



DEATH RIDES HIGH

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*Powell was fighting mad. It wasn't the crashed altimeter that got him—
it was the startling discovery he made after that.*

THE FIRST GRAY LIGHT OF DAWN was creeping over the drome of the 48th Pursuit Squadron. Five S.E.s were drawn up at the deadline, their Hisso 200's idling over with the sweet purr that accompanies mechanical perfection. Lieutenant Jack Powell detached himself from the small group of pilots waiting on the tarmac and stared gloomily at the hustling greaseballs as they serviced the ships. His gaze wandered from the busy mechanics to the insignia painted boldly on the fuselages of the crates. It was the face of an altimeter painted white. Big black numerals showed up in a faithful representation of the height recorder, and the indicator was pointing to nine thousand.

An involuntary shudder ran down Powell's spine. To him the insignia of "D" flight was a hoodoo.

The dawn patrol was to be his first outing with "D" Flight, and he wasn't relishing the idea. There was a time though when he would have given his right hand to be called a member of Fighting "D". That time harked back to the days of Russ Owen, Swede Anderson and the rest of the boys. Split-tail pilots, every one of them, and sheer poison to the Huns. In those days "D" Flight was the fightingest outfit on the front and the luckiest bunch of eagles ever gathered together under one hangar.

But the advent of Captain Walters and his trick insignia had changed all that. "D" Flight's traditional luck had deserted them overnight. Twice they had gone out, a full complement of five, for a dawn patrol; and each time only Walters had returned to report that the ships under his command had gone down under heavy anti-aircraft fire.

Powell hated to admit that he was superstitious, but nevertheless he blamed the altimeter insignia for all of "D" Flight's trouble, and he wasn't overcome with joy when the old man moved him up from "B" as a replacement.

Captain Walters regarded Powell out of mocking half closed eyes. "What's the trouble, Lieutenant," he said coldly. "Scared on your first patrol with "D"?"

"Scared nothing," Powell blurted out angrily. "There's nothing to be scared about. I'll admit though, Captain, that I'd feel a whole lot easier in my mind if you'd order the greaseballs to slap a paint brush over those insignia. The damned things give me the willies!"

"Yeah," Walters leered. "Then you'd better make up your mind to shake 'em off. That insignia is my lucky symbol—and it stays. I got all my Huns at nine thousand. That's why I'm so partial to showing it. Now get to your machine. We take off in two minutes."

Powell and the others started to their crates. "V formation and stay at seven thousand until I signal for a higher ceiling," Walters called after them.

"Higher ceiling?" Powell swung around sharply and faced his commander. "I thought the operations officer said we weren't to go above seven thousand?"

"Well, don't think," Walters retorted sharply. "I'm giving orders in this flight and if I say higher ceiling, you'll follow. Didn't I just tell you nine thousand is my lucky height?"

The sneering tone of his Flight Commander brought an angry red flush to Powell's face. A feeling of hate and resentment filled his heart. For a moment he felt the insane desire to smash Walters in the face and take whatever consequences might ensue. In his present mood even a firing squad would have been welcomed by Jack Powell if he might only have the satisfaction of smashing that soft sneering smile from Walters' face. He checked the impulse though and climbed into the cockpit of his crate. Then with blazing eyes he awaited Walters' signal to take off.

WALTERS BARELY gave his pilots time to settle into their cockpits when he signaled for a takeoff. The musical drone of the Hissos changed instantly into a reverberating roar as the pilots jerked full gun. With a thunderous clamor the S.E.s leaped away from the dead line and lurched into the air, split-tailing for position.

At seven thousand the ships jockeyed for formation. Rapidly they came around into a battle V with Captain Walters as the apex. A red Very light shot out from Walters' ship. The pilots recognized it as the

signal to advance. Instantly the S.E.s shot forward, full gun, and the fighting wedge of combats roared toward the German lines.

Below them, stretched out to infinity on either side, lay a jagged corridor of desolation, of scarred stumps and shattered buildings. Roaring guns were thundering out their messages of death. Carefully hidden nests of machine guns sent chattering streams of lead and steel through the ragged lines of barbed wire. Tell-tale splurges of mud and smoke told that trench mortars were hitting their objectives with deadly monotony. But in the air there was silence. There was not a German plane to be seen and the enemy anti-aircraft batteries were strangely silent.

Powell huddled into his cockpit and allowed his gaze to travel over the other crates. The pilots were keeping perfect formation. Their heads were just visible above the coaming of the cockpits. Their faces were drawn tense, waiting for the dread Boche onslaught.

