



HARD-BOILED WINGS

by RAOUL F. WHITFIELD

It was a case of rough meet tough when "Bing" Burks and the fighting newcomer declared war.

BING" BURKS was a hard-boiled soldier. He looked hard-boiled and he acted that way. He banged a Nieuport around in the sky as though it didn't matter much what happened—and he got results, which means that he got Boche. His clothes were worn sloppily; he was medium in height, with broad shoulders and a slight stoop. Every two or three weeks he cracked up. Minor crashes, they were; but they battered him a little. He had red hair and blue-gray eyes. The crack-ups had given him goggle cuts and a broken nose. When he talked it was without moving his lips much. And he seldom talked about the War. He'd been in France more than a year before he got up front, but he didn't wear the six-month stripes.

His wings were a dirty silver, and the silk braid was torn in places. He had one uniform, and he wore it for everything. Only the green pilots commented on Bing's appearance, and they only commented once. Burks was the second oldest man at the Tenth Pursuit, and the second wisest. His first name was Compton, and he didn't like it; he hated it. To the outfit personnel he was Bing Burks, and he was humored—he wore hard-boiled wings, which is enough to get anybody humored.

On the afternoon that Lieutenant Dunning winged down from Colombey with a nice, shiny Nieuport, Bing had been having a rough time with Fritz over in Heinie Land. Two Fokker pilots banged down on him from the clouds, and he scrapped back. Burks

always did that. He got one Boche while rolling out of a barrel, and his ship got a spray of lead in the tail assembly, from the other Fokker's pilot.

BING dropped out of the scrap with the second Boche on his plane's tail, and he worked with both hands and both feet to keep away from tracer bullets, and the ground. The Nieuport's tail assembly was shredded, but it hung together. And the Boche hung on.

He gave Bing a bad five minutes before he banked his Fokker off and tailed it for the German side. And he gave Bing a bad humor. Over the Tenth's sloping field at two thousand, the broken-nosed one got down the best way he could. It wasn't very pretty to watch. Lieutenant Dunning had just made a beautiful landing and had taxied his shiny ship toward the camouflaged hangars. He climbed down and watched the landing. The ground-crew men were watching it, too. And Bill Tate was out with his head tilted back. No one said anything, however, except Dunning.

"What's this?" he demanded cheerfully. "Some kiwi swiped a pilot's ship, eh?"

Bill was about to say something, when Burks got his Nieuport straightened out a little and came down in a cross-wind landing. The left wing was low and when he picked it up, the ship started to skid. He kicked her nose into his flight path, and she struck. She bounced; came down, and started the ground hop all over the place. Her general direction was toward the hangars, and Lieutenant Dunning's shiny crate.

The ground-crew members broke. Bill Tate shouted at Dunning and ran down the tarmac. But Dunning stood his ground. He waved his hands wildly, standing between his Nieuport and the ground-hopping ship. For about three seconds he stood there, trying to wave Burks' plane off. Then he ran.

The crash was noisy and devastating. It shattered the prop of Burks' plane; it twisted the right wing around and battered the leading edges. The shiny ship that Dunning had brought down from Colombey jumped forward a few feet and let Burks' crate climb right up her back. The tail assembly was raked and ripped; the rear fuselage fabric took the sweep of Burks' ship prop before she shattered into jagged pieces.

Bing climbed down; he jerked off his helmet and goggles and turned his back on both planes. He started to inform the north end of the field concerning his thoughts about Nieuports, the Tenth Pursuit, the Boche—and the War in general.

HE WAS just getting worked up when Lieutenant Dunning reached his side. Bill Tate was back of Dunning, but he was too late to do any good.

"My fault," the green pilot was saying. "I should have been five minutes longer getting here!"

His voice was smooth, almost silky. He had a round, almost chubby face, blue eyes and a head of carefully parted hair. He was taller than Bing—almost a head taller—and nicely built. There was a nasty sneer playing around his lips.

Bing turned slowly. His eyes went from Dunning's head to his highly polished boots. Then he looked at Bill Tate.

