



# THE ACE OF SPADES

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

*Somewhere in the ranks of the border patrol a spy was operating. Day by day fliers were being knocked out of the skies—and always beside the dead bodies there lay a mysterious ace of spades!*

**C**AN'T HELP SHIVERING every time I see an ace of spades. It always takes me back to the wrecked Waco out there on the desert, and the poor devil lying in it with the black death card stuck in his stiff fingers. And then I remember all the hellish, crazy things that followed, all marked by the black ace, with a bullet hole through its center.

It happened that I was the first one to see the wreck. There were three of us flying together in formation, heading back to the field after one of old Archibald's eternal tactical problems. He was the C.O. of our outpost field near the border—Major John Archibald, a sour, weatherbeaten old crab nobody liked and almost everyone feared. He used to send us up on the hottest days, working out theoretical air tactics. We'd come back and spend half the night cursing the border, the head, and Archibald most of all.

This had been a terrible day. We'd been spread out all over the map, eleven of us, playing his crazy game for him. After our last contact point, Red Derringer, Fred Newton and I started high-balling for the field. I was leading. About twenty-five miles north of the border something down in the mesquite caught my eye. It looked like a cracked-up plane to me, so I dropped down a bit. Sure enough it was a crash. I felt a little queer, thinking it was one of our outfit, but when I got closer I saw it wasn't an Army ship.

Red and Fred Newton followed me down, and we managed to find a place to land. We ran over to the wreck, which was a Whirlwind Waco. Then we saw we were too late. The pilot was out cold. I reached out to touch his hand, to make sure. Then I saw it—that black ace, stuck in his fingers as though it had been put there after he passed out.

We all stared at each other, and I for one felt a bit shaky.

"Looks queer," muttered Red. "Say—what's that on the wing?"

I looked over and saw the fabric ripped loose in one or two places. And then I saw something else. Bullet-holes, a whole bunch of them. They'd ripped through and into the fuselage from the other side. We lifted the dead pilot out and found he had been shot in four places. When we examined the plane we ran across a little hidden compartment that had been partly broken open. Inside the compartment was a package of what I recognized as narcotics.

"That makes it simple enough," commented Fred Newton, wiping the perspiration from his freckled face. "Dope-runner got in wrong with another gang or double-crossed his own so they let him have it. Look, there's a machine gun. He must have tried to shoot it out with the guys that bumped him."

He was right about the nose gun. It was jammed under the wreckage around the nose, so we couldn't get at it to see how much ammunition he'd used.

"I guess you're right," I said. "But that ace of spades made me fell funny for a second."

"Well, let's be going," cut in Red, impatiently. "We can send out a truck when we get in."

We flew back to the field and found that the rest of the outfit had beaten us in. I cut off my engine and went in to the office to report the killing. Archibald never batted an eye as I described the crash; he was a hard, calloused old fellow, forever bitter because he had been shelved and sent to this forsaken post, and also because of rankling suspicions about his coquettish young wife.

"Well, it's none of our business," he said harshly when I had finished. "I'm not going to go to any trouble over a dope-runner."

He turned to Captain Hunt, his adjutant, who had listened to my report.

"Send a squad out there tomorrow and bury him and have them burn up the wreck."

"Yes, sir," replied Hunt quietly, and went out with me. Hunt was the only man who got along with Archibald, though he could have gotten along with almost anyone. He was an easy-going chap, and well liked for an adjutant. He had 13 Germans to his credit, more than any other overseas pilot on the field, but he seldom spoke of those victories.

"The old man's sore about something tonight," Hunt said to me. "He came in a while ago and

slammed the door, nearly knocked it off its hinges. Asked if Brady had landed ahead of him. When I said 'yes' I thought he was going to have a stroke."

I UNDERSTOOD then. Captain Brady was a thorn in Archibald's side, for it was an open secret that Brady, in spite of the fact that he too was married, was not above paying close attentions to Jean Archibald when the major was not around. Most of us hated Brady cordially. He was a good-looking rascal, with a sneering manner for men and a devilish way with women. He had stepped in and won the fiancée of Lieutenant Frank Pierce when she came West to marry Frank. There had almost been murder, but she had kept the two apart, finally marrying Brady. Frank had proceeded to drink himself half to death, keeping far away from both of them whenever possible. He had asked for a transfer and had been refused. Brady had been a model husband for just about a month, and then had started down the primrose path again.

Somehow I couldn't eat much that night. My mind kept going back to that black ace, clutched in those dead fingers. And in spite of all I could do, a premonition of evil swept over me. Red Derringer had already told the rest of the pilots about the murder and the card. Bob Ellis, the youngest man in the group, was kidding him about his superstitions. All but Felix Renshaw joined in the razzing. I saw him staring moodily at the table, a sullen look on his swarthy face.

"Felix got another bawling out from Brady today," whispered Scotty Campbell who was jokingly called the squadron tightwad. "He never loses a chance to rub it in."

Felix had been court-martialed a year before on account of a public row. He had a notoriously bad temper. He had been reduced from a captain to a first lieutenant, unfortunately going five numbers lower than Brady, whom he had ranked till then. Brady never let him forget it.

IN SPITE OF the kidding about Red's superstitions, there was something in the atmosphere that disturbed me. I tried to get rid of the feeling by starting a bridge game after mess, but in my first hand I drew the ace of spades. I must have looked startled, for Kenneth Livingstone lifted his aristocratic eyebrows and smiled amusedly. Ken was a newcomer, but we all had liked him from the start.

"What's the matter, Andy? Did you draw thirteen trumps?" he drawled.

“Oh, I don’t feel like playing after all,” I muttered, throwing down my cards. “Get somebody else, will you, Ken. That crash upset me, somehow.”

