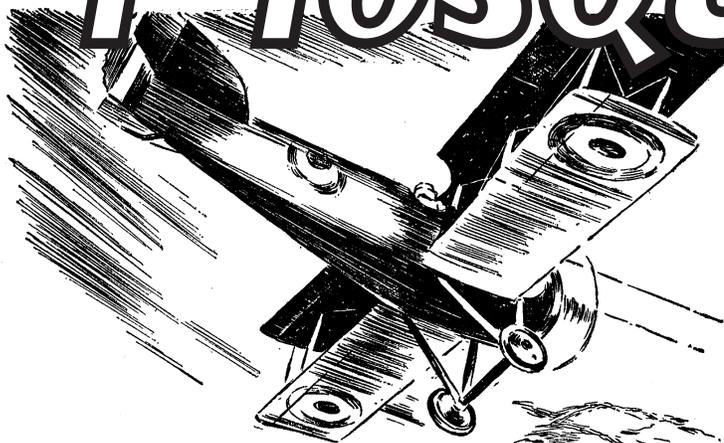


THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

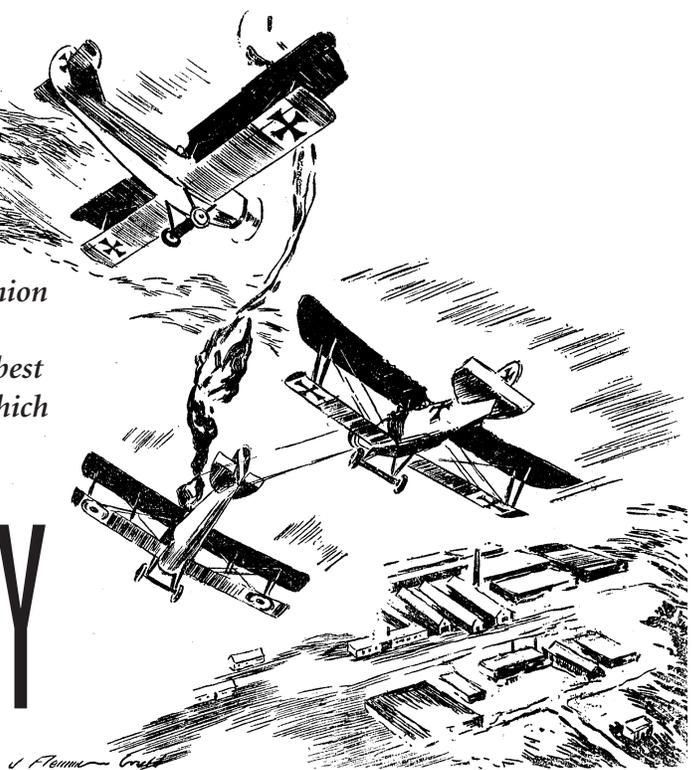


Kirby felt his blood turn to ice, while sheer horror paralyzed him in every muscle. His eyes continued to stare wildly—there, right in front of him it had happened! The Spad of Shorty Carn had vanished—vanished in the same mysterious fashion that had already claimed the lives of those other American flights. Here was a ruthless and bloody mystery which the best minds in the Allied armies were at a loss to fathom, and which those three daredevil mosquitoes set out to combat single-handed!

NO-MAN'S-SKY

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

THE GENERAL'S FIST CRASHED DOWN on the desk top. "So it's come to this!" he thundered. His eyes were blazing, and his stern grizzled face was almost crimson. "It's come to the point where our flyers are afraid to go up in their planes. And yet they are supposed to be men—with guts."



They shifted uncomfortably, the dozen officers who stood before him in brigade headquarters. They were all commanding officers, C.O.s of the twelve American squadrons which operated in this sector. Each of them was a hardened experienced veteran, who had learned to know men and how to lead them. But they did not look it now. Now they looked beaten, bowed down by

a responsibility which had suddenly become too heavy for their shoulders. There was not one among them whose face was not haggard and lined with horror.

The general, who had charge over this whole sector but who in turn was responsible to G.H.Q., presented a strange contrast to these twelve haggard squadron commanders. Only the keenest of observers would have noticed that his face, too, was somewhat drawn and lean. To all outward appearances, he was every inch the commander, a man of steel, hard and unbending.

He rose from his desk now and faced them, accusation in his eyes.

"You come to me like a bunch of whining babies, with a story like this, and you confess that you have tolerated insubordination in your squadrons, that you can't handle your men. Is it any wonder? Why," he burst out, with harsh contempt, "you're as frightened as they are—you who are supposed to set an example to them, lead them. You come here with your silly excuses, trying to tell me that the Boche sky over this sector is a 'No-Man's-Sky,' where no plane can survive. And the reason for all this panic?" He gave a snort of profound disgust. "One German ace and his squadron has you all buffaloed, scared out of your wits."

The twelve squadron commanders stiffened at this last accusation. One of them, who had more nerve than the rest, sprang courageously to the defense.

"But, general, isn't that criticism a bit unjust?" It was the grizzled C.O. of the 44th pursuit squadron who spoke—the leader of the most famous and hell-raising bunch of war birds on the Western Front. "We are not afraid of von Goetz and his notorious circus—not any of us.

"The only reason we mentioned the circus was that we feel it is connected, in some fashion, with this other business"—here the muscles of his face grew suddenly taut—"this business of planes mysteriously disappearing. That's what has been breaking down the morale of our flyers—the fact that scores of planes, whole flights of them at a time, have gone out and disappeared without a trace. That's why we've been calling the Boche sky, here, No-Man's-Sky."

The eleven other C.O.s nodded in slow but firm agreement. The general, however, seemed unimpressed.

"The whole idea is absurd," he insisted. "These planes that have disappeared were simply shot down, that's all. If you were fighting as you should be, you'd have put a stop to it long ago, and prevented the

enemy from taking such tolls. But instead of fighting, you all lie down and blubber that you can't combat the situation. And all because you've let yourselves be influenced, actually influenced, by such fantastic stuff as this!" He banged his fist on a paper which lay on his desk. "This ridiculous report has poisoned your minds, made frightened babies of you all." He snatched up the paper, glanced through it carelessly. It read as follows:

"Reported by Lieutenant A. Andrews, pilot, pursuit squadron 32

"Though I do not expect this report to be believed, it is gospel truth, and I am willing to swear to it. I shall recount exactly what I witnessed.

"On September 4th, I accompanied C flight on the usual morning patrol. There were seven of us as usual, and we flew 220 Spads. Flight Commander Roberts led the V-formation, in which I was right-end man.

"The weather was ideal, and the sky was as clear as could be. Visibility was perfect. There was not a cloud to be seen. I mention this fact because it makes what happened all the more mysterious and uncanny.

"We crossed the lines over Remiens and proceeded to look for von Goetz' circus, in the hope of engaging them. After some time, we sighted seven or eight Fokkers which bore the black and white stripes that mark von Goetz' ships. They were flying some two thousand feet above us, but they did not want to dogfight. When we tried to climb up and engage them, they climbed higher and kept away from us.

"We followed them from below for a way, hoping that they would soon decide to fight. It was at this point that the engine of my Spad developed some slight trouble which caused me to fall behind the rest of the formation. As I continued to fall back farther and farther, I expected that von Goetz' ships would come down and finish me off, since I was now easy prey. But they paid no attention to me; they kept sailing above and ahead of the rest of our flight, which continued to trail them below.

"Fortunately, I managed to get my engine working properly again after a few minutes, and I put on full throttle and raced to catch up to the flight. I gained on them swiftly. They were only doing three-quarters throttle. Pretty soon I was only a hundred yards or so behind them, almost back in my place at the right end of the V. I could clearly see the other six Spads spread out before me, with the red-white-and-blue circles on their wings and fuselages. Even their numbered insignias stood out distinctly, and I could recognize all the pilots in their cockpits. That's how clear the air was.

"I don't know how I can ever describe the thing which happened next. All I can say is that suddenly, when I was just catching up to the flight, when they were right in front of my nose—those six Spads vanished. They vanished into thin air—the whole flight of them. The spot where they had been was just clear blue sky

now. One second those six Spads had been flying along smoothly, six solid machines of wood and fabric, with a man in each; and the next, they had simply melted away into nothing. During all this time the planes of von Goetz' circus had remained above and ahead, like a bunch of buzzards.

"To say I was frightened would be putting it mildly. I was so overcome that I scarcely knew what I was doing. I only remember one sensation—the feeling that any second now I and my Spad would also vanish into thin air, just like the rest. It was a horrible thought, and it so terrified me that I simply turned tail and sped for home as fast as I could. Here several of von Goetz' planes came down and tried to jump on me, but I put on full throttle and managed to get away from them.

"Not until I was right over my airdrome was I able to pull my wits together. I managed to make a decent landing and give in a straight report. Major Saunderson, our squadron commander, instructed me to write out the whole story in full detail, omitting nothing. That is what I have tried to do here.

"As for my conclusions, I can really offer no explanation of the strange phenomenon I witnessed. I am sure that it accounts for the mysterious disappearance of our planes, and I believe von Goetz' circus has something to do with making the ships vanish; else why were they hanging above us like that? Nor do I know why I was spared from that horrible finish, unless it was because I was far enough behind the flight not to be noticed by the agent or agents who made those planes disappear.

"But one thing I know. I did see those six Spads vanish. I saw them vanish in a sky as clear as crystal. Of that I am absolutely sure—as sure as I'm alive and able to report it.

Signed, A. Andrews."

THE general tossed the report to his desk with an oath. "Rot!" he exploded. "Absolute rot." He thought a moment, his face an inscrutable mask. Then he snapped out, "Which of you commands squadron 32?"

"I do, sir," a tall stern-faced major replied.

The general nodded. "Well, now, just what kind of man is this Andrews?" He gave a little snort. "No doubt he's one of these nervous morbid fellows, with too much imagination. Isn't that so?"

The major shook his head in a decisive negative. "No, indeed, sir. On the contrary, he's one of the soundest men I ever knew. He isn't brilliant; he's rather the plodding literal-minded type, with lots of common sense. Of course, this last report of his cannot be corroborated, and the fact that it comes from him makes it all the more strange and uncanny."

"In other words, you don't believe it yourself?" the general suggested, almost hopefully.

The major shook his head. His voice was weary, harried. "I don't know what to think," he sighed. "I can't help believing Andrews, and yet I can't help feeling that the story he tells is absolutely unbelievable."

"And how about the rest of you?" The general addressed the other eleven C.O.s. "Do you believe it?" They, too, shook their heads and shrugged.

The general turned to Andrews' C.O. again. "Well, now," he suggested, "couldn't it be that this man Andrews, in spite of his common sense, is inclined to be superstitious, as most aviators are?"

The major laughed mirthlessly at this question. "Andrews superstitious? Why, there never was a man who scoffed more at anything pertaining to mysticism. He's got his feet solidly planted on the earth, and he doesn't even believe in all these luck charms and omens which the other pilots hold sacred. You'd have to show him proof of a thing to convince him."

The general frowned, and for just a moment he seemed almost nonplused. But again he covered his worry and anxiety with hot rage. "Well, then," he snapped furiously, "why the devil didn't you bring Andrews here with you, so I could see him for myself and question him?"

The major was a trifle embarrassed. "But, sir," he explained apologetically. "I couldn't bring Andrews here. You see, the strain was too much for him, after all. Two days after he wrote this report, he collapsed from a nervous breakdown, and had to be confined to the base hospital at Souilly."

Instantly the fire of defiant challenge leaped back to the general's eyes, and there was triumph in his voice. "Well, that ought to be enough. That proves it. This report is the product of a deranged mind, of a morbid imagination."

He continued with growing conviction, not as if he were advancing a theory, but as if he were laying down the incontrovertible truth. "Andrews went out with the flight, and as he says, he fell behind the formation. From that time on, he never really saw the flight again. He lost them. The fact that he found himself alone probably broke down his last shred of resistance, and he went out of his head altogether. What he thought he saw next was a hallucination.

"There have been many such cases. Why, the very nature of the thing Andrews claims to have seen puts it in the form of a vision. A flight of planes appeared before him in the sky, then faded out. What could be clearer? And then," he concluded, as if clinching his

argument, "look at the report he wrote. Not the calm terse report of an officer stating the bare facts, but an emotional panicky piece of writing."

He paused, and there was a little silence. Then Andrews' C.O. spoke again.

"But, general," the major persisted gloomily, "the fact remains that the rest of that flight never did return—that they were really lost."

A slight shadow crossed the general's face, but this time he did not back down in the least. "What of it?" he demanded. "Of course, the flight was lost; but not in the manner Andrews describes. They were simply attacked and shot down. The idea that they were made to vanish in mid-air is so preposterous it can't be considered for a moment." Again he became furious. "And this atrocious report should never have been allowed to circulate among the rest of the flyers, to poison their minds. Why wasn't it suppressed, kept hushed?"

The major of Andrews' squadron flushed guiltily. "I did try to keep it secret," he argued weakly. "But—well, you know how these things leak out, sir."

"And now every squadron in the sector knows the full story, and the men are all scared out of their wits." The general became more and more indignant. "Why, it's a crime to let such rubbish get into their heads, especially when they're already morbid from losing so many of their comrades, and they're sufficiently worked up to believe any explanation at all. And for all we know," he went on, suddenly taking a new train of reason, "this stuff might just be enemy propaganda. How do we know that this Andrews is not secretly in the employ of the Germans, that he didn't deliberately bring back this false report and—"

"Andrews a spy?" The major was so outraged that he did not realize he was interrupting his superior officer. "Why, he comes from one of the oldest families in America, from early, pioneering stock. And I should have mentioned the fact that he's an ace, with seven enemy ships to his credit."

"Well, then"—the general calmly came back to his original conclusion—"he was out of his head, and that's all there is to it." He drew a long breath, as if the matter were settled. Then his manner suddenly changed; the rage left him, and he spoke in a calm, reasoning tone.

"Now let's try to look at this situation logically and coolly," he urged. "Here are the facts. A large number of our planes have been mysteriously lost; that is official record, and we cannot dispute it. Also, these

planes have been lost in the zone of sky patrolled by von Goetz' circus, and I think we can safely assume that this circus has been wiping out all our ships. How? Well, this von Goetz is a crafty fellow. He's not only a great ace, but he's one of Germany's foremost aeronautical engineers. He has perfected several new battle maneuvers, as well as several ingenious devices for airplanes. Somehow, he has found a way to shoot down whole flights of our planes at a time. We've got to find a way to stop him, to combat him.

