



*This is the round-table of airmen. Here after flying hours they gather to yarn and smoke. All of these tales are told by airmen, in an airman's fashion that'll make you feel right at home in the old hangar.*

# SUDDEN HARDWARE

by O.B. MYERS

**D**ID J'EVER HEAR how Ab Longstreet got my *Croix de Guerre*?" asked Ed, flipping his cigarette butt so that it landed right next to a five-gallon can of gas.

"No," I replied, rising in haste to grind it under my heel, "but I may live to if you're more careful with those butts."

"Pshaw!" retorted Ed. "The gas they give us nowadays ain't worth a boot. Now that pink dynamite we had in France—"

"Was it a *Croix de Guerre* or a D.S.C.?" I asked, to get Ed back on the track of his tale.

"It was a *Croix de Guerre*," said Ed flatly. "How would a Frog general be givin' out a D.S.C.?"

Knowing nothing about the habits of Frogs—or generals—I shrugged my shoulders and waited patiently. Ed's stories were usually worth waiting for.

"You see, it was nine o'clock before we even heard about the inspection, which was to commence at eleven. And to be followed, as the orderly announced, by the award of the *Croix de Guerre* to five of our most recently distinguished Hun-crashers. General Liggett, of the First American Army, officiating, ably assisted by some Froggie, General Lily de Valley, or something of the sort.

"The names of the lucky ones were not announced, which meant that everybody got all steamed up about it. And there was great rushing around, polishing of Sam Browne belts, brushing of uniforms, and so forth.

"The first I knew Ab was in a jam he came to me and asked if I had an extra regulation uniform to lend him. This gave me to laugh, because I was no taller then than I am now, while that guy stood six feet six in his dirty socks.

"Why, Ab?" I asked. "What's the matter with your own?"

"Aw," said Ab, with that slow drawl of his, "I loaned it to that lousy Y.M.C.A. man the other day. He went and got taken suddenly drunk in Bar-le-Duc about nine in the evening, and spent the rest o' the night failin' down in the road between town and here. So it's in the cleaner's now—can't be fetched till Friday."

"I sympathized with Ab, but told him that even if I had an extra uniform, which I hadn't, it wouldn't any more than cover the front half of him anyway—and what if the general looked at his back?"

"So Ab drifted away, with a kind of a woebegone look on his face. But I didn't worry about him much; Ab always did have a way of comin' out right side up, no matter what happened. Bein' rather busy gettin' my own outfit shined up, I didn't see him again."

"ABOUT half past ten I moseyed up toward the hangars, thinkin' I'd have a word with my grease-ball about the bus, and what do I see just as I cross the road but a Spad takin' off the field. I thought that was kinda funny, somebody takin' off only half an hour before inspection was due to start, so I asked Tod about it.

"Why, that was Lieutenant Longstreet, sir," he said. "The major left orders there were to be no patrols till after inspection but he ran up in a hurry and ordered his bus out—said something about an important errand. Said he'd be back before eleven."

"Tod, my boy," I told him. "If you see Lieutenant Longstreet around here before inspection, I'll thumb my nose at the general."

"I had a hunch that Ab had no intention of coming back, but what excuse he was goin' to offer for bein' absent when his name was called I didn't know. As a matter of fact—as he told me afterward himself—neither did he.

"He fussed around for about an hour or so, tryin' to borrow a uniform that would fit, but was naturally out o' luck. He kept gettin' more worried all the time; knew he'd catch hell if he didn't show up, but knew he'd catch particular sarcastic hell from the general if he showed up in a sweater and a flyin' coat.

"Finally he decided he'd rather be bawled out by his own C.O. than by some strange general, so he figured

he'd take his ship and buzz around till the ceremonies were over. He gave the mechanics that stall about an errand, and was off the ground before the major knew what was goin' on.

"Well, he climbed her to about three thousand, and headed up toward the lines—more force o' habit than anything else, I guess. He wasn't payin' much attention to where he was goin'—though he did notice the balloons, he said—his mind bein' pretty well taken up with tryin' to figure out some alibi to pull when he got back. He just drifted along—the way a Spad drifts at two thousand revs, you know—not lookin' for trouble, and not expectin' any. Which, I've noticed, is just the frame of mind that seems to attract trouble quickest.

"Well, he didn't exactly know himself how close to the lines he was, but all of a sudden he looks over his cowl and sees a Breguet—one of them French two-seaters—split-airin' around all over the sky. At first he couldn't see the reason for all the maneuvers, but then the next minute he did.

"A little black-crossed Fokker was pickin' on that Breguet from under his tail. Ab noticed that the bird in the after cockpit of the two-seater wasn't doin' any shootin', and figured that maybe his guns were jammed, and that was why the Fokker was gettin' so fresh.

"It struck me sudden like," Ab told me afterward, "that here was the softest chance I ever had. Just one Fokker, and a Breguet around to help out if needed. So, heroic like, I dove in."

"Ab almost got on the Fokker's tail before the kraut saw him comin', but the beggar looked up just in time and zoomed away. Round and round the Breguet he went, and Ab hot after him. But the kraut was quick on the stick, and Ab couldn't seem to get him in his sights.

"Ab was beginnin' to get dizzy, and wished the Breguet would get out of the way and give him more sky room—when all of a sudden he saw yellow spots on the tail of the Fokker, and knew it wasn't the same Fokker he'd started chasin' in the beginning.

"HE TOOK a quick look around, and by golly, the sky was full o' them black-crossed devils. A whole patrol o' them must have been waitin' upstairs in the sun, and come down when Ab butted into the private fight.

