# LUCK OF THE CLOUDS

by MICHAEL McINTOSH

***Mac, an old-time "Wing Walker," went out on a cloud-shopping expedition, stepped into "Dead Men's Shoes," and brought his C.O. a most curious birthday present.***

FIRST LIEUTENANT NED BEATTY groped his way in the dark along the duck boards flanking the flying field. It was a cold, murky night with the moon hidden behind low, scurrying cloud banks. He proceeded cautiously, wary of the mud on either side of the narrow walk, until the black shape of a low building, housing the officers' mess, loomed up in front of him.

Tiny splinters of light peeping from the edges of a heavily curtained window showed that there was life within. Pushing open the door he clumped in.

"Major around?"

The three pilots sprawled around the wide table in the middle of the room looked up.

"Oh hello, Ned, old socks!" exclaimed the red-haired one. "How are you now?"

"Seen the major," Ned repeated.

"No. The Old Man's turned in, I think. Left here half an hour ago."

"Good! Look, fellows I got some inside dope. The Old Boy's birthday is to-morrow and we're all going to have a celebration dinner. Get me?"

"Damn good!" chorused the trio.

"Can't let Old George's natal anniversary pass unnoticed," added the sorrel topped one. "Let's have a regular old time blow out! And in the meantime, Ned, have a drink."

In spite of his thirty-two years, Major George Merrill, the Commander of the —th Aero Squadron, was affectionately referred to by his subordinates, as the "Old Man" or "Old George." He was extremely popular with the hard-boiled bunch of flying men he commanded; and to be held in such esteem among youngsters calloused by the grim realities of war, betokened only one thing—the major was "regular."

Just how Ned Beatty had ascertained the date of his squadron commander's birthday was a matter of conjecture and no one ever found out definitely. Several theories had been advanced only to be squelched promptly by the affable Ned. Having served as a reporter, of a Boston daily for two years, he had that strange intangible gift to newspaper men—a nose trained to scent news. This ability to perceive things long before they came to pass had clung to him long after he had left the typewriter to manipulate a joy stick.

WHEN Ned finished making his rounds, he hurried back to his hut and pushed open the door. His room-mate, Gene Tomlinson, was sitting with his feet up on a packing case, dreamily smoking his pipe. He looked up as Ned breezed in.

"Well, everything all set for the big dinner, old timer?" he asked.

"Yes, Gene, and damned if the old man won't be surprised. I got the mess sergeant fixed and the gang are right with me on everything," Ned replied as he dropped into a chair.

"The only thing is," he added, "we really should do the thing up right and give the old fellow a present or something. Corking good head the major, eh?"

"Yes, that's an idea, we should get together and give him something. But what under the sun can we buy, borrow or steal, in this God-forsaken country?"

"If Tubby hadn't gone to-day," muttered Ned soberly, "he would have had keen ideas. Damn the luck, in flames too!"

"But the kid went down fighting," said Gene. "Bagged two Boche before he . . . You know, Ned, I was in a hell of a fix at the time, a Fokker on my tail tearing the devil out of the old bus and me with my guns jammed. Tubby saved me from a hell of a fate and in doing so, left himself wide open. Lord how he riddled that tail-hugging Hun. I—I—blame myself."

"Don't be foolish, Gene," cut in Ned. "Didn't you get that Boche, the one that finished Tubby?"

"Yeah, but it was too late to save the kid."

"Oh well don't worry old man. This man's war is a hell of a mess anyhow, so we've got to make the best of it."

"Guess you're right Ned," replied Gene. "But after all what are we going to give the chief?"

Both lapsed into deep thought, further conversation being apparently taboo. The silence was shattered a moment later by the door of the hut being flung violently open.

"Hello Mac!" cried Ned, as the intruder clumped in. "Greetings! What's on your chest?"

The newcomer was a short, thickset chap, known to all as Mac; the full MacDonald being used only officially. Famed for his combat fighting and his insatiable passion for stunting and wing walking, he was the pride and envy of the squadron. When he laughed, and that was often, his eyes became dark slits from which merry gleams of light twinkled.

