

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™ **UP AND OUT**

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

Breikhart, the great German Ace, flying his darting little red Fokker, was bringing down captive balloons with devilish frequency. Again he outwitted Kirby—and now Kirby was in a savage, reckless mood!

THE BIG CAPTIVE BALLOON FLOATED in the haze, just over the outskirts of the forest. It lay there like a lazy cow, bloated with food and interested only in rest. Yet, a thousand feet below, on the ground to which it was cabled, everything bustled with noisy activity. Trucks were filing up the roads toward the forest; tanks were lumbering along; light and heavy artillery were being stationed; while everywhere men in khaki were marching, building, digging, preparing for the furious, relentless advance through the woods. The distant rumble of shells kept growing more ominous—on the other side of the forest all was smoke and fire.

It was incongruous—this quiet, clumsy bag hanging so serenely over the seething ground. Up here there was only one sign of activity, of motion. Like insects buzz around a lazy cow, three tiny planes were buzzing around the “sausage,” sweeping above it in wide, graceful circles, their wings glinting in the sunlight.

To the men in the basket of the balloon—men who sat above the vast panorama of forest, hills, and fields, watching the great pageant and telephoning their stories to the men below—the sight of these three planes was a source of grateful joy. They felt safe now,

and they were not so grimly aware of the parachute-harnesses strapped to them. It was unlikely that a Boche pilot could manage to get past those circling planes, swoop low enough to pour his incendiary bullets into the bag. The gigantic target, vulnerable in almost every spot, was amply protected.

The men in the planes, however, did not share this joy. Playing nursemaid to a “sausage” was not their idea of war. On a day like this, with one of the biggest battles to be launched, they expected to be blazing their way through the enemy’s sky. It was natural that they should expect this. Fighting had won them their fame, had placed them among the few individual heroes of the war, and there was hardly anyone who did not know of “The Three Mosquitoes,” as they were called.

Why, then, should they be sent out on a job of such a nature? Kirby, their leader, asked himself this question for the hundredth time. He signaled his comrades, got them beside him in close formation so they could all circle together for awhile. “Shorty” Carn, coming up on his right, grinned at him mirthlessly; Travis, oldest and most mature of the three, shook his head as he resumed his place on the left. Kirby voiced

his own opinion in words which fortunately were drowned out by the roar of motors. It was ridiculous, this idiotic circling, this meaningless patrol: they were getting nowhere, accomplishing nothing.

Yet, he knew inwardly, the C.O. never did anything without good reason. And his reason in this case was Breikhart.

Breikhart! Despite his ennui and depression, the name could not fail to bring a faint gleam into Kirby's eyes, a gleam of mingled excitement and anticipation. Instinctively, he glanced up at the sky, scanned the puffy white clouds hanging close overhead. If only Breikhart would show up! Then all this dismal wadding, this monotonous circling, would be worth while.

Breikhart was the latest German ace to rise to fame. While he could outwit the best in plane-to-plane fights, his chief specialty was the lighter-than-air craft. He simply couldn't resist balloons. It was his joy, his greatest thrill, to drop down on a "sausage" and pierce its bag like a mischievous boy will stick pins in a toy balloon. His string of victims kept piling up, until headquarters, glancing at its bills for lost balloons, groaned and demanded rigorous protection for the bags. But if Breikhart could penetrate so far into the lines as to find a balloon, he could penetrate anything. They tried to trap him with dummies, decoys, barrages, but he always smelled the rat in time. When they guarded the "sausages" with airplanes, Breikhart either eluded the machines or shot them down too.

In short, this solitary figure had become a big problem. And to-day the problem was more momentous than ever. At least one captive balloon, placed at a convenient spot, was depended upon by the artillery for the big "push." Airplanes were too uncertain; wireless vague. It must be a balloon, which could remain above and keep directing the fire.

That, as Kirby knew, was why the C.O. had called on the Three Mosquitoes. If three of the best aces in the force, their insignias plainly marked on their planes, held guard over a balloon, it was very unlikely that Breikhart would dare to attack. And if he did, the three men should know what to do.

"It'll be a loss not to have you right in the action," the C.O. had explained when the three stood before him. "But I guess that balloon's as important as anything else. So you fellows had better go up and keep circling around there until they've got all the information they need." An anxious frown appeared on his grizzled face. "If anything should happen to this balloon, they will send up another at the southeast

extremity of the Bois. In such a case you will proceed at once to that point."