A perplexed frown appeared on Powell's face. It was funny that the anti-aircraft batteries were not ripping into them already. There were no other planes in the skies, and it wasn't like Jerry to allow an allied formation to go unmolested. He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. He supposed Jerry would pick them up when he was good and ready. And then poor old "D" flight would catch it in the neck in the same manner that already accounted for its cracked-up pilots. And all because of a hoodoo insignia. Damn that altimeter anyway!

He halted in his ruminations to stare with hate blazing eyes at the white dial painted on the other crates. Then before he was aware of it an uncontrollable spasm of rage took possession of him. Damned hoodoo altimeters were wiping out the fighting "D"s. Altimeters! That was it! In a blind fury he drove his clenched fist full into the face of the instrument on his dashboard. The glass shattered under the impact and the point of the little steel indicator twisted out of adjustment.

Powell stared at his handiwork and grinned sheepishly. Boy, what a sweet temper he was in this morning.

And all on account of a painted altimeter. He was letting the thing get his goat and that would never do. He'd be easy pickings for the first Hun that came along if he didn't smooth out his frayed nerves.

THOROUGHLY ASHAMED of his outburst he snatched off his glove and set about straightening the altimeter needle. His bare fingers reached out and touched the flimsy piece of metal and then withdrew hastily as though he had been stung.

A startled exclamation escaped him. "What the hell?" He reached out and repeated the performance. The same thing happened. A sharp stabbing shock ran up his arm and was repeated at intervals of a split second for as long as he allowed his fingers to touch the needle.

"Hmmm. That's funny," he addressed himself aloud. "That's magneto current or I'm Jack Pershing! What do you suppose has gotten into that fool thing?"

He touched the indicator again to satisfy himself that he wasn't dreaming. The same thing occurred. He withdrew his hand and shook it vigorously. "Yes, sir! That's magneto current and there ain't any of that stuff feeding into an altimeter without a connection of some sort." Keenly interested, he ran his hand up behind the dashboard and groped around the altimeter casing. His fingers closed around a wire leading right into the instrument. He continued to rummage around and found another wire which entered the casing at the top.

Powell's brows knitted thoughtfully. Two wires! Both of them leading right into his altimeter and at least one of them charging it with magneto current! Now what the devil could that mean?

His eyes strayed again to the painted insignia on the crates flying beside him. Then the answer came to him in a flash. Grinding out a terrible oath he yanked viciously on one of the wires and tore it away from the altimeter. So that was it, eh? That altimeter insignia was something more than Walters' good luck symbol. It was a signal to the Huns to lay off any plane carrying it. To lay off and not waste ammunition because they were doomed anyway. Doomed to be blown up in the air! Murdered! And not shot down by archie as Walters had reported before.

Powell figured it out quickly. Somewhere in his plane a bomb had been planted. An electric wire had then been attached to the detonator and connected to the altimeter in such a way as to leave a terminal just above the bent spring that controlled the vacuum chamber. Then another had been tied into one of the magneto leads and connected to the spring itself, so that as the atmospheric pressure diminished when the plane climbed to higher altitudes, the spring, operating in accordance with the altimeter principle, gradually approached the second wire and at a certain height established contact. The resulting current spelled doom for both plane and pilot!

Powell's face set grimly. He knew now how his buddies of the 48th had been killed. And he was ready to stake his life that he knew who had killed them. It

wasn't for nothing that Walters had announced his intention of disobeying operations orders. No, sir. He intended to take the flight above seven thousand simply because he knew that his infernally clever death trap would not work at that height.

Powell's teeth were clenched and his eyes were blazing. He knew now what was at the bottom of his intense hatred of Walters. Some inexplicable subconscious sense had told him that the man was a spy!

He was racking his brain for a plan of action when he saw Walters nose up slightly as a signal to zoom for altitude. Powell's heart almost stopped beating. A cold perspiration broke out on his forehead. There was no doubt in his mind that all the other crates had been rigged up with the same altitude bomb. That damned Hun was leading the others up to sudden, devilishly calculated death. He groaned aloud. God! He had to do something. He had to stop them before those damnable altimeters blew them to destruction.

With a fury born of desperation he charged through the formation like a madman and pitched clean onto Walters' tail. His thumbs were leases and before him the twin Vickers spat viciously.

The startled pilots veered out of formation and draped their crates all over the sky. Walters found himself suddenly immersed in a howling rain of steel from Powell's guns. Startled into action, he slipped off steeply on one wing. Powell followed him down and continued to pour a withering fire about the Flight Commander. He wasn't aiming to kill though. But Walters could not know this. All he saw was a flurry of streaking tracers screaming about him and a rushing S.E. tearing headlong at his tail.