Mac executed a rapid clog dance and then flopped into a chair, beaming at the two. "Old kid, I've got an idea! Boy it's a hot one!"

"SPRING it and make it fast, Ned and I are brain fagged," Gene said with a grin.

"Well Ned, you know when you came over to my dump and told me about the plans and all? And that you were stuck for something to give Old George, remember?"

Ned yawned and grunted, "Naturally! But tell us your brain wave."

"Ah *mes enfants,* 'tis this. I happen to know that the Skipper wants something pretty badly."

"Let's hear it," chimed in Gene.

Mac drew out a cigarette and lit it very laboriously. The two waited with restless impatience. MacDonald's eyes twinkled as he finally replied:

"A Hun machine—intact. There you are, Lieutenant Beatty, your problem, your tantalizing mystery is solved. I bow to my dear public."

Gene and Ned groaned and cast vicious glances at their grinning visitor. "You hound of hell!" cried Ned. "How can we get a German plane here at the drome by to-morrow? Or any time, for that matter?"

Gene was slowly getting to his feet; but Mac had seen this move and was edging his way toward the door.

"That is up to you. Well I must be going, fellows, and never say I didn't help you."

As Gene rushed for him, Mac slipped through the door into the night and a merry laugh floated into the room.

Gene smiled and said, "Damn Mac anyway, he is funny sometimes."

"Yes, but he's right about the major's pet craving. I heard him express that wish once myself," replied Ned. "Although it doesn't mean anything to us."

"Forget this business Ned, and let's turn in. Gotta escort those bombers to-morrow morning, remember."

Ned stretched and murmured his assent.

EARLY next morning the airdrome was humming with activity. A blood-red sun peeping over the hill to the east gradually dispelled a low-lying mist, revealing a line of low-Spads lined up on the tarmac. Greasy mechanics hovered around each plane, testing and examining every detail. One by one the motors started to roar until they were all in full cry.

A pilot, slowly emerged from between the hangars followed by several others. Major Merrill appeared and started walking down the line to where three Breguet bombers were drawn up. Leaning against the fuselage of one of the big planes were three officers chatting together.

"Where's Mac, Dave?" asked Ned Beatty of the tall figure beside him. "Gene and I want to see him very much."

"We sure do," smiled Gene.

"He'll be along in a minute. Checking up on some maps, I think," replied the addressed one, Dave Burroughs by name. "You know I'm piloting Mac to-day. The major wants him to do some bombing."

"What's the big idea of a good pilot like Mac going as an observer?" asked Ned.

"Dunno," Dave replied. "It's the chief's idea. Mac used to be a wizard at the game, when he was a one-winger."

"Yeah that's right, but—" Ned checked himself, as he saw the squadron commander approaching.

"Morning boys. All set?" the major said, as he returned the salutes.

"Yes, sir!" replied Gene. "We just wanted to see MacDonald for a minute. Didn't know he was going as observer and bomber to-day."

"Mac's a damn good man," replied the major. "Used to be one of the best one-wingers; that was before he became a pilot. Jones and Bonnell going west left me short. Here he comes now."

Fairly bouncing, Mac came toward them, his figure looking bulkier than ever in the loose flyng isuit. As he reached the group he snapped into a salute and then greeted everyone with a cheery "Morning."

"Well boys, hop to your planes," ordered the major.

Ned jabbed Mac in the ribs as he left and was rewarded with a grin.

"Say, old Mac's looking for trouble, going as a bomber," remarked Gene, as they hurried off.

"True, but he will look after himself," replied Ned. "Isn't he the good natured cuss? I don't think I could ever quarrel with him, despite the kidding last night."

"Well the old major doesn't get a present this birthday, I guess. Wonder how old he is?" Gene asked, as he stopped by his plane.

"Wouldn't ask him if I were you," replied Ned. "Well so long. See you above."

Ned reached his machine and scrambled into the cockpit. The engine was idling with the propeller just turning over. "Everything O.K.?" he asked, as a mechanic came up.

