



This is the round-table of airmen. Here after flying hours they gather to yarn and smoke. All of these tales are told by airmen, in an airman's fashion that'll make you feel right at home in the old hangar.

THE BOBTAIL ACE

by FRANKLIN H. MARTIN

LIEUTENANT HOWDY DEAN winced as a pilot from the Seventeenth Observation stuck his head in the mess hall of the One Hundred and First Pursuit Squadron and yelled a general invitation. "Hey, you birds," he sang out, "Duke got his fifth Boche today and he's settin' 'em up down at the buvette."

There was a general stampede for the cafe down the road. Between verses of "Madelon" the pilots of the two squadrons squinted through the bottoms of their glasses and argued hotly the merits of their respective outfits. Duke Byers, the Seventeenth's new ace, came over to the table where Captain "Spooky" Miles and Howdy Dean were sitting and thumped the lanky Dean between the shoulders.

"What's eating you, Howdy?" he demanded. "With the face you're wearing you ought to make a swell undertaker."

"I'll tell you what's got his goat," Spooky offered. "For ten days Howdy has had four and a half Jerry ships to his credit."

"Only half a plane from bein' an ace, huh?" Duke grinned. "How come the half business?"

"You tell him, Spooky," Howdy growled. "I get steamed up every time I think of it."

"One day Howdy and Nig Shields are coming back from a sortie," Spooky began, pushing his glass over to the man with the bottle, "and they spot a Rumper. They both pounce on it together and down goes the Jerry."

"They both keep pumping lead into it long after the Boche is out of control. The idea being that the bird who got in the last shot would put it on his combat report and get credit.

"It was finally settled by giving them each credit for half a ship."

Duke wagged his head consolingly. "Don't worry, old son. He said, 'you'll get plenty of 'em yet.'"

"I doubt it," Howdy mumbled gloomily. "I haven't had a bit of luck since. That fraction is a jinx." And the long-legged pilot reached for the bottle. "This one is to me, Howdy Dean, the bobtailed ace of the Hundred and First."

AT DAWN C flight of the One Hundred and First saw the sun come up from a vantage point of eight thousand feet over Dampiers. Spooky was leading the flight and Howdy rode at cover on the right leg of the V formation.

"Either I get me a Heinie today," Dean told himself as his eye swept the high ceiling, "or the home town paper will be printing my picture with a swell black border around it."

It was then that he saw the flight of Pfalz scouts, slightly below and half a mile to the northwest. Strung out in the staggered line of echelon formation, the Jerries had seen the Yank flight and were climbing to meet them.

Howdy slapped the throttle and his Camel leaped forward, the Clerget chopping away prettily. Soaring over Spooky, Dean pointed to the Jerry flight but the leader had already seen them.

Neither flight tried for altitude but came rushing up and met with a roar at the apex of a forty-five degree angle. Howdy stood his Camel on one wing and cut off the trailer of the Pfalz flight. Warming his guns as he gunned the motor he continued his tight vertical bank.

The Jerry seemed as anxious as Dean to swap bullets and they started a deadly game of ring around rosie. Smoking tracers zipped between Howdy's struts and he rocked his ship violently. He tried an old but dangerous trick. Breaking the tight circle he zoomed for the clouds and pretended to pique for home.

The Jerry thought his opponent was either hit or scared to death and flung his ship on Howdy's tail. Dean felt his stick jump and could visualize the Spandau lead chewing at his flippers. It was part of the stunt and he had to risk it. Throwing a quick glance over his shoulder, Howdy spotted the Boche's position

and gave the throttle a smack that threatened to tear it out of its bracket. Back with the stick and the world was upside down for a minute. Then he was on the surprised Hun's tail.

He held his fire until he was in position, then followed with his eye the path of his tracers as they nipped the fabric from the top wing of the Pfalz. A little left rudder and a slight forward pressure of the stick and his Vickers raked the Boche's fuselage.

The Jerry turned and half stood up in his cockpit, gesturing frantically and pointing to his Spandaus. His guns were jammed and he wanted to quit!

Howdy flew alongside and motioned down for the Jerry to land. The German pilot nodded and shrugged his shoulders. Ahead of them was a large field well behind the American lines. The rest of C flight was busily engaged a mile away and Howdy had his man cold.

He was over the jinx now sure enough. He was getting his ship, bringing it down whole and a live pilot to boot. Goosing his motor and grinning from ear to ear Howdy followed his man down. The road running past the field was filled with soldiers pointing up.

"Boy!" Howdy chirped. "It's a swell day for the picnic."

Then his motor started to rant. Dean cut the switch on and off and blipped the motor, then he gave her the gun.

He shoved up the minet to adjust the mixture. No use. One cylinder quit, then another. Lucky break they were going to land anyway, he thought.

His Jerry opponent looked around, seeming to sense Howdy's trouble. Sensing that his captor was having difficulty, he decided to make a break. Gunning his motor suddenly, the Boche threw his ship into a zoom and streaked for the clouds.

Howdy fired a frantic burst at his fleeing foe and tried to pull the nose of his ship up quickly. The Camel sputtered and threatened to stall. The Boche worked with his guns for a minute, trying to clear them, then gave up and high tailed for Germany.

Dean stood up in his cockpit as far as his belt would allow and hurled abuse at his lame motor. A big hunk of cold meat—a Jerry right in his lap, ready to give up—and his motor had to quit!

Nothing to do now but land, down wind and straight ahead with a prayer that the field was as smooth as it looked from the air.

Yelling insults at everyone that ever had anything

to do with the building of his balky plane, Howdy cut the switch and fish-tailed down to the field. Long grass swept the under surfaces of his wings and the still spinning prop chewed off great bunches of it, hurling it back in Howdy's face.