Kirby smiled faintly. "I'm sure that won't be necessary, sir," he said. "One, balloon will be plenty this time. I'm sure," a note of bitterness crept into his voice, "nothing will happen."

NOW, as he broke from his comrades again and they all flew around on a separate course, he was more sure than ever that nothing would happen. He glanced down past the big, gray-brown bag, saw the tiny specks of men that were the ground crew. They were sitting around, leisurely. They weren't worried. They knew, as the men in the basket of the balloon knew, that Breikhardt wouldn't dare to come. And what was a relief to them only filled Kirby with vexed disappointment. He wanted the German to show unwanted to get him off to himself for one of those great, clean hand-to-hand fights that make champions of the blue.

A dull explosion from the ground, audible above the roar of his engine, cut in vaguely on his thoughts. He glanced down. A big gun, carefully camouflaged in a clump of trees, had just fired. As Kirby looked it fired again—a sheet of flame whipped out and something went screaming through the air, over the forest. Kirby saw it explode on a distant field, saw the ground rise in a mighty geyser of smoke and dirt.

Then hell broke loose. A hundred cannons thundered in unison from every hill and nook. The peaceful trees and hushes belched forth smoke and fire as shells were sent hurling towards the enemy. Kirby saw them hitting. Some of them were landing in the forest, their purpose being to clear the woods of Germans; others were ranging a distant hill—obviously one of the Boche's vantage points. It was on this hill that Kirby saw an enemy battery swing into action; tiny flashes and puffs of smoke sprang from every part. But the shells did not reach here. The Germans hadn't ranged this spot, and their fire was concentrated on the Allied part of the forest—just far enough in to avoid their own troops.

The thunder of guns below had now become deafening, and their concussions were making the planes wobble slightly. Kirby got his men together again, and they flew a little higher. They now had an excellent view of the enemy territory—they saw the frantic rush to get artillery up the hill, saw tractors dragging along the big guns, saw tanks and armored cars. Shells were bursting over there continually; a line

of trucks was interrupted by a barrage that blew two of the machines to smithereens; an ammunition dump was struck and took half the side of the hill away with it. The guns below was scoring now, scoring indeed. And it suddenly struck Kirby that the men in this balloon, this awkward bag below him, were responsible for scoring. Despite his personal grudge, a thrill tingled through him. They knew their onions, these fellows. They were playing their part well, directing this stupendous barrage that was to pave the way for the men who had to walk through that forest.

Those men were now massing together on the road below, until the whole place was swarming with tiny khaki figures. Officers, some mounted on steeds, some in motorcycles, dashed up and down giving directions. The men began to fall in. As they did a group of tanks came lumbering up beside them, got in the vanguard, and spread out, side by side. Slowly and awkwardly they rattled into the forest—clumsy iron monsters which trampled down every tree and brush in their path. The men fell into battle formation behind them—advanced in long columns, their bayonets fixed. On they went, line after line being swallowed up in the dense foliage. The great push was on! Kirby was awed at the spectacle of it all. Never before had he seen so many men. It was stupendous—those columns of O.D. going straight in to the woods, where shells and machine-gun fire were waiting to slaughter them. In spite of the grimness of the thing—to them it was merely, a dirty job that had to be done—Kirby felt like cheering, cheering like a kid.

A moment later something new caught his eye. A squadron of Allied planes was coming straight this way, flying at full speed. Kirby and his men rose higher to greet them. And as they drew closer Kirby felt another big thrill. They were planes from his own squadron! Seven little Camels in beautiful V-shaped formation.

The Three Mosquitoes flew up beside the V and waved cheerfully to the pilots they recognized. The pilots waved back with equal enthusiasm. For a few seconds they flew together, exchanging greetings. Then Kirby happened to look down, happened to see that they were moving further and further from the balloon. A wave of bitter despair seized him. Why couldn't they go into battle with these men? Why must they stay here when such momentous things were about to happen?

Yet, they could not leave the balloon alone—it was dangerous. Bitterly, reluctantly, he led his men around,

waving farewell to the pilots, some of whom he knew he'd never see again. As they flew back to the "sausage" Kirby saw the little squadron fade into tiny distant specks. They were going into enemy territory, going hunting for Huns, while the Three Mosquitoes had to stay back here—playing nursemaid. A groan escaped Kirby as they started the dismal circling again. In vain did he tell himself that he and his men were playing a vital part in the battle; after all a lot depended on this balloon, and they were protecting it. Protecting it! He laughed bitterly. They were just scarecrows put up here to keep Breikhart away. While everyone else was taking an active part in the push, going forth into battle, they had to stay up here and just fly—fly aimlessly, without purpose.