"Who's the smart guy?" he asked. "Does he belong here? Or can I kick his pants off the tarmac?"

His voice was low and hard. He didn't move his lips, and his eyes were little blue-gray slits.

Bill Tate tried to laugh it off. But he saw that it was going to be a tough job.

"Lieutenant Dunning," he said cheerfully, but with an effort, "meet Lieutenant Burks!"

Dunning's head had dropped forward a little. He held his helmet and goggles in his right hand; now he let them drop. His face was white. His lips twitched.

Bing was looking him squarely in the eyes.

"Kick *whose* pants—out of *where*?" Dunning snapped, and his voice was like ice.

Bill Tate started to say something, but it didn't count. Bing Burks was sore. He'd been sore for two days. He'd got his crate back to the tarmac only by a sweet piece of ship handling. He'd got down wonderfully, all things considered. And now some green, cherub-faced pilot was talking up to him.

"Run along, kid!" he muttered. "Your wet-nursin' don't start until tomorrow. Trot!"

He turned his back on Dunning, just a little too soon. That pilot started to swing at Bing's last word. His blow caught Burks off balance, with his guard only half raised. It was a heavy blow, and Bing went down.

BUT he didn't stay down. He fairly bounced up. There were a lot of rumors about Bing. He was supposed to have been a prize-ring man. He was supposed to have been a night-club bouncer, back in Chicago. One thing was sure; he was a rarity in the air service. He showed it now.

Leaping for Dunning, he took two blows going in, and then he fought. His arms moved like pistons. He stayed close and his blows told. Bill Tate was shouting fiercely.

“Lay off, you damn fools! Cut it, you crazy—”

And Bing cut in. Pulling back suddenly, he brought up two blows—a right and a left. The right missed Lieutenant Dunning’s chin by inches. The left didn’t miss at all. The green pilot groaned and dropped. Bing stepped back and looked down at him, then he grinned at Bill.

“He’s a boxer!” he breathed heavily. “Get in on that breed, and they’re finished.”

Dunning was moving around a little. Bill Tate told Bing what he thought of him. He was one of a few men who could do it. Bing just grinned, then his face suddenly hardened. His eyes went to the group who were standing close.

“No gab on this!” he warned. “No talk. He hit me first—but he didn’t hit me *hard* enough, see? Pull that crate of mine off his and fix her up. Fritz spilled lead all over her tail assembly, and I had to kite her down. The Boche I got couldn’t do *that* much.”

He stopped. Dunning was pulling himself to his feet. He swayed before Bing, a red spot on the right side of his jaw. His hands were motionless at his sides.

“You’ll kick my pants out of this outfit, Burks,” he muttered, “or I’ll kick yours out! Get that?”

His voice was a snarl. There was rage in his eyes, but it was a cold, bitter rage. His cherublike face had altered. He looked like a killer. Even Bing sensed the change. He laughed; it was a low, throaty laugh.

“Go in and get water on your jaw!” he muttered. “And the next time something happens you can’t understand, freeze on the controls!”

THEN Bing headed for the barracks at the north end of the field. He didn’t look back. Lieutenant Dunning stood staring after him. There was mud on his uniform and his short flying coat. He muttered a word that Bill Tate didn’t catch.

“You hear him, lieutenant?” Tate asked slowly. “He had a shredded tail assembly to haul back here. That’s why he made the rough set-down and crash. He’s Bing Burks. Ever hear that name, back of the lines?”

Dunning smiled grimly and touched the red spot on his jaw.

“He didn’t have to pull the one about kicking my pants off this field!” he said grimly. “I’ve met up with hard-boiled gents before.”

Tate nodded. “Maybe you didn’t meet ’em this hard,” he suggested. “If you take something I’m a damn fool for giving—my advice—lay off Bing?” The pilot who had ferried down the Nieuport swore softly,

then reached for a pill. Ground-crew men were pulling the two ships apart. Dunning winced as he got the cigarette between his lips.

