head, shoved his Colt into the German belt-holster. He transferred his papers and Nelson's map into his grey tunic. Then, shrewdly, he draped his own discarded khaki teddy-bear over the corpse, in such a way that it looked like the man was wearing it.

He was ready now for the door to burst open. But it did not burst open. Instead, once more the pounding stopped abruptly; once more, to his cold alarm, he heard the Boche out there retreating. Not until he saw the second potato-masher come whizzing through the window did he realize.

Though the Boche could not have seen him in the smoke, they must have heard him moving around when he changed the uniforms. They had thrown another grenade!

This time the potato-masher landed right beside him, even as he flung to the floor. He saw smoke, from the nose-fuse, curling insidiously from the lethal missile. Out of sheer wild instinct, he grabbed up the still unexploded potato-masher. With luck he might throw it from him before it exploded and blasted him to bits. It was at that instant that there flashed to his brain one of those ideas that can only come out of the greatest desperation. All in a second, he was bringing back his arm with the grenade, and sent the smoking hand-bomb hurtling low across the room, hurling it directly underneath the huge steel bulk of the safe in the far corner.

B-r-oom!

Again the deafening, reverberating detonation, the blinding flash. Again Streak Davis, hugging the floor, felt his very teeth rattle with the impact of the explosion. The chamber rocked as if in an earthquake—its strong stone walls threatening to collapse. The room became almost dark with swirling,

billowing smoke. But as the acrid fumes eddied toward the windows, and the safe was revealed. Streak Davis felt a surge of frenzied joy.

The huge steel safe had been split right in two! Its sides were twisted and bent as if they had been mere paper.

Its door was blown off, revealing a gaping black aperture.

Even as he could hear the Boche once more pounding on the oaken door of the chamber, which must break down in seconds now, the explosion having completely broken the cracked hinge, Streak Davis fairly leaped through the smoke to the ruined safe.

Within it he found a strong-box which had burst its sides and top from the concussion. He reached into it, drew out a long envelope—intact because it had been protected by so much steel. And on the envelope were the words: “*Counter-attack. Operation 12.*”

HE HAD them in his grasp—the coveted plans he had come for! With new life-blood surging through him he stuffed them hastily within his German tunic—and at that very second the oaken door of the chamber burst open, its panels splitting, and a whole horde of Boche came surging into the smoky room.

The first thing they saw was the prone corpse draped in khaki on the floor—its face an undistinguishable pulp.

They didn’t guess at first glance that it was their own *Uberleutnant*. And before they could see that there was indeed another man, alive, in the room, Streak Davis, in his borrowed German uniform, with the plans safe under his tunic, had surreptitiously slipped through the smoke until he was actually mingling with the crowd of Huns.

The Boche, intent on pouring into the smoky room, didn’t even notice him. He slipped right through them, was making his way as fast as he dared to stride down the ruined corridor.

Another instant and he was out of the building, out in the clear afternoon air.

A GROUP of hurrying grey-clad soldiers came right in his direction. Nerves taut, Davis drew himself into the arrogant pose of a true Boche officer, but at the same time kept his face partially down beneath its visor-cap.

He waved imperiously at the soldiers, pointing toward the ruined chateau.

“Into the chamber on the right—*mach schnell!*” he ordered in rasping, perfect German. “They have found the Yankee—dead!”

Trained by years of discipline to obey such a command, the Boche soldiers presented arms and clumped to the chateau without giving the “*Uberleutnant*” a second glance. Davis walked on—headed for the trees.

Here there were more Boche, but he passed them in the same way, diverting suspicion by rasping orders, waving them aside arrogantly as he approached.

But then suddenly he stopped in his tracks, and now it was his turn to stiffen to attention, to snap out a simulation of a Prussian salute.

The stern-faced German *Oberst* he had seen before from the window was confronting him, looking right at him with cold, challenging eyes.

“*Wer da?*” rasped the *Oberst*. “Who are you? Your face does not look familiar to me!”

Streak Davis, his heart going cold, tried desperately to stall.