“All right,” he said obligingly. “How about it, Frank. Sit in?”

Frank Pierce shook his head morosely. He was already well on his nightly drunk. We had all tried to make him snap out of his despondency, but without avail.

“I’ll make the fourth,” said Art Lee. “If you don’t mind my trumping your ace.”

Ken looked mournfully at me.

“See what you did?”

I grinned as I shoved off, for Art’s bridge playing was as wild as his flying. He was popularly known as “Dizzy Lee” by all the mechanics—behind his back, of course. He had had three crack-ups, one resulting in a fractured skull. A few of the outfit even thought he was not “all there,” as they said.

I strode on out of the mess and into the night. It was pitch black. I wandered toward the hangars, thinking about the crashed Waco. Suddenly, I heard voices. I stopped. In a moment I recognized them. Brady and his wife were somewhere beyond me in the shadows, quarreling bitterly.

“I won’t stand it any longer,” she cried. “I followed you—I saw her run away when she heard me coming.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?” sneered Brady.

I turned to go, not wishing to hear any more, for every word made me hate the snake. But I caught her hysterical answer.

“I’ll tell him!” she said hotly. “You know who I mean. And if I do, he’ll kill you!”

I got away from there and went to my room. The events of the day combined to make me depressed, and when I finally fell asleep it was to drop from one nightmare in which a menacing figure advanced on me, a figure with the ace of spades for a face, into another still more gruesome one.

TWO DAYS passed, and gradually I forgot the incident of the Waco. We searched for strange planes in our area, but without success. On the third day a welcome cloud layer made the day cool and pleasant. The pilots took off early for independent practice hops. I was one of the last to reach the locker room. Brady was just pulling on his jacket, and indulging in some wise crack with Bob Ellis when Major Archibald entered. An uncomfortable silence fell. Brady hurried

out to his ship, not even pausing to speak to Scotty Campbell and Hunt, who called something at him. I saw Archibald’s jaw harden as he turned to get his helmet and goggles.

I climbed into my P-1 a minute later and took off. For a while I put on a dog-fight with Red Derringer and Art Lee, but after a bit Lee’s maneuvers became too erratic for me and I cut loose for a joy hop. I pulled up into the first cloud layer, as two or three other ships had done, but found another layer above that. I jazzed about for some time, occasionally cutting through to be sure of my location. At last I headed home, still flying between the two cloud levels. My main tank drained dry suddenly. The engine went silent. I nosed down and lazily turned on my reserve, waiting for the engine to pick up again. But before it could resume its steady drone I heard something that made me sit up quickly.

Somewhere in the clouds, or above them, a machine-gun was snarling into action!

Once again, the premonition of evil gripped me. There was no mock combat scheduled for that day, and the sound was ominously realistic. As my engine picked up, I zoomed hurriedly for the layer of clouds 1000 feet above me. I was half-way there when through that gray ceiling burst a spinning plane, another P-1, headed straight for me. I swerved hastily to one side and watched it spin past.

The pilot was slumped down from view. Something cold took hold of my heart. I cut closer, diving as near as I dared. It was Brady’s ship—but Brady was unconscious!

INSTINCTIVELY, I pulled away and climbed as fast as I could. As I plunged upward through the top of the second cloud mass I saw a ship racing across the sky. I tore after it, but before I had more than leveled out, it hurled itself into a huge cloud and was buried from sight. I tried to follow, but it was useless. I dived at full gun back toward the spot where Brady’s ship had spun down.

As I came through into clear air I saw it making its last turn before it crashed into the ground. At least five ships roared down from as many different angles as I shot down for a landing. To my relief, the wreck did not burn. Perhaps there was still a chance. But when I reached the demolished P-1 I saw that Brady was stone dead. He had been badly cut about the head in the crash, but something told me that he had died before that. Scotty Campbell and Hunt were the first to join

me. We pulled Brady out of the wreck. Then our eyes met significantly. Brady had been shot through the throat.

"My God!" muttered Scotty. "Shot! But who on earth—"

"Nobody on earth," I said shortly. "Somebody up there behind that second cloud level."

I explained what I had heard and seen. While I was speaking, two more ships landed. Archibald and Fred Newton ran over to the crash.

"It's Brady, Major," said Hunt gravely. "Somebody shot him down."

Archibald's face went gray.

"Shot!" he exclaimed, his eyes staring. "You're crazy. Hunt—"

"What's that?" cried Scotty suddenly. We turned and followed his upward glance. A bit of paper attached to a small streamer was drifting lazily down two hundred feet away. Archibald himself ran toward it and picked it up when it fell. As he returned, his face was pasty white.

"Look," he half-whispered. He held out the thing. A chill went down my spine.

It was the ace of spades, its center, drilled by a bullet!

My brain was in a turmoil. I stared at the card, not believing my senses. Until that instant, I had thought this new crime plain murder by one of our own pilots, murder to avenge a grievance, for there was more than one who had good reason to hate the man now lying dead before us. But the ace of spades! What connection could this have between that other killing? What possible connection?

But was there a connection? Might not the man who had killed Brady have thought of this as a means of diverting suspicion, something to link it with an unknown gang?

"I'll have him carried in, Major," Hunt was saying quietly. "We'll have an investigation, of course?"

"Yes, yes," muttered Archibald. For once his harsh manner was gone. He seemed at a loss for words. "Take charge of everything, Hunt. I'm going back. I—I'll see you later." He clumbed into his ship and made a crooked take-off.

THAT NIGHT the mess was very subdued. No one had voiced a suspicion and yet I knew that all had the same thoughts. Red Derringer and I had checked up on the timekeeper's record, and we had found that only two pilots were on the ground at the time of Brady's killing.

