



J. F. Gault

a HUMPY & TEX adventure

LIBERTY—OR DEATH

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*Humpy and Tex were out on liberty, When they couldn't get that they preferred death,
but the reaper has a funny way of choosing its victims.*

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IT WAS, as “Humpy” Campbell had just remarked for the twenty-fifth time, one hell of a way for a couple of sea-going sky busters to visit Paris. And he emphasized his assertion by depositing a liberal amount of tobacco juice somewhere in France.

The little Frog train was crawling along through the late afternoon, seemingly unable to decide whether to keep up the unequal struggle against space and time, or to surrender and sleep by the countryside. So far, it had progressed but a few miles east of Laval.

“About twelve knots!” swore “Tex” Malone, the second-class boatswain’s mate who was Humpy’s observer back at the Ile Tudy seaplane base. “And one day of our five days’ leave is already shot, with us nowhere near Paris!”

“We won’t have time to change trains there!” Humpy said bitterly. “We’ll have to grab a limited in a suburb and start back to the station, or we’ll be over leave. And there won’t be any use wiring for an extension—the skipper told me that. He said there wouldn’t be any use askin’ for three days of grace, and I said what I wanted was three more days of Yvonne—”

He sighed and reached inside his jumper, producing a large rectangle of silk, neatly rolled. Unfolded, it proved to be a cushion cover, with the American flag for its design.

“What’s that?” demanded Tex. “Takin’ embroidery along?”

“No, you rubber sock!” retorted Humpy. “You wouldn’t understand, but this is for Yvonne. I met her in Marseilles before the war, when I was on the Arkansas for a midshipmen’s cruise. She’s in Paris now, and I got her address.”

“One of these guys with a girl in every port, eh?” Tex sneered. “Givin’ the outfit a bad name. All right. But if you’re so hot why didn’t you borrow an ark long enough to make a liberty in Paris?”

“Whatcha mean? Don’t look at me like that! Didn’t I try to promote a plane for this trip? I told the skipper I could land a seaplane on a park lake or in the Seine. And what did he tell me?”

“I’ll bite. What did the skipper tell you?” asked Tex with deep sarcasm.

“He said we were damn lucky to get the five days’ leave. He said he knew we would get tanked up on cognac and crack up a ship if he was fool enough to let us have one. He said—”

What further remarks the skipper had made were doomed to be repeated at some later date. The little

train jerked to a halt so suddenly that Tex fell out of his seat. A few yards from the window the green earth suddenly spouted gray and brown. There was a deafening roar. The glass shattered. Bits of mud and debris rained in on the two sailors as they struggled to rise.

“Are we bein’ shelled?” gasped Tex, scrambling to his feet.

Humpy caught the deep drone of motors in the sky above and shook his head as he climbed through the broken window. He pointed up.

“Boche plane just dropped an egg, that’s all!” he exclaimed. “Let’s hunt a hole!”

Another ear-splitting crash came from somewhere forward. The train rocked on its rails. French peasants, *poilus* who had been on leave and other travelers crowded out into the smoke-filled air.

The second car from the engine was demolished and burning.

Tex Malone craned his neck skyward. There they were, four crimson-winged, black-crossed Fokkers plunging along in the pleasant sunlight. A bomber and three smaller ships flying protection. Even as he looked the big ship turned its nose toward the Fatherland, its bombs probably exhausted. The smaller, faster craft circled warily, keeping vigil.

Humpy shook his fist aloft. It seemed that even the German air force had combined with Fate to prevent the two sailors from enjoying a Paris liberty. Here these planes had come all the way from behind the lines to wreck their train, and he and Tex were stranded in peaceful, pastoral France with about as much chance of getting to Paris on time as they had of making admiral next cruise.

The ex-cowboy suddenly grasped Humpy’s arm.

“Look!” he exclaimed. “One of the Jerries is in trouble!”

Humpy looked. One of the smaller ships was still circling above, fast losing altitude. It fluttered down in wide spirals, while the pilot apparently hunted a landing place, and as its nose turned toward the watching men they saw the propeller cease whirling.