“I am new to the corps, *mein Herr Oberst*. I am *Leutnant Schloss*,” he had picked the first German name to occur to him. “It was I that discovered the body of the swine Yankee.”

“Then the Yankee is dead?” the *Oberst* seemed to relax at the news, a look of cruel satisfaction gleaming in his eyes.

“*Ja wohl, Herr Oberst!*” Davis also feigned satisfaction. Thank God, the *Oberst* was no longer challenging him now. He was going to get by, get past and—

There came a sudden shout of alarm from the small window of the chateau looking out from the safe-chamber.

“*Herr Oberst! Uberleutnant Weimar* is dead in here. We found his identity disc. The Yank is not here—he has taken the uniform and thrown his own over the dead body.”

THE *Oberst* went rigid, enraged realization coming instantly to his Prussian face. With a snarl, he reached for his Luger, eyes glaring murder at Streak Davis. But at the same instant, the desperate Yank, once more sent his left fist catapulting forward.

Pough! The *Oberst*, caught right on his long chin by that piston of flesh and bone, reeled backwards, and collapsed like a deflated balloon. But now the other Boche soldiers came yelling across the grounds, leveling their Mausers—for they had Davis spotted now despite his uniform.

CHAPTER VIII
WAR IN THE AIR

MAUSER LEAD WHIZZED PAST his ears as the Yank leaped into the trees. He was scrambling like a madman through the wood, leaping over underbrush, hurling for the clearing where he had left his Spad. Behind him he heard the Boche pounding like hunters hot on the trail of their quarry. He zigzagged from tree-trunk to tree-trunk to throw them off, rushed on, one hand holding his breast tunic to make sure he would not lose the precious plans he had made off with.

Another minute, and he was bursting upon the small clearing where his Spad squatted, waiting. He leaped to the propeller, pulling it once over to get compression. Even as he was hurrying to the fuselage to switch on the ignition the first wave of pursuing Boche soldiers came pouring through the trees. Rifles raised, they charged toward the plane.

Cursing, Davis ducked beside the fuselage, whipped out the Colt he still carried, and fired blindly, desperately. As the Boche fell back, one of them sprawling, the Yank reached up into the Spad's cockpit, switched on the ignition and put the throttle-lever full forward in one lightning-swift movement.

He darted back to the propeller then as Mausers began to bark and sent lead whizzing for him once more. Gripping the propeller blade, he gave it a mighty tug—then leaped aside to avoid the sudden whirl of the blade. The Hisso engine had roared into earth-shattering life. And because he had put on full throttle, the Spad instantly leaped forward, was moving.

Streak Davis ducked as the wing went past: then, with an agility that came from experience in such situations, he caught the moving fuselage with both hands, and swung into the lurching ship.

Crack! Crack! Mauser slugs tipped from all sides now, pelting the Spad's fuselage. Cursing defiance, Streak Davis ducked low in the cockpit cowl—got the controls, and slewed the moving Spad around like a skidding sled. Straight toward the crowd of Boche he sent the crate thundering—saw them scatter like frightened rats from the path of its charging propeller.

Trees at the fringe of the field were rushing toward him.

But, with his usual flying skill, Streak Davis had his plane off the ground then—and he sent it rocketing right over those trees in his usual, reckless arrow-like fashion. Bullets whizzed up after him, but he soon was soaring into the sunny blue sky like a bird exultant to be free.

FROM the cockpit compartment he snatched out a spare pair of goggles, snapped them over his German-capped head. Then, banking toward the Allied lines, he pulled back his stick and climbed steeply. He was trying to get all the altitude he could so that he could pass again over the perilous anti-aircraft zone. The altimeter needle climbed before him—six thousand—seven thousand—ten—

High now, he was racing westward and—

B-r-rooom! B-r-rooom! B-R-OOM! A cry of frenzied alarm ripped from his throat as, at the very instant he was starting to pass over the anti-aircraft zone, the peaceful terrain erupted as if hell itself had burst from the earth's surface. And there came such a spew of shells that they made the earlier barrage Davis had seen when the guns were first massed seem like harmless child's play.