“When I lay off that bird,” he said, “one of us’ll be gone from this outfit!” Bill Tate nodded and smiled faintly. “It takes a good pilot to manage the public war that’s going on up here, lieutenant,” he remarked. “A private war on the side—it’s liable to cramp your style for the one that counts.” Lieutenant Dunning’s face was expressionless.

“Thanks, lieutenant,” he said, in a toneless voice. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Bill Tate grunted and shrugged his shoulders.

“Better to figure it out now than when you’ve got Fritz riding your ship’s tail,” he said quietly. “Want to wash up before you report to the C.O.?”

Dunning smiled. “Thanks, yes,” he replied. “Like to do that, and get some of this mud off my”—his voice was suddenly grim—“kicked pants!”

CAPTAIN HARLAN WAYNE sat back of his crude desk and grinned at the pilot who stood stiffly before him. Wayne was short and thickset. He flew like a fool, but he didn’t run the Tenth the same way.

“At ease, Bing,” he ordered. “Grab a portion of the bench and explain why you messed up one Reginald Dunning, shave-tail, air service.”

Bing Burks stiffened. He stared at the C.O. of the Tenth. Then his eyes narrowed. Wayne shook his head.

“Don’t guess wrong, Bing. No one tipped me. I had just stepped out of No.3 hangar, and you were picking yourself up out of the mud. I saw the rest, but I didn’t hear the conversation.”

There was a little silence. Gun rumble drifted through the burlap hung over the windows in the C.O.’s office; the gasoline lamp sizzled. Then Bing chuckled.

“His name’s Reggie, eh?” he muttered. “Hell!”

The C.O. smiled narrowly. He ran the outfit without too much pomp and glory, but he ran it. He called pilots by their tagged-on names, but that didn’t interfere with a lot of other things.

“Bing,” he said slowly, “your name’s Compton. Don’t forget that. And while you’re in here, sign this, will you? Saves time.”

He shoved over a paper. Bing read the typewritten words slowly. He swore, but he didn’t raise his eyes from the paper. He picked up the stub of a pencil and signed.

“Three days—on the ground!” he muttered. “It wasn’t—worth it!”

The C.O. continued to smile. He tossed Bing a cigarette; they both lighted up.

"You're working too hard, Bing," he stated. "Your nerves are on edge. Green pilots get you sore. But don't lose any sleep over Dunning. He's going back to Blois to-morrow."

Wayne's voice was hard, and Bing stared at him. The C.O. pulled on his cigarette.

"I said no one tipped me, and I mean just that, Bing. But I've been having a few of the men in here—and asking questions. Saw enough to do that. And this isn't a kid outfit, Bing. We're having a tough time on a tough sector.

I can't fight Boche with pilots who take time off to call each other names. So Dunning goes back for court-martial—and you sit on your pants and cool off for three days. That's all, lieutenant."

BING got to his feet. He was sore.

This wasn't what he wanted. Dunning going back for court-martial! He'd struck first, of course, but getting kicked off the front—

"Captain," he said eagerly, "the kid was sore. He didn't know I'd been riddled in the sky. An' he didn't know—"

Wayne smiled grimly. "He knows *now*," he interrupted. "So do you. Good night, Bing!"

Wayne's head was bent over papers on the crude desk. Bing Burks stared down at him. He was on the verge of speaking, of muttering bitter words, when a new sound came into the room—a droning sound. It went above the rumble of the front-line guns to the eastward, above the rattling wind on the glass. It was the distant beat of many ship engines.

The C.O.'s head came up. He stiffened on the chair back of the desk. Bing swore fiercely.

"Boche!" he muttered. "Big girls—with eggs!"

Wayne snapped out words: "Steady! The Allies have bombing squadrons, too!"

Bing stood motionlessly. He had keen ears, and so had the C.O. They were both veterans.

"Comin' *from* the front!" Bing muttered. "Gotha engines!"

The C.O. was listening. The drone of engines was loud now. It had a peculiar, high pitch, the beat of Gothas. The engines sang as they roared.

