



CRASH PROUD

by THOMSON BURTIS

*Scarth admitted he was the best in the flying game.
Then came the flood, and a doomed city looked to the air.*

LIEUTENANT ROBERT SCARTH, known to his fellow pilots of the Army Air Service by the highly descriptive cognomen “Dumpy,” was a paradoxical young gentleman. He was short, fat, soft-looking, and yet he was admitted to have few equals and only one possible superior as a flyer. Inasmuch as he was flying on border, patrol along the Rio Grande, which patrol includes some of the best pilots in the service, that estimate means much.

He was probably the most naively conceited man regarding flying who ever handled a stick, and was one of the excessively few braggarts in any profession who could at all times make good on his self-adulating conversation.

Finally, despite his conceit, he was popular with his fellows.

Before one got to know the real Dumpy, the fat

little pilot would be an affliction to have around. Later one found out that he was the best-natured, most impulsively generous chap in the world—that he would go to hell and back for a friend, and then talk about what a wonderful trip he had made to everybody who would listen.

His flying was the only thing that went to his head. He never talked about his really fine musical ability. Dumpy could tease a wicked rag out of a piano, strum a mean ukulele, and possessed a high sweet tenor voice that had been a hundred-dollar-a-week meal ticket to him in civilian life, but these accomplishments never were subjects for his self-praise. However, when flying was mentioned Dumpy would start by admitting that he was the best in the world and keep on trying to prove it as long as anybody would listen.

He could keep the whole Maria Flight listening to him sing some rollicking ditty to his own

accompaniment on the ukulele, but he had rather keep one Mexican gaping wonderfully at his flying eccentricities. As Hinkley, his sardonic observer, was wont to remark:

"If three people are watching Dumpy fly, my life isn't worth the change of a nickel. He'd kill us both to get a stickful of type in the *San Antonio Express*."

Dumpy would not have been Dumpy if he had not been dreaming of possible achievements that would make his name a household word, as he sat in the operations-room at McMullen. With eleven other airmen, brought together from Sanderson, McMullen and Marfa, he was waiting to hear Captain Kennard's instructions for the special duty for which the little group had been gathered.

They were a hand-picked bunch. Lanky, homely "Hub" Chester was the holder of a world's record. Jimmy Jennings of McMullen was credited with four boches in the big scrap. "Tex" MacDowell had wrested from Dumpy himself the status of premier all-round flyer on the border, and Captain Kennard, who was to lead the flight, was a D.S.C. man with an overseas record that had brought him his rank.

The captain finished his low-voiced conversation with MacDowell and as he arose from the desk and faced his flyers the hum of conversation died. The captain was short and stocky; his face deeply lined.

"I presume you all have some idea as to why you have been gathered together," he began. "For the benefit of those of you who have not heard details, I will say this. The storm night before last, that created so much havoc even here, was a veritable hurricane down on the coast.

"A tidal wave wiped out the business section of Corpus Christi completely, as well as some little towns along Nueces Bay. MacDowell flew down there yesterday. The present estimate is six hundred people dead. Trains can not run, wires are down, boats all along the gulf wrecked, food scarce, and all the conditions accompanying a disaster of that magnitude can be found there.

"On the mainland around the bay, hundreds of people are marooned. Our mission is to fly regular patrols, drop food and water to these survivors, and in general make ourselves useful. There is no question that we can save many lives.

"Due to the large number of dead bodies floating in the bay, sharks are numerous. MacDowell says that many bodies are being washed ashore more than half-eaten away. When we make these patrols we will be

flying low over the water. If the motor cuts out, there will be nothing to do but come down in the bay and swim for it. Is there any man that does not care to make the trip?"

His words had been matter of fact, cold. As he swept the little gathering with his eyes the captain smiled a little, his homely but attractive face lighting up warmly.

"I thought not. You men were gathered together under orders from Department Headquarters, because you were considered the best men available for the job. Tex picked a field for us to land in, but it is muddy and water-soaked. Taking off and landing will be difficult—you must watch your step every minute. Your ships will all be ready after dinner—"

He turned to Tex, lately made engineer officer of the McMullen Flight. The tall, lounging pilot nodded.

"All of 'em will be warming up by the time we finish lunch," he drawled.

"We can discuss the detail of our work after we get there. One thing may be of interest to you," said the C.O. "Dave Ransom and his wife, Natalie, are down at Corpus Christi on their honeymoon. Tex heard that Dave had been in town during the storm, but could not locate him. Natalie must have stayed out at the cottage. I guess most of you know Dave, and all of you Natalie. I won't need to ask you to keep your eyes peeled while you are on patrol. We're hoping they lasted through all right, but no telling."

THE dinner-gong, smitten lustily by the fat chink cook, sounded as he finished speaking.

"Let's go," said the captain, and led the way to the mess-hall adjoining.

"I sure am sorry to hear that Ransom and Natalie are down there," remarked Hub Chester. "How did that kid ever carry off the belle of the border, anyway?"

"It's a gift," retorted Tex MacDowell.

"He's having an eventful life since he hit the border, isn't he?"

"Sure is," chimed in Dumpy as he sailed into the steak and French fried potatoes. "He got a lot of publicity out of that fire in the air you and he had, Tex. Probably that helped him marry Natalie. She sure is a peach."