With deafening explosions, the black mushrooms of A.A. fire were sprouting all around his Spad, making the ship rock and pitch like a cork on an ocean. Shrapnel whizzed through the air like huge hail-stones.

The whole girdle of guns was loosing its deadly spew. With a sense of horrified panic, Streak Davis realized now that the Boche on the clearing must have informed the gunners of the Spad's take-off—they had watched for the Yank crate, doubtless with telescopes. And now they had spotted him, were trying to blast him out of the sky.

ONCE more, Davis was blindly whipping over his stick and rudder, forcing the Spad around in a complete vertical bank to get out from above the fringe of the hellish barrage—and this time the only way out was back into Hunland. To go on ahead would be absolute suicide.

And again, luck was with him: again he managed to slip out of the edge of that blackening barrage by the skin of his teeth. He managed to put the bursting spew behind him, and an instant later it stopped—the whole spew-filled sky clearing as if by magic. The Hun gunners were not wasting any shots. But let him so

much as fly back over their range and they'd let him have it.

The only thing he could do now was to go further into Hunland—way in, until they gave him up. Then try to sneak back at a high altitude. To go around the sectorwide belt, he knew was out of the question: he would not have enough gas to make such a long, roundabout trip. Reaching his decision, he pointed his nose east—put the A.A. zone behind him—and started to fly inland.

But he did not get far. In the very next instant, even as he started eastward at full throttle, his eyes widened with fresh horror—his blood froze.

Out of the eastern sky, diving like bloodthirsty vultures with black smoke trailing from their exhausts, came seven coffin-nosed Fokkers. Green-striped they were, save for the plane in their lead, which was all green in color, from nose to tail.

A cry of rage burst from Davis. Von Lorner himself! Von Lorner, the Boche ace of aces who had shot down Nelson and caused this A.A. zone to be massed. Von Lorner with six of his deadly Staffel. Coming down like winged furies!

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

The staccato chorus of Spandaus shattered the skies, as jagged streaks of flame leaped from the Fokkers' coffin-noses. Tracers fell like hail around Davis' Spad. And then the Boche vultures were upon him; they were flattening out of their dives on all sides of him; they were looming with their coffin-noses and flaming guns. The green crate of von Lorner hovered above.

Streak Davis could glimpse the Boche's hawk-like goggled face leaning out, could see von Lorner waving for his men to close in on the Spad, to get it boxed—when, no doubt, he himself would come down for the kill.

STREAK DAVIS cursed as he half-rolled to throw off the streams of tracer coming from all directions. He cursed and then, once more, he was fighting with all the skill, all the lunging, reckless fury, which had won him his nickname.

He fought like a bat out of hell, weaving among the Fokkers which attacked him, pressing his stick-triggers and squirting tracers as if from a swinging, lethal hose. He caught one of the green-striped ships as it passed but fleetingly across his sights—he pinioned it to the sky like a butterfly with a long, desperate burst of tracers—then saw it buckle and go down. A second Boche crate he crippled, filling its Mercedes engine

with slugs; and the Fokkers staggered out of the fray like a lame duck.

But there were five left, and one of those five was von Lorner. And now von Lorner himself took active part in the fray, shrewdly staying out of the way of the Yank's guns—but coming down to get in his own Spandau bursts whenever the opportunity offered. Streak Davis cursed in frenzy at the German ace, shook a fist at him.

“CURSE you, von Lorner!” he yelled, though his voice was more than drowned in the din of engines and guns. “If only you didn't have these others around you I'd shoot you to ribbons!”

They had cut him off from the Hun interior now, were forcing the fight on him, pumping his ship with burst after burst. Dodging, twisting, he headed instinctively in the only direction which was not blocked—the west. But this brought him again over the A.A.s—and no sooner was he again over the fringe of that zone than two things happened simultaneously.