"Heavy!" Bing muttered. "Boche—with a load!"

"Douse that light!" Wayne ordered. Then, in the blackness, he leaped for the door. Outside, his eyes went toward the hangars, beneath the net of camouflage. He called out sharply:

"Lights out! Bombers—up above!" No lights showed. Bing was close to the C.O. They stared up into the night sky. There were no stars. The clouds hung at around six thousand—or *had* hung there at dusk. Just beneath the clouds were exhaust trails—a lot of them; Bing counted seven. The planes were winging back of the Allied lines, far back. The Tenth was located ten kilometers back of the front.

A form was running toward the barracks in which the C.O. had his quarters. A voice called out.

"Captain Wayne! Captain!"

"Here!" The C.O.'s voice cut in on the orderly's call. "Got a message?"

"Battery H 5 reports strong enemy squadron of bombers passed their position at—"

"Hell!" Bing snapped. "It took 'em long enough to get that over the wire."

"Get the men out!" Wayne cut in. "Night pilots, orderly! Hop to it! Bing, get out there on the dead line and have the ships out. All planes! You stick until we're off—then you can follow. Ground order rescinded! Fast, Bing!"

Bing ran for the hangar line, tilting his head as he ran.

THE bombing outfit was winging westward to the north of the Tenth's field. Already the exhaust streaks in the sky were growing dimmer; but the big ships would have to circle, come back over their objective and release their bombs. And if the Tenth could get up, locate them—

Men were piling out on the tarmac now, running across toward the hangar dead line. A light flickered here and there. They didn't matter; the Gotha formation was now a half mile to the westward. Crew men were pulling out the little pursuit planes.

Things happened fast; Bing Burks made them happen that way. Lieutenants Harboard and Dantor got away with half-warmed engines and instructions to get altitude a half mile to the westward of the field. Sam Murray was warming up his Nieuport on the dead line. The crew men kept pulling drips out. Everybody was working.

Bing caught a shape that loomed up close to him, saw that it was Sergeant Beale; he grabbed the man by the arm.

"Roll out one of the replacements for me, sergeant!" he instructed. "Don't let any of these bozos ride her, either!"

The sergeant nodded and ran toward the hangar that held the few emergency ships. Two more planes

took off, one with a spluttering engine. But the beat steadied as the pilot crabbed into the wind.

"Four up!" Bing muttered. "Two more night pilots, counting the C.O.!"

Five lieutenants beside himself had taken night flying before they had winged up front. The Tenth was not a night-flying group; the Americans had no such squadron on the front at this time. But, like several other squadrons, the Tenth had pilots who could wing a ship with the dark, blurred horizon that night offered.

Wayne came up, breathing heavily; he was pulling helmet and goggles over his head. Ground-crew men were using flash lights. The C.O. caught sight of Bing.

"Four up, eh?" he muttered. "I'll take off. You follow. Briggs is on the sick list—that'll make six of us. I've got flares, and I'll lead."

He was gone. The rotary Gnome of another Nieuport was spluttering. The C.O. headed for the ship. At the far end of the hangars Bing saw a crew hauling out another Nieuport—the one he'd use. He shouted for the adjutant, who came running up.

"Helmet and goggles. Joe!" Bing's voice was hoarse. "Mine are in the barracks!"

THE adjutant moved toward one of the hangars. The C.O. was rolling his Nieuport out. Her engine was missing badly, but all the pilots were taking chances. The Gnomes warmed up quickly in a mild climb.

Bing turned toward the ship they were pulling out for him. The adjutant came up with helmet and goggles. He spoke grimly.

"The new man—he's ordering out a ship!" he told Bing. "Got his goggles on. Raising hell in there."

He pointed toward the No.2 hangar. Bing swore fiercely.

"Tell him to stay down!" he snapped.

"Tell him to—"

A Gnome kicked, roared. It wasn't the prop of the ship they were hauling out for Bing. It was the engine of the Nieuport Dunning had ordered out. The ship was on the dead line, out from the hangar. Then Bing's plane engine kicked and roared. The rumble died, roared again.