"Wrong, Dumpy my boy," returned Tex. "He had asked the question and she had made the proper answer before it happened. I suppose when you saw the newspaper accounts of that fire you were sorry you didn't have it, weren't you?"

"Oh, I've had 'em!" returned Dumpy characteristically. "Why, say, I—"

Hinkley, without cracking a smile, placed his hand over the mouth of his fat pilot.

"The narrow escapes and hair-raising stunts of your past career are of practically no interest to us, Dumpy. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may dive into the bay."

"Dumpy'd make a sweet morsel for a shark," said Captain Kennard from the head of the table.

Out on the field the first De Haviland got going on the warm-up, and as the roar came through the open windows the twelve men around the table forgot to talk and settled down to the business of eating. Their thoughts turned to their mission and took on a distinctly personal tinge as Ransom and his bride entered them. Ransom, a young observer, had recently married the daughter of Colonel Brewster, C.O. of the McMullen Cavalry Post.

Captain Kennard, with the memory of Colonel Brewster's broken voice over the wire that morning, spoke his thoughts aloud.

"When I get thinking about those two we know it gives me some idea of what a couple of thousand people down there must be going through right now," he said.

"Sure is hell," said Tex MacDowell. "There are a lot of things that go along with it that help pile up the misery, too. I wouldn't be surprised at an epidemic of some kind. They let all the jailbirds out to save their lives, except 'Reddy' Connors, and there is a lot of looting."

"Reddy Connors! Not that bird that ran for a while with Jesus Rentaria?" asked Dumpy.

"Read the papers, you ignorant whisky tenor. Didn't you know that Connors had to leave Mexico when the new administration came in, and that he was caught for the murder of some prominent man in Corpus Christi? He was robbing the house, I think. Anyway, they have him locked up in the town hall. The rest of the jailbirds, and Corpus has a lot in the Summer when its full, are out."

Reddy Connors was an American with Mexican blood in him who had fled into Mexico as the result of a killing at Candelaria some months before. He had attained unsavory notoriety as a member of Rentaria's bandit gang. That same gang had been responsible for the capture of Davidson and Marsh, two flyers who had been held for ransom under threat of death, so that the airmen were particularly interested in his fate.

The conversation became about equally divided between the Ransoms and the notorious Connors, but Dumpy took little part. His thoughts ran ahead to the newspaper reports that would eventually go out to the world from Corpus Christi, and in them he knew the work of the Air Service would bulk large. In his mind's eye the words, "Lieutenant Robert Scarth, the man who—" assumed much prominence.

He had always striven to attain the place where people would whisper to their neighbors and say, "There goes Scarth!" when he walked into a hotel lobby or down a theater aisle. Even the circumstances surrounding this flight to Corpus Christi could not entirely turn his mind from its customary channel. He would work as hard, probably a little harder than the others, but he would not have been the well-known Dumpy Scarth if he had not thought considerably about the public recognition that would follow. As for the danger involved—that really meant less than nothing to him.

OUTSIDE the warming motors of six De Havilands filled the air with a drumming roar that made conversation impossible. The airmen hastily finished their meal, donned leather coats and helmets, and made for their ships.

Dumpy and Hinkley climbed into the cockpits of the black D.H. with the white hood which had carried them through many an eventful moment. Dumpy watched and labored with that ship with a love for it that was almost personal. He called it *Abigail* for some unknown reason, and had been known to converse with, pray to, and swear at *Abigail* as if the lady could hear him. No other flyer ever touched the stick and no mechanic worked on *Abigail* except under Dumpy's careful supervision.

He checked his instruments casually—he knew they would be right—and then tried out his motor. It roared wide open, straining at the wheel-blocks, while he cut first one switch and then the other, retarded the spark, and watched the gages. The McMullen mechanic who had been warming it up leaned over the cockpit to watch, likewise. Slowly Dumpy throttled down until the motor was idling gently.

"All right, sir?" asked the mechanic before jumping off the step.

Dumpy nodded.

"Take away the blocks," he commanded.

This done, he sat quietly awaiting the take-off signal from Captain Kennard. Down the line the other

five ships were idling, motionless leather-covered figures in the cockpits waiting the signal.

The end ship sprang into life as Captain Kennard took off. His wheels off the ground, he banked sharply, and as he did so Tex MacDowell, with George Hickman in the back seat, sent his ship swiftly over the ground. Jimmy Jennings and Beaman followed, then Hub Chester with Captain Miles, a flight surgeon from Laredo, flying with him. Pete Miller and Binder, flying number five, were next and Dumpy brought up the rear.

He held his ship close to the ground until it swept within ten feet of the hangars on the far side of the field. As they came close he pulled back steeply and brought his ship over them, almost scraping the roof. Sarcastic, lanky old Hinkley in the rear seat smiled wearily and never turned a hair. He had flown three hundred hours of border patrol with Dumpy.

In single file the six ships circled the tiny airdrome, until by means of cutting the circle the stragglers had caught up and were spaced evenly. The lead ship dived slightly and pulled up in a steep zoom. That meant "get in formation."

Captain Kennard throttled to fifteen hundred and Tex MacDowell gave his ship the gun. moving up until he was fifty feet back of the captain, and half that much to one side. He slowly throttled and the momentum he had generated by using full throttle slid him into formation position.