Von Lorner's Fokkers promptly fell back a ways—and once more a spew of devastating fire came blasting up at the Spad. Von Lorner and his men had been perfectly willing to relinquish their quarry to the deadly, concentrated anti-aircrafts!

As the deafening shells flashed around him again, as a piece of whizzing shrapnel actually tore a gaping hole in his upper wing, the frantic Streak Davis again was forced to turn out of the fringe of ground-fire. Whereupon, he ran right back into von Lorner and his waiting Fokkers—which met him with a withering, combined burst of Spandau slugs, pumping his fuselage until it was drunk with bullets.

“Lord, if only I had Nelson's ability to dodge anti-aircrafts!” he gritted, while his Spad was once more being forced toward the A.A. belt, while the green-painted Fokker of von Lorner led his four companions like a wolf-pack against the khaki Yank crate, raking it with burst after burst. Yes, Nelson, the hapless ex-anti-aircraft gunner, would have known what to do in such a predicament.

Why, as a matter of fact, Nelson must have escaped von Lorner the very way that Streak Davis could not escape the German and these other Fokkers now—escaped by flying through the infernal gauntlet of anti-aircrafts. Nelson had gotten through that zone, even though he had been riddled and dying. God, if only Nelson were here now, to show Streak Davis the magic he used in dodging the Archies!

CHAPTER IX DEAD MAN'S WINGS

AMID THE CRACKLING STORM of tracers that screamed all around him, Streak Davis was brought bolt upright by a sudden remembrance. It was as if something had clicked at last in his desperate brain. His eyes lighted wildly. All in that instant, while the Fokkers kept closing in on him with their gibbering guns, he snatched out the big map he had transferred to his stolen German uniform—and was glancing once more at the figures Nelson had scrawled on the margin of the chart.

R 6, L 10, R 14, L 6, R 8, L 11, R 3.

By heaven, could those figures be? Hope was flaming in Streak Davis, as he recalled how Nelson had made it his last dying act to hold up the map. Understanding was coming to him at last—he was remembering the few small facts he did know about anti-aircraft guns.

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! His Spad shivered with a fresh, terrific impact of lead. Von Lorner and his green-stripes were closing in behind him, like vultures trying to make the kill, their guns winking like a bunch of evil, fire-eyes in the blue. Cursing defiance, Streak Davis jammed the map upon the dashboard-pin where it hung before him. Then, with a wild light of hope in his goggled eyes, he deliberately sent his Spad thundering toward the west again, careful this time to follow exactly the route-line that led right over the anti-aircraft zone.

NOW again the Fokkers of von Lorner were falling back, hanging behind like buzzards to watch the anti-aircrafts do their work. Again the fringe of A.A. guns was coming below Davis. The Yank looked at the map-margin, then leaned over his cockpit, watching the ground as he swept over it. He saw the flashes of the first battery of anti-aircrafts—a score of livid, leaping flame-tongues. He saw their spew coming hurling upward.

R 6!

He kicked his rudder bar to the right, and his Spad went veering off on a sharp turn. Davis held the

rudder, and his lips moved, counting approximate seconds.

“One, two, three, four, five, six!” Even at that instant he saw a whole grape-cluster of sheds burst almost right in the spot from which he had veered. He saw the flash of the next battery below.

L 10! Hard went the rudder bar to the left this time. The Spad slewed in that direction, and Streak Davis counted out ten seconds. And again, close enough to rock him but leaving his Spad absolutely unscathed, the mushroom shells sprouted ineffectually in the spot from which he had swerved.

It was working. The figures which had failed to open the safe in the Chateau Villairs were not failing in this new and correct application. Here was Nelson’s magic. The ex-gunner, whom Davis had tried to make an expert flyer, had been able to get through impossible anti-aircraft zones simply by applying his knowledge of those guns and their working, and by putting himself figuratively in the place of the Hun gunners, estimating their exact timing and ranging.

He had worked out the position of these batteries, figured to a second just how to throw off their range by timed zigzags. Davis’ only fear had been that perhaps the figures pertained to the trip coming through from the Allied lines, instead of the return journey.