"Yes sir, everything is perfect. Give 'em hell, Lieutenant," replied the mechanic, his dirty face creasing in a grin.

"Do my best, Hawkins," Ned answered.

At a signal from the flight commander, the line of Spads took off, the three Breguet bombers following them into the air.

THE flight crossed the enemy lines at twelve thousand feet and droned steadily onward, the escort of Spads flying well above the three heavily-laden bombers. Below appeared numerous black puffs, as the Archies indignantly and vainly protested the right of way. Still the formation headed on and on.

As they neared their objective, the flight swung into a wide circle to the right. Suddenly the observer in the leading bomber held up a Very pistol and fired two green lights. At that signal, the bombs were released from the three Breguets simultaneously.

The target was a huge ammunition dump, poorly camouflaged into a resemblance of a dead forest. Several fires started as the bombs hit their mark, immediately followed by violent explosions. Yes, the raid was a success!

Ned was flying above Mac and to the right. He observed with satisfaction the results of the egg dropping and smiled to himself. Good old Mac, could count on him every time. With a start he suddenly saw the flight commander's wings waggling. He looked hastily upwards and behind—and gasped. Twelve Fokkers were tearing down upon them out of the sun.

And then the Spads went into a furious, milling dog fight.

MacDONALD watched the bombs descend and grinned gleefully when he heard the low rumble below and saw the yellow flames shooting up. A hit! It brought back memories of the days when he sported one wing over his heart and was regarded as best bomber in his squadron. Evidently his old cunning accuracy had not deserted him.

Dave turned in the pilot's seat and smiled broadly, his lips forming the word, "congrats." Peering up, Mac saw the circling Spads above him. "Damn glad those boys are with us," he thought. "We'd be easy meat for any two-gun Boche."

Suddenly he started, for the formation overhead was breaking up, planes banking to right and left. He wondered—and then he saw the diving Fokkers.

Dave had seen them also and had pushed the nose of the Brequet down and pulled the throttle wide open. The other two bombers executed the same maneuver; for the only thing to do now was streak for home.

Mac could see as they dived that the escort was out numbered and a terrific dog fight was in progress. Suddenly one of the Spads spun out of the milling planes and plunged headlong downwards, tiny red flames licking its sides. Mac shuddered as he saw the flames fanned into a roaring furnace. He looked quickly away.

The three bombers, relieved of their heavy loads, rapidly left the battle scene, the pilots pushing their Lorraine Deitrich motors to the limit. Mac drew off his gloves and examined the two Lewis guns mounted in the rear cockpit. "Probably have to fight our way out," he thought, as he fired short bursts from each. "And maybe these two gats won't be useful."

LOOKING up, his blood froze. Good God, now they were in for it! He rapped Dave's helmet sharply, and as he looked questionally back, Mac pointed behind. There outlined against the blue, were two diving Hun planes!

The other two Breguets, flying to left and right of Mac, had taken warning; the observers waiting at their guns for the enemy's inevitable attack. The Boche machines zoomed out of their dive and then came roaring down again on their prey. They singled out the two extreme bombers, leaving Mac and Dave unmolested for the time being.

As one Fokker dived on the left hand bomber, Dave banked steeply over to help his comrade. The Boche was shooting now and mixed-streams of tracer and armor-

piercing bullets flowed from his stuttering Spandaus. The observer in the Breguet was behind his guns pumping a hail of lead at the darting target. Suddenly he wilted and slumped down in the cockpit. The bomber quivered and then its nose dropped abruptly and the big plane plunged violently down, down.

At this moment, Dave opened fire on the flashy little Fokker, his guns synchronized to fire through the whirling propeller blades. The Hun seemed surprised and banked steeply out of range of the spitting Vickers. Zooming, he came tearing up underneath them, his guns vomiting steel death. As he pulled steeply past the bomber, Mac let go with both his guns. He saw the first burst drill directly through the yellow belly of the heeling ship. The Fokker seemed to hang by her nose, while Mac tore burst after burst into her. A spurt of flame suddenly appeared and the Hun plane side-slipped and then vanished in a swirl of sooty vapor.