The last columns of khaki below were disappearing into the woods now. Kirby watched them, saw their bayonets gleaming as they filed in slowly, between the trees. Now they were gone, and he wondered how many would come out of that forest. They were in for it from the artillery and—

HE STOPPED short, his whole body stiffening. It was incredible, yet he could have sworn he heard it—a faint tattoo audible above the roar of his engine. Swiftly he glanced upwards, scanned the sky again. Nothing but fluffy cloud banks against the pure blue. He relaxed in the cockpit, calling himself a fool. But the next second he was cutting the throttle so he could listen—listen keenly.

Rat-tat-tat! His muscles grew taut. It was unmistakable this time. A shrill, staccato clatter from somewhere above. He knew that sound, knew it too well to be deceived. It was the shrill, staccato clatter of a Spandau's machine gun—the machine gun of the enemy!

A strange, tingling feeling warmed Kirby's blood, made his eyes gleam. Instantly he was the fighter, the hunter eager for the chase. A second glance still had revealed nothing, but now he was sure of it. His expert ears could not be deceiving him. He knew that somewhere above there lurked an enemy plane—a plane which was warming up its guns for attack!

Swiftly, with a clearness of mind that always came to him in combat, he banked his plane around, caught sight of his two comrades circling leisurely around the great bag. He leaned forward and jerked his stick-triggers, felt the guns vibrate as they stuttered into action. Three short bursts in rapid succession. That was the signal—the signal which meant "Boche!"

Its effect was instantaneous. The other two planes

swerved around and came racing towards him. At the same moment, the tiny men on the ground sprang up and swarmed around the cable of the balloon, seized it hastily. Slowly the big bag stirred from its lazy relaxation, and as the men pulled frantically, it began to move downwards—an awkward beast clumsily trying to move out of danger.

Carn and Travis were now on either side of Kirby, both gesturing interrogatively. Kirby shook his head and pointed upwards. This time he thought he saw a faint rustle in the cloud just overhead—a vague shape whipping through the mist. He jerked back his stick, led his men into a steep climb at breakneck speed.

And as they climbed it happened. Out of the cloud poked the square, silvery nose of a little Fokker! It stuck out for a second, insolently spat two streaks of flame, and then disappeared.

Kirby was gesturing wildly, excitedly. “He’s up in that cloud!” he yelled, though only to his own ears. “Head him off! He’s coming out—!”

Even as he said the words, the little plane suddenly shot out from the other side of the cloud. It was a Fokker of the latest model, and except for its silver nose, was painted a gaudy, flaming red which dazzled the eye. Kirby did not have to look at its insignia to find out whose plane it was. He knew, knew for certain that it was Breikhart.

Now the German was sweeping around in a wide, graceful circle—obviously intending to get right over the balloon, which was sinking with painful slowness. Kirby’s arm shot upwards, waved back and forth with vigorous gusto. His comrades waved in response, and the three of them banked to the left and dashed over to intercept the Fokker.

But the German was no fool. He saw them coming, saw that they would be right in his circular path. So, with a grace and accuracy that filled Kirby with envy, he did a sudden, vertical bank and commenced to circle in the opposite direction. The Three Mosquitoes turned too, followed him at full speed. Around they went, with Kirby and his men creeping ever closer to the Fokker’s tail. The ground crew below, working frantically, tugging for all they were worth, glanced up apprehensively from time to time. They saw the planes sweeping around high above the bag, now dipping, now climbing through the haze of sunlight.

Kirby was gaining now. He was urging his plane on with skill and strength, getting every atom of speed out of the engine. The tail of the Fokker was right in front of him now, and he saw the pilot too. The latter

suddenly jerked his head around, glanced at the plane behind him, and waved enthusiastically, a grin on his goggled face. Kirby waved back with one hand, but with the other poured out a stream of sulphurous tracer.

Fokker did two quick rolls to out of the way and then, with dramatic suddenness, hung perfectly still in a trembling stall. The move was so unexpected that the Three Mosquitoes, before they had time to change their course, were carried a full hundred yards past the enemy plane by the momentum of their speeded-up engines. There was a second of confusion, during which they were banking around hastily. And that second was all Breikhart needed.