The others moved up into their places—each ship twenty-five feet back, as far to one side, and about ten feet higher than the ship immediately ahead, all sighting by means of the center section struts. When the pilot of a formation ship is in such position that the two diagonal center section struts of the plane ahead are exactly lined up, appearing as one strut, he knows his ship is in perfect formation.

Dumpy had the most difficult position of all to fly. When the first five planes were in position, Captain Kennard leading and the other four divided two on a side, Dumpy shoved on the throttle and ruddered into position directly behind Captain Kennard. Sighting by means of the lead ship, and also by the rear ships on each side of the V, Dumpy slowly moved into a position where he was ten feet above the two rear ships, about twenty-five feet back of them, and directly behind Captain Kennard in line of flight.

The infinitely delicate use of throttle and controls needed to gain and maintain his position was a test for any pilot and Dumpy handled his ship with the perfect

judgment and instinctive knowledge of speed and distance that mark the natural-born flyer. Formation is the final test of accurate, nervy flying. Ships weighing over a ton and a half, with sixty feet of wing-spread, traveling at a hundred miles an hour and only twenty-five feet apart, need masterly handling.

There are no brakes to apply if that twenty-five feet interval grows less. The flyer must realize before the space lessens that his ship has gained speed and cut the throttle a trifle to compensate. If he cuts it the merest trifle too much, that space will grow larger, the man behind him will be thrown out, and in the hands of any but the most expert the formation will degenerate into continuous overcontrol that will keep it ever shifting instead of smoothly accurate.

That elongated diamond of De Havilands winging their way to the gulf, was evidence in itself that the Air Service was sending its best to the aid of the stricken city.

DUMPY, flying his ship by instinct, had been peering over the side almost continuously during the last fifty miles of the hundred-mile trip. The tight-fitting helmet and big goggles gave an irresistibly humorous impression of perfect, owl-like rotundity to his face. Usually Hinkley was wont to gaze at his pilot often and grin at the picture he made, but on this trip he had no eyes for anything but the ground, and peered down as interestedly as Scarth.

Fields under water—houses forming islands in the midst of wide-spreading, shallow ponds—little knots of people gathered on higher clumps of ground—carcasses of dead cattle—all were parts of the picture which grew more desolate as the lowlands near the gulf were reached.

Corpus Christi itself capped the climax. As the formation circled the town, Dumpy forgot himself and what opportunities for glory awaited him, drawing his breath wonderingly at the shambles of two thousand feet below.

Half of the famous Summer resort presented a picture of utter destruction. The business section of town, a mile square, was a solid mass of wreckage, gaunt high buildings piercing it like spectral girders in a great unfinished building. The beach around Nueces Bay, as far as the flyers could see, was rimmed with a band of flotsam and jetsam thrown up by the sea. The boathouses, dancing pavilions, and bungalows that had lined the beach for a half-mile either side of the town were no more.

Dumpy awoke from his trance as he felt Hinkley's hand gripping his shoulder. Hinkley pointed ahead and Dumpy saw the lead ship rocking from side to side—the signal to break formation. Dumpy did not change position until one by one the ships ahead got into single file. Then he gave his D.H. the gun and caught up with them, falling into position on the rear of the line.

Like participants in a game of follow-the-leader the line of ships dived behind Captain Kennard. At two hundred feet the lead ship straightened out and began circling a long narrow field marked with a landing T. It was plain that the field was very wet. The carcasses of three animals, evidently dragged to one side of the field, could be seen plainly, and at one end of the fenced pasture the wreck of a barn was strewn about. Twenty-five or more men were gathered at one side and still more were carrying something from two trucks drawn up on a road that ran alongside.

Captain Kennard circled down and landed, the rest of the flyers circling still. The captain's ship threw a thin but plainly discernible spray of water and mud as it stalled down. As he taxied to the fence at one side, where the men were, Tex MacDowell started down. In order the others followed, each one landing after the man ahead was safely out of the way.

There were fully fifty people in all to watch Dumpy land, so Hinkley, grinning sardonically, waited to see what Dumpy would figure out to give them a thrill.

Instead of stalling in slowly and "pancaking" down in the mud. Dumpy went far back, and dived steeply at an angle that made him level out fully a hundred yards before his ship reached the boundary fence. Although the Liberty was idling, the big ship sped over the ground, three feet high, straight for the fence. As he reached it he pulled back slowly. The ship went up in the air and over the fence, losing speed almost instantly due to the low-throttled motor. Ten feet in the air the nose was still pointed up, and the De Haviland was practically stalled. A quick thrust at the throttle and the motor roared for an instant, just enough to keep the nose up as the ship settled the ten feet to the ground. It lighted hard, but on three points.

As Dumpy taxied to where the other ships were lined up Tex MacDowell turned to Captain Kennard.

"Ain't nature wonderful?" he inquired, looking down from his six-feet-two to meet the eyes of the stocky C.O.

"The bravest man in the world," returned the captain cryptically, "is one Larry Hinkley."

WITH eager civilians on each wing to help him Dumpy brought his black-and-white ship into line, and cut the motor by means of turning off the gas pet-cocks and then the switches to prevent back-fire or plug-fouling. Dumpy was crazy in the air, but wise in the ways of motors. He and Hinkley climbed out and splashed their way through the puddles toward the other flyers, who were now the center of an eager group of haggard, unshaven men.

