



THE C.O.'S STRIPES

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

There were ribbons on the tunic of that new C.O. that showed he had not felt fear when German lead was singing and death was combing the air—ribbons no coward could have won. Yet now, with nothing in sight below but the pilots of the 19th Pursuit Squadron, their new commander was afraid to land!

THE NEW COMMANDER of the 19th Squadron sat in his little Camel above the first American fighting drome that he had ever seen, and trembled like a leaf. Fear ran like ice in his veins—a strange fear that caught his throat in a grip of iron and shook him until he was weak.

There was ribbon galore upon the tunic of the new C.O., hard-won ribbon that showed he had not been afraid when German lead was singing and death was combing the air with his long scythe. There were papers, too, in the portfolio of the new C.O., that no coward could ever have won—but today he was frankly afraid in the peaceful skies behind the lines with nothing more dangerous in sight than a scattered group of American pilots who looked skyward from a hard-baked drome and waited for him to come down and let them get a look at him.

“I’ll foozle it. They’ll laugh at me and I can’t stand it. Wish I’d stayed with the British.”

The new C.O. wet his lips and banked the little Camel around. He forgot to cut his engine and he banked right. The Camel didn’t take that from anyone and in one lightning second the ground and sky whipped around him like a skipping rope. Castor oil spurted into his face and when he fought for control, the little ship sideslipped madly and almost put him into the ground.

For three minutes above the drome of the squadron he had come down to lead, the new C.O. gave an amazing exhibition of how not to fly Camels. He was all over the sky—upside down as often as right side up; then at last he pulled his ship into line again and looked for the drome.

He found it right under him and noticed that there were more pilots out looking at the sky now than there had been before. The sweat broke out heavily on his forehead and mingled with the castor oil that was only partially swabbed off his face.

“That helped me, didn’t it? Hell!”

THE new C.O. flew a wide circle and tried to get up courage enough to face the 19th Squadron. It was his first command and he was afraid of leadership. A bashful youngster who had been educated by the private tutor method, he had never mingled with his kind until he ran off to the war at eighteen. He was twenty-one now and, although he had gotten used to the English and had won a place with them, he was in deadly fear of his own countrymen. He had heard how

they hazed and kidded newcomers and he couldn’t take hazing.

For the new C.O. had been told that he was a sissy when he was just a kid and he was still afraid that he was a sissy. The things he had done and the medals that he had to show for those things did not change, him on that point. He was afraid that Americana were too rough for him.

He dropped his nose and, in doing so, he slapped the stick forward too abruptly. The Camel snorted and hurled him hard against the safety belt. He had another fight on his hands before the ship was his again. He had won his wings on heavy stuff and there were a hundred Englishmen who would have sworn that he was a pilot born, but the Americans were getting their first look at him in a Camel. How could he explain, without losing face, that he had qualified on Camels in one week—an impossible feat—in order to take over this command which he hadn’t wanted and to which he should never have been appointed? He just couldn’t explain.

The hard brown field flowed under him and he was coming in. His lips tightened and he concentrated on his ship. Maybe he could make them think he was stunting up there if he made a pukka landing. Too much concentration ruined him. He hit hard, bounced and couldn’t relax quickly enough to whip his ship. With something that sounded like a vicious grunt, it flipped over on its back and laid the new C.O. in a cloud of dust.

Mechanics came running from four corners of the field; and when they unfolded the Camel, they found a very red-faced pilot who was too mad to cuss. Despite all the rules and the legends that no one could crack a Camel and come out without some busting, the new C.O. did that.

He stood up, shook himself and took note of the fact that there were only non-commissioned men around him.

His lips tightened. It never occurred to him that the pilots of the 19th had tried to save him embarrassment by staying away from his crack-up; he thought that they were showing contempt for him.

“Sergeant,” he said grimly, “have the adjutant assemble the pilots for a meeting in exactly one hour.”

With a defiant swagger, he made his way to what was obviously the C.O.’s sanctum—a stone house in surprisingly good repair that stood apart from the little cluster of barracks beyond the hangars.

PRECISELY on the dot, the new A C.O. fared forth to meet his pilots. As an act of defiance he had toggled himself out in the last word of the crack British squadrons.

