

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

CRASHING THROUGH

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

Kirby, the daring leader of the “Three Mosquitoes,” had been on some strange flights, but this looked almost impossible—and more dangerous than ever. Of course he would have his two flying buddies with him, but carrying ammunition to those surrounded doughboys was no easy job—in a heavy De Haviland plane.

IT WAS JUST BEFORE DAYBREAK, and the big drome was still shrouded in shadowy darkness. On the deadline stood three throbbing ships, which the mechanics were revving up. Two of them were Spads—swift, graceful single-seaters. The third, cumbersome-looking in comparison, was a big De Haviland “freight plane.” It had originally been a two-seater, but its fuselage had been rebuilt to carry cargo, and there was now room only for one pilot. Near by, the “Three Mosquitoes” stood on the tarmac, while their C.O. gave them their final instructions.

“Sure you can handle her, Kirby?” the C.O. was asking, in a voice strangely tense. “It’s going to be a tough job. That cargo of ammunition is heavy, and you must be careful.”

Kirby, young leader of the Three Mosquitoes, nodded gravely. “Guess I can manage her O.K. sir,” he assured the colonel. “I only hope the stuff is wrapped up properly, so it doesn’t go off when I open the floorboard and drop it into that trench.”

“Just what I was thinking,” “Shorty” Carn chimed in. “We don’t want to blow up the guys we’re out to

help.” Travis, eldest and wisest of the trio, said nothing. But he, too, looked grave and anxious.

“Of course,” the C.O. admitted, “there is some danger of such a thing. But it’s up to you, Kirby, to drop the stuff from a low enough altitude to make the impact harmless. Yes,” he repeated, grimly, “I admit the whole thing is extremely perilous. I admit that if you run into Jerry planes, there’ll be hell to pay—their incendiary bullets could set that cargo off. But just remember that the dangers you have to face are nothing compared to the dangers which that handful of men down in that trench are facing.

“Put yourself in their places—stuck in a muddy, filthy ravine, cut off from the rest of our troops, surrounded on all sides by Germans, getting killed off like flies until only two dozen of that whole valiant company remain—perhaps even less now. Yet they refuse to be daunted; they’re clinging stubbornly to the little strip of ground which they were ordered to hold, despite the fact that their ammunition is practically exhausted.

“They need food, drink, clothing, and yet when,

by sheer luck, one of our wireless planes found them and managed to communicate with them, they asked only for ammunition, nothing more. They've done more than could be expected of any soldiers, and now it's up to you fellows to help them through. As I told you, Kirby, I don't know just how you'll manage to drop that ammunition to them, but I'm convinced you can do it, provided you other two fellows protect him from above with your scout planes. You must get to them before daybreak. The Germans are sure to spring another attack on them at that time. Without ammunition, they'll be slaughtered. Even with ammunition,"—he shook his head—"it is hard to believe that they can hold out until our troops break through and save them."

He paused, deeply moved. The Three Mosquitoes shifted, impatiently, as if the C.O.'s words had stirred them to action, filled them with a desire to be off on this strange and hazardous enterprise.

The C.O. looked over towards the deadline, where the three ships were now roaring thunderously. He shouted above the roar to the mechanics: "Aren't those planes ready yet?"

"They're all set now, sir!" came the answering yell, from one of the grimy-faced mechanics.

The C.O. turned again to the Three Mosquitoes. His tone now was terse, rasping: "Into your planes, men! You will take off at once! It's beginning to get light! Snap into it!"

"Let's go!" Kirby cried eagerly, as he and his comrades leaped for their ships. Kirby clambered into the cockpit of the big D.H., while Carn and Travis hopped into their Spads. Furtive gleams of light were stealing down from the sky now. It wouldn't be necessary to use the flood-lights for the take-off.

Kirby quickly tried his throttle, read his instruments. The C.O. was standing beside his fuselage, shouting in his ear.

"Have you the roll-map?"

"Yes, sir!" Kirby yelled back. He pulled down his goggles, and strapped his safety-belt. "S'long!" he shouted cheerfully. "We'll do our best!"

"Good luck!" the C.O. replied. "Though you'll need more skill than luck now!"

Kirby gripped his stick. Then he waved at the mechanics. Promptly they jerked the chocks from in front of the D.H.'s wheels. With a mighty roar the huge plane began to move forward, sluggishly gathering up speed. Kirby opened his throttle wider. The big ship with its heavy cargo was reluctant to leave the earth. It

rolled way out across the field, its propeller churning furiously. But the trim little Spads of Carn and Travis swept right into the air like dragon flies, and soared swiftly upwards.

Finally the wheels of the D.H. lifted from the ground, and the plane began to roar upwards like a great, panting monster, breathing smoke from its exhaust stacks. Carefully, Kirby climbed her through the gray dawn. Above him, at about three thousand feet, he picked out the shadowy shapes of his comrades' Spads, circling as they waited for him. Easing back his stick, he headed towards them. Yes—he mused grimly—this D.H. was hard to handle: worse than driving a heavy truck over a muddy road. And it wasn't pleasant, either, to know that his fuselage was loaded to capacity with explosives—explosives which could so easily be set off by an incendiary bullet from an enemy plane or even from the ground.