"Well, Ab began to think of all his past sins, and wondered if he'd bounce much when he hit—all the time maneuverin' his stick and rudder like a crazy man. For a minute it seems there was so many of 'em

they got in each other's way, and nobody fired a shot.

"Then Ab came out of a wild swoop and found one of those Fokkers right in front of his nose—and naturally grabbed his triggers. His guns started spittin', but the kraut split-aired away, and Ab, hearin' an unfriendly tattoo behind him, let up on his triggers and zoomed.

"And right then the funniest thing happened you ever heard of. His guns, instead of stoppin', kept right on firin', just as if he was holdin' the triggers down. They had jammed *on!*

"Ab fiddled with the grips, and hammered the breech with his fist, and kicked the control lead with his foot. He did everything he could think of—all the time yankin' his ship around the sky to keep out o' the way o' the Huns—but still the old guns kept goin' like a house afire.

"Never," Ab told me afterward, 'do I wanta get that excited agin. Them damned guns yappin' away like a pair o' mad dogs, and five or six Fokkers all tryin' to git on my tail at once, and me bouncin' all over France to keep away from 'em—oh, boy! Buh-leeeeeve me, the tracers were pourin' out o' my prop like water out of a hose.'

"Well, Ab kept swoopin' around, with his head down inside the cowl about half the time, tryin' to see what was cock-eyed with the gun gear. That was why he never knew, at the time, that his tracer stream caught a couple of those Fokkers broadside, and knocked them for a row of brick kitchens. Anyway, down they went; but there were still enough so that Ab never noticed the difference.

"But his guns goin' steady like that, and his crazy antics with his head inside the cockpit half the time, somehow threw the fear o' God into the other krauts. Guess they figured he was a madman, pure and simple, and too dangerous to play with.

"The first thing Ab knew, he raised his head—he'd been tryin' to get at the air valve on the Bowden control—and instead of a skyful of Huns he saw four Fokkers scootin' off in one direction, and one Brcguet "Which was already a dot in the other direction—and himself sittin' there all alone, king o' the air! Just then his guns stopped—the ammo was all gone—and it struck Ab that the party was over. So he lost no time makin' tracks after the Breguct.

"In a few minutes he was back o' the balloons, and began to feel fairly safe from interruption once more. He buzzed around aimlessly for about an hour. He hated to think of comin' back to the field to take the

bawlin' out he knew was comin' to him, but he knew his gas wouldn't last forever, so finally he came, edgin' over.

"Down on the drome we were all lined up two deep, for inspection, the five who were to get hardware out in front by themselves, feelin' happy and silly by turns. Out o' the tail o' my eye I saw a Spad slippin' down quiet-like—there bein' nobody else off the ground I knew of course it must be Ab.

"He eased her down toward the corner by A Flight hangar, with the motor cut: you could see he was tryin' to sneak in without attractin' any more attention than was necessary. But I saw the major glance at the ship, and lick his lips, and I knew he was thinkin' up his openin' line.

"THE Frog general was busy pinnin' his gewgaw onto the fourth hero, and slappin' a whiskery kiss on each side of his face, and bein' rather busy keepin' my eyes to the front, I lost sight of Ab for a minute. All of a sudden there was a most glorious crash just behind my right ear—sounded like a couple of fightin' elephants had been dropped into a cellar full o' egg crates.

"Of course everybody did a perfect eyes right—and there was Ab's Spad, spread out on the grass like butter on a sandwich. He'd undershot a trifle, and having cut his motor couldn't stretch it. His wheels tripped on a hangar guy and spilled him pretty. The only whole piece left was the after end of the fuselage, stickin' up out of the mess with his number on, big as life.

"For a minute nobody moved, but all of a sudden the Frog general let out a loud yap and a couple o' yards of French, and started runnin' for the wreck like a scared nigger. General Liggett and the major set out after him, and of course we all followed.

"By the time we got there Ab had crawled out; he wasn't hurt a bit, but he sure looked scared and sheepish. He stood up and faced the major, prepared to take his medicine, but before the major could open his mouth the Frog jumped on Ab's neck and kissed him passionately on each cheek. Then he took his last *Croix de Guerre* and with a lot o' flourishes and fancy French lingo, pinned it on Ab's heaving bosom.

"Well, you never saw anybody so surprised as Ab; when the Frog hugged him the second time he almost fell over backwards. And as for the major—I thought he was goin' to pass out. He got red and purple by turns, and kept mutterin' to himself like a man havin' a bad dream.

"The Frog gave Ab a fast salute, turned around

and grabbed the major and General Liggett by the arms, and steered 'em off toward headquarters pourin' French at 'em a mile a minute. I don't savvy that lingo, so I was still in the dark about it all until I got Ab alone, and put two and four together to make eight."

Ed paused.

"You don't mean to tell me that the famous French general, de Vallais, decorated Ab because he crashed a Spad?" I asked.

"No," continued Ed, with a look of scorn. "It seems that the general's car broke down near a French drome, and one of the Frog pilots offered to bring the general to our field in his ship. On the way he asked to be shown the lines, the pilot got a little too close, and they were jumped by the Fokkers. And the guy Ab saw in the after

cockpit of the Breguet was the general himself, too scared—or too dumb—to shoot the guns.

"But not too scared to remember the number of the Spad that dove in, chased the krauts, and saved his life."

Ed paused again. It was a good story, but there was something—

"Tell me, Ed," I asked, "why did you say in the beginning that it was your *Croix de Guerre* that Ab got?"

"Well" grinned Ed, "it was, in a manner o' speakin'. When Ab hit the field, the Frog had just pinned the next to the last hunk o' bronze on the fourth man in line. And I was the fifth."