The nose of his plane suddenly dropped and he went thundering down in a steep dive—headed straight for the balloon!

Kirby plunged after him, and Carn and Travis followed. Closer and closer drew the Fokker to the descending balloon, while the men on the ground tried vainly to make more speed. Kirby was gaining, gaining steadily but slowly. He cursed, yelled at his plane to hurry, wished he could hurl it down like a missile. He kept his eyes on the sights, tried to train them on the plunging Fokker below.

Suddenly the German’s dive grew steeper—almost vertical. He was right on top of the balloon now. Kirby was trying to get on his tail. But it was too late.

Rat-tat-tat went the German’s machine gun. His plane, both its guns spitting, swooped down directly on top of the balloon, then gracefully flattened out for a zoom. And Kirby, leveling off to work out a course of action, could only stare dazedly as a ribbon of flame leaped from the bag and greedily licked across its surface, only to be swallowed up in a mighty burst of black smoke and fire which immediately enveloped the whole top of the “sausage.” From the basket tumbled four tiny figures—something white mushroomed out over their heads and they floated down to the ground. They were just in time. A few seconds later the balloon was a crumpling ball of fire, falling with increasing speed, until it lay on the ground in a smouldering heap.

AND as he watched, pausing over the scene, a sense of utter frustration, of bitter defeat, came over Kirby. To think that he and his comrades, the famous Three Mosquitoes, could let a thing like this happen right before their eyes. A sob choked him. What fools they had made of themselves. They had been trusted, relied

upon. The safety of the balloon had been placed in their hands. It had been a simple task for men used to going over enemy territory and facing innumerable odds. Yet they had failed utterly, had been beaten by one of the oldest tricks of the game.

Then he saw the bright red Fokker zooming upwards, saw his two comrades heading for it. Despair turned to rage, a terrific fury which shook him from head to foot. His teeth clenched, his hand closed tightly about the joy-stick. He'd show that Breikhart! He'd show him some tricks!

With a savage motion, he pulled back his stick and went shooting up—his engine roaring as if it shared his anger. The Fokker was banking around, racing over the forest for its own lines. Kirby sped after it, his fury increasing. There was only one thought in his mind now, one mighty resolution: to get Breikhart, to put him in his place, to make him pay dearly for that balloon.

Suddenly the other two Mosquitoes slowed down their engines until Kirby caught up with them. They got beside him, and both commenced waving frantically, pointing off to the left, Kirby understood at once what they were driving at. The C.O.'s words raced through his brain: "—If anything should happen to this balloon, they will send up another at the southeast extremity of the Bois. In such a case you will proceed at once to that point."

And simultaneously came the remembrance of his confident, cock-sure reply: "I'm sure that won't be necessary, sir."

The burning shame of his defeat, paradoxically enough, made him determined to disobey the order. He shook his head at his comrades, then signaled them to proceed to the balloon without him. They waved for him to come along.

"The hell I will!" he bellowed, and answered by letting the motor burst into a series of deafening detonations, as he sped forward to chase the Fokker—now fading into a distant speck.

But his comrades also put on full throttle and flew in V-shaped formation with him. If he was going to disobey orders, they'd do it too. They must stick together.

The hunt was on! The hunters urged on their winged steeds and rushed forward, gaining rapidly on their quarry. But they were chasing a very sly fox this time, a fox who surprised and eluded them at every turn. Breikhart had not been flying at full speed, evidently he had not expected them to follow him. But

when he saw them coming up on his tail, he opened his throttle wide—black smoke belched out at them from his exhausts. Slowly, the gap between the planes grew wider.

He led them over the forest, now dipping, now climbing, but always throwing off their sights when they came into range, always making them waste precious ammunition. He played them "Follow-the-leader" and made them perform breakneck dives, zooms, and twists to keep on his trail. He played them "Hide-and-seek" in and out of the clouds, confusing them each time and gaining new headway. In fact, he reveled in teasing them, taunting them. What was to them a grim hunt, with life and death in the balance, was merely an amusing game to him. Kirby knew his feeling—often he had felt and acted the same way. But now, in the fury of his defeat, he went on grimly, bent on vengeance.