SUCH were Kirby's thoughts as he continued climbing upwards. He was drawing closer to the ships of his comrades now, and the higher he went the lighter grew the air—for dawn comes to the sky before it reaches the earth. It was cold up here, and there was a thin but penetrating mist which was flung right back into Kirby's goggled face by his powerful propeller. The goggles were soon frosted by it, and he wiped them off roughly with a sleeve of his tunic. Then he moved his stick forward a bit, leveled off.

The two Spads of his comrades broke from their circling course, swung down behind and above the big ship, on either side. Kirby waved an arm at them, then kicked his rudder to bank mildly to the left. Sluggishly, the big D.H. swerved, and, with throttle open, roared eastward. The two Spads followed, and Carn and Travis had difficulty in keeping the slow pace of the lumbering freight plane. Their swift scouts were tuned for high speed and, like sensitive race-horses, had a tendency to leap forward and go streaking through the sky. But, expertly, they held their machines back, and kept their positions behind their leader.

They were off—off on the strangest mission they had ever undertaken. In fact, the more Kirby thought of it, the stranger it seemed. It was hard to believe that the cargo which his big plane bore was the key—and the only key—to the salvation of a lost handful of infantrymen. Yet it was true, and it was up to him to drop that cargo into the trench before daybreak.

Before daybreak? With a start, he realized that the eastern sky was beginning to turn pink. The sun was

rising! At once Kirby became keyed up, tense. They must hurry, hurry! He pulled out his throttle to the last notch, fed his powerful engine more gas than she was ever meant to take. The D.H. struggled clumsily in its efforts to go faster. Its engine thundered mightily, and it shook and swayed, struts shrilling and wires singing, as it plowed forward. Kirby glanced up to see if his comrades were still in place. They were—he saw the bobbing noses of their two Spads, wraithlike in the grayish light. For them the D.H.'s pace, though it had been speeded considerably, was still painfully slow.

On they sailed, drawing closer and closer to the lines. But all the time it kept growing lighter. The mist began to drift away, and the sky started to turn clear and blue. The shadows were fading from the blurred earth below, and the landscape became more and more distinct, like a picture coming into focus. And presently, to Kirby's dismay, the rising sun became visible—a big red disk which was slowly but inexorably emerging from the horizon. Soon, in minutes now, it would be visible to those on the ground. And Kirby cursed at his clumsy freight plane, struggled futilely to make it go faster, to race with that rising disk.

The Front now! The seething battlefield was swimming below them in an infernal maze of bursting shells, rockets, and "flaming onions." And as the sun rose higher and brighter, until the whole disk was revealed, they crossed the lines and sailed smoothly through the erratic and important anti-aircraft fire. And now a tense excitement began to grip Kirby, and his blood tingled with nervous anticipation. They were in Jerry territory now, and near their objective! Could they make it in time? Hastily the Mosquito pulled out his roll-map, got his bearings. A forest was looming up below and ahead. Rois Woods! At the sight of it Kirby felt a strange thrill. For he knew that somewhere on the other side of that forest was the ravine—the ravine where the remnant of the unfortunate infantry company was trapped.

Quickly, he signaled his comrades, and all banked slightly to the right to get over the forest. They must keep the trees below them. Kirby, still urging his big plane forward, led them on. Must keep his eyes about now. Watch out for enemy planes. Also watch for that ravine.

The three planes continued over the forest, with all three pilots scanning the earth keenly for signs of their objective. But they could distinguish nothing, and Kirby's hopes began to sink. Suppose they couldn't find the place? And even if they did find it

now, it might prove to be too late. Certainly it must be daybreak below by this time.

Cursing with furious impatience, he waved again to his comrades, shoved his stick forward, and descended to a lower altitude where he got a clearer view of the ground. The two Spads swept down with him, and at a thousand feet they resumed their search. They had reached the end of the forest, and Kirby swung around in a wide arc, determined to cover every inch of that ground. He strained his eyes. But still he saw no ravine, and a sense of bitter frustration came over him. To fail in the easiest part of his task—locating that ravine! It would make him and his comrades the laughing stock of their squadron, and destroy completely the C.O.'s implicit confidence in them.

But then, abruptly, his eyes caught something. Off to his right, a red flare came streaking up from the ground, to be followed by others. Very lights—distress signals! It could mean but one thing! The lost handful of Americans were there! They had spotted the Allied-marked planes, and were signaling them—signaling them even though they had to risk signaling German planes as well. Their plight must be desperate indeed!

At once, Kirby led his comrades in the direction whence those rockets were popping. The red flares continued, guiding the aviators like beacons. The three planes drew closer, until, with startling suddenness, Kirby saw the ravine—a tricky bit of landscape which all but camouflaged itself by its merging colors and shadows. Eagerly, Kirby took his formation over the spot, started to circle above. He looked down. In one glance his keen eyes had taken in the whole layout. Down in the bottom of that ravine was a big, muddy trench. He could see the thin helmets of Americans—about twenty of them. They were being shelled—and heavily. Great geysers of smoke and flame spouted all about that trench.

And the Germans! Kirby gasped at their numbers. The surrounding neighborhood was literally swarming with them. There were scores of machine-gun nests, and on the slope close to the Americans were trenches filled to the brim with gray-clad, pot-helmeted figures, whose bayonets glistened cruelly. They seemed to be waiting, those Jerries, waiting for the signal to go over the top and charge the handful of Yanks. The Yanks, however, were also waiting, Kirby saw. If they had any ammunition left, they were saving it for their last stand. But they could not have much left, for they were all looking up at the American planes, waving frantically, using every signal they knew to explain

that unless fresh ammunition were brought to them somehow, they could not hold that ravine much longer.