These were Ken Livingstone and Bob Ellis. Frank Pierce had come in last of all. He had taken the news grimly, after one look of amazement. Felix Renshaw had been forced down by a bad engine near a little village twenty miles east. I had not seen him until mess. He had nothing to say, but I could not detect any sign of regret for Brady's passing, which was not unnatural.

That night Red Derringer and I were alone in my room.

"You know what they're all saying," he said, after a silence. "It was Archibald himself—somebody told him about Brady's playing around his wife."

My mind flashed back to that night by the hangars, when Marion Brady had threatened to tell—whom? Who was the man she had told, if she did tell! Archibald or Frank Pierce. Frank, who still adored her, in spite of her faithlessness, who hated Brady fiercely—or Archibald, the outraged husband.

"I'm not so sure," I said slowly. "Did you notice that Renshaw was forced down? Maybe that was to get back his nerve and fix up his story."

The door had opened as I was speaking. Art Lee and Hunt stood there.

"Pardon me, Andy—didn't mean to eavesdrop," said Hunt. "Art and I wanted to see you. Don't go, Red. We'd like your slant on this."

They sat down and lit cigarettes.

"I happened to hear what you said about Renshaw," Hunt went on. "But you're wrong, Andy. Archibald suggested the same thing, and I checked up on his story. He was really forced down, and within ten minutes of the time when it happened. He'd have had to go like mad to make that."

"But it's possible," I insisted.

"Not probable, however. Personally I don't think Felix is that type. He'd more likely swing on a man and knock him out than shoot him. And anyway, Art here has something that sounds bad."

Art hesitated, looking a little frightened.

"It sounds like squealing, but I had to tell somebody," he said hurriedly. "I was jazzing around pretty high when I saw a ship below me. I was in the sun, and I thought I'd have some fun and dive on this bird. But when I was about half a mile off I saw tracers streaking out of his guns. I pulled up and looked all over, but he wasn't shooting at anything. I sneaked down a little closer, still behind him. It was—well, it was Archibald."

He looked nervously from one to another.

"Understand—that was all I saw. I thought he was

just trying out his guns and so I didn't pay any more attention. I dived on through the cloud."

"Say! There's an idea," I exclaimed. "We're dumb not to think of it. Why not examine all the guns?"

Hunt shook his head.

"I did, but no luck. I was too late. I never thought of it until Archibald told me he'd given both his guns a trial burst to see if they were O.K. He said it would look queer, and not to mention it. I immediately went out to the hangars, but the gun crew had taken all the drums off in a bunch, and given the guns the usual cleaning."

RED DERRINGER scratched his head, squinting one eye at the floor.

"Well, I'm damned glad of that. You see, I took a few pot shots at a lousy buzzard, and you might've hung this stunt on me."

Hunt grinned.

"That's the rub. The gun crew said four ship's guns had been fired, but they didn't remember which ones.

"We all shoot a little target practice at things on the ground now and then," I said. "On this border work it's a damned good thing. I'm stale right now, as it is."

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Hunt. "We haven't a thing on the old man, or anybody else. And there's a possibility, of course, that whoever bumped that dope-runner did this, too. Maybe someone on the border is trying to wipe us out."

Red scowled.

"Plenty of 'em would like to, all right," he muttered. "I'm keeping my eyes peeled from now on. But we might as well lay low on this Brady deal till we really know something." We decided to await further developments, as he suggested. They were not long in coming. Several of us were clustered around the reading room of the mess next evening when Ken Livingstone ran in, breathless.

"Four or five of you grab some ships and get down to Mestiza," he gasped. "Somebody just called me from there, scared to death. He said some planes were shooting up the place."

Ken was officer-of-the-day, so we jumped up and ran for the hangars. He had already given the alarm, and the ships were being rushed out. Archibald appeared with Hunt a moment later. He climbed into the first ship that was ready.

"Hunt, pick out five more men and get down there as fast as you can," he barked, and turned to warming up his engine.

Hunt hurriedly signaled Scotty Campbell, Fred Newton, Frank Pierce, Red Derringer, and myself. He gave us our orders crisply:

"Keep well apart, and switch your running lights on so we won't be bumping each other in the dark. But try to keep close enough so we can contact. Don't take any chances shooting till you're sure it isn't one of us."

WE JUMPED into our ships and took off one right after another. I wasn't any too keen for the hop; not that I minded a scrap with the border mob—but it was like flying blind. I dug out well to the left so I could just see the port wingtip light of one ship, and I was all set to bail out if I cracked anybody in the dark.

Mestiza is a dirty little village just this side of the line, and nobody would have minded if it had been blown off the map. But an order was an order, so we high-balled for it as fast as we could. It was only twenty-two miles and we got there in a hurry. I strained my eyes looking for some sign of a row, but there wasn't a ship in sight.

The P-1 next to me glided down toward the town, so I followed suit. But all of a sudden I began to feel queer. A crazy idea hit me, but before I had time to think twice a pair of twin-guns burst into unholy hell about 500 feet above me. Straight down in front of me roared a ship, and in three seconds I saw a spurt of flame where its bullets had nicked one of our group.

The P-1 that got hit fell off and dived, on fire. I drilled onto the tail of the bus that had got the P-1, but it pulled up and zoomed off into the dark. I followed blindly. Another P-1 flashed by me about ten feet away, and I almost swallowed my heart. I kicked out to miss him and banked straight up and down. And just then the chap I'd almost hit cut loose with both guns at the mystery ship. I swerved around and drove in to catch the strange plane in a crossfire between the two of us. But the pilot was as clever as sin. He plugged the other ship and zoomed clear over it at me, his guns spurting. I felt my crate jump as he poured lead into it, and I thought I was gone.