"But in the meantime we are confronted with a momentous problem. At present the Germans have full supremacy of the air in this sector. Where our infantry and artillery have been paving the way for the coming offensive, our air force has fallen down on the job altogether. A full week has passed since G.H.Q. sent me this order." He fumbled through some papers, pulled out one, and read it to the group.

"From Allied general headquarters to nth brigade
headquarters

We have learned that the enemy has concentrated its chief ammunition supply at the base near Remiens. It is imperative that this base be wiped out before we can begin our offensive. Since it is out of range of the artillery, it will have to be bombed from the air? Measures are to be taken immediately for this raid to be carried out, at any cost."

"That was a week ago," the general repeated, as he put down the order. "And so far we have not touched that ammunition base."

"But we've certainly tried our best, sir." It was another of the listening C.O.s who spoke—a colonel who looked older and more haggard than all the rest. His voice was dull and listless, as if he had already gone through every possible emotion and could feel no more. "You sent the order to my squadron, the 22nd bombing and observation unit. Immediately I sent out a whole flight of our D.H. bombers to raid the place. They never returned. I sent another flight the following night. They, too, were lost. Finally, when new replacements and planes had come in, I sent my complete squadron—twenty-four ships in all. His face whitened, and he seemed to swallow hard. "I am now waiting for a new command. My—my squadron is gone, wiped out."

There was a long ominous silence. Once more the C.O.s all looked horrified. Once more the general saw them reverting back to the brooding thoughts he was trying so frantically to get out of their minds. Anger still remained his only resource.

"And why were they lost?" he demanded furiously. "Because they were wiped out by von Goetz and his circus. That ammunition base is right in the middle of the area patrolled by the circus. That's why we haven't been able to raid it. But, by God," he burst out, "we're going to raid it to-night, von Goetz or no von Goetz!"

THEY stared at him incredulously. Some one said weakly, "But, general, the men—they won't go. They're in no condition."

"They must go!" the general thundered. "That base must be destroyed; it's holding up the whole push! Moreover, if we delay any longer we surely won't be able to destroy it; we'll have no more planes or pilots left. Already half of the flyers who haven't been lost have cracked under the mental strain. We've got to do this thing while we still have a shred of hope. Just now, according to your reports, we have at our disposal about seventy planes and pilots, not including observers. Well, to-night all these seventy ships will go over in one great force, and the fact that they are traveling in such large numbers ought to give the men enough nerve to go through with the thing.

"It will be a case of do or die. Either they raid that base, despite von Goetz, or they get wiped out—in which case, we'll have lost all our air strength in this sector. And that will mean absolute failure. The big push can't be launched. We can't get any outside help, can't get squadrons from other sectors. They have just as vital work to do and can't be spared. It's entirely up to us, and we've got to make good. We—"

He broke off dismally, for he could see absolute doubt written on every face before him. Though he had all but convinced them that Andrews' report was absurd, they did not yet believe that they could get their men to go up in their planes, even in such a large group.

"All right," he conceded this time, for he knew that anger would no longer help him now. "I'll admit that as it stands the thing might be too much of a gamble. If we can reduce the risk, perhaps that will change matters. And there's just one way we can reduce the risk." He paused a moment, thinking.

"Now I want all of you to consider the men under your command. Certainly, among your squadrons, there must be a few at least who have not been influenced by this atrocious nonsense, who haven't lost their nerve. We've got aces who have shown themselves absolutely fearless, who are dare-devils in every sense of the word."

"Yes!" exclaimed a voice which was vibrant with sudden pride. "We've got the 'Three Mosquitoes!'"

It was the grizzled C.O. of the famous 44th pursuit squadron who spoke once more, and as he mentioned the renowned trio of aces, all the rest turned toward him with sudden interest and hope. The general saw this, and eagerly seized on it, like a drowning man clutching a straw.

"By God, that's right!" he exclaimed. "The Three Mosquitoes. They're just the men we need. They've tackled impossible jobs and come through, and I know they won't fall down now, unless"—here his face clouded a trifle again—"they, too, are affected by all this morbid stuff."

"If they are, they certainly don't act it," their C.O. said proudly. "In fact, they've been begging me to let them go up and continue their usual patrols, but since every one else refused to leave the ground, I didn't think it would be right to send them up alone."

"You are quite right there," the general admitted. "But now things have reached a state where we'll have to depend on these three courageous flyers. We will have to ask them to go up this very afternoon, and I'm sure they're clever enough to pull off the stunt I have in mind." He paused a moment, and then he stated flatly, "I want these three men to fly across the lines and make a reconnaissance right over that German ammunition base. They will look over the whole layout, find out just how impregnable the place really is, and come back and report."

Once more the twelve others all stared at him incredulously, and the 44th's C.O. asked in alarm, "But, general, isn't that an impossible undertaking? No plane has ever been able to get near that ammunition base. What chance would three planes have, when whole flights, whole squadrons, have been wiped out?"

The general was unshaken. "A very reasonable chance, I should say," he replied calmly. "You see, I still persist in believing that von Goetz and his circus have been doing all this destruction, and that three small scout planes, therefore, ought to be able to slip through without being spotted by the German squadron. They need not fly together. In fact, let them fly one behind the other, sufficiently far apart so that if anything should happen to the lead plane, the second or at least the third will be able to turn tail and come right home.

"But I'm sure nothing will happen," he said confidently. "Those Three Mosquitoes know their stuff, and they'll be clever enough to slip through and come

back safely. And even if they don't bring back much information about the base, the mission is worth while for its moral effect alone. It will show the rest of the flyers that this business of a No-Man's-Sky is ridiculous; that planes can go out and come back. It will make them thoroughly ashamed of themselves. They'll realize that if three ships can go out and sail over that ammunition base, without being wiped out or dissolved, certainly seventy ships can do it."

To his relief, the general saw that he had convinced the men at last. There was hope in their faces now, and some even looked confident. They had all been won over to the general's plan—all save the C.O. of the Three Mosquitoes' squadron himself, who frowned darkly and still looked troubled.

"I hate to risk those three men," he said gloomily. "I'd certainly feel like hell if they went out and—"

"Naturally." The general judiciously interrupted him before he could finish the grim sentence. "And I can assure you that I should feel the same way. But I just have a strong hunch that they're going to make good." He glanced sternly at the 44th's C.O., and his voice became terse and official. "The Three Mosquitoes are to be sent on this mission this afternoon, colonel, early enough so they can return well before dusk."

The colonel stiffened respectfully. "Yes, sir," he responded, true to army discipline. "The order will be carried out, sir."

"Good," snapped the general. "That settles the business." He rose from his desk, facing the twelve C.O.s once more. "Now you all go back to your squadrons and try to put some life into your men. Convince them that Andrews' report is utter rubbish, that the planes that have disappeared were shot down by von Goetz' circus. Incense them against von Goetz, arouse their hate and fill them with a desire for revenge. Work them up so that by to-night, when their nerve will be brought back by this courageous flight of the Three Mosquitos, they will be eager to go out on this raid, eager to clash with von Goetz, should he try to interfere."

The twelve squadron commanders nodded earnestly. When they took their leave, filing slowly from the big sunny room, their shoulders were straighter, and their faces set with firm determination and confidence. The C.O. of the 44th squadron was the last to leave. The general detained him to give him detailed instructions.

"Let me know the moment they return," were his final words; and the grizzled colonel departed, the

troubled look still on his face, but his shoulders as straight and determined as the rest.

When the door had closed behind them all, and the general was alone, he did a very strange thing. With one great sigh, he literally collapsed into the chair at his desk, and he slumped back in it like one exhausted, physically and mentally. His features, which had remained so firm and hard, relaxed into an expression of anguish and worry and horror, and into his face came lines which the twelve C. O.s had never noticed.

His hand moved across his desk, and weakly plucked up Andrews' report. Again he read it—read it for the thousandth time. Not a word in it that he didn't know by heart, not a sentence that he had not involuntarily memorized. He had received the report only two days ago, and day and night the lurid story had kept repeating itself in his head.

Of course, he told himself once more, as he had told all the C.O.s, it was absolute rot—fantastic nonsense. The man had been out of his head. Yet the general was strangely disturbed by the haunting remembrance of something he had once read—something about an invisible death ray which would reduce any solid to atoms, make it vanish into thin air. He couldn't recall where he had read about it; he couldn't even remember whether it had been fact or fiction. It must have been fiction, of course. And yet—

"Good Lord!" he groaned, mopping his brow. "This thing is getting me, as it's getting all the rest."

Once more he was tempted to call up G.H.Q., to shift the burden from his own shoulders to theirs. But he knew he mustn't do this until he absolutely could not stand it any longer. It was bad enough that the squadron commanders had weakened and been forced to come to him. If he weakened now, there would only be G.H.Q. left. And then if G.H.Q. weakened—well, the war was as good as lost.

The door suddenly opened, and an orderly came in to straighten out the room. He saluted crisply, and the man who returned the salute was not the worried haggard man of a moment before. He was the general. His eyes were hard and keen, and his face firm in its expression. He was crisply running through the papers on his desk—a busy alert man, whom nothing could upset. The general.

THE motor cycle bounced across the rough tarmac of the 44th pursuit squadron, and rolled to a stop. The C.O. climbed quickly from the side car and walked across the sunny field. His eyes took in the scene of inactivity which

had characterized the drome for days now. Just one or two planes were out of the tent hangars, and mechanics tinkered at them idly. The C.O. shook his head as he went on to the mess hall and entered.

There they all were, just as he had expected. All of them indoors, though it was midday, and the weather was ideal and sunny. They sat around, listless and moody, playing cards or dice, drinking *vin rouge*, and sulking and brooding. Few of them even noticed their C.O.'s entrance, until a tall redfaced pilot who was staggering drunkenly around the room almost collided with the colonel. The pilot, bleary though he was, recognized his commander, and made a sloppy drunken salute. An inane grin spread over his face.

"Hello—*hic*—colonel," he croaked boisterously. "Look, I'll show you th' latesht trick." He stood swaying, and held up a card in his hand. "Wash now," he directed. "Now you shee it. And now—*hic*—" He flipped his hand, and the card neatly vanished. "And now you don't. Clever, ha ha!"

The C.O.'s face was grim. Until now, he had let these things pass, had not raised any objections to them. But now his eyes narrowed to slits, and his voice was as cold as steel.

"Cut that out, Brooks. Get to your bunk instantly, and take some sleep." Something in his tone forced the drunkard to obey without hesitation. He staggered out of the room. The C.O. faced the others, not as a worn-out, helpless man, but as a determined commander.

"This nonsense has got to stop," he thundered, and every one sat up and began to listen with mingled surprise and interest. "I've just come from brigade, and they've officially discredited the famous Andrews report. The planes have not been vanishing, they have been shot down by von Goetz' circus. And to-night we are going to avenge ourselves, once and for all."

He would have said more, for already he had the men tensely interested, but now his eye suddenly fell on a table where three pilots sat together—three pilots who were neither drunk nor listless, but who were playing a lively cheerful game of pinochle. The C.O., realizing that there was no time to be lost, called to them sharply. "Captain Kirby, Lieutenants Carn and Travis!" Instantly the three men sprang to attention. "You three will come with me to the operations office at once," the C.O. snapped.

The Three Mosquitoes nodded, and followed him out. A moment later they stood before his desk in the unobtrusive headquarters shack. He looked up at them appraisingly.

"How's your nerve?" he demanded bluntly.

They grinned.

"We're getting nervous prostration from doing nothing," Kirby, impetuous young leader of the trio, responded. "Otherwise we're okay."

"Lazy as I am, I certainly would like to see some action," put in little "Shorty" Carn. "This being grounded doesn't seem to agree with me."

"Same here," drawled the lanky Travis, eldest and wisest of the three. "And I suppose we're going to get our wish now," he suggested, almost hopefully.

The C.O. nodded grimly. "You certainly are. But before I give you the dope, I want you to speak frankly. Tell the truth. What do you think of this business of planes vanishing into thin air?"

"I have a swell imagination," Kirby confessed. "But there's going me one too far. Personally, I think it's the biggest lot of bunk that's ever been spread." His two comrades nodded their agreement vehemently.

The C.O. smiled quizzically. "Then you wouldn't be afraid to fly into—No-Man's-Sky?"

Their eyes lit up eagerly. "It won't be No-Man's-Sky if we leave the ground," Kirby promised. "When do we start?"

"At once," the C.O. informed them. Then he told them the full details of their mission. They listened attentively, and when he was finished they all nodded their eager assent.

"It's a cinch," Kirby said cheerfully. "We'll have no trouble keeping von Goetz and his circus from spotting us. Only," he added wistfully. "I wish we could fly in our usual formation; we're sort of accustomed to it, and we can do our best work that way."

"It would be too risky," the C.O. replied. "Three planes in formation would surely be spotted. No, you'll have to fly single file, one behind the other. You can decide for yourselves who goes first."

"Decide, nothing," Kirby stated firmly. "Being the captain and leader, I naturally lead the line."

"Like hell, you do," Shorty Carn exclaimed. "The littlest guy always comes first, and so for once I'll be the leader."

"You're both wrong," drawled the lanky Travis with calm but unshakable conviction, "because my Spad will be the first in that line."

"Now listen here—" Kirby began hotly, only to be interrupted by Carn, who in turn was interrupted by Travis. The argument was on, and it grew more and more heated and serious. Despite all their firm denials that they thought there was any danger, none of them

wanted either of his comrades to fly first place in that line. The C.O. observed this with growing worry and anxiety. Doubts began to assail him. Were these three men really untainted by the awful rumors which had poisoned the rest of the flyers? Were they as unafraid as they claimed to be?

He decided to stop the argument himself. "Since you can't settle it for yourselves," he said, "I'm going to settle it for you in the good old way." He opened his desk-drawer and pulled out a deck of cards, trying not to associate them with that drunken pilot in the mess hall, and his significant palming trick. "Each of you will draw," he instructed. "You'll go in order of your cards."

The Three Mosquitoes did not like the idea of settling the matter by pure luck, but they had no choice but to obey. Travis had the first turn to draw. He did.

"Nine of diamonds," he drawled, and waited in hopeful suspense.

Kirby drew next. He grinned triumphantly. "King of hearts. I've got first place, so far, and you'll have to go some to beat me, Shorty."

"Yep," Shorty conceded. "I'll admit it would take an ace to beat you." He reached for the cards and drew. The moment seemed interminable. Then Shorty said quietly, "No sooner said than done. Guess this gives me the lead." He gave a peculiar little laugh—a laugh that made the others wonder, until Shorty tossed his card face-up on the table. They all looked at it. Kirby and Travis tensed just a little, and a shadow crossed their faces. As for the C. O., he actually winced.