Kirby wasted no time. He leaned out of his cockpit, waved down to the men in the trench reassuringly. Then he pulled out his own Very pistol, fired a white rocket—signal of mercy. That ought to cheer them up a bit. God, his heart went out to those men, they certainly were going through hell. And he marveled that they had withstood that horde of Jerries so long.

All this time the three planes had continued circling above the ravine, and now Kirby was studying the ground carefully, preparing for the daring descent he must make, it was rough down there: rotted and gnarled trees stuck up grotesquely, barbed wire and underbrush were confusedly tangled together, and there were those continually bursting shells. No place for a plane to get close to. It was going to be a job to maneuver the clumsy D.H. right over that trench. And, once down there, it would be still harder to clear the slope which rose on the side.

But he must manage it! Determinedly, he signaled his two comrades. Immediately, the two Spads broke from formation, started to swing out together. They were to hover about, protecting the D.H. from above. Both the other Mosquitoes waved to Kirby encouragingly. Kirby waved back, then started to shove his stick forward. But he didn't shove it forward.

Instead, he stiffened, sat bolt upright, his heart pounding.

Enemy planes! There they were—five of them—speeding straight towards him and his comrades from the east, coming in at a terrific clip. Five gray, coffin-nosed Fokkers! Carn and Travis saw them, too, for they immediately started to swing back towards Kirby, crowding close to protect the cumbersome D.H.

FOR a second Kirby was utterly confused, unable to decide just how to cope with the situation. The Fokkers were almost upon them, coming closer, closer. There was no means of getting away: they had to face the attack. Ordinarily Kirby would have welcomed a fight with five Jerries—for the Three Mosquitoes could handle odds like that; but now, flying a clumsy freight plane full of high explosives, knowing that any further delay might prove disastrous to the men down in that trench, he felt almost panicky. What to do? An impulse to try to streak down and drop his ammunition while his comrades held back the Fokkers came over him, but he quickly abandoned it. Too late for that. Too

late indeed! For now the Fokkers were right in-front and above. They were swooping down one and all like streaks, diving upon the Three Mosquitoes.

Carn and Travis, expert, cool-headed flyers that they were, immediately zoomed up past Kirby to take the brunt of the attack and keep the D.H. covered. Kirby straightened out his clumsy ship below them, even as the air was shattered by the shrill, staccato clatter of the Germans' Spandaus machine guns. Jagged red streaks were leaping from the square noses of the Fokkers, as they came sweeping down like blood-crazed vultures. But the twin guns of Carn and Travis blazed in defiant response.

Kirby, looking up, saw the two Spads weaving in and out among the German ships, mixing in fiercely. The Fokkers, however, kept forcing their way down—their object apparently being to get the D.H. And before Kirby could move, they were right on top of him. *Rat-tat-tat!* The hellish clatter drowned out the roar of his engine. The air on his right was penciled by a yellowish stream of tracer bullets. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* Another stream came whistling down to his left, so close that he seemed to feel the breeze of its passing, which chilled him to the very marrow. God, if one of those bullets went into his loaded fuselage, set off that ammunition!

Desperately, he struggled with his plane, tried to maneuver to throw off the Jerry's sights. He kicked his rudder, zig-zagged and half-rolled. The D.H. floundered pitifully in its clumsy efforts to respond. It lurched and groaned, and Kirby had to employ all his strength to keep it in hand. A Fokker came streaking by in front of him, left to right. Hastily he leaned to his sights, kicked right rudder, and pressed his stick-triggers. His twin Brownings stuttered into life, but the bullets missed. He could not hope to score now: he would be lucky if he could merely avoid being hit!

He banked to the left again, and pulled up to find himself in the very thick of the dogfight. The sky around him seemed literally dense with planes, which gyrated, zoomed, and circled all about in a confused whirl, guns blazing. His comrades were still valiantly trying to protect him, hurling themselves at the Fokkers which plunged for the helpless D.H. So intent were they on keeping their leader covered that they had no chance to score.

Kirby kept maneuvering, firing his guns even though he knew it was useless. Fokkers were swarming all around him like maddened hornets, and the D.H., sluggish monster that it was, tried in vain to shake

off its tiny tormentors. The Germans clung to its flanks, peppering away at it with merciless fury. Bullet holes began to appear in Kirby's wings, and his heart stopped as he thought he heard them ticking through his fuselage. Certainly one of those tracers must soon strike!

During these breathless moments, in the heat of the battle, Kirby had all but forgotten the men down on the ground. But as the dogfight raged, the sun kept getting brighter, until it was shining with its usual morning brilliance. The day was here. And now, in one of those few seconds when he had time to catch his breath, Kirby looked down at that trench. The sight that met his eyes brought an anguished groan from him.