“Dead-stick landing, and I hope he Washes out!” Humpy exulted. “He’s comin’ down behind those trees. I hope he smacks into one!”

“Well, I don’t!” Tex disagreed. “Use your head, you big sap! We’re stranded here until they send another train. There’s a plane awaiting us, less than a mile away. And you hope they crack up!”

“I get you! I get you!” Humpy Shouted. “It’s a two-seater, and will we fly to Paris? Well, I’ll kiss a marine!”

FRENCH soldiers and the other passengers, absorbed in their present plight, stared at the two Americans in amazement as they dashed madly across the green fields toward a fringe of trees. Every minute counted; the Boche peelot might be able to repair his engine, if it was that which had forced him down.

Neither was armed, but that fact did not deter Humpy and Tex. A plane had descended beyond the narrow wood. It was an enemy plane, therefore it was their duty to capture it. Besides, they needed transportation.

Puffing and blowing they reached the trees which stretched like a green barrier between two farms. Here, Tex Malone, who was slightly in the lead over his thick-set, shorter companion, halted and stopped Humpy with an outstretched, cautious hand.

"Take it easy, mate!" he panted. "They got a machine gun, you know!"

Humpy knew. A machine gun. Two of them, in fact. Twin Spandaus in the observer's cockpit that could swing their way in a chattering song of death and mow them down while they were yards away from the plane. He nodded, little beads of perspiration glistening on his heat-reddened face; his heart pounded so violently he was almost afraid the Germans would hear.

Together they crouched in the shadows of the trees and began a wary advance. A few paces, and Tex halted again, lifting his hand.

Clink! Clink! The sound of a wrench against steel. The Germans were working on the plane, somewhere not far ahead! Humpy breathed a sigh of relief. That noise told him the ship was not out of gas, which he had feared forced her down.

It seemed quite natural for Tex Malone to take the lead in this venture. It was Humpy who led in the air, for he was navy-trained, a tattooed and salty son of the sea who would soon rate two hash-marks on his port sleeve. But the ex-cowboy who had shipped as a D.O.W. man was a hard-fisted product of the Western ranges and knew instinctively that this job of stalking Heinies in broad daylight was his.

Now they had reached the farther edge of the trees. A dry twig snapped under Humpy's feet with a sound like a five-inch Navy gun to his tense ears. They halted for a moment in the shadows, then peered cautiously forth.

There it was, a fast Fokker two-place ship, crimson and trim. It looked as fresh as though it had just left the factory. Humpy saw in one quick glance that it had descended on a level stretch of meadow; the landing gear was intact.

Then he saw the two Germans. The observer was on the ground, keeping a close lookout toward the wood and toward the distant farmhouse on the other side. He swung the prop back and forth at the other man's directions. The pilot was astride the cowlings, tampering with the motor.

"It was the ignition!" Humpy breathed. "Magneto probably disconnected by the vibration. Let's rush 'em!"

"Wait a minute!" cautioned Tex "Know much about these Fokkers?"

"Not much!" whispered the other sailor.

"Well, then, there you are!" Tex said. "Let Fritz fix it, first, then we'll step in!"

Humpy glanced at his companion in admiration. That was true strategy! He had to hand it to the lanky ex-cowboy. Then he looked at the plane again.

Neither of the two Americans ever found out for certain just what minor motor trouble had forced the Fokker down. For a few nerve-straining minutes they crouched, tense and waiting in the edge of the wood. Then they heard the Boche peelot grunt gutturally with satisfaction and saw him straighten from his position on the plane. He motioned to the observer. The man on the ground jerked the prop down and the motor started.

Tex Malone surveyed the situation swiftly. The plane would have to be swung around to point its nose away from the trees before they could take off.

Now was the time, now before the two Germans took their places in the trim ship, to send it speeding over the level meadow.

"I got the observer!" said Tex Malone. That the observer had a Luger in his hand failed to impress the ex-cowboy, it seemed. "You take the other Kraut. Let's go!"

They went without further ado, dashing from the friendly shelter of the trees. There was thirty yards of open space to be covered while the Germans were singing their crate around. Tex had traversed twenty of it when he heard the observer's startled shout and saw the Luger whipped up at him. He ducked and heard the automatic crack.