His tunic was Bond Street and there was a flair to it that only a tailor with three years of war experience could impart. His breeches were cut wide and were a coral pink. The gloss on his boots could only be attained on a boot costing five pounds—and he carried a swagger stick that was made of cartridge casings, surmounted by a knob that was nothing else but the spark plug out of a crashed German plane.

All in all, the new C.O. was an elegant figure; one to inspire hatred—and a fierce envy in the breast of any pilot. He made the mistake of looking for the hatred and expecting it. He might, if he'd known it, as easily found friendship and liking.

His boyish features were twisted into what he imagined was a commanding scowl as he looked the assembled pilots over. In short, clipped phrases that passed no compliments and that sought no support, he explained that he was a veteran and that he had served nearly three years in the Royal Naval Air Service.

"Maybe you won't like serving under a man who comes to you from the British," he said, "but if you don't, maybe I won't like commanding you either. We get jobs to do and we do them."

He paused, and he never realized what a slap in the face that speech was to the pilots of the 19th. His jaw set hard. He had reached the point that he dreaded more than any other.

"My name," he said slowly, "is Walter Lilly."

There was a moment of shocked silence. Joe Corbin, the bulldog of the squadron, was the only one honest enough to uncork the grin that he felt. He nudged the man next to him and whispered hoarsely.

"From the Navy and he's a lily—a water lily. Haw!"

In the tense silence of the room, his whisper carried. The C.O. stiffened and his soft blue eyes became suddenly hard. "I expected that pun from some low wit," he said icily. "I've heard it before."

The term "low wit" wiped the grin off Joe Corbin's lips. He was top ace of the squadron and discipline wasn't his long suit. He rose slowly to his feet—a powerfully built chap who packed more weight across than he packed straight up and down.

"Yeah?" he said. "What do you usually do about it?"

The C.O. took an eighteen-jewel wristwatch off his wrist and laid it carefully on the desk. Then he walked

down the aisle—a slim youth who was taller than Joe but not nearly as broad.

"This!" he said.

His right fist rocketed from his waist as an S.E. zooms. Joe Corbin had no time or room to get out of the way and it took him over the eyetooth. He went down like a log, but he was up before any referee in the world could have counted ten.

Somebody grabbed him and said something in his ear. His knotted fists opened slowly and he turned his back. Without a word, he left the room. The C.O. walked slowly back to the little platform up front.

"That's all for now," he said evenly. "I'll lead A flight on the dawn patrol myself."

IN A dazed silence, the pilots of the 19th rose and headed out of doors. They had just listened to an incredible speech and seen an incredible thing. They needed time to digest what they had seen and heard.

None of them looked at the C.O., who was slowly restrapping his watch, except Hub Lawton. Hub was an exnewspaper reporter. He had brains, commonsense and a realization of the fact that even Commanding Officers are people. He met the C.O.'s eyes coolly.

"You made a rotten talk," he said bluntly, "and you treated this outfit as if they were a bunch of Germans." Lilly wiped his lips. He seemed about to argue the matter; then he slumped. He had expected to make a bad impression and his worst fears had been realized. He sat heavily in a chair, and to Lawton, who was twenty-five, he looked more like a kid of twenty-one than like a major in charge of a squadron. The C.O. slowly nodded his head.

"I was warned that this would happen," he said gloomily. "I didn't want the command. They don't want me for a leader and I won't quit. I'll fight—"

"Bosh!" Hub Lawton lighted a cigarette. "These are the finest fellows in the world and they get enough fighting from the Germans. They'd like you if you'd let them."

"Yes? And mock me for the name that was given me before I was old enough to kick?" The C.O. was bitter. Hub grinned.

"We've got a pilot named Schildkrust," he said, "and we like him. You just asked for it with all the cracks you made."

The C.O. frowned. "There's one of them that won't crack again about that name," he said grimly. Hub Lawton sobered.

"You did a rotten thing to Joe Corbin," he said, "and

he could have you broken for it. Hitting a man you out-ranked. He didn't hit back because he doesn't want to lose his stripes. You took an unfair advantage of him and that didn't help you any."

The C.O. looked up dazed. "Gosh, I never thought of that," he said. "It was unfair, wasn't it?"