The card on the table was the ace of spades. In the air force, superstition runs pretty high. The Three Mosquitoes did not believe in cards; but they knew all too well that the ace of spades was supposed to stand for only one thing. It was the death card.

Kirby broke the tense silence. "Damn it all, I'm going to lead that line," he insisted furiously. "I'm captain, and I'm giving the order."

"Don't be a sore loser," Shorty reprimanded. The little man seemed to have recovered all his former poise and confidence now. He grinned. "I won, and I guess the colonel will see that I get my rights. How about it, sir?"

The colonel smiled, and he never knew how ghastly a smile it was. "The first place is yours if you want it. Captain Kirby comes second, and Lieutenant Travis last."

FIFTEEN minutes later, three trim khaki Spads stood on the deadline, their propellers turning over lazily as their engines warmed up. Near by, buttoning up their teddybears and pulling down their helmets, stood the Three Mosquitoes, and with them the C.O., who was giving them their last instructions.

The rest of the squadron was also out on the tarmac. All the pilots, drunk and sober, had turned out to watch their three comrades depart. Now they stood staring at the trio and at the three Spads, as if they were imagining planes and men being dissolved to atoms. The Three Mosquitoes were conscious of this, and they did not like it at all.

"Where the hell's the funeral?" Kirby demanded. "You'd think we were ghosts or something, the way you're looking!" He turned to his comrades angrily. "Let's get out of here, guys. It's more cheerful up in the sky."

The other two nodded, and the C.O. hastily finished his instructions. "Now remember, keep away from von Goetz' circus, and if you see the thing's impossible, come right back. Goodby and good luck."

"So long!" they called back gaily, as they rushed to their planes and climbed into the cockpits. A moment later, the three engines roared with deafening power. The C.O. and the crowd of pilots stood watching. The three Spads trembled. Black smoke belched from their exhaust stacks. At the signal, the mechanics jerked the chocks from the wheels. One of the Spads leaped forward—Shorty's. Close on its tail came Kirby, and behind him, Travis. The three planes streaked across the tarmac, gathering speed. Then, one after another, they lifted from the ground and swept gracefully into the air.

The C.O. stood like a statue, following them with his eyes as they climbed in single file into the sunny translucent sky. The officer's face was white. He could not get the picture of that drunken pilot out of his mind. "Now you see it, now you don't." He shook his head as the three Spads slowly faded into distant specks, up here in No-Man's-Sky.

The day was even brighter and clearer than the day described by Andrews in his report. The weather was mild and balmy. The sky was a limitless clear expanse of blue, with streaming golden sunshine. Visibility was perfect as far as the human eye could see.

The three Spads moved smoothly through the clear air, high above the relief-map earth, which stood out distinct to the minutest details, with its forests and hills and fields. They moved smoothly, in single

file, about half a mile behind one another. Shorty Carn steered their course faithfully, and the other two followed faithfully, as if they were all attached to a single towline which Carn's Spad was pulling. They were not flying fast. Shorty was setting them an almost leisurely pace. They were approaching the Boche sky cautiously, almost with trepidation.

Had their C.O. seen them now, he would doubtless have cursed himself for sending them up. They were no longer cheerful nor carefree. They sat tense at their controls, their goggled faces grim and taut. Kirby, and Travis behind him, kept their eyes glued to the Spad of Shorty Carn. They never let that trim lead ship with its flashing wings get out of their sight for a single instant. Shorty, on the other hand, was always jerking his head back over his shoulder to see that his comrades were there in line. The sight of them was the only thing that reassured him—gave him the nerve to go right on flying toward their objective. Even as it was, he couldn't resist throttling down his engine more and more as he drew nearer to Boche land. His round little face was strangely pale. Damn that ace of spades!

By this time, Kirby was furious at himself for having allowed Shorty to fly first in line. He had to fight down a growing impulse to race ahead and take the lead himself; but he knew neither Shorty nor Travis would stand for it. It would only lead to a confused race in which all would try to get first place, and ultimately they would have to fly together in their old formation—which would probably be fatal. So Kirby kept in his second place, watching the bobbing, rocking Spad ahead of him, as a mother bird watches its fledgling. His mind was full of tormenting doubts and fears. He was telling himself, as he had told the C.O., that Andrews' report was just so much bunk. But something else was telling him that every plane that had tried to go out over this area had disappeared, been mysteriously lost. Damn that ace of spades!

Travis, the lanky wise Travis, was the tensest and most worried of all. Being the last in line, he watched not only Shorty's Spad, but also Kirby's, and he felt responsible for both. He would have been satisfied now to have even second place in the line; the idea of being in what he knew was the safest position didn't appeal to him at all. He was glad, at any rate, that the sky was so clear, for he could see both planes before him in every detail, see the helmeted heads of their pilots protruding from the fuselages. There could be no deceptions; if anything happened he would see it. He shook his head. Damn that ace of spades!

Such were the thoughts of the Three Mosquitoes as they filed slowly toward Boche land. And presently, all too soon for them, they found themselves crossing the lines. The seething shell-torn battle-front with its zigzag trenches was swimming below them. Enemy sky—No-Man's-Sky. They began to look for enemy planes now. They scanned the surrounding sky. Not a sign of anything; not a speck to mar the clear pure blue. But there was the brilliant sun, in whose blinding orb planes might be hiding, lurking.

Shorty went on. The other two followed. A tiny winding ribbon of silver appeared in the landscape below—a river. Shorty's Spad banked mildly, and the two Spads behind him duplicated the bank as if moved by the same controls. Gracefully the line of three ships swerved and then straightened out to follow that river below. On they droned, one after another, deeper and deeper into Boche land—three Spads sailing alone through an empty limitless sky. The very peacefulness and stillness of the air made the Mosquitoes all the more tense. Their nerves kept stretching tauter as they drew nearer and nearer to their destination. They were cold with suspense, and a nameless dread was growing within them.

The river below curved away abruptly, and Shorty, going now by his compass, led his comrades straight on. The landscape suddenly changed into a rolling panorama of hills and valleys and ravines. And then, out of the distance, nestled in one of those valleys, there appeared a low squatting cluster of buildings. The Three Mosquitoes stiffened, and their hearts jumped. The ammunition base—their objective.

Shorty headed straight for it, but slowly, cautiously. The others continued to follow. Nearer and nearer they drew to that ammunition base. The squatting cluster of buildings loomed slowly into a larger and clearer focus. Still not an enemy plane was in sight, though only Shorty was watching for them now. Kirby and Travis were once more keeping their eyes glued to the lead plane. And again Kirby was having all he could do to remain here in second place. A tense presentiment was beginning to grip him, and his heart was pounding like a sledge hammer. He watched that Spad in front of him so intently that his eyes ached from the strain.

Closer and closer now. Soon they would be coming directly above those buildings in the valley. Kirby tried to down his fears now. Certainly everything would be all right. Since they had got this far, there was no reason why they shouldn't be able to go right

on. Nothing was going to happen. Shorty's Spad was right there ahead of him, its wings rocking gently and flashing in the sun.

WHETHER Kirby actually screamed, he never remembered. He felt the hair rise beneath his helmet, felt his blood turn to ice, while sheer horror paralyzed him in every muscle.

His eyes continued to stare wildly through their goggles, even after they had seen the ghastly incredible thing take place. There, right in front of him, it had happened—happened without any apparent reason or logic. The Spad of Shorty Carn had vanished. One moment it was there, as solid and real as could be; and the next it was gone melted into the empty clear blue sky.

During the next stunned moments Kirby had no idea what he was doing. He didn't know that he was letting his plane flounder crazily, until it was threatening to go into a spin. His mind was a rioting tumult of confusion. He was dizzy from the conflicting emotions which swept through him in successive waves. With horror, he realized what he had seen. With anguish, he realized he had lost his comrade—Shorty Carn, his buddy. With terror, he realized that any second he, too, might dissolve into nothing. In fact, in his dazed state, he half-wondered if he hadn't been reduced to atoms already. Was he still alive, still in his plane? Everything seemed so unreal, so nightmarish.

Not until he heard the deafening staccato clatter behind him did he recover any semblance of his wits. The familiar sound brought him back to reality with a shock. He pulled up his plane to stop it from stalling, and jerked his head around fearfully—to see Travis' Spad writhing and twisting between two streaking Fokkers, whose forward machine guns were blazing away at it with merciless precision. They must have been hiding up in the sun, those Jerry scouts, and they had dived on Travis unawares. And even now Kirby saw that they bore black and white stripes. Von Goetz' planes!

They were cutting Travis to ribbons. It was plain to see that the lanky Mosquito had been trapped cold. Doubtless he had been so overcome by Shorty's disappearance that before he could spring to the defense he found himself caught in a prison of deadly cross-fire. Though he was fighting gamely, though his own guns were blazing, he was being shot to hell. He didn't have a chance.

Kirby did not stop to think. With a berserk oath,

he kicked his rudder and whipped his Spad around in a breathless skid turn which seemed almost to raise a cloud of dust. Frantically he rushed to the rescue of his comrade. Straight for the three twisting, gyrating planes he raced, at full throttle. In a matter of seconds, he was getting there, but even then he saw to his despair that Travis' plane was beginning to lurch and flounder from the bullets which pumped it from both sides.

"Hold on, Trav!" Kirby yelled frenziedly. "Hold on, old man. I'm coming. Hold on, for God's sake!"

Even as he spoke, he was leaning to his sights, trying to fasten them on one of the fleeting Jerry scouts. He pressed his stick triggers and fired wildly, as he swept into range. But he was too late.

A gasp of abject horror tore from Kirby as he saw Travis' Spad slowly turn over on its wings, saw it nose downward in a tight spin which grew more and more sickening in its speed. Wild sobs shook him as he followed the plunging ship with his eyes—followed it until it crashed in a heap of dust and debris somewhere on the Boche ground below. Three times Kirby saw it somersault before it finally lay still, in a grotesque heap of wreckage.

"Travis!" The agonized moan came from his very soul.

A whistling fusillade of tracers cut off the rest of his words. The two Fokkers, having shot down Travis, were now concentrating upon Kirby's Spad, closing in on it with deadly purpose. Bullets began to tick through Kirby's fuselage and ricochet from the cowl of his cockpit.

And then suddenly all Kirby's tumultuous emotions turned themselves into one mighty volcano of rage. His face turned crimson, and his eyes narrowed to slits behind their goggles. These damned Jerries had shot Travis to hell, and somehow he felt that they also had something to do with Shorty's ghastly finish. By God, they would pay! He'd make them pay if it was the last thing he did.

The two Fokkers were above him now, darting at him from either side and raining down their tracers. But he ignored their bullets. A demon was inside him, and this demon knew no fear or caution. Savagely, guided solely by rage, he hurled his Spad up at his two attackers. Furiously he pressed his triggers, and a wave of fierce exultation swept him as he saw his tracers cutting into one of the two Jerry ships, saw bits of wood and fabric leaping from the Fokker's tail assembly. The two Germans, realizing that they were

up against a determined man, redoubled the fury of their attack. But nothing could stop Kirby now. He was flying and fighting like a winged fury. His Spad was everywhere its opponents didn't expect it to be. It streaked and flashed in and out among them like lightning, too swiftly for them to set their sights on it. In its cockpit was a mad Yank, a Yank bent on revenge.

One of the Jerries tried frantically to Immelmann for altitude. Kirby, with a mad curse, whipped around to force the Fokker on the outside arc of the turn, and he recklessly ignored the fact that the other German was taking the opportunity to swing onto his tail. Around he shot, and even as the Fokker was pivoting over above, Kirby caught it dead in the ring of his sights. Again he pressed his triggers, and his guns vibrated and clattered. The Fokker never finished that Immelmann turn. It flew queerly, drunkenly for a moment, like a wounded bird. Then it went plunging earthward in a sickening dive, and a column of livid flame and smoke proclaimed its landing.

But now the other German, enraged by the fall of his comrade, got on Kirby's tail, and his bullets were beating a rattling tattoo on the Spad's elevator fins. Kirby let out an oath which almost brought the blood to his mouth, and this time he Immelmanned; nor did he give the Jerry time to force him on the outside arc. He pivoted over and then came roaring down on the Fokker, both guns raining tracers. Again, to his savage triumph, he saw that his bullets were hitting the mark. Slowly but surely he was shooting this second Fokker to ribbons.

The German must have realized that he had no chance against this madman of a Yank, for suddenly he tried to pull out and flee. At full throttle, he headed deeper into German territory. But Kirby had no intention of letting him get away. The Mosquito was out for revenge, and he was going to get it.

He had some altitude on the fleeing Fokker, and he used it fiercely to his advantage. He pushed his stick forward and sped down after the Jerry ship in a slight dive which gave him superior speed. Presently he was pouncing on the Fokker's tail, like a hawk on a chicken, and again his tracers were cutting mercilessly into the German ship. The Jerry tried desperately to swerve off to the right, but Kirby gave him no chance to do so. The Spad shot ahead, intercepting the Fokker's path. The Jerry was forced to turn back, rather than risk a collision.

THUS it went on—a one-sided fight now, with the German putting up a weak futile defense. Relentlessly

Kirby kept crowding him, cutting him off whenever he tried to move in any direction, and firing round after round of tracer at him. The German's maneuvers were becoming wilder and wilder now. He began to take desperate chances. Twice he almost collided with the Mosquito, who stubbornly refused to give him any quarter. For desperate as the German was, the Mosquito, having lost his two comrades, was even more desperate. He did not care what happened, so long as he sent this Fokker to destruction.

Just how the thing happened Kirby never knew. He had been edging in on the Fokker, forcing it back, back, back—when suddenly, to his incredulous horror, the Jerry ship vanished, just as Shorty's Spad had vanished before. It was gone without a trace, and again Kirby found only empty sky before him.

The horror-stricken Mosquito decided that he must be mad—stark, raving mad. He was seeing things, or he was in the throes of some lurid nightmare. He could not attach a semblance of logic to the thing that had happened. Here one of the Germans' own planes had vanished. God, it was horrible, supernatural! It was—

He had no chance for further thought. For in that instant there came an ominous shadow overhead, the roar of a wide-open motor, and the shrill clatter of Spandau machine guns. And down from the sun, straight upon the unsuspecting Mosquito, dived a new Fokker. This Fokker was completely black in color, save for the white squares which framed its Maltese crosses. Even as Kirby heard the bullets smashing into his Spad with deadly accuracy, he recognized that plane. It was the allblack Fokker of Germany's latest and greatest ace, von Goetz.