Out of the trenches on the slope clambered the gray-clad figures. They swarmed out like a horde of ants, moved towards the Yanks with bayonets fixed. God, if the Americans could not hold them off—

A fusillade of tracer screamed in on his thoughts, and though he was tortured by the suspense he felt for the men on the ground, he had to set his mind once more on his own perilous predicament. Fool that he was, he had given one of the Jerries an opportunity to gain an advantageous position while he stared down at the trench. Below his tail, right beneath the D.H.'s blind spot; one of the gray Fokkers came zooming, both guns spitting. In such a circumstance, Kirby knew he was helpless—helpless to maneuver out. Skillfully, the Boche pilot was crowding in, creeping up, up. He was so close now that Kirby could clearly see his helmeted head, leaning to the sights between the twin Spandaus guns. Frantically, the Mosquito began rolling and turning again. *Tick-tick-tick!* Bullets going into his fuselage! There was no doubt about it this time! He was done for!

Then a shout of frenzied relief broke from him. Like a streak, a Spad came plunging down behind him, its guns beating out a thunderous tattoo. Travis—good old Travis! He was diving straight for the Boche who threatened Kirby, diving unmindful of the other two Fokkers which followed right on his tail. Straight down he came, firing burst after burst. The Fokker beneath Kirby veered abruptly from its course, staggered under the merciless rain of lead. It flew crazily for a few seconds: then it seemed to slide downwards on a slippery current of air, and went fluttering earthward like a dead bird.

Travis had scored! Only four of them left now! It would be easier. But those men down in the trench—

Again Kirby literally risked his life by looking down there. He drew in his breath sharply. The gray-clad figures seemed to be moving a trifle slower. The Yanks were fighting them off, fighting them off with guns and grenades. It was a weak resistance—and yet, to Kirby's incredulous amazement, it seemed to be stemming the tide! The Jerries actually seemed cautious, afraid to charge that handful of Yanks. Again Kirby thrilled at the courage of those men: they had taught the Boche to respect them, despite their scant numbers!

BUT then Kirby realized that the stemming of those Boche was only a temporary matter. The Germans did retreat a bit, but now they were rallying their forces and preparing for another attack. And the Yanks in the trench were again looking up at the planes, signaling frantically. Kirby cursed helplessly, futilely. They were out of ammunition! The Germans evidently didn't know it yet, else they would surely have crashed straight through. But the attack they were about to make was sure to wipe out those men, unless they got ammunition at once. And Kirby, who had; ammunition to give, who was right over their heads, was powerless to help them because of the Fokkers which swarmed around him. Powerless?

Suddenly a fierce, gripping determination came over him. His eyes blazed defiantly behind their goggles, and he gritted his teeth. He would, get down there! To hell with the Fokkers! He was going down and land this ammunition somehow—even if it was the last thing he did!

With feverish haste, he glanced about to catch sight of his comrades. There they were, still whipping about in furious combat with the four Fokkers, still protecting Kirby's tail. The Mosquito pulled out his Very pistol, fired a green-rocket. That meant: "Stay here and; carry on. I'm withdrawing."

He did not wait for any response. With a savage oath, he shoved his stick forward. The big D.H. nosed over with a vibrating lurch, went roaring into a steep dive. Down, down, down, at full; throttle, faster and faster, with the wind rushing up through the flying wires and the big plane shaking and lurching as if the strain must surely crack it. Not the orthodox thing to do—diving a heavy freight plane wide open. But it was the only way.

The Germans, however, had no intention of letting him slip away like this. Two of them broke from the fray, and Carn and Travis, engaged with the remaining

two, were unable to stop them. The two gray scouts plunged furiously after Kirby, followed him with tracer. But Kirby ignored the bullets now. He must stake everything on this one wild gamble.

The ground was looming up below, rushing towards him with breathless speed. He saw the trench in a vague blur which swam beneath his eyes, saw the men still waving. The tracer was streaking close—terrifically close. Bullets were ricocheting from the cowling in front of him, and a piece of one grazed his cheek painfully. The Fokkers were right on his tail, in merciless chase. But he laughed at them with reckless defiance.

“Come on!” he bellowed savagely, wishing they could hear. “Follow me down—if you dare!”

Yes, if they dared! He knew the Germans were afraid to dive these Fokkers too close to the ground—for the ships had the one great fault of not coming out of a dive quickly enough, and crashing. Besides, there were shells down there, and those trees. And if the swift, maneuverable Fokker could not fly down there, how about the big, clumsy D.H.? If she didn’t come out of the dive, if she crashed with that ammunition—

He suppressed the thought with an oath, and stubbornly went right on down. Two hundred feet now. But the Germans, obviously brave pilots who were willing to risk all to get their prey, still followed, still peppered him with tracer. One hundred and fifty feet. Dare he go any lower? One hundred feet—

The ground seemed right under his nose. It was jumping up as if to give him a sharp crack. With all his strength, he pulled back hard on his stick. He held the lever against his chest, and waited with drawn breath for results.

There came such an unearthly rending of struts and fabric, of splintering wood and snapping flying wires, that for a second he thought his ship had fallen apart. The big D.H. lurched with a violence which tossed Kirby about in his cockpit and made his safety belt strain until it almost broke. Like a madman, he fought with his controls, struggled with every last atom of strength. And the D.H. came out, came out sluggishly and protestingly, but leveled off nevertheless—scarcely twenty-five feet from the ground.

And in the same second Kirby heard a terrific, reverberating crash off to his right. Glancing there, he saw one of those gray Fokkers somersaulting weirdly on the ground. A wave of pity for the unfortunate Jerry passed through him. He had gone too low, and hit a tree. For a few seconds the wrecked ship continued to

gambol about crazily, like a chicken without its head. Then the Fokker crumpled in a twisted heap, and made her own funeral pyre with a column of flame and smoke which rose high into the sky.