The bullet sang over his head and buried itself in the echoing trees. In the next split second the sailor had sprung like a lithe, maddened panther at the German's throat.

TOGETHER Tex and the Boche observer rolled on the ground, battling for possession of the Luger. The gun was still in the German's hand, but fingers of

sinewy steel had closed on his wrist and he was unable to pull the trigger or aim the weapon. He fought desperately to keep the American's right hand from his throat, and they rolled beneath the Fokker's crimson wing.

On the other side of the fuselage Humpy and the Boche peelot were using different tactics. Both were unarmed; each apparently had had boxing experience. They squared off and slugged away at each other lustily. The German went down from a crack on the jaw, but bounced up again like an India-rubber ball and poked Humpy under the heart with a straight, rib-jarring left that all but stretched the sailor out as cold as a paymaster's heart.

Under the fuselage, Tex could see his shipmate was having a tough time of it. If Humpy were knocked out it would leave him battling two Krauts, and one of them with a Luger. He decided to change tactics, and he adopted Humpy's within the second.

The Texan stopped clutching at his opponent's throat. He clenched his right fist and drove it at the enemy's jaw in a succession of short, chopping strokes. More than once it struck hard, ripping skin from his knuckles. The two men panted and cursed, the German fighting back with a strength born of sheer terror. There was no telling what these accursed American sailors might do to one.

"*Verdam*—" he began, but stopped short with a gasp as Tex Malone's knee struck him full in the pit of his stomach. He attempted to double up while lying on his side, then a hard fist crashed into his jaw again and everything went black.

"Comin', Humpy!" yelled the Texan. He snatched the Luger from nerveless fingers and ran round the tail of the ship.

"Reach, and make it high!" he shouted, but the command went unheeded. A left hook with all of Humpy Campbell's substantial weight to give it authority curled around and straightened against the German peelot's jaw. He went out like a snuffed candle, sprawling backward in the green grass.

Panting, the two Americans grinned at each other. Humpy's lips were bruised and bleeding. His starboard eye was bordered in black.

"Grab yourself the observer's helmet and goggles before he wakes up!" he gasped.

"What'll we do with these Krauts?"

"Leave 'em. Let 'em head back for the Fatherland afoot. They'll be picked up before they've gone ten kilos."

He slipped the German pilot's flying coat and

helmet on his own thick frame and climbed into the cockpit. Both Germans were reviving.

"Say!" Tex exclaimed. "They got archie artillery in Paris. They'll shoot us down for Germans, sure as hell!"

"Oh, will they?" Humpy returned. "Look at the sun. It'll be dark in an hour. We'll find some field out on the edge of the suburbs and pancake onto it. What do we care if we crack up the ship? It ain't ours. It's the most expendable thing in France right now, except second looies in the army."

"All right, shipmate!" said Tex Malone. "We're off for a Paris liberty. Give me liberty, or give me death, as Patrick Henry remarked. Shove off!"

"Wait. Hand me that stick on the ground before you get aboard!" Humpy directed. "I'll show 'em our colors!" He produced the cushion cover that had been meant for Yvonne. Silken cord dangled from its corners, and Humpy used this to secure the cover to the improvised staff. Once made fast, he had an American flag.

"I'll wave this if we meet any Allied planes on the way!" he said. "Now, let's get under way!"

Tex Malone, watching back over the Fokker's tail lest they be attacked from the rear, saw the sun drop from sight in a red haze. Shadows flowed in and filled the valleys below with pools of darkness.

Humpy was flying high, so high that no one below would be likely to see the alien insignia on their wings. Military bases would be more frequent as they approached Paris, and the Texan was glad when the friendly dusk closed in at their altitude and little lights began to twinkle in the farms and towns below.

The lights increased, the towns over which they flew became larger. Now and then a searchlight's thin finger reached up through the air at some distant point. Then, with a suddenness that startled both of the sailors, Paris burst upon their field of vision.

