

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

STACKED CARDS

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

It was Intelligence stuff, and Kirby could not even tell his two buddies. He took off alone—for Germany—and how was he to know that the cards were stacked against him? Another of Oppenheim's breathless thrillers.

THE C.O.'s VOICE WAS GRIM: "It's a most perilous assignment," he told Kirby, who stood before his desk in the headquarters shack. "One of the most dangerous jobs I've ever asked you to do. And you must do it alone—without the usual company of your two comrades. The gaff will be pretty stiff. Now what do you say?" His cold gray eyes searched those of the young pilot shrewdly. "Feel up to risking your neck?"

Kirby, famous leader of the "Three Mosquitoes," met that cold, scrutinizing gaze unflinchingly enough. He nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Outside, on the field, airplane engines were choking and barking as they warmed up in the chill dawn.

"I'll try anything once!" the Mosquito said cheerfully. "But just what is it all about, sir?"

"The facts are simple enough," the grizzled old colonel began. Then, furtively, he glanced about the room as if to make certain that no one was listening. When he spoke again his voice was lower, almost a whisper. "Understand that what I tell you now is strictly confidential—intelligence stuff." He paused long enough to let the fact sink home, then resumed his explanation.

"Due to the extreme vigilance of the German intelligence corps lately our spies have found it next to impossible to return across the lines from Germany. They can get into Boche territory easily enough, but they can't seem to get out. This has made it difficult for us to get information—and just now we need information badly, for our present offensive.

"Now,"—his voice became still lower, and the Mosquito had to lean over the desk to heard the words—"one of our agents has worked out a desperate measure. Before leaving for German territory, he agreed with intelligence headquarters that, if he saw that his chances of getting back were hopeless, he would write out his information and place it in a certain secret spot where it might be possible for us to get it.

"The idea was that our drive would carry us beyond that spot within a couple of days. However, owing to the very fact that we lacked information, our drive has been badly checked, and we haven't gotten near the place. Evidently, according to other sources, the man succeeded in getting his information all right—most momentous information revealing the exact position of the Germans in this sector, and their plans.

"But,"—he shook his head—"he hasn't come back.

And we must assume that he left the message in the spot agreed upon—drive or no drive.”

He paused, cleared his throat, and tapped the table-top with nervous fingers. Then, suddenly, he rasped out: “Kirby, that information must be brought before noon to-day. It’s now 4:35. That leaves less than eight hours. We’ve got to have it. Understand?”

Again the Mosquito nodded slowly. “Yes, sir.” His voice was calm and determined. “I get the point. Now where is it?”

The C.O. hastily pulled out a roll-map from an inside pocket. He laid it on the desk, and as the Mosquito bent over it, he pointed out a red square.

“This,” he stated, “is Field 21, and is fifteen miles across the lines. Intelligence picked it out carefully when they sent the spy over. It’s fairly decent for landing purposes, and, as far as we know, in a vicinity infrequently occupied by the Germans. There’s a chance—a slight chance at least—that a lone plane can get through unnoticed, land there for a few minutes, and then break away. That’s why you must go alone. If your comrades accompanied you, the three planes would surely be spotted in the air, and you’d be delayed—possibly stopped, by enemy aircraft. You get the point?”

“Clearly,” was Kirby’s laconic reply. Yet he knew he could not entirely conceal the fact that he would much prefer to have his two comrades go with him. He liked to play the lone eagle at times, but this spy stuff was different—too damned lonely.

The C.O.’s voice broke in on his thoughts. The colonel’s finger was again pointing to the red square on the map. And again he was speaking in a tense whisper.

“On the north side of Field 21 is a wood. Leading into it is a narrow dirt path which you will have no trouble in finding. Follow this path for a few yards, counting the trees on the right. The fifth tree—on the right side of the path—is the one you want. Its trunk forks out in two great branches. In the crotch of that fork, covered with dirt and pieces of bark, is an oil-cloth-covered packet. And that packet,”—his voice rose eagerly—“is what we want.” He picked up the map, held it out. “You can take this with you—but under no circumstances let the Germans get it in their hands.”

Silently Kirby took the map, studied it for a few seconds, then rolled it and stuffed it under his overalls. “Then,” he said slowly, soberly, “my job is this: I’m to fly to Field 21, land, hop out of my ship and get that packet, then hoik for home.” He shrugged. “Simple

enough.” But he could not help adding, in a different tone, “That is, provided no friendly Jerries are waiting down there to give me a reception.”

A troubled frown came over the C.O.’s face. “Of course,” he said sternly, “if you see any signs of Germans down there—or in the sky, you’ll have to abandon the idea. Those are orders, and don’t forget them. Simply do the best you can.” He glanced at his watch. The sight of it seemed to stir him to action. He jumped up from his desk. “We mustn’t take up any more time. Every second counts. You must leave at once!”

FIVE minutes later Kirby stood with his two comrades on the tarmac, impatiently watching his trusted mechanics revving up his Spad. The sun was still a red disk behind the camouflaged hangars, and the planes of the dawn patrol were sweeping into the air, one after another.

Both of Kirby’s comrades seemed considerably disturbed.

“Hell,” drawled the lanky Travis, oldest and wisest of the trio, “I don’t see why you can’t tell us what you’re going to do.”

“I told you I couldn’t,” Kirby replied, for the tenth time, and with slight irritation. “It’s nothing—nothing serious, anyway. So don’t worry.”

“I don’t like these special secret missions,” confessed “Shorty” Carn, puffing nervously on his inseparable briar pipe. “I wish the Old Man would quit picking on you.”

“Aw, I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Kirby assured him. “And then we’ll all go up on our usual—”

“Come on, captain.” The rasping voice of the C.O. suddenly broke in. The colonel had reappeared on the scene, and he looked worried. The peculiar gruffness of his speech betrayed his uneasiness. He almost barked. “Your ship’s ready! Hop into it and be off!”

“Right!” Kirby shouted, with exaggerated eagerness. He turned to his comrades. “So long, fellows!” he cried, and inwardly cursed himself for giving those words a significance he had not wished to imply. “S.Y.L.—see you later!”

“So long!” they responded, as he climbed into the plane, and they too said the words as if they meant them.

Kirby settled down in the cockpit, tinkered with the controls for a moment, tried out the throttle. Then he fastened the safety-belt, and pulled down his goggles.

The C.O. came up beside the fuselage, shouted to

him above the roar of the engine: "Good luck! Don't take too many chances!"

Shorty and Travis yelled something he could not hear at all. He waved to them reassuringly, however, then signaled the mechanics, who promptly jerked the chocks from in front of the Spad's wheels.

With a roar the slender little plane moved forward, bounded out across the field. Looking back Kirby saw the C.O. and his comrades standing motionless, like three statues, staring after him. The colonel still looked worried. And Carn and Travis looked more than worried. Their faces were pretty pale.