"Told him to stay—down!" the adjutant was muttering. "He told me to go to hell!"

Bing jerked on his helmet and goggles, running toward the ship that Dunning had ordered out. That pilot was swinging a leg over the fuselage as Bing caught him by the shoulder, jerking him down to the soggy earth.

"You—stay down!" he snapped. "This isn't green-pilot stuff! You keep your feet—"

A flash light struck the face of Lieutenant Dunning. It was white, twisted with rage.

"You running this outfit?" he snapped back. "I'm going up, you squealer!"

He made another move toward the ship. Bing understood. Dunning thought that Bing had squealed to the C.O. He had been told that he was due back in Blois for court-martial.

Bing's left hand pulled Dunning down from the fuselage for the second time. The drone of ship engines in the sky was fading. Precious seconds were passing.

"You don't rate night flying!" he snapped. "It's suicide—for you."

AND then Dunning struck. Bing hardly saw the blow coming; he had time only to move his head an inch. A clenched fist caught him heavily under the left ear. He felt his legs give, and he went down.

He tried to rise, but it was no good. There was a buzz in his ears; a different buzz from the rumble of the Gnome engines of the two ships. From a great distance he heard Dunning speak. There seemed to be a wavering light on the green pilot's face.

"You—got me sent back, busted—damn you! I'm *taking* this flight, see! You can't stop me. You aren't the only man on the front that's wearing—hard-boiled wings!"

Bing Burks tried again to rise, swaying to his knees. He saw the adjutant-try to stop Dunning, saw that pilot strike at him savagely. Crew men were standing close, but they made no move to interfere. Then the Gnome roared in fuller voice, started to roll. Lieutenant Dunning was in the cockpit. The plane headed out cross wind.

Bing got to his feet. He swore thickly. Joe Crews gripped him by the ring arm. Bing shook him off.

"Hard-boiled wings!" he muttered thickly. "That kid's—crazy!"

The adjutant was at his side as he moved unsteadily toward the remaining Nieuport.

"Listen, Bing—you're groggy!" he muttered. "Wait a little."

"Wait—hell!" Bing cut in. "Wait down here? With that green kid taking off!"

He swore harshly as they reached his ship, then climbed into the cockpit. The adjutant had his head over the fuselage curve of the baby fighter.

"Wait, Bing!" he begged. "He hit you pretty hard. Wait until—"

Again Bing swore fiercely, and his left hand fumbled toward the ratchet throttle on the side. He muttered words.

"I'll kill the gunnery bozo—if this Vickers isn't sighted."

The ship rolled. Ahead of her, fifty feet off the field, Bing spotted an exhaust trail in the darkness—the trail from Lieutenant Dunning's ship. He fought his own plane out of a rotary-pull *cheval*, lifted her gear from the soggy earth. His head was clearing rapidly. Narrowing his eyes on the blur of the horizon, he climbed the little ship.

The beat of the Gnome was steady in his ears. He squinted through the ring sights of the Vickers gun. This was an emergency ship; in theory she was right for combat. The side of his jaw ached. Bing wiped his lips with the back of his left hand; in the faint glow of the dial-board light he saw red on his hand. He laughed harshly against the beat of the Gnome.

Dunning was a fighter. Twice he had battered Bing down. And the second time there had been a reason; Bing was willing to admit that. The kid had thought he had squealed to the C.O.; Blois—a court-martial—because of the squeal! And Dunning was up for his taste of the War, before they broke him.

"Hard-boiled!" Bing Burks muttered hoarsely. "The kid's—a fighter!"

A QUARTER mile ahead was the exhaust trail of the Nieuport. It was faint, thin. The other streakings of color were out of sight. Bing got his safety belt snapped across his lap. He was winging his ship more to the northward than Dunning. It was a hunch. There was a French dump a mile from the hospital base at Lurienne. It was heavily camouflaged and had never been bombed; but there was a beginning to all things, and the enemy had a way of learning locations. Their intelligence department was keen.