It was not the gay, brilliantly lighted French capital of ante-bellum days. Both had been expecting a blaze of incandescence, the Eiffel tower well-lighted and standing as a beacon. Instead, they had progressed well over the outskirts of the semi-darkened city before they realized it, and in a breath-taking instant the sky became full of weaving, blinding searchlights tracing an intricate pattern in search of enemy planes.

Both suddenly knew they had gone too far in a foolhardy venture that might be their last, but it was too late to turn back. Neither would have suggested such a thing, lest he be accused of lacking intestinal fortitude.

Humpy throttled the Mercedes down and waved triumphantly to his observer.

"Paree!"

"Hooray!" Tex yelled, with a gayety he could not feel. This matter of landing in the dark wasn't what it was cracked up to be.

HUMPY eased back on the stick and the Fokker pointed her snout even higher above the city. They climbed in a steady slant toward the cold stars, keeping, thus far, out of the searchlights' range. Far, far below the half-lighted streets looked like tiny, close-strung necklaces.

The bluejacket pilot leveled off and throttled down his engine again. He leaned back toward Tex, and the latter caught his words over the motor's noise.

"Watch for a big dark spot that looks like it might be a field!" Humpy was saying. "We'll be ashore in half an hour!"

"And what a liberty!" Tex grinned. "As I said, gimme a Paris liberty or death!"

As though in answer to his jest there came a deep drone above the sound of their own throttled engine, the noise of many motors in the sky. It was below, and both men twisted in the Fokker's wicker seats to peer down over the side in wonder.

At the same instant a dozen new searchlights stabbed the darkness over to the right, in a dazzling interplay of light. They swung around in sweeping arcs, putting through the area from where the drone of engines came, and suddenly they found their mark.

Gaunt birds of prey had winged in over the city, bearing death and destruction. Tex and Humpy counted them as the converged rays of the searchlights picked them out in bold relief. One, two, four, six, eight!

"Heinies!" shouted Humpy, chokingly. "An air raid!"

Hell started popping in the air and on the ground. Tex saw a new flare down in the Parisian streets where a bomb struck; a crimson burst splattered near the raiding ships. Another anti-aircraft shell screamed high above the Germain squadron before it burst, and its concussion rocked the American-piloted plane.

The enemy ships scattered through that maze of searchlights. A beam swept through the heavens and struck the captured Fokker. Almost on the instant an archie burst rocked the ship again. Tex Malone sensed what they would do. He pressed the triggers of the twin Spandaus that were mounted in his cockpit. The guns thundered, and tracer bullets snarled into the night.

Another puff close to their starboard wing-tip. The core of red fire had not died away when Tex shot a couple of tracers into it just to try his aim. The gunners below had no way of telling that this was not a German plane, and they were doing their best.

Humpy Campbell glanced back and saw that his observer was ready. Then he leaned down and busied himself for a few seconds thrusting the stick on which he had secured the American flag into the wicker seat at his side. He straightened, and saw the colors rippling in the searchlight's white shaft.

They were ready, just as the American navy is always ready. The captured German crate suddenly tipped on her nose, with a full gun pulling her downward in a thundering dive. Her prop shrieked and roared, the night wind howled in her struts, and she careened like an avenging demon toward the other black-crossed ships three thousand feet below.

Tex Malone caressed the butts of his guns and flung a deep-throated chuckle into the wind. Humpy Campbell was handling the Fokker as though he were a jagdstaffel chief and not a first-class quartermaster, U.S.N.

Plop! More shrapnel near by. Bits of steel hissed past and pounded through the fabric of their wings. The Americans' ship was nearly perpendicular and scarcely felt the concussion. The next instant they were on the tail of a German raider, silhouetted against the glare of a searchlight below.

Tex Malone went into action. He jerked the gun muzzles around and sat back on the triggers. Twin scarlet streaks fell just short of the Boche's tail assembly. He elevated the flaming snouts slightly, and the tracer lines climbed upward along the enemy's fuseage and ripped a dotted line of death toward the pilot's cockpit.

A searchlight blinded the Texan for moment, but he knew instinctively that the peeler below was staring up at him with a distorted, terror-stricken face, amazed that one of his own countrymen should have gone mad in this manner. Then the leaden hail found its mark.