Desperately Kirby tried to pull up to face his attacker. Again a fierce volcanic rage was upon the Mosquito. Von Goetz—the man who was said to be behind all this ghastly business, who was said to be responsible for all the American ships which had been lost. And now he had pounced on Kirby like a hawk, was shooting him to bits.

This time the Mosquito's rage availed him nothing. He had been caught unawares, and now, before he could move, there came such a terrific fusillade of bullets from the Fokker above that Kirby wondered how he had escaped being hit. As it was, one of the shots passed right through a sleeve of his teddybear, and another seared his cheek. Relentlessly the German kept blazing away. With a crash, half of Kirby's rudder was shot to shreds, and the smashing of metal against

metal told him his engine was being hit, too. The Spad shivered as if a giant had picked it up in his hand and was shaking it like a rattle. Kirby felt the joystick go limp in his hands, and then he was hurtling downward in a helpless dizzy spin. On his tail, diving after him, but no longer firing now that the quarry was certainly caught, came the all-black Fokker of von Goetz.

The next seconds were just a confused nightmare to Kirby—a nightmare in which he fought like a madman with his controls; in which he was flogged unmercifully by the wind, as it shrieked through his flying wires and seemed to grow more and more terrific; in which the blurred earth came rushing up toward him, looming, looming. He never knew how he was able to regain partial control over his Spad. He never knew how he had come out of that spin and managed to pancake right in the valley where the big ammunition base was located. Not until his plane settled with a dull violent impact, which broke its undercarriage but otherwise left it intact, did he realize that he was still alive and unscathed.

And then, as he sat there in the cockpit trying to catch his breath, he was seized by rough hands and literally dragged from the ship. A moment later he stood, dazed and shaken, in the midst of a ring of gray-clad helmeted figures, who covered him with rifles and revolvers. He stared at them sullenly. Then he realized with despair and anguish that he was a prisoner. He had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

But there was nothing he could do about it; he saw at once that escape was hopelessly out of the question. He stood there resignedly, and made no resistance when one of the Boche—a cruel-faced *Oberleutnant*—came up and stripped him roughly of his weapons and maps, hurling guttural oaths of hate at him.

“Stand here, swine,” the German officer commanded in heavily accented English. “If you move, you die.”

Kirby made no reply, but sullenly did as he was bade. He continued to stand there, and the Boche remained in a ring around him, their glistening guns still keeping him covered. They were holding him here for some reason, instead of marching him off and turning him in for the prison camp. Prison camp! The realization that he was going to be helplessly cooped up during the rest of the war deepened his despair and grief. But there was nothing he could do about it.

All this time he had been so dazed that he had not really been aware of his surroundings. Now as he stood here waiting, he began to look about. For the first time he felt the strong breeze which seemed to be blowing

through the valley. It was whipping his clothes, against his body, inflating the bulky sleeves and trousers of his teddybear like a balloon. Somewhere, seemingly from the surrounding hills, a shrill continuous wail was audible. It was an eerie sound, almost like a human scream of agony. Could it be wind? Kirby was unable to understand it. The weather had seemed so mild, and there had been hardly a breeze in the air.

This last thought reminded him of the all-black Fokker, and he glanced upward looking for it. It was nowhere to be seen. Von Goetz, satisfied that his victim was down and captured, had doubtless streaked off on some other mission.

Kirby continued to gaze on the surrounding scene. His eye fell at last on the ammunition base. The cluster of low buildings were quite a distance away, in the very center of this expansive valley. There was an air of bustling activity about the place. Men were running around everywhere, and shells were being loaded on a little donkey train. This narrow-gauge railroad ran from the buildings into a tunnel through the largest and steepest of the surrounding hills. Where all the other hills were full of trees and foliage, this one big hill was absolutely barren. Moreover, it was smooth in its steep incline, where the others were of rough contour.

All these things mystified Kirby, made him wonder. The strong breeze down here; the distant continuous wail; the one great hill with its smooth barren surface; the tunnel in that hill, where the narrow-gauge railway ran—all were strangely puzzling. The horror of everything he had seen and experienced took its hold on Kirby once more. God, what kind of place was this, anyway? Never before had he seen so many fantastic things.

HE BROKE off suddenly, for at that moment a staff car suddenly came bouncing across the ground, and drew to a stop near the ring of Boche. In the rear of the car sat a man in the uniform of a German colonel. He climbed out. He was a tall young fair-haired Saxon, with hard intelligent features and the stamp of reckless courage on his face. He approached Kirby's captors, who all stiffened respectfully. They broke the ring to let him through, and he came right up to the Mosquito and confronted him. His smile was not unfriendly, nor was his tone.

“Good day, my Yankee friend,” he greeted the Mosquito, in flawless English. “It is a pleasure indeed to meet so clever and courageous a foe. I congratulate you, Captain Kirby.”

Kirby stared at him dumbly. He managed to find his voice, and blurt out foolishly, "Who—who in hell are you?"

"The name," said the German, with an exaggerated modesty that betrayed a streak of self-importance and pride, "is von Goetz."

Kirby started, and his eyes widened incredulously. Could this be von Goetz—this young cheerful fellow? He had expected that the German ace, judging from his diabolical work, would look like a fiend out of hell, a snarling fanatical devil. Yet even now he noticed the insignia of the Imperial flying corps on the young Saxon's tunic.

"So you're the great von Goetz?" the Mosquito said. "Well, believe me, if you hadn't jumped on me like that, if you had given me a real fight, you wouldn't be standing here now and grinning about it."

Some of the surrounding Boche who understood English growled at this impudence and flourished their revolvers menacingly, but von Goetz merely smiled more broadly.

"I don't know about that," the German said. "I think I would be standing here grinning, anyway."

"Well, it was a pretty dirty trick, diving on a man that way," Kirby insisted hotly.

"After the man had done for two of my best flyers?" von Goetz inquired casually.

"One of them, you mean," Kirby corrected, and at the same time a pang of anguish went through him as he thought of his two fallen comrades. Shorty and Travis! Rage filled his voice. "I wish to hell I had done for two of them. And I would have, if—"

The German waved him off. "You needn't try to pretend, Captain Kirby. I know just how much you know, and that what you did was quite deliberate. But," he added with firm conviction, "I'm sure you're the first of our enemies who has even suspected it. Besides being one of your country's greatest aces, you must be amazingly clever. Until you came along, everything worked perfectly. As the magicians on the stage always say, 'The hand is quicker than the eye.'"

The words completely mystified Kirby. Like everything else around this place, they seemed inexplicable. What did von Goetz think the Mosquito knew? Something he didn't know—that was certain. He was shrewd enough not to betray his ignorance, however. Instead, he pretended to know everything, so that the German would talk with freedom and perhaps reveal the mystery.

"Well," he said furiously, "all I can say is that it's a hell of a way you Germans have of fighting a war, with

your poison gases, and rotten underhand business like this. It isn't sportman-ship."

Von Goetz' face hardened, changing him from a smiling young man to a stern relentless German soldier. "War is not a game of sport," he said slowly. "It is a serious business, and each side takes advantage of the other's weakness. If our enemies are dense, there is no reason why we shouldn't trick them." He paused a moment. "But now time presses. I regret that I shall have to turn you over to the military authorities, Captain Kirby. The least I can do for so worthy a foe is to take him in personally, in my staff car."

He turned and barked out some crisp orders to the Boche soldiers. A moment or so later, Kirby was seated in the staff car, with von Goetz on one side of him and the cruel-faced *Oberleutnant* on the other. The latter kept an ugly long-barreled Luger resting on his lap, its muzzle pointed toward the Mosquito. Two soldiers stood on the running board of an auto, and one other sat in front with the chauffeur. Seated in a staff car with six Boche, Kirby was more helpless than ever. There could be no escape.

At a word from von Goetz, the car leaped forward and went bounding across the sunny valley, moving in the opposite direction from that big hill with its tunnel. As they approached the other end of the valley, the breeze which blew through here increased to a strong flogging wind, which whipped down on the men in the staff car. The continuous wailing sound which Kirby had heard became louder and shriller. The car was on a road now, and the road led out of the valley between two hills. The wind kept increasing, until it was so strong that it actually retarded the speed of the heavy car, and the chauffeur had difficulty in steering. Von Goetz suddenly leaned over to speak to Kirby, and though he shouted, the shrill wail in the air all but drowned out his voice.

"Now, my friend," he was saying, "you must not be surprised by the sight you are going to see. We have to pass the place, so I might as well show you—especially since you discovered our secret and know all about it."

Kirby had heard enough to make him sit up with a start. A burning curiosity gripped him, and he was tense and alert in every nerve. What was the sight he was going to see? The staff car went on bucking the increasing wind, moving slowly along the road between the hills. Kirby, full of apprehension, waited and watched. The sunlight dazzled him, as they came out from the hills into the open once more. Another valley stretched before them, and here the wind was

terrific. The wailing noise was now behind them, back in the hills. Von Goetz gave another order, and the car was drawing to a stop. The German ace nodded to Kirby, and pointed.

“Look, my friend!” he shouted. “Look and see!”

Kirby looked, and slowly his eyes widened with indescribable horror and awe. The blood drained from his face, leaving it an ashen ghastly white. A gasp broke from him.

“God—Good God!”

Strangely enough, at this very moment, pale and haggard, the general of the nth brigade stood before the long table, facing the all-high chieftains of the A.E.F. With shame and humiliation, he listened to the harsh angry accusations from the man in the center of the table—a broad-shouldered erect man with iron-gray hair and a mustache.

“So you come to us,” the commander-in-chief of the U.S. army was thundering, even as the general had thundered at the twelve squadron commanders, “You come to us like a blubbering baby, to say that you’ve failed—that you can’t get your air force to perform their duties. And why?” Contempt edged his tone like a knife. “Because you’re as frightened as they are; you’ve been influenced by a lot of fantastic nonsense!”

The general winced and shook his head. The thing he had feared had happened; he had weakened and been forced to come here to G.H.Q. He tried desperately to defend himself against the very charges he himself had made.

“I did my best to handle the situation,” he said. “But now that the Three Mosquitoes have all been missing since early this afternoon, the rest of the flyers are in a hopeless condition. I have ordered the raid on the ammunition dump for to-night, but I doubt if the order will be carried out.”

The commander-in-chief banged his fist on the table. “It must be carried out. We’ve got to wipe out that base. Now I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Though we really have no right to spare them, we’ll use some squadrons from another sector. We’ll combine these with yours, and have a force of over a hundred and fifty ships. Certainly your men won’t be afraid that anything can happen to so many planes. They will go over shortly after darkness and raid that place, and they ought to be able to wipe out this von Goethe circus.” His eyes leveled on the general sternly. “Now you go back and try to put confidence into your squadrons again. Preparations will be made for this great raid at once.”

The general straightened a little, the hope coming back to his face.

“Very well, sir,” he said quietly. “I’ll do my best.”

MEANWHILE, Kirby sat there, horrified, gaping at the sight which von Goetz had pointed out to him from the staff car. There was no mistaking the significance of the scene before him. It was all obvious, all perfectly clear.

The wind-swept valley which spread before him was covered, actually littered, with grotesque heaps and wrecks of splintered wood, shredded fabric, and twisted rusting metal. Once these wrecks had been fleet airplanes which roared through the sky, but now they were so much junk. There were scores of them, hundreds of them; one could never begin to count them. They filled the entire valley, covered every part of it. Here and there, on some of the torn pieces of fabric, faded markings were visible, and though the paint was warped and peeling, one could still distinguish the colors—red, white and blue. The tricolor of the Allies.

Realization brought a hot surging fury to the Mosquito.

“So that’s where all these planes have vanished,” he burst out, still unable to grasp the mystery, but convinced now that there was nothing supernatural about it. “That’s what’s been happening to our squadrons. And you can make a collection like this and be proud of it!” The *Oberleutnant* at his side snarled and lifted his Luger menacingly, but von Goetz only smiled.

“A collection to which you added one of our own planes,” he reminded Kirby.

And Kirby again was baffled, mystified. His eyes swept over the littered valley. He was searching, not for the German plane, but for a Spad with a certain insignia. He was searching for the plane of his buddy, Shorty Carn. Somewhere among all these wrecks, somewhere in this valley, that plane must be. But he looked for it in vain; it was impossible to distinguish one wreck from another.

“So I guess you have grasped the whole upshot of the business,” von Goetz stated, and did not know how he was flattering Kirby. “I’m sorry that I cannot give you a practical demonstration but—” He broke off with a surprised gasp. “Well, this is certainly a coincidence. Talk about the devil—”

His eyes were glancing up toward the sunny sky, and Kirby, with a growing apprehension, followed

them. Instantly he saw, and his heart jumped.

Far overhead, and somewhere off in back of the valley where the ammunition base was located, were two swift planes. One was following the other—seemed to be chasing it. The fleeing ship was a Fokker. The pursuing craft was a French Nieuport.

“Yes, a coincidence indeed,” von Goetz was saying, and now there was just a slight smirk in his manner. “Never before have I seen action suited so nicely to words. Furthermore, this will be the first Frenchman we have caught. The Yanks have not been coming over lately, and this poor Frenchman must have got lost and wandered into our sector by mistake. He will never realize the mistake he made.”

The words struck horror into Kirby, for already he could sense what was going to happen. Helplessly, he stared with awful fascination at the two ships above. All the Boche in the car were looking at them now, though they still took pains to keep Kirby covered. The Fokker came skirting on, and the Nieuport followed.

“You see,” von Goetz explained, “that Fokker—one of my own men—is carefully leading the innocent Frenchman into the trap, which he himself will avoid. Watch now.”

Kirby did watch, with growing horror. The Fokker went on, teasing now. The Frenchman followed. Suddenly the Fokker did a sharp unexpected bank off to the right. The Frenchman, before he could follow the maneuver, was carried straight on by the momentum of his speed. And then it happened. The Nieuport vanished.

But no—it did not really vanish. This time, from his position in the staff car on the ground, Kirby’s eyes saw much more than they had seen in the sky. Rather than vanish, the Nieuport seemed suddenly to spurt ahead with terrific, incredible speed, so fast that it became a wraithlike streak. It drew one long circular line through the sky, one long arc, up and around.

Then, in the next split second, there was an unearthly shriek overhead, and like a plunging meteor, something came crashing down into the valley. Right in the midst of all the wreckage it crashed, and the ground shook from the impact. A geyser of smoke and flame shot upward and fell in scattering debris. Then silence—save for that wailing in the hills, a wailing which sounded now like some ghoulish death chant.