Then the Spad's wheels whisked off the ground, and, gracefully, Kirby got into the air. He climbed his ship gently through the morning haze. Up, up, up, until, a mile from the earth, he leveled off in the clearer regions of the sky and banked to the east. He was off! He glanced at his wrist-watch—ten of five. He had seven hours and ten minutes left to carry out his task—plenty of time. But plenty of things could happen in that period.

The Mosquito's lips drew up into a tight little line. He unrolled the map, and hung it on his dashboard. He must think only in terms of action, do everything coolly and mechanically. He must not brood over the dangers of the thing. All set now! With his motor roaring mightily, and his propeller churning the slight mist which drifted in the sky, he flew straight towards his objective—Field 21.

Scarcely ten minutes after his departure, the C.O. burst out of his shack, went rushing across the field with amazing vigor for one of his years. Straight to the tarmac he dashed, and there he found Carn and Travis, engaged in preparing their planes for flight, trying to lose their anxiety and suspense in work. One look at their superior officer, and the two Mosquitoes knew that he had some frightful news about Kirby. They stood, faces drawn and pale, waiting for the C.O. to speak. The colonel was panting, had to catch his breath. Now he looked very old and haggard, and the lines on his face were deeper than usual.

"Men!" he blurted, and then, of a sudden, he managed to recover control of himself, became the hard, commanding officer. His tone was terse, to the point. "I can't tell you everything—but I'll give you as much as I can. Listen carefully, so I don't have to repeat. I've just gotten a wire from intelligence. Kirby is going to sure death unless you act at once. He's to land on a field across the lines. The Germans have learned that we've sent a plane there, and they're laying

for it—troops on the ground. They're going to let him get out of the plane, and find a certain message which is concealed there, and for which they've searched in vain. As soon as he takes the message, they'll capture him, wrest the information, and deal with him as promptly as they've been dealing with all spies lately."

He stopped, fumbled in his pockets, at the same time watching to see what effect the news would have on the two Mosquitoes. Travis stood perfectly still, frozen. But not Carn. The little man, eyes wild, clutched the C.O.'s arm convulsively, and shouted with frantic anguish, ignoring his rank.

"Where is he? For God's sake, don't let's stand here wasting time! Give us the course!" A hysterical sob tore from his throat. "We must stop him from landing there!"

"You must!" the C.O. echoed, with gripping firmness. He finally found what he had been searching for in his pockets—another roll map. "You'll find the course charted out on this. Don't look at it now. One of you take it and lead the way! It's up to you—you know how to signal him! Hurry! Are your planes warmed?"

"Yes, yes!" Travis snapped, seizing the map and rushing for the machine. Carn stumbled over to his, hoisted himself in with wild haste.

"Hurry!" the C.O. yelled, as the engines roared thunderously. "Full throttle! You must catch him!"

Travis got off first. His Spad roared across the field like a streak, swept into the air and zoomed. Close on his tail came Carn. Travis, letting his plane out to the last notch, unfurled the map, glanced at it hastily, and set the course. Hell-bent, smoke pouring from their exhaust stacks, the two ships raced through the sky. Both men were determined to catch up to Kirby before he reached that field, to catch up to him and stop him. And they clung to one stubborn, frantic hope. It was the hope that Kirby was not flying at full speed.

BUT, just now, Kirby was flying at full speed. He had already crossed the lines, and had come through a storm of harmless but annoying anti-aircraft fire. Now, at full throttle, he continued on his course. And the farther he went the more tense and keyed up he became. Somehow, he had a hunch that things weren't going to work out so well. It was no joke—this having to abandon ship on an enemy field. And he realized with a start that the thing must take place in a few minutes now. Every second brought him nearer. Why was he going so fast anyhow? There was plenty of time. It was only two minutes past five, with the sun just getting

bright. After all, he reckoned grimly, this might well prove to be his last flight. Why cut it so short by racing to the field? The thought of that landing was so chilling that he had an uncontrollable impulse to delay it.

He shoved the throttle down a few notches, and the roar of the motor lowered to a more steady drone. Slower now. Sailing through the ever-brightening sky. That was better.

But things move fast in the air. And not help. It seemed only to be giving him more time to brood and worry. He found himself racking his brain with a thousand conjectures. Would he be spotted? Again he glanced up at the sun, in whose bright orb enemy planes might be lurking. There was nothing there. But how about Field 21? And suppose he could not find the paper. If the spy had failed to leave it there, and—

He broke off with a berserk oath, shifted about with savage impatience. Hell, it would be better to hurry, to get the damn thing over with. He would! He'd go as fast as he could! Determinedly he pulled out the throttle wide again. Once more the motor burst into a deafening roar. The Spad shot forward, cleaving the air like a dart.

But things move fast in the air. And during the brief period when Kirby had slowed down, his two comrades, constantly getting up more speed, had begun to gain on him. Their planes were going faster than his now, for his ship was just opening out again while theirs were fully open. And perhaps their desperation, their wild determination to catch up to their leader, enabled them to fly as they had never flown before, to attain a speed which broke all records for the swift Spads. On they rushed, their two planes lurching, shaking, as if the terrific strain must break them to pieces. Their faces were grim and set now, their eyes peered through their goggles, straining to catch a glimpse of a plane in the sky ahead.

Now Kirby knew that he was getting closer to his objective. A road had just appeared on the relief-map earth below, a tiny winding ribbon of brown. He must follow it. He ruddered over, kept it swimming beneath him, raced on. Presently, in the distance ahead, he saw a blurred patch of green looming towards him. The forest! And on the other side of the forest, he knew, was Field 21! Getting there now, getting there! Again he banked slightly to keep his course.

And it was at that very moment that the keen eyes of Travis spotted him. As he and Shorty raced on, the eldest Mosquito dimly picked out a black speck against the sunny Eastern sky, and by its location he knew it

must be Kirby's Spad. Frantically, he signaled Carn, who responded with equal excitement. They must attract Kirby's attention, somehow. Hastily, Travis fumbled for his Very pistol—got it out of his teddy-bear. It was loaded with orange rockets—a special color. It was the color used exclusively by the Three Mosquitoes for the purpose of identifying themselves to each other.

Carefully, Travis held the pistol in the air, pulled the trigger. The orange rocket zipped upward through the sky. Travis waited, watching the distant speck anxiously. But then he shook his head, and his face grew even thinner and harder. No, Kirby couldn't have caught the signal. The speck ahead moved on, serenely indifferent. Furiously, Travis and Shorty redoubled their efforts to get more speed out of their ships. Again the eldest Mosquito fired a rocket, determined to keep sending them up until Kirby saw them.