But he missed me in the dark, and before he had a chance to try in again I snapped off my running lights and was climbing high and fast. Down below me I saw the lights of two more P-1's, and once I saw a blur shoot between me and them. I pitched into a steep dive at the blur, but it was gone after two or three bursts at our ships. By this time the rest of our outfit must have thought about the lights. They all went dark, and there we were, tearing around at one hundred and forty

miles an hour, in a night as black as the inside of a hat, trying to find the devil who'd knocked down two of us already.

It wasn't my idea of fun, and I was glad when I saw a white rocket go up from Archibald's plane as a signal to land. I waited till I got close to the ground before putting on my landing-lights, but evidently the treacherous crook who had laid for us was gone.

THINGS WERE in a mess when we finally got down together. Scotty Campbell had gone West in the ship that burned. He never had a chance. Fred Newton had fared better, but he had a compound fracture of his right leg from his crack-up, besides a bullet in his shoulder. Half the population of Mestiza was out to see the fracas. We got Fred patched up enough to carry him into the village. Archibald ordered Hunt to have him transported in a hospital plane to Fort Bliss as soon as he was able to be moved. He made arrangements for taking care of poor old Scotty, and then we all took off for the field.

In the meantime, Felix Renshaw, Bob Ellis and Art Lee had come skyrocketing over to act as reinforcements. Livingstone had called Mestiza for details of the trouble after we took off and had found that there was no air-fight in progress. Suspecting a frame-up by the border mob, he had hurried the other three to our aid. They had arrived about the same time as we.

When we landed at the field Archibald called us all in to his office. He looked ten years older, and his eyes were almost glassy.

"From now on we fight," he said grimly. "I've let that border gang off too easily, it's clear. From this second on, remember, shoot to kill. Whoever it was got poor Scotty without giving him a prayer, and maybe Fred Newton will be another. We're up against a bunch of dirty, cowardly rats—and we'll treat them as such. That's all!"

We went out silently. I was doing some hard thinking, which wasn't any too easy. It kept me awake most of the night, but I still didn't have the answer to the riddle.

Next day we went over our ships carefully. Archibald's, Hunt's, Red's and mine had been caught in the savage fire of the night before. Our wings were punctured in a dozen places with bullet holes. Hunt's tail group had almost been shot away, and I found that I had escaped destruction by a matter of inches. Frank Pierce and the second group of ships had not been hit.

Art Lee was assigned to accompany poor Scotty

Campbell's body to his home, according to custom. Five of us were to fly over the field in a blank file formation as a last tribute. But a few minutes before we were due to take off, Art came hurriedly to me. His face was white as a sheet, and he was trembling.

"What's the matter?" I demanded.

He looked all about him and drew me into a corner of the hangar.

"Look," he whispered, and his eyes were filled with fright. "Look what I found on the box containing the casket."

I looked. The blood went cold in my veins.

It was the ace of spades!

Through the center, exactly as in the other two cases, a hole the size of a 30-30 bullet was drilled. I turned the card over and looked at the back.

"Mind if I take this?" I said to Art.

"Lord no," he mumbled. "The sight of it makes me all clammy."

"Get a stiff upper lip," I told him. "And now go along, and don't tell a soul about this. I'm going to see Archibald myself."

I ASKED Frank Pierce to take my place in the formation and went in to Archibald's office. He was talking in a low voice with Hunt. I turned to go, but they called me over. I closed the door and told them about the death card. Archibald came up to his feet with a rush.

"Andy, we've come to an ugly decision. See if you do, too. First, did you get a look at that ship that shot down Scotty and Fred the other night?"

"It was just a blur," I answered. "I couldn't tell what it was."

"Neither did I," said Hunt, "but the major saw it closer."

"Too damned close," muttered Archibald. "It looked like a P-1."

"Second," proceeded Hunt, "we checked that phone call, or tried to, rather. Of course we knew it was a fake message. Ken Livingstone said the voice was harsh and excited, but quite strange to him. We think it may have been disguised."

He stopped. Both he and Archibald waited, expectantly. I stared at them and moistened my lips.

"You're right," I half whispered. "I've had the same idea since yesterday. That call came from this field. Somebody here pretended to be calling from Mestiza, just to get us out there."

Archibald jumped nervously to his feet and strode

up and down the room.

"That cinches it. Three of us can't be wrong. Hunt, I'm going to send for Department of Justice men. This thing is driving me mad. I haven't slept a wink for two nights."

He whirled about on me.

"Do you realize what it means, Andy? One of the pilots on this field is a murderer!"

"But why?" I asked curiously. "Why should anyone do it?"

Archibald shook his head helplessly.

"That's what we don't know. I can understand Brady's death. I can see how the guilty man tried to make it look like an outsider by using that ace of spades."

He broke off and gazed at us accusingly.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking, you two!" he cried. "You think I did it. Don't lie to me. I know what they're saying. Well, I'm glad he's dead. Damned glad, do you hear? But I didn't get him. And I don't know who did."

He stopped, shaking, and then turned away as though ashamed of his outburst. Somehow, in that instant, I disliked the hard old veteran less, and I felt he spoke the truth.

"But this other thing," he went on more quietly. "That's different. There's only one thing I can figure. The murderer of Brady thinks someone saw him, or has evidence. He hoped to get him at Mestiza."

I laid down the card Art Lee had found.

"Perhaps if we could find the rest of the deck, it would help," I suggested. "And if you have the other two—"

"I burned them up," muttered Archibald. "They got on my nerves," He snorted. "Nerves! Bah! I'm getting to be as jumpy as a kid in his first battle."

"We're all jumpy, Major," I said. "The morale is shot to pieces. We ought to get into the air and get rid of our nerves before they get us."

He wheeled about.

