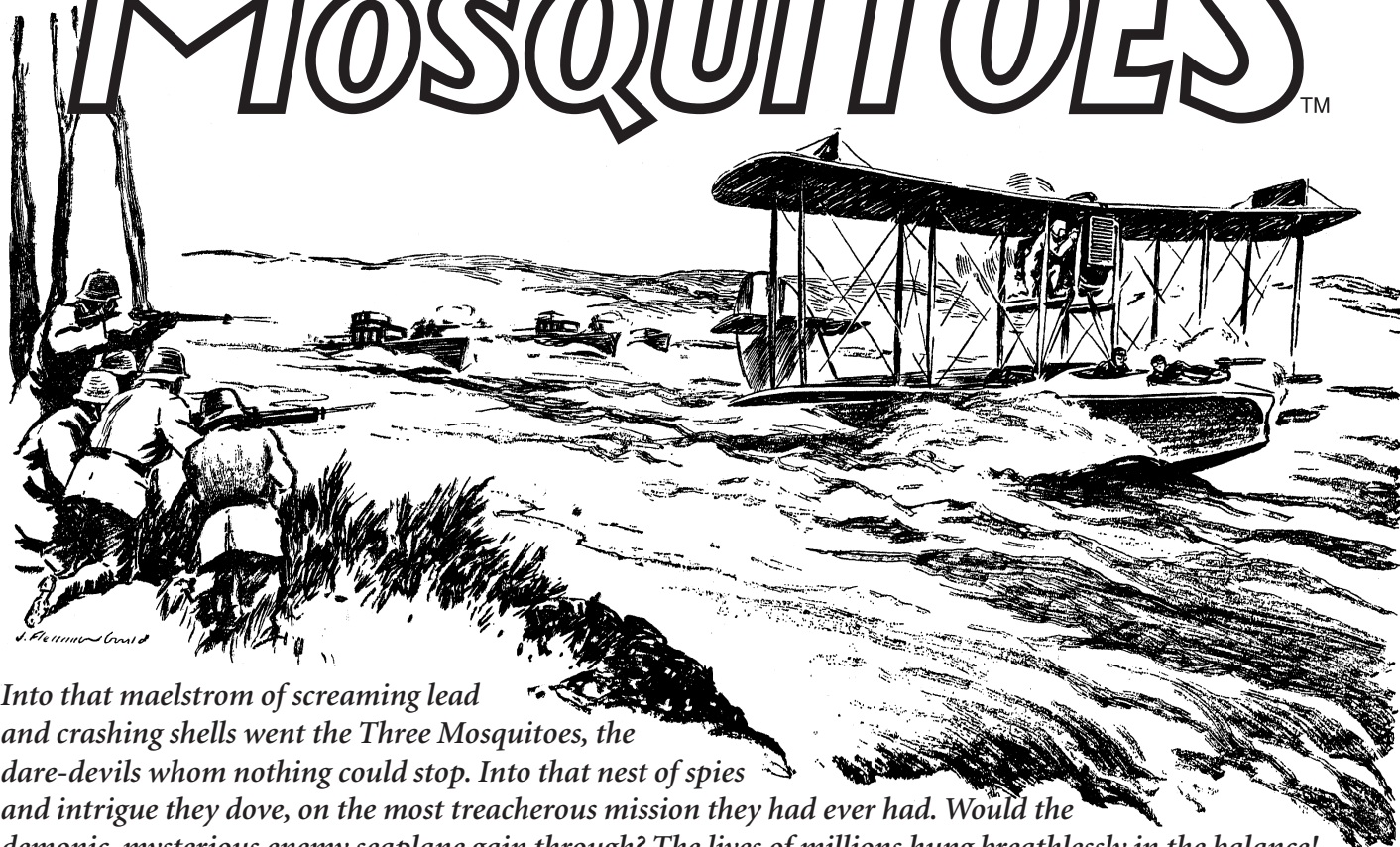


THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™



Into that maelstrom of screaming lead and crashing shells went the Three Mosquitoes, the dare-devils whom nothing could stop. Into that nest of spies and intrigue they dove, on the most treacherous mission they had ever had. Would the demonic, mysterious enemy seaplane gain through? The lives of millions hung breathlessly in the balance!

THROUGH ENEMY JAWS

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**



ET SET, FELLERS! We'll be there in a coupla minutes now. Ready with those bombs!"

Above the throttled roar of twin motors, Kirby's shouting voice just reached the ears of "Shorty" Carn and the lanky Travis, who sat in the tublike cockpit behind him. As he spoke, Kirby brought his stick gently over to the right, and the giant,

three-place bomber banked gracefully, following a tiny, winding ribbon of silver which crossed the blurred landscape far below—a river. And on this river, just about a mile ahead, a dim cluster of low buildings showed in the hazy, dawn light. Kirby pointed them out to his comrades with his free hand. Carn and Travis nodded grimly. They leaned to their bomb sights and releases, ready to cast loose the deadly, steel-

jacketed missiles which were tucked snugly beneath the belly of the giant plane. High explosive bombs, and enough of them to blast that cluster of buildings from the face of the earth!

It all looked easy enough—too easy if anything. The huge bomber had sailed unmolested all this way into Germany, forty miles within enemy territory. It had slipped right across the lines, without even waking up archie, the anti-aircraft, though its twin engines made a thunderous drone. In just another moment now, the big ship would be reaching its objective. Yes, it looked like a cinch. And yet—

No plane had ever been able to reach that objective. Whole squadrons, literal fleets of great bombers, had been shot to hell before they could get near those buildings. The defense seemed invulnerable. And now, finally, a desperate G.H.Q. had called upon the “Three Mosquitoes,” as this reckless trio of war birds was known. “You three dare-devils are our last hope,” the grizzled staff general had told them frankly, as they stood before his desk, “You’re the only ones we would dare assign to such a mission, the idea is that if you take just one plane, the new type of bomber which can carry an enormous supply of bombs, you might slip through and get to your objective without being spotted. Then everything will depend upon fast work. You must try to wipe out the place before they can get after you.” He frowned darkly. “I’ll admit it looks almost suicidal, but we’re asking you to take the chance. It is absolutely vital that the place be destroyed.”

And vital it was. For the place was none other than the Reutz Aircraft Factory, one of the largest in Germany. And Allied intelligence had learned, through its usual ingenious sources, that the Germans had built here a great seaplane, destined to turn the whole tide of the naval war. This seaplane, it was said, was a virtual cruiser of the air, a compact fighting and raiding ship, which could make remarkable speed and cover remarkable distance. It was even rumored that the Germans proposed to send a whole fleet of these new planes across the Atlantic, with the object of raiding the American coast. Mother submarines would serve as refueling stations for the return flight.

The whole Reutz plant had been given over to the construction of these big seaplanes, the idea being that if they were built here in the interior, the Allies would have less chance of getting at them. The river on which the factory was located afforded ample space for testing. And very soon, perhaps even to-day, these new

seaplanes would be sent off on their deadly tasks.

Even discounting the fact that the prowess of the new ships might have been exaggerated, the Allies knew they had no plane which could compete with this. Something had to be done, therefore, before those seaplanes were released. If they could be destroyed together with the factory, the Germans would at least be delayed in building more of them. Afterward, perhaps the Allied experts would get an inspiration. That was why all those desperate attempts had been made to wipe out the plant, not only from the air, but also on the ground, through the valiant work of spies. But the spies had failed just as utterly as the airplanes for the strict vigilance of the Boche made any move instantly fatal.

And now three reckless Yanks were drawing closer and closer to that aircraft factory, determined to succeed where all others had failed. Slowly but steadily the giant bomber moved toward that cluster of buildings on the river, its twin engines chanting in powerful unison, its great wings rocking gently. And still everything was quiet and peaceful. The air was just getting lighter, and the sky bluer, as the sun glowed with its usual morning brilliance.

Kirby jerked his head around. “Ready, fellers?” he repeated, this time interrogatively.

Shorty and Travis nodded, shouting back, “We’re all set!” Carn was at the bomb-release levers now, while Travis was commencing to peer through the vertical sights, to direct the aim.

The cluster of buildings loomed slowly out of the haze, coming into large and clear focus. They were in really just big wooden sheds, and, if a few direct hits were made, perhaps the whole plant could be set on fire. At one end of the grounds a huge brick chimney rose toward the sky, and smoke curled from it in dense black clouds. On the river itself were a few hangars. No planes were visible, however.

Kirby throttled down again, and Shorty and Travis leaned forward to catch his words. “We haven’t been spotted yet, but we are going to be as soon as we get any closer now. We’ve got to work fast. I’m gonna dive straight down over those buildings, and it’s up to you to give it to ’em as we pass. We can’t take a chance at circling. We’ll have to play the old dive and zoom game. Okay?”

Again they nodded, tensely this time. “Okay!” they shouted back. “Let’s go!” But their shout was drowned in the renewed roar of the twin engines. Kirby was peering down now, judging his distance with expert

precision. His eyes were narrowed to slits behind their goggles. His hand was tightening on the joystick. For a split second more he waited. Then, with a wild yell, he plunged the joystick forward.

The giant bomber tilted abruptly. Its nose pointed at a sharp angle toward the earth. It was diving, diving with its engines roaring and its wires shrilling wildly in the wind. It shot down like a streak toward that factory below, while its three occupants sat tense, their blood stirred savagely to action. The cluster of buildings seemed to come toward Kirby in a breathless rush. He gripped his stick tightly, ready to level off. And behind him Carn and Travis waited, nerves taut.

And then hell itself erupted from the ground which up to now had been so serenely peaceful. From every part of the place livid sheets of flame leaped into the air. Anti-aircrafts—scores of them! A shell burst to the right of the descending bomber, leaving a great black mushroom standing in the sky. Another burst to the left, and its shrapnel seemed literally to shower down upon the plane. But Kirby went right on down, though he ruddered back and forth a little, to zigzag and throw off their range. He wasn't scared of archie, whose bark was always worse than his bite. But then came a new sound which did scare him. *Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!* Machine guns and pom-poms! You couldn't see these, but they were the ones to be feared. You could hear them whistling past in a shrill pitch. They were unhealthily close. Three lines of perforations appeared as if by magic in the top wing of the bomber. A bullet ricocheted from the cowl of Kirby's cockpit. But still he went on down, down, down.

Into that maelstrom of screaming lead and crashing shells went the Three Mosquitoes, the dare-devils whom nothing could stop. Kirby gave the big bomber all the gas her twin engines could stand. Everything depended on a mad dash through that deadly barrage—then up again into the safety of the higher regions. That was their only hope of escaping without being shot to ribbons.

As the housetops below seemed about to come up and smack the plane head-on, Kirby pulled back his joystick with a savage gesture. The bomber lurched from its dive. Struts shrilled protestingly. Wires creaked. And then the big plane had straightened out right overhead of the grounds, and was racing across them like a streak, trying to beat the bullets and shells which pursued it relentlessly.

"All right, guys!" Kirby yelled exultantly. "Give 'em hell!" And it did not matter that his shout was

absolutely lost in the thunder of the engines and the roar of shells. His comrades did not have to be told. Travis, whose eyes had been glued to his bomb sights, raised his hand and brought it down violently. Shorty, with a yell, jerked his release lever, once, twice, and again, as the bomber kept rushing across the grounds below. In swift succession, three huge objects detached themselves from the bomber's belly and went spinning down through space. *B-oom! B-oom! Boom!* Three geysers of smoke and debris shot up from below, and settled slowly. The tall brick smokestack at the end of the grounds swayed like a clown on top of a pile of tables. Then, ludicrously, it collapsed, telescoping from top to bottom in a confused heap of bricks and smoke.

SHORTY released four more bombs before the racing plane had finally passed over the grounds. Then Kirby was zooming her madly, for all she was worth. Up she streaked, back into the sky. The crashing shells fell farther and farther behind, and the whistle of bullets died. Another moment—and the Three Mosquitoes were comparatively safe, far enough above and away from the plant to be out of range. As Kirby swung the ship around in a wide, sweeping turn, they took stock. The bomber had certainly been hit! It was nicked in a hundred places, and its top wing resembled a sieve. The starboard engine was beginning to miss a little, and one aileron showed signs of wobbling. But the Three Mosquitoes gave scant attention to all this; they were all absorbed in peering down at the aircraft factory below, eagerly looking for the results of their work. Kirby shook his head.