“That was a rather ugly one,” von Goetz was saying quietly. “There is not much left of the Nieuport.”

Kirby sat speechless, stricken with awe and horror. God, what a terrible death! Poor Shorty—the thought

that the little Mosquito could only have met the same fate as this Frenchman filled Kirby with an anguish which wrenched at his heartstrings. But at the same time, his brain was racing madly, frantically. Somehow a glimmer of light was beginning to come to him now, and he commenced to grasp things, tentatively. That wailing wind, that Fokker dodging out of the way so the Nieuport would go straight ahead—

A sudden savage oath broke from him. His eyes blazed.

“So that’s your trick,” he burst out. “That’s what you’ve been doing. Leading our ships into some kind of freak wind.”

Von Goetz seemed surprised. “You talk as if it just occurred to you,” he said, and the Mosquito remembered then that he was supposed to have known all this right along. He hastened to cover up his slip.

“I thought there was more to it than this,” he said disparagingly, in the wild hope of drawing von Goetz out. “I thought at least there was some cleverness attached to the thing.”

It worked. Von Goetz’ one weak point had been touched—his pride. “Perhaps you will realize that there is some cleverness attached to it when I explain a few things to you,” he retorted hotly. Turning to the chauffeur, he barked out another order. The staff car started forward again, with the Boche soldiers still clinging faithfully to its running board, and the scowling *Oberleutnant* still keeping Kirby covered with his Luger. As they moved on along the road, with the wind now decreasing and the wailing sound growing fainter and fainter behind them, von Goetz began to talk.

“Since you know so much about our trick, I might as well tell you the rest, if only to amuse you during this bore-some ride. Being a prisoner, you have no chance to betray our secret, anyway. Consequently there’s no risk.”

While Kirby listened in awed silence, and while the Boche *Oberleutnant* beside him scowled and made no effort to hide the fact that he thought his superior officer was indiscreet to give any information to a Yank, von Goetz told his story—the strangest and most thrilling story Kirby had ever heard.

“I WILL start at the beginning,” said the German ace. “Quite some time ago, I was flying along over these hills, when without the slightest warning, my Fokker was suddenly caught in a terrific gale—a virtual twister. The thing seemed all the more

unnatural in view of the fact that the air had been so clear and calm, and there had been no sign of a real wind.

“By sheer luck I managed to keep control of my ship, and suddenly, to my surprise, I was out of the gale, and the air was as calm and peaceful as before. Furthermore, when I looked back at the zone where the current had caught me, I could see no sign of a twister, nor hear any sound of rushing wind. The sky looked as clear and peaceful there as it did outside the zone. I realized then that I had inadvertently stumbled upon one of those freaks of nature for which we might search the four corners of the earth, and never discover.

“Being an aeronautical engineer, I was naturally interested in this phenomenon, and I decided to make a thorough investigation of it. I did, and soon found out the cause of the freak current. It was due to the peculiar topography of the valleys below. It so happens that the sun hits these hills in such a manner as to cause a high-pressure area in the valley where you saw those wrecked planes, and a low-pressure area in the valley right next to it—the valley where we have our ammunition base. The fact that two extreme pressures exist next to each other is the real freak. The peculiar atmospheric condition causes a continual wind from one valley into the other. The current begins in the valley of the wrecked planes, and as it passes into the low-pressure field of the other valley, it instantly accumulates the speed and fury of a gale.

“With increasing speed, this gale goes rushing across the bottom of the valley where we have the ammunition base, and by the time it reaches the large steep hill you must have noticed at the end of this valley, its power has become terrific. It goes shooting right up the smooth side of the hill, which is curved like the inside of a cup and which directs the gale up and around through the air, right back to the valley from which it came. In other words, we have a sort of perpetual motion of nature—a continual circle of wind, a whirlpool of air which describes its wide sweeping arc through the sky.

“It occurred to me that this natural phenomenon might possibly be harnessed and put to use. Why not develop it as a weapon of war? I laid my idea before the high command, and they gave me full authority to do whatever I deemed feasible. I got right to work, and for months a staff of meteorologists and engineers labored with me, making countless surveys, figuring out various currents and pressures. We did a lot of

excavating and constructing. Finally we smoothed down the surface of that big hill and made it even more cuplike, so that the gale would accumulate even greater power as it was sent shooting into the air. By the time we were through, we had not only enlarged the zone of the gale in the sky, but had so increased its strength that it could pick up any number of planes like feathers, regardless of their size and weight, and dash them to earth with a speed which made them almost as invisible as a projectile. However, I must confess that I did not think the trick would work so well as to create the illusion that the plane caught was vanishing. But when our enemies came to this conclusion, we used the thing to our advantage and let the propaganda spread.

“The first thing to do, of course, was to educate our own flyers to keep away from this treacherous body of air. As a matter of fact, only the planes of my own circus are permitted to fly in close proximity to the zone of danger; they are all trained aces and able to watch exactly where they go by the landmarks on the ground.

“How we caught all your planes? It was child’s play. We simply led them on, played a teasing game, and finally sucked them into our little trap. So successful was the measure, that the high command wisely decided to lay its biggest ammunition base right in the valley beneath the gale. No place could have been safer, for any plane trying to fly above the buildings would be caught and destroyed instantly. There was a slight problem, we had to put up pretty strong buildings to withstand the wind down here, and also we had to make a tunnel through the big hill so that we could transport our shells to the Front. We never could have run them over the hill, on account of the gale.

“Well, establishing that ammunition base brought us even better results. Your planes came over and tried to raid it, and whole squadrons of them were wiped out at a time.

“And now, my friend,” von Goetz concluded, as the staff car continued to speed along the dusty road, “are you not convinced that our trick is quite clever? Don’t you think we have turned this freak of nature into a very ingenious and effective device?”

Kirby could not suppress his awe. What wizard was this young German engineer, who could harness the very forces of nature and use them to the advantage of his country? Now at last the whole thing was clear, the mystery revealed. Now at last Andrews’ report was explained. And so were all the strange ghastly things

which had happened this afternoon. Shorty Carn, leading the line of Spads, had flown right into the fatal zone, and Kirby and Travis would have met his same fate had they gone on ahead.

As for that Fokker, Kirby must have unwittingly crowded the German into the whirlpool, despite the latter's efforts to steer out of it. No wonder the Jerry had maneuvered so frantically. It was just sheer luck that Kirby hadn't guilelessly fallen into the trap himself. In fact, had von Goetz not dived on him—a measure the Boche ace had taken because he thought Kirby had discovered his secret—the Mosquito would probably have gone to certain death.

However, Kirby had no intention of admitting to von Goetz that his stunt was so ingenious and remarkable. Instead, he said coldly, "Well, you've got away with murder so far. But you're going to pay for it. Wait and see. You'll all be frying in your own grease." Again the *Oberleutnant* snarled, and again von Goetz smiled his careless smile. "Isn't that rather strong talk," he inquired casually, "considering that practically all your flyers are afraid even to go up in their planes?"

Kirby winced at the thrust, but his anger only increased. "Sooner or later they'll find out your childish trick," he promised vehemently. "And then you'll see a few things."

"Again I think my friend is too much of an optimist," von Goetz remarked. "The day may come when our trick is discovered, but that day will be too late. I have heard from good authority that it is quite vital to your army that our ammunition base here be wiped out immediately." His smile was bland now. "I can assure you that our ammunition base won't be wiped out immediately, or even eventually."

Again the Mosquito could not help wincing, for he realized the truth of these words. He knew that the coming push depended on the destruction of that ammunition center. God, if only he could get away somehow, escape back across the lines so he could at least reveal this mystery to the Allies! Perhaps, then, they would find some way to combat it. Here he was, the only Yank who held the secret in his grasp, and yet there was nothing he could do about it. He was utterly helpless.

Even now the staff car was slowing down and drawing to a stop before a chateau, which seemed to be some kind of military headquarters. The Boche, soldiers jumped from the running board, and as von Goetz motioned Kirby to get out, and the *Oberleutnant* nudged him with his long-barreled

Luger, the Mosquito knew that there was no further hope. He was being turned in to the authorities, who would send him straight to a prison camp. The war was over for him.

THEY marched him into the chateau, the Boche soldiers flanking him with rifles shouldered, and von Goetz leading the way. The *Oberleutnant* followed in the rear. Sullenly, in hopeless resignation, the Mosquito walked along between them. They took him down a long corridor, through a doorway, into a large spacious room. There a stern-visaged Teuton colonel crouched over a desk and—

Kirby's sudden frenzied whoop of joy made all his captors jump and grip their weapons apprehensively. The Mosquito was beside himself, almost delirious with wild relief and exultation, "Shorty!" His vibrant voice filled the room. "Shorty, you little son of a gun!"

Before the awed Germans could intervene, there came an answering yell from the small corpulent figure in khaki flying togs, who stood in another part of the room, also surrounded by armed guards. It was Shorty Carn, all right, and no ghost, though the little man's face was pale and still full of the horror he had been through. Otherwise, he was unscathed.

"Shorty, you little runt!" Kirby kept on cursing joyously. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Damned if I know," Shorty came back. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Kirby could not get over his surprise. "But I thought sure you were—"

"Silence!" The sharp command came from the stern-visaged colonel at the desk. He also spoke flawless English. "This is no place for sentimental reunions."

But though Kirby and Shorty had to hold their tongues, for the crowd of Boche in the room menaced them with guns, they could not be stopped from grinning affectionately at each other. Never before had they felt the bond of their friendship so strongly. But then Shorty looked at Kirby inquiringly, and Kirby had no trouble reading the anxious question in his eyes—the question which said as clearly as words, "How about Travis?" Kirby evaded Carn's eyes with his own. There was no use marring Shorty's joy by letting him know how Travis had crashed.

Von Goetz was smiling now, as he addressed the colonel at the desk. "In a way, *Herr Oberst*, we cannot blame these two men for making such a demonstration. Certainly, I know Captain Kirby is the

most surprised man in the world to find his comrade alive." He turned to Kirby. "I congratulate you on having so remarkable a colleague," he said frankly. "Indeed, he has achieved the record of being the first pilot to fall into our trap and come out alive. How he did it, I don't know. He must have kept his head throughout his brief but harrowing experience, for when we pulled him out of his crashed ship, we found he had removed his goggles before the crash and thrown both arms before his face. That was the only thing that saved him from sure death."

"I don't even remember doing it," Shorty put in frankly. Again the horror of what he had been through showed on his features. "All I remember is that some kind of hurricane picked my Spad up and pulled it through the air so fast I lost my breath in no time, and started to pass out. The next thing I knew some jerry medico was fixing me up and—"

"That is enough." Again the stern colonel at the desk interrupted impatiently. "I told you to hold your silence, swine."

Shorty obeyed sullenly. Von Goetz spoke again. "Well, it was, all in all, a miraculous escape," he concluded. "And I am sure that he will be the last as well as the first man to have come out of that trap alive."

"Which brings us to the point," the colonel at the desk put in, speaking German this time. "We have some questions to ask both these men, and then we'll send them away to the prison camp." He barked at the Boche soldiers, "Bring them up to the desk."

The two Mosquitoes were marched before him. He looked up at them with shrewd narrowed eyes. Then, with unexpected abruptness, he snapped out, "Our scout planes have reported that the squadrons in your sector, as well as some in neighboring sectors, are making preparations for a raid on our ammunition base to-night. Is this true?"

The two Mosquitoes stared at him blankly. Then both fought to control the horror they felt, as they realized that what the *Oberst* said must be the truth. All this time Kirby had felt that the scheduled raid to-night would not come off. Since he and his comrades had not returned, he knew the rest of the flyers would never have the nerve to go up. This would have been fortunate, for if they did attempt the raid, they would only be doomed to certain destruction.

But now this German colonel had informed them that outside help had been obtained, that squadrons from other sectors were going to pitch in and join the

raid. These reinforcements would give the flyers in this sector the necessary nerve to go up. A tremendous fleet of planes would come over, and they would be wiped out as certainly as all the planes which had come over before them.

Von Goetz was talking now, smiling his usual smile as he spoke. "It's all right, *Herr Oberst*," he said in English. "I watched these two men's reactions. They know nothing about this intended raid; they were quite surprised, in fact."

He turned to the Mosquitoes. "Yes your squadrons must be in a desperate condition, indeed, to have to call on outside help. And unless I am very much mistaken," he went on, almost with keen anticipation, "we are going to cripple the whole United States air force tonight, by doing away with a vast number of their planes and pilots."

The two Mosquitoes flushed with a futile helpless anger, and now both of them prayed vainly for some loophole, some opportunity of escape. If only they could get back, warn their comrades— But the more they thought of it, the more ridiculously impossible the idea became. Even now it was growing dark outside. Dusk was in the air. Before long, one of the Boche had to switch on the electric light which protruded from a socket in the wall. Night was coming on, and with it, that tremendous number of doomed planes. Even if Shorty and Kirby could escape now, by a miracle of miracles, they could never get back in time to warn their countrymen.

In the next moment, like a final crushing blow to their last remaining shred of hope, the *Oberst* at the desk snapped out, "Well, there is no sense keeping them here any longer. Take them away to the internment camp." The crowd of Boche soldiers in the room stiffened, and rifles snapped to shoulders. They closed in about the two helpless Yanks, the *Oberleutnant* taking the command. Von Goetz delayed their departure to say a last word.

"Let me assure you that it has been a great pleasure to meet you both," the young Saxon said with his friendly grin. "It is not often that one meets such courageous and clever flyers. I hope you find your internment not too disagreeable."

"I hope you rot in hell," Kirby replied with cold savage fury. "You with your inhuman, murderous methods!"

"And I hope he gets his hope," Shorty put in vehemently.

The inevitable angry scowl rose from the

Oberleutnant and some of the other Boche, and the inevitable smile remained on von Goetz' face.

"Thanks," he said with profound urbanity. "And I might add that I admire your sincerity. At least, you Yankees are frank and outspoken." He turned to the colonel at the desk. "Well, *Herr Oberst*, I must get back to my squadron. I trust I shall see you soon again."

"*Auf wiedersehen, Herr von Goetz*," the colonel replied pleasantly, and von Goetz strode from the room. Soon the sound of a starting motor and the crunching of sand under wheels announced the ace's departure.

The scowling *Oberleutnant* again took command of his prisoners.

"March, swine," he snapped at the two Mosquitoes, as the Boche soldiers flanked them on either side. Bitterly, listlessly, Kirby and Shorty started for the door with their captors.

