

HELL BIRDS

by FRANK SUMNER

The roar of propellers—the whistling of wind through the wires—the insane chatter of guns—furious breathing battle in the clouds! Fighting in the sky-lanes over the scarred fields of Flanders was a thrill to Hellbird—but Hellbird was grounded for disobeying orders! Could any ace with that moniker stay out of a fight?

A LOUD KNOCK ON THE DOOR of the cubicle. Johnny “Hellbird” Maguire, Lieutenant, R.A.F., gripped the stem of his briar pipe more tightly between his teeth and let the newspaper that he was reading fall to the floor. He had been expecting this. At his angry “Come in” an orderly entered.

“Squadron Commander’s wishes, sir. You will report to him at once.”

Johnny grunted an acknowledgment but made little haste in complying with the old man’s orders. With a shrug Hellbird finally went out into the dripping wetness of “sunny” France. A muffled growl in answer to his knock brought him to attention in front of the old man’s rickety desk. The squadron commander did not waste words.

“You don’t give a blinkin’ damn for orders, do you, Maguire? You got my orders along with the rest of the squadron that there was to be no more free-lance flying. The hell you care for orders! Eh? Pot-hunting this morning, weren’t you, lieutenant?”

“But—”

“That’s enough, Maguire,” the old man roared. “You are grounded. Hear that? Confined to the limit of this drome on your word of honor. One more damned crazy stunt like you pulled this morning and—” Johnny did not have to be a mind reader; well he knew the veiled threat in the old man’s words.

“But, sir,” he began testily, “this inaction is hell, sir. I got into this man’s war to fight not to dig in like a groundhog. Perhaps a transfer, sir.”

“Transfer, hell! That’s all, lieutenant.”

The days that followed were torture to Hellbird. He longed for the feel of the stick, to hear the whistling and shrieking of the wind through the wires, the insane chatter of the guns, and the roar and excitement of battle above the clouds.

He would stand at the edge of the tarmac and watch, with yearning in his heart, the pilots in the pit tuning up their busses before the takeoff. The gargantuan roar of the propellers as the line of angry birds shook with fury was as a siren’s son to Hellbird. And then, after watching the S.E.5’s until they were but tiny specks in the sky, he would go back to his cubicle and sit in bitter, brooding silence.

At the conclusion of these regular fits of pique it became Hellbird’s custom to go to the estaminet in the village that bordered the drome and imbibe five or six well assorted drinks before mess, where later for the nth time he would impress it quite vociferously on his fellow fliers that the old man was the most objectionable person among the Allies.

In defense of the squadron commander it may be said that none of the other men held Hellbird’s opinion. They were perfectly satisfied with a leader who did not believe in taking unnecessary chances with life.

“It’s too bloomin’, blinkin’ bad you couldn’t be a whole squadron in yourself, Maguire,” said Captain Brown sarcastically in answer to the usual tirade from Hellbird.

“Yeah?” snorted the grounded warbird, “I could do a helluva lot more against the Jerries than a lot of mudhuggin’ lead swingers, shy even an ounce of guts. Two Pfaltzes in the air an’ the whole bunch of you guys dive under your bunks. Hah! A helluva fine flyin’ corps we got. They ground a bloke that really wants to fly. I wish I’d a joined the Nurses’ Corps—I’d’ve seen some action by now. And the gold braids are gettin’ their brains in an uproar trying to figure out the reason why Fritz controls the sky!”

“You’re a conceited ass, Maguire!”

“You’re a liar, Meadows! I’m an Irishman. Some men fight and some men don’t!”

MEADOWS stepped squarely around the table. Hellbird Maguire rose and kicked it partly aside. Then the two men clashed. It was apparent that Meadows was no match for Hellbird whose fists crashed like battering pistons into the Englishman's face. Meadows backed away and rushed again but the Irishman brought a pile-driving right up from the floor and it thudded sickeningly on the point of the Englishman's chin. Meadows crashed to the floor.

Hellbird leaned against the table, wild-eyed and breathing heavily. "And if any one of you other Piccadilly dudes want to take up the scrap, hop to it!" he roared.

Then as no one seemed anxious to snatch up the gauntlet that he had thrown amongst them, the Irishman turned and fairly ran out of the door.

Once back in his hut Hellbird threw himself on his bunk, every fibre in his body quivering. The critical clash in the mess hall had severed the last strand of his will to endure further subjugation. He hated life, the squadron, and the war. To hell with this milksop outfit

Wasn't Squadron 91 known all over France as a coop of weakling birds in the R.A.F.? And he, Hellbird Maguire, descendant of a long line of ripping, fighting Irishmen, was a member of that bunch.