Slowly, before the wondering Hub Lawton's eyes, he stripped off the lovely tunic and every other thing that marked his rank. Then he tightened his belt. "Come on and we'll find this Corbin," he said.

Behind the hangars, with practically the whole squadron grouped around him, they found Joe Corbin. Lilly walked up to him, his face pale and his lips in a thin firm line.

"I apologize for taking advantage of my rank in there," he said slowly, "and I've left the rank behind me. If you think that poke was an accident, I've got a few more."

Joe Corbin cleaned the everlasting daylights out of the new C.O. in the next fifteen minutes. His supremacy was never in doubt from the first minute on, but the man whose name was Lilly would not let anybody stop it. He stayed in there and took it till he went out cold on his face. Joe Corbin himself carried him back to quarters, and of all the badly puzzled pilots in the squadron, there was none so puzzled as Corbin.

"He's not yellow," he said, "as I thought he was—but there's something the matter with him and I don't like him. First guy I ever had a good fight with that I didn't like, too."

JOE CORBIN was in A flight, and he was still puzzled about the new C.O. as he walked slowly out in the chill of dawn to where the Camels were softly purring on the line. Grayson and Burke, who flew the two tips of the V in formation, were equally doubtful about the quality of their new leader, but inclined to be impressed by the fight of the day before. Hub Lawton strolled out from mess with a cigarette dangling from his lower lip. Burke hailed him.

"Where's the lily that leads us, Huh? See him any place?"

"Naw. Wasn't at mess."

"Too good to mess with the help, maybe." This from Grayson. Hub raised his head.

"Lay off him, fellows. He's all right. Wait till you see him in the air. That's where a man counts in this business."

"We saw him in the air." Burke shuffled awkwardly.

He was thinking of the sad show of the afternoon before and getting very little cheer from it. It was no joke fighting in Camels, and with a sour leader it would be plain hell.

Almost to the dot of take-off time, the new C.O. strolled out to the line. Even his Sidcot suit had an air. Usually as shapeless as a pair of overalls, there was precious little swank to a Sidcot. Lilly's was different. It looked tailored—and pilots, who have a yen for the picturesque, no matter how they deride it, are easy prey for envy.

Envy took hold of A flight now, and the C.O.'s stock dropped once more. Nobody noticed that one of his eyes was blackened and swollen shut or that his lips were puffed so badly that he had been unable to eat breakfast. Once more he was a high-hat slob who wouldn't eat with the help and who put on airs. In silence the men scattered to their little ships.

The C.O.'s take-off was perfect—probably because he didn't give it a thought. He was still worried about these men at his back and he didn't give a damn for the Germans. He had seen more Germans in this war than he'd seen Americans, and Germans had lost all capacity for scaring him.

He led a tight flight across the lines and he had a few pale faces behind him when he elected to scoot right across where archie woofed the loudest, disdaining to take all the altitude that he might have taken.

His strategy was good, too. There was a two-seater low down and hugging the lines—an A.E.G. that had the godforsaken job of scuttling back and forth on a spotting job for the artillery. A high-flying Camel flight that was avoiding archie would never have seen that A.E.G. This flight saw it and the C.O. flipped his hand up and signaled for Burke and Grayson to take it.

The two Camels flashed off the tips of the V and rocketed on the hapless German two-seater like hawks after the rabbit. The German ship turned fast, tried to turn again and almost spun in a panic to get out of the way of the unexpected attack. The Boche pilot had been doing his job for weeks and the only scare he'd had was from the guns. This scare was the last he ever got.

The guns of the Camels were flaming red as they came down and the German was caught in mid-turn. The wings folded back and flame darted from the motor cowling. It flipped end over end like small game that has been hit with heavy ammunition; then it plunged flaming into the German trenches—and that was all.

A FLIGHT was more respectful as it followed its leader into the high blue—and its leader was more confident. Then they sighted the Fokkers.

Lilly's heart was pounding hard under his ribs. This was his first fight as scout to scout. He'd fought these slim devils in bombers, but this time he figured that he'd be able to do what he always had a secret yen to do. He'd be able to close with them and go around with them.

He had altitude, too, and he jockeyed his flight into the sun as the Germans spied them and made a desperate attempt to improve their position. The C.O.'s hand went up and his fingers spread.