But Kirby was now concentrating all his attention on the landmarks below, and the map on his dashboard. He must make no mistakes. He rushed on, and presently he was sweeping over the forest. Damn, how quickly those green-tops were receding! He would be on the other side, in just a couple of minutes. Almost there! He began to strain his eyes for signs of Field 21. At first he could not see anything, but then, dimly, he picked out a lighter-colored, oblong patch, surrounded by trees and shrubbery. His heart jumped. For he knew that he was there, on that oblong patch, he must land and accomplish his perilous mission.

Forcing himself to remain cool, he began to work out his course of action, plan his landing. Better start going down now, so that, by the time he came over that field, he would be low enough to swoop right down into the wind. Must make a quick landing, and—he smiled grimly—an even quicker getaway.

Gently, he started to shove the joystick forward. But then he paused, and instinctively looked about once more to make sure that no enemy planes were at hand. He squinted up at the sun, put a thumb to his eye. Nothing there. He jerked his head, and looked behind him. Then he stiffened, sat tense, rigid.

Advancing high in the western sky, coming straight towards him, were two tiny specks. On they moved, glinting in the growing sunlight.

Were they Jerries? The line of his lips grew even straighter. If those were enemy planes, his scheme would be ruined. If—

He broke off, starting with incredulous amazement. For, as he looked back there, an orange light suddenly

popped from one of those shapes, went streaking across the sky. An orange Very light! Why, that could only mean one thing!

A furious oath broke from Kirby. "The damn fools!" he muttered. "Following me! Playing nursemaids—as usual!"

NATURALLY, Kirby could only assume that his two comrades, being worried about his secret mission, had flagrantly disobeyed orders, and come up to join him in spite of everything. Ordinarily, he would have welcomed them—for their presence by his side warmed his blood, filled him with strength and confidence. But now, realizing that they might well throw a monkey-wrench into the works, he was furious with them. His first impulse was simply to ignore them, to go right on down and do his work as if they weren't there at all. After all, they were still miles away, and by the time they got to him he might have his task accomplished.

During these seconds, while he watched those planes back there, he had mechanically been guiding his own ship straight ahead, continuing to speed over the forest. Now, with a start, he saw that he was almost directly over that field! It was looming right below and in front of him. It would take him a moment to get down there!

Again his hand started to shove the stick forward. But again he paused, and shook his head. No, it would be foolish to just ignore them and go ahead. For their presence hereabouts might betray him. If the Germans saw them hovering around, they would get suspicious, The C.O. was right. A lone plane might get through unnoticed. But three planes, even two, had little chance of escaping detection.

Carn and Travis, of course, had no idea that Kirby had seen them. Both men were half frantic, and were doing everything in their power to catch their leader's attention. Travis had already run out of rockets, and now Carn was shooting them off. Both saw that no matter how fast they went, they could no longer catch up to Kirby if he were going to land. So they zigzagged, tolled, zoomed and dived—performing maneuvers as only the Three Mosquitoes could perform them.

Kirby saw that succession of rockets, saw those two specks gyrating about like insects in play. A feeling of bewildered puzzlement came over him. What in hell were those two guys up to? Certainly they were either plumb crazy, or were trying damn hard to attract his attention.

Well, regardless of everything, he must get them out of here so he'd have the sky and Field 21 to himself. He decided to turn and go to them, shoo them away.

Quickly, he banked vertically, straightened out, and went racing back over the forest, racing towards those two specks. Carn and Travis, with frenzied relief, also straightened out, and reopened their throttles. Slowly the three planes moved together on converging lines. The specks ahead of Kirby began to grow, loom into shape and color. On they came, closer and closer, rocking as they sped through the air.

The three met about two miles from Field 21. At once, Carn and Travis swung in on either side of Kirby, pulling so close that their wings almost touched his. The three cockpits were side by side, and Kirby could look across at both his comrades. Both men commenced waving desperately, using every signal they knew.

Kirby, glancing from one to the other, was confused. All he saw was that both of them were making a lot of wild gestures, as if each were trying to outdo the other. He shook his head, interrogatively. This went on for several seconds, and then Kirby decided to watch only Travis. The eldest Mosquito worked like a madman to convey his message. He pointed to the ground, shook his head, made pantomimes of slitting his throat. But Kirby, little dreaming that they had anything to tell him concerning his work on Field 21, could not understand. He shook his head again and again. Travis, his features drawn taut, began anew.

But Kirby did not even see him this time. For at that moment, he saw something else, something that brought a frantic shout from him.

Diving out of the sun, swooping down with breathless fuxy, were four shining Pfaltz pursuit planes! They had caught the trio unawares, had maneuvered into position while the Three Mosquitoes were preoccupied with their signals. And now, before Kirby and his men had time to pull out, they were upon the three Spads.

The air above was shattered by the shrill, staccato clatter of machine-guns. The Germans had opened up; red flames were streaking from the noses of their ships. The smoky, zigzag lines of tracer bullets began to pencil the air on all sides of the Mosquitoes. A few shots went ticking through their fuselages, drilled holes in their wings.

In a flash, Kirby became the commander, the leader of his men. He waved his arm, signaled his two comrades to pull up. They obeyed at once. The three Spads spread to receive the attack, doing half-rolls to

throw off the Germans' sights. The Three Mosquitoes leaned to their Own sights then, placed their fingers on their stick-triggers. Their guns blazed defiantly as the Germans, coming out of their dives, slithered in and out among them. Then it was dog-fight, a deadly mixup of swirling, circling ships which sought to down one another.

The Three Mosquitoes could fight. Fighting was their natural game, their meat. And Kirby and his men, enraged by the surprise attack, turned and charged their attackers with a vengeance. Like winged furies they whipped about, blazing away at every enemy in sight. Kirby, banking, saw a Pfaltz streaking by close overhead, so close that he could clearly distinguish the black crosses on its wings. He pulled back his stick and zoomed breathlessly. And as he zoomed, it struck him that perhaps this was the gist of his comrades' signals. They had been trying to tell him that Jerry planes were lurking about, and that he was likely to be attacked. Yes, that must be it! Well, they'd settle this quartet!

Cursing savagely, he opened up both guns on the streaking Pfaltz above. The German half-rolled, tried to nose down for Kirby, but the Mosquito had already shot up past him, and was Immelmanning to swoop for his tail. The Spad roared down like a blood-crazed vulture, guns blazing. The Pfaltz veered, staggered, like a bird surprised by a sudden wound. Then, resignedly, it nosed over and went fluttering earthward. Kirby had scored!

Three of them left now. Three of them, but Carn had already badly damaged one, which, with a crippled motor, was staggering about uncertainly. Only two really to combat. A cinch! Waving to his comrades, Kirby hurled his Spad towards one of those two.

Then a new thought struck him, filled him with sudden alarm. This dog-fight might attract attention, might attract more Jerry planes. And if any more came—if, even, these three held out—Kirby would never be able to go down to Field 21 and land. He'd fail to get that packet, and—his eyes narrowed—the dope was needed, needed before noon.