The other Boche flyer, doubtless unnerved by the sight, had pulled out of his dive farther above. He was climbing away, leaving Kirby alone! At first the Mosquito was surprised, but then, as he glanced upwards, he understood. High above the dogfight was still raging: he caught a fleeting glimpse of his comrades’ planes, still deadlocked with their two antagonists. But one of those Jerry ships seemed crippled—as if its engine had been hit. The Fokker which was leaving Kirby was doubtless climbing to its assistance. So much the better, Kirby thought. That left him free, and while it gave his comrades more to worry about, he knew they could handle three Boche any time.

ALL these things had taken place during the few seconds when Kirby was leveling off. Now, as he guided his D.H. right over the ground, he at once forgot everything but the task in hand. The trench—where was it? To the left. He banked, carefully. The big D.H. swung around, its left wing tipping so low that it threatened to tangle with one of those rotted tree-stumps. But Kirby got it around safely, and went skimming on towards the trench.

B-rrr-oom! A shell burst close below him, and the terrific concussion rocked his plane. He could smell the acrid stench of the smoke, which all but obscured visibility. Furtively, he looked out across the ground, towards the slope. Dimly—because he was so low and because of the fog of smoke—he saw a wave of gray, which was steadily advancing. The Boche were coming again! He must hurry! Another shell tore up the earth below him, and the whistle of shrapnel was in his ears. He worked his controls furiously to keep his plane from reeling. Watch out for those trees now—don’t get his undercarriage caught in them.

Suddenly he was coming over that American trench. He was coming right above it, and he could look straight down into it. It was not a pleasant sight—that muddy ditch which contained more dead men than alive. The remaining handful of Yanks were aiming their rifles over the parapet, but they were not firing. Must be completely out of ammunition! They were watching the huge plane which was swooping right over their heads, watching it and waving at it wildly. Kirby waved back at them.

Then began the most difficult and nerve-racking bit of flying he had ever done. His keen eyes had already picked out the spot where he must drop his ammunition. The other end of the trench was unoccupied, except for the gruesome heaps of corpses.

Carefully he nosed his ship a little lower. For a second he cut the throttle, so he could yell down to those upturned faces.

"Duck!" he shouted, above the wind-shrill. "I'm dropping ammo! Duck and hold on!"

He thought he heard a hoarse cheer rise from the trench, as the men ducked. The Mosquito went still lower—so low that his undercarriage was almost between the two sides of the trench. Without turning, he saw the advancing Germans out of the corner of his eye. They were closer now, and their bullets were whining through the air. Machine gun shots ripped into his plane. But he went on, lurching over that trench, fighting to avoid a fatal crash.

The empty spot now! Here it was! He held his ship up with all his might, made sure that he was right over it. Then he reached forward to grab the lever which would open his floorboard.

For a split second he hesitated, hesitated even though his ship was already beginning to pass over the spot, even though the Boche troops were looming right up, and their bullets were flying thicker and faster. He was as low as he could possibly get—yet was it low enough? Or would that ammunition explode when he dropped it?

Well, this was the best he could do. And so, with a grunt, he pulled that lever.

Immediately the bottom fell out of the D.H.'s fuselage, fell right into the trench. And with it fell the heavy, padded bundles. They dropped with a thud which made Kirby's blood run cold. But in the next second he sighed with intense relief. They had not exploded—thank God!

The big D.H., suddenly emptied of its great burden, seemed to give a mighty leap into the air. It was easier to take up now, and Kirby quickly got it under control. He pulled back his stick, opened his throttle wide. The D.H. roared into a zoom, just clearing the tree-tops on that slope. And as he climbed away Kirby caught a glimpse of the Yanks in that trench, crowding around the bundles and pulling at them with frantic haste. Could they get out the stuff in time? The Boche advance had almost reached the barbed wire entanglements. Line upon line of gray-clad figures were swarming in, all firing their rifles.

Then something else attracted the Mosquito's eye. Sweeping down towards him came the two Spads of Carn and Travis. And the sight of them warmed his blood, filled him with new enthusiasm. They must have licked those Jerries, or sent them chasing home. There were no more Fokkers to be seen.

Kirby sped towards them, and they immediately swung in on either side of him again. He waved to them excitedly, pointing down towards the gray-clad masses. He had decided, at once, that as long as he and his comrades were free now, they would help those Yanks below as best they could by ground-strafting the Germans.

Carn and Travis waved in hasty assent. Again Kirby nosed his big ship downwards, and his comrades, breaking apart from him, did likewise. The two Spads, which could cover two feet to the big D.H.'s one, shot right ahead of him and in a flash were swooping down over the gray ranks, raining lead upon the Jerries. Kirby, coming down more slowly, glanced at the American trench. His eyes lit up. The Yanks were firing again, blazing away with new fury. They had their ammunition. Yet, though the Boche were being delayed by this resistance, and by the Spads which molested them from above, the effect was not as it should be. The Yanks were not stemming the tide as they had done before, which was strange because they now had fresh ammunition. Something was wrong. Kirby, determined to find out what it was, gave up the idea of joining his comrades in their ground-strafting, and circled back over the trench. He looked down.