With the exception of the old man there wasn't one in the crowd whom he would call a fighting man. And he, Maguire, had tried to show the rest of the Air Force that he was not a sufferer from yellow jaundice. He hated this whole bunch of lead-swinging English aristocracy who must have joined the flying service because they looked "simply doggy" in the uniform.

Hellbird Maguire wanted to fight. They wouldn't let him. The more he brooded, the more his mind propounded a question. Should he let them get away with it? Stay glued to the drome for God knows how long, or tell the old man to go fly a kite and take things into his own hands. Hell, once in the sky, who could give him orders? It was ten to one he'd get it in the air before the war was over anyway the way he, Hellbird Maguire, mixed it. Hah! What could they do to a dead man? To hell with 'em!

GRABBING his helmet that he rammed beneath his tunic, Hellbird sauntered out onto the drome, his eyes scanning the sky. The ceiling was low and the mist was as thick as soup. Hellbird grinned. The squadron would be in their holes today. At the edge of the tarmac he saw a mechanic tinkering with an S.E.5. Leisuredly he strolled over.

"Hell's bells, my old bus!" he breathed. "How's the old crate?" he asked as he stopped beside the plane.

"Rarin' to go, sir," answered the smiling mechanic.

The steely expression in Hellbird's eyes was lost in the gloom. "And I'm goin', kid. Drift!" In Hellbird's words the command and threat were unmistakable, but the man hesitated.

"But, sir," he stammered. "You have orders—I believe—"

"Get goin' or by God I'll—"

The old man was talking to Captain Brown and several other members of the squadron in front of his headquarters when his eyes happened to pierce the gloom and fix themselves idly on the tableau in front of the dripping hangars. He paused, then apparently satisfied that nothing was amiss, he resumed his conversation.

A motor coughed, followed by the thundering roar of a prop.

"What the hell?" The words leaped out of the old man's mouth even as he shouldered the group aside and started on a half-run in the direction of the sound, shouting angrily, for through the mist he could make out the head and shoulders of a man above the cockpit of the plane. Another seemed to be picking himself up out of the mud.

A cursing mechanic was pawing at eyes blinded by dirt from the slipstream of the S.E.5 when the old man reached the spot. But Hellbird was full gunning the bus down the takeoff, quite out of reach of the old man and the rest of the squadron that stared after him in amazement at the audacity of the thing.

"It was Lieutenant Maguire, sir!" shouted the mud-soaked greaseball. "I tried to stop 'im, sir, but he conked me one he did, yessir."

The old man, ankle deep in mud, his face working convulsively until it was colored a deep purple, tried to swear but only a hoarse croak issued from his lips. To all the fliers standing near him it was only too obvious that the punishment in store for Hellbird Maguire would be limitless.

IN THE village of Mercidieu a battalion of Yanks found themselves stoppered up. After retiring northward, the Germans covered their retreat with harassing troops, two squads of which, with machine guns, had occupied a most impregnable position on the side of Mount Mauvais. From this point of vantage the Boche covered the only means of egress from Mercidieu.

Now and then, by way of reminding the American troops of this fact, a hail of bullets would sweep through the village to seek out any adventurous Yank who perchanced to stray from his place of concealment. Several heaps of khaki spread widely apart between the village and Mauvais was a grim object lesson as to the folly of approaching the machine gun nests even under cover of darkness.

In a short trench not more than a quarter of a mile from the village was the battalion's observation post. In this muddy sanctuary two men lay. While one of them peered at the mountain through powerful glasses, the other spoke swiftly into the mouthpiece of a field telephone.

Astride an empty wine keg in a cellar back in Mercurieu, Captain Barstowe, in command of the battalion, received this description of the Boche stronghold for perhaps the hundredth time. With a curse the captain threw the telephone that he had been clutching to the floor.

"Hemmed in like rats, Jenkins, since yesterday afternoon. And not a chance in hell of getting out. Cripes. The mouth of that tunnel that the Jerries are squatting in is fortified by concrete and stone. The only thing that'll blast 'em out is heavy artillery and we haven't any. If we show our faces ten feet from here we'll get sprayed with lead. And we've got orders to move on!"

"Sergeant Poole told you he saw two men appear on the summit of the mountain. Says it ain't nothin' but a smooth plateau. There must be an entrance to the place there from above. If only three or four guys could get through with a load of Mills grenades!"