Before Mac could realize what had happened, he saw splinters and bits of fabric kicked up on the right wing of the Breguet. The other Boche was upon them. Dave pulled the big plane up on her nose and then suddenly dived. The Fokker was directly behind, their tail. With a lurch the bomber zoomed upwards again and Mac brought his guns into action as the Hun suddenly came across his sights. A short burst and then both jammed. Cold shivers ran up and down his spine. They were done for now!

Realizing what had happened, Dave dived abruptly, giving Mac a brief chance to clear the jams. Amid sprays of lead from the chattering Fokker's guns, he frantically tried to clear the obstructions; his fingers seemed paralized and numb.

With a half sob rising to his lips, Mac straightened up and shook his fist at the flaming Spandaus. As he did so, a yellow streak came hurtling down across his vision. A wild shout of joy burst from his lips as he recognized the racy lines of a French Nieuport. With both guns belching fire, the speeding scout pounced upon the Fokker. And before that pilot could realize just what part of hell had fallen on him, greedy flames were licking their way around his cockpit. Whirling in a cloud of black smoke, the plane plunged downward, spinning helplessly. The Nieuport clung like a leech, drilling the Fokker through and through; and then, seeming satisfied, straightened out and climbed in wide circles back to the Breguet's altitude.

WITH No-Man's-Land well behind them, Mac breathed a sigh of relief. The fiery little Nieuport had escorted them this far and now with a friendly wave of his gloved hand, the Frenchman dropped abruptly away. Dave shut off the engine and yelled back, "All right, old timer?" Mac nodded and grinned.

"Guess we're born lucky, eh Dave?" cried Mac. "Now let's head for home."

Dave smiled his assent and gave the engine the gun. It roared triumphantly and the plane straightened out again. Suddenly the motor coughed and spluttered, and, with a final wheeze, died. Mac's heart was in his mouth—but why worry—they were well behind the lines. Pushing the nose of the Breguet down, Dave turned and called, "Guess we're out of gas, Mac. The gauge is shot to hell. We'll have to land somewhere, damn soon."

The plane spiraled slowly downward while the two men searched the terrain below. Dave pointed eagerly to the right, and on looking, Mac made out an airdrome nestling beside a small wood. As the bomber descended the drome became quite distinct. Several planes were drawn up at the dead line and little figures swarmed around them. Mac perceived by the markings on the planes below, that it was a British drome.

Circling lower and lower, Dave brought the bomber to a gentle landing. It ran toward the line of hangars for a few yards and then stopped, the propeller motionless. Two ack emmas came racing out to them. "What's wrong?" panted the first grease-streaked one, as he came breathlessly up.

"Out of gas," replied Mac as he scrambled out of his cockpit. Dave followed him and together they walked to meet an approaching officer.

"Glad you fellows dropped in," he cheerily remarked, after he had ordered the Breguet's tank to be filled. "Come over and meet the wing commander, I have to hop off very shortly myself."

Major Maxwell, the wing commander, was extremely interested in their story; which Mac related while the three sipped steaming coffee. "Say, you fellows didn't come across the derelict by any chance, did you?" he asked suddenly.

"The derelict?" queried Mac.

The major laughed and replied, "Guess you didn't; but here's the story: A few minutes before you chaps arrived, one of my pilots came in with a strange tale. It seems a few miles south of here he observed a Hun machine winging its way along at about ten thousand feet. He climbed to get above it and was extremely puzzled to see this lone Albatross two-seater flying so far from the lines and all alone. Diving with his guns ready, he swooped onto the Boche's tail and fired a burst

through her fuselage. The bus still continued evenly on her course. Suspecting a trick, the pilot cautiously flew alongside, and to his great surprise saw the pilot crumpled over the side of the cockpit, apparently dead. The rear cockpit was empty. He flew all around the Albatross and then was finally convinced that he had come across a derelict of the air."