They soon passed over the other side of the forest and, looking down, Kirby saw a sight which could not fail to stir him. Out of the woods poured the gray-clad masses—regiments of them, marching swiftly, frantically. Little did they resemble the crack, machine-like troops of the Imperial army; their ranks were broken or disordered, they were just a mob of frightened men trying to run to safety. Behind them came light artillery; the drivers, sitting above the bouncing wheels, whipped their horses madly to get more speed. Sometimes a gun got stuck in the mud, and they had to stop and get out to push, lift, and drag it. And throughout it all shells came screaming over from the Allied lines, burst amid the retreating forces to scatter death and add to the confusion. The big push was succeeding all right. The boys who had gone into that forest had marched straight through, muting the Boche in their path. Kirby smiled faintly: at this rate the war wouldn't last much longer.

Then his smile faded, his lips set grimly, as once more he threw himself into the chase. The Fokker was climbing ahead of him now; his two comrades were behind him. He pulled back his stick and roared up after the red plane. He must catch Breikhart: he must get him!

But this task began to look more and more impossible. They were far within the German lines now, in danger of being attacked by an enemy squadron any moment. Breikhart continued to stay out of range: they could not close the big gap between him and themselves.

It seemed useless to go on; they were no further now than they had been at the beginning.

Besides, the German was doubtless headed for his airdrome, and there was no hope of getting him if he landed.

AGAIN a sense of frustration and despair overcame Kirby. Despite his grim determination, he was too good an aviator not to realize the folly of further pursuit. There was nothing to do but give up, acknowledge that the German was too quick and clever for them. They had been beaten, and they would be beaten even more if they continued. Bitterly, futilely, he held up his hand to signal his men—then stopped abruptly, as something off to the right caught his eye.

Close by, not a mile away, hung a German captive balloon. And at the sight of the big, gray-brown bag Kirby's spirits rose considerably. Here, at last, was a chance to get an eye for an eye. Evidently it was an important balloon, for it was the only one they had seen near the battlefield. And if they dispatched it they could go home without feeling so utterly defeated, could square themselves with the C.O. They would finish it off. And perhaps—a gleam of hope flickered in him—perhaps Breikhart would try, to stop them, in which case they'd get him too!

Reaching his decision, he waved to his men. They nodded, and all banked to the right and went racing towards the balloon. Kirby glanced around to look for the red Fokker. A start of surprise went through him. The plane had disappeared! Then he saw the many cloud banks drifting above, and he understood. The German was somewhere up there. Perhaps he was following them overhead, to dive on them when they reached the balloon. Well, Kirby thought cheerfully, let him try it!

They were almost above the balloon now, getting in a position to dive. Evidently they had not been seen, for the bag hadn't started to descend yet. Kirby laughed dryly. It would descend fast enough now!

His arm shot upwards, and the three planes plunged over as one and went thundering down. Down they came, right on the bag. Kirby seized his triggers, started to jerk them. His guns trembled, and the streaking flames leaped from their muzzles. He saw a mass of grayish brown coming up to meet him, and started to level off.

And at that moment the whole earth seemed to close in on him with a deafening roar. A great tongue of flame leaped up towards him, while visibility was completely blotted out by dense black smoke which

rose in choking layers. The air was thick with flying, hurling missiles—he heard them screaming past his ears, hissing around the plane's fuselage and wings. Every now and then, close by, came a reverberating crash, and the red flame showed through the smoke. Then Kirby was struggling frantically with the controls, trying to climb out of it. In a flash he had grasped the whole upshot of the thing. Fools that they were, they had dived on a dummy balloon! It was just a bait put out to trap enemy pilots: the basket was loaded with high explosives, while a battery of anti-aircraft guns and pom-poms below had the whole thing ranged. If they got out of here without being blown to smithereens, they were damned lucky. And, Kirby thought bitterly, they didn't deserve to be lucky. It was their own fault that they had dived before thinking twice. Why, they had fallen into a trap that even beginners knew enough to avoid. They had blundered, just as they had blundered in everything else to-day.

But there was no sense sitting here and moping about his damn-foolishness. The thing to do now was to work his way out, to try to escape from this trap before it was too late. He could not see the other two planes, but he was sure his comrades were fighting their way out too. He jerked back his stick, put on full throttle, and went into a zoom. And at that moment there came a sharp, stinging blow on the back of his head which sang in his ears. He had been hit! Dizziness was creeping over him: he felt faint, felt himself drifting off. . . . He fought that feeling, refused to give in to it. He mustn't go "out." He leaned forward and seized the joy-stick again. His head began to throb, each throb bringing a spasm of pain. He clenched his teeth and went on through the maelstrom of lead.