"Good idea, Andy. Why didn't you think of that, Hunt? We'll start out early tomorrow, with a full formation. Every pilot on the field will take part. We'll take off at eight sharp. Get your orders out this afternoon."

"Will it be a field maneuver, or will it be a tactical problem?" asked Hunt.

"We'll stick close to home for once," said Archibald. "And by the way, the machine guns will not be armed. Understand?"

Hunt nodded grimly.

"I understand, sir."

He went on out to prepare the schedule. Archibald turned to me.

"Have you noticed anything unusual about Pierce and Renshaw lately?"

I shook my head. He gazed at me thoughtfully. The mail orderly appeared in the door and Archibald inclined his head in dismissal to me.

"Letter for you, Lieutenant Anderson," said the orderly.

I took it. It was from Fred Newton at the Fort Bliss Hospital. I stumbled out into Hunt's office while I read it.

"The nurse wrote it for him," I said to Hunt. "He's going to pull through, but they may have to operate on him."

"He wants to know everything that happened after he dropped out of the fight, even how many of us got nicked, and how much. Guess he's afraid he missed something. Well, he can have my part next time."

"I'm glad he'll pull through," commented Hunt. "You know, Fred and I were overseas together for a while, till we were sent to different outfits. I like the old codger."

I went on out into the sunshine, but the gloom remained in my heart. It all seemed incredible, but I know it was true. One of my comrades, one of those with whom I sat down at mess daily, had deliberately plotted to murder Brady, and had not hesitated at further killing to hide his tracks. Two faces stood out in my mind—those of Frank Pierce and Felix Renshaw. I was startled a minute later, to see them heading toward Archibald's office together, as I went on toward the hangars. What development did this portend?

I got a ship and took off for a stunt hop, hoping to clear the worry from my brain. I succeeded to some extent, but half an hour at mess undid my work. Dead silence reigned. I saw Ken Livingstone leave in the middle of the meal, while Frank Pierce and Renshaw sent bitter glances after him.

"What's the trouble?" I whispered to Hunt, when I was able to get him alone after mess.

"The gang is sore," he said. "They know the old man suspects someone here; without knowing all his evidence, they naturally think he's crazy, or trying to divert suspicion from himself. It got out when he got Ken to hide in an inner room and listen carefully to Frank and then Felix, to see if he could recognize who telephoned that night."

IT WAS an ugly humored crowd that gathered at the hangars next morning for the scheduled formation. Hardly a word was spoken. Even the mechanics caught the ominous spirit of the day and moved sullenly about their tasks. It seemed almost useless to even try to get any of our old pep—even by a good flight.

We took off in a fairly good order, and assumed a wide formation. The instant my wheels left the ground I had an intense desire to set them back down again. Never since my first solo had I felt such a sensation. But this was different, for it was not fear of the air. It was a blind, unreasoning dread, a dread that grew and grew until it was all I could do to hold my place in formation, instead of diving back to the field and getting far away from that accursed place.

I looked across at Frank Pierce, staring grimly ahead. Archibald was leading. Frank seemed to be putting all his rage into the glance he sent toward the major's ship. I looked to the other side and saw Renshaw, his swarthy face a sullen mask. The others I could not see so well, but the whole formation seemed surcharged with an atmosphere of hate and menace.

YET WE NEVER flew better. The eight ships moved like one, following Archibald's signals perfectly. We went through the whole list of maneuvers and finally came to the last one, double-level formation in which each level was composed of four ships, flying in a diamond. Archibald led the lower group. I led the second group. It flew in line with the lower one, but somewhat to the rear.

As leader of the upper group, I had to keep my eyes constantly on Archibald for signals. I had no opportunity to look around, nor was there any need. My group would take care of spacing itself, guiding by me.

Archibald flew straight for a few seconds and then signaled for a left turn. I repeated the signal. Archibald dropped his wing as the execution signal and went into the turn. And as he did so, I plainly saw him jerk forward in his cockpit, half-rise in the seat, and then slump down with his head against the instrument board.

Before my horrified eyes he pitched down, apparently unconscious, and the P-1 went into a stalling turn while the three ships behind him swerved out hurriedly to clear. For an instant a mad desire to zoom up and away from there possessed me. At any second the thing that had struck Archibald down

might reach out for me. I jerked around in my seat and stared at my three ships. They were spreading out, but still in formation.

I gave the signal to break, and then dived for the ground. The air was filled with flashing P-1's and for a moment I thought there would be a crash, but by a miracle we escaped collision. Archibald's P-1 was in a wide spiral, whether from its stability or the major's last effort at control, I did not know.

It fell off suddenly and struck with an ungodly crash within two hundred yards of the field. We landed in a mad rush, seized sidecars, a field truck and an ambulance, and dashed for the wreck. When we reached it we knew Archibald was dying. He was almost gone, but we rushed him into the first-aid station. Red Derringer, Hunt and I carried him into the operating room.

"Well, they got me, boys," whispered Archibald with a game smile, though there were beads of perspiration on his brow that showed his agony. "I guess it's my last hop."

The flight surgeon, Morrison, put us out then, and we were glad to go. It was a pitiful sight to see the old man smiling like that when he knew it was curtains. We waited outside with the other pilots. There was little talk, but I was almost sure that some of them thought it an ordinary crash. No one mentioned having seen Archibald slump over in his cockpit.

In ten minutes Morrison came out. He looked us all over and then beckoned to Hunt.

"You're senior officer here," he said in a curt tone. "You might as well decide what to do."

"He's dead, then?" asked Hunt gravely.

"Yes. But it wasn't the crash that killed him."

A hush fell on the group. I was watching as closely as I could for some betraying sign, but I saw none. Every man I noticed was staring at Morrison as if in amazement.

"What do you mean?" muttered Renshaw at last.