The captain only grunted and pointed toward some of the shapeless heaps that lay strewn along the road outside of Mercurieu. "That's as far as any of us'll get, Jenkins," he said grimly.

Further speech was silenced as a shell hurtled overhead and passed above them, only ceasing its whining when it landed beyond the village, the harbinger of a German barrage that soon spread a hail of iron over the battalion. Fifteen minutes later the Yankee troops were busy extricating themselves from the heaps of fallen masonry. More casualties. Minutes passed. In the cellar the telephone tinkled.

"Thank God the wires aren't cut!" exclaimed Captain Barstowe as he picked up the instrument and raised it to his ear. "What's that? Huh?" Jenkins heard him say. "A plane over Mauvais? A Jerry, maybe. It ain't? Well, I'll be—" The captain dropped his phone

and, before Jenkins could restrain him, started for the stairs leading to the roof of the partially razed building.

HELLBIRD in the S.E.5, drilled into the drab sky and climbed toward the clouds, the ceiling of which was scarcely a thousand feet. The airdrome that he had just left was but four hundred feet below the ship, yet when he looked overside the muddy field was completely hidden from view. Then he was in the clouds.

Swirling vapor, churned by the whirling prop, engulfed him in the cockpit, fouled his goggles. Hellbird pushed them up and snapped his jaws together against the touch of sudden chill that penetrated to the bone. Up and up he flew until he broke through the cloud bank into the brightness of the early afternoon sun.

Hellbird's eyes swept the sky. Not a ship, friend or enemy, was visible. He looked down. The rolling cloudbank obscured from view the theatre of war below, but the angry rumbling of the guns assured him that the front was popping.

He glanced at the petrol gauge and then nodded satisfactorily. Full to the gills. Squeezing the trigger of the Vickers brought forth the welcome, insane chatter from the nose of his bus. After a week of pounding leather on the drome it was lilting music to his ears.

For an hour he flew, constantly varying his direction. Still no sign of a plane. Hellbird swore as he relaxed in his seat. It would be just his luck that the Jerry jagstaffels were having a national holiday. And after he had gone to such extreme measures to oblige them with a little hell of his own!

Forgotten was the old man and the weak-live red squadron. He was in his glory, seeking fight or frolic. He would fly until his petrol gave out and then fill the bus up again at some strange Allied drome.

The cloudbank began to lift and huge murky chunks of it were breaking away from the solid mass. He nosed his bus down to five thousand feet and then patches of the terrain beneath became visible through the rifts in the crumbling ceiling.

Hellbird, yipping gleefully, dove through one of these holes and not until he was a thousand feet from the ground did he pull back the stick and level out the S.E.5. His eyes swept the pock-marked surface below from which the mist had cleared and to the southward he espied what looked like a busy sector.

Hellbird grinned, mirthlessly. The errant flier made

up his mind that if the Jerries would not come up into the clouds he would go down and strafe them on the ground. Downward he skimmed. Then, barely five hundred feet in the air, he banked the S.E.5 a bit and leaned over to scrutinize the battle-swept panorama.

A RUINED VILLAGE, out of which ran a single road that wound past a huge heap of rock which must be Mount Mauvais. At first Hellbird could not make out a sign of human life below but as he continued to circle over the town he made out the forms of two men crouched in a shallow trench well beyond the village. And then a dozen other figures appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, on the roof of one of the shattered houses.

He swooped low above them and as he swept past he caught a glimpse of khaki with arms that gesticulated wildly. Directly in front of his plane was Mauvais and as Hellbird zoomed up to clear its summit, a low whistle of astonishment escaped his lips. On the mountain's rocky face, near its top, two apertures were visible and from each of these the nose of a machine gun protruded. Crimson tongues spat from their muzzles even as Hellbird stared, and the threatening drone of bullets hummed dangerously close.

The situation dawned on Lieutenant Maguire's war-trained mind like a flash. The only road out of the village was under the ruthless surveillance of the Boches in the side of Mount Mauvais. In the village Allied troops, whether British or Yanks he could not tell, were bottled up.

Directly over Mauvais he cut the motor and circled in the manner of a hawk stalking a chicken, straining his eyes for the most minute detail of the mountain's top. He examined the mountain from every angle until he found what he was looking for.

As he swooped low the head and shoulders of a man appeared over the edge of a gaping hole near the rim of the plateau, evidently having come up to look the plane over.