"Got to do better than that," he shouted, as he throttled the engines. "We only hit that smokestack and a coupla shacks that don't matter. We've gotta try again, and this time you fellers aim for that big building in the center. I'm sure that's where all these seaplanes are." Again he gripped his stick, and his lips drew up into a tight little line. "It's gonna be damned hot this time," he warned his comrades. "They'll be ready for us now. If we get through it'll be a miracle.

They nodded grimly, but their eagerness did not leave them. "Let's go!" they shouted again. "Let's go!"

"Okay!" Kirby bellowed cheerfully, and again jammed that stick forward. Again the bomber was diving. The shells began to burst closer. The whistle of machine-gun bullets rose. It was ominous this time, and it was getting thicker. But suddenly it stopped altogether.

The Three Mosquitoes were too experienced not

to realize what it meant when ground fire suddenly ceased. And even as the air above was shattered by the shrill staccato of Spandaus, and a stream of tracers drew a smoky line right past the bomber, Shorty Carn had leaped from his bomb levers and was swinging up his flanking machine gun. A split second later Travis reached for the gun on his side of the cockpit, while Kirby let out a savage curse and stubbornly kept his joystick forward.

Fokkers! Six slender little scouts with checkered wings were sweeping down on the bomber's tail with incredible speed. Where they had come from the Mosquitoes did not know. They must have sneaked up stealthily. And now they were right on top of the diving bomber, jagged streaks of red leaping from their noses. *Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!* More streaking lines of tracer, zigzagging across each other. The infernal tick of bullets through fabric and wood. *Crash!* The smash of glass and metal as the altimeter and air-speed indicator were shattered.

Shorty and Travis had whipped their guns around now and were firing away at the Fokkers behind, trying frantically to pot one of those fleeting scouts. Kirby, hearing the clatter of their guns behind him, continued to dive straight toward the factory. At first he was recklessly determined to carry on with the raid. But the Fokkers, which were twice as fast and more easily manipulated than the huge bomber, had already closed in for the kill, and their bullets were pumping lead through the big ship relentlessly. Two of the German planes now streaked past, cutting in on Kirby's airpath below, their purpose being to force him away from the factory. Cursing, Kirby squeezed his stick-triggers, and his fixed forward gun blazed away shrilly. But under the circumstances, he had no chance to aim, and his tracers went wide by several yards. Finally he was forced to pull up from the dive and turn to confront his attackers. The aircraft factory was still far below and ahead.

The Fokkers whipped in from all sides now, and swarmed about the slower Allied plane like a bunch of hornets. Their guns kept blazing, peppering the big bomber with short bursts. Frantically Kirby half-rolled and zigzagged to throw off their sights, but the bomber responded sluggishly to these maneuvers. Against these six graceful little Fokkers, it was like a clumsy, stupid ox. It had been built for carrying bombs, not for dogfighting. But its three occupants were fighters, nevertheless, and they were trying desperately to see the thing through despite the overwhelming odds.

While Kirby was kept busy maneuvering to throw off the Jerries' aim, Shorty and Travis flanked their guns up and down and around, firing burst after burst at these elusive birdlike shapes which loomed up only to veer away, sometimes coming so close that the helmeted heads of the Boche pilots were visible.

The Germans were playing the old game of "trap the mouse," as they called it. By this time they had managed to force the giant bomber a full mile away from that aircraft factory, and now, slowly but inexorably, they were cutting in on the big ship from every angle, seeking to wall it in a fatal prison of cross fire. Thicker and thicker grew the bullets, until the air was dense with them. One of the bomber's outer-bay struts splintered, cracked, and the wing it supported began to shiver ominously. A bullet grazed Kirby's cheek. Another actually tore through the collar of Travis' teddy bear, but miraculously it left him unscathed. The Mosquitoes knew they could not last much longer now. In just another moment or so they and their ship were going to be shot to ribbons.

And then, like cornered animals, the Three Mosquitoes suddenly became desperate. A savage rage came over Kirby, and his face turned crimson. Fiercely, he jerked his head back. "Come on, fellers!" he bellowed. "Let's give 'em hell! Looks like we're cooked, but let's see how many sons we can take with us!"

Carn and Travis yelled an eager assent. And the Three Mosquitoes really began to fight, began to fight in the reckless, fearless fashion which had made them famous.

Madly, Kirby opened his throttle and whipped his clumsy ship up and around. And somehow now he made that bomber fly as it was never meant to fly. He made it respond. Like a winged fury, it zoomed into the very midst of its antagonists. Kirby, his keen eyes picking out the first opportunity, half-rolled and then pulled up to give his comrades in the rear a decent shot. They did not fail to take it. Both swung their guns upward, and fired long bursts. And one of the Fokkers reeled from the fray. A ribbon of flame licked greedily down its fuselage and popped into a livid blaze. The German ship curved and twisted toward the earth, leaving a wake of dense black smoke behind it. Carn and Travis would never know which one of them had scored, but there was no question as to who got the next Fokker. As Kirby swung around wildly, one of the scouts crossed his sights. A kick on the rudder, and he caught it right in the ring. In that split second he squeezed his trigger. The Fokker lurched, flew crazily

for a moment, and then fluttered earthward like a dead bird.

But then the other four Germans, enraged by the downfall of their comrades, hurled themselves at the bomber with renewed fury. And though the odds were lessened now, they were still overwhelmingly against the big Allied ship. These Jerries could fight too when they wished. Nor they did not lack daring. They closed in now, recklessly defying the guns of Carn and Travis. There came a literal rain of bullets, a fusillade which made Kirby's blood run cold. God, something must have been hit this time! Fearfully, he jerked his head around. Shorty and Travis were all right, thank heaven! They were still crouching over their guns, firing away! But even then there was a sudden, metallic crash, and without warning the starboard motor of the bomber conked out cold. Horror gripped Kirby. They had got one of his engines, and now he was virtually helpless.

"Get that wing up!" It was Travis, the wise Travis, who was yelling wildly to Kirby, as the bomber, with one motor gone, began to wing over. "Get it up, for God's sake!" But Kirby did not have to be told. He was struggling like a madman with his controls, while the Fokkers kept swarming about, and Shorty and Travis stuck to their guns. Sluggishly, as Kirby got the stick far over to the side and leaned on it, the drooping wing came up. Kirby gave the good port engine every bit of gas she could take, opened her up until she shrieked in protest. He was holding up that bomber, holding it up on one engine. It was a feat which only a skilled airman could have accomplished. And what made the feat all the more miraculous was that the Three Mosquitoes were continuing to fight, although now they tried to make it a running fight. With just one motor to pull them through the air, the only thing to do was to head for the lines—the lines which were now almost forty-five miles away. The huge bomber, wobbling perilously, threatening every second to go into a stalling sideslip, ploughed its way forward clumsily, while Kirby used every ounce of energy to keep her up and level. So terrific was the effort that he felt he was actually holding that giant ship up sheerly by his own strength.

The Germans saw now that they had their quarry cold, and they showed no mercy. Instead, they kept swooping in with a vengeance, their guns continuing their relentless peppering. The bullets kept tearing through the impotent bomber.

"Fight, guys!" Kirby was yelling furiously. "Hold 'em off, the dirty skunks! Fight for all you're worth!"

Shorty and Travis did their damndest. With the big ship lurching and reeling, they nevertheless aimed their guns and kept firing. And in the next moment a shout of savage exultation broke from Shorty. He had scored. Though he had not shot down the Fokker, he had disabled it. The German scout veered slowly and limped away, evidently to make for its airdrome. Only three were left now; but these three fastened themselves to the bomber's flanks like leeches. They were making the kill.

"Come on!" Kirby almost screamed. "Give it to 'em! Give——"

HE BROKE off abruptly, and the blood drained from his face. For suddenly the joystick in his hand had become a limp, wobbly thing. A tortured groan tore from his lips. His controls had been shot away. The bomber was floundering crazily now, as if drunk from all the bullets which had pumped it. With Kirby powerless to control it now, it began to wing over. Its nose lurched sickeningly. And then it was hurtling downwards in a dizzying tailspin, faster and faster, until the rush of wind through the wires rose to a piercing, agonizing shriek. Down, down, down, twisting and turning in wide, uncontrolled curves, while Kirby toyed insanely with a limp joystick and kicked a rudder-bar in vain, and Shorty and Travis held on gamely, though their faces were white as sheets. The three Fokkers were hovering above now, waiting like buzzards for the finish. They were holding their fire, since it was needless now to waste more ammunition. The target had been bagged.

Dazedly Kirby saw the blurred earth spinning toward him in a confused kaleidoscope of houses, rivers, trees and fields which finally merged into one dense mass of green. This green mass rushed up toward him with sickening speed, looming suddenly into clear focus. Nausea gripped him, and cold terror clutched at his heart. Tree tops! The bomber was plunging straight into the midst of a dense forest, where a head-on crash was sure to be fatal. Closer and closer they came, those tree tops which were such deadly shoals to the aviator. In a frenzy of desperation Kirby struggled anew with his limp joystick and his good rudder bar. He tried every trick he knew. God, why hadn't the safety-wires held? He turned his stabilizer wheel frantically. Must get out of this spin somehow, he kept telling himself through clenched teeth. The tree tops seemed to be springing toward him in a breathless, final leap. Vaguely, above the

shrieking wind, he heard Shorty's cheerful, vibrant shout, "*Finis la guerre*, Kirby! S'long!" and Travis' "Good-by, see you in hell!" Then Kirby realized, as if for the first time, that they were all going to certain death, that he was powerless to stop it. A feeling of helpless resignation came over him. It was no use. In another second, the fatal crash would come.

But in that last second something happened; Kirby's frantic efforts at last brought results. Through its stabilizer and rudder, the big plane suddenly went into neutral, and the spin changed to a steep but straight dive. Controllable again! But there was no stick to control ailerons or elevators. In that second, Kirby did one of the greatest bits of flying of his whole career. He literally stood on his left rudder. With the plane diving almost vertically, the rudder now served as an elevator. And just as the bomber's nose was about to plunge into those fatal trees, she came up, lifting sidewise out of the dive. In this manner, the bomber stood on one wing for an instant, as Kirby cut his single good engine and stalled her into a sideslip. At least her nose was up now, and that meant there was a chance, anyway. And fortunately Travis had had the foresight, as they were spinning down, to release all the remaining bombs, which removed still another peril and—

"Hold on, fellers!" Kirby just had time to yell, as he threw his arms before his goggled face.

A rending impact, a shivering crash, a ripping of fabric, the splintering of wood and the groan of twisted metal. Sidewise, on one wing, the giant bomber struck the tree tops. The wing crumpled, and then the whole ship careened and jerked itself down through the trees to the earth, where it settled upside down. And Kirby found himself hanging out headfirst by his safety belt, dazed but otherwise unhurt. Mechanically he started to unfasten himself, and at the same time a pang of anguished fear went through him. His comrades—what of them? Were they, too, all right? He hurried to get himself out. A sudden, acrid smell assailed his nostrils. Smoke! Again horror gripped him. The bomber had caught fire. In another moment, the gas tank would be touched by the flames.

Frantically, he undid himself, and let himself fall to the ground. He wriggled out from under the fuselage, and found himself in a sort of small clearing which had been made by the plane itself. He was just scrambling to his feet when a familiar sound made him sprawl with frantic haste. He lay inert, deathly still, as a Fokker roared right above the trees and

commenced to circle over the burning wreck. The Jerry pilot was leaning out from the cockpit, peering down through his goggles, obviously to see if the Yanks had been killed or not. Evidently he decided that all was well, for the Fokker soared away. But Kirby knew that the German would attract help to this place, that soon soldiers would come here, where no plane could land—soldiers who would make the capture if there was any to be made. The place would soon be swarming with Boche.

Kirby leaped wildly to his feet. The air was filling with dense black smoke now. The bomber was burning. Flames, eddying along its crumpled fuselage, were creeping toward the gas tank. Wildly Kirby looked around for signs of his comrades. He noticed with sudden horror that the part of the fuselage where the rear cockpit was located was almost directly on the ground, leaving hardly room enough for a man to crawl out. God, were his comrades trapped under there?

"Shorty! Trav!" he yelled, his voice rising with shrill hysteria. "Shorty! Travis! Answer me!" A sob choked him. "Where are you?"