"He was shot," said Morrison coldly. "Shot through the back. The bullet just missed his heart. And there was a second bullet wound in his right shoulder."

A DEATHLY SILENCE followed. From astonishment, the expressions on the pilots' faces altered slowly to understanding, then quick suspicion. Each one looked furtively at his neighbor, and the air was electric with tension.

"Murdered," added Morrison, driving it home deliberately. "Killed by someone within pistol range of

him, where the noise of a lot of engines would drown the sound.

He eyed us grimly and turned away.

“Murdered!” repeated Frank Pierce in an awed voice. The others glanced at him swiftly. He caught their looks and reddened. “Damn you—don’t stare at me like that. I didn’t bump him. Why the hell would I want to kill him?”

Ken Livingstone started to leave. Red Derringer grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Where are you going?” he demanded roughly.

Ken shook him off with unwonted fierceness. His face was pale.

“None of your business,” he snapped. “I’m not running away, if that’s what you mean.”

“Wait a minute, Ken,” said Hunt. “Nobody’s accusing anyone—but we all ought to decide on some plan of action. This thing can’t go on. We’ll all be crazy in another day or two. Let’s go to the mess and thrash it out.”

He turned to a master-sergeant who had come in with the truck.

“Perry, throw a guard around those ships. Don’t let anyone get near them. Search them for a gun, and report any unusual thing you notice.”

“Aye, sir,” replied Perry. “And if you’ll pardon me, sir, I’ve already seen something mighty queer. There’s three bullet holes through what’s left of the major’s ship. All of ’em around the cockpit.”

“All right, Perry,” Hunt told him. “See if you can find any bullets in the wreck. Report to me in the mess.”

We gathered around the bare mess table. Hunt began nervously.

“I’d like any suggestions,” he said. “If anybody saw anything during the formation, let’s have it.”

A stony silence followed for half a minute. Red Derringer finally broke it.

“From what Perry said, somebody was shooting at him at long range. Otherwise, he’d have hit him easy; we were close enough for even a bum pistol shot in that lower group.” Felix Renshaw jumped up with an oath.

“You mean me, damn you! I was the last man on the second group. I know I had the best chance. But don’t you accuse me, you—”

“I don’t mean anybody,” retorted Red sullenly. “I’m stating what I think. Nobody close to him got him.”

“Hold on,” said Ken Livingstone. “That doesn’t follow. I get your drift. You were one of those close up,

weren’t you? Well, how about plugging several holes through the ship to make it look like a long shot?” Hunt intervened as the session threatened to become a madhouse.

“Fellows, the way I figure it, anybody could have killed Archibald, except Andy here.”

“Why not Andy?” muttered Frank Pierce.

“Andy was leading the second group. Three men had their eyes on him for signals. They’d have seen him, sure.”

A CHILL SWEPT over me at the thought that I was being tried, at least in the minds of my comrades, for cold, stark murder. Not even the thought of this powerful evidence against my guilt held back the horror of that moment. For an instant I was physically ill.

“He looks innocent, all right,” sneered Felix Renshaw. “Look at his face.”

I whirled on him furiously, and he leaped up, but the others came between us. I sat down, trembling, and we glared at each other.

“Archibald must have got it just when he dipped into that last turn,” said Ken Livingstone. “That would have been the best time. Nobody would notice a ship twisting a bit off to one side, or have much time to be watching other pilots. But I should think the smoke from a pistol would have been noticed even though the engines drowned out the sound.”

“Smokeless powder, probably,” commented Hunt, thoughtfully.

“And he could have dropped the gun,” added Red Derringer.

“We can search for it,” suggested Frank Pierce. “But it’d be easy to miss in all that sage and stuff.”

“Say, how about getting Morrison and finding from what direction those bullets hit Archibald?” demanded Bob Ellis.

To my surprise, Red Derringer turned white at this. He wet his lips.

“I—oh, go get him,” he muttered. “I know what he’ll tell you. I saw the hole in his back when I helped carry him in. It was from the left—and I was on the left of him. But it doesn’t prove anything. He got it just while he was making that turn. If it hit him as he started turning, the bullet came from the left; if it got him after he turned, it came from the right.” Frank Pierce nodded.

“Yeah, and if it nicked him in the middle of the turn, then the bullet came from one of the center ships.”

"That means me again," flamed Renshaw. "You already counted Andy out. But everyone knows half the guys in the upper group don't pay any attention to anybody but the main leader."

I leaped to my feet at that, but the entrance of Morrison averted another scene.

"We were just going to send for you," said Hunt wearily.

Hunt related our theories about the course of the bullet. Morrison agreed with Red, which put us back where we started.

"But I didn't come for that," Morrison went on, with a peculiar gleam in his eyes. "I want to show you something I found."

He reached into his pocket. Even before his hand came out I knew what it would be.

"I found it in his jacket pocket," Morrison said slowly. "Just where the bullet came through."

He held out his hand. It was the death card, its black center pierced this time by two holes, its edges stained with crimson.

"The second hole was made by the shot that killed him," said Morrison grimly. He laid the card before us and went out.

THE CRUMPLED, red-stained ace lay there on the table before us, a sinister, horrible thing. The eyes of every man in the group were focussed on it for full ten seconds, and then as if at some silent signal, we all glanced up and stared at one another. I think the full horror of it all burst on us at the same time, the realization that one of us was a foul, cold-blooded murderer, that behind one of those pairs of eyes lurked the soul of a demon.

"There's only one way out," Hunt said dully. "We'll never reach the truth ourselves. Every one of us here is under suspicion. I guess I'll have to take back what I said about you, Andy. Not one of us would swear that any of the others is innocent. I'm going to radio the Corps Area Commander to send a special board to investigate the murders. Until then, or till the new C.O. reports, we're all technically under arrest on the station. There'll be no flying. I'll ask Corps Area to detail another squadron for our sector of the border."