How he came out of that he never knew, but suddenly the air began to clear, and he saw the shells bursting farther and farther below him as they fell short. At first he was dazed and a little bewildered, but as he shook himself out of it he thought at once of his two comrades, and looked around with anxious haste. A wave of grateful relief swept him when he saw them climbing up behind him. He banked around to meet them, waved to them excitedly.

THE other two men were signaling that they were going to try to get back to the drome before their machines "cracked" on them. Kirby realized that it was the wisest course to pursue, so he started to lead them towards the lines. They flew slowly, on account of the

damaged planes, and every now and then an A.A. gun would send a shell screaming up at them. But they ignored the fire, kept unwaveringly to their course.

Kirby glanced down, scanned the ground behind him. There was a black, smoking heap where the balloon had fallen, and he saw the enormous battery of guns which had sent up the barrage. Yes, that had been a close call. They—

Suddenly a realization came to him, a realization that brought him up in his seat with a cry of wild rage. Breikhart! He had forgotten in all this confusion. But now he remembered, now he saw it all. Breikhart was responsible for the whole business. The clever German had lured them to this balloon, had carefully brought them within a close distance of it. No wonder he hadn't tried to interfere. He had fooled them, fooled them to the bitter end!

Kirby's face turned livid, his eyes blazed.

"Damn him!" he shouted hoarsely. "Damn the dirty skunk!"

And then, once more, that mighty, single resolution took possession of him, took him heart and soul, crowding out everything else. He was going to get Breikhart, get him if he had to search the whole sky for him. And he was going to get him now!

He forgot his wound, forgot his comrades, as he banked around fiercely. Carn stalled to wave to him, but he paid no attention. The other two Mosquitoes had to continue on their way; their planes were dropping ever lower and they had no choice but to make for home.

Kirby was racing through the sky, racing at breakneck speed with the wind rushing through the flying wires and tearing at his goggled face. It hurt, that wind, for he was feverish now. But the fever and the intense pain in his head only served to egg on his wild fury. He was a man obsessed with a single thought. To get Breikhart. Nothing else mattered.

Yet his mind was astonishingly clear, for he flew directly to the airdrome where he knew Breikhart was quartered. With a savage oath, he swooped straight down over the hangars, ignoring the hail of machine-gun bullets that came up to meet him, ignoring the commotion on the field as planes were dragged out to be sent after him. He swept down closer, almost touching the buildings. Then he jerked his triggers, raking the slanting roofs with his tracer. That was the customary challenge, the challenge to a duel.

He went through it three times to make sure, then zoomed up and circled around—waiting.

Three Pfaltz scouts took off and climbed up toward him. He sped into a cloud and shook them off—they turned and started for the lines to look for other cold meat. Kirby came out and waited, continuing to circle. Minutes passed. He shifted with furious impatience, then swooped down again.

"Come on up!" he shouted, shaking his fist. "Come up and fight, you damned slinking coward!"

Again he sent his bullets ricocheting along the roofs. Again he waited. Still no sign of the red Fokker. He began to rave, curse, yell. Then it suddenly occurred to him that Breikhart could not be here. If he were here he would certainly come up. He was that kind of a man.

And with this realization came another—came like a final blow to bring his fury to its highest pitch. That balloon, the southeast extremeity of the Bois—

His plane whipped around in a gagging rush of air, and he went smashing toward the lines again. Oh, yes, he knew, knew this time. Breikhart was going to bring his day's mischief to a glorious climax by getting the balloon the Three Mosquitoes should be guarding.

A fierce, gripping determination came over Kirby. Breikhart wouldn't get that balloon—this time he would fail. Kirby would have the last say, and it would be a big say. Breikhart would pay for his work.

On he raced, his engine roaring, his head throbbing, beating wildly. His whole body was hot with fever and rage now, one feeding the other as he went on.

IT SEEMED like ages, interminable ages, before he saw the third captive balloon of the day. He made a bee-line for it, speeding up his tiny Spad until the plane trembled as if it must fall to pieces.

And as he drew closer, he saw something else. Two little planes were chasing one another around, above the bag, flame streaking from their noses. And one of these planes was a bright, gaudy red. The other, he soon discovered, was a British Dolphin.