But he had banked on the remembrance that Nelson had not been worried about the trip over, but only the return. He had probably sneaked over the way Davis had, but figured that he could not sneak back. And so, doubtless from observing the gun positions on his way over, he had calculated the bursts, written his counts down.

AND now Streak Davis, using those counts, was penetrating the very diabolical core of the A.A. zone, was going through it on a zigzag. Already the air around him was black with the spew of the shells; he could smell their acrid fumes, and the proximity of the flashes blinded him. But through it all he watched the flashes below, and dodged them according to the directions on the map. R 14—a long skidding slew to the right. L 6, six seconds again to the left.

The strangest, most hair-raising flight Streak Davis had ever made in his career! Streak Davis, the ace who always flew straight as an arrow, who, in the air, followed the theory that a straight line was the shortest distance between two points. He was not flying straight now.

He was not using his style of flying at all. Patiently, he was zig-zagging, right, left, right, left—his Spad describing giant lop-sided Vs as it made its slow forward progress.

THE girdle of A.A.s was going berserk now. The gunners below, who probably remembered how another Yank plane had gotten away from their clutches this morning, and to whom the dodging motions of Davis' Spad must have been as tantalizing as the grapevine which went out of reach at the very moment the legendary Tantalus tried to seize it—were cutting loose with everything they had, loading and firing as fast as they could. But they could not change the ranging mechanism of their A.A. guns, could not change deflection or trajectory speed.

And Streak Davis was dodging them, was avoiding each burst by mere yards as he zig-zagged at the exactly proper moment. He was literally being guided through that hellish, flaming sky by the dead Nelson, the man who had been his only buddy. Nelson might just as well have had the controls of the Spad—for it was Nelson's brain that was doing all the outwitting of the antiaircrafts below.

R 8! On, on, slewing through the sky which was darker and darker around him. In the very maw of the zone now, with his eardrums splitting from the shells which cracked wide to still spew on all sides.

Streak Davis was sure that hell itself must look like this—nothing but a void of destruction, of hurling shapes, leaping flame-tongues, acrid choking smoke.

One miscalculation—or even the slightest mistake in Nelson's figures would cause the Spad to meet those bursting shells head-on, and Davis would be blasted to oblivion before he knew it.

BUT, though his head was splitting from the din and the stench, though his face was sweating and black with smoke, he was still alive. Though he was exhausted from the terrible strain of his perilous journey, he was still untouched by the whizzing shrapnel slugs, the spewing shells. Eons were passing, an eternity in which Davis was just an automaton, with no mind of his own. He was an automaton obeying the direction of a man who was dead—following mechanically the figures on the map margin.

He thought he'd never get out of this artificial night, so black, he had to bend forward over the map figures to distinguish them. He thought that, in these slow zigzags, he was doomed to this screaming inferno

of sky forever.

And then, dazedly, he felt the sudden, dazzling warmth of sunlight on his sweating face, his lungs were tasting air that did not reek with the stench of powder and lydite.

At first he did not know that the bedlam had subsided around him, for his half-deadened ears were still ringing with the bursts—they were echoing in his brain.

And then he heard his own Hisso engine, pounding faithfully though tiredly.

He saw that there were no more figures left on the map-margin. And a hoarse cry of joy broke from his dry throat. He had gotten through—before him was a clear stretch to the twisted, smoking battle-lines. He had left the anti-aircraft girdle behind his tail-fins: the black spew of the shells was sinking earthward even now, the gunners having failed to blast the Spad despite all their efforts, despite—

A shout of sudden, new alarm ripped from Streak Davis then. For even as he glanced back at that dispersing anti-aircraft smoke he saw a winged green shape come whisking out of the clearing fumes. Like a winged fury it was tearing straight for the Spad.

The all-green Fokker of von Lorner!

In a flash of cold understanding, Davis realized that the Boche ace must have followed right behind him—followed behind the anti-aircraft barrage itself, just far enough back to keep out of the westward-moving spew.