The group of men, all armed, were asking eager questions of the flyers as to what they had seen on their trip down. Many of them had relatives in the back country—others were beseeching the flyers to look up this and that place to see if any one was alive. They had come out with gasoline for the ships and had been carrying it from the trucks to the field in big drums. Tex MacDowell had arranged for it the day before.

A stocky young fellow who looked as if he had not shaved for three days nor slept for as long was standing beside Dumpy and Hinkley on the outskirts of the group.

"Corpus sure has been ruined, hasn't it?" said Hinkley.

"Right. And most of the people in it, too," returned the other.

"Is the estimate still six hundred?"

"Been raised a little now, I think. Bodies are being washed up all the while. We have a gang of men working day and night digging graves—not even identifying the bodies now."

With several men talking at once, the flyers heard something of the true extent of the disaster. One man had lost his whole family; another who had owned a garage had had the whole thing washed away, with fifteen brand new cars ruined; still another had not seen his wife since the night of the storm and did not know whether she was alive or dead.

They talked with a sort of dazed detachment, eyes strained and tongues often mumbling from fatigue, that was horrible. Many of them, whose homes were in smaller towns near by or on farms in the lowlands around the bay, had no idea as to whether their families or possessions were safe or not, but the chances were they were not

A BATTERED Ford bounced and rattled up the muddy road and stopped beside the field. Two men in uniform got out. The smaller of the two vaulted the fence and ran toward the knot of men in front of the ships.

"Dave Ransom!" yelled Captain Kennard, and the group split to allow him to go through. "How are you, boy—and Natalie?"

In muddled, torn uniform, minus his observer's wing, his face lined with worry and fatigue, it seemed as if Ransom had aged ten years since he had left McMullen. There was no trace of the slim, boyish chap who had left them two weeks before.

"I'm glad to see you all," he said huskily. He had one of MacDowell's hands and one of Captain Kennard's and continued to pump them up and down.

"Is Natalie all right, Dave?" asked Tex.

The other flyers looked at Ransom eagerly.

"I don't know, Tex, and I'd give my hopes of heaven if I did!"

His sensitive face, smudged and sallow, twisted with pain.

"I came over to town to get some stuff that afternoon, and the cursed thing came up so suddenly I couldn't get back. Natalie is about ten miles away from here, on the east coast. There was a little food in the house and an old nigger mammy—you know. Colonel Brewster's cook—is with her. The bungalow is fairly high, but it's right on the edge of the bay."

His voice was strained and husky. He looked at the captain in painful suspense as he asked—

"How soon do you suppose I can hear something about her, captain?"

"In ten minutes, old-timer, if the captain says the word," announced Dumpy. "Let me take off and hike over there, will you, captain? In fact, we've all got plenty of gas yet—two hours' worth—and even if the food-bags and water bottles aren't ready we can all look over the land and maybe do some good. We can bring back a lot of news for these folks, too." He nodded at the eagerly listening civilians.

"Pardon me, I'm Major Sims, Cavalry, from Fort Roe."

"Glad to know you, str. Kennard is my name."

The captain shook hands with the tall, broad-shouldered major, who had accompanied Ransom.

"I'm sure glad to see you fellows. The town is under martial law, and I am in command. I was here on leave when the storm broke."

"We are under your orders, sir. For any service we can perform in addition to flying we hope you will call—"

"Thank you. I think it would be an excellent thing to make a short patrol this afternoon to look over the land, spot any survivors you can, and so forth. The

message-bags, food-sacks and water-bags are nearly completed; several women have been working on them and they will be ready for your use tomorrow. Up to now we haven't even had any boats in commission to use for communication with people who may be stranded in the bay or back in the lowlands. One or two, we hope, will be ready tonight."

The major turned from Captain Kennard and swept the group of flyers with a keenly appraising look.

"The whole town is under a regular guard system," he said, turning again to Captain Kennard. "Most of the men have been without much sleep for two days. Could your officers take a six-hour tour as officers in charge of districts—say from midnight to six tomorrow morning?"

"Sure thing. Major."

"Good. I suggest that you do not go out on patrol this afternoon yourself, captain, but return to town with me so that we can discuss details. Oil and gas are already out here and a detail of men to help you with the ships. Will six be enough?"

"Plenty. All right, you fellows, help each other crank your ships and start off. Don't stay over an hour. Major, I guess you know this country better than I; will you assign sectors for each man to cover?"

In a few minutes their routes had been assigned. Dumpy and Hinkley, at Dumpy's request, had secured the sector which took in the eastern shore of Nueces Bay, which would include Ransom's bungalow. Jimmy Jennings and stout Dr. Miles helped start the motor and the black-and-white ship was the first to warm up.

Ransom had begged to go but had been dissuaded. Dumpy promised that he would fly back over the field and rock the ship for good news, zoom if the house had been damaged and Natalie not observable, and fly straight if there was no news. By no news he meant no sign of Natalie, but the house in good condition and no observable reason why Natalie should not be safe.

Several civilians guided the ship by means of the wings as it taxied through the mud and turned around at the end of the field, which was about four hundred yards long and fifty yards wide. The other pilots watched interestedly to see how the muddy ground would affect the take-off.

Dumpy adjusted his goggles and turned to Hinkley in the rear seat.