BUT before they reached the door, a newcomer suddenly walked through it, entering the room. He was a tall lean man in the uniform of a full German general. At the sight of him, the Boche halted with their prisoners and stiffened to attention, while the colonel at the desk jumped up respectfully.

And at the sight of him Kirby and Shorty almost passed out.

Only by the sheerest will power could the two Mosquitoes contain themselves and conceal the joyful surprise they felt. Only by the sheerest effort could they manage to show no sign of recognition, to give no shout of greeting.

For the man in that general's uniform was their comrade, the third of the Mosquitoes—Travis. There he was, alive and apparently unscathed. And he was playing his part to perfection. He looked every inch the arrogant Prussian, as he strode into the room with a supercilious expression on his features. He glanced at Kirby and Shorty as if they were a sight unworthy of his eyes. Nevertheless, as he glanced at them, his eyes covertly flashed them a message which none of the Germans saw—a message which clearly said, "Don't recognize me."

But Kirby and Shorty needed no such warning. Both of them had been shrewd and quick enough to keep their wits. The expression of their faces had not changed in the slightest, though their hearts were leaping with exultant joy and relief. They were together again—the Three Mosquitoes. They were reunited, though two of them were prisoners surrounded by a

swarm of Boche, while the third was a pseudo-German general, armed and free, but nevertheless in a perilous role.

Travis faced the respectfully inquiring colonel of the army.

"*Oberst von Ritter*," he snapped out in his flawless German. "I was informed that you had two Yankee aviators here from this sector. Since they are the first pilots we have caught alive in many weeks, I came here to interview them personally and get some information about the offensive our accursed enemies are planning. I am General von Sachs, attached to Imperial staff."

The colonel was all courtesy and respect. "We are indeed honored by your visit, *Excellenz*. Here are the two prisoners, but I must warn you that they are typical Yanks, insolent and stubborn."

Travis' eyes narrowed ominously, and his face looked absolutely cruel. "I know how to handle these Yankee pigs," he said with malignant significance. He turned to the crowd of Boche soldiers who still surrounded the other two Mosquitoes. "Back them up against that wall," Travis rasped.

The Boche soldiers obeyed with alacrity. They marched Kirby and Shorty up to the wall, where the two of them stood, outwardly resigned and sullen, but inwardly wondering what their comrade could have up his sleeve.

Travis' expression became even crueller, and he suddenly pulled out a Luger from his holster. "Now all of you get out of my way. Let me face these two dogs," he barked. The soldiers instantly backed away from the wall, though they still kept their guns ready and trained. The *Oberst* at the desk stood watching in respectful silence.

Travis confronted his comrades now. Again his eyes, even as they seemed to gaze at them with scorn and hate, were flashing them the warning not to show any recognition. He shook his Luger at them.

"Now, you, there," he rasped in English at Kirby. "What squadron are you from?" And his eyes said, "Stall me off. Answer any old way."

"None of your damned business," Kirby shot back.

Travis acted as though he were almost paralyzed with rage, as if he were going to break a blood vessel.

"Impudent pig!" he roared. And deliberately he leaned forward and gave Kirby a vicious crack across the face with the back of his hand. The blow was all too realistic; it stung Kirby painfully, made him stiffen up. But in the same instant, he saw the reason

why Travis had resorted to such a measure. For as the lanky man leaned forward, close to his leader, his free left hand slipped a tiny folded paper into one of the pockets of Kirby's teddybear. And though the expression of rage on his face did not change in the slightest, his lips moved and spoke in a whisper which was audible only to Kirby, who had to strain his ears to catch the rapid words.

"Light switch right behind you. Turn off when I give signal. You and Shorty out through window; run for woods behind chateau. I'll cover, and meet you in rendezvous written on paper. Meanwhile, keep stalling—" And in the next second he was roaring loudly, "Now will you tell me your squadron?"

"The only thing I'll tell you," Kirby retorted, realizing that it was best to keep acting insolent, since he had already established a reputation among these Boche for doing so, "is to go to hell."

Travis' face was satanic. "I'll deal with you, you swine," he promised. "We have ways of taking the insolence out of your kind. Meanwhile, I'll examine this other dog of a Yank." He wheeled on Shorty. "How many planes are there in your sector? Answer at once."

"Nine million," Shorty replied, without batting an eye.

"You lying little rat!" Travis leaned forward and seized the little Mosquito by the collar, shaking him as if he were a rag doll. But as he shook him he whispered, "Jump through window when light goes out. Follow Kirby." His voice rose in a bellow. "Now are you going to talk or not?" And at the same time, his glance shot to Kirby, shot the signal which his lips formed.

"All right! Shoot!"

Kirby did not hesitate. By edging back against the wall, he had located the exact position of the light switch. All in a flash, he wheeled half around, his hand darting furtively. A shout of alarm broke from several of the Boche, and they started to bring their rifles and revolvers to bear. But Kirby's fingers had already found the switch. With his heart in his mouth, he pressed it.

Click! The room was plunged into darkness—a darkness that was intense not only because it was night outside, but because the men's eyes had become accustomed to the dazzling electric light which had flooded the place a moment before.

Confusion followed. Everybody shouted at once, and there was a wild scramble of feet. But Kirby and Shorty knew what they were doing. The great French window stood out like a light patch in the darkness,

because it was lighter outside than in. The two Mosquitoes fairly flew across the room to that window. They heard Travis' shouting voice now.

"Get them!" he was roaring in German. "Get the dogs!" He was over at the door of the room, and cleverly he opened it and slammed it, at the same time making a lot of noise with his feet. This brought all the Boche rushing confusedly in his direction, and gave Kirby and Shorty their chance. Calmly they pulled open the French windows, and unnoticed, leaped out into the night.

Travis was making the most of the situation, deliberately balling things up so that Kirby and Shorty would have ample time to get away into the woods. Now the lanky Mosquito suddenly hurled himself upon one of the dim Boche figures. He seized the surprised and protesting German around the neck in a strangle hold, and yelled triumphantly. "I've got one of them. Put that light on, for God's sake!"

AT LAST somebody found the switch, and every one blinked in the sudden dazzling light which flooded the room again. All stared at the squirming, struggling man whom Travis held tightly in his grip. Travis acted as if he just saw his mistake. With an oath, he freed the unhappy German.

"I thought surely he was one of the Yankee swine," he insisted. He looked around the room searchingly. "They are gone!" he roared. "They must have run through the door—I thought I saw them pass."

The *Oberst* was over at the French windows. "This window is open, *Excellenz*," he exclaimed. "Perhpas they jumped out here." He looked out, but evidently saw nothing, for his head came right back again.

"They went out the door," Travis insisted. "Hurry, we must catch them. Don't stand around like a bunch of gaping idiots," he bellowed. "Come on—*schnell!*" And flourishing the Luger in his hand, he led the way out the door. The rest followed confusedly, gripping their rifles and revolvers. They dashed down the corridor, and came to the entrance of the building, where two surprised sentries met them. Travis halted to face them in fury.

"Blockheads!" he thundered at them, to their growing amazement. "Do you mean to say you did not stop those two Yanks from slipping past you?"

The sentries looked blank. One of them finally found his voice.

"But—but we saw no Yanks here," he protested.

Travis wheeled on the German colonel. "What kind

of discipline do you have around here?" he bellowed. "Here two prisoners ran out of the building, and your thick-skulled sentries never saw them."

The colonel was embarrassed. "Perhaps they didn't run out, *Excellenz*," he suggested timidly. "Maybe they are still hiding inside."

"Impossible," Travis snapped. "But we'd better look." He was about to lead the whole crowd back into the corridor when he thought the better of it. After all, he couldn't carry this farce too far, or they'd surely suspect him. By this time, Kirby and Shorty ought to be safely away, so he could stop this dangerous stalling. He sent a few of the Boche back into the building, and shouted to the rest, "Let's look for them out here."

Then he dashed out into the night, the others following. A brilliant moon was rising in the sky now, and the stars were coming out one after another. Travis and the Boche rushed all around the building, looking vainly for a trace of the two escaped prisoners. But then, to Travis' cold dread, the German colonel pointed to the clump of woods some few hundred yards behind the chateau.

"Perhaps they ran into that forest, *Excellenz*," he suggested. "Shall we search there? We can comb every inch of the wood."

Travis' brain raced frantically. A search in the woods now, when Kirby and Shorty could not be so far away, would result in the sure capture of the two Mosquitoes. He must prevent that search, or at least delay it. He must delay it even if further stalling meant risking his own betrayal as a spy.

An idea suddenly flashed to him, and he seized on it shrewdly. He nodded to the colonel in the darkness, as if in agreement. "Yes," he conceded, "we shall comb the woods and—" He broke off with a sharp gasp of surprise. Then he pointed excitedly in the direction opposite to the forest, across a broad expanse of fields and hills. "Look!" he shouted wildly. "There they are—two figures running!" The Germans all wheeled around, and their eyes followed his pointing finger. They saw no sign of men, though the whole landscape was now bathed in bright moonlight.

Travis cursed. "*Gott*, they are no longer in sight," he said cleverly. "They must be lying on the ground to hide from us. But they are running off there. Quick, we will catch them!" And waving his Luger in the air, he dashed off in the false pursuit.

The Boche, little suspecting how they had been duped, followed eagerly. Thus Travis led them away from that forest, and he was determined to keep

leading them away from it until he knew that Kirby and Shorty were safe in the rendezvous he had planned for them.

But as he dashed on, with the Boche behind him, his heart was cold with dread and foreboding, and he had to fight down a growing inner panic. How long, he wondered fearfully, would he be able to get away with this daring masquerade?

Meanwhile, Kirby and Shorty had halted furtively in the seclusion of the woods. It was pitch dark, save for the moonlight which filtered through the foliage above. In the darkness, the two Mosquitoes faced one another breathlessly. Their get-away had been far easier than they had dared hope it would be. They had simply leaped from the window and run into the forest, unseen.

"Got to see what's on this paper Trav gave me," Kirby was saying now in a low tense whisper. "Hell, how can a guy read in this darkness?"

"Wait. I've got a light," Shorty volunteered. "The Jerries took about everything I had, but they left my matches." An instant later, Kirby heard a slight scratch, and a match flickered and glowed in Shorty's hand, grotesquely lighting up the little Mosquito's face. They held Travis' piece of paper in its faint glow. Nor did they need more than one match to read the terse message, which had evidently been scrawled in great haste.

"Follow fringe of woods to its right until you come to deserted dirt road. Go down road to stone bridge over brook. Will meet you under bridge on bank of brook."

Kirby nodded slowly as the match flickered out. "Well, there's nothing to do but to go where Trav says, though I'm damned if I know how he's working this whole game. I saw his plane crash, and I thought sure he was dead. And then he comes parading into that place in a Boche general's uniform."

"It's damn lucky he did come," Shorty asserted. "He certainly saved our necks."

"Well, no use standing here chewing the rag," Kirby said. "Let's go!"

The two began to grope their way along the fringe of the woods. Cautiously they moved on, jumping at every sound. Progress was slow, painful. In the darkness they tripped and stumbled over twisted underbrush and rocks. They were guided only by the moonlight which showed through the edge of the forest.

After a tedious but otherwise uneventful hike, they

came upon the deserted road at last. From then on, they made much better progress. The open highway was bathed in moonlight, for there was no foliage overhead to screen it. Compared to the blackness of the forest, it seemed as bright and clear as broad daylight. The two Mosquitoes had no trouble keeping to the road. They walked down it briskly. But all the time their nerves were tense and alert, for they were fearful lest some Jerries should suddenly come along the road and spot them.

No such thing happened, however. The road, as well as the woods, seemed absolutely deserted. Before long, after a mile or so of hiking, they came to a bridge of rude stone—the rendezvous.

A moment later, the two Yanks were squatting wearily beneath this rude bridge, on the damp grassy bank of a tiny brook which babbled liquidly through the night. It was a lonely place, and the moonlight filled it with eerie fantastic shadows.

“I don’t like it here at all,” Shorty was saying tensely. “Gives me the creeps. Of all places, why did Trav have to pick this?”

“Must have had his reasons,” Kirby insisted. “But I do hope he shows up soon.”

They settled down to wait for the lanky Mosquito. Minutes passed. Travis did not appear. Kirby and Shorty became at first anxious, and then alarmed. A thousand fearful doubts assailed them. Had their comrade been trapped, caught as a spy? Time kept dragging. Still the lanky Mosquito did not show up. The two men sat tense, silent. The little brook babbled on imperturbably. The suspense became more and more unbearable. It was getting late now; the night was deepening. With a sense of despair, Kirby realized that any time the tremendous air raid would be coming—coming straight to its doom.

But there was nothing he or Shorty could do about it. It was too late to do anything, anyway.

Suddenly the two Mosquitoes stiffened, sat rigid. Sounds drifted to their ears. Somewhere in the distance of the forest, they heard heavy running footsteps, the clink of rifles, and now and then a shout. Boche! The woods had suddenly become alive with them. They were evidently combing the whole place in their search. Soon the whole forest was resounding with the noise of running, marching men. Louder and louder it grew. The searching Jerries seemed to be coming nearer and nearer to the spot where the two Mosquitoes hid, tense and fearful, beneath the rude bridge.

“Gosh!” Shorty breathed fearfully. “They must be looking for us.”

“Unless,” Kirby replied grimly, “they’re looking for Travis.”

“Let’s hope not,” Shorty prayed.

“God, if—” He broke off, and the two men drew in their breath sharply. For now a new sound reached their ears—the tramp of marching feet. It was on the road above, and it rose louder and louder. Boche were coming down that road, directly toward the bridge! Closer and closer now. The two Mosquitoes’ nerves stretched taut, and their hearts pounded like sledge hammers. They crouched under that bridge like statues, not daring to move. Now the Boche were coming right overhead. The bridge trembled and shook with the clump of heavy shoes. If they should happen to stop and look—

But to the Mosquitoes’ frenzied relief, the Boche had passed over the bridge, and their footsteps were dying away down the road. Also the clamor throughout the forest seemed to be receding now, as if the searchers were no longer coming this way. Kirby and Shorty breathed at last. But not for long.

SUDDENLY they stiffened again, and their hearts seemed to leap in their throats. They heard a swift furtive movement in the brush right above them. Twigs crackled and snapped. In the next instant, to their horror, the dazzling white beam of a flashlight stabbed at them from the darkness, caught them right in its glare. With a gasp of fear, they jumped frantically to their feet.

“Don’t be scared, fellers. It’s only me.”

And at the familiar drawing voice, the two men almost sobbed with hysterical relief. Travis had come at last. He was still in his general’s uniform and unharmed.

“Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner,” he told them. “As soon as I figured you were safely here, I made some excuse and took my leave of the Jerries. Thank God, they didn’t suspect me to the end. But as soon as I left them, that damned *Oberst* must have taken it into his head to search this forest, anyway, despite my telling him you ran off somewhere else. That was bad for me, because I was sneaking through the woods to get here myself, and if I should meet the colonel or any of his men, I’d have a hard time explaining my presence here. I had to lie low until they gave up the search, which they’ve done now.”

“But how the hell did you get that uniform and find Shorty and me in the first place?” Kirby wanted to

know, "Why, I thought you got killed in that crash of yours."

"It wasn't so bad as it looked," Travis explained. "I managed to jump clear just before she hit the ground, I landed near a road, and no sooner did I get to my feet, than a staff car pulled up, with only a chauffeur and a general in it. They held me up, and since there were no other Boche around, they took me into their car to drive me in to the authorities. I was seated in front, next to the chauffeur, who kept his eye on me while the general kept a Luger poked into my back.

"Well, you know how these old generals are—not so good when it comes to real soldiering. We hit a bump in the road, and my general was thrown back in his seat. That gave me my chance. I socked the chauffeur on the jaw and pulled the emergency brake. The car skidded into a ditch, and meanwhile the general and I had a pretty mean tussle. The Luger finally went off we wrestled for it, and the general got drilled clean through the heart, poor devil! His uniform suited me nicely, I looked over his papers, and found that he was ordered to go to the military headquarters of this sector, to find out something or other for the high command—just some trivial matter about food supply or something. I decided to go for him and pose as him, figuring that I might be able to get some information about these disappearing planes before I tried to sneak back across the lines.

"I couldn't use the staff car, it was wrecked there in the ditch. But soon an empty supply truck came along, and I ordered them to give me a lift to headquarters. I explained that I had been driving my car alone and wrecked it—which probably did not seem strange to them for a general. Of course, I had carefully hidden the body of the real general and the unconscious chauffeur in the bushes near by.

"I arrived at the headquarters building, and as I was going in, whom should I meet in the corridor but the great von Goetz himself, in person. I didn't recognize him, of course, but he stopped to salute me, and seeing he was a flyer, I asked how things were going on in the air. From his answer, I learned who he was. I also learned, to my astonishment, that you two guys were both prisoners inside. Von Goetz had just left you there, and was going home. I immediately changed all my plans. Instead of getting information, I'd get you fellers out. I remembered that the truck had come through this deserted road over the bridge, here, and since I knew I could find my way back here, I figured it would be a good place to have you meet me. I

scribbled this note to you out in the corridor, and then walked in on you all. Well, I guess you know the rest."

Kirby and Shorty nodded. At last Travis' remarkable stunt was explained now.

"Well," Kirby said—and now for the first time since their reunion he became the leader of the Three Mosquitoes once more, the captain of his men—"the question is what to do now? Here we are, stuck under this bridge in Bocheland, and at any time all our squadrons and a lot of others may be coming over. They'll be wiped out. Now, I don't know how much you guys know about this lousy stunt the Jerries have been pulling, but von Goetz explained the whole thing to me. I can't take time to explain it all to you now—we've wasted enough time with explanations—so I'll just say that right over that ammunition base there's an invisible gale which can pick up any number of planes and dash them to the ground. That's what happened to you, Shorty."

"Don't I know it?" the little Mosquito put in with grim reminiscence.

But Kirby ignored the interruption "And that's what is going to happen to all our ships to-night," he went on. "unless we do something about it."

"But what can we do?" Shorty asked helplessly. "As it is, I don't see how we're ever going to get back to our own lines. Only one of us is armed and—"

"That reminds me," Travis cut in suddenly. He drew out two automatics—one a Colt 45, which he gave Kirby, and the other a German Mauser, which he handed to Carn. "I kept my Colt, and got my Luger and this Mauser from the general and his chauffeur," he explained. "So at least we're all armed. Besides, I have this flashlight, a compass, my roll map of this whole terrain, my Very pistol. Finally I've got this general's uniform, whose nice big cape enables me to carry all these things without showing them. We ought to be able to do something."

"We must do something," Kirby exclaimed, even though he felt quite helpless as he said it. "To hell with our getting back to the lines! We've got to find some way to stop all those planes from going into the trap."

"If we could steal a Jerry ship somehow, go up and signal the formation," Shorty suggested, with a gleam of hope.

"That's out of the question," Travis said. "The only drome around here is von Goetz', and that's miles and miles away. Besides, every flyer there is well known. Even with this uniform, we'd never have a real chance to steal a crate."

"Well, then, I give up," Shorty protested. "We certainly can't stop that gale in the sky, and that seems to be the only way to save our ships."

"There must be something we can do," Kirby kept insisting. He thought a moment. "If only we could find some way of blowing up that ammunition base ourselves, before the planes came I over. Then, seeing the thing has been destroyed, they might call off the raid and turn back."

"But how the hell could we blow up that ammunition base?" Shorty demanded. Of all three, the little man was the most hopeless now. "We might as well go to Berlin and try to capture the Kaiser."

Travis was a little more optimistic. "I'll admit it seems quite impossible, but there's nothing like trying. Seems the best thing we can do is sneak right into that valley where the ammunition base is. Then we'll try to see just what we can do—if anything."

"Well, let's get going right now," Kirby urged. "Those planes are likely to come at any time, I tell you. We've got to hope that they've planned a late raid." He turned to Travis. "You say you have a roll map with you, Trav?"

Travis nodded, and pulled it out quickly. They spread it out on the ground and examined it under the glow of Travis' flashlight.

"Here's where we are now," the lanky Mosquito pointed out, dabbing the map with his finger. "And here's the ammunition base. If we go straight west, we ought to hit it. It isn't so far away—only three miles."

"But we'll have to go right out into the open," Shorty protested. "And with these uniforms on."

"We'll have to take a chance," Kirby told him, and then added, "What's the matter? Scared?"

"Scared?" Shorty instantly became indignant, which was just what his captain wanted. "Who? Me? You don't think I've been worrying about myself, do you? Why, you big kiwi, I'll show you how scared I am. Now where the hell's that ammunition base?"

THE wind tore through the moon-flooded valley like a streak out of hell—a continuous tireless gale, which whipped across the valley bottom and went shrieking up that steep hill into the sky. And out in the valley, near a great ammunition base, three men huddled together in a wind which all but ripped the clothes from their bodies, and flogged their faces with vicious ferocity. The three men were desperate Yanks, desperate enough to risk standing right out here in the open, though two of them wore the telltale khaki

of the U.S. air force, and only one was disguised as a German. The only thing that saved them from being seen and noticed, despite the darkness, was the fact that the Boche themselves seldom came out here in the middle of the open valley, where the wind was so terrific. They preferred to remain either in the shelter of the hills, or the shelter of the ammunition base.

So the Three Mosquitoes huddled here unnoticed. They stood in the wind, with their eyes fixed on the cluster of dimly lit buildings before them. Work had not ceased at the ammunition base; there was just as much activity as Kirby had seen this afternoon. The machinery of war must be kept going day and night. Even now, one of those donkey trains was stationed at the first building, and its cars were being loaded to capacity with shells.

The Three Mosquitoes kept peering at the place, all of them trying vainly to discover some vulnerable spot they might penetrate. They spoke to one another above the wind.

"It looks pretty hopeless," Travis was saying now. "That place is too damned well guarded; it's just teeming with sentries. Of course, with this uniform, I might be able to pass the sentries and walk right in, but—"

"Why in hell can't we all walk in?" Shorty demanded, for he had gone from one extreme to the other, and was now a confirmed optimist. "Look here. We ought to be able to pick out a couple of sentries who are off by themselves. We can knock 'em cold, take their uniforms and—"

"Wait a minute," Kirby cut him off. "Not so fast, now. Let Trav finish what he was saying."

"Well," Travis continued, "I just don't see how we can manage it. Even if I did get inside the place, or we all got in, the moment we started anything we'd probably be spotted. The Jerries have that place well protected. I'll bet they have a lot of secret agents in every building, right among the workmen. Besides, it's no joke to try to set off a whole ammunition base."

Kirby nodded, unable to deny the logic of Travis' argument. But then again he spoke with desperation. "Still, we've got to do something. Maybe Shorty's idea about our swiping a couple of sentries' uniforms isn't so bad."

"Isn't so bad?" Shorty retorted indignantly. "Why, it's the only decent idea we've got."

"But those uniforms won't let you into the building," Travis persisted. "Why, I don't even know whether my own uniform would let me in. They might require a

special pass. In fact, now that I think of it, I'm sure they would."

"Well," Kirby decided, with sudden reckless abandon, "we're going to take the chance, that's all. If we fail, we fail. You, Trav, will try to go into the buildings and see if you can't do something there. We'll try to work Shorty's idea about swiping some uniforms. And then—"

He broke off abruptly, and all Three Mosquitoes stiffened, listening with ears horribly alert. They all heard it plainly, even above the wailing wind.

Mmmmmmmmm. A faint but vibrating drone, like that of a bumblebee. It was not the noise of it, for the wind might have easily drowned that out. It was rather the fact that the very air seemed to tremble with it, and the Three Mosquitoes felt it rather than actually heard it. Stronger and stronger it grew.

"Good God, that's the raid!" Kirby expressed the despairing thought which was on all their minds. "They're coming. And there must be almost two hundred of them, judging from that vibration."

"They're probably still miles away," Travis exclaimed. "But in just a few minutes, they'll be here."

The Mosquitoes felt their last remaining hope smashed to pieces. There would be no time now even to attempt to blow up that ammunition base. Before they could so much as try to enter the place, to start putting any of their plans into execution, those scores of planes would be here—soaring straight into the jaws of death. Never before had such a sense of utter helplessness and frustration come over the Mosquitoes. There was nothing they could do, absolutely nothing.

Then suddenly Kirby's desperate eyes fell upon that donkey train which was being loaded from the first building. All in a split second he saw its engine, from which sparks were flying, saw its six cars loaded almost to full capacity with shells. All in an instant he remembered the tunnel where the tracks led. And like a bolt from the blue, the idea came to him at last—an idea which only a desperate brain could have devised. He spoke to his comrades with frenzied haste.

"Listen, fellers, we've got to work fast. There's no time for stalling. See that donkey train there? Well, there aren't any men on this side of it, and they don't look very alert on the other side." His voice rose eagerly. "We're gonna gang that engine, fellers. I'm sure I know how to run her. We're gonna steal that train and run it straight under the tunnel in the big hill. Then we've got to find some way to blow up the shells in the cars, and we've got to do it fast."

The other two stared at him in the darkness.

"Are you crazy?" Travis demanded. "What good can such a thing do?"

Kirby was almost wild with impatience. The drone was getting louder and louder. "I can't explain it to you now; there's no time. But if we blow up that big hill, I know this freak gale won't be able to shoot up into the sky any more. It will be stopped, and the planes will be able to come right through. Now hurry!"

Already he had whipped out the Colt Travis had given him. "There's no more time to waste. This is the only way we can possibly save those planes, and even so, I don't know how we can ever make it on time. Come on, guys."

Travis and Shorty did not hesitate. Though they were still unable to grasp the meaning of Kirby's plan, they followed their leader as they had always followed him.

"Let's go!" they yelled, giving the familiar war whoop of the Three Mosquitoes. And they went.

Madly, recklessly, without even dodging to escape being seen, they rushed across the valley through the wind, plunging into it with shut teeth and firm shoulders, holding their automatics in their hands. Straight for the donkey engine they dashed, with the increasing drone in the sky to keep spurring them on, faster and faster.

Not until they were up to the engine did the Boche even see them. The engineer, sitting in his cab, was the first to sight the three charging Yanks. A yell of alarm broke from him and was taken up by the scores of Jerries who were loading the cars from the other side. But already Kirby, guided by a demon which gave him superhuman energy, had leaped into the cab. He fired his Colt blindly, at the shouting engineer. The latter dropped like a log, and rolled right off the small locomotive. Kirby was leaping for the controls now, while his two comrades crowded in beside him.

WITH a roar of rage, the crowd of Boche surged forward toward the cab of the engine, and commenced to bring their guns to bear on the three impostors. *Crack! Crack!* Rifles blazed shrilly; revolvers barked. Bullets began to whistle around the cab, clanging against the metal walls and flooring. But the absolute surprise of the attack had taken the Boche unawares, and before they could really take accurate aim, Kirby, with a savage gesture, pulled open the engine throttle and jammed the lever forward.

Chug! Chug-chug-chug! With a hissing of steam,

the little engine lurched forward, just as the mob of shouting Boche were coming up to it. Two of the Jerries tried to catch onto the cab. Shorty and Travis, crowding next to Kirby, thrust out the muzzles of their revolvers and fired away at the two Boche, dropping them like flies. The little train with its six cars gathered speed quickly. Vainly the Germans tried to stop it, tried to jump onto the cars.

Before they could do anything about it, the train had pulled out of the station, and was chugging down the narrow-gauge track—with three desperate Yanks crowded in its cab. The Germans rushed after it, blazing away for all they were worth. Again bullets sang wildly in the Mosquitoes' ears. One of them just missed Travis as it ricocheted from the metal wall beside him. Furiously, Kirby kept opening the throttle, feeding the cylinders more steam. Faster and faster went the engine, until presently it was pulling safely out of range of the Boche's guns, hopelessly outdistancing them.

As soon as the protecting side of the building was no longer sheltering it, the train came into the full fury of the wind. But fortunately the wind was coming from behind it, and helped push it on. Sparks flew from its belching stack. The fire under the boiler raged, and it became so hot in the cab that the Three Mosquitoes were soon covered with perspiration. No longer now could they hear or feel that drone in the sky, with the locomotive roaring and puffing and vibrating. But though they could not hear the drone, they knew those planes were coming, coming, and the thought kept urging Kirby to get more speed out of the train.

"Better look at that fire!" He yelled above the hissing steam. "Put more fuel on it. We've got to get up all the steam we can."

Shorty, being the smallest, squeezed through between his comrades to obey the order. He opened the fire box, and the wind that rushed in from behind almost sent the raging fire flying all over the place. There was plenty of wood in the tender, and Shorty began to throw pieces into the fire box, one after another. Faster and faster now. The little train was lurching and swaying as it sped down the track. Even now that big hill was looming ahead of it, with its tunnel.

"How are you going to blow her up?" Shorty was demanding now. "And how are we going to be clear of the explosion?"