It took him only a few seconds to reach his decision. He saw that his two comrades would have no trouble holding off these three Pfaltz planes, perhaps even downing them. And meanwhile, he would pull out and do his work.

Banking, he jerked back his stick and managed to climb beside Travis, who was clinging stubbornly to a Pfaltz's tail. Hastily, Kirby waved. Unlike the message which Travis had tried to get by, this was a signal

which Kirby had often used before: many times he had pulled out to do some task while his comrades stayed to fight off German planes.

Travis caught the idea at once, and his goggled face filled with horror. He shook his head, began signaling back frantically. But it was, too late. For already Kirby's ship had swerved away. Swinging around, he shoved his stick forward, got his plane into a mild but speedy glide-dive. Tracer streaked after him, but he ignored it. And in a second he was out of the fight, rushing, hurtling down a hill of space. Down he went, and the forest below loomed closer and closer. Looking back he saw the fighting planes fading into tiny specks. And also he saw a flaming Pfaltz plunging earthward in a trail of smoke. The disabled one, most likely. They had plugged it!

Then he turned forward, and gave all his attention to the task in hand. Now, once more, Field 21 was approaching. At a thousand feet Kirby leveled off and flew straight ahead. And again all his fears and doubts rose to the surface. His heart pounded wildly, and a cold dread enveloped him. God, could he go through with the thing? It seemed more and more impossible—a reckless, idiotic stunt which looked like sure death.

KIRBY'S Spad roared on, was coming over the field. He glanced down, scanned that patch of earth more keenly than he had ever scanned a landing place before. The field was fairly large, and sufficiently level. Sure enough the forest bounded it on the north side, and even from here Kirby could see the path. Bushes and heavy underbrush lined the other three sides.

And the place seemed absolutely deserted, a desolate-looking spot. No signs of life on it. Yet, somehow, Kirby couldn't suppress that hunch of his, that things weren't going to go as well as expected. He was worried, and strangely nervous.

But he forced himself to stop conjecturing. Determinedly, he banked over, circled to get into the wind.

Meanwhile, Carn and Travis found themselves in one of the most harrowing predicaments they had ever faced. Tortured by the knowledge that every second brought Kirby nearer to that field, they nevertheless had no choice but to stay and fight the two remaining Germans. And they found their hands full with these two ships. The Germans, enraged by losing two of their comrades, had suddenly thrown themselves into the battle with surprising viciousness. Recklessly, they

took the two Mosquitoes head-on, and blazed away at them. Worried, torn by suspense and anguish, Carn and Travis stubbornly kept them at bay, held them off.

And then Travis, glancing down toward Field 21, saw the tiny speck which he knew was Kirby's Spad starting to maneuver to glide into the wind. A feeling of reckless desperation seized the eldest Mosquito, Ignoring the bullets which whistled about him, he banked and, opening his throttle, tried to break away as Kirby had broken a way before. But one of the German ships, its pilot reckless beyond words, instantly swept in front of him, heading him off. Travis, seeing that the only result of his efforts would be a fatal collision had to turn and resume the fight. He swore bitterly, hopelessly.

By this time Kirby had headed into the wind, he reached forward to cut his throttle. His hand fell strangely limp, but it did not falter, he cut the engine and then, with his heart in his mouth, he started down.

Gracefully, the Spad glided towards the ground, the wind singing through its flying wires. Down, down, down, with the field coming inexorably closer. With expert control, keeping a cool head, Kirby was bringing his ship down for a flawless landing. The wheels whisked over the ground, caressed it, settled upon it. Gently the Spad bounded along. Kirby gave her more throttle, taxied around to pull up parallel to the forest, in a position whence he could take off again into the wind. The Spad slowed up more and more, coasted a few yards. Then, easily, she rolled to a stop.

With his motor idling, purring softly, Kirby sat for a moment in the cockpit, glanced about him furtively. A sense of utter loneliness suddenly gripped him. What a desolate job this was!

But he must work fast now! Quickly, he unstrapped himself. With one leap he was out of the plane, on the ground. He was breathing heavily. He had a strange dread of walking away from his ship. He wanted to stay near it.

He steeled his nerves. The path—it was right over there. He started for it. He walked, then began to trot. Then he ran, faster and faster. He was nearing the line of trees. The path was only a few yards ahead.

Then, of a sudden, his blood went cold, and an icy chill ran up and down his spine, he stopped, stood perfectly still, yet retained the presence of mind not to betray completely his horrified surprise.

Through the trees ahead, despite the brush in which they were camouflaged, Kirby's keen eyes had picked out the glint of rifles and machine-guns . . . guns whose muzzles were trained directly on him!

And he realized, realized with cold terror, that he had fallen into a trap. Most likely every side of the field was lined with Germans. He was surrounded! Instinctively, he glanced back at his plane. God, it was way out there on the field!

For a second, panic seized him. He stood there like a gaping idiot, pale as a ghost, not knowing where to run. But only for a second. Then the trained soldier in him rose to the surface, began to think clearly, coolly. Evidently he had not allowed the Germans that he had seen them, for they would have come out after him at once then. No, they didn't know that he had found out. And, he immediately reasoned, they were doubtless waiting for him to get the paper. Then they would jump him!

But if he stood here any longer he would surely betray himself. He must move, move somewhere, as if nothing were disturbing him. He thought fast. Then, deliberately, he turned on his heel.

"Oh, hell!" he exploded, in a clear, even voice, though he had to use all his effort to keep it from shaking. "That damned engine! Eating up gas! Didn't cut her enough!"

It was the tone, he hoped, that would do the trick. He had tried to make it sound like the tone of a man mumbling to himself in order to relieve his loneliness. And surely, somebody among these Germans, provided they heard, would understand English.

With firm tread, he started walking right back towards his plane. He was afraid to run this time, afraid that it would at once arouse their suspicions. He tried his best to act indifferent, serenely oblivious. But he could scarcely breathe. One false move and he could be plugged like a rat. He walked on. Sweat broke out on his face, and his legs felt weak. The plane seemed miles away. It was only about ten yards from him. Never before had he experienced such sheer terror. It was the terror that comes when one feels absolutely powerless—one weak, frail individual against scores. If just one of those Jerries hiding on the edge of the field fired, Kirby would be dropped.

But he was getting closer to the plane. In fact, he was up to it now! Still taking his time, he went beside the fuselage he put a foot on the little step, lifted himself upwards. Then he had the foot in the rock pit, was half in. He stayed in this position for a moment, to assure his enemies that he had nothing up his sleeve. He reached forward, got the throttle. He eased it down a notch, and the motor died out even more. He opened it a bit, moved it back and forth. His hand

was trembling now. He longed to just make a desperate break and be done with it, was savagely impatient. But he must do the thing slowly or he was lost!