And now, bent on getting the Yank who had miraculously sailed through the A.A. zone, von Lorner was coming like a flashing meteor. The Boche must have surmised that Davis had made off with something of military value from the chateau—and he was determined to stop the Spad, even as Streak Davis had previously been determined to stop him—when von Lorner had made off with the heliographed spy message.

CHAPTER X SKY POKER

DAVIS WISHED HE COULD welcome the opportunity to match Germany's greatest ace—who was flying alone now. He wished he could slam back into von Lorner, and avenge himself on the man who had killed his buddy.

But because he was already exhausted, because his Spad had already been riddled by the bullets of von Lorner and his men, Davis knew that he must bend all efforts to get back to the Allied lines with the precious papers he carried. And so, cursing, Davis straightened his ship, put down its nose, and sent it hurling down a long hill of space toward the smoking battle-lines, trying to out-race that pursuing green Fokker.

But von Lorner had the superior altitude, was able to dive at a steeper angle. The green Fokker dipped its nose: it came down at a speed faster than that of the lightning-marked plane of Streak Davis.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

The Allied lines were still miles ahead when Davis heard the ominous staccato clatter rise above and behind. A wisping wraith of tracer-smoke went whizzing past his very face, making him duck sidewise with wild haste. Invisible drum-sticks seemed to beat a tattoo on the Spad's tail-fins, and the whole ship shook like a rattle.

And looking back. Streak Davis saw the green Fokker riding right down on top of him with both Spandaus licking out jagged streaks of livid flame. Between the butts of those flaming guns, behind the invisible arc of the Fokker's propeller, the hawk-like goggled face of Germany's deadliest ace was bent determinedly to the ring-sights.

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! Slugs ricocheted from the cockpit cowl beside Davis, buzzed like hornets in his very ears. Cursing, he half-rolled in an effort to shake off von Lorner, but the German was on him now, clinging like a leech. And Streak Davis knew then that he had to fight it out with von Lorner. He could not hope to get to the lines with this Jerry right on top of him.

A RECKLESS, savage gleam leaped into the Yank's eyes. His head jerked back.

"All right, von Lorner!" he gritted. "If it's a fight you want, you'll get it, by God!"

And with a reckless oath, he slammed over his joy-stick, stood on the rudder, and whipped the Spad around to face the Fokker. He was leaning to his own sights now, and his fingers closed on the stick-triggers. He was hurling his Spad right for that all-green ship, with both guns vomiting streams of nickel cupro-steel.

For several minutes they madly maneuvered on with neither man able to gain advantage. And it was then, as he was slewing around in a breathless, tight bank, that Streak Davis caught a sight out of the corner of his eye of something which filled him with sudden frenzy and panic.

SPEEDING toward the fray from the interior of Hunland came the other four remaining Fokkers of von Lorner's flight. And Davis realized then—they too had followed. Less bold than their leader, they had waited for an anti-aircraft barrage to die entirely, waited until the sky was clear.

And now they had come; to catch the Spad while it was still engaged with von Lorner. Streak Davis would be trapped—this time fatally. After all he had been through, he could not possibly hope to fight off all these Fokkers.

Desperate, he flung his Spad into a side-slip which made it skid side-wise down a slippery current of air, away from the green Fokker of von Lorner.

Then, madly, Davis opened the throttle, trying to break away and race toward the lines.

But at once the green Fokker, flashing through the sky in a maneuver of consummate skill, cut right in before Davis' airpath, was intercepting him from those lines, blocking his way with its great-winged bulk and its gibbering Spandaus.

Davis cursed, his panic rising. Von Lorner was holding him—and from behind now those other four green-striped Fokkers were creeping up, coming closer, closer. They'd have him, shoot him to ribbons.

Then it was that Streak Davis threw all caution to the winds, and truly became the reckless, wild-flying ace that he was. Unable to pass the green Fokker which blocked his path, he bent to his controls and deliberately sent his Spad hurling straight for that green crate!

"Call this bluff, if you dare!" he gritted between clenched teeth, as the green Fokker loomed before him in a rush. He was heading right for it, headed on a course that would ram von Lorner head-on unless the German swerved.