"Ready, Hink?"

Hinkley nodded and Dumpy slowly shoved on the throttle. The wheels dug deep in the mud, but gradually picked up momentum as the great propeller

bit the air on full throttle. Half the length of the field, and still the ship would not go off. Ahead loomed a deep mudpuddle—possibly ooze so deep that it would slow the wheels and wreck the ship.

Dumpy jerked back on the stick and the ship responded, hopping the puddle, but bouncing on the other side. Luckily it was comparatively dry there, and the ship hopped five feet in the air. Like a flash Dumpy eased forward on the stick, and then held it so the slowly moving ship just stayed off the ground.

For a moment it seemed that the ship would stall and flop back to the ground again, but the little pilot jockeyed it, with barely enough speed to stay in the air, and succeeded in keeping it off the ground. Gradually it picked up flying speed, and in a triumphant zoom Dumpy lifted it over the ruins of the barn and turned toward the bay.

As he swooped over the littered town hundreds of people stopped in their tracks to watch him pass. It was the concrete evidence of help from the outside world, and to the marooned populace it was the harbinger of hope. They were not to fight their battle entirely alone.

DUMPY nosed down the ship and swept the highest church steeple with only a few feet to spare. Ordinarily he would have stopped long enough to have circled it at least for the benefit of his audience, but the memory of Ransom's haggard face and of Natalie out there in the desolate regions around the bay was clear in the pilot's mind.

He did not even glance at the acres of wreckage below, but with his four hundred horsepower Liberty turning up seventeen hundred revolutions a minute he roared out over the bay.

His ship and motor were working perfectly. That ship was the pride of his heart, and the hours of work that he put in on it every week showed in the smoothly firing motor and the gage needles which stood motionless, all recording exactly what they should—oil, air, temperature.

Both pilot and observer had careful data about the cottage from Ransom; it was just around the point which jutted into the bay. Dumpy did not even look down at the muddied, filth-splotched waters of the bay a thousand feet below, nor did he think of what would happen if the Liberty went bad. Hinkley, in the rear seat, looked impassively at the bloated bodies of both animals and human beings that floated below. He could not see any living people clinging to rafts,

although once he thought he saw an arm or a leg move off to one side of their course. The body was lying limply along a great beam that floated half-submerged. He signaled Dumpy, pointing to it. They circled several times, but could discern no signs of life below.

They resumed their course over the point and in a moment swept in sight of a little white cottage set on top of a hill that rolled up from the beach. As they sighted it, three miles ahead, Dumpy turned with a wide grin and Hinkley raised his hands and clapped joyfully. The house at least was there.

As they came closer Dumpy nosed down, throttle full on, and at a hundred and forty miles an hour they approached it. The line of wreckage cast up by the water was fully a hundred yards down the hill from the house.

Leaning out to one side, fighting the terrific air-pressure of their speed and the propeller blast. Dumpy kept diving, planning to fly past the house low to the ground so that they could see as much as possible. With a wild whoop of joy he turned to Hinkley and pointed. It was unnecessary—Hinkley had already seen the two feminine figures waving madly from the porch. Natalie was safe.

They rushed past the house and as Hinkley pushed up his goggles and waved, Dumpy let off some, of his exuberance by pulling up in a dangerously steep climbing turn that sent him over the house. Five minutes later he was rocking his ship from one ninety-degree bank to another over the field. Down below he could not pick up Ransom, who, after one look at the wild antics above, had crumpled down in the mud, his head in his hands and tears of relief coursing unashamed down his face. Captain Kennard's steady hand was on his shoulder.

AN HOUR and a half later the last ship had pancaked down into the field and was in its proper place in line along the fence. All the flyers brought back substantially the same story. Lowlands under water, groups of people gathered on the higher spots, beach lined with flotsam and jetsam that included many bodies, cattle standing patiently up to their bellies in water as much as ten miles back of the shore.

Tex MacDowell, who had flown straight over the bay and out to the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico, reported a little group of people on a raft. Pete Mills had seen a body about half-eaten by sharks, flung up on a pile of rocks on the western edge. Jimmy Jennings and Binder, his observer, reported the town

of Rockville, a hamlet on the coast, under what looked to be at least six feet of water, not a living soul responding when they flew low over it.

All the observers had noted on paper the location of people who would need food and water.

All the automobiles in the city that were running had been commandeered and three were waiting to bear the flyers into town. Three times everybody piled out and helped dislodge their conveyances from mud-holes in the road. As they drew into the outskirts of the town proper the sickening stench of death and decay increased in strength.

Cars piled with food and clothing passed them, and barefoot women and children dressed fantastically in everything from kimonos to overalls grew more frequent. Bricks from chimneys and fallen telegraph poles lined the streets, but only the hurricane had got in its work up on the heights. It was the business-section below, built on the lowlands near the water, that had been completely demolished.

The cavalcade of cars drew up in front of the town hall as Captain Kennard, Ransom and the major came down the steps. A continuous stream of men, women and children was filing in and out of the big stone structure. Its tower had been blown down, but otherwise it had stood the storm well. The tidal wave had not reached so high—it was built on the crest of the terrace that divided the town. At the foot of the terrace was the business-section of the town, now a tangled mass of torn buildings, overturned automobiles, and the contents of stores which had been gutted by the wave that had literally swamped all of Corpus Christi that was built below the seventy-foot hill. The residential section, almost entirely located on top of the hill, had escaped comparatively easily. Bungalows that had been built along the beach were complete wrecks—many of them had been picked up and flung bodily from their foundations, crumpling in the process.