"Let's go get them!" those fingers said.

Fanning out and coming down with the fury of wasps, the Camels roared to attack. Lilly felt the glory of it and he fingered the gun lovingly as he uncovered his sight. A German showed in the Aldis peep for a flash and Lilly's guns chattered. He missed. He had only one good eye and his vision was bothering him.

Around him was a vast confusion as scout roared to scout up there in the boundless blue. Spandau slugs hammered at him and he laughed as he flashed out of the way and came into his foe with a climbing turn that was pukka Camel flying and that he couldn't have done if he'd been thinking.

The C.O., wasn't thinking. He was fighting. He was doing what he had been doing ever since he came to France—proving that he wasn't the sissy that he suspected himself of being. A German flipped end over end out of the way of his guns and he laughed. He didn't think that he got him.

"Gave him a helluva fright," he whooped. "This is better than the big stuff. Like walking stilts over ice, only shakier!"

The flight was strung out and he got a quick flash of a German that went spinning down in flames off to his right. He saw the victorious Camel turn on a dime and come across the sky with a comet's speed; then he saw what was bringing the Camel, and his heart caught. Speed or no speed, he knew that Camel was too far away to do what it was roaring in to do.

Right below him there was a German on the tail of another Camel—Hub Lawton's Camel. The German was pounding hell out of the little scout and Hub was twisting and turning futilely—moving his wings helplessly, like a fly caught on the point of a needle. Death had his bony finger on Hub Lawton—but the C.O. was close enough to get into that mess and he had altitude. He could blow that Boche off Hub with one red breath of his guns.

His heart was jumping hard against his ribs and he was conscious of the life that hung on his guns, conscious of having to strike and strike quick—he was thinking. Nothing more fatal than thought ever happens in a dogfight.

The C.O. who had fought gloriously and instinctively a few seconds before suddenly became a man imbued with desire. He banked right and dropped his nose without cutting his engine. His hand went to his gun trips and—he never had a chance to fire them.

The torque of the engine pulled him over, flipped him upside down and sent him down the sky like a cigarette paper caught in a high wind. The breath was shaken out of him and once again fear entered his heart; not the fear of death nor the fear of Germans—but of something far more capable of hurting him. He kicked the little ship under control, turned and headed back for the fight, over fifteen hundred feet above him now.

As he turned, a sob came into his throat. A Camel was plunging downward in a blazing spin. That Camel, he knew, was Hub Lawton's.

THE rest of the patrol was a blank to Walter Lilly. He got his flight, conspicuously and painfully missing one member, back into formation, and led them once more. The swagger was gone out of him, though, and out of his leadership. He cut the patrol short and came home. No mishap marred the journey and, because he didn't care and didn't think about it, he set his Camel down as ably as the finest Sop pilot in France.

Alone, and with the seven blue devils riding him, he strode off to the stone house. Behind him three weary men climbed out of their cockpits. Joe Corbin spat.

"Any of you fellows see Hub go?" Burke shook his head. Grayson nodded gloomily. "Saw him going down." Corbin spat again and there was a wild rage and a bitter grief in his voice.

"I saw it all. Got that green striper up north of him and saw him in a jam. That damned water lily was right above the German that was riding him. He could have jumped in and ruined him. But what did he do? What did he do?"

Corbin's fists were raised. "By all the gods, that yellow little dude took a run-out rather than fight that Boche he had cold. He let that lousy German burn old Hub and he never fired a shot for him!"

The 19th squadron talked of little else that day. The C.O. didn't get around much. His eye was pretty bad and he was sick of soul. At six o'clock, however, there

was a phone call from Wing that made a new man of Walter Lilly. He answered the terse instructions that he received with a crispness that hadn't been in him a few minutes before; then he got into a shining uniform that the 19th hadn't seen before and called assembly.

Because they were curious and because they couldn't do very much else, anyway, the pilots came slowly and wonderingly into the bullpen and watched with solemn and sullen eyes while the slender, elegant figure of the C.O. swaggered to the rostrum. He faced them with an air that they would have noticed was different if they hadn't been packing a hate.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the Independent Air Force is sending over a flight of five Handley-Pages tomorrow at dawn to flatten out that gun nest at St. Pierre. H.Q. has got wind of a German drive that is scheduled for dawn and Jerry has his supplies jammed behind the lines two ways from St. Pierre. We're escorting the Handleys. A flight takes the show again with B flight meeting the bombers on the way back. I'm leading A with Corliss assigned to—" he hesitated and a spasm of pain contorted his face—"the vacancy."