Bing swore softly. His eyes went toward the faint exhaust in the sky.

"Reginald!" he muttered grimly. "Reggie!"

He stared ahead, downward. It seemed to him his eyes had picked up dancing light, perhaps a mile distant; white, flashing light. He glanced at the altimeter. Three thousand five hundred, and still climbing. He was crabbing the ship into the wind and making fair speed. The engine roar was steady. His eyes went toward the direction of Lurienne. And then, suddenly, the blur of horizon earth in that direction was suffused with red. White light danced through the red. But the red remained, spreading.

"Got the dump!" Bing muttered.

"Hit her! Coming back——"

He banked more to the northward. The bombers had passed almost over the Tenth's field. They would go back of Laurienne, winging toward the front with their load of sky eggs. And when the bombs were released, the ships would be lighter—and headed for the lines. The turn would be to the northward.

Bing twisted his head. Dunning had seen the glow, too. The slant of his exhaust was changed now; he was winging northward. But the rest of the flight would be too far to the southward; unless they swung, banked toward the glow of red, the returning bombers would be past them.

A flare burst high in the sky, far to the southward. It was a green flare. The C.O. was signaling for a turn to the starboard, northward!

Bing was climbing his Nieuport in a series of zooms now. The Gnome was droning in high-pitched tone. Altitude! He had to have altitude.

THEN he picked up the exhaust trails of the big bombers. There were several of them; more cut the air as he leveled off at five thousand. The Gothas had dropped low for the laying of their iron eggs; now they were winging back toward the front and gaining altitude. They angled in toward Bing's ship. He had the Nieuport almost directly in their flight path now and was perhaps a thousand feet higher.

He swore hoarsely. If only the other five ships were in this sky spot! If only the C.O. and Harboard, Dantor and Sam Murray were winging ships near his. What a scrap they could give the big girls!

Twisting his head, he saw the shape of Dunning's plane. It was nearer his ship than he had expected, several hundred feet lower in altitude. Lieutenant Dunning had cut in sharply. His plane, too, was in the path of the returning bombers.

Bing Burks laughed harshly. The cold night air and the prop wash had cleared his head. But he could not forget that blow of Dunning's, even with the German ships roaring toward his plane.

A green pilot and himself! The two of them in the path of a formation that had done damage, big damage, far back of the Allied lines. And both he and Dunning were winging ships in whose cockpits they had never sat before! They were riding back of prop-synchronized guns into whose ring sights they had never squinted before!

Bing nosed his ship over, cutting the throttle

speed down. Without exhaust trail he might be able to surprise the formation below. They were very close now. Surprise was necessary. He and Dunning needed every break possible. Bing swore as he wiped a spattering of oil, flung back by the rotary, from his goggle glass.

"All right, Reggie!" he gritted as the little pursuit plane dived, her wires screaming. "This is one time you've *got* to be hard boiled!"

Then he forgot about Dunning, forgot about the other ships from the Tenth Pursuit. There was nothing defenseless about these German bombers.

They were flying a tight formation, and they mounted guns fore and aft; perhaps, even, they had a gunner below. It was the darkness that gave the little Nieuport an edge. Bing had bulky shapes to catch in his sights—shapes that maneuvered slowly, sluggishly. The German pilots had only the diving, zooming, twisting, small shape of the pursuit ship.

Bing's eyes sought Fokker or Albatross escort ships as he piqued on the leader of the formation. He sighted none of them. A hundred yards from the shape of the leader, he banked vertically to the starboard; then he kicked the Nieuport out of the bank and dived at an angle.

Tracer color rushed past his port wings. He squeezed the stick trigger, the Vickers clattered sharply. He zoomed out of the dive and caught a flash of one Gotha going out of formation.

THE Nieuport came around and Bing dived again. The Gotha formation was almost past his ship now. A shape flashed upward; his fingers closed over the stick trigger. But he didn't squeeze it again.