Swearing loudly, as if irritated by having to spend time on his engine, he put his other foot in the cockpit. Now he stood, still playing with the throttle. Slowly, almost nonchalantly, he sat down. Again he had shoved the throttle in, and the motor was purring softly. Kirby's hand closed more tightly on the lever. His furtive eye was measuring the stretch of field ahead, judging his distance. His muscles were tensing. He gathered himself together for the terrific effort, rallied all his strength and courage. For a final second he paused, knowing that life and death were in the balance. Then he acted.

With one move, he ducked low in the cockpit, low enough to protect his head by the metal cowling. And then, like a man sealing his own doom, he pulled the throttle wide open.

The Spad's engine burst into a series of deafening detonations. The little ship trembled, vibrated from nose to tail. With a roar, it started to move.

AND at that moment hell broke loose.

The whole place echoed and reverberated with the report of guns, the clatter of Maxims. From every side of the field they blazed, and their bullets came whistling, shrieking right over Kirby's head. His Spad was moving faster now, gathering speed. Still crouched in the cockpit, he lifted his head only to see where he was going. And as he lifted it he saw that desolate field suddenly swarm with life.

As if by magic, gray-clad figures with coal-scuttle helmets sprang out of trees and bushes, came rushing out from every side, rifles leveled. They were firing, but not yet firing to kill. They were demanding Kirby's surrender, waving to him to give himself up honorably or be shot to bits. But simultaneously machine gunners were trying to cripple his plane, to stop it as it went bounding across the field, faster, faster.

Stubbornly the Mosquito went right on with his take-off. Stubbornly he kept his plane streaking across the field, though he saw his enemies closing in all around. Bullets tore into his ship, drilling it full of holes. With a crash, the windshield before him was shattered, and pieces of glass showered down on him, cutting his face. God, he couldn't make it! There was a mob of Jerries right in front of him, guns trained on him. He was done for!

Then a wave of giddy joy swept him. For, in that

terrific second, when he thought his chances were gone, he saw two other planes swoop down overhead like maddened hawks. They were Spads. And they were the Spads of his two comrades! Shorty and Travis, having beaten off the two Paltz planes, had rushed to the field in the hope of saving their leader.

Now, with their usual expert precision, they at once proceeded to clear a path for the Spad which moved on the ground, to open the way for a takeoff. Down they plunged, their guns stuttering into blazing life. Right for the Germans in front of Kirby they swooped, and sent a hail of tracer down into the gray-clad ranks. The Germans, terrified by these monsters which charged at them from above, were thrown into momentary confusion. They spread out in one great wave, many of them rushing for shelter like scurrying rabbits. Others were dropped like flies, riddled by the deadly bullets. And Kirby streaked on ahead, streaked on until, though the bullets were zipping and whining all about him, his wheels left the ground and he soared into the air.

Jerking back his stick, he pulled up in a long zoom, climbed away from that infernal spot. And Carn and Travis pulled up with him, on either side. The Germans on the ground opened up on them with everything they had, and the bullets kept zipping up after them. But soon, climbing westward, they were free again, out of range.

Kirby strapped himself in his cockpit, adjusted his goggles. Then he drew his first real breath.

But it was a short breath. Mechanically, he had been leading his comrades towards the Allies lines, as if accepting the idea that they were all going home. Now, with a shock, he realized that his mission still remained unaccomplished. He had gone through all this hell for nothing! The papers were still down in that tree! And he had gone out with a stubborn determination to get those papers. Never before had he failed in his job. And, his lips set firmly, he could not fail now!

He glanced at his watch. It was five thirty-five—still plenty of time. But there was no sense wasting it by going back to the drome. He must make another attempt to get to that tree. It seemed hopeless, ridiculously impossible, yet perhaps there was a way. Field 21? No hope there. The Jerries would remain on watch, ready to catch any ship which came there. And next time they would know how to act more quickly. Next time, if they saw their man breaking for freedom, they would not give him a chance to surrender, but would shoot at once to kill.

Well, how could he get down there, then? He racked his brain. And then, slowly, a vague hope rose in him.

He waved to his comrades, and the three Spads leveled off at about nine hundred feet. They were flying over the forest which bounded Field 21. The danger that the Germans would spot them again, from the air, was great, but Kirby decided it was worth the chance. He might need Carn and Travis again. They had proved that he needed them before.

Cutting down his throttle and remaining low, he led them about, sweeping around over the forest in wide circles. His eyes were glued to the trees below, searching, scanning every portion.

Minutes passed, and still the reconnoitering continued. And then, all at once, Kirby's eyes lit up, and his hope mounted.

A bit to the right, he had picked out a small clearing in the trees. Looked like a possible place. He would see. Again he signaled his comrades. The three Spads swerved as one, flew over to the spot. Kirby scanned it carefully. Gosh, but it was small! Just a tiny gap in the woods. And the ground was rough and uneven. But it looked deserted—even more deserted than Field 21 had looked. It didn't seem possible that there could be Germans down there. The place was too wild, one of those God-forsaken spots which are just left unoccupied by humans.

He continued to circle above, keeping his two comrades beside him, glancing now and then at their bobbing Spads. But he kept studying the ground. And the more he looked at the spot, the more it seemed suited to his purpose. Yet, to land a plane in such a place would be a feat indeed, not to mention taking off again! High trees all around, scarcely any room. Could he chance it?

He pondered. Then he decided at least to make certain of all the details that the thing would involve. Again he signaled his comrades, led them upwards. They climbed higher. At one thousand, five hundred feet Kirby had a wider view of the earth below. He picked out Field 21 again, and compared its position with that of the little spot he had just discovered. About a mile apart, his keen eyes told him. Then he saw, to his great satisfaction, that if one went due southeast from the tiny field below, he would arrive directly at Field 21. It would be asy to set that compass course on the ground. Quickly, but with painstaking care, he figured out the bearings, figured just how he would have to go to get to the path where the tree was located.

When this was done, he reviewed the whole scheme once more, went over every detail. It seemed reckless, perhaps an act of folly, but he could not help feeling that it was possible. And those papers—

"Hell!" he burst out, determinedly. "I'll take a shot at it!"

And, having, reached his derision, he at once proceeded to carry it out. He got his comrades closer to him and then, slowly carefully, he began to wave a series of signals. He pointed to himself, thence to the little field on the ground. He made a pantomime of going down and landing. Both Travis and Carn understood. They shook their heads vigorously, and Shorty tapped his helmet as if to say: "You're crazy!" But Kirby merely waved off then-protests. He pointed to Field 21, then to them. By more pantomimes, he made it clear to them that he wanted them to go over that field and circle, so as to keep the Germans' attention attracted to them. They were to serve as decoys. The enemy, intent on them, would not see Kirby landing scarcely a mile away.