Tongues of flame suddenly licked out of the motor cowlings below, and black, oily smoke belched into the searchlight's white beam. The Boche crate veered and fluttered like a crippled bird, to plunge down with increasing speed to flaming destruction.

"One!" shouted Tex Malone. He half stood in his cockpit and surveyed the light-streaked air about him. Humpy was hot on the tail of another unsuspecting

Boche, but the light was playing about their colors now and Tex knew one of the fast one-seaters was climbing to get above them and attack.

"Two!" he snarled as the Spandaus stuttered again. The jets of scarlet ripped through the intervening space and found the pilot's cockpit. The Boche plunged into a nose dive and thundered earthward, the peelot hanging grotesquely over the side with his arms dangling like a marionette's.

A TRACER bullet from a third Boche crate cut by Tex Malone's cheek and shattered glass on his instrument board. He saw the smoking lines hurtle dangerously near to Humpy Campbell. The flying sailor did not pause to look back, but kicked his rudder bars over and threw the ship on her ear, slipping down for distance.

Tex caught the German's goggled face, set and murderously tense, in the searchlight's glare. There were twin Maxims on his dash, with flames bathing their black snouts in a glow of death as he charged the Americans who had dared join the German raiders.

"You Kraut so and so!" drawled the Texan. He jerked his guns skyward and poured hot lead into the Boche's floor boards.

The German shot past above them while Humpy side-slipped. He went into a steep bank beyond and turned like a hungry buzzard to renew the attack on the Americans.

Humpy Campbell saw a shell burst squarely in the face of one other German plane and heard the explosion above half a dozen motors. He watched fascinated while the Boche plunged, a flaming coffin, into the void below.

"Three!" was his mental comment. But there were five left, five against one, and at least two of them were faster ships. He shuddered as another archie burst sent the crate careening like a swamped boat.

"Damn those Frog gunners. Can't they see there's a sky battle going on up here?"

The squadron leader flashed above them again, tracers spewing from both his guns. A strut cracked, the sailors' ship wobbled. Bullets zipped through the motor cowling. Humpy Campbell crouched low and clenched his fists tight about the stick, expecting a slug to tear through his body. But the Boche hurtled above and beyond, with Tex hurling profanity into the propeller stream and filling the Fokker's belly with lead.

Five out of eight Germans still in the air! Another Boche dived at them even as Humpy Campbell firmly resolved to make it fifty-fifty by getting another en-

emy crate before they got him. Bullets streamed in on the two Americans, chipping bits out of the cowlings, ripping holes in Tex Malone's coat. He thanked his stars that the German observer who had worn it was a larger man.

Ping! A wire snapped. The ship faltered in her stride, and Humpy Campbell kicked frantically at the controls to keep her on an even keel.

A flaming tracer sang past his ear and cut the flag-staff squarely in two. Old Glory, ripped by a dozen bullets and bathed in the searchlights' white beams, floated proudly to earth.

"Damn you!" screamed Humpy. "We haven't struck our colors yet, you lousy Krauts!"

He threw the crippled crate into a wing-over and dived to escape the determined attack from the new enemy. He leveled off and circled, out of the searchlights' glare for a moment, then got his bearings and headed for the attack.

One more plane!

The Sailor-driven Fokker zoomed, twisting as it climbed under a full-gunned motor, fairly under the ugly-bellied ships of the raiding squadron. Humpy Campbell thrilled to its power compared to the slow French seaplane he had been flying at Ile Tudy, over the sub-infested waters off Point Penmarch.

The broken strut howled in the wind, ringbolts and wires groaned and screamed in shrill protest. Blue flame licked from the exhaust.

Rat—ttt! The Spandaus spouted fire. Tracers rocketed skyward in a deadly pyrotechnic display. They buried themselves in the bellies of the raiders. Guns from the observer's cockpit on one of the Boche bombers answered, and the tracers swished past each other in the air. A fighting ship lunged at Tex and Humpy, and a collision seemed imminent.