A wave of relief swept over me, and I could see that Hunt himself was relieved at his decision to take the step, though it meant a nasty scandal involving the entire squadron.

The special board arrived by air the very next day, and two days later Major Ernest Brecht reported as the

new C.O. He brought with him six new pilots to carry on the border routine, until the regular pilots were free. There was need for them. The border mob, consisting of nondescript dope-runners, alien smugglers and others of their breed, had taken advantage of the situation to run amuck.

The board busied itself with giving the third-degree to everyone, but without success. In the meantime, I decided to follow an old idea. I began looking for decks of cards from which the aces of spades were missing. I looked in every nook and cranny, for a whole day. About dusk of that day I was returning to my room when to my surprise I saw Frank Pierce steal cautiously into it.

I tiptoed after him and saw him pulling out drawers, hastily poking under piles of clothing.

"What's the idea?" I shot at him.

He jumped and whirled around, his face flushed.

"I—I was looking for something," he said lamely. Then his jaw hardened. "I'm looking for decks of cards, decks with the black aces out. Get me?"

It was too much. The strain of the week gave way to an outburst and I roared in his face. Then I told him what I had been doing. He looked thunder struck, then I saw his suspicions return slowly. He apologized gruffly and went out.

I turned to replace the things he had disarranged. My fingers struck up the layer of paper under the shirts. There lay four decks of cards!

I TURNED to run after Frank, and then stopped. He could not have placed them there, for he had nothing in his hands, nor had he had time to do it. It was possible that he had placed them there before, and had changed his mind suddenly—but not probable. But who, then, had tried to throw suspicion on me?

I hastily locked my door and picked up the decks. As I expected, the black ace was gone from each. The last deck riveted my attention. The backs of the cards were identical with that of the ace gripped in the hand of the dead pilot in the Waco!

My room whirled about me. Then the mysterious murderer of Brady, Scotty Campbell and Archibald had not merely copied the trick of the first killer. The first killer and he were one and the same. But what connection had that dope-runner with the other deaths?

I resolved to ask for leave as soon as the board finished its investigation, for I was sick of the whole thing. But fate decreed otherwise. The board ended its

task after ten fruitless days, ended it in stark failure, as I had guessed it would. Brecht was left to carry on the search, but on the same day the technical arrest was lifted and once more we were free. Free to fly, to join the six new pilots of the patrol—but not free from the menace of the unknown killer.

We went armed at all times, and there was no skylarking in the squadron. Silently, grimly, we went about our duties, our nerves on edge, our eyes always ready for a suspicious move. But after a week without any untoward incident, we began to relax. And it was on the eighth day that I received my second letter from Fred Newton at Fort Bliss. It read:

Dear Andy:

Your description of the fight at Mestiza and your answers to my questions have convinced me that I am right in my theory of the murders. I have heard about Archibald, of course, and his killing fits in with my idea.

I may be far off, and I hope to God I am, for it is a horrible thing if I am correct. But I must tell you; you're the only level-headed man in the outfit, and I know you'll keep this strictly quiet and forget my idea if I prove wrong. Please come here as soon as you can, and be careful every second till then.

Yours sincerely,  
Fred Newton.

My heart beat fast as I finished reading. Something told me that here at last I was on the right track. I wasted no time, but went to ask Major Brecht for a ship. Brecht was out, but the officer-of-the-day, Sterne, granted the request reluctantly.

IT WAS JUST after noonday mess, and several of the pilots were at the hangars, getting ready for the afternoon patrols. Six P-1's were on the line. Three of them took off, and separated for their various area inspections while I warmed up my engine. Pierce, Hunt, and Renshaw were warming up near me. Suddenly the mail orderly came running to my ship. He handed me a special registered letter, marked "Personal delivery only."

I recognized Fred Newton's writing. I tore it open and started to read it.

Dear Andy:

"The docs have decided to operate tomorrow so you'll have to hurry to see me. I've decided that—

I got no farther. Renshaw leaned out and yelled across at me:

"Hey, Andy—pull over or get clear, will you? We're late now."

I shoved the letter in my pocket and hurriedly took off. I must reach Fred before he underwent that operation! If anything should go wrong, his secret might die with him. I could read the rest of his letter in the air, as I sped along.

The cloud ceiling was fairly low so I soon leveled out and headed on my course. Soon after taking off my engine developed a miss. I nursed it for a bit and finally it cleared up. Then I took out Fred's letter.

"I've decided to tell you what I think," it continued, from where I had stopped. "The docs say I'll be O.K., but I'll not take a chance. It isn't easy to write this, and if I prove to be wrong, for God's sake forget this, and burn my letter.

"That first killing, the pilot in the Waco, didn't bother me. I never thought of that black ace at all. And when Brady was bumped I supposed Archibald did it, or if not he, then Pierce or somebody else, and had used the card to try to switch suspicion. But that night at Mestiza I saw the ship that plugged me. I saw it get Scotty, and I know it was a P-1.

"Then when I heard about Archibald and the ace in his pocket, and the ace Art Lee found that was meant for Scotty, something clicked in my mind. You know I was overseas, Andy, I started out with two or three of our gang who are right there at the field. We were separated later. But there was one chap who was sent to an outfit called the Ace of Spades Squadron, that was almost wiped out in '18. Those birds went through hell, and this fellow took plenty before they knocked him down. He was crazy for three weeks, and they had to tie him up. He thought he was back in the air, bumping off the Huns. He almost killed a nurse.

"They operated on him, and after that he recovered. I had forgotten all about him till this whole mess came up. Maybe I'm wrong, but Andy, something tells me the old madness has come back on the poor devil, God knows how or why. Maybe you've guessed who I mean. It hurts like hell to write his—

I hurriedly started to turn the page.