And then he saw, with a little start, what was amiss. Those Yanks were using only rifles and grenades. They were not using machine guns—and in a case like this, Kirby knew, machine guns were a vital necessity. In fact—a worried frown increased his forehead—most of the ammunition he had dropped had been for machine guns.

He descended a bit lower, the better to see. Weren't there any machine guns down there? There were! Now he saw them—three of them in position. Men were hammering at them with their fists, pulling and pushing them. But no streaks of flame were biting from their muzzles.

Suddenly Kirby grasped the whole upshot of the business. Those guns were out of order—jammed, probably. They were out of order and the men could not make them work. The Mosquito could see that the soldiers hammering at them had no idea how to fix them. It was easy, then, to put two and two together.

Their gunners had been killed off. The others, though they knew how to operate the guns, had never been taught enough about their mechanism to repair them, for the average soldier could not be grounded in everything. Consequently, when the guns had jammed, they could no longer be used.

ALL this time, however, the other soldiers in the trench had been fighting tirelessly, blazing away with their repeating rifles and hurling grenades at the gray troops. And Carn and Travis kept plunging down on the advancing Jerries in breathless swoops, their guns stuttering. And at last the Germans, realizing again that they were up against very stubborn men, did give a little ground once more. They fell back, reorganized to advance again, then fell back a second time.

But Kirby, still circling over the trench, knew that unless those machine guns could be put into use there was no hope. With the three guns working, there was a chance because the Boche could be mowed down in great numbers. But how could the guns be made to work, when the men who labored at them were unable to cope with their complicated mechanisms? Kirby shook his head. He could have fixed those guns, for a pursuit pilot must know machine guns inside out, know how to take them apart and put them together again blindfolded. Yes, he could have fixed them. But he was in an airplane—flying around, helpless to do anything about it. And—

He broke off, and a cold thrill passed through him. Suddenly a wild idea had dawned on him, an idea which he tried in vain to suppress. It seemed absolutely crazy—a reckless, impossible stunt which could only mean his finish, and yet—

The gray-clad masses were swarming forward again, with new determination. This time they seemed to realize that their strength was overwhelming. True, they advanced cautiously, but they were moving straight towards that trench. They ignored the potshots and grenades which met them, ignored the two buzzardlike Spads above. On they came, slowly but inexorably.

And then a wave of crazy recklessness, of savage abandon, swept Kirby. By God, he would take a shot at it—and the consequences be damned! It was the only possible means of getting those guns working.

He did not hesitate a second. Quickly, he swept downwards, swept right over that trench again. Down along it he skimmed, watching keenly, measuring his distance, judging his time. The place where he had

dumped the ammunition was again empty—the men had taken the stuff further down. Kirby was coming to the spot now. He nosed his ship lower, lower. His heart was in his mouth, and in the last breathless second he felt a terrific impulse to abandon the idea. But then, with a berserk oath, he reached forward and cut out his engine.

The big D.H. settled, settled. Kirby, pulling back the stick, fought with all his strength to pancake her. The plane lurched, staggered, threatened to crash nose-first. But Kirby knew how to fly, knew how to handle his ships. And the feat he performed was one of the greatest of his whole career.

He let his fuselage drop right into the trench, while the great wings of the D.H., caught by the two sides of the ditch, simply folded upwards like the wings of a butterfly. There was a shivering impact which rattled Kirby's very teeth, and a rending crash as the wings snapped right off. Then he was down. But immediately a new danger confronted him. His cockpit was almost level with the parapet of the trench, and immediately some ambitious German machine gunners opened up on it. Kirby ducked beneath the cowling as a terrific fusillade of bullets screamed over his head. He waited a second, and his hands quickly unfastened his safety-strap and tore off his goggles. The whine of bullets died. He decided to stake all on one quick break.

In one move, he let himself drop from the cockpit. Again came the whine of machine-gun bullets. But he made it. He was standing in the trench now, in front of his wrecked plane. His ears were ringing with the hellish clatter of guns around him, and the horrible stench of the dead was in his nostrils. He hurried down the trench, wading through the mud and slime to get to the men. A slight bend, and he came upon them. They had not moved from their positions when the plane had crashed, for they were too busy firing at the Boche. God, what a sight they were! Their clothes were tattered rags which only covered parts of their bodies, their faces were unshaven, grimy and even bloody, and their eyes had a vacant, blood-shot look in them. But, gamely, they were clinging to their guns.

Suddenly one of them turned, descended the firing step, and came over to Kirby. He was a great, hulking giant with a homely but courageous-looking face. Kirby saw that he was a sergeant. Hurriedly, the non-com looked the Mosquito over.

"Hello, sky-guy!" he said, huskily, and then added with acrid mirth. "Sorry I can't say 'sir' and salute you—but we don't do them things here. Our officers

was all killed long ago—and I'm the only non-com left." He adjusted his tin hat. "You're the guy who brought us the ammunition, ain't you?" Kirby nodded. "Well, believe me, we needed it! That was doing something. But it's tough you crashed here—tougher than hell. This trench is no place for a sky-guy."

"Maybe not," Kirby replied, a trifle impatiently. "But I came down to fix those damn machine guns for you and help—"

"You *what?*" the sergeant gasped, his eyes widening with incredulity. "Hell, you don't mean to say you came down here on purpose? Not unless you're stewed to the gills or damned anxious to commit suicide!"