Walters leveled out from the slip and screamed over in a tight loop. He dropped like a plummet onto Powell's ship and tore at him, guns hammering like mad. Powell found himself engulfed in a rain of death and pushed his crate down in a full power dive. He knew he was in grave danger of being wiped out under the Flight Commander's terrific fire, but there was no time to think. Somehow he had to make the flight lose height and get them back to the drome. And this seemed to be the only way.

THE TWO PLANES dropped earthward with breath-taking speed. Powell held his S.E. into the dive as long as he dared. Walters was buzzing angrily on his tail, raking him with terrific bursts, intent on smashing him to death.

They had lost nearly two thousand feet in that crazy power dive before Powell finally pulled out and

rolled to get out of the line of fire. Walters swooped out behind him and raked him mercilessly with twin streams of leaden hate. Powell pulled into a loop and Walters followed him over, his twin Vickers pumping furiously. As his crate came out of the loop, Powell let his stick go forward and dropped into another breath-taking plunge to earth. Again he held his S.E. to a full power dive. His Hiseo was roaring like a fiend. Wings humming with the terrific force of his drive, wires screaming like a million devils as they cut the air, he sent his crate hurtling earthward. Walters was right behind, fastened onto his tail like an angry hornet. Powell flashed a glance at the Flight Commander and saw his hate-maddened features pressed forward against the gun sights. He looked beyond and caught a glimpse of three other crates streaking down behind Walters. He smiled grimly. The rest of the flight were joining the party.

Powell made a quick decision. He had gotten the boys down. Now it remained for him to get them to the drome. With the ground hardly more than five hundred feet below he swooped from the dive and shot toward the drome. Walters and the others hung to his tail like a pack of hungry wolves. Rolling, twisting and dodging, slipping, turning crazily, anything to keep out of the line of fire they poured into him, he roared toward 48's field.

Soon the slack canvas hangars, grotesquely camouflaged, loomed ahead. Powell kicked rudder and swept over the tarmac with the remainder of "D" Flight roaring after him. Then he banked around, cut his switch and glided in for a landing.

ONE SHIP after another sat down behind him and taxied to the deadline. Powell was on the ground as Walters came in. The Flight Commander leaped to the ground and gestured wildly to a bunch of grease-balls. "Grab that man," he shouted wildly. "He tried to shoot me down."

Before the startled mechanics could obey Powell leaped at the Flight Commander and swung his right fist with terrific force. It crashed home full in the face of the shouting Walters. Blood spurted from his mouth and nose. He reeled under the impact and struggled wildly to pull his automatic. Powell jumped at him like a madman. Their bodies came together with a sickening thud and they both sprawled full length on the tarmac.

A milling crowd of greaseballs and flying officers pried Powell away from the battered Flight Commander and

dragged him to his feet. Walters picked himself up and stared malevolently at the enraged Lieutenant. There was a snarl on his lips as he tried to frame adequate words. "Guess I'll leave you for the firing squad," he said nastily.

"If anyone faces a firing squad it'll be you. You dirty Hun spy." Powell ground out.

Walters' face went livid but before he could reply Major Watson, Squadron Commander of the 48th, had pushed himself through the crowd.

"Say, what's going on around here," he demanded angrily. "Has the whole squadron gone crazy?"

Walters' face twisted in a crafty smile as he replied to the Major's question. "I wish to report, Sir, that Lieutenant Powell deliberately attacked me in the air."

"I'd like to inform you, sir," Powell cut in stiffly, "that this man is a German agent and is responsible for most of the recent casualties in "D" Flight."

"You're mad," the major yelled incredulously. "What's got into you."

"Not a thing," Powell returned quietly. "But I'll stake my life that if you search "D" Flight's ship you'll find bombs in every one of them with the exception of Walters'. And those same bombs are connected to the altimeter with a wire. There's another wire tapped in on a magneto lead and so arranged that it'll make a contact at nine thousand feet. It's those bombs that have accounted for all of "D" Flight's troubles—not anti-aircraft fire. That insignia was Walters' method of wising up the Huns to lay off while the flight was in the air."

Walters' face was a study. "It's a lie," he screamed.

"We'll see about that" the major said grimly. He turned to one of the officers standing by in open-mouthed amazement "Search "D" Flight's ships and tell me if there are any wires connected to the altimeters." The officer saluted and harried away. He was back in a few minutes.

"Well, what did you find?" the Major asked him.

"Wires attached to every altimeter except Captain Walters', Sir." Walters' face had turned a pasty gray. Major Watson fixed him with a stern stare. "So you're a spy and a murderer, eh! Well, I don't think you'll be with us long. The best I can promise you is a hasty court-martial and a prominent part in an early morning execution."

"But how did you find this out, Lieutenant Powell?" he said, turning to that rather excited looking pilot

"That insignia got my goat. Sir, and I—well—I just got mad at my own altimeter," was the somewhat enigmatic reply.