For awhile Carn and Travis kept protesting. But in the end they had no choice but to obey their leader. After all, they realized, his mission must be important, or he would not be so reckless in his determination to accomplish it. And since they could not stop him, they must help him. So, reluctantly, they waved their assent.

Kirby, giving them a grin of final reassurance, nosed down and swept out of the three-plane formation. Looking up he saw the two Spads winging their way towards Field 21. He nodded, satisfied. They would play their part.

CAREFULLY, Kirby circled down. In a moment he was right over that tiny field. This time he swooped right above it, to make absolutely sure that no Germans were waiting there. He scanned the surrounding trees keenly, looked for the glint of rifles. Nothing there. He was certain. Now to get down!

He turned, headed into the wind once more. Then, with infinite patience, he maneuvered his ship downwards, judging his distance as he had never judged it before. Every yard counted. One mistake and he would crash on those trees.

The little field jumped up towards him. The Spad whisked past the tree-tops, all but brushing them with its undercarriage. Kirby eased back the stick, gently. And he made it. He managed to settle the Spad right down on that ground, rough though it was.

Again he sat in the cockpit, looking around. Then,

again, he was on the ground, he walked around to the tail of the throbbing Spad. He must swing her about so that he could take-off into the wind again. There was just about enough room.

With all his strength, he dragged the Spad's tail around. It took him several precious minutes. But at last he had the little ship headed into the wind, ready to take right off as soon as he hopped back into it.

He pulled out his compass. Carefully, he got his bearings, mentally planned his course. Then, compass in hand, he set out. He walked off the field, into the woods. The place was wild and rough. He had to tear through heavy brush. It didn't seem possible that he would ever find his way to Field 21. And even if he did find his way, even if he found the path he was after, he had no idea how he was going to get that paper with all those Germans about.

But he was determined to try, nevertheless. He trudged on. Already his feet were aching from the rough tramping. But now the wildness of the forest seemed to be lessening. Signs of civilization began to appear. Paths came into view. Kirby's nerves began to tense once more, and he became keyed up, alert. He must be on his guard now.

On he went. Then, suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. He had just come upon a path. And right beside him, nailed to a tree, was a sign. It read:

"Nach Felt 21."

And he could have shouted for sheer joy. This was an incredible stroke of fortune. The path he was on led to Field 21! And, he reasoned, since there was only one path leading from the field to this forest, it must be the very path he wanted! Ought to take him right to the tree.

With fresh confidence, he hurried on, following the path for five minutes more. And then, again, he stopped short, stiffening. Scarcely twenty yards ahead, a road crossed the path. And on this road, marching past, was a column of German infantry! Men moving up, moving up on a secret, camouflaged highway. Quietly, Kirby ducked off the path, crouched in the bushes, waited. The Germans kept passing, line after line. The column seemed endless. Would they never be gone?

Finally they were gone. Kirby came out of the bushes, hurried along. He came to the road, started to cross it. He looked up and down the highway. His heart jumped. More of them coming! Another column, scarcely a stone's throw away. But they would not know him, would not be able to see his uniform

from there. Calmly, he crossed the road, found, the path on the other side. Again he tramped on. But now his eyes and ears were alert to everything around him. Several times, when he heard sounds, he jumped, was ready to crouch again in the bushes.

Presently, he noticed that the air was getting lighter, though the place was still densely wooded. There could only be one reason. He looked ahead, strained his eyes.

And through the trees he saw the clearing, the clearing which he knew was Field 21!

He was here! Careful now! He clung to the edge of the path, stealthily moved closer. Again that frightful pounding of his heart began. For now, as he looked, he could see scores of gray-clad figures. They were right near the edge of the forest, manning machine guns or standing about with ready rifles. At the same time Kirby's ears picked up a familiar sound in the air above. The drone of motors! His two comrades were doing their work!

He glanced down the path. And then he saw that, while there were Germans all about, the path itself was clear. Could he get by? Slowly, stealthily, half crouching, he went on. He watched the trees on the right side of the path. Quietly now! Germans were all over the place. God, but his shoes were making a lot of noise, snapping twigs and brush. If he heard——

He broke off, realizing with a start that he could go no farther down this path. True, there were no Germans on it, but right ahead, just off the path, were scores of them. If he tried to get to that tree they would surely spot him. He stood, pausing dubiously. What to do? How could he get to that paper?

All at once he fairly leaped for the bushes again, on the left side of the road. Perhaps it was some sixth sense which had prompted him, told him that danger was approaching. He crouched low, remained still as death. And he hadn't been a moment too soon.

Down the path, having just come from the field, walked a German sentry, idle on shoulder, eyes alert. From his hiding place in the bushes, Kirby watched him pass, he went by, walked up the path a ways, then came back. This continued steadily. Up and down, right in front of Kirby, the German kept pacing. And as Kirby crouched there, a wild idea took shape in his mind, an idea which he could not cast aside. After all, it was the only thing to do. The German was just about his size. That helped. And, if he worked quietly, he was far enough from all those Boche to get away with it unnoticed.

Reaching his decision, he crouched a bit lower,

waited for the sentry to pass again. The German was coming. Kirby's whole body tensed for the spring, and his left list clenched until his nails dug, into his palm. The sentry walked on, serenely oblivious. Now he was passing, he was here!

With catlike agility, Kirby leaped out of the bushes, and as he leaped he swung that left of his. It was all over in a flash, before the German knew what was happening, that terrific blow, backed by Kirby's whole body, crashed to his jaw. Silently he collapsed, sprawled in a heap. But his rifle dropped with a clang which made Kirby's blood run cold. With frantic haste, he dragged the man into the seclusion of the bushes. He kneeled over him. The German was out.

IT TOOK Kirby just a few minutes to accomplish his work. Quickly he stripped the German's uniform, got into it. It was far too large for him, but over his heavy teddy-bear it fitted well enough. He wanted to keep on his teddy-bear so that, when he went back to his plane, his comrades would be able to identify him if they had to. The German's iron helmet was big and uncomfortable, but it would have to do. Completing his masquerade, Kirby looked himself over as best he could. Rather baggy, but it ought to get by. Now to attend to the German.

Using his handkerchiefs and the Boche's shirt, he tied the man securely and gagged him. Then he rose and strolled out of the bushes with an air of easy assurance. Outwardly he was calm and cool. But inwardly he was all nerves, as jumpy as a frightened rabbit. He was a spy now in every sense of the word. And if he was caught—But he had no intention of being caught!

Reaching the path, he picked up the German's rifle, shouldered it, and began pacing as the sentry had paced before him. Down he went, closer to the spot where that tree must be, and also closer to the Germans who were right off the path. They must see him, he knew. Would they see that he was not the sentry, become suspicious? And if anyone found the gagged man Kirby's goose would be cooked.

He drew in his breath sharply. For now he was going right past a group of Boche who were just off the path, cleaning out a machine gun. They were so close that he could see their begrimed and unshaven faces clearly. They could have reached out and touched him. But they merely glanced up indifferently as he passed.