"Easy," Kirby shouted back, wiping the sweat from

his face with one hand and holding down the throttle lever with the other. "We'll stop her in the tunnel, uncouple the engine, and run her out on the other side of the hill. Then we'll put the engine in reverse and let her run back into the tunnel by herself. She'll hit the cars with a terrific impact and set off the shells. If only we have time," he added fervently, but even then, as if in ironic answer to his wish, Travis suddenly gave a shout and pointed up over the cab, up toward the sky. Both Kirby and Shorty looked. Their hearts sank.

The sky was quite light with the full moon and stars. And silhouetted against its light background, the Three Mosquitoes could clearly see the literal swarm of black specks which were moving this way. The gigantic fleet of planes was arriving—a tremendous formation, a mass of squadrons. They looked almost like some big cloud which was drifting this way. Closer and closer they came. The specks were gradually growing, assuming birdlike shapes.

Desperately, Kirby fought with the locomotive, trying to make it go still faster. He shouted for more wood on the fire, and Shorty kept piling it on until the safety valve hissed ominously, and the boiler threatened to burst. On rushed the train, nearing the mouth of the tunnel now. But even then the Mosquitoes were beginning to despair. How could they ever blow up that hill before the planes got overhead? The great formation was so close now that they could see the sparks from the planes' exhausts.

And then suddenly, from within the tunnel, or from the other side of it, there rose the shrill piercing shriek of a steam siren. The Three Mosquitoes almost jumped out of their skins. It could mean but one thing, that whistle. A train was coming through that tunnel in the opposite direction, and there was only one track. Whether this was a deliberate measure on the part of the Germans to stop the fugitive Yanks, whether they had signaled ahead for this other train to block the way, the Mosquitoes did not know. But they did know that they were headed for a certain collision unless they stopped.

But Kirby had no intention of stopping. His only thought was that he must not let that other train get out of the tunnel before his own train got into it. He yelled wildly to Shorty, "More wood! More wood!"

And somehow he managed to coax still more speed out of the roaring locomotive. It was threatening to fly off the track now. The tunnel was looming swiftly, closer and closer. And the mass of planes in the sky was almost overhead now.

Then Kirby shouted frantically, "All right, guys. She'll never go any faster than this. We've got to jump for it now, and trust to luck that we won't break our necks. Let's go!"

The other two instantly understood his purpose. And as the train went rushing on, as it was coming right to the mouth of the tunnel, the Three Mosquitoes leaped for their lives, one after an other. All sprawled to the ground, but were unhurt. They rushed together. The train, with its six cars of ammunition was entering the tunnel now. They had won the race. It would meet that other train under the hill.

"Run like hell, guys!" Kirby yelled above the wind now, and above the drone in the sky that had risen to a mighty thunder, a deafening chorus of wide-open engines. The vanguard of the fleet of planes was coming overhead now. The Mosquitoes could see tiny lights on their wing tips. Madly the trio of Yanks dashed across the windy valley, determined to put as much distance between themselves and that hill as they could. They were several hundred yards from the place when it came—came with a dull muffled crash which shook the ground like an earthquake and sent all three men sprawling. Then there was one terrific ear-splitting explosion, and like a volcano, that steep hill literally shot into the air. The two trains had collided in the tunnel, and the six cars of shells had been detonated. Slowly the debris mushroomed out and settled. The steep hill was wiped out, razed completely from sight.

The Three Mosquitoes jumped to their feet, and to their amazement found that the furious wind had died out to a brisk but gentle breeze. The destruction of that hill had changed the whole atmospheric condition of the valley. The gale had been stopped. Nature had been defied by three determined Yanks. And now, overhead, the sky was darkened by the scores and scores of roaring planes which sailed right in over the valley serenely. Von Goetz' trap was no longer there. The tremendous formation of ships moved on in safety.

Again Kirby was yelling. "We've got to find a shelter. In a second, bombs will be raining all over the place, and when they hit that ammunition base, good night."

The other two agreed vociferously. The three men dashed for cover. Kirby led the way, for he had an idea where he would find a suitable shelter. Straight to the ruined scene which had been the steep hill he led them. And there, among all the broken, cracked stones and dirt, they found a cleft, a sort of cave which the falling debris had formed.

It looked bombproof enough, for its side and top were at least three feet in thickness. Into this natural dugout, the three Yanks crawled, nor were they a moment too soon.

IN THE next instant hell itself broke loose. *Br-r-room! Brooom!* Bombs came whizzing down through space, to burst with deafening detonation. Engines roared overhead as the bombers came swooping down. And then the air was shattered by the most terrific series of explosions the Three Mosquitoes had ever heard. The concussions made their very teeth rattle, and threatened to make their dugout collapse. The air outside suddenly became livid with a light which made it as bright as day. Then, slowly, the glow faded like a red sunset, and the explosion died out in a series of rumbling reverberations.

Slowly, dazedly, the Three Mosquitoes emerged from their dugout in the ruined hill. Slowly, dazedly, their eyes took in the surrounding scene.

The valley still spread before them in the moonlight, but where the ammunition base had been, there was now a great gaping hole in the ground, full of smoldering debris. The ammunition works had been wiped out at last—blasted off the face of the earth.

The sky above was dense with planes. Everywhere the Mosquitoes looked, they saw fleeting, darting ships. With the big formation scattered and spread out like this, they realized for the first time how many planes there were. Never before had they seen such a vast quantity of ships at once. They were soaring, swooping, turning like a great flock of exultant birds.

The three Yanks walked out into the valley, where the wind no longer shrieked out its eerie song. There was not a sign of life out here; the Boche must have all been caught like rats in a trap. The valley was desolate, empty.

"But sooner or later," Kirby was saying, "this place will be filling with Jerries again. We've got to get out. We've got to signal one of those planes to come down and pick us up. But how the hell can we do it?"

"It oughtn't to be so hard," Travis assured him. "Didn't I tell you I still had my Very pistol. It has our squadron rockets in it, and we can shoot off three of them—the distress signal. Some of our busses must be up there." As he spoke, he jerked out the Very pistol. He pointed it toward the sky, pulled the trigger. A red ball popped from the barrel, went streaking up through the air. Travis shot off two more rockets. Then the Three Mosquitoes waited hopefully.

They did not have long to wait. Presently, out of the

swarm of ships above, a great-winged D.H. bomber detached itself and came swooping down over the valley. Straight over the heads of the Three Mosquitoes it roared, so close that even in the darkness the trio could see the pilot and observer peering down over the fuselage. The Mosquitoes waved frantically. But evidently the men in the D. H. bomber did not yet grasp the situation, for the big ship began to circle overhead, as if inquiringly. Travis suddenly got another inspiration, and pulled out his flashlight. He turned it on and sent its beam stabbing into the air. Then, by cupping his hand over the light and withdrawing it again, he began to flash a message in Morse.

"Three Mosquitoes. Land and get us. Three Mosquitoes. Land and get us." Over and over, he repeated the message, while the D.H. continued to circle. And at last the men in the plane must have caught that message. The big ship banked again, headed into the wind. It came sweeping down in a shallow dive and skimmed over the surface of the valley, which was still level and fairly smooth, though it was full of bomb craters. Slowly the D.H. rolled to a stop. The Three Mosquitoes dashed over to it. Voices greeted them excitedly.

"Well, of all the places to find you three hell-fired buzzards!" the observer in the rear cockpit was exclaiming. And as the Three Mosquitoes recognized him, they let out a whoop. It was their own C.O.—the grizzled wiry colonel of the 44th pursuit squadron.

The Three Mosquitoes drew themselves up with mock dignity, and made a snappy salute.

"Good evening, colonel," Kirby said with profound respect. "The Three Mosquitoes hereby report to you for duty, sir." And then he grinned and exclaimed, "But all joking aside, colonel, what the hell are you doing in this flaming coffin? I thought you never did any flying yourself, any more."

"Well, as a rule I don't," the colonel admitted. "But you know how the boys were feeling. I thought if I went along on the raid it might encourage them a bit. So I got Wilson, here, to take me as his observer."

The pilot of the D.H., also one of the Mosquitoes' squadron-mates, grinned. "And believe me, the colonel's the best observer I ever saw. He got two of von Goetz' ships with that rear Lewis gun!"

The Mosquitoes were surprised. "You mean," Kirby asked, "that there was a dogfight up there, too?"

"Dogfight?" snorted the C.O. "Slaughter, I'd call it. We wiped out von Goetz' whole circus, and we dropped a lot of eggs on his airdrome, too."

"Did you get von Goetz himself?" Kirby asked with burning curiosity, as he remembered the cheerful young Saxon.

"I don't know whether they got him or not," the C.O. replied. He chuckled. "Well, I'm certainly glad I came along. I never had such fun in all my life. What a night! We not only blew up that base, but we got complete control of the air. But," he asked, with sudden surprise, "what are you fellows doing here? We thought you were lost for good."

"It's a long story," Kirby told him. "And probably if we told it to you just now, you wouldn't believe us. Besides, don't you think we better be moving out of here? This is Bocheland, after all." He glanced skyward, and gave a sudden surprised exclamation. "Gosh, look! The ships are all leaving for home."

Sure enough, the mass of planes above had straightened out into an orderly pattern once more. Again they formed into one huge wedge, and the formation was moving westward, toward the Allied lines.

"Can you beat that?" the C.O. exploded. "Left us flat! Well, you fellers hop in here—anyway you can. There isn't much room, but there's plenty of capacity. After all, if the plane could carry a ton or so of bombs, it ought to be able to carry you three fellers."

The Three Mosquitoes nodded, and proceeded to get into the bomber. Shorty and Travis crowded into the rear cockpit with the C.O., Shorty sitting on Travis' lap. Kirby got into the front with the pilot. "If it's just the same to you," he told the latter, "I wouldn't mind taking the controls. I just have a sudden yen for flying."

The pilot smiled his cheerful assent. "Okay with me, captain. In fact, I'd rather have an expert like you take the ship up with this mob in it. Go to it."

Kirby did. His hand gripped the joystick, and his feet found the rudder bar. He opened the throttle. The big D.H. moved forward, roaring across the valley. Presently she lifted slowly into the air, and Kirby climbed her into the moonlit sky.

BUT even as he straightened out and was heading for the lines, there was a sudden staccato clatter overhead, and a fleet birdlike shape came swooping down, with jagged streaks of flame leaping from the muzzles of its forward machine guns. Tracers began to cut through the wings of the crowded D.H. With an oath, Kirby half-rolled as the German scout shot by. In the rear cockpit Shorty, Travis, and the C.O. were all trying vainly to bring the flanking machine gun into play. But they were too closely crowded to do it.

The German plane was below now, and it was streaking up right for the bomber's blind spot—right for its belly. Suddenly, above the roar of the engine, Shorty yelled out, "It's von Goetz! It's his all black Fokker. They didn't get him, after all."

Even as he spoke, the German's Spandaus were ripping out another burst. Bullets ticked through the D.H.'s fuselage, whistling in the Yanks' ears. Von Goetz was closing in on another victim, coming up to make another kill. The D.H., clumsy monster that it was, was virtually helpless against the fleet Fokker which attacked it.

Then, once more, a savage overpowering rage was upon Kirby. Von Goetz, who had jumped on him and shot him down. Von Goetz, who was now intent on slaughtering not only Kirby and his buddies, but also their C.O. and another comrade. By God, Kirby would settle the score with the German ace—and tie it once and for all.

The Mosquito was not foolish enough to think that he could let the crowded D.H. be engaged in any kind of fight. He knew he could not put it through any maneuvers. He even knew that he could not shake that Fokker below off his blind spot, for now von Goetz was right underneath, fastening like a leech, and blazing away with more and more deadly accuracy.

But Kirby had already planned just what he was going to do. He leaned over to the pilot crowded next to him, shouted above the motor's roar, "There are still some bombs on this plane, aren't there?"

The other nodded. "Two or three, I believe," he shouted back.

That was all Kirby wanted. "Turn around and tell them in the back to pull the release when I raise my arm. We're gonna send that Fokker to hell."

The pilot nodded and turned to transmit the order to the men in back. Kirby gripped his stick tightly. He held on, even as von Goetz came right on coming up. The bullets grew thicker and thicker, until the air was dense with flying screaming lead. He held on, deliberately letting von Goetz come beneath him. In fact, he so steered the D.H. that he was actually aiding the Fokker to get in its position below.

Then, with a berserk yell, he raised his free arm, waving the signal.

It was Shorty who pulled the bomb release. From the belly of the D.H., a missile of steel and T.N.T. detached itself and went spinning down through space. There was a second of fierce suspense, a second during which the Fokker's bullets kept pumping into

the D.H. until the big ship actually began to wobble and lurch. Then—

Crash! Br-r-room!

The explosion shattered the air, and its concussion almost sent the heavy D.H. into a sideslip. The aim was true. Straight on top of the Fokker that bomb had fallen and detonated. The Fokker had disappeared in a shattered burst of smoke and flame. It had disappeared, never to be seen again.

By an irony of ironies, the thing which von Goetz had made the Allies believe was happening to their planes, had actually happened to his own. He and his Fokker had actually vanished, vanished into thin air. They had been reduced to atoms.

A wild cheer went up from Kirby's comrades in the D. H. Even the C.O. shouted. But Kirby felt no sense of triumph or exultation. He merely felt that he had discharged a debt, settled a score. And when all was said and done, it hadn't been a pleasant thing to do. For he could still see the smiling cheerful face of the young Saxon. Somehow, in spite of everything, there had been something likable and admirable about the young wizard who had harnessed the forces of nature into the most diabolical machine of war ever used.

Such were Kirby's thoughts, as he straightened out the big D.H. once more and headed her toward the west, for the lines and home.

The general of the nth brigade flushed modestly as he stood before the high officers of G.H.Q. With joy and pride he listened to the words of the commander-in-chief of the A.E.F.

"We are proud of you, general," the latter was saying. "We must congratulate you on the splendid way you managed to clean up the mess in your sector. The destruction of that ammunition base will be one of the decisive factors in this war, and your country will not forget that you were responsible for it."

Later, that same day, the general, beaming and cheerful, faced the twelve commanding officers of the squadrons in his sector. They, too, were flushing modestly at his words of praise.

"I am proud of you, men," he told them. "I must congratulate you on the splendid way you cleaned up the mess in your squadrons. The morale of our flyers is wonderful. Once more, we have indisputable supremacy of the air, and your country will not forget that you men are responsible for it."

And still later, on still the same day, the grizzled old C.O. of the 44th pursuit squadron grinned up from his desk at the three cheerful pilots before him.