At once he understood what had happened. The British pilot had caught Breikhart going for the balloon, and had dived to attack him. He was holding him off, fighting him hard—

It happened so suddenly that Kirby could hardly believe his eyes. The British plane had just sped past the Fokker. It started to bank. But it banked right in the Fokker's smoky line of fire. For a second it paused, seemed to hang stock still, like a bird surprised by a sudden wound; then it turned over into a tight left-hand spin and went crashing straight to earth.

And at the same moment Breikhart's plane plunged over and dived for the balloon. Kirby's teeth gritted—he went into a glide dive to increase his speed. Never before had he gone so fast. But he was determined this time, determined to beat Breikhart to it. The German was getting closer to the bag now, almost in range. . . .

Kirby increased the angle of his glide—he was shooting through the air like a missile now. The men on the ground saw him, saw him coming straight towards the diving German. Could he make it? Already the German was leaning forward in his cockpit, his thumbs on the triggers. There was not a second, not a fraction of a second

Rat-tat-tat! It was Kirby's gun which spat, as he whipped right under the German and hung in a stall. Breikhart would have to take his choice between crashing in to the Spad, head-on, or leveling off. He chose the latter, leveled off. Kirby banked vertically and was on his tail, chasing him away from the balloon. The German pilot looked around, saw him, and waved in recognition. At the same time he nodded his head.

Then he zoomed upward, Kirby in hot pursuit.

Breikhart was accepting his challenge, was willing to fight it out. That was why he had nodded. Good! Kirby's eyes gleamed with keen expectancy. His grim hatred began to leave him. This was going to be a real fight, and he liked real fights!

They were climbing now, Kirby climbing behind Breikhart, trying to get on his tail. They went on up to those thin high regions where aces go to fight it out, up above the clouds, away from prying eyes. It was terrifically cold up here, and the cold flogged Kirby's fever-stricken body, until he was shaken by a chill. His head was racked with pain, but he did not care. He was ready to do battle.

Suddenly the German leveled off, whipped around, and they rushed past each other from above and below. Kirby shot up and around in a breathless Immelmann, gaining altitude. The German tried to get him while he was turning over, but failed. Kirby came roaring down on him, and his tracer went closer. The German rolled out of the way, then banked swiftly. His sights were on Kirby for the moment, and his bullets whistled past the Mosquito's ears.

Thus they fought—a battle of skill and strength at breakneck speed. Neither seemed to be able to gain headway. When one ranged the other, the latter would slip out like an elusive eel. They could not get their shots home.

In spite of his fighting spirit, Kirby was beginning

to feel exhausted. His muscles ached with the pain of sickness—started to rebel. He felt dazed, and the whole thing became a strange dream—a dream in which he felt the rush of air, saw the flashing red Fokker above or behind him.

He clenched his teeth and fought on. Breikhart was creeping up on his tail now—the tracer was streaking closer. He rolled into a trembling stall. The German plane went past, and now it was Kirby's turn. They started to circle, Kirby rolling after the German like a hawk after a chicken.

TIME began to drag, and still the fight went on. And now, suddenly, a vague, hazy cloud appeared before Kirby's eyes, floated slowly toward them. He tried to brush it off with his hand, then snatched off his goggles. What was the matter with him?

He fought anew, fought for all he was worth. The cloud grew denser now—it was black. Without goggles his eyes were all the more sensitive. Yet there was no use putting them on again: visibility was too difficult already.

Once more he rolled to shake the German off as he heard the bullets ripping through his wings. The cloud was closing in around his head from all sides. God, was he going blind? He could hardly see now. He could hardly distinguish the red Fokker. No longer were his gun-sights of any use. He had to trust his naked eye, and his eye was getting dimmer every minute.

He tried to fight against that unseen force which was dragging him into darkness. He tried to push it away, then cursed at it, raged at it. But it kept closing in on him. He could not stop it. In a few more seconds everything was going to turn black!

He began to race with the approaching blindness, then. Before he lost his sight he must get Breikhart! He whipped around as he felt the Fokker on his tail once more, crashed towards it, his guns splitting. The German banked and he went past, only to bank again and race back.

Another attempt failed. And then he began to give up. He could only see very dimly now—everything was blurred and vague. Sobs of bitter despair broke from his throat. He heard the whistle of bullets again, but hardly made any effort to avoid them.

It was no use. He was beaten.

"Well—old duffer," he choked, forcing the words out with his breath. "Guess—you win. . . . Guess you're—champion." He laughed harshly. "Come on—shoot. . . . Don't keep—me waiting. . . ."