"Dunning!" he muttered grimly. "He's fighting!"

He dived again. This time tracer stream came from two directions. His own Vickers was battering down lead on the big plane he had singled out. He saw the dim outline of her tilting wings. She, too, was banking out of the formation. He zoomed again, banked, dived.

The formation was swinging. It banked to the southward. Bing glanced in that direction as he dived. There was no sign of the other Tenth Pursuit ships. Then he was pulling back on the stick, spraying lead at the shape below, and this time his plane did not rise without being hit. A strut crackled, spurting wood splinters.

Bing leveled off, stared out toward the wing fabric. A shape dropped down, green-red tracer color slanting toward the Nieuport. Bing groaned and kicked the ship into a slip.

"The kid's gone wild," he muttered. "He's shooting at me—and—"

A big plane was going down in flames; the sky was lighted brightly. For a second time, as Bing pulled out of the slip, the small shape came down. Bing saw that it wasn't Dunning's Nieuport.

It was a German plane—a Fokker! An escort ship!

Bing got the Nieuport in a spin. As she lost altitude he caught a glimpse of two other shapes in the sky. Black crosses stood out against white-gray fabric. There were other escort ships for the bombers.

Bing Burke smiled twistedly, got the controls in neutral and checked the spin. Slowly he pulled back on the stick. The nose of the Nieuport came up. He tilted his head. Two Fokkers were diving on him! They had followed him down.

The flaming Gotha lighted the sky like a giant torch. Bing had a glimpse of many little ships now; the sky seemed filled with them. The planes from the Tenth Pursuit had arrived!

HE BANKED around. A flying wire let go, screaming in toward the cockpit. He ducked, raised his head again. A shape was diving ahead of the Nieuport. He pulled back on the stick and squeezed the stick trigger. There was a short burst, the Fokker shot upward and went over on a wing. Almost instantly flame was streaking up from her.

The Vickers had jammed, but a lucky short burst had caught the enemy plane. Bing shoved the stick forward, twisted his head. He failed to see the second Fokker. On the earth below there was a great burst of white flame. One of the bombers had gone down.

The starboard wing had a slight droop with the stick in neutral. Bing banked to the port, glancing upward. The formation of bombers was a half mile distant, but the sky fight was still on. He could see the spark-streaked fire of tracer streams. A flare, red and clear, burst and drifted downward. On the earth, perhaps a quarter mile distant, there was another flash of white.

Bing leveled the ship off; and then, as he twisted his neck like an owl, the burst caught his plane. The prop shattered, the engine was pounded with Maxim or Spandau bullets. He reached for the ignition switch, even as his head went down low to avoid the splinters flung back from the prop.

"Done!" he muttered. "Got—me!"

The Nieuport was shrilling toward earth. Bing smiling faintly, lifted his head. Off to the right, above,

he saw a tracer stream rip the darkness in a long burst. Then he turned his head away and looked toward the ground. The Nieuport was very low.

He fumbled on the rack for a flare. There was none. Pulling back on the stick, he got the ship in a mild glide. His eyes were straining back of the goggle glass. A stretch of level earth was below. The Nieuport was less than a hundred feet above the earth.

Lower and lower she dropped. Bing muttered mechanically:

“Into wind—bad crash unless—”

His words died as tracer color ripped downward into the earth to the starboard of the ship. Bing laughed harshly. A Fokker pilot was still trying to make certain he had got the American pilot. Bing could see the bullets rip into the earth. They gave a little light as they exploded, marking the earth line.

He pulled all the way back on the stick; the ship stalled. The nose of the plane was high; as she lost flying speed, the Gnome weight pulled the nose down. But the tail assembly was dropping now.

The ship struck. It was a shivering, crunching pancake crash. Bing tried to get his arms before his face—he was too late.

The stick, battered against his right leg, was wrenched from his grip. His head, flung forward, struck heavily against the dial-board lining. He heard the hot oil sizzle over the exhaust pipes, saw a flash of red. His hands went to the belt buckle, fumbling with it. But he was weak, dizzy. Acrid smoke reached his throat; he was choking. The Nieuport was burning, and he was trapped.