So that was it! German ingenuity and foresight again. Realizing the advantages of this strategic position far in advance of the events taking place, the German machine gunners in the retreat, had evidently scaled the mountain from the rear and lowered themselves into the little fort. The mountain was like a huge tooth with a cavity at its top.

Hellbird knew that it would take every ounce of his flying skill to send lead into that comparatively

small space and still keep from crashing on the top of Mauvais. But taking chances was his favorite sport. Hell, he couldn't expect to live forever! And wasn't he a man without a squadron?

His heart leaped within him as he circled the village once more, preparatory to his assault on the German gunners, and waved to the tiny figures below who would be the gallery for one of the strangest acts in the theatre of war.

Revelling in the thought that this was to be the acid test of his flying career, Hellbird pulled back the stick and climbed. Gaining sufficient altitude, he tested his guns and after reassuring himself that both he and his bus were ready, he swooped down on Mauvais, a silent prayer on his lips.

A thousand feet from the summit he pushed the stick forward and the S.E.5 plunged downward almost vertically, a veritable juggernaut. The hole beneath widened. At its bottom panic stricken gray figures appeared in his ringsights, rushed up at him.

His hands clutched the trigger handle, squeezed. The Vickers spat crimson and riddled the cavity with steel. His heart standing still, Hellbird desperately pulled back the stick and the S.E.5 shot upward, the rocks flashing beneath. They seemed only inches away.

UP HE zoomed for sufficient altitude to make a second dive on Mauvais, but even as he climbed he felt a compelling urge to look back. At the top of his climb he shot a fleeting glance over his shoulder and above and behind him he discerned two black specks. Larger and larger they loomed up. The rays from the sinking sun flashed momentarily on the wings and Hellbird caught the golden sheen. Pfaltzes! Forgotten were the machine gun nests below. This was real game. Now they were diving on converging courses of which the S.E.5 was the apex.

"I'll give 'em hell!" cursed Hellbird, slinging his ship into a vertical bank, and the maneuver disconcerted the pilot of one of the Pfaltzes and it plunged past, its guns burning through empty air.

The other ship was on his tail as the flickering tail of a tracer told him. He caught a glimpse through his spinning prop of the Pfaltz that had shot down beside him. Lowering the nose of his S.E.5 in a brief dive, his fingers shot to the trips of the Vickers. The burst burned through and through the cockpit of the Jerry plane and into the petrol tank. It shot down flaming, shrieking, the pilot dead in his seat.

"Hot stuff!" roared Hellbird, but his exultation was

short-lived. The remaining Pfaltz had caught him in its line of fire. Bullets tore at his wing fabric. A strut disappeared and, even as he stunted wildly, a German bullet went home, burning like a hot iron through his side.

The Boche was sitting glued to his tail. At any second now he expected to meet Death. Death and the long, flaming, endless plunge down, down through space—a sight that he had witnessed so many times. It was a hell of its own, that agony of lethal attack from the rear.

He looked over his shoulder and could see the blazing eyes through the goggles behind the whirling prop of the Pfaltz. The eyes of a maniac. Hellbird tried desperately to climb, but as the nose of the S.E.5 turned upward, his exposed cockpit was sprayed with lead. Downward he started, and the Pfaltz followed.

He banked and the Jerry followed relentlessly. It was a hopeless position. Then in a last desperate maneuver Hellbird side-slipped, wrenched his bus out of that path of fire, and pounced on the tail of the Pfaltz.

The German pilot had expected the British plane either to dive or go shooting down in flames. A burst from the Vickers ripped through his head and the Pfaltz, out of control, fluttered earthward like a wounded bird. Once more the sky above Mercurieu was clear of German planes.

Hellbird swung about and raced back toward Mount Mauvais, drunk with the excitement of battle, forgetting even the throbbing pain in his side where the Jerry steel had plowed through. Nothing could stop Hellbird Maguire now, not even the Boche gunners squatting in the mountain pocket below. Once over the summit the S.E.5 seemed to poise in mid-air for a moment and then the men watching from the rooftops of Mercurieu saw it dive again like a plummet.

Hellbird kept the spinning prop pointing at the hole atop Mauvais as he plunged down. A feeling of apprehension at the thought of his splintered strut. Would his bus hold together after that scrap with the Pfaltzes? A fleeting sardonic smile passed over his face.

What the hell would it matter to him, Hellbird Maguire, who was on, his last flight anyway, win or lose? The old man would spreadeagle him to a gun carriage if he went back to the drome.