There was silence for a full minute; then Joe Corbin rose to his feet. "I'm applying for a transfer to B flight," he said gruffly.

The C.O. stood straight and cool and met the contemptuous stare of the man who had blackened his eye. In asking for a transfer to B, Corbin was serving notice of the fact that he did not object to the morning's assignment but that he did object to his flight commander. Walter Lilly didn't waver as he met that challenge.

"You—and anyone else in this squadron—will fly where I tell you to fly or you'll do no more flying in the U.S.A.S.," he said calmly. "If you think I can't break you, try me."

Joe Corbin's jaw dropped and the 19th sat up straight. This was a new note. For a few seconds nothing happened; then Joe Corbin growled something unintelligible and sat down. He had been publicly licked and he didn't like it, but he couldn't do anything about it. The 19th squadron marveled as it filed out into the early evening.

It would have marveled more if it had known that the change in the C.O. had been effected by two simple words that constituted the name of a giant airplane—"Handley-Page."

THE night was a hell of noise. Preparatory to the drive, Germany's big guns laced the Allied lines with

flame. The barrage grew in fury as the night advanced, and there was dust and ashes in the dawn where men and horses and houses and huts had been at sunset.

Even far back where the eagles laired, the earth shook and eardrums ached. Pilots were jumpy-nerved in the gray light that preceded dawn. There was a faint mist, and the mechanics moved like phantoms about the little ships that warmed impatiently on the line.

The mood of the tense pilots was not helped any by the sight of their C.O. in dress togs instead of flying kit; a pink-panted figure of strut and swagger, as out of place as a tuxedo in a flop house or a dove of peace in a barrage. They didn't know—and couldn't know—that there was something of a holiday for the C.O. in this grim assignment.

All the 19th knew was that there would be a hell of a row across the lines when the bombers messed up preparations for a drive—and that that row would break about their ears while the bombers went home.

One by one they took off into the soupy sky. At 2,000 feet they rendezvoused and fell into formation—Lilly at point, Burke and Grayson at the tips, Corbin and Corliss in between. Above the shell-whipped town of Coicy they picked up the Handleys—grim black monsters of the sky that dwarfed the Camels as an eagle dwarfs a sparrow.

The sky was filled with the roar of the mighty Rolls Royce engines and the drone of the Clergets was smothered in the beat of them. Above the song of horsepower rolled the thunder of the barrage.

The Camels strung out at 12,000 feet and the Handleys dropped to 8,000. Lilly, his eyes gleaming behind the goggles, rode herd on the monsters with an unholy joy. He spotted four Fokkers that were cutting across on the Handleys from the far side and, while the men behind him tensed, he just grinned and the expected signal never came. He knew that he'd never get into formation again above these egg-layers if he took time out to cross over—and he knew something else.

The Fokkers dropped to the Handleys and A flight lost sight of them. One Fokker flew out—and the C.O. didn't have to see what happened to the rest. He knew.

St. Pierre was under them—a dark blotch in a wind-swept terrain. The Handleys roared low and archie declared high carnival. The air was thick with flat, bloblike puffs of smoke that flamed out with red hearts in the center. Death rode those blobs, and the Handleys twisted and turned through the flaming hell with surprising agility.

The Camels were twisting and turning, too, as the C.O. changed direction and altitude with every beat of his watch. Then the Fokkers came down in a black cloud and this time the C.O.'s hand went up.

It rained Fokkers. They came from every point of the compass, and the little Camels were scattered and forced to fight for life in a hail of Spandau lead.

With the memory of yesterday in his brain, Lilly fought with the sweat dampening his forehead. He flew in and out of the Fokker swarm and his guns glowed red hot. A German came into him in a climbing turn, miscalculated sadly and became a no-deflection shot for a misty second.

The C.O. saw the man's face as the lead whanged into the cockpit and never forgot it. The Fokker was a smoking ruin at the outskirts of St. Pierre when the Handley destruction started to rain down.