An answering shout suddenly rose behind Kirby. Dimly, in the smoke-filled air, Kirby made out the lanky form of Travis. A gasp of relief broke from him.

"Travis! You got out! Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," the eldest Mosquito answered quickly. "I jumped just as she hit and managed to catch a branch. I just got down." His eyes peered anxiously. "Where's Shorty?"

Kirby shook his head despairingly. "God, he must be in that plane." Again he shouted wildly. "Shorty! For God's sake, answer us. Can't you get out? Shorty!" There was no response. The flames had risen high now. The whole plane was enveloped. The fire crackled and roared. But Kirby leaped right toward the burning ship. Travis followed. Waves of smoke repelled them at first, choking their lungs. The withering heat of the fire held them back. But then Kirby was plunging in recklessly. He drew out his pocket knife and hacked away at the canvas side of the fuselage. Travis was soon by his side, lacking and tearing and punching at the fabric. They were cutting a hole. A tongue of livid flame licked out toward them, searing their hands and faces and all but igniting their clothes. They leaped back, then plunged in again. Furiously they hacked away, until at last they had made a fairly large opening. And only then did they glimpse Shorty Carn—a limp form still strapped in his seat. Kirby, ignoring the

burning pain of it, reached in and jerked at the safety belt catch.

"Hurry!" Travis was yelling. "That gas tank will go in another second and we'll be blown to hell!" Kirby redoubled his efforts. Damn that catch; he couldn't seem to undo it. He hacked at the belt with his knife. "Hurry!" Travis repeated, frantically. "For God's sake, hurry!" The strap yielded at last. The limp form of Shorty dropped from the seat, and Kirby and Travis caught him. They dragged him out with frenzied haste. They pulled him away from the flaming plane, as far as they could get. Nor were they a second too soon.

There was a shattering explosion. And what was left of that giant bomber flew up in a thousand pieces. Debris showered down, just missing the Mosquitoes. Then the smoke cleared, leaving only a twisted, charred heap of smouldering ruins, and a tiny fringe of flames where dry leaves and grass had caught fire.

Kirby and Travis bent over their comrade anxiously. Kirby pulled out a metal flask and held it to the little man's lips. Slowly, Shorty's eyes flickered open, blinked dazedly. He peered at his comrades.

"Where am I?" he asked dully. "Is this hell?"

Kirby gave a grim smile. "The next thing to it," he replied bitterly. "You're just about forty-five miles in Germany, and stuck!" His tone became anxious. "Are you okay, guy?"

"Sure." Shorty said, sitting up abruptly. He was not badly hurt. Just a nasty bump on the head from the cockpit cowl. The flames had hardly touched him. Nor were Kirby and Travis really burned, except for a few torturing blisters on their hands. "Well," Shorty wanted to know, "what do we do now?"

The question was decided in an unexpected way. Suddenly the three men stiffened, as once more the drone of an airplane filled the air, rose steadily louder, louder—

"The Fokker!" Kirby shouted. "It's coming back, and we gotta get out of here fast, before we're spotted. Think you can make it, Shorty?"

"Sure." The little man got to his feet, spurning the support of his comrades. The drone was getting closer and closer. And now, suddenly, the forest was filled with other sounds: the fall of heavy, running footsteps, the shouts of men.

"Jerries!" Kirby yelled. "Hurry—they're all coming to this place. We gotta get out fast."

They rushed forward. Shorty faltered just a little in his steps, but his comrades, spurred on by the ever-increasing roar of the Fokker, seized him on either side

and literally pulled him along. Into the thickness of the trees they plunged, just as the Fokker roared overhead once more. The Three Mosquitoes stood stock still as they heard it pass above the tree tops. But they were safe. The Boche pilot could not see them; the trees were dense enough to conceal them from view.

"Keep going," Kirby said. "I hear Jerries, and they're damned close."

Sure enough, the sound of men rose from the spot they had just left. The Fokker was circling overhead, evidently it had marked out the spot for the soldiers. The Boche must now be swarming about the wreckage. Rifles clinked. Shouts echoed back and forth.

"They'll probably think we were all burned to cinders," Travis said confidently. "Then they won't be looking for us!"

"But, damn it, the whole forest is lousy with them!" Kirby returned. "I can hear them all over the place. We've gotta keep out of their sight."

THEY kept on going through the thickness of the woods, pushing their way through heavy brush, stumbling over rocks and undergrowth. At last they reached a particularly dense spot. The sounds of the Boche were far away. The Three Mosquitoes paused out of breath, and began to take stock of the situation.

"Well," Kirby sighed, "here we are in Germany, lost, strayed and stranded. What are we gonna do about it?"

"Let's go home," suggested Shorty brightly.

"For that brilliant idea," Kirby almost snapped at him, "you ought to get a D.S.C."

Travis frowned. "Nevertheless, Shorty's right," the wisest of the Mosquitoes drawled. "We've got to get back across the lines somehow. And there's no use sticking around here. Just as you said, the place is lousy with Jerries. They might smell a rat when they find no trace of us in that burnt wreckage—not even a button. And then they'll be looking all over, combing the forest."

"Well, what do you suggest?" Kirby asked impatiently.

Travis thought a moment. "Well, as we were coming down I managed to catch a pretty good view of this territory. This forest is damn big, and extends toward the west, which is toward our lines." He pulled out a pocket compass, glanced at it. "Suppose we just start moving west, and during the day this forest will hide us. By the time we reach the open it will be night, and then we can move more freely. And maybe something will turn up."

"Yeah, a Jerry regiment or something," Kirby mused grimly. But then as his ears again picked up the sound of Boche reechoing from the distance, he shrugged. "Well, we'll try it anyway. Let's go!"

And so they started hiking west, with Travis directing the way by his compass. On they plodded, through the dense forest. And always they could hear signs of the Jerries, though they were reassuringly far away now. Half an hour passed. And then, abruptly, the three stopped.

With startling unexpectedness, they had come upon a road. It had been cut right through the midst of the forest, and though it was well-kept, it seemed absolutely deserted. Nevertheless, the Three Mosquitoes glanced up and down it tensely. There was a curve in one direction, and they could not see beyond it. Travis consulted his compass. "We'll just cross this road and duck back into the woods on the other side. Then we'll head on."

The other two nodded and they all stepped out onto the open road, where the sunlight dazzled them. They were just starting to cross the highway when there came a sudden noise from around the bend. The Three Mosquitoes, prompted by a single instinct, literally leaped across to the other side of the road, and ducked into the heavy brush there; and at the same instant a German staff car came swirling around the curve in a cloud of dust.

"Lie low, fellers," Kirby whispered. "They might spot us if we move." The three crouched silently behind the brush, as the staff car came on. In the front seat sat a chauffeur soldier and a lieutenant. In the rear, next to another lieutenant, sat a stern-visaged high officer, a colonel. The Three Mosquitoes waited for the car to pass by.

But it did not pass by. To the horrified surprise of Kirby and his comrades, the car came to a sudden stop, its tires squealing as they skidded in the dust. The four occupants leaped out, drawing their Lugers. Straight over to the side of the road where the Three Mosquitoes were crouching, they came. They started poking around the bushes with their revolvers, furtively. And they were poking at a spot less than twenty feet from the Mosquitoes!

"Lie low," Kirby repeated, in a scarcely audible whisper. His heart was pounding. "Don't move. Not a sound." But as he spoke he drew out his Colt, and so did Carn and Travis. All gripped their revolvers as they crouched, still as death, hardly daring to breathe.

For a full minute, which seemed like an eon to the

three tense Americans, the four Germans poked away at that brush. Then suddenly they stepped back onto the road. One of the lieutenants addressed the colonel. Kirby and his comrades, understanding German perfectly, listened with ears horribly alert.

"You see, *mein Herr Oberst*," the lieutenant was saying placatingly. "It was only your imagination. There is nobody hiding here."

The colonel stroked his chin. "Nevertheless, lieutenant, I could swear I saw three khaki-clad figures jump into the brush. And did they not tell us awhile back that a plane had been brought down somewhere around here? They believed the aviators were burned, but perhaps they are running loose. Search more thoroughly."

The search recommenced. The Three Mosquitoes remained as still as statues. And then all three drew in their breaths sharply. One of the lieutenants had come straight in front of them. He seemed to be peering straight at them, through the brush. He leaned closer, started to poke the brush aside with his gun. "Out at 'em, fellers! Give 'em hell!" At the old, familiar war whoop of their leader, the Three Mosquitoes sprang out of those bushes like three tigers. A shout of horrified amazement broke from the Jerries, and they tried to bring their Lugers into play. But already the Mosquitoes, benefiting by the advantage of a surprise attack, had acted with their customary reckless alacrity. Kirby fired as he leaped, and the colonel dropped like a log, and lay where he had fallen. The chauffeur doubled up, clutching his heart, as Shorty and Travis blazed away. The two lieutenants, recovering from their first surprise, then rushed in with a vengeance. A Luger rose right in front of Kirby's face, looming like the mouth of a cannon. *Bang!* A searing tongue of red just missed him, as Travis knocked the gun out of the man's hand. Kirby hauled off and sent a mighty left hook to the Boche's jaw, and he passed out. The remaining lieutenant crumpled as Shorty brought a revolver butt crashing down on his soft hat.

It was over in a breathless instant. All in a couple of seconds, the Mosquitoes had done for that party of Boche. The colonel and the chauffeur were dead. The two lieutenants were out cold, and they would stay out for many hours to come. Gasping and perspiring, their nerves shaken, the Three Mosquitoes stood still for a long moment. Had the shots been heard? Far in the distance they could still make out sounds in the forest, though the sounds did not seem to be approaching.

It was Kirby who broke the silence, stirred them all

back to action again. "Let's pull 'em off the road and see if we can get us three Jerry uniforms. We gotta get out of here anyway, before more of 'em show up."

"What about the bus?" Shorty asked, glancing at the staff car which stood with its engine idling;

"We'll use it, you fool!" Kirby snapped at him, as if impatient at this foolish question. "Leave it alone until we rig up like Jerries."

Swiftly they set to work. They dragged the two corpses and the two live but limp lieutenants off the road, and far into the woods.

"That colonel's uniform ought to fit me," Travis said, his grim glance falling upon the tall, thin body of the German officer.

"Yes, and that's good," Kirby said. "You talk Dutch better than any of us, and if you're a colonel, your word will be law. You can do all the gabbing. I think Shorty and I can manage to get into those lieutenants' uniforms. I'll take that big feller's."

It took them only a few minutes to strip the uniforms, though it was onerous work to remove the dead colonel's suit. They got out of their own uniforms then and slipped into the others. Travis had an almost perfect fit. When he had buttoned up, adjusted his hat, sheathed the colonel's Luger, and stiffened into an attitude of military dignity, he looked every inch a proud Prussian high officer. Kirby's uniform fit him "tightly, and Shorty's was quite loose; but they ought to pass."

"Put on the gloves," Travis was saying. "Our hands are burned, and that might attract suspicion. Lucky our faces are all right." They managed to get into the Boche's gloves. Then, as a final precaution, they tied the unconscious lieutenants to a tree, and gagged them securely.

"They'll be found here sometime," Kirby said grimly. "But not to-day, I think. Anyway, they're getting off easy. They're still alive!"

"And now what?" Shorty wanted to know.

"The staff car," Kirby replied, hurrying out through the bushes. The others followed. Unafraid, they walked on the road. If they were seen now, they would be accepted as Boche officers. They went to the car. Kirby climbed in behind the wheel. Shorty and Travis got in the rear.

"We're minus a chauffeur but nobody ought to ask questions," Kirby said. "We can tell 'em that we're on an important private mission or something. Now," he turned to Travis, "which way is home?"

Travis glanced at his compass. "This road goes

almost directly north and south," he drawled. "Better go north. We'll be sure to find some road that branches off to the west. That will take us straight to the Front. We can get as near the lines as possible, then ditch the car, and try to get across some other way."

A sudden shadow crossed Kirby's face. "There's only one thing that bothers me, though. Do you fellers realize that we failed to wreck that damned aircraft factory?"

"Well, what of it?" Shorty argued. "Others failed before us, plenty of them. And no one can deny that we did our damndest."

"That's true," Kirby conceded, "but still it's gonna be damned rotten, if we do ever get home, to stand up and tell G.H.Q., 'The Three Mosquitoes beg to report that they failed to destroy the Reutz Aircraft Factory.'"

