

# THE POISONED PUP SQUADRON

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*When the enemy shot down Pond's buddy in an orange-black plume of flame, doing this hellish thing against certain unwritten rules of air warfare, trouble started for fair—and then some!*

**F**LIGHT LEADER FUSHUN—they called him the Chinese ace, and he was really Irish—had a reputation for “carrying” certain men who had flown to glory behind his leadership. Many of the largest names in American air had been made under Tad Fushun’s carefully reckless guidance: and his outfit, the Poisoned Pup Squadron, keeping these owners of great names from the killer, had sent them out to command other and more politic organizations.

Anyway, Headquarters sent the new ones to Fushun with green in their eyes and fear in their hearts, and Tad Fushun worked overtime in his efforts to remove the green and make the fear safe for squadron consumption. “I don’t want any man of you to lose his honest fear of this dam’ flying game,” Fushun would tell the green hands. “When a bucko gets cocky, under fire, there’s an ‘open’ season declared on him right then and there. Give me the boys who are all eyes, an’ goose flesh, with an occasional prayer thrown in; and I’m not kidding about the prayer stuff, take old kid Harry Pond, here”—if Lieutenant Pond was at hand he would blush a bit and kick stones—“next to me, he’s the most prayingest guy in this flight. And look at the luck he’s having. Seven Hun planes in less than two weeks. Two in one day. And before each take-off, Harry’s down on his prayer bones in the cockpit; the while, if a mechanic comes alongside, Harry makes him think that he’s adjusting the toe straps on the rudder bar. Crafty boy, Harry; he’s just making a gang of two with God and licking the world. So I’d advise you fellows to go into partnership too. I tell you what: when the formation breaks, goes hay-wire, and the

world begins to spin, you’re alone up there. You’ll never be more alone in your life. And the hereafter, during every dog fight, will strike you as possibly just after. Now never try to shake your honest fear; and don’t think for a second that you can work this thing alone.”

And weeks came and went. New men came to the Poisoned Pup. New men and old hands left the outfit, in two ways, but Harry Pond stuck. Tad Fushun was surer than ever that Pond had a good stand-in with his God. Always, as the new-comers came in for first instructions, the flight leader told them about it.

“Follow me,” he’d say, “but when things go wrong, stick close to Pond. Bullets—you can see the tracers do it—just curve away from Harry. Stick close to him, men. Mooch in on his immunity.

“AND never kid Pond when you’re in with us a while and notion that he shoots them down by day, and drives all over the sector burying them by night. He knocks them down with a prayer; and he buries them the same way. Do as he does; and remember that you’re going to be alone at times. Yeh, you’re going to be so alone that you’ll welcome anything. Anything that’ll help you forget.

“Alright now. Work for the Poisoned Pup, help Harry Pond with his praying, and some day you’ll maybe have your own command with fame thrown in. but you’ll have no fame here. This outfit’s outa luck, sure outa luck! Just as S.O.L., as though it was in the S.O.S. And ain’t that tough on soldiers? I ask you.”

Lieutenant Harry Pond didn’t really like killing. The killing thing, to him, was merely a part of war. He

was at war, so he killed. But he killed strictly according to the book, with the true standards of sportsmanship always in mind. That's why, one day, he allowed an enemy pilot to wing his way back into Germany.

Next day, Lieutenant Pond was told to report to, and stand on the carpet before, a certain high officer in that area. He went to stand. And sitting, the high officer told Pond a-plenty, then asked him whether he was fighting a private war or obeying orders as prescribed. "What was your idea in letting that man go back to his lines?" asked the high one.

"That pilot, sir," Pond answered, "was all done with this war the minute we shot him out of formation." Then Harry Pond, as was his way, stood there on both hind legs and told the mighty one the why and how of his action, foot by foot, thought by thought, and maybe, prayer by prayer. "I say we shot him out of formation. He was one of eleven Hun flyers. When he went down, came out of a spin, and redressed his ship. I was on his tail I was so close that I could see into his cockpit, see the pleading fear in a kid's face, and see more. His right arm was a dead thing, sir. He was trying to handle the control stick with his knees: and only part of a left hand was on the throttle. The right leg was flopped over to one side, and he was holding right-rudder on his ship by crossing his left foot to the right side. And, that way, sir, he was going home. We've had boys come back that way too. And if we ever thought that an enemy flyer would jump one of our men in such a condition, well, sir, there'd be a war! And we won't jump the other fellow when he's done, and counted out."

FOR a long time the high officer twirled an eraser on the end of a string, and thought. When he got the thing down so fine that the twirling eraser was just missing the end of his nose, he came to a decision, and said, "Go back to your squadron, Pond." Then, as Lieutenant Pond put out the regulation salute and turned to go, the high boy added, "There are some things, Pond, that we can't find in the book."

The very next day, on the dawn patrol of the Poisoned Pup, a thing happened to change quiet Harry Pond's whole scheme of life: the Poisoned Pup lost three men, and one was Fushun. It wasn't the fact that the three were lost, but the way Fushun went out.