TONS and tons of explosive swooped earthward and the moaning wail of heavy bombs descending rose above the clatter of machine guns, the roaring of engines and the hell of artillery fire.

Three Fokkers fastened themselves to a Handley and worried it like wolves around a stag. The nearest Camel did its best and won a grave of glory. Two more Fokkers pounced on it and literally tore it apart. Then the Handley blew up.

No wilder sight was ever seen in war skies. Men went end over end like rag dolls hurled into a hurricane. The mist swallowed them as they passed out of the glare of the blazing ship; then the ship itself was swallowed up in the heavy fog that blanketed the ground, and only the memory of an eye-searing blaze of hell fire remained to mark its passing.

The C.O. passed his hand across his eyes and shivered. In an instinctive gesture of raw rage, he hurled his little ship across the sky and caught one of the victorious Fokkers as it reeled back, singed and scarcely under control yet. He fired just one burst and the German pilot went where the Handley crew had gone.

"Hope they're waiting over there to kick hell out of the Boche!"

Lilly's lips were white and he hardly realized that he spoke. He could watch a Camel go and be sorry and a little sick—but to see a Handley go was a pull at his heart strings that robbed him of reason.

Then suddenly it was all over. The last bomb had gone down into the smoking ruins of Germany's supply depot, and the Handleys were snorting and

turning from the blackened field of their endeavor. Like huge mastiffs shaking terriers from their flanks, the bombers shook the Fok-kers off—and in the shaking, sent some of the scouts down the dim trail to the vague eternities.

Lilly passed his hand again across his eyes and reached for a Very pistol. A white light flashed heavenward and told the Camels to go home. The show was over and B flight would be coming out to take over the escort.

Even as he fired that light, Lilly gave a startled gasp. One of the Handleys was reeling. There was no Fokker near, but the big ship had dropped out of formation and was wobbling as though a drunken hand held the controls. For a few seconds it fought a spin, and then it circled slowly toward earth—slipping, sliding, but never quite spinning. Lilly's throat was dry.

"Pilot's badly hit."

He hesitated as he saw the big ship settle, looked longingly after the two Camels that were hitting homeward, and then, with his lips tight, he went down after the stricken bomber.

THERE was a blackened flat where a building had stood at the outskirts of St. Pierre. Beyond that was a rolling meadow that went down to the river. The Handley rolled in on the meadow.

The C.O. followed it and he was thinking of the Handley and not the Camel, so his landing was perfect. It was not till he had landed that he saw the second Camel. It had not landed so fortunately. A man sat beside it with his head in his hands. Lilly paused as he raced toward the big bomber. The man raised his head.

"Corbin!"

It was no time for questions about how the pilot had got there. Obviously his engine had conked or his ship had gone haywire and he'd been forced to come down. Lilly spat the one question that needed answering.

"You hurt, Corbin?"

Joe Corbin came to his feet, a light of hope on his oil-stained features. He spat. "Hell, no! Just hating Germany."

"Let's go!"

Lilly was running toward the Handley. Fires were burning in St. Pierre, and most of the soldiery were still in dugouts away from the prime bombing that they'd got. There would be a few minutes to act in.

With a skill born of first hand knowledge, Lilly vaulted to the pilot's compartment of the

Handley, high in the nose of the grim monster. With determination, but less speed, Corbin followed him. Lilly bent over the man at the controls. The pilot was still breathing. He recognized an American bending above him and he tried a smile.

"Randall, New Orleans," he gasped. "I'm going out. Garvey has a chance. Gunner. Horton has, too, maybe. Observer. Get 'em doctors."

He went over the divide as he gasped out the last word. Lilly looked up into the white face of Joe Corbin. "You're pretty strong," he said. "Put him in the bomb compartment. Back there! Hurry."

While Corbin strained at the pilot's body, hauling it over the back toward the long, narrow bomb compartment, Lilly turned to the slumped body of the observer in the seat beside the pilot. He shook his head. "Take this one, too," he growled. "He's gone."

He moved up to the gunner's nest in the nose. Corbin's voice came to him from in back. "Fellow alive back here!"