"Don't be a fool," Travis remonstrated. "What we'll really say is, 'The Three Mosquitoes beg to report that it is a military impossibility to destroy the Reutz Aircraft Factory. Though we succeeded in getting through the ground fire, we were attacked by six enemy aircraft, three of which we brought down before we were finally incapacitated. We report that the defense at Reutz is absolutely impenetrable.'"

"Which means," Kirby added bitterly, "that those seaplanes will be released." He shook his head. "And they say they're gonna send 'em over to raid the American coast."

At this, Shorty and Travis could not help feeling depressed, too. Their faces clouded. For a moment all were silent, gloomy. But then Shorty Carn cursed.

"Look here, what's the use of moping now? We did our best, and maybe we'll try again. And you two guys make me laugh, sitting here way in Germany and worrying about the report we'll give when we get home. How about getting home first?" He glared at Kirby. "What the matter? Don't you know how to drive this thing?"

"All right, all right, never mind the cracks," Kirby growled back. He stepped on the clutch and ground the gears viciously into first.

"WAIT—hold on a minute!" Travis suddenly exclaimed, just as Kirby was releasing the clutch pedal. Kirby, with a curse, put her back in neutral and waited. "I've just been looking through my pockets," Travis went on, "and I've found something that'll open your eyes. Look!"

He showed it to Shorty first, and the little man gasped. Then they passed it to Kirby. It was a paper,

bearing an important seal. And on it, scribbled with pencil in German script, was a message.

From: the Headquarters of Imperial Staff
To: Oberst Heinrich von Sachs,
5th Army Corps.

It gives me great pleasure to congratulate you on the excellent reconstruction work you have been doing behind the lines. Truly you have accomplished wonders in the rebuilding of our roads and bridges. I take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of our Fatherland and our Emperor, and to inform you that your promotion to a higher post has already been arranged.

Von Hindenburg.

Kirby whistled. "Well, I'll be a—" His eyes were wide with incredulity. "Old papa Hindenburg himself, no less. He scribbled this note. Boy, what a souvenir to take home!"

"But," put in Shorty Carn, whose only desire seemed to be to get out of here and start moving, "it's not going to do us any good now. For the luvva Pete, drive this car!"

Kirby handed the paper back to Travis. Again he was about to start the car when Travis once more shouted, "Wait! Wait now!" The wise Mosquito's face had taken on a sudden, shrewd expression, and his eyes gleamed as if with an inspiration. Suddenly he brought a fist down on his lanky knee. "By God!" he exclaimed. "I have it!"

"You have what?" Kirby demanded in bewilderment. "Insanity?"

Travis did not seem to hear him. The lanky Mosquito was like a man possessed. "If I only had a pencil and an eraser," he almost moaned. "Wait, though, here's one in my pocket, all ready for me. Hold on now!"

"What in hell is the matter with you?" Kirby asked in growing alarm.

Travis smiled craftily. "You know, guys," he said, seeming to digress, "I've got to make a confession to you. I'm one of the best forgers going, but up to now I've never employed my talents except as a joke."

"What's that got to do with getting home?" Shorty almost wailed.

"Don't you see?" Travis asked. "This damn thing is in pencil. It can be erased and—damn it," he burst out exuberantly, "we're going to carry out our mission after all! We're going to bust up that seaplane business and get back to our lines at the same time!"

Still Shorty and Kirby could not grasp what he was driving at. "All I know," Shorty was saying, "is that if we stay here much longer——"

"The hell with that!" Travis said carelessly. "Suppose some Jerries do come along—let 'em see us. I'll talk to them."

"And suppose they find those real Jerries in the woods?" Kirby suggested pleasantly.

"Don't be a crab. You're the one who was moping about not being able to carry out our mission. Now we're going to carry it out. But we're wasting time. Something to lean on now!" He fumbled around, excitedly. Never before had Kirby and Shorty seen their eldest comrade so flustered. "A book, a pad, anything!"

Dazedly, Shorty managed to dig a blank memorandum pad from a pocket of his borrowed uniform. Travis grabbed it, and while Shorty and Kirby waited with bewildered impatience, the lanky Mosquito set to work.

He worked patiently and without haste. He worked without regard for time or danger. Minutes passed. Kirby shifted at the wheel. Shorty almost broke a blood vessel. But Travis, unperturbed, kept bending over that paper, using pencil and eraser.

Only once did Travis look up from his work, and that was to say, hurriedly, "Give me some German names, quick! No use taking the real names of the officers we rooked. Give me names!"

"Fritz," Kirby said instantly.

"Hans," Shorty insisted vehemently.

Travis' eyes blazed at them. "Last names, you fools. Last names!"

"Hassenpfeffer," Shorty supplied exultantly.

"Schmidt," Kirby suggested. "Schmidt will do for you," Travis decided hastily. "And how does *Oberst* von Braun sound? Yes, it's all right," he conceded, before they could give their opinion. "And Klein—that'll do for you, Shorty. It fits you." And again he bent to his work, and was lost for another interminable period.

At last, to his comrades' relief, he gave a little whoop of satisfaction. "Look it over, boys," he said, not without pride. "See how it hits you."

They did. The printed-heading of the paper was exactly the same. The seal was there as before, and so was the scrawled signature of the mighty Von Hindenburg. The message was still in pencil, and in the identical script, but it was not the same message by any means. What had been a mere note of congratulation had now been changed.

TO: Officer in Command,
Reutz Aircraft Factory.

To you are hereby requested to admit *Oberst* von Braun and two of our aeronautical experts, *Leutnants* Schmidt and Klein, who are ordered to inspect one of the new four-place seaplanes. These three officers will be permitted to make a test flight so that they can personally bring me a full report on these new planes and their qualifications as offensive weapons.

Von Hindenburg.

At first Kirby and Shorty were so dumbfounded that they could say nothing. Travis, taking advantage of their astonishment, plunged into a hurried explanation to make sure of winning his point. "Don't you see? They must have at least one of those seaplanes out on the river, for testing. We'll just climb in and fly home. It's a cinch. And that will more than accomplish our mission. If the Allies get one of those new planes, they can take all the new features of the model and even improve upon it. They'll be able to turn out a ship that will ruin these. Why," he went on enthusiastically, "it's even better than destroying that factory!"

Kirby at last found his voice. "One thing I must say," he confessed dumbly, "and that's that you've done one helluva slick piece of forgery. I bet even papa Hindenburg himself would swear he wrote this note!"

"Of course, it wouldn't get by a handwriting expert," Travis was modest enough to admit. "But why should there be any handwriting experts around that factory? One squint at that genuine signature ought to knock them cold. They'll give us the whole factory."

There was a moment's silence. Slowly the faces of Kirby and Shorty were lighting up with the same enthusiastic eagerness that had come over Travis. "Damn it to hell," Kirby suddenly burst out, "but that is an idea! We might get away with it, at that."

"We can try, can't we?" Shorty chimed in, all his worry suddenly gone.

"Why not?" Travis demanded. "We couldn't think of a better way of getting home, anyway. And only one of two things can happen. Either we succeed and pull one of the biggest stunts of our lives or—"

"We decorate some nice wall before a firing squad," Kirby finished. But he laughed carelessly. "What the hell? I'm willing to gamble, if you guys are." And again came the old, reckless battle cry of the Three Mosquitoes. "Let's go!"

"Okay!" Kirby got right down to business then. "Now the first question is, how do we get to that factory?" Again the shrewd Travis showed his remarkable sense of location. "Go straight ahead," he answered promptly. "I'm sure the plant lies northwest of this forest. We'll find it somehow, even if we have to ask. And remember"—once more he stiffened up into military dignity—"we're full-fledged German officers from now on."

"*Ja wohl, mein Herr Oberst,*" Kirby replied with profound respect. Then he shouted gaily, "Well, we're off at last." He slid the gear into first, smoothly this time, and let out the clutch. The staff car jerked forward, down the dusty road. Quickly it gathered speed, as Kirby threw it into high and stepped on the accelerator. The Three Mosquitoes were off for a second and even more daring attempt to carry out their mission.

Kirby let the car out more and more. They were rushing along now, bouncing over the bumpy dirt road and lurching breathlessly around curves. The trees rushed past in a vague, green blur on either side. For awhile the road remained deserted, but then, suddenly, there came into sight a long, bobbing column of gray-clad men, with rifles on their shoulders. Kirby's heart pounded, and instinctively he began to slow down the car. German infantry, marching down the road. Looked like a whole regiment of them. God, if they so much suspected the Mosquitoes—

"Go ahead!" Travis ordered from the rear seat. "Don't be afraid. They're not going to be suspicious. Honk your horn and they'll get out of your way."

Reluctantly Kirby complied. He literally forced his right foot to press down on the accelerator again, and the car picked up once more. Swiftly the column of infantry loomed closer. Kirby honked his horn furiously. The column veered to one side, getting out of the way. Kirby went shooting by like a streak, giving the engine all the gas she would take, so that he and his comrades wouldn't be seen too clearly. They were seen clearly enough, however, although the Jerries did not suspect them in the least. The soldiers all stiffened with perfunctory respect as the car passed, and some of them, officers, saluted the colonel in the rear seat. Travis, playing his part to perfection, acknowledged the salutes by a careless flick of his hand from his cap.

At last the Boche column was behind them, and only then did Kirby breathe freely again. Shorty Carn also drew a sigh of relief. "Gosh, I've never been so close to so many Jerries in all my life," he said.

"You'll be closer yet to more of them before we're through," Travis promised.

THEY went on. A crossroad suddenly loomed ahead, and on it was the traffic of trucks, ambulances, and artillery caissons, all evidently moving up to the Front, since they were following that crossroad toward the west. In the center of the busy intersection stood a German military policeman, who was playing the part of traffic cop. At the sight of the staff car whizzing down the road, this Boche policeman all but developed St. Vitus' dance in his haste to clear the road. But he was not so successful. A snarl developed as a truck coming down this road tried to turn in to the other. The intersection was blocked, despite the military policeman's frantic contortions.

"You'll have to stop," Travis shouted to Kirby. "I'll bawl hell out of that Boche cop and at the same time casually find out the right way to the Reutz factory."

Kirby gasped. "Are you crazy? Why our own M.P.s are bad enough, but a Jerry M.P.—gosh, you couldn't pick a worse combination if you tried!" Nevertheless, since the trucks were in the way, he was forced to apply his brakes. The staff car slowed down as it approached the spot. Meanwhile Travis was putting on a face expressive of rage, indignation, contempt and impatience, all rolled into a single look.

Just as the staff car stopped, the Jerry M.P. succeeded in clearing the road at last. The Boche cop hurried over to the Mosquitoes' car. Guilt was written on his face, and a profuse apology started to burst from his lips before he had even finished his stiff salute. Travis leaned out and fixed upon him a withering stare which made the unfortunate Jerry wince and turn pale. The eldest Mosquito certainly looked like an irascible and impetuous colonel. His voice barked ferociously. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded in his flawless German, while Kirby and Shorty playing their parts, also glared at the M.P. "Why in the name of thunder are we delayed? We are in a hurry. How dare you allow those trucks to get in our way?"

The unhappy M.P., his face ashen now, started to mumble and blurt almost incoherently. "*M-mein Herr Oberst—the—the road—*"

"Don't you dare talk back to me, species of a thickheaded imbecile!" Travis roared. Meanwhile, trucks were being held up at the crossroad, their drivers waiting with forced patience for the high officer in the staff car to pass. "Thunder and lightning,

but you will be punished for this shameful bungling!"

"But, sir—" the M.P.'s face was rapidly breaking into a sweat, "I tried—"

"Silence! I have stood enough nonsense from you and all the other incompetent blockheads around here. The fools, telling us to come over this abominable road! We'll never get to Reutz. Perhaps even now we're going the wrong way, what with their idiotic directions. I suppose," he sneered, with the most cutting sarcasm, "if I asked you where the Reutz Aircraft Factory is, you wouldn't know either." Cleverly he had worked in this last question which, in reality, was burning him.

The poor M.P. bit right away. "But, sir, I do know where it is." He spoke clearly for the first time, for now he saw a faint chance of making amends. "I can give you the exact directions, sir."

"I don't believe you," Travis snapped disgustedly. "Let me hear you!"

"Well, sir, you follow this road until you come out of the forest. There, sir, you will find another crossroad. Turn to the left and follow this, sir. When you've gone about a mile, sir, you'll come to a branch that goes to the right. Turn onto this, sir, and it will lead you straight to the factory, sir."