The flyers had but little time to take in the sight for they were engulfed by eager men and women. They escaped as soon as possible, following Captain Kennard and Major Sims inside the town hall, which housed relief headquarters as well as the heads of the martial administration. They gathered in Major Sims' temporary office.

"The town has been divided into guard sections—as it happens, just twelve of them. Each section is guarded day and night by six guards, and each section likewise has an officer in charge. Each of you

gentlemen will have one of these sections, going on from midnight to six o'clock. The guard details form here."

The major turned to Captain Kennard.

"I see your men brought Colts and holsters along. Have they plenty of ammunition?"

"Yes, sir; eight clips apiece."

"Good. We are very shy of it. Now gentlemen, this guard matter is a serious one. Shoot at sight any one attempting to loot. We have already shot four looters—three Mexicans and one white man—and hanged one negro for attempted assault. To make matters worse, all the prisoners in the jail, except one, were released during the storm to save their lives. This one prisoner—the only important criminal in the jail—was the notorious Reddy Connors, as you probably know from the newspaper accounts of his capture. He held up Mr. John Seely and shot him in cold blood when the old man resisted.

"We didn't know down here that the police had captured the famous Connors until the day after he was arrested for Mr. Seely's murder. No one had any idea Connors was around here. Rangers from Austin were on their way down here after him when the storm broke and their train was stopped at Beeville.

"Well, Connors escaped this morning. He was locked up here in the town hall. One of his guards, completely worn out, had fallen asleep and Connors killed the other guard by mashing his skull with a table-leg. He is over six feet tall, has red hair and walks with a limp. He has a scar running all the way across his forehead. Shoot him on sight.

"You will report here tonight at 11:30, and each of you will be given special instructions by the night provost marshal covering your special district. You will all sleep in the morgue, upstairs in this building."

The major, who had been talking with crisp finality, relaxed as he uttered the final sentence, and his tired eyes twinkled. He laughed aloud as Tex asked gently—

"Has this morgue all the—*er*—modern improvements?"

"Blankets, anyway," returned the major. "Now, Captain Kennard, you can take up the arrangements about patrols and courier service."

It did not take long. Five ships were to patrol morning and afternoon, the sixth to fly trips back and forth between San Antonio and Corpus Christi carrying news to the outside world and messages as to things specially needed in the relief train that would come through from San Antonio when the railroad

washouts were repaired. The pilot on this trip would make it alone, leaving the back seat free for carrying much-needed surgical supplies.

Flying sectors were assigned. The observers would drop food-bags and water-containers where needed. Some were equipped with floats for the use of people found floating in the bay. A message-bag containing a note would be dropped first explaining a simple visual signal system whereby the people on the ground could let the airmen know whether they needed anything, and just what it was. Pete Mills drew duty as courier for the next day.

"Now we'll go down to the church next door, where we'll get something to eat.

"Then I guess you fellows had better beat it to bed and get some sleep. We'll call you at 11:30," said the major.

"From church to morgue is rather reversing the usual procedure, isn't it?" grinned Tex.

As they went downstairs Dumpy was kept busy answering Ransom's unceasing flow of questions about Natalie. The young observer looked like a different being now—the drawn lines in his face had disappeared, and only fatigue remained.

"Yes, we just swooped down right over the lawn and almost shook hands with her," boasted Dumpy. "I give you my word I could see how red and healthy her cheeks were!"

Captain Kennard looked back over his shoulder and grinned.

"Major, I guess we'd better shoot Dumpy Scarth here after that thug Connors.

"Dumpy is the official crook-catcher of the air."

"I sure got that Simon guy when he tried to steal a ship and deliver it to Mexico," returned Dumpy.

"Oh, you're the man that pulled that stunt, eh?" said the major, as they came out on the sidewalk and walked toward the near-by church. "I heard about it. Broke his prop in the air, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir!" Dumpy swelled proudly. "I never thought it could be done, but I did it!"

Ever since he had been in the Air Service Dumpy had been trying to achieve country-wide fame as a flyer, and in the exploit of bringing down a ship stolen from Donovan Field he had nearly realized his ambition. The Government had suppressed all public news of his exploit, however, and a surreptitious kind of fame was his only reward.

As the party entered the church where sandwiches and coffee were served to refugees and homeless ones

Dumpy, his round face aglow, was happily explaining to the interested major the exact methods he had used. He would have been even happier had he known that before many hours he was to achieve his ambition in it full perfection—that newspapers and movies would feature him as "Lieutenant Robert Scarth, the man who—" In other words, Dumpy stood on the threshold of his private idea of paradise.

IT WAS 5:45 a.m. and the dawn was gray and chill. Dumpy leaned against the back of an overturned automobile, and lighted a cigaret.

He was tired; he had been walking from guard to guard all night long. His sector ran up from the beach and included a portion of the completely washed-out section of town. He had walked through narrow lanes cleared through the clogged streets, climbed piles of splintered wood and articles that three days before had been offered for sale in the stores, and he had many scratches and bruises to show that his electric flashlight had not always been effective in showing him the way. To make matters more monotonous, nothing had happened. He had had no opportunity even to arrest anybody. He was mighty glad that it was time to collect his detail and go off duty.