"Okay. Leave him there. This one's dead. Never mind any more corpse-hauling. Get up there and man that front gun. We're taking this thing out in a minute."

Corbin was staring at him open-mouthed as he swung over and let himself drop to the ground. He was running as he hit. Two well-placed shots from the Very, and his Camel burst into flames. He did the same for Corbin's Camel as a squad of infantry came running out of the smoking street from St. Pierre. Shots cracked but Lilly ran a jagged course and reached the Handley with his skin whole.

He was dirty, disheveled and anything but the fashion plate that he had been an hour-before, but there was a glow to him that was not the wardrobe glow of a fop.

Corbin was shaking slightly and his eyes were wide. "You can't fly this thing!" he said nervously.

Lilly laughed. "Stick on that gun and watch," he said.

His hands fondled the wheel of the big ship lovingly. He played with the throttles, and the idling engines came to life. Lead was singing about him, but the song in his heart drowned out the whine and he settled to the controls. The monster obeyed the hand of a master and moved slowly across the meadow. As it moved, it seemed to grow in strength and power and majesty. The blue biplane's tail surfaces rose; the ship bounced in the ruts and then it took the air.

Walter Lilly laughed and Joe Corbin looked around at him with something of awe in his face.

AT FOUR thousand feet, the Fokker shower hit them. Baffled, beaten and sore, the German scouts had been reforming and counting their losses. They did not expect any more Handleys, and this sudden apparition was startling. Only for a minute or two, however, were they startled. A grim leader signaled and the pack closed in.

Hugging that front gun, Joe Corbin saw more war in the next few minutes than he had seen in a month on Camels. The slender figure at the controls had turned suddenly to a man of iron—a man who refused to run before the menace of the scouts, who elected to fight it out in the biggest thing that flew.

Walter Lilly was in his element. Lips tight back off his lips, he did things with the Handley that the Germans didn't believe even when their eyes told them that the thing had been done.

"They're tired and they're low on gas and there wouldn't be any fight in them at all, only they think they're too many for us."

The C.O. was talking to the cockpit and to the corpse in the observer's straps and Corbin couldn't hear him; nevertheless the man at the front gun turned around. He was white and shaken and he was feeling as Lilly had felt in the Camel that betrayed him. This big stuff was new to Joe Corbin and the two guns had blistered his hands and, to his Camel-trained eyes, it looked as if there were too many Fokkers.

Then the German leader made a mistake.

He staked everything on a bold play at shooting the pilot or the gunner. He dived down head-on for the Handley.

Lilly saw him coming and his lips tightened. His hand twisted down on the wheel and the nose of the Handley went up. The engines found a sudden burst of power that the Boche didn't know was there, and there was no checking the Fokker in time. The trucks of the sky dread naught cut the little scout in half and the pieces went drifting down the sky in the full view of the Germans that were left.

The menace went out of the enemy scouts then and, with a laugh on his lips, Walter Lilly herded his sky elephant home. In the nose of the big ship, a veteran Camel pilot became sick—very sick. To him, the trip home was a gray blur. Not till Walter Lilly set the Handley in with the undercarriage shot to pieces did Joe Corbin raise his head.

As the big ship settled and ceased to move, Corbin turned around and rose to his feet.

"Major," he said humbly, "I thought you were

yellow and I said so. I apologize. I was scared green up there and I'm still scared and if there's anybody that's yellow, it's me."

The C.O. left the controls and stuck out his hand. "No apologies in order," he said. "I was scared and scared plenty—in Camels. But—" A white grin broke through the layers of grease on his face—"I herded Handleys for more than a year and they're home folks to me. This little trip of ours was the first time since I've put on an American uniform that I haven't been scared to death."

The eyes of the two men met and each read something in the other that was bigger than the moments of stark fear that might come to either of them; bigger even than the moments of heroism that both had known and both would know again. Each man knew at that moment that the other was human. Joe Corbin spat.

"I stick to names when I call 'em," he said slowly, "and you'll always be the 'Water-Lily' to me; but—" He took a deep breath and his own grin came back to him—"what a water lily!" he said softly. "What a water lily!"

The C.O. smiled happily. Anybody who won rank could be called "Major," but it took something that he had always wanted, to be called "What a water lily!" by a Joe Corbin.