Travis grunted dubiously. "All right, I'll try it. But if it doesn't lead to the factory, I'm coming back and take your name and number. And hereafter," he added significantly, "be more respectful when you address your superiors; don't be so miserly with your 'sirs.'" He nodded toward Kirby. "Very well, lieutenant. Proceed."

All too eagerly, Kirby, who had been in suspense all this time, started the car. They left the M.P. standing there in the middle of the road like a whipped dog. And as they got further from the spot, Shorty Carn, who, like Kirby, had been shyly silent in the background during the whole scene, now leaned from the rear of the car and shouted boldly, if not too loudly, "And you'd better remember that too, *dumkopf!*"

Travis' face now relaxed again into a grin. "Boy," he said with almost smug satisfaction, "but that certainly does a man good, bawling out an M.P.—even a Jerry M.P.!"

"If you tried it on a Yank M.P., he'd bust you on the jaw," Kirby told him grimly. "These Jerries are damned polite!"

"I hope they continue to be so," Travis said. "If not, we may be out of luck."

As they sped along, the trees on either side of the

road began to thin out. They were reaching the end of the forest. And suddenly with the dazzling sunlight upon them again, they were out in the open. They came to the crossroad so abruptly that Kirby, unable to slow down very much from his wild speed, took the left turn on two wheels. Shorty and Travis held their breath as the car went careening around, its tires squealing in the dust.

"For the luvva Pete, be careful!" Travis warned. "Don't wreck this car, that will ruin everything. We're taking enough risks as it is. Why add more?" Kirby snorted. "Never mind the back-seat driving. And remember, I'm only listening to your orders when there's other Jerries around. Otherwise I have no respect for your uniform, and that would go even if you were dressed like a general."

"I'll have you court-martialed for insubordination!" Travis barked in his former, terrifying Prussian style.

"You mean I'll have you court-martialed," Kirby corrected. "Remember, I'm the captain here and you're only a lousy loot."

"Shut up!" Shorty Carn told both of them irreverently. "There's Jerries ahead." He was right. There was another column of Boche ahead, marching along. And thereafter the road was quite full of men and traffic. But by this time Kirby had enough experience to have full confidence, and he passed everything without a tremor.

Presently the branch in the road appeared, and Kirby took it to the right, as the M.P. had directed. As they sped down this new road, they suddenly found a river running beside them. It was the river they had followed from the air.

"We're getting there," Travis said. "We ought to see that plant any minute now."

Sure enough, they soon espied the cluster of buildings that they had seen from the air. The Reutz Aircraft Factory lay before them. The grounds stretched right across the road, to the river, and were surrounded, on all sides but the water front, by a great iron fence which blocked the road.

A tense feeling gripped the Three Mosquitoes as they drew closer and closer to this place that was so impenetrable. Even Travis, the most confident of the three, began to look a little anxious and worried. The test of the dare-devil scheme was soon to come. Would it succeed? Would they actually be allowed to make off with one of the new seaplanes?

Kirby was applying his brakes now, and the car was slowing down as it came right to the gate of the grounds. There were sentries all over the place, scores

and scores of them.

The car came to a stop before the big gate. A German sergeant who seemed to be in charge of the guards stepped forward immediately, and presented arms. Travis, having again assumed his ferocious mask, barked at him savagely, "Who's in command of this infernal place?"

"Does *mein Herr Oberst* mean—" the sergeant began uncertainly.

Travis looked as if he were going to eat the man alive. "What the devil do you think I mean?" he roared. "Can't you answer a simple question? Who's in command here?"

The sergeant swallowed hard. "Colonel von Richter," he blurted.

"Where can I see him?"

"In his office. The main building, sir."

"Very well, we shall leave our car here. You can put it wherever you wish. Come," he ordered Kirby and Shorty, and all three of them climbed out of the car. "Have a man escort us to the colonel's office at once," Travis demanded as they walked toward the gate, where the sentries all presented arms.

The Boche sergeant seemed acutely embarrassed. He confronted the trio with sheepish temerity. An inane grin came over his face. Again he swallowed hard. "But—sir," he stammered, "I regret to say that unless you have a pass—"

"Imbecile!" Again the sergeant winced, as Travis all but struck him. "Jackass with long ears! Do you think we would come here without a pass? Look, fool!" Violently he thrust the forged document into the astonished sergeant's hands. The latter looked at it. The Mosquitoes all waited, outwardly cool and contemptuous, but inwardly tense with doubt and fear. Here was the first test of that forged letter. Would it pass? "

The sergeant finished reading. And his eyes almost popped out of his head. Dumbly he held out the paper, and Travis snatched it back. The sergeant fairly drooled, "I beg your pardon, sir. If I had known—"

"If you made it a practice always to respect your superiors, apologies would never be necessary," Travis lectured. "And now suppose you have us escorted in without further delay? Or perhaps," he suggested with acid politeness, "you wish to see our birth certificates, too."

"I shall, myself, escort the colonel and the lieutenants in, with their kind permission," the sergeant said eagerly. He gave an order, and the sentries opened the massive

gate. With the sergeant leading the way, the Three Mosquitoes walked into the grounds which up to now had been impenetrable to any enemy. At least they had gotten in, and that was something!

With tense curiosity, the three men looked about them as they followed the sergeant. At once they saw the effects of their own handiwork—the ruined smokestack, the wrecked shacks, and several gaping craters in the ground. Men were working like industrious ants at all these damaged places.

"There has been quite some excitement here, sir," the sergeant explained. "We were just raided awhile ago by an American plane."

"Did it do much damage?" Travis asked, feeling that he ought to ask something.

"Not really, sir. Nothing was seriously hurt."

PRESENTLY they came to the main building, a big, wooden affair. The sergeant ushered them into a small, unobtrusive office, where a gray-haired colonel bent over a desk. He looked up with brusque inquiry as the sergeant, as well as Kirby and Short, saluted stiffly. Travis merely gave that careless flick of his hand.

"Well?" demanded the C.O. of the factory, none too amiably.

Travis got right down to business. "Colonel von Richter," he said pleasantly, "this paper will explain everything and serve as an introduction." He held out the forged document once more. Silently, with a skeptical look on his face, the C.O. of the factory took it and read. Again the Mosquitoes waited in suspense. Would it get by this intelligent colonel as well as it got by that dumb sergeant?

Again their fears were unnecessary. The Boche C.O. rose from his desk, a look of mingled awe and respect on his face. He extended his hand, and smiled warmly.

"It is a pleasure, Colonel von Braun," he said, shaking hands with Travis. "And how are you, Lieutenants Schmidt and Klein?" He shook hands with Kirby and Shorty. "Pardon me for seeming a bit suspicious and gruff when you came in. We have to be careful here, you know. We have to be on the lookout for spies. Only the day before yesterday we caught two of them.

They were trying to set fire to the place. We shot them at once."

"That's the only way to do," said Travis, and at the same time he and his comrades felt a peculiar coldness around the spine.

"And to-day they attempted to bomb us," the Boche

C.O. added. "Fortunately, we shot down the airplane. They tell me the aviators were probably burned in the wreck, which is just as well for them. The penalty would have been death for trying to bomb this factory. It is our rule."

"An excellent idea," Travis said, while Kirby tugged at his collar and Shorty shifted a trifle. "A fine way to discourage enemy airman. But now," he changed the subject quickly, "suppose we get down to business."

"Yes, yes," the Boche C.O. assented. Then he frowned, and his fingers tapped nervously on the desk top. "I hope you gentlemen will pardon me for saying that you have been assigned to do something that is—*er*—most irregular, indeed. Never before have we permitted any but our own personnel to touch the new planes. If it were not that our esteemed marshal himself sent you, I should be forced to refuse. As it is, we have only one available plane just now, our own test plane on the river. We have tested it several times, and already full, detailed reports have been made to Imperial staff. But since the marshal wants your personal report, he shall have it."

The Three Mosquitoes could hardly conceal their eagerness. Travis' hunch that there would be at least one available plane had proved correct.

"Then, sir," Kirby put in now, just because he felt he must say something, though his German was not perfect, "we shall be permitted to make the test flight?"

Again the C.O. frowned. Then he glanced up at the three men keenly: "Are you all good flyers?" he asked. "I can see that you are not of the air corps."

"We are staff officers," Travis explained. "But we are all experts on aeronautics, and thoroughly experienced pilots."

"That is good," the Boche colonel said. "However," he added sternly, "as you may know, gentlemen, we must take good care of this seaplane of ours. We can take no chances. It is not that I distrust you, but I'm sure you will have no objections if I assign one of our flying officers here to accompany you on the flight. He will take the controls at first and explain them to you, for they are quite different from those of the average plane."

A slight shadow crossed the faces of the Three Mosquitoes at this announcement. They glanced at each other, covertly. And in that single exchange of glances they tacitly reached a decision. They would not oppose the plan; they could not very well offer objections without arousing suspicion. Let a Jerry officer accompany them. It would not be difficult, once in the air, to put that Jerry out of commission.

And so Travis said, cheerfully, "No, of course we have no objections. In fact we should want some one to show us the controls."

The colonel nodded. He turned to the sergeant of the guards, who was still standing by like a ramrod. "Go and get Captain Vogel," the colonel commanded tersely. "Tell him to report here at once." The sergeant vanished. The Boche C.O. again turned to the Mosquitoes. "I trust you know all about these new ships of ours," he said. "You must have learned all their features at Imperial staff."

"Yes, naturally," Travis replied, thinking it was wisest. "They certainly seem to be marvelous ships."

"They are." The officer's eyes shone with enthusiasm as he thought of the new ships. "Wait until you see how smoothly they fly and what remarkable speed they can make. Only the other day our test plane stayed in the air twenty-four and a half hours. It could have stayed up much longer, but the weather turned bad and we did not want to take too much of a chance. However, we know that these ships will be good for prolonged flights."

Travis smiled, craftily. "And perhaps," he suggested, his curiosity to learn the facts making him reckless, "perhaps those prolonged flights will surprise our enemies."

The C.O. smiled with proud triumph. "Indeed they will. Why, just think," he exclaimed, "inside of another month we'll be carrying out our projected raid on New York City!"

The Three Mosquitoes stiffened, and had a hard time controlling their emotions. So it was true, that rumor which so many had refused to believe. It was true that the Jerries intended to send these seaplanes across the Atlantic. Again the three looked covertly at one another, and this time their eyes pledged a fight to the finish. They were fiercely determined now to succeed in their mission.

But aloud, Travis was saying enthusiastically, "It will be wonderful."

"And a complete surprise to the Americans," Kirby added.

"If only it succeeds!" Shorty put in, speaking for the first time.

"Why shouldn't it succeed?" demanded the C.O. "We shall have submarines lying all along the course, at various intervals. If a seaplane is incapacitated or needs fuel, it can simply alight and use the submarine as an emergency station. It will all be simple. We cannot fail." But the Mosquitoes were resolved that they would make this last statement a lie.

At this moment the door opened again and a tall, slim officer in the gray uniform of the Imperial flying corps strode into the room and saluted. "Captain Vogel," said the Boche C.O. crisply, "you will take these men up in the X-22, show them the controls and let them handle the plane if they wish." The captain nodded respectfully. "Yes, sir," he answered cheerfully. The colonel introduced the Three Mosquitoes by their adopted names, and Captain Vogel shook hands with them.

"We shall all go down to the seaplane at once," said the C.O. "While the mechanics prepare it for flight, you three gentlemen will start your inspection."

A few minutes later the party of five men had walked down to the water front, and onto a pier, beside which was a shed.

The Boche C.O. barked out orders. Mechanics instantly sprang into action. The door of the shed was opened, and all in a matter of minutes, a gigantic, winged monster, shining silvery, was pushed out over the water on its great pontoons. The Three Mosquitoes stared at this huge seaplane with awe and admiration. Never before had they seen such a ship. It was streamlined as no other planes had yet been streamlined. Its wings were long and tapering, like an eagle's. The rugged contours of its engine proclaimed might and power.

There were surprisingly few wires or struts, for everything was reduced to a minimum of wind resistance. Simplicity and strength were its chief characteristics.