GRIPPED by Fred's words I had almost forgotten where I was. I came to myself with a violent start. A flashing something was sweeping down on me from the sky. I stared upward in consternation. A P-1

was diving straight at me, its guns already aflame!

I zoomed frantically. An icy fear clutched my heart, for I knew now that a madman sat at the stick of that roaring ship. A madman who had struck four times—and won!

I looped tightly, Newton's letter whipping out into the wind. My fingers froze to the trigger trips of my guns. But the crazed pilot behind me followed through with fiendish skill. I snapped off into a dizzy turn, climbing furiously. He charged insanely across at me, and bullets ripped savagely through my wings. I kicked out to avoid the crash, and the other ship raced by in a blur, the pilot bent low over the stick.

We both whipped around and tore at each other. I yanked up into a terrific climb and then snapped into a half-split. For an instant the other man was almost in my sights. My guns snarled twin bursts into his fuselage. He slipped clear and lifted his head to glare across at me, his maniacal eyes staring from a pale, distorted face. The marrow all but froze in my bones at that awful sight.

"Hunt!" I screamed. The engine tore the word away, but it echoed in agony through my brain. "Hunt—My God!"

The glaring fiend across from me seemed to see my horror. With a swift movement, he shoved up his goggles and opened his mouth in a horrible laugh, as his mad eyes held my terrified gaze. He raised his hand in a mocking gesture, and then clapped his goggles over his eyes, at the same time jerking his ship over into a steep bank that threw his guns onto my tail.

I lost my head and dived. But before he could finish me, I had fought off my dread of that awful creature at the stick and was roaring over in an outside loop. He came on after me, but lost on the climb. I whipped about and drove in diagonally, and my guns traced a crooked line from his rudder to the cockpit. But he kicked out of my fire with devilish skill, and once more was crowding onto my tail.

A cold sweat bathed my body under my jacket. I threw the P-1 into a terrific bank, fighting desperately to close in as we roared around in that circle of death. Again I saw that distorted, mad face and again horror swept over me. But this time it gave me a superhuman power and skill. The P-1 tightened into its dizzy whirl as it had never done before under my hand. In that instant I became a part of the roaring ship, part of the twin-guns seeking the madman as he climbed frenziedly for the vantage of height. I kept pace with his climb, gained slowly but surely on the man I knew I must kill, or be killed, myself.

Once more I saw Hunt's face, and now there was a great fright added to the madness that reigned there. I shuddered as my sights crept up the tail of his hurtling ship. Hunt—the best friend I had had in the squadron. Likable, generous Hunt—and now he must die at my hand! But no, this was not Hunt. This was a killer, a wild, un-human thing, that would kill and kill and kill until it destroyed itself.

I closed my heart against him, and gripped the triggers. The fuselage swept full into my sights. I saw my tracers eat greedily into that flashing ship, on into the cockpit, to the huddled body of the madman at the stick.

Hunt jerked sharply to one side as the leaden stream crashed into his instrument board, but I saw him plunge forward as I kicked the nose to bring my guns to bear. His ship slipped off, and dived wildly. I followed at a safe height, watching for him to pull out. The nose came up at 1000 feet, and then fell off again from a wide spiral into a forward slip. The ground leaped up and the ship crashed solidly to earth.

I CIRCLED for a moment above the wreck, but saw no movement. I landed nearby, and approached cautiously, a 45 in my hand. The P-1 was smoking slightly, but it did not catch fire. I stooped and saw Hunt, wedged in the wreckage, a long gash in his head from which blood flowed. I tried to pull him out, but in vain. He opened his eyes while I tugged at him. The mad light was gone from them now.

"No use, Andy," he whispered painfully. "I'm caught somewhere; all broken up inside, I think."

He stifled a groan, and I saw his hand move to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. He looked up at me and smiled faintly.

"I'm glad it's all over, Andy," he said huskily. "It was getting worse again. I thought I'd beaten it, but—no use."

I stared at him silently. It seemed a terrible nightmare, that this quiet man, who lay there, dying with a smile, had ten minutes ago been doing his best to kill me, as he had killed those others.

"What started it?" I asked him, at last. "Why did you kill that dope-runner?"

"He opened up on me," said Hunt, haltingly. "I had to drop him. It was a short scrap, but something seemed to snap in my brain when I was finishing him. I remember landing there by him. I searched him. He happened to have a pack of cards in his pocket. The ace of spades was on top—when I saw it something hit

me again. I don't remember anything else but landing back at the field. "Next day I felt it, the old craving to be up there, killing, killing. Oh, God help me, Andy, I tried to fight it! But I knew I was gone, so I tried to ditch all flying when you fellows were on the field. But Archibald told me to lay off the kiwi stuff and fly. You know the rest—"

His voice trailed off into silence.

"Why did you try to get me?" I asked, quietly.

"That letter from Fred," he said, in a low voice. "You told me one day that he asked about what planes got hit at Mestiza. I knew he was getting suspicious. You see, he was the one who almost shot off my tail group. I watched for another letter, and steamed open the one you got today. I was going to try to beat you to Fred, and beg him not to tell, or give me a chance to escape. Then I saw that registered letter, and I knew he'd told you."

He broke off, coughing violently. His hand went to his side. I saw his glance move downward. He slowly pulled something from his pocket.

It was the death card.

His eyes met mine with a wan smile.

"It was for you, Andy," he whispered. "But it seems I dealt it to myself, after all."

He closed his eyes, but opened them again with an effort.

"I'm glad," he said simply, and reached out his hand toward me.

I took it. Then his eyes shut once more. This time they did not move again, and I knew that the last of death's aces had been dealt.