The flight had been cruising at 15,000 feet Nearly an hour of their two-hour gas supply was done. Fushun had just signaled for a turn, and was well into his turn when his motor quit. Right away, trying to

start his propeller again, the leader sent his Nieuport into a straight dive. The rest of his men made their turn, held their 15,000, and watched the diving Fushun. He dived a thousand. Two thousand. Near the end of the third thousand, the motor "took it," and he started to pull out of the fall. Pond and the other watchers knew a feeling of fear—for Fushun—as they watched the Nieuport come out of that dive minus most of the linen from its right lower wing. That was an old Nieuport-28 trouble: losing linen in a hard dive. Fushun. holding that bum right up. with left-rudder and aileron, started to limp for home; and then, as Fushun went down, the other thing happened—two squadrons of enemy craft jumped the Poisoned Pup.

There was a fight there. Pond, busy with all the enemy that one pilot could handle, saw three others go down on Fushun They didn't spare Tad Fushun for a minute. They shot his limping plane down, burned him down, sent him down at the falling point of an orange-black plume of flame. The Chinese ace had passed.

Pond came home from that patrol. Not the same Pond as had gone away two hours before, however. This Pond, now, was a man loaded with hate. Just a guy who said. "Wait." He knew now that there were things to be found in no book. But, he knew too, you could take leaves from the other fellow's book.

Automatically, Pond became flight leader of the Poisoned Pup. His orders, to new men and old were not as elaborate as had been those of Tad Fushun. Fact is, Pond gave few orders. All he ever said, before a flight, was, "You men know your stuff. Get 'em. Get 'em quick, and get 'em cold. Let's go."

DURING the first few days of Pond's leadership, the squadron knew no losses. And, on the other side of the sheet, they scored much stuff in the red for Germany. But, with the added patrols, the Poisoned Pup's flying equipment was growing older, and ship replacements were hard to get. A day came when Pond took off with a lot more hate in his heart and fewer men at his back, than was usual, or good. Four planes were in that patrol. The sky was cloudy, and visibility very poor. Before they had won anything like working altitude, the outfit was split.

Up through a hole in the clouds, at close to 10,000 ft. Pond flew into the open Below him now, the sky was a woolly-white field that extended, without a clearing, for miles and miles beyond human sight.

Pond climbed into the clear. He circled and waited for his followers. None came above. The leader, after minutes of stalling, decided that they'd all turned back. Few pilots care to go up and up, on and on, through clouds that promise no top. And Pond did not hold it against them. In the end, he took up the patrol alone.

Flying above such a sea of white is a pretty thing, at least, it is if you are in a position to enjoy such beauty. But Pond had seen enough such days, and he wasn't interested in aerial sightseeing. Those fine billowing clouds below were tricky things. Here and there, they would give a pilot an opening, but, quickly, with a pilot once above, that opening might be suddenly closed. Of course, here and there, other openings would show up. But then again, maybe at any minute, that cloud bank might decide to stay put. Might run together solid. Then what price sightseeing? Where did a pilot get off? Better than 10,000 ft. and a solid blanket below, a blanket with no known thickness, a blanket that might end at four or five thousand—or go clear to the ground. All in all, riding above those clouds, was not so good; and Harry Pond was the boy in a position to know as much.

THE late-morning sun was high in the clear at his back. For nearly an hour he kept it in that position. Just so long as he had his sun, he had a rough idea of his location. There hadn't been any wind for the last few days; and he had little fear of side-drift even at this higher altitude. However, nearing the end of his first hour, with the top of the world to himself, he decided on a turn. He flew that turn. At the same second, with the direction reversed, he picked up a distant plane. He'd seen enough of this particular silhouette to recognize in the other craft the outline of a Fokker. In a short time, after the other pilot had seen Pond, the former changed his course and started to go away from there.

"Ha," Pond thought, and guessed rightly, "here's another bird in the same fix. He doesn't care about war just now. Chances are, my Hun friend is on the raggedy-end of a gasoline supply and only interested in finding his way down and home. Guy, you're my meat!"

At that altitude, Pond's Nieuport-28 was as fast as the enemy Fokker he now pursued. In no time at all, Pond was coming up on the other's tail; and the Hun offered no promise of fight. Then, with the Hun under his guns, Pond realized the why of the other pilot's reluctance, looking back over his shoulder at the oncoming Yank, the German flyer was frantically pumping gas, with a wobble pump, from a low main

tank to his reserve. He was making a big try toward getting home. All the troubles in the world had piled up on this guy. Pond half-laughed, and then, going stone-cold, he thought of the old Chinese ace, Tad Fushun, and, forthwith, Pond proceeded to warm his guns. He saw his first burst of tracers circle the ship ahead, then, as before. Pond found himself suddenly losing interest in a kill

THE German still pumped gas.