His voice died in a mumble which he himself could not hear above the roar of his motor and the throbbing of his head. He was ready to quit—for the first time in his life. He was through.

But not quite through. Even as he slumped back, waiting for the end, a vague shape appeared in front of him, flashed by to the right. He kicked right rudder and banked. The shape appeared again, and he pulled both his triggers—kept pulling them while complete darkness closed in on him, kept clinging to his gibbering gun until the ammunition drum was completely emptied. Then he stopped.

Had he scored? If not he was done for! He was helpless now. In fact, no man could have been more helpless. Fifteen thousand feet, three miles above the ground—totally blind, completely shut off from the world! Never before had he felt such a sense of isolation. He did not know whether Breikhart had gone crashing down, or whether he was still up here—ready to pounce on the easy prey.

Then there began a strange buzzing noise in his ears as fever and exhaustion began to claim their toll, going “out” once more, and he didn’t care this time. He was slumping forward in the cockpit—

Dazedly he felt the plane dropping in a dizzying plunge, for he had fallen against the stick. Vaguely he felt the wind tearing up at him. He was crashing down, crashing down to certain death. Yet he could not help it. Resignedly he let himself sink . . . deeper . . . deeper . . . Consciousness was leaving him now.

But then a sudden start shook him. It was a feeling, a feeling that the earth was close below. His skill meant something after all; years of flying, of diving just like this, had come to his aid in the final test. He *knew* where the ground was now, and the knowledge revived him momentarily at least. With frantic effort, he jerked the stick backwards for a pan-cake, felt the plane dropping down on level keel, like an elevator.

There was a dull thud. Then everything went blank.

VOICES drifted to his ears, vague voices coming through space.

“Hell be coming out in a minute. . . . He’s O.K. . . . just a scalp wound and too much excitement.”

He opened his eyes, and was overjoyed at being able to see perfectly. He was in a hospital cot, and the sun was streaming in the window. Suddenly he was wide-awake, feeling as fresh and strong as ever, though his head was wrapped completely in bandages. He sat straight up in bed. And there before him stood three

men. One came forward to feel his pulse. The other two were his comrades, Carn and Travis!

“Hullo!” he said cheerfully. “I thought I’d be greeting Saint Peter, but it’s only you two devils—hey?”

The other two Mosquitoes both opened their mouths to reply, but the doctor held up a restraining hand.

“Don’t talk to him yet,” he warned. “He mustn’t be excited.” He turned to Kirby. “Fever’s down all right. How do you feel?”

“For the love of Pete?” Kirby addressed his two comrades, ignoring the doctor. “Don’t keep me on pins and needles. What happened—and where?”

Once more the two started to reply, and once more the Doctor stopped them. Then Shorty Carn got an idea. While the doctor bent over Kirby, the stocky little man began to signal—using the signals they always used when their airplane engines made speaking impossible. Lanky Travis soon joined in, and the two of them stood there waving, pointing, gesticulating.

“I got him then!” Kirby exclaimed excitedly. “You say it was a ‘swiss-cheese’ job—filled his plane with holes? You know I was as blind as a bat—and batty too, I guess. Well, what about the C.O.? Is he sore?”

The two men shook their heads. Again they went through a series of signals—signals perfected and expanded through months and months, so that they could talk on almost any subject.

“Well,” said Kirby, “of course getting Breikhart ought to please the Old Man. And Breikhart only got that one balloon. But what about yourselves? Huh? Well, as long as you managed to crash on the field it’s all right. And he sent you right up to watch that ‘southeast’ balloon? Funny I didn’t see you. Yes, guess Breikhart and I were drifting further and further away from the place all the time. You saw me pan-cake, did you? You bet it was neat. Otherwise I wouldn’t be talking to you fellows now. Well, everything’s O.K. then, and when do I go back, doc?”

“A couple of weeks,” the doctor replied. “You’re all right except for an extraordinary affliction of the tongue.” He turned to Carn and Travis. “You may talk to him now—all you want.”

“Thanks,” said Travis, with dignity, “but we haven’t anything to say.”

“Words fail us,” sighed Shorty Carn.

“Well, I have something to say,” Kirby went on, loquaciously. “I want you guys to make a request to the colonel. Tell him please, please never to make us guard a balloon again. I thought I’d bust—it was so damn dull! Give us something with action in it!”