5:55. He raised a whistle to his lips and blew a shrill, piercing blast. Almost immediately two other whistles could be heard faintly. The other flyers were collecting their men likewise.

One by one his guards appeared, the early arrivals leaning lifelessly against some handy resting-place to wait their comrades. The men from the more distant posts arrived at length, until five of the six in Scarth's detail had gathered. For five minutes they waited, but the other man did not show up.

"I wonder what the hell is keeping him," said Dumpy at length. "Who is it that's missing, anyway?"

"Drayton—he was on post two, along the waterfront," returned a young fellow who had been a clerk in a cigarstore before the storm.

"That's right near by, too. He ought to be here."

Dumpy raised his whistle again and sent a nerve-shattering blast through the misty air. Two or three of the guards raised a halloo, but there was no answer.

"Let's go down and see where he is," proposed Dumpy at length. "I saw him three-quarters of an hour ago. Probably the poor chap has fallen asleep. He looked like a death's head when I saw him, he was so tired."

The weary little company followed Dumpy toward

the water-front. They were compelled to make many twists and turns, and once they had to climb the remains of a building to get to the beach. They finally surmounted the last line of wreckage and stood on the beach, which was wet beneath their feet. The water had receded somewhat the day before, leaving a few feet of unencumbered sand.

Dumpy whistled again, but there was no answer.

"He was sticking close to those two boats they fixed up yesterday," remarked the flyer. "We'll rove up there and see what we can see."

They rounded an out jutting point made by a transplanted dancing pavilion and came in sight of some rowboats, two of which had been repaired for use the day before. Through the thin, chill mist a motionless form could be seen beside the boats, prone, on the wet beach.

"He must be sleepy to drop in the wet sand like that," said one of the guards. "I guess the poor chap—"

He broke off suddenly as they came closer and a low groan reached their ears. At a run, Dumpy in the lead, they came up to the stricken man. A red pool around his head and the bloody end of a shattered two-by-four told their own story.

"What happened, Drayton?" Dumpy asked as he leaned over the man, whose eyes were open.

"Connors—he stole one of the boats. He—he surprised me—and—knocked the gun out of my hand before—he—hit me," said Drayton faintly.

"Driggs, run up to town and commandeer the first car you see. Well carry him to that first cleared street and meet you. A car couldn't get through here."

Driggs started at a stumbling run on his mission. Under Dumpy's direction they bound up the ugly wound on the guard's head with handkerchiefs. Before they started up to town with him Dumpy examined the boats—only one of them was serviceable. It was as Drayton had said—the escaped murderer had made off with one of the only two useful boats Corpus Christi had.

The little cavalcade was making its way slowly up from the beach when Dumpy stopped in his tracks with a bitter curse. For a moment he stood as if turned to stone, then he sprang into life.

"I'm going on ahead—you fellows tend to Drayton and then report to headquarters to be relieved," he said shortly.

Without another word he started running, his short fat legs covering the ground with surprising speed.

Despite the chill of the morning he was in a

wringing sweat when he reached the town hall.

Hinkley with his detail was just going in and Captain Kennard was standing on the steps.

"Who's chasing you, me brave aviator?" inquired the surprised Hinkley as Dumpy rushed up the steps. "You look as if—"

"Come here!" gasped Dumpy, and dragged his tall observer up to Captain Kennard, who was watching interestedly.

"Captain, one of my guards has been half-killed by this fellow Connors, who stole one of those boats they fixed up yesterday. He has been gone a half-hour or so now. And the cottage Natalie is in is the first one Connors will sight that he can get to. Probably he needs food and water anyway, and it's sure as anything can be in the world that he will go up there. It's on a hill that stretches right down to the bay. He can't miss it. He'll land, go up there, and no telling what will happen!"

The stocky little captain swore feelingly—

"That's bad," he said slowly, his square face grim. "I—"

"Give Hink and me permission to get out to the field right away and take off. I'll keep an eye on the boat and if worse comes to worst I'll find some way to keep him away from the house. I think I can scare him just by flying around. I don't know, but we must do something, sir!"

"Go ahead, Dumpy, and luck be with you. Here, you!"

The captain roared the last words to the driver of a passing car. In a few words the situation was explained to him, and Hinkley and Scarth piled in. At a perilous rate of speed they bumped and swayed along the road to the field, sending the mud in flying lumps back of them. By great good luck they did not get stuck in mud-holes, for the young driver hit them with plenty of momentum.

The three—Hinkley, Scarth and the driver—were out of the flivver almost before it stopped and ran toward the ships. They tore off the canvas motor and propeller-covers, and Dumpy climbed into the cockpit. He turned on the gas pet-cocks, pumped up the air-pressure, and gave the motor three stiff shots with the primer. Meanwhile Hinkley was turning over the propeller and got it set.

The lanky observer gave the young driver a few words of instruction, and then yelled—

"Contact!"

"Contact!" repeated Dumpy, and turned on one switch.

The driver set himself with one hand on the propeller and Hinkley took hold of the other one. With a mighty heave the two men pulled the propeller through. Hinkley jerking the young civilian out of the way while Dumpy, in the cockpit, jazzed the throttle. There was a sputter and Hinkley deigned to smile when the motor caught. It was almost miraculous luck that the cold Liberty should start at the first try.