The sailor pilot leveled off in time, the German shot overhead, and Tex Malone swung the spewing Spandaus after him in a flaming arc. He saw the peelot suddenly throw his hands aloft and slump into his seat. He saw the ship go twisting toward earth, then he realized that their own craft was falling swiftly, while the dimly lighted streets rushed up—

Tex jerked at his helmet strap, feeling giddy and sick. There was blood on his cheek. He saw the German ships collecting and heading out toward the east.

"I reckon we got ours, too!" mutter the Texan weakly. "Four to one. Not so bad."

His head snapped forward into blissful unconsciousness.

"WAKE up!" Humpy was saying. "Rise and shine, sailor! Hell, that slug just grazed you, that's all. Kinda creased you like you would a horse. Hit the deck!"

"What deck?" muttered Tex Malone "Ow, what a headache!"

"You'll have a worse one when I tell you the news!" retorted Humpy. "We're in the brig!"

Tex gasped and sat awake. There was a barred window.

"What the—" he began.

"Yeah, the brig!" said Humpy in deep disgust.

"That's gratitude for you. We shoot down three ships out of the four that fell. Then we damn near crack up ourselves. I barely made it out to the edge of town and set the Fokker down in a field. Then a lot of Frogs came running and capture us for Germans, and it turns out that we are twenty miles from Paris. They call this place Neuville."

"Well, let's get outa here!" Tex flared. "Twenty miles ain't so far. I want to see Paris from some place beside a bullet-spattered sky wagon. We aint got but five days, you know—"

"We ain't got but three days, after we get outa this brig!" Humpy corrected. "Today's Sunday, you see. Well, the constable, or whatever he is, won't do anything on Sunday. To-morrow he'll bring the military around to see us, he says, and he's damn sure we'll be shot for spies or something worse."

"That'll be about noon, at least!" groaned Tex.

"Then when we prove who we are, we get to Paris. That'll leave one day in Paris, and we'll have to grab the slow train through France back to Finisterre!"

"What mathematics!"

"Pipe down!" Tex retorted. "Liberty or death. Pat Henry never knew what it was to want liberty. Hell, I'm goin' to see Paris if I have to ship over for it!"

Two days later, on a Tuesday, saw Humpy and Tex lapping up enough coneyac to make up for that lost time. Paris was one sweet little estaminet after another, and they didn't care whether trains flew or planes traveled.

"Shay, Hum'y," hiccoughed Tex, with a lavish swing of his arm, that spattered coneyac all over the bar.

"Guess we taught 'at Frog cayuse few thingsh, huh?"

"Yuh damn ri', guy," Humpy grinned fatuously.

"Time we finish' cussin' 'im out, he didn' know wha' port he was in. Callin' us Krauts! Huh!" and Humpy spat disgustedly, but not carefully.

For a tough-looking M.P. leaning against the bar alongside him, turned suddenly with a black jaw as big as a locomotive jutting into Humpy's face.

"Who the hell do yuh think you're crowdin', yuh lousy goldbrick?" snarled the M.P.

"Wha' ya mean—goldbrick? We're on leave," answered Humpy in an aggrieved tone. Then he added with an owlish wink, "But we got a good joke on the shkipper. Leavsh up"—he hiccoughed—"but we're not goin' back yet."

"Huh?" growled the M.P. edging closer.

"Nope," chimed in Tex. "Gotta make up f' losh time." He nodded with a mysterious air.

"Oh, y'are, are yuh?" The M.P. gave his buddy a significant wink. "C'mon, Pat, let's give these guys the bum's rush to the train."

"And how, Henry!" answered the other hard-boiled M.P.

Tex cocked his head and then an expression of great cunning illuminated his face.

"Pat! Henry!" he exclaimed. "Glad tuh meetcha." He extended his hand. "Y' the guys tha' said, 'Gi' ush Lib'ty, gi' us Death. Lot y' know 'bout Lib'ty—hid"

But before he had time to shake hands, he found himself rushing to the door in an involuntary but irresistible manner. Humpy let out a yell of protest as he found himself leaving in the same way with the help of the second M.P.

Once more on a train, Tex was mumbling disconsolately, "Wasn' Lib'ty. Mush a been Death. Always knew they was M.P.s in Hell."