Pond held his fire and watched. Pond knew what it was to have ship's trouble. Lord! the Nieuport-28's were the cradles of all trouble. What if he were in the same position as this Hun? Was this war? Is victory victory when the other fellow hasn't a Chinaman's chance? But, that brought Harry Pond back to thoughts of his own Chinese ace—what chance for his white alley had they given Fushun? None! So why should Pond lay off this bird now? No reason on earth. Get him. Get him now and here, but no—

Pond, everything that was Harry Pond, was too big for that. Air fighting should be on the square. If its own men were to make a barroom, kick-and-run thing of air what chance was it to have for tradition? There was something to be upheld, and till now Pond had carried his end with honor. And by-hell! he'd go on being white.

Pond, except for the Hun, was alone in this sky. Nobody could know, and the enemy would never tell. Anyway, maybe, Pond would never get home either. The clouds were heavier than before. It was time, at any rate, that he turn to his own affairs, and. . .

Shadows began to cross the surfaces of Pond's plane. He looked up and behind. A whole flight had jumped him. He now shot a quick glance ahead—and the guy he had had the drop on had dived.

Harry Pond talked to himself. He called himself rough names, but he lost no time while doing so. Instead, he shoved his ship's nose down, and gathered speed. The flock of anxious Fokkers followed close. At the end of a power dive, the Yank pulled up into a loop—and he knew he was pulling a boner—with the idea of coming down among his followers. Pond came down, motor open and guns spitting. While still on his back, he got an enemy ship, and saw it turn orange-red and drop earthward. Then the milling was on.

POND should never have remained to "go round and round." The thing was insane, and he knew it. In the first minute of play, they hit him in the shoulder.

It was his left shoulder; and the left arm went sort of dead. But his right hand was his business hand, and he found himself another near enemy that looked likely and easy. Pond got that second ship with a single burst. Then he pulled up and turned—turned headon into three on-coming fighters.

Again he should have drawn out, but didn't. Those three nearing-planes were a bit lower than his ship. He could have flown high above them. But he was going to call their play, he dived wide-open and shooting. At last split second, with the idea of banking sharply to the right, he threw over his stick and kicked in full-right rudder. Something happened right there. Instead of turning sharply to the right, Pond's plane bolted down and to the left. He saw a shower of flying scraps, and knew that his propeller had clipped an enemy wing. Also, his propeller had shattered. In a flash, he had cut his switch, and went spinning into the clouds below. Spinning down at his side, was the ship with the clipped wing; and it was so far out of control that Pond figured three as his bag for that short fight.

Pond came through the lower level of clouds when his altimeter had dropped to 6000 ft. "Not so bad," he thought. "I had an idea that these clouds had fallen clear to the ground. With 6000, in spite of a dead propeller, I can yet go places, and—"

"Ah, there's my Poisoned Pup's field. Right where I left it, and the rest of my boys seem to be waiting for me. Guess they've been listening to what was going on behind those clouds. Hope they counted those three ships falling through. I want full credit for them. I think I earned it."

From his 6000 ft. elevation, the Yank was able to stretch an easy glide into his home field. He made a fast-rolling wheel landing and wheeled almost to the deadline. When the plane came to a stop, Pond, as was his practice, did not get out directly. Instead, he was deep—on his knees—in the Nieuport's cramped cockpit.

Somebody, of a standing group of mechanics and pilots, said, "Guess old kid Pond is praying. As Fushun used to say—Pond's the most prayingest guy in the flight."

"T'hell he is!" the sergeant said. The sergeant walked toward Pond's ship. The others watched him go. In a minute, he was gazing over the gunnel into the pit. Pond, truly, was on his knees.

"What's wrong, lieutenant?" the non-com asked.

"This dam' toe-strap on my rudder-bar. Look at the dam' thing! It's been bothering me for weeks, before every flight since I drew this ship. I tell you what, sergeant. I got to use these straps. I need 'em."

"Well why didn't you tell me before?" the non-com asked.

"I didn't want to bother you boys. You have plenty of mechanical troubles without bothering with a runt like me who can't sit in his seat and reach the bar like a man. But I can't, sergeant. I'm like the little French birds. A few minutes ago, it got me in Dutch for fair. I was diving three ships, and my dam' right foot slipped off the bar just as I was starting a split-S turn. Blooie! In a shake, I was out of control, sergeant. I did a spin for about five thousand feet. But before I went into the spin, just as the foot slipped, I collided with a Hun, and by hell, I got him—clipped his wing. That's what broke my prop', sergeant."

"You shouldn't kick," the non-com laughed. "That slip off the rudder-bar maybe saved your neck."

"Neck be damned!" Pond said. He was still on his knees. He was pulling at the twisted right-toe strap, and he was saying certain words that are used in prayer. "The dirty, lousy, doghide strap. Sergeant, I'll fix this Hell-raisin' scurvy strap or I'll fix it so's nobody else will ever fix it! The damn witch! The lieutenant ended in some verbal pyrotechnics which would have insulted a mule.

"Praying or no praying," the sergeant laughed, "you sure know all the words, lieutenant."

"Me praying?" Pond questioned between usage of those prayerful words. "I wish I could pray at times, sergeant. Now take old Tad Fushun—he was the boy who could pray."

"Say, lieutenant, what's wrong with your left arm? You been winged? Hey, gang"—the non-com yelled to the group—"come a-runnin'! Bring a meat wagon! This guy's fainted."