JUST then a shout rose from one of the men on the firing line. "The Jerries are breaking through our first barbed wire!" His voice was shrill. "They're coming right through!"

At once the line of rifles clattered with fresh vehemence, pouring out bullets as fast as they could. The men, too utterly exhausted and emotionally spent to feel any fears, simply cursed, and kept shooting. The sergeant, stirred to action again, spoke hurriedly to Kirby.

"Say, if you can really fix them guns, sky-guy, we'll mow down the Jerries proper. We only got three good ones left, as you see, but the water-jackets are filled and they'll do. Go to it! Wait until I count heads again." He looked about, counting off on his big fingers. "Fourteen—including the sky-guy."

"Wrong—sarge—" gasped a weak but cheerful voice, as a man crumpled and fell. "Thirteen now!"

And at that the others did seem alarmed. Again they cursed. Some even groaned, and one or two stifled a sob.

"Gawd!" wailed one—a lean, redheaded fellow. "Thirteen! And that means—"

"Never mind, 'Red,'" the sergeant cut him off quickly. "That stuff's all horse collar." He turned again to Kirby. "Here's a tin hat for you. Now get to work—toot-sweet!"

Kirby put on the helmet, and was just moving towards one of the machine guns when he heard a familiar roar overhead. Close above the trench swept a khaki Spad. It was Carn! He was looking to see what had become of Kirby. The little plane circled, came dangerously low. Kirby, moving away from the other men so he would stand out from them, waved vigorously. Carn, leaning out of his cockpit, saw him almost immediately, and waved back. Then the other

Mosquito sped away again to resume strafing the troops.

In a moment Kirby was bending over one of the machine guns, working at it with feverish haste, using a trench knife and a bayonet for tools. Already he had found the trouble—a jam caused by a forced feed, and he struggled like a demon to clear the stoppage. In his sheltered position he could not see the advancing Germans, but he did not have to see them. From the shouts of the men in the trench, and from the increasing clatter of gun-fire, he knew they were coming closer every second. They were! They were threshing their way through the barbed wire, determined to let nothing stop them. And Carn and Travis were still strafing them tirelessly, scattering death throughout their ranks.

The sergeant suddenly was at Kirby's side: "Say, sky-guy, if we don't get that gun in a hurry we're sunk!"

"I'm doing the best I can," Kirby replied.

"Well, if—" The sergeant's speech was cut short by a terrific explosion close by. A German potato masher had landed right in the trench. There were a few anguished cries as men were wounded. And Red rolled over in the bottom of the trench and laughed his last breath away.

"I busted the jinx for you!" he shouted. "Twelve now!"

Twelve—but two of them badly wounded, one in the side and the other in the chest. Their comrades helped them in their efforts to stop the flow of blood, and they fought to stand up and stick to their guns.

Kirby redoubled his efforts. His fingers were raw and bruised. His face was full of grime and sweat. But slowly, the obstinate gun was yielding to his labors.

And now hell was really breaking loose. The very ground seemed to rock beneath the men's feet, and the air was literally dense with flying, screaming lead. Another man dropped with a piece of shrapnel in his brain. Eleven now! Eleven Yanks to hold off all those Boche who came plodding closer and closer.

The sergeant's booming voice rose above the clatter of guns: "Fight, men!" he was bellowing. "Here they are—the dirty Krauts! Plow 'em down! Shoot—you lousy, cootie-bitten sons!"

The men, spurred on by their leader's words, fought anew. But the crackle of Jerry bullets kept growing more intense. Another potato masher came whizzing into the trench, but this one exploded without damage. Kirby, cursing and sweating, worked as he had never worked before.

"For God's sake, hurry with that gun!" the sergeant

almost pleaded with him. "It's the only thing that can save us now! The whole German army's right out there!"

Nor did his words seem to exaggerate the situation. The first wave of Boche, an enormous contingent of them, had reached the trench, and were preparing to take it with bayonets. The men on the firing line saw the gray-clad, pot-helmeted figures looming up right above them. With berserk challenges, they fired their revolvers and rifles, determined to drop every Boche they could. Germans fell, but the wave kept coming. In another second they would be in the trench. In another second—

And then a triumphant shout broke from Kirby. He had fixed the gun! Instantly the sergeant was at his side, and the two of them were lifting the weapon into position, placing it on the sandbags. Quickly, Kirby got the belt of cartridges in it. Looking out he saw the Germans—incredible numbers of them. The Mosquito got the trigger in his hands, pulled it.

AND as the Germans came right up, that gun stuttered into life with a clatter which was music to the Americans' ears. And the Boche walked right into a withering, flanking line of fire which mowed them down like grains of wheat. Kirby, with the sergeant helping him, kept the gun going, kept moving it back and forth. His eyes saw only the wave of gray, the wave that must be stemmed. He did not even see his comrades now—though they were still darting about overhead.

The Germans, surprised by this unexpected resistance, fell back. But not for long. Soon they were advancing again.

"See if you can fix them other guns!" the sergeant was directing Kirby. "We'll pull through yet!"

Kirby nodded. The sergeant got another man to help him with the first gun, and Kirby went to the second, worked swiftly and with an added deftness which his experience with the previous gun had given him. He looked around, to see how many men were left. Nine now. The two wounded fellows had gone.