Relieved, he went on with more confidence. And then, abruptly, he slowed his pace, his eyes fixed on

a tree to his left or, from the field, to the right side of the path. It was a tree whose trunk was forked into two great branches. And counting the other trees which stood ahead of it, up to the field, Kirby knew, knew beyond every shadow of doubt, that this was his objective—the objective which he had risked life and limb to reach! It was right beside him. Yet, even now, it seemed unattainable, with those Germans so close at hand. If he made any false moves, they would surely discover him.

So he marched past the tree, walked down to the field. There he glanced skyward. He saw the two glinting Spads of his comrades circling, insolently low, while the Germans were aiming but not firing at them. Evidently the Germans thought that perhaps they might fall into the same trap Kirby had fallen into, and they would nab the pilots.

His blood wanned by the sight of those two planes, Kirby turned, to pace back up the path. Again he was nearing the forked tree. He glanced about, furtively. No one seemed to be watching. It would only take a second. He resolved to try.

At the tree he stopped, yawned lazily, he went up to the trunk, half leaned against it, lowered his rifle. Cautiously, his hand reached out for the fork, and he was just about to touch it when a cold, guttural voice made him wheel fearfully.

There, standing before him, was a tall, slender German officer with steely eyes and stern and aristocratic features. By his uniform Kirby saw that he was an *oberleutnant*. The Mosquito, despite his tremors, had the presence of mind to salute in the manner he knew German soldiers saluted.

The *oberleutnant* scowled at him darkly, and for a second Kirby was afraid that the man suspected him. The German began to bark out a string of angry words. Kirby could not understand them, but the Mosquito sensed that the officer was bawling him out for falling down on his job. He must be asking what he meant by lolling against a tree instead of sticking to his watch. Kirby listened meekly, hanging his head as if in shame, but really to avert his face from the other's eyes.

The *oberleutnant's* voice kept growing more and more angry. Suddenly, with a snarl, he gave Kirby a vicious slap on the cheek with the back of his gloved hand. The Mosquito stiffened, and tears of rage welled in his eyes. The blow stung, and he longed to haul off and bash in that haughty, contemptuous face before him. But he controlled himself, and remained meek and submissive.

The *oberleutnant* spoke again, evidently commanding him to go back on duty. Kirby saluted, turned on his heel, and once more commenced pacing up and down. In a moment the officer was gone—as quickly and mysteriously as he had appeared. Kirby shook his head. Damn, but these Boche officers certainly kept an eye on their men! How could he ever get that paper? He must get it soon, before he was discovered, or before they found the real sentry.

For two or three minutes he paced up and down patiently, performing his duties as a German sentry. Then he could wait no longer. Again he went to the tree. This time he looked about most carefully, approached more, slowly. At the trunk he started to lower his rifle, then quickly reshouldered it as he heard sounds in the trees. But no one was coming.

He put the rifle down, and again his hand reached out. He reached for the secret nook. Sure enough there were leaves and bark there. He pulled at them. They yielded. Again he thought he heard someone approaching, and he paused apprehensively. Then again his hand worked to pull away the leaves and bark. It seemed as if he would never uncover the thing. But suddenly it was uncovered.

A package was revealed. He pulled it out, shook the dirt from it. It was wrapped in oil-cloth.

His eyes glowed. The packet, at last! At last he held in his hand the small but precious object he had worked so hard for! He shoved it way beneath his flying togs, where he could feel it next to his chest, he reached for his rifle again.

But then, to his horror, he saw that same, haughty *oberleutnant* confronting him again, staring at him with blazing eyes. A wave of giddy terror swept through the Mosquito. If the officer had seen, all was over.

THE *oberleutnant's* rasping voice jarred on his thoughts. Again came that backhand slap in the face. The German yelled at him, shouted at him. Two dabs of red had appeared in the officer's checks, and just beneath his helmet a vein stood out, swollen purple. Suddenly his tone seemed to become challenging, questioning. He was asking Kirby something, asking it over and over again. The Mosquito, unable to understand, began to grow panicky. He dared not answer, yet he knew that if he didn't he'd be lost. He stammered incoherently, choked, pretended to be seized with a fit of coughing. The officer stared at him with peculiar keenness. And now Kirby was certain that he was suspicious. He must say something!

"Ja—" he blurted, hoping that he was giving the impression of a soldier so cowed by his superior that he could not speak. "Ja, mein herr. Ich—ich—"

Again he choked, coughed.

For a moment the *oberleutnant* continued to stare at him with keen scrutiny. Then, abruptly, the officer threw up his hands in a gesture of disgust. "Dumkopf!" He spat contemptuously. And, to Kirby's intense relief, he turned on his heel. But he did not go. For, at that moment, the thing happened.

Out from the trees ahead emerged three figures. Two were dressed in the uniforms of German privates. But between them, leaning on them a trifle for support, was a man wearing just underclothes and shoes. And the sight of that man was like a blow that crushed all Kirby's hopes, made him feel that there was nothing to do but resign, throw up the sponge.

The sentry! They had found him! And now, as the *oberleutnant* barked at them interrogatively, they all came over. Kirby stood there stupidly, shoulders stooped, and a strange weakness in his knees. The Germans were talking excitedly. The real sentry was pointing at Kirby with an accusing finger, shouting in a humiliated, furious voice.

Suddenly the *oberleutnant*, white with rage, whipped out a Luger, aimed it right at the Mosquito.

And then a wave of crazy recklessness swept Kirby. He might be caught, but he was going to be caught fighting! His eyes blazed defiantly.

With a lusty oath, he gave a mighty kick at the *oberleutnant's* Luger. The aim was true. His foot sent the revolver flying into the air. One of the privates impulsively lunged at him with his bayonet. But Kirby had already whipped out his own Colt, and he fired point-blank. The private crumpled, a bullet through his heart. The grim spectacle seemed to startle the other three Germans, whose faces blanched. For a moment they were too confused to act.

Kirby seized his opportunity. Turning, he dashed off the path into the trees. A swarm of Boche were right there, but as yet they had not caught the alarm, and simply stared at him with bewildered awe as he went rushing in and out among them. On he went, leaping madly, trying to lose himself. Shouts rose behind him. They were after him now! Turning, he ran back to the path. He got on it again and went dashing along it, as fast as he could. Again he heard the shouts of his pursuers, close behind. The shrill crack of rifles and revolvers shattered the air. They could not see to aim at him through the trees, but they were

trying to scare him. However, the sound of the shots only spurred him on. He redoubled his efforts, hurled himself forward.

On, on, on, he went. He was panting heavily, but he plodded along nevertheless. Leaden weights seemed to have attached themselves to his legs, but he forced them to keep running. His body was a mass of perspiration beneath all his heavy clothing, but he could not do anything about it now. He kept following the path. The whole forest seemed full of shouts and gunfire now. God, it seemed as if the entire German army were on his heels.