The mechanics eased the floating monster right up to the pier so that its lower right wing extended over the dock. They moored it there. Then they set to work, preparing the big "seaplane for flight. Petrol was pumped into the tanks, oil was poured into the engine, and water in the radiator. The engine was greased, along with the control pulleys. The mechanics, all of them skilled from years of experience, went over every inch of the ship from nose to tail. Meanwhile Captain Vogel and Colonel von Richter were pointing out the features of the new seaplane to the admiring Mosquitoes.

"You see, it's a four-place ship," the captain said. "Two spacious cockpits, fore and aft, with plenty of room to move around."

"Of course when she goes into action," added the colonel, "she will be heavily armored. There can be four machine guns and even a one-pounder. Also there will be space for plenty of bombs."

The Three Mosquitoes nodded, glancing at the cockpits where there were no guns now. This wasn't going to help them. When they stole the ship, they would have to get away fast. If they were attacked and had no guns, it meant death.

"How fast can she go?" Travis inquired, trying not to sound too anxious.

"Oh, she can do about a hundred and thirty when you let her out?" said the captain. "Her flying speed is fifty, and her cruising speed a hundred."

This brought relief to the Mosquitoes. At such a speed they ought to be able to get away. "And how about the controls?" Kirby wanted to know.

Single controls in the front cockpit," answered Captain Vogel. "There's depth control—the wheel, you know—for the ailerons and elevator. And then there's the usual foot rudder-bar. You have your throttle and mixture right on the dashboard, and there's a special automatic stabilizer which you set before you start."

Thus he went on, explaining about the controls, the engine, and everything else, with the colonel joining in from time to time. And all the while the Three Mosquitoes waited, trying to appear in no hurry at all, but in reality burning with frenzied impatience. God, if only they could get the thing over with before something happened to spoil it! But as yet the mechanics had not even started the engine. They were still busy greasing up and tightening bolts and wires. In just another moment or so they would be turning over the propeller.

"COLONEL VON RICHTER!" The deep, stentorian voice made all the men on the dock turn. A heavy, elderly man with a Van Dyke beard approached. He was dressed in the blue uniform of the German Imperial navy. And the gold insignia on his sleeve, beneath the crown, proclaimed him to be no less than an admiral.

Colonel von Richter was all respect. "Good day, admiral," he said pleasantly. "What brings you here this morning, sir?"

The admiral spoke crisply. "I've come to make arrangements with you regarding this very seaplane." He glanced at the big ship appraisingly. "I must have this plane immediately to be used in conjunction with our warships in a projected action to-day in the North Sea. It was promised to me by Imperial staff this morning, and I have come to make sure that I will get it!" A look of perplexity came over von Richter's features, while the Three Mosquitoes began to feel a cold apprehension.

"I should like to have more than one ship," the admiral went on in the same crisp tone. "But I shall have to wait for that. Two of my naval flyers are now on the way to call for this seaplane and fly it to Heligoland. They will be here inside of fifteen minutes. Can you have the ship ready for them? It must be fully equipped and armored, but no bombs will be necessary."

Von Richter at last found his voice. "But, sir," he said in bewilderment, "there must be some mistake. These three men here have also been authorized by Imperial staff—by no less than the great marshal himself. They are to test this plane. If you will wait until the test is over, I can have the ship ready for you in an hour or so."

The admiral shook his head decisively. "I must have that ship at once! Even as it is, it will be late for the battle. And I cannot understand how these men were authorized to test the plane. Imperial staff knows you have only one ship ready here. Why should they tell me to call for it immediately if they have already sent some one to test it?" Absolute doubt was in his voice, and the Three Mosquitoes felt that the net was slowly closing around them. Even now the admiral's eyes—piercing, keen gray eyes—were studying the trio shrewdly, sizing them up.

Travis, desperate, stepped forward. "Pardon, sir," the shrewd Mosquito questioned, "but were you authorized to do this by the marshal himself?"

The admiral shook his head, and then waved a sealed paper of his own. "No. The marshal was not even there. But this is an official staff order, nevertheless."

"Well, then," Travis rushed on hopefully, "I think I can explain this situation. The marshal decided to send us to make this test quite suddenly this morning. He summoned us privately. Perhaps he did not yet have a chance to inform staff of his decision. He is a busy man, you know."

Colonel von Richter nodded in sudden agreement. "That's doubtless exactly what happened," he conceded. "You see, admiral, the paper these men have is signed by the marshal." He handed the letter to the admiral, and the latter read it. He was not very much impressed, to the Mosquitoes' dismay. He merely grunted. "Letter or no letter, I must have that ship! I am in a hurry. You will have to yield to my demands. This test can wait. I can't! I'll tell you what I'll do," he suddenly decided. "I'll call up Imperial staff and straighten things out once and for all. Perhaps the marshal is there now."

The Three Mosquitoes fought down a growing inner panic, and looked at one another in alarm. And again Travis argued desperately. "But why call up staff, when we can just as easily straighten things out right here by ourselves?" His voice took on a pleading note. "Look here, admiral, let us make just a short test. We'll be back in a short time. Just so we can carry out our orders. Then you can have the plane."

"Nonsense," snapped the admiral. "Either you have a real test or none at all. And the best thing to do is to call up staff, while the plane is being prepared in either case. I'll phone them at once."

Travis made a last frantic effort. He summoned all his wits. "But, admiral, don't you think it is taking a needless risk to be phoning about this business, which I was given to understand is strictly secret? You can never tell who might be listening in on the wires."

"That's true," von Richter agreed. "The enemy has been sparing no efforts to find out our plans and frustrate them." And Travis could almost have kissed him for coming to the rescue, for the admiral was impressed.

"Very well, I shall not phone," he said. "However"—again his voice was adamant—"I must have that ship at once." He turned to von Richter. "You must realize, colonel, that it is more important that I get this ship than that they carry out the test. I trust you will get the plane ready at once."

Colonel von Richter looked helplessly from the Three Mosquitoes to the admiral. Then suddenly he reached his decision. "The admiral is right," he stated, and his words rang like a knell in the Mosquitoes' ears. "I am sorry, but the test will have to be postponed until we have more planes. That will be to-morrow." He shouted to the mechanics. "Put the machine guns on this plane and prepare it for a long flight at once!"

And the Three Mosquitoes stood there, and now they could not conceal their utter dejection. Their project was nipped in the bud. And the most damnable part of it was that there was absolutely nothing they could do about it. If only the engine had been started they might have taken a crazy, reckless chance and tried to make off with the plane right now. But the engine was not started, and there were Boche all over the place, all of them armed.

Helplessly the trio stood there, wondering what to do. The sanest course would be to get out of here now, get back into the staff car, and try to get home by their original plan. But then again their eyes met, and reminded one another of the pledge that they must

carry out their mission, must prevent these seaplanes from raiding New York. They would not give up until they were absolutely cooked. Even now Travis' shrewd brain was working again. Suddenly he stepped forward, and spoke resignedly.

"Well, then, we shall postpone the test," he agreed. "However, we hate to go back without anything to report. Suppose," he suggested to von Richter, "you show us through the plant, and let us make a tour of inspection?"

The colonel was all too willing. He was anxious to make amends. "It will be a pleasure," he said. "Just follow me." And leaving the admiral and Captain Vogel here to help prepare the plane, they all moved back toward the big main building of the plant. And as they moved back, with von Richter in the lead, the Three Mosquitoes had one brief opportunity to hold a few whispered words.

"Listen, guys," Kirby was saying, "since we can't steal that plane, we've gotta find some way to destroy this whole plant, and all the other ships in it. Keep your eyes open."

They nodded grimly. Then all assumed their former nonchalant attitude as von Richter brought them up to the main building.

"All the seaplanes are here," the Boche C.O. explained, as they entered and walked down a hallway. "They are just being finished up, for release to-morrow or the next day. I want you to see what modern and efficient methods we employ here, and yet what care we give to each plane." He paused before a doorway, and glanced anxiously at the three. Then he nodded with satisfaction. "It is all right; I was merely looking to see that none of you are smoking. We must be very careful here."

Travis smiled wisely. "You oughtn't to have these wooden buildings," he said.

"Well, we have spent so much money on equipment and material that we cannot afford modern, fireproof buildings," the colonel replied. "That is the only thing that is not modern about the plant. And usually it is all right, but to-day they are applying dope to all the ships and when fresh that stuff is highly inflammable."

He opened the door. A pungent, almost sickening odor at once assailed the Mosquitoes' nostrils—a smell as of bad, over-ripe bananas combined with ether. They stepped into the room, their noses screwed up. And then, with awe, they took in the scene before them.

In the immense, spacious room, where the sunlight streamed in from many windows, were two long lines

of the huge seaplanes. Side by side, wing to wing, they all stood there. They were shining from new paint, and even now scores of workmen were busy giving them another coat of dope, while others were finishing up the installation of the engines and putting in the controls. Von Richter led the Three Mosquitoes slowly down the line, pointing out various things of interest. The smell of the dope was at first unendurable, and the three coughed several times; then, gradually, they became accustomed to the odor and, like von Richter and the workmen, they felt no discomfort.

"It is certainly marvelous," Travis was commenting. "It is stirring to see all these gigantic planes side by side. I can just imagine them as they sail through the skies in a mighty fleet to raid New York."

He spoke the truth. He could just imagine them, and so could his comrades. Frantically, all three were racking their brains for some scheme to ruin these beautiful ships. But what could they do? The room was swarming with men, all of them armed. The Germans were taking no chances.

They reached the other end of the hall, and the Boche C.O. paused. "Well, now you have seen how we work on them here. I'll start showing you a few details concerning the fuselage and—"

He broke off abruptly, as the door at the other end of the big room burst open. Followed by a crowd of soldiers with pointed rifles, the admiral came rushing in. His face was crimson with fury, and he was gesticulating wildly. His deep voice thundered and reverberated through the whole room.

"Seize those three men! They are spies! I called up staff anyway, suspecting that letter. Von Hindenburg never wrote it."

For a stunned second the Three Mosquitoes stood perfectly still, while von Richter's jaw dropped and his eyes stared bewilderedly. And then the soldiers, with the enraged admiral urging them on, were rushing down the room.

THE jig's up, fellers!" Again Kirby's reckless shout rang out. "Don't give up the ship! Let's go!" Savagely he whipped out his Luger. Simultaneously von Richter, grasping the situation at last, was drawing his gun. Kirby fired point-blank, and von Richter dropped with a shrill, choking cry. The workmen were now rushing toward the trio with the soldiers, yelling at them to throw up their hands. As yet they didn't shoot; they hated to shoot in this room, lest they start a fire.

"Come on, guys!" Kirby shouted, and led the

way. Travis and Shorty, with their revolvers out now, followed eagerly, for Kirby was their true leader after all. He led them between two of the big seaplanes, and all three ducked through toward the wall of the room. Two workmen suddenly loomed in their path, started to bring their revolvers into play. Kirby's left fist shot out mightily, sprawling one of them. The second dropped as Shorty shot him through the chest. The Mosquitoes darted on toward the wall. With a shout, the Boche followed, closing in and trying to trap the trio. Then the Yanks had gained the wall, and they rushed down along it until they came abruptly to an immense pile of cotton waste, wadding and shavings which smelled of kerosene and ether. Previously, during their tour of inspection, Kirby had noticed this pile and now he had brought his comrades here deliberately. "Quick!" he ordered. "If we can set this off it will do the trick. God!" He was searching his pockets vainly. "I can't find a match!"

Travis hastily pulled out a silver cigar-lighter he had found in his pockets. He flicked it once and it failed to light. Jerries appeared from between the planes, rushed up. But in that split second, Travis got the lighter to ignite. Quickly but not so quickly that it would be extinguished, he dropped it right into the pile of rags.

There was a sizzle which changed quickly to a crackling roar. The pile of rubbish went up in a mighty burst of flame. Dense clouds of black smoke poured out over the Three Mosquitoes, even as it had poured out when their plane had crashed in the wood. So thick was the smoke that visibility was almost gone. The day was turned into night. The Germans, shouting frantically, could not keep track of their three quarries.

"Come on!" Kirby called. "Hold onto me, guys! Don't lose me!" And with Travis and Shorty clinging to his tunic, he plunged blindly through the smoke. He fought his way through the choking darkness, out between the planes into the center of the great room. It was lighter here, although the whole room was rapidly filling with pungent smoke. Somewhere a bell clanged frantically. A siren began to wail. Shouts of "*Feuer! Feuer!*" rose everywhere. The dim forms of men rushed about confusedly. The Three Mosquitoes stumbled down toward the end of the hall, brushing past scores of Boche who did not notice them. A blasting stream of water suddenly showered down upon the Yanks, as a hose opened on the flames. But it was too late now, for already the seaplane nearest that blazing pile of rubbish had caught fire, and its newly doped fabric was covered with dancing flames.