The fuselage hump that earned the ship its name hid a huge rock nestling in the weeds. The horizontal axle hit the rock squarely in the middle and the Camel nosed over on her back with a crash.

Howdy released his belt and spilled out in the grass. He was crawling out from under the wreck when the doughboys from the road ran up.

"Damn all Camels!" Howdy greeted the surprised infantrymen. "Why don't we get Spads, huh? Tell me that!" Howdy thundered, beside himself with rage.

The doughboys stood around and gaped.

"Hey, flyer," one of them said, "I thought you had that guy. Did you let him get away?"

"How would you like a bust in the snoot?" the pilot bellowed.

Still the bobtailed ace. What was the use of trying with breaks like that?

When Dean in a side car arrived at his own drome half an hour later, he was so mad his clothes were wringing wet. To the good-natured inquiries of his fellow pilots about the fate of his ship his reply was a savage, "Nuts!"

But he became voluble again when he saw the replacement ship on the line, standing where the ferry pilot had delivered it from Orly.

On the Air Corps records that ship was, no doubt, officially listed as Camel S 442. But Howdy had other and more elaborate titles for it. That plane had been assigned to him when he first came to the One Hundred and First and his own name for it had been, "that lousy ice wagon."

Howdy had always maintained that the thing was in the pay of Germany. It would stall ten feet off the ground. In perfectly smooth air it would suddenly gallop like a merry-go-round steed or leap into a spin for no reason at all.

Dean was sure the thing was trying deliberately to kill him. On the day when it crashed taking off and the pieces were thrown in a truck and it was hauled away, Howdy had breathed a sigh of relief. But a thrifty government had sent it to Romorantin, patched it up, and here it was back.

Dean being without a ship it would naturally fall to him.

Howdy sought Major Cole, face purple with impotent rage. This was too much.

"Say, Major," the pilot blurted. "Do you know what ship they sent us from Orly? That lousy old ice wagon of mine, Four-Four-Two. That mangy old fly-trap all patched up. How come we have to fly these junky old Camels when all the green outfits get shiny new Spads? Am I jinxed? Ask me. New Camels are bad enough but when they send us that same junk back—" Howdy choked.

C FLIGHT beating the sun to the sky and looking for trouble. A spearhead of snub-nosed fighting ships bound for the lines and spoiling for a fight before breakfast. Howdy rode at his accustomed position at the controls of his despised old ice wagon.

A bobtailed ace riding a second-hand junk with a jinx perched on his tail feathers.

The Camel skimmed along like a swallow, motor roaring, controls responding to his slightest touch. But Howdy wasn't fooled by that. Wait till he was in a tight spot, then watch it act up. Howdy decided that as soon as he got back to the drome he would buy the thing from the government, let 'em take it out of his pay. Then he'd get him a nice big sledge hammer and pound the thing to tiny bits. He'd take the bits up twelve thousand feet and scatter 'em all over France.

He was still grinning over the prospect when the black signal whipped out from Spooky's cockpit. The enemy! Lined against the ceiling and waiting for them this time.

Howdy forgot he was riding the old ice wagon, forgot he was a bobtailed ace with a jinx howling in his wake. Here was a fight! The Yank's fighting V closed up. Down came the Pfalz line and C flight burned the air on the way up to meet them.

Roar of motors, the scream of wires and struts, the staccato jabber of guns and the souging of props until heads and ears ring with church bells and crickets and the nostrils are filled with burned powder and oil. A dog fight.

Howdy went to work methodically. Feinting at the last Hun in line, Howdy veered off and climbed, the Jerry after him. Dean zoomed and fell off on one wing, exposing the belly of his Camel to the onrushing Pfalz for a fraction of a second. Off for altitude with an escort of Jerry tracers. Maneuvering carefully, he pulled the Boche away from the pack.

Dean banked to spoil the German's aim and Spandau slugs nipped a monogram in the fuselage six inches from the seat of Howdy's pants. Dean crossed his controls and threw his Camel into a falling leaf.

The Pfalz pounced, convinced that he had cut a green pilot out of the pack—and ready to deliver the death blow. Howdy righted his ship. Now to pull into a tight loop and ride the Jerry's tail to glory.

Back came the stick and the Camel started up and faltered. The motor sputtered. Curtains for sure! The old ice wagon up to its tricks. Cold meat for the Kraut.

Down went the Camel's nose again in a full dive and as it did the motor caught up its full cadence. Maybe he could pull out of it yet. Back with the stick.

Once more it stalled, hanging on its prop. Jinxed!

The diving Jerry pulled up sharply to avoid a collision and streaked right dead across the sights of the stalled Camel.

Howdy caught his breath as he sensed the amazing trick that old S 442 had played. The junk ship was making amends! One quick burst and the Pfalz leaped like a wounded bird as the pilot sprawled forward over his stick. Down it went.

The old ice wagon had stalled just in time to catch the Jerry dead in its sights! Howdy dropped into a slow

spiral and followed the stricken ship down. No doubt about it. He'd gotten his man before the Jerry knew what was up.

Howdy turned his nose for home and the Camel's motor roared like a healthy bull. After all his abuse the perverse old crate had knocked down a Jerry almost unaided. The jinx was busted— Howdy was a full-fledged ace!

Headed for home, the Camel sang a full throated song of victory. "Damned if I don't think the old crate knows we're going home," Howdy grinned, "just like an old ice-wagon mare headed for oats." But there was no rancor in his voice now.

As Howdy tumbled from the cockpit at the Hundred and First field Major Cole met him, smiling. "Got some good news for you, Howdy," he said, "we are going to get brand new Spads—tomorrow. You've made your last flight in your ice wagon."

"Yeh?" the new ace answered. "Gee, you know, Major, I just sorta took a second notion to that old junk. Hope the next guy that gets her treats her right."