The wheels were already blocked, so Dumpy closed the motor shutters, retarded the spark and advanced the throttle until the tachometer showed eight hundred revolutions a minute. The pilot watched the thermometer steadily. It would be madness to start with a cold motor, but it seemed an eternity before the instrument showed forty degrees, centigrade. Even that was low, but time was infinitely precious. Dumpy motioned to Hinkley and the observer flattened himself out on the tail. Slowly the throttle went forward until the great Liberty was running at 1400, hitting perfectly on all twelve cylinders. Each switch proved to be without a miss and the thermometer crawled up to sixty.

Slowly Dumpy throttled down to idling speed, and motioned Hinkley to come up to the front cockpit.

"You and this fellow here help me taxi out and turn around, will you? You can get in out there."

Hinkley nodded, leaped off the step, and quickly instructed their eager aid.

Then, with both men hanging on the right wing, he turned around, his left wing just scraping the fence. Hinkley ran around to the other wing, and at a rate that kept both wingmen at a halfrun Dumpy taxied up the field. When he had turned again and the ship was pointed straight for the take-off Hinkley got in, put on helmet and goggles, and fastened his belt.

With a wave to their helper Dumpy gave *Abigail* the gun.

THEY got into the air without trouble. Without circling the field at all the pilot sent his ship across Corpus Christi, scraping the tops of the buildings. The Liberty was open as far as she would go, and a hundred and twenty miles an hour showed on the airspeed meter as they sped out over the muddy bay. The ground mist was already lifting a trifle, and was so fleecy the airmen could see through it without difficulty.

It was less than five minutes before they spotted the lone boat. It was about two miles from the cottage where Natalie was. As the plane scraped the water

a few yards from the boat the flyers grinned at the astonishment pictured on the ugly, scarred face of the boatman. He stopped rowing for almost a minute and then resumed his work. He was heading in toward the cottage, as Dumpy had foreseen. Probably he needed food badly right then.

For once in his life Dumpy was striving to think of some flying exploit in which no idea of personal glory entered. As the plane ceaselessly circled the slow-moving boat he racked his brain for some means to keep the criminal below from getting to the cottage. The thought of Natalie at the mercy of a man like Connors made the little pilot's blood run cold.

He remembered the first time he had met Ransom's bride. She had been like a sister to them all and although many of them had tried to win her, it had remained for young Ransom to come along and carry her off. But a hundred flyers, Dumpy among them, would have gone to any lengths to save her from far less than would probably face her when Connors landed.

Dumpy was a master flyer—the pilot in a hundred daredevil flying feats. But in all of them he had been playing to the gallery, striving for the notoriety that he hoped would accrue to him. Circling low over the bay in the chill morning air, Dumpy deliberately decided what he would do, totally without thought of self.

He looked over the land for a moment as Connors beached his boat. There was an open space fifty yards wide between the line of wreckage and the house, with lines of trees bounding it on each side, running down nearly to the edges of the bay.

As Connors struggled through the tangled mess of lumber, wrecked boats and animal carcasses Dumpy turned and looked at Hinkley, his sardonic, jeering, steel-nerved partner in all the vicissitudes of a year of border-patrol flying. By motioning with his hands Dumpy let Hinkley know what he meant to do.

The observer nodded. Both men knew that only a miracle would bring them out without a bad crash—that Fortune would have to smile if they emerged with only injuries.

Dumpy watched Connors' big form emerge from the wreckage and start across the lawn. The De Haviland was a hundred feet high, and as far to one side of the house. Dumpy circled and straightened out with his ship pointed across the clearing, parallel to the beachline. He opened the throttle wide and nosed down. Connors was nearly halfway to the house.

Wires screaming, struts quivering, speed-meter needle wobbling crazily at a hundred and seventy miles an hour, Dumpy skimmed the trees and leveled out two feet above the ground, headed straight for Connors. The man saw what was going to happen to him too late, if he realized it at all.

Dumpy did not waver. The De Haviland hardly felt the shock as it hit Connors and threw his mangled, lifeless body aside. But the propeller, splintered and useless, meant that the worst had happened.

Dumpy's hand was on the switches and he cut the racing engine like a flash. He pulled back on the stick and their momentum lifted them for a moment.

There was just speed enough left to lift the ship over the line of trees. It wavered for an instant and then plunged the thirty feet to the ground, a shapeless mass.

HINKLEY was up and around the house when boats were available two days later to bring in

castaways, but the Air Service had completed its duty at Corpus Christi and had been home two weeks before Dumpy could hobble about.

Lieutenant David Ransom and Mrs. Ransom gave a week-end party at the bungalow when Dumpy was able to walk on crutches and the airmen who had been on the storm patrol were the guests. Hinkley, smiling his careless, mocking smile, carried a huge bundle of newspapers.

Dumpy, bandaged and comparatively thin, seized them eagerly. His face lighted up with a beatific smile when he opened the San Antonio Express, dated three weeks back.

The head-line was there, and in the sub-head Robert Scarth was very prominent.

Tex MacDowell, in the group which surrounded Dumpy as he lay on the sofa, grinned at Captain Kennard.

"Dumpy has recovered," he drawled.