The overhead entrance to the machine gun nest rushed up to meet him; it loomed wider and wider. Bullets ripped through his wings, sang past his head—the Jerries at the bottom of the hole were fighting back. It was the critical moment.

The black snout of a machine-gun, flanked by white faces, flashed in his ring-sights and Hellbird squeezed the trips. The Vickers spat a hail of steel projectiles into the cavity. A split second before he yanked back the stick he caught a glimpse of the havoc he had wrought and a wild yell of triumph escaped his lips as he zoomed up. The yell choked off to a gasp as an ominous crackling sound betrayed the buckling of a wing. The last dive had been too much for the weakened strut.

The S.E.5 wobbled drunkenly and Hellbird knew that he would have to nurse it down. As he worked frantically at the controls Hellbird realized that he was a sick man. His head was spinning and his left side ached horribly. Both his mouth and throat were utterly dry and an allcompelling weakness began to surge through every fibre in his body.

Hellbird fought to regain his strength and a sob tore from his lips. Had he failed to completely silence the guns in the side of Mauvais? He was certain that he would have wiped them out in one more dive.

Down, down, like a stricken falcon, slipped the S.E.5, and five hundred feet from the ground Hellbird thought he saw many figures running swiftly beneath him. The landing wheel skimmed over stunted trees. Then the ship bumped heavily, rose again, lurched sickeningly and one wing plowed up the dirt. Hellbird, with his last ounce of strength, cut the switch. Then everything went black before his eyes.

THE AMERICAN DIVISION swarmed out of Mercurieu, swept past Mauvais to their objective. Rumbling along in their wake in a field ambulance was Hellbird Maguire. The Yanks had paused in their advance long enough to pull the flier out of the wrecked S.E.5 that had cracked up near the foot of the mountain. Hellbird, save for a bullet in his side and a broken arm, was feeling fine.

When the Yanks, armed with grenades, scaled Mauvais to mop up whatever was left of the machine gun crews, they found that Hellbird had wrought terrific havoc. One man only was alive. In the comparatively small space those bullets which had not found a direct target had ricocheted from the rocky walls and completed the job.

While Hellbird Maguire lay in the base hospital near the front lines, news of his exploit had reached every air squadron in France and had seeped into every dugout in the sector, thanks to Captain Barstowe who had appointed himself personal press agent for the Irishman.

The inevitable show of appreciation by three governments was furthest from Hellbird's mind. The wrathful countenance of the old man of Squadron 91 was ever before him—the cause of many a nightmare. Every morning he awoke with a feeling of apprehension. No doubt he was officially under arrest and that court martial, proceedings were in order.

But Maguire forgot that the Strict discipline of other branches of service scarcely applied among the warbirds—that legion of highly nervous and reckless fighters who assumed that they were a law unto themselves.

HELLBIRD, still a little groggy and badly scared, found himself at last standing before the grim personage of the old man. He could not make himself believe that the faintest trace of a twinkle was playing in those orbs under the heavy gray brows.

“Well, you're back, Maguire.” The voice sounded like a cannon's roar in the little room.

“Y-yes, s-sir.”

“Of course, you couldn't expect to go unpunished after this last hellroarin' stunt, even if you are a hero.”

“N-n-no, s-sir.”

“And you're goin' to be—not in the way we usually

do it A helluva fine time I'd have of court martialling a young hellion who broke up an impregnable machine gun nest in the side of a mountain while hanging from a cloud by his heels, at the same time bringing down two Pfaltzes and gettin' an entire Yank Battalion out of a steel trap! So I had sense enough to keep my mouth closed as to your defiance of my orders here on the drome.”

“Th-thank y-you, s-sir.”

“Never mind that, Maguire. You won't thank me after you hear what I've got in store for you.”

Hellbird gulped.

“You're a flight leader now and your punishment, CAPTAIN Maguire, will be trying to change these dam' milksopping unmentionables of this squadron into real hell-for-leather fighting men. If that ain't punishment enough, I'll eat my wings!” Then the old man's pent-up laughter gushed forth and, despite the fact that it hurt his battered nose, Hellbird's mouth stretched into a wide grin.

“That's all, Maguire,” the squadron commander finally continued. “You better get rested up. A bunch of gold stars are comin' out tomorrow with a brass band and a basket of medals to meet you personally—all that sort of rot, you know. Now, dammit, Captain Maguire, let me shake your hand!”