Dave gasped, "Good Lord, how spooky!"

"Yes," went on the major. "The controls on that plane must have locked and it will probably fly on until the petrol is all consumed."

"Where did you say this plane was heading for?" asked Mac, his eyes shining.

"In a southerly direction," replied the major. "And she was banking very slightly to the west. Probably will fly in a wide circle, until forced down."

"Strange, alright," said Mac. "I heard of an incident like that once before. But, Major, we must be on our way. Thanks awfully for the gas and the coffee and—"

The major stopped him with a laugh. "Don't worry, old chap. Some day I may drop in and repay your call."

Mac grinned, "Do that. This war has its pleasantries after all."

THE Breguet climbed rapidly above the British airdrome and Mac waved his hand at the diminishing figure of their hospitable host. The engine ceased its roar and Dave leaned back and cried, "We'd better swing over to southwest, eh?" Mac nodded.

The bomber jumped forward again and slightly banking, began to climb. For an hour they kept steadily on. The altimeter read twelve thousand feet. Searching the skies above and below revealed nothing unusual to Mac's eyes. He was beginning to give up in disgust and get Dave, to head for their own drome, which now lay to their right. They were running through heavy cloud banks and that alone made things discouraging.

Suddenly Dave pointed excitedly ahead. Mac looked; he saw, no more than five hundred yards ahead, a plane with black crosses on the wings. As he gazed it entered a fluffy cloud and was lost to sight. Dave looked back, his eyes bright, and Mac nodded and waved him on. For in that brief second he had readily seen that the plane ahead was of the Albatross type and without doubt the derelict.

WITH his heart hammering against his ribs, Mac thought of the task that lay before him. Foolhardy and ridiculous as he realized it was, there was no turning back now. The experience of changing from one plane to another was not new to him; but the thought of transferring to one piloted by a dead man sent icy shivers racing up and down his spine. With a shrug he motioned to Dave.

His face white with determination, Mac swung out of the cockpit and thrust himself forward onto the wing. Grasping a strut, he hung desperately to it with legs and arms, the rush of air momentarily choking him. Little by little he pulled himself across the wing, hugging the sheer side of the fuselage. Dave looked over, his eyes eloquent with admiration and fear for his observer's safety.

The Breguet, plunging through thin vapory clouds, suddenly emerged into the open. Straight ahead, they perceived the Albatross. The banks of clouds were left behind and the blue skies looked down on them.

Gradually worming his way, Mac swung his body over the edge of the wing and hitched his way down, until he was half-sitting, half-swinging on the wide axle of the undercarriage between the two landing wheels. He strove to keep the panic-stricken feeling down as his eyes focused on the earth so far below. God—he'd have to get his nerve back. Weird, jumbled thoughts raced through his brain—suppose the German pilot wasn't dead; or the engine konked at a critical time; or Dave miscalculated.

With a start he saw that the Albatross was merely twenty yards ahead and slightly below them. He could clearly discern the slumped figure of the dead pilot sprawling grotesquely over the padded rim of the cockpit. Nearer and nearer they approached and Mac could feel the bomber slow down as Dave throttled the engine. The wheels of the Breguet were now just above the rudder of the German plane.

MAC eased himself downward, hanging on with his arms and hands, his legs dangling. At that instance the full significance of his plight swept over him. Would he ever make it? A mistake and his body would go hurling down, down to the patchworked earth so far below.

The bomber moved closer and closer, the undercarriage just above the fuselage of the Albatross. Mac was now hanging by his hands at arms' length, for the moment was almost here.

Now or never!

An air bump tossed the plane below him and he felt his feet touch the slippery fuselage. Steeling himself, he released his grip and dropped. He landed astride the fuselage, his hands clawing for a hold.

The Breguet moved slightly upward away from the Albatross and the imminent danger of collison. Dave looked eagerly over his cockpit and saw his companion crawling slowly along the fuselage of the plane below. Offering up a fervent prayer of thanks, he pulled open the throttle and began to climb.