Soon the planes on either side of it caught too, until the devouring fire was licking greedily down the whole line of them. The wooden wall of the building next to the rubbish pile was also crackling now with eddying flames.

The Three Mosquitoes stumbled on. They reached the end of the room, found a doorway. They plunged through it, slamming the door behind them. They found themselves in a little anteroom which turned out to be the workmen's locker. It was quite full of smoke, and more smoke was filtering in through the cracks in the doorway; but it was light, for the sun still showed through the windows.

"We've done it!" Kirby exulted. "The whole place is on fire. They'll never save it. All the damn seaplanes will burn like matchwood!"

"But how are we going to get out?" Shorty asked.

"Through the window!" Kirby shouted.

"Wait!" Travis cautioned shrewdly. "They know we're spies now; the alarm must have been spread all over the place. If we're seen, we'll be nabbed surely." He glanced around keenly. Suddenly his eyes fell upon one of the walls. "Look!" He pointed to several pair of stained coveralls which hung from pegs. "Into 'em!" Travis ordered. "They'll think we're workmen. We'll be jumping out with the rest and in the confusion no one ought to notice us. Hurry!"

Quick as a flash they all snatched a pair of coveralls, got into them and buttoned up. Just as they were finishing the door of the room opened, and some real workmen came in. They did not suspect the Mosquitoes at all. They were busy trying to get stuff out of their lockers and taking down fire extinguishers from the wall. The smoke in the room grew heavier and breathing was becoming hard. The Mosquitoes, at a shout from Kirby, leaped to the window, pushed it open, and jumped from the sill to the ground outside, one by one. A couple of workmen, evidently deciding that this was a good idea, followed, making them even less conspicuous.

The Three Mosquitoes were out on the grounds. And out here the confusion was as great as in the building itself. Men were rushing around crazily, officers were yelling orders that nobody heard, workmen and mechanics were staring at the fire with helpless fascination. From all directions great hoses were hurling tons and tons of water onto the building, which was now completely enveloped in flames. Men were still swarming out of the place when there came a shattering crash, and a big portion of the roof caved

in. It was the end. The buildings began to crumple now on all sides, like a house of cards. The Three Mosquitoes had done their job thoroughly.

Still unnoticed, the trio walked calmly across the grounds. Suddenly an eager shout broke from Kirby. "Look! Look, guys!" The two others followed his pointing finger down to that pier on the river. There was the big seaplane. Its engine was running, warming up. And in the forward cockpit, evidently ready to take off despite the fire, were two helmeted and goggled figures. The two German naval flyers were about to fly to Heligoland. The ship was ready. Even from here the Mosquitoes could see the glistening machine guns which had been put on.

"Come on, fellers!" Kirby yelled. "It's the chance of a lifetime. Hurry, before they start taking off!" And with the other two following eagerly, he dashed down to the river. The mechanics on the dock were starting to cast the seaplane loose from its moorings. The Three Mosquitoes swarmed onto the dock. The mechanics, bewildered enough by the fire in the building, were even more confused to see three apparent workmen rushing toward the seaplane. Not knowing what to do, they did nothing.

However, at the same instant the Mosquitoes arrived, the big seaplane had been cast loose from the dock. It began to move away. But before it moved far, the Three Mosquitoes had leaped, one after another, upon its great wing. The two Jerry flyers saw them coming, and jumped to their feet in the cockpit, where they had not yet strapped themselves. Before the two Boche had time to realize what it was all about, Kirby and his comrades were upon them. With a punch that was also a push, Kirby sent one reeling backward, out of the cockpit and into the river below, where he fell with a splash. The other crumpled as Travis got him with a revolver butt. They chucked him unceremoniously out of the cockpit, onto the dock.

The mechanics at the dock realized at last what was taking place. A shout of alarm broke from them. Frantically they began to whip out their revolvers, while one of them rushed up the grounds, evidently to summon help. Meanwhile Kirby had plopped into the pilot's seat of the plane. His hand groped for the throttle. He couldn't find it at first, since it wasn't in the usual place on the side of the cockpit. He pulled out the choke instead and almost conked the motor. The mechanics were beginning to bring their revolvers into play. A shot rang out, followed by others. A bullet whined in Kirby's ear. But now Travis and Shorty

had climbed into the rear cockpit, and Travis, being on the side of the dock, swung around the new and well-loaded flanking machine gun which had been installed there, and pointed it straight at the group of mechanics. The mechanics dropped like flies, one by one. And then Kirby remembered that Captain Vogel had said the throttle was on the dashboard, and he found it. He opened it wide. The engine roared mightily. The seaplane began to move from the dock, out toward the middle of the river.

By this time a crowd of Jerries were swarming down toward the dock. Officers, enraged enough that the factory and all the seaplanes in it had burned down, were determined that these insolent Yanks would not make off with the only remaining seaplane as well. They spurred the soldiers savagely to action. The alarm spread rapidly. And even as Kirby was carefully steering the plane around by his rudder and heading down the river for the take-off, hell broke loose. Rifles blazed as the soldiers reached the dock and the bank of the river. From the opposite shore a machine gun suddenly stuttered into life. A fusillade of bullets zipped toward the plane, some of them tearing into it. Kirby opened his throttle wider. The huge ship gathered speed. Its pontoons cut through the water. Shorty and Travis, meanwhile, flanked their two machine guns around and settled behind them, blazing away at the Jerries on either side.

They were streaking over the water now, faster, faster. Kirby gripped the wheel tightly. The huge ship began to rise. Its pontoons were lifting out of the water. But by now the pursuing bullets were thick as rain. Evidently both sides of the river were full of Boche, and they had all received the signal to shoot at the fleeting plane. The Mosquitoes ducked low in their cockpit. Taking off now! Skilfully, though the ship was absolutely new to him, Kirby was getting her off the surface of the water. And in the next second she swept into the air gracefully. Kirby pulled back gently on the wheel and started to climb toward the sunny sky. But he did not climb far.

Suddenly, and without warning, the engine of the seaplane lost its full-throated roar. It began to sputter ominously. Kirby gave her more gas, but it was no use. He jerked his head around. "She's missing on a few cylinders!" he called. "They've plugged her!"

Even now the big ship was beginning to lose flying speed. Kirby had to put down her nose to keep her from stalling. The engine continued to pop and sputter. The seaplane settled, settled.

"Hold her up!" Shorty and Travis yelled as they had yelled when they were all in the doomed bomber before. "Hold her up!"

"Can't!" Kirby answered despairingly. "Got to let her drop." He struggled madly with his controls. Lower and lower now.

Splash! The seaplane bounced as its pontoons struck the water, then she settled. But she kept moving forward, down the river. Her propeller was turning just fast enough to pull her along, but not to lift her into the air. The seaplane now had been reduced to an ordinary boat. And the Jerries on either side were still peppering away.

Travis leaned forward to shout above the popping motor. "Only thing to do now is to keep heading down the river. We're going toward the lines anyway, although the river can only take us within twenty miles of them. Keep going, and maybe we'll find some quiet spot where we can stop and try to fix that damn engine."

Kirby nodded, and kept the ship headed straight down the river. On they went, crouching low beneath the cockpit cowl to avoid the relentless hail of bullets. They were doing about thirty miles an hour now, and at least the engine was not getting worse.

Shorty and Travis kept firing their two guns at the Jerries of both banks of the river. Kirby kept steering down along the center of the river. Suddenly a shout of alarm broke from Carn. "Holy hell, look what's coming! God!"

FEARFULLY, Kirby jerked his head around. His heart stood still. Streaking down the river in hot pursuit, coming straight after the seaplane, were three speedy little boats. They were evidently patrol boats which guarded the aircraft factory from the river. They were armed with a small but deadly cannon, and their speed was incredible. Even now they were gaining on the seaplane with such rapidity that the Boche on the river banks ceased firing for fear of hitting them.

Frantically, Kirby opened his throttle all the way now, almost choking the sputtering engine with gas. The seaplane sluggishly picked up a little more speed. But it was not enough. The patrol boats, though they were no longer gaining so swiftly now, were creeping up, nevertheless. Slowly but inexorably the gap between them and the seaplane was closing. So sure were they of catching the fleeing seaplane that they held their fire. It would be better to recapture their ship intact than to shoot it to ribbons!

A feeling of helplessness gripped the Three Mosquitoes as they saw those patrol boats gaining on them steadily. In just a few minutes they would be caught. And then, in his desperation, Kirby hit upon a reckless idea. Again he jerked his head around. "One of you guys take the controls. I'm gonna go out and see if that engine can't be fixed before they catch up to us."

Travis and Shorty stared at him, wondering if he was crazy. But there was no time for hesitation. Even now Kirby was getting out of his seat. Travis, being faster than the corpulent Shorty, climbed out of the rear, wriggled over the fuselage, and got in to take the controls and keep guiding the seaplane down the river.

Kirby climbed out from the cockpit, onto the wing. He worked his way forward, clinging to the fuselage. It was hard to keep his balance, for the seaplane was bumping and rocking through the water, but he managed to hold on. He reached forward to the engine cowl and just managed to lift it. He looked in. Sheer relief came over him as he saw. The damage was not really serious. Four of the wires which brought the ignition to the spark plugs had been shot away. Consequently four cylinders were unable to function. Kirby moved back toward the front cockpit. The patrol boats were still gaining, inch by inch. The Jerries on either side were still holding their fire.

"Look for the tool box," Kirby directed his comrades. "See if you can't find some wire; that's all I need."

Shorty and Travis both groped around. The tool box proved to be in the forward cockpit. Travis found it, and also he found a small coil of wire. He gave it to Kirby. Again Kirby crept out to the engine. He got a firm footing and further supported himself by leaning against the fuselage. Then he drew his penknife and started cutting off pieces of wire and splicing them. In a few moments he had one of these wires attached to one of the four missing spark plugs. Now to attach it to the distributor. He started to do so. An electric shock went shooting through his whole body, making him withdraw his hand abruptly. His gloves had not saved him as he had hoped they would. This was going to be a job.

Closer and closer came those three patrol boats, while Travis held on full throttle and tried in vain to make the sluggish seaplane move faster. Again, and still a third time, Kirby tried to hook up that distributor, and the shock stopped him. But then, as he saw the patrol boats looming right behind, closing in, he gritted his teeth and steeled his nerves. He reached

the wire to the distributor again. Again that shooting, spasm of pain. But he held on. With electricity jerking through his body, he hooked up the wire and got it fast.

The result was instantaneous. With the new cylinder suddenly set into action again, the sputtering engine picked up considerably. The seaplane moved faster. It was skimming through the water now, but still unable to lift. The patrol boats began to fall back, farther, farther. They did not give up, however. Stubbornly they continued the chase.

Kirby stayed out at the engine. He was trying to hook up the second missing spark plug now. Again he was getting shocked, and with the plane moving faster now his task was all the more difficult.

Suddenly a bridge hove into sight, a bridge which spanned the river pretty low. It looked almost too low for a big seaplane to get under. Travis tried to gauge it with his eyes as it loomed closer.

"I'll have to chance it," he shouted. "There's no other way to go, with those damn boats still following us!"

He bent grimly to his controls. The bridge loomed closer, closer. Kirby did not even bother to look at it. He was too busy with his work, trying to hook up that spark plug. Nearer and nearer they came, with Shorty and Travis wondering if the bridge would be high enough. It was full of Jerries, they saw now—Jerries who were waiting with rifles ready. They had heard the alarm, too. They were aiming at the swiftly approaching seaplane, obviously determined to disable it by a good shot as it passed beneath them.

But at that moment Kirby had made the contact on the second spark plug, and the seaplane now literally shot forward, all but flew. Travis had to hold her down now to keep from bouncing. The arch of the bridge rushed toward him, looking much smaller than his plane. He aimed for it, and held his breath. There was a crack of several rifles. But the bullets did not make any vital hits. The seaplane had shot under the bridge like a streak, too fast to give the Jerries their hoped-for shot.