The fight went on. And at last all three guns were working. The Germans were repulsed every time they came. But every time they came they scored too. One after another, the Yanks were being wounded and killed. Their numbers kept dwindling, dwindling. And now there were only five—Kirby, the sergeant, and three privates. Five men, who sat at three machine guns and waited for the Boche to come again. The sergeant turned to Kirby.

"It looks like we're sunk!" he said. "We could hold 'em off, but at this rate there won't be any of us left to do it!" Kirby nodded grimly. The Boche were coming again. The three machine guns blazed at them. But they answered with a fusillade of bullets such as Kirby had never before seen. One of the three privates got it. And the sergeant winced suddenly.

"Wounded?" Kirby asked, tersely.

"Just a scratch," the sergeant assured him, but Kirby did not like the taut expression on his face.

Stubbornly the four men clung to that trench. Their bodies were covered with sweat, their heads were splitting from the incessant clattering and the hot stench of powder, but they kept on. There was not one of them who did not have several bullet nicks. And the sergeant seemed to be growing weaker and weaker.

Then, with unexpected suddenness, their position became desperate. One of the two remaining privates saw it first, and a cry broke from him, a frenzied shout.

"The Jerries are coming from behind us again! Cripes!"

Sure enough, the Boche were now advancing from the other side of the ravine. The four men had forgotten about their unprotected backs in the excitement of the frontal attacks. They had been taken completely unawares. And the only things hindering those Germans behind them were the Spads of Carn and Travis. The two Mosquitoes, seeing the Jerries at once, had immediately plunged after them.

With frantic haste, the four men in the trench struggled to move a machine gun around. Bullets came pelting down at them from all sides now. They were surrounded, like rats in a trap! And Kirby grunted as a sharp pain stabbed his shoulder, and he felt the warm blood trickling beneath his clothes. Hit! But he could not kick. The sergeant was far worse off than he was. The huge non-com seemed hardly able to move now, and the other two were also badly hurt.

The idea of surrender had never entered the heads of these four men, but all realized that they were through. They had done their best, but there was no more hope now. The Germans were simply closing in on them, to finish them off.

And then, all at once, everything changed. To their bewildered surprise, the whistle of bullets suddenly ceased. They looked out. Dazedly, they saw the gray ranks breaking, scattering frantically. It was a general and disorderly retreat! The Boche were fleeing, fleeing for their very lives!

There could only be one reason. Sure enough,

the whole ravine suddenly swarmed with figures of a different-colored garb—the olive drab of the U.S. infantry! The Yanks had broken through at last! They were sweeping down from all sides, and the Boche were scurrying before them like scared rabbits.

For a moment the relief was so overwhelming that the four men in the trench just sat perfectly still, staring with wide eyes. Then a strangled sob tore from the sergeant.

“Gawd!” he cried.

And the two privates blubbered like babies, and even Kirby—who had not been in this hell as long as they—found the tears welling in his eyes.

In the next moment doughboys were pouring into the trench, surrounding the four figures. Crazily, the sergeant and the privates threw their arms about their fellow-soldiers, danced about like madmen, despite the burning pain of their wounds. Kirby stood by, dazed, trying to figure it all out.

Suddenly the sergeant, with a little curse, collapsed. And when they examined him they found a great hole in his chest. Kirby felt a warm glow of admiration for the man. God, but he had guts!

“I guess it’s curtains,” the sergeant was saying, and then he grinned with faint triumph. “But I lived to see us hold this stinking trench, anyways.”

A stern-faced captain had just come up now, and he at once took charge.

“Give these men first aid!” he ordered. Immediately, the Red Cross men appeared. Two of them bent over the sergeant. Another bandaged up Kirby’s shoulder.

The captain looked at Kirby.

“Say,” the officer demanded sharply, “how come you’re wearing flying togs, man?”

“I’m a flyer,” Kirby replied, not without pride.

“A flyer?” the captain echoed, and there was a faint suggestion of scorn in his tone—for the infantry,

generally speaking, had little regard for the bird-men, whom they called “dress soldiers.” “Why,” the captain pursued, “this is just about the last place I’d expect to find an aviator.”

“Well,” Kirby responded, cheerfully. “I can promise you it’s the last time you’ll ever find me in a place like this.”

“But fighting with our infantry—it’s impossible!”

“Say, captain,” the sergeant suddenly broke in, weakly but with intense conviction, “I want to tell you, sir, if you don’t mind, that our infantry ain’t so wonderful. It look a lousy sky-guy to show us how to hold this trench. He came down on purpose, sir, and fixed our machine guns.” He gasped, fighting vainly for breath. Slowly, he sank back. “And that,” he concluded, “was somethin’ worth seeing in this here man’s war!” And with those words he died.

There was a long silence. Even the rumble of distant guns had stopped. The men stood, quiet, respecting the dead.

Then the captain turned to Kirby again, spoke in a different tone.

“I guess I owe you an apology,” he said simply. “I confess you’ve done something which I, myself, wouldn’t dare to attempt. And I want to say—”

But Kirby did not hear him. He was looking upwards now, looking at two Spads which gyrated about like birds in play.

He was waving, with mingled relief and sadness, at his two comrades who were waving back to him from their cockpits. The leader of the Three Mosquitoes sighed, suddenly feeling out of place among all those infantry men. For after all, he was a birdman, and he didn’t like to be without his wings. Well, he’d go back now, and get them—and keep them. No more of this ground stuff for him, if he could help it.