Clawing and clutching desperately, Mac crawled toward the cockpit ahead. The wind tore at him like shrieking devils, trying with all their might to sweep him away, and screaming horribly. His hands gripped the edge of the rear cockpit and he swung himself in, gasping and shaken as the plane roared away on its wild mad ride.

Peering ahead he saw the bobbing helmeted head—he gasped and then steadied himself for the gruesome ordeal. He leaned forward and looked intently into the cockpit, where the corpse was. He saw that one of the dead man's hands was gripping the control stick and that his feet were rigidly set on the rudder bar. Flying on, in complete control of his ship, even after the grim Reaper had touched him. "A wonderful death," thought Mac. "Like the funeral of a Viking of oldtimes." He glanced up and seeing the Breguet circling above him, waved his hand cheerfully aloft. Then slowly he edged himself out of the cockpit, his feet landing on the wing beside the pilot's seat. Gripping the edge of the cockpit, he stared at the blanched face before him. A dark, irregular blot stained the German's flying suit over his heart. Mac shivered and then reaching inside, he loosened the death-cold fingers from the joy-stick. It was no easy job and he felt streams of perspiration coursing down his body. Once the stick was free, he seized it and gently pushed the pilot over to one side.

It was a tight fit, but Mac finally squeezed into the cockpit and pushed the dead man's feet away from the rudder bar. A strong sensation of nausea overpowering him, he pushed and pulled the corpse until finally it lay half across the fuselage back of him. Leaning far back, Mac with a last supreme effort tumbled the inert figure into the rear cockpit. There it lay, an arm hanging limply over the side, waving in the Wind.

ONE by one the escort landed back at their airdrome hours overdue. Major Merrill had stamped up and down the tarmac, cursing tfie fate that had apparently befallen the flight. And now as they appeared, he counted each plane as it dropped to earth. One—two—until six Spads were accounted for out of the flight of eight. The three Breguet bombers were still missing. "Undoubtedly shot down," muttered the major when the pilots had told him the details of the fight.

It had been a furious affair, that dog fight. Roaring planes slashing and clawing at each other like infuriated beasts. No one knew exactly how many Boche machines had been destroyed; for some claimed eight, while others saw only five destroyed. Two Spads had been seen hurtling downward enveloped in flames.

Both Ned and Gene brought their riddled machines back safely. A steel-jacketed Fokker bullet had creased its way through Ned's left forearm, leaving a nasty flesh wound in its wake. With his arm bandaged and in a sling, he was now standing beside Gene, chatting with a group of pilots. The long overdue Breguets and the flight in general were being discussed.

"God, boys, I guess the three are goners," murmured one of the officers. "And we were supposed to give them protection. Damn! What a lot we did!"

"Hell, man, how could we help it—if a bunch of lousy Fokkers jumped?" The speaker stopped, his eyes bulging, as he gazed upward. "For the love of . . . . Look!"

The eyes of every man in the group followed the direction of his shaking finger, and gasped.

For there, circling above the drome, was a strange sight. A Breguet bomber and a plane bearing black Maltese Crosses on its wings, were spiraling slowly down. With s bellow of amazement, the group raced for the hangars. The major was watching the strange spectacle with open-mouthed amazement, as his officers came racing up.

"What the hell?" he cried. "It's one of our Breguets or I'm damned!" They watched with eyes popping, as the Hun machine dropped lightly to earth and came roaring toward them. Five mechanics, led by a sergeant brandishing a revolver, streaked out to the enemy plane. A figure leaped gaily out of the front cockpit as they came up and lifted his hands high in the air.

Major Merrill led as the officers started out on the run. They saw and recognized the pudgy figure of Mac, as he strolled to meet them. Before anyone could utter a word, Mac saluted his commander and said:

"Many happy returns of the day, sir! Here's a little present Dave and I picked up. Did a little cloud shopping on our way back."

Standing with his mouth agape, the major gazed with fixed eyes at Mac. He muttered, "Well, I'll be damned—"

If he intended saying anything more, it was lost in a thunderous roar as Dave taxied in the big bomber.