But then, to his horror, von Lornier was calling his bluff! The Fokker did not swerve an inch. The German ace, with Teutonic stubbornness, was showing the Yank that it wouldn't be he who had the weaker nerve. Hell-bent, head-on, the two ships were rushing for a collision that would smash them both to atoms and send both of their pilots into oblivion.

There was still time for Davis to turn, to admit his bluff was called. But to turn would not get him past von Lornier—would only give von Lornier a perfect chance to slice him with a broadside kill-burst as he passed. And unless he got through now, those Fokkers pounding behind, looming ever closer, would be upon him.

AND so Streak Davis held his course. He held his bluff. With a will of iron, he held his plane right on its straight, arrow-like course. The green Fokker grew gigantic in front of him now, blotting out the world.

Both pilots were firing, but ineffectually, unable to range each other from their head-on positions.

Closer, closer, two iron wills clashing there in the air, two men playing sky-poker, bluffing it out.

Another instant and the crash must come, the ghastly collision.

And then von Lornier broke! Stubborn and courageous though he was, this Yank played too hard for him. The bluff had gone too far.

In the last split-second, even as the two noses were coming right together, the green Fokker veered off like a frightened bird.

And it was Streak Davis who got the broadside shot as he was tearing past the German. A kick of his rudder, and his sights were cold on von Lornier's cockpit.

RAT-TA-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT! The Vickers rose in a shrill death-song.

And von Lornier died before he could have felt death. He died in that swift, clean way that all airmen hope to die. He died at his controls, as the well-aimed tracer streams riddled his heart.

The green Fokker, with the dead hands of Germany's greatest ace at its controls, went into its last and greatest dive. Like a plummet it dropped straight down through space, and a column of flame on the earth below proclaimed its landing.

Nelson, the hapless ex-anti-aircraft gunner whose calculations had saved Davis' life before, was now avenged.

The four green-striped Fokkers of von Lornier's

flight, having seen the fall of their leader, came tearing through the sky bent on murder.

But they never reached the Spad. For, before they could catch it, Streak Davis sent his crate in a long, desperate dive which carried it clear across the pock-marked battle-lines and left the green-striped ships hopelessly behind.

Nor did the Yank stop diving until he had reached the 25th's drome, where he ended his long descent in a hair-breadth, lightning-swift landing on the tarmac.

Pilots and mechanics of the 25th came running as they saw the figure in German field-grey climbing from the riddled, exhausted Spad. But Streak Davis waved them tiredly aside.

"False alarm," he told them, as they had been about to pull out guns. "It's only me—not the Kaiser."

ONE minute later he was handing the precious envelope to a dazedly relieved Major Johnson, who in turn sent it straight to General Thorpe by motorcycle dispatch.

That small envelope proved later to turn the very tide of the war.

On the very next day, the Yanks started a surprise counter-attack on Hindenburg's left wing—his one weak flank. Soldiers in khaki, moving behind the wake of a tremendous barrage, smashed that left wing and sent it curving back to the German center flank like a closing razor. Torn and twisted by flaming battle, the map of France once more changed hands. And Hindenburg, veteran beloved general of the Fatherland, knew that he had made his last successful attack—that Germany had shot her bolt in her effort for a "place in the sun."

The Allies turned with grateful praise to General Pershing, who promptly passed the credit to the dead Brigadier-General Sampson who had made the plan and to General "Eat-'em-alive" Thorpe who had caused it to be recovered. And General "Eat-'em-alive" Thorpe passed it on to Major Johnson, the grizzled C.O. of the 25th, who again passed it to his ace of flyers.

BUT Streak Davis didn't keep it either—he passed it for the last time to the dead Bert Nelson, and there it remained on the books—and Nelson was buried with the highest military honors.

"Then," Major Johnson was saying to Davis, "Nelson's combination worked the way you thought it would?"

"Sure," Streak said, forcing a semblance of a grin to his face, "that combination worked perfectly."

And after all, that was no lie.