Abruptly, he came to the cross-road again. And again he saw German infantry moving along. This time, however, he did not stop and wait. He had on a German uniform, and he would take a chance. He rushed straight to the road. Furiously, he broke right through the Boche ranks, ignoring the guttural protests and roars of anger which greeted him. Then he was back on the path, nearing its end. A couple of hundred yards more, and he was again beside the tree to which the sign was nailed.

Then, at last, he paused, listened. The sound of his pursuers seemed further away now. He must take up precious time. He pulled out his compass, got his bearings, picked out the trail again which must take him to his plane. Then he stripped off the German uniform, and felt a bit freer in his flying togs. Before resuming the dash, he reached beneath his shirt to make certain that the oil-cloth packet was there. *It was.* Now to get to his ship!

Once more he was tearing his way through wild growth, desolate country. Progress now was slow and painful, and in his haste he was cut, bruised and scratched all over. He had to keep stopping to glance at his compass, make sure he was not getting off his course. Straight ahead—then the compass. God, how tired! Straight ahead—then the compass. Every muscle ached, shrieked in protest. Straight ahead—then the compass.

Minutes went by, seemed like hours. Still he saw no signs of the clearing where he had left his Spad. He began to suffer torments. He thought surely he must be lost, that he was just floundering around aimlessly. And presently the sound of his pursuers began to rise again. They were close on his trail! Sobbing convulsively, he kept tearing his way ahead, stubbornly clinging to the same route. Once more the whole forest seemed to reverberate with the sound of running men, the clatter of guns. Kirby fell that he could not go

much farther. His strength was ebbing, and a feeling of faintness was coming over him.

But in the next second, to his dazed relief, he found himself stumbling right out on the field he had been seeking. He was here, and his throbbing plane was waiting, ever-faithful! Good old bus! The sight of it filled him with new life. He hurried over to it, climbed in. The moment he sat down in the cockpit, touched the controls, he felt better, for now at last he was in his own element again.

However, there was little time for relief. The clamor of his pursuers was getting closer and closer. He must hurry—get away from here before they found him! He glanced ahead to judge his distance. Could he take off? Could he clear those trees right in front of him? He gritted his teeth. He must!

He pulled open the throttle, and the thunderous roar which followed was music to his ears. The Spad began to move.

It had not moved a yard before a dozen gray-clad figures swarmed out of the trees, rushed across the field after it. And again hell broke loose around the Mosquito. Again came the infernal whistle of bullets. He ducked low, stubbornly continued to take-off. His plane was just leaving the ground when it gave a sudden lurch, backwards. Fearfully, Kirby glanced around. A cry escaped him.

Two of the Boche, reckless in their zealous determination, had grabbed the tail of the Spad, were trying to climb it. And while their presence made the other Germans stop firing in this direction, Kirby knew that if they succeeded in hanging on he was done for, sure to crash!

THE Spad bounded along, sluggishly. Kirby, unable to do anything to make them let go, realizing that if he didn't get into the air at once he'd never have room to get off at all, employed all his skill as a pilot to lift his overburdened plane from the ground. The Spad lurched again, its motor roaring in shrill protest. And the lurch threw one of the Boche off! The other German clung, however, and was already coming up on the fuselage, wriggling forward. Drunkenly, the Spad staggered into the air. Its tail was weighed down, and Kirby knew that he couldn't possibly clear those trees unless he got rid of his stubborn Boche. Frantically, the Mosquito turned, reached back, trying futilely to touch the clinging, gray-clad figure. The German, a brave man indeed, insolently whipped out his Luger and fired. A bullet whined unhealthily close.

Kirby cursed, yelled, sobbed. The trees were looming ahead. The crash was coming in seconds!

Closer and closer, and still unable to get altitude! There was no hope. It was all over.

But not quite all over. For in that last, breathless moment, Kirby's two comrades were with him once more! Carn and Travis, circling over Field 21, had seen their leader's Spad start to take-off, and were hurrying to join it. Now, at once perceiving Kirby's predicament, they were diving down with their usual reckless speed, dropping like plummets. Travis was far in the lead. Straight down for the drunken Spad he came, his keen eyes glued to his sights. It was a desperate risk the eldest Mosquito had to take, a risk of killing Kirby or disabling the latter's plane, but it was the only course. As he swept down overhead, his twin guns suddenly blazed. Down came the streams of tracer. But they missed their mark!

Twice more the Luger had barked behind Kirby. And now there was only a second left before, those trees would be upon the Spad. Only a second, and Travis' chance was over, since he had already been forced to pull out of his dive. But though Travis was through, Shorty Carn wasn't. And in this final second, his Spad came plunging down. The mild-eyed little man was aiming as he had never aimed before. He had a reputation of being one of the best shots in the service, and he was fiercely determined to live up to that reputation now.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! The jagged streaks of flame spat from his twin muzzles.

And Carn did live up to his reputation. The German on Kirby's fuselage dropped off like a dead fly.

And as soon as he felt the sudden lift of the Spad, Kirby, flying as he had never flown before, used stick and rudder bar with almost uncanny precision.

As the trees came rushing towards him in a blur of green, he banked just slightly enough to give himself a little more room. Then he pulled his nose up, and zoomed.

Up he soared, and once more Carn and Travis were beside him. The three men waved to one another with crazy excitement.

Meanwhile, Germans on Field 21 and on the little field Kirby had left, sadly watched the three Spads winging their way towards the west, fading into tiny, glinting specks. And officers who had directed the movements to trap Kirby shook their heads. They could not understand how he had escaped.

Nor could he. He was still a bit bewildered when, later, having turned in the packet, he stood with his comrades before a very relieved and cheerful C.O.

"That was a show, Kirby," the grizzled old colonel commended. "Really, don't you think you're wasting your talents on us here? Intelligence would be delighted to get you. Can't you imagine yourself as a spy?"

Kirby frowned darkly. "Yes, I can," he replied. "And the idea of it is going to give me plenty of nightmares. Believe me, I'd rather have twenty Jerries sitting on my tail in the air than be standing alone on a piece of German ground!" But then he grinned, turned to his comrades. "Say, guys, just what was all that deaf and dumb play about before? I haven't got it straight yet."

"What?" drawled Travis incredulously. "You mean you still don't know what we were trying to signal you?"

"Man," exclaimed Shorty. "You couldn't get into intelligence—you're too damned dumb! Here we were doing everything but the St. Vitus dance trying to tell you that there were Germans down on the ground, and you were too thick to catch on."

Kirby glared at him indignantly. "The hell you say!" he exploded. "Thick? I found out there were Germans down there all right, didn't I?"

Whereupon both Carn and Travis sighed in unison: "You did!"