BING didn't lose consciousness, but his fingers failed to loosen the safety belt. He tried to rise and found that his legs hadn't the strength to lift his body back of the belt. His face was twisted as he tried to suck in breaths of clear air. In a few seconds the flames would reach the petrol tank.

Then he felt strong hands gripping his shoulders. There was a pull. But his body was held by the belt. Twisting his head, he stared blankly. Dunning was at his side. Bing could see his face in the light of the flames.

“The—belt!” he muttered weakly. “It's—got—me.”

Fingers snapped the belt buckle. This time Bing Burke was lifted from the cockpit seat. He felt himself dragged over the side of the fuselage; his body dropped heavily. Then it was raised again, lifted from the earth. He tried to speak.

“Get out! Let me go! The tank!” Slowly, steadily, he was dragged away from the ship. It seemed to him that it took hours. He tried to help, but his whole body was numb, useless. Dunning's breath rasped in his ears. Then, suddenly, they fell, both going down in the mud. The explosion roared over the field. Bits of fabric, struts, twisting wires, were shot upward and outward from the Nieuport's wreckage. But none touched the two men as they lay face downward in the mud.

After a little while Dunning raised himself slightly.

“All right, hard-boiled?” he muttered thickly. “Still kicking?”

Bing Burks raised himself weakly and rolled over on his back. His head was one big ache. His legs stabbed pain up through his body—but he was still alive.

“You damn fool!” he muttered in a whisper. “You *landed*—to pull me—out!”

There was a little silence. Beyond them some wreckage of the Nieuport burned. Bing could see Dunning's red-streaked face: the green pilot was smiling twistedly.

“Stuck close to you—in that scrap, Burks,” he said. “Tried to do—what you did. Was pretty scared. Then they got on your tail—and I got that last Boche. Shot a burst into the ground. Thought it might show up something. Did help—a bit. I nosed over—landing. But I got to you in time.”

“Dunning,” said Bing Burks slowly, “I didn't squeal—on you. The C.O.—he saw me picking myself up. He called in witnesses—”

THE green pilot was staring at Bing. He groaned. Some doped fabric flared up brightly. Bing spoke again.

“You an' me, Dunning—we busted up that formation. The others must have smeared 'em some more.”

He stopped talking, but he still grinned, lying on his back in the light of the flames. Beyond he could see Dunning's nosed-up Nieuport.

“And I—rate Blois!” Dunning was muttering with disgust. “For strikin' a—”

“Not when I get to the C. O.—you don't rate Blois,” Bing muttered. “You an' me, Reggie—we just acted up a little. You go back—after the flying you did to-night? Say, the Tenth needs *more* guys—like you!” Dunning's face was twisted.

“I hit you—pretty hard, Burks,” he said haltingly. “Saw you take off after me—and felt rotten. Thought

you might be groggy. So I stuck close when you banked off. I've had night flying—a long course, this new one. It wasn't so hard. Then, when we got scrapping—well, I was glad you were up there in the sky with me. I was pretty scared, Burks.”

Bing, sitting up weakly, grinned at Dunning.

“Scared!” he exclaimed. “You didn't act it. But you did soak me hard, Dunning. Only, you soaked the Boche hard, too. That sort of—evens it up.”

He stuck out a mud-stained hand, and they shook. Bing looked up at faint tracer streams in the sky. The running fight was still on. He drew a deep breath, kicked out weakly with his left leg.

“Still alive and kicking, Dunning,” he said thickly. “But I'm not kicking—you.”

Dunning was grinning, looking down at his silver wings. Neither pilot had had time to change into leather coats or flying overalls. And Dunning's wings were smeared with the field mud, wet and slimy. Bing's eyes dropped to them and he chuckled.

“Hard-boiled wings, Dunning!” he muttered. “They'll keep you—out of Blois!”

And they did.