The seaplane streaked on through the water. Far behind now, the three patrol boats pulled down their high smokestacks and slid under the bridge, still continuing the chase. Travis guided the big plane on. It was actually skimming off the surface of the water at times now, though it always settled down again. It was like a speeding aquaplane ricocheting along. Kirby kept working, though he was exhausted from holding

on and receiving one electric shock after another. His nerves were all jumping. But he went on. It oughtn't to be much longer now. One more spark plug, the third, ought to turn the trick and get the plane in the air.

But then there came a sight which made the Mosquitoes' hopes sink and brought cold fear to their hearts. Ahead of them had appeared another bridge. And this was a pontoon bridge, stretching clear across the river, and making a virtual barricade through which no craft could hope to pass. Even the patrol boats would be stopped here.

With breathless speed, the pontoon bridge rushed toward the seaplane. It, too, was full of waiting Jerries. Kirby, knowing that he could not possibly fix another spark plug in time to get the plane in the air before it reached that bridge, now stopped working and looked helplessly, at Travis. God, what could the lanky man do? How could he get past there? And yet he must get past, for the patrol boats were still behind them, and the moment they even slowed down those speedy craft would catch up to them in no time.

Suddenly Travis' face became a grim, set mask, and a wild light gleamed in his eyes. He bent over his controls. Calmly he went on heading straight for that pontoon bridge. His comrades' eyes widened in sheer horror. God, was he crazy? He was going to crash into those pontoons head-on. In the next second, in the very next second——

And then Travis showed that he too knew how to handle a plane, even though the plane was unfamiliar and could not fly. Just as that pontoon bridge appeared right in front of him, he jockeyed his controls quite calmly. He opened the motor all he could. And exactly as he had planned, the seaplane again skimmed off the surface of the water in its furious speed. Right over that bridge, right over the heads of the astonished Jerries, who fired confusedly, that great seaplane bounced. *Splash!* And the huge ship was on the other side of the bridge, back in the water and speeding along as before. Shorty's rear-machine gun was still blazing, he had managed to knock several of those Boche off in the bridge as they passed.

Kirby shouted with admiration, "That was great, Trav! Some stunt!"

"Fix that damned engine!" was Travis' grim reply. "That will be a real stunt."

"And hurry up!" Shorty Carn put in. "Those patrol boats haven't given up the chase yet."

He spoke the truth. The patrol boats had not let the pontoon bridge stop them, as the Mosquitoes had

expected. Instead the bridge was opened for them in the center, and they came dashing through, still in hot pursuit. But the Mosquitoes were not alarmed. Kirby was starting to hook up the third spark plug even now. As soon as he got it connected——

THEY should have been prepared for what they next saw, should have seen it from the air on their way to Reutz in the bomber. But they had not seen it, and it came as a complete and horrifying shock!

Scarcely a mile ahead of them, the river dropped precipitously over a big dam, making a waterfall which led into treacherous and shallow rapids. A fatal place for a seaplane or any other craft! No wonder those patrol boats had kept following. They knew that soon they would have their quarry cornered, at the falls.

Kirby, looking up from the engine, shouted frantically. "Keep going!" he ordered Travis. "I'm gonna try to hook up this plug so you can take off before you get there."

Travis nodded tensely, and kept going. Kirby worked fiendishly. But this third plug was the most difficult of all to hook up. He had to reach forward and several times he almost lost his balance, holding on for dear life to keep from tumbling into the river. Again the damnable electric shocks stopped him. The waterfalls were looming close now, coming fast, damned fast. And in just another moment Travis was yelling, "Have to turn! Can't go any farther without risking those currents and going over."

Madly he kicked on his rudder-bar. The big seaplane careened crazily, and went skidding and lurching around, churning up the waters. Travis headed her up the river, in the opposite direction. But not for long. For now the patrol boats were coming in, with surprising swiftness. Closer and closer they came. Travis could not go on toward them. But he could not go toward those falls either. Helplessly he started to sweep around in a mad circle, while the patrol boats closed in. Desperately Kirby worked. God, he must get that thing hooked up! He redoubled his efforts. Again he ignored the shooting pain of the electricity. The patrol boats kept on moving in. Travis was being forced to circle closer and closer to the waterfall; otherwise they would have him. It looked hopeless, utterly hopeless. The Three Mosquitoes were trapped—trapped between a treacherous waterfall and three deadly patrol boats.

And then, suddenly, the engine of the seaplane lifted its voice in a louder and almost steady roar. And

Kirby was shouting at the top of his lungs, so he could be heard above the roar, "All right! I've got her hooked. There's only one missing now. Try to take off—and pray that she'll make it!"

Travis waved his wild assent, then glanced around with frenzied haste. Take off? Where? He tried to do it across the river, which was also across the wind, but there was no room; the ship would not lift in that space. He could not head for the patrol boats. There remained only one alternative, and perilous though it was, Travis had no choice but to try it. He swerved around once more. Straight for the waterfalls he headed at all the speed he could make. He knew that there was not room between here and the falls for the take-off, but he hoped frantically that his second desperate stunt of the day would work.

Kirby now clung onto the wing for dear life. The terrific slipstream from the propeller almost blasted him off. Shorty Carn gripped the cowl of his cockpit nervously. Travis, his face grim and white, went on. The brink of the falls appeared, and with it a sickening view of the sheer drop of water and the rapids below. And the big seaplane, with breathless speed, skimmed over that brink, out into space.

The drop was sheer and nauseating. Kirby was almost knocked off the wing again. He held on grimly. The seaplane floundered in space. Travis was fighting with his controls like a madman, trying to hold her up.

Then, slowly, the big ship straightened out. Slowly she roared forward, at last getting a support on the air. And Travis pulled back the wheel and climbed toward the sunny sky at a mild angle, so as not to throw Kirby off. He climbed toward the sky, while both Kirby and Shorty shouted with frenzied joy. They had made it! They had taken off!

But sweeping in from the sky, coming straight toward the seaplane were a swarm of fleeting shapes which looked like fragile dragon flies. Fokkers! There must have been at least thirty of them up there—a tremendous squadron! It was obvious that they had been sent out to stop the seaplane from ever getting across the lines. The Jerries were taking no chances. And they were gaining swiftly, those Fokkers. They were coming right in and in just a moment or so they would be upon the Mosquitoes.

"God!" Kirby shouted wildly. "We can't put up any kind of a fight against odds like that. We've got to get away! Give her gas, Trav! Give her gas, for God's sake!"

But Travis had already given her all the gas she could take. He had straightened out and headed

for the lines, and now the seaplane was doing its maximum speed on all but the missing cylinder. But it was far too slow. The Fokkers kept sweeping in, approaching with breathless rapidity.

And then an oath broke from Kirby, and with a reckless abandon he bent over that engine once more. It meant pulling the very whiskers of death, up here in the air, with the terrific flogging rush of wind. A bump or lurch, or even a strong electric shock, might well send him sprawling into space. But with thirty Fokkers approaching there was nothing else to do.

He worked now as he had never worked before. He steadied his two feet on the wing and leaned his body against the fuselage, so he could have both hands free. Travis, with his heart in his mouth, tried to keep the seaplane as level as possible. Fortunately he succeeded. The seaplane was beginning to show its amazing virtues now; it flew with astonishing smoothness, keeping steady.

Kirby struggled on with his piece of wire. The Fokkers came closer, closer. Even now they were climbing for altitude, so they could get into a position to dive.

And then at last the engine of the seaplane triumphantly burst into its original full-throated and steady roar. And Kirby, dizzy and exhausted, stumbled and crept along the wing, back toward the front cockpit. Shorty leaned from the rear and, with Travis also lending a hand, helped him climb in. He plopped wearily into the seat next to Travis, hardly noticing the sudden spurt of speed which the seaplane was making. He only knew that by some miracle he had stood out by that engine, both on the river and in the air, and hooked up four missing spark plugs.

And now that seaplane flew. Its speed became terrific, once its engine had regained its full power. It swept through the air, faster and faster. And huge and heavy though it was, it left the Fokkers behind. The Germans, seeing their quarry escaping, stopped climbing for their dive and raced at full throttle after the seaplane. But the powerful ship kept widening the gap between them and itself steadily.

By the time the Mosquitoes had reached the lines, the Fokkers were so many miles behind that they gave up the chase. They turned for home, and doubtless their pilots would get the worst bawling-out of their lives. The seaplane had gone through.

"Be careful now!" Kirby warned Travis. "We're likely to be attacked by our own planes now, or get shot at by our own archies. Remember this plane is marked

Jerry.” Even as he spoke, his eyes had picked out a score of distant specks in various parts of the sky ahead. Allied planes!

Travis cursed. “No use going on toward them! We better land right away and have it over with. We’re safe home now, anyway!”

Kirby nodded. “Well, go down and land anywhere then, and—holy hell,” he suddenly exclaimed, “I forgot that this is a seaplane! You’ve got to find water!”

All three Mosquitoes looked for it. At first they could not see a trace of water anywhere in the terrain below. But then as they searched, they discovered a small body of water which appeared to be a little lake. “Set her down there,” Kirby directed. “And make it pronto! If anyone’s down there we’re gonna get shot at!”

Travis nodded, and gently he shoved the wheel forward. The nose of the seaplane dipped gracefully. They descended. Before they had gone down very far the fun started. Anti-aircrafts opened up. Shells burst right and left. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* Machine guns took up the chorus.

But it was nothing compared to that awful barrage the Mosquitoes had gone through at Reutz, and so they laughed at it and went on down. The lake loomed below them, and Travis was circling to get into the wind. Kirby and Shorty meanwhile both waved white handkerchiefs. They were seen, thank God! The firing stopped, as the men on the ground decided that here was a Jerry plane in trouble. It had to make a forced landing, they figured, so its occupants were surrendering.

The little body of water rushed up now, as Travis glided. It was a small place to make a landing. But he made it. *Splash!* Again the pontoons struck the surface of the water. Travis ruddered furiously, turning the ship so it would not crash into the banks. The seaplane came to a slow, drifting stop. The Three Mosquitoes looked around. They grinned, as they saw the crowd of British Tommies surrounding the lake and training rifles on the huge seaplane, which they gazed at in awe and astonishment. A seaplane here!

“Put down those guns!” Kirby was shouting. “You damned idiots, what the hell do you think we are, Heinies?”

One of the Tommies, a little sergeant, let out a gasp. “Strike me pink,” he exclaimed, “h’if it ain’t three bleedin’ Yanks!”

“I’ll strike you more than pink,” Kirby shouted impatiently, “if you guys don’t drop your guns and give

us a hand. Grab this damn ship!” Travis was taxiing in toward the bank. The Tommies, eagerly cooperating, grabbed the wing and helped pull her in. They beached her on a spot where the bank was shallow.

“Gosh, what a filthy place this is,” Shorty was saying. “That water is the dirtiest I’ve ever seen. And there’s a rotten smell around here.” He held his nose. His comrades didn’t hear him, however. They were busy giving orders to the Tommies. “Guard this ship as you would a bottle of Scotch,” Kirby was saying. “It’s valuable. You hold it here until they send up a crew and a truck for it.”

“Yes, sir. Very well, sir,” the British sergeant replied.

“And remember,” Travis added sternly, “take good care of it. Don’t let it get dirty. It’s got to be kept as neat and good as possible.”

The Tommy sergeant gave a grin. “Beggin’ your pardon, sir, but h’if it’s got to be kept so neat and clean-like, why didn’t you bleedin’ ayviayters keep it that way yourself?”

“We did our best,” Kirby said. “Why? What’s the matter?”

“Well, I guess you don’t know then, sir. This ’ere plyce—” he pointed to the lake—“h’is one of the biggest latrine dumps on the Front!”

A look of sickly horror came over the Mosquitoes’ faces, and Shorty groaned, “I thought there was an awful smell around here!”

“And I must say it was a wonderful stunt,” the grizzled staff general at G.H.Q. finished, while the Three Mosquitoes, neat and clean in shining khaki uniforms again, stood respectfully before his desk. “You’ve turned a menace into a wonderful advantage for us. It would have been enough to destroy that factory. But by bringing us the plane, you’ve enabled us to turn the tables completely. It’s a dirty trick, but,” he smiled grimly, “all’s fair in war.”

“Yes, sir,” Kirby replied. “All’s fair in war. We’ve committed robbery, forgery, arson, and murder; and instead of getting strung for it——”

“You’re going to get a few nice medals,” the general finished, beaming upon the Three Mosquitoes.

