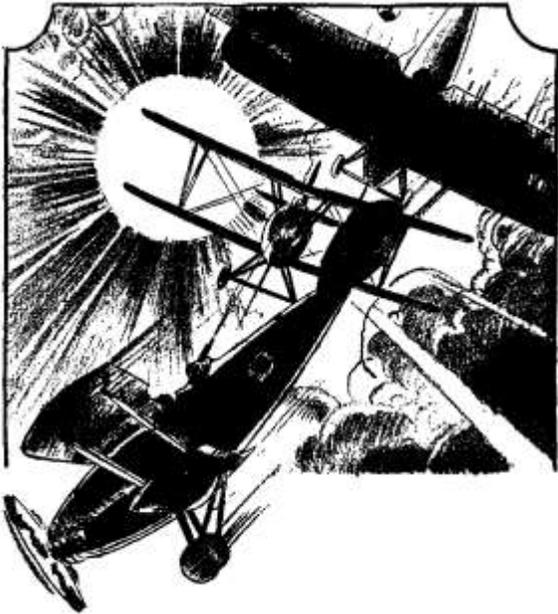


Fat Chance

By Major George Fielding Eliot



IN the rear cockpit of the zooming Bristol, "Tubby" Gorkin squirmed uncomfortably. While he never would admit that he was as much oversize for that cockpit as his irascible little pilot, "Squirrel" Ryder, claimed, he certainly didn't rattle around in it. To tell the truth, the designers of the celebrated Bristol Fighter had not arranged their rear cockpit for the accommodation of observers built on Gorkin's generous lines.

His ambition was to be a pilot. It was more fun, and besides, a pilot had more room. Tubby could fly well enough; for months he'd never missed a chance to beg a lesson of some good natured pilot, until he was convinced that he could handle a Bristol as well as Squirrel Ryder. But Ryder laughed the idea to scorn. He was down on Tubby, anyway, claiming that the plump observer's extra weight and clumsiness were handicaps to him and kept him from many a victory.

"Excess baggage," he'd snarl. "That's all you are, Tubby. And you get fatter every day. Excess baggage!"

Ryder being a captain and a flight leader, his views had weight with the squadron commander. Tubby couldn't get ordered to a pilot's course.

Now the old squadron commander was gone; a new major, preceded by a fiendish reputation for cold-blooded efficiency, had been ordered to the squadron. Major John Brisk. Brisk! Tubby could imagine what he'd be like—a perfect pal for Squirrel Ryder. Ryder was already cackling with glee over the prospect.

"I'll get rid of my excess baggage at last!" he had chortled at breakfast that morning. "Just wait till this new C.O. sees what's makin' my poor old crate tail-heavy!"

Upon Tubby's gloomy recollections of this scene, Ryder's querulous, high-pitched voice broke in sharply, via the voice-tube.

"There's a German over there, Tubby," he snarled. "I'm goin' after him. See if you can remember how to use those Lewis guns, for once."

Tubby stood up, and swung his twin-mounted Lewis guns right and left, loosening the grip of the chilled oil. He fired two short bursts; the guns were working all right. Then he looked around for the German.

There he was, a blue Albatross single-seater, coming straight toward the Bristol.

But just before reaching effective machine-gun range, the German pilot suddenly dived. Tubby knew what that meant. The Boche was going to come up from below, the proper method of attacking a two-seater in her blind spot.

The Bristol turned suddenly, sharply, to the left in a steep bank, almost throwing her over on one wing tip—this maneuver giving the observer a good clean shot at the Albatross passing below him.

Tubby was ready. He swung his Lewis guns downward—or started to. They stuck.

He jerked at them, swearing. The tourelle would not revolve.

Too late he saw that a fold of his heavy flying-coat had caught in the circular track on which the tourelle moved. He tried to pull it away, but it was no use.

The Albatross flashed past below him, a perfect shot—if only his guns could have been brought to bear. The voice-tube crackled with Ryder's furious vituperations.

“Stuck fast in your cockpit, you fat cow! My only chance, too!”

The Bristol leveled off and increased speed, heading for home. The unhappy Tubby looked up and saw the reason—three black shapes high in the blue sky, hovering Boche just waiting for the Bristol to become fully involved in a scrap with their blue pal. Now they dived, too late. The swift Bristol was away clear, but without the victory that might have been hers.

Sick at heart, Tubby worked at the tourelle till at last he got his coat out of it. If he hadn't been so fat, he wouldn't have jammed up against it so tight and gotten all snarled up. Damn the luck, anyway! A victory would have given him a good start with the new major; now Ryder'd have a good talking-point to launch his campaign to transfer Tubby to the squadron supply-office.

HOME they went; on the tarmac, getting out, Ryder was grimly silent save for one sentence. “The major'll be here today,” he threatened. “You wait. Tubby!”

He must have told some of the others about what happened, for at lunch Tubby was the target of various derisive remarks, and the adjutant, who inclined rather to the plump side himself, looked at him with undisguised sympathy. It was funny, reflected Tubby, how fat fellows always stuck together against the over-energetic, efficiency-worshipping lean ones of the world.

The waiter passed round a steaming dish of creamed potatoes. Tubby's eyes glowed suddenly. He loved creamed potatoes, and the squadron cook was noted for them. But as the man bent over him, he caught the glittering gaze of Squirrel Ryder fixed upon him.

He could read the thought behind those eyes. “Two more pounds of useless excess baggage.”

He waved the savory dish away. “I'll just have the chop—and—and some of the lettuce salad,” he muttered. Tubby hated lettuce salad, but a guy had to eat something.

“There's pie for dessert,” the adjutant told him comfortingly.

Ryder overheard, and snorted.

“I got some work to do,” said Tubby hastily. “Can't wait for dessert.”

He was just rising from the table when an orderly came in.

“The new major's calling up from group headquarters, sir,” he said to Ryder, who was the senior officer in the room. “Somethin' about a special patrol.”

Ryder jumped up. “I'll lead it myself,” he announced. “Here's where I get in good right off the bat.”

He hurried out of the mess-shack in the orderly's wake.

Tubby and the adjutant followed, as did several of the others, anxious to hear what was up.

“Might get a line on what sort of C.O. we're getting,” as the adjutant put it. “First contact, and all that.”

In the office, Ryder was doing a good job of listening to a very vibrant telephone. Once inside, the others could hear what the major was saying quite clearly. What a voice—crisp, sharp, dominant.

Brisk by name and brisk by nature, thought Tubby. A man who'd have no patience with a fat guy's troubles and mistakes.

“Direct information, Captain Ryder. Secret service stuff. These two bombers are coming over to lay their eggs on the squadron drome—on my drome, damn their impudence! I want you to teach 'em a lesson, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Take off right away. You haven't much time. I'll be there by the time you get back, and I want to hear from you that those bombers have been shot down in flames.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ryder's gaze settled suddenly on Tubby. “Er—one thing, major—”

“Yes, yes! What is it?”

“My observer, sir. I'd like to have permission to take someone else.”

“What's the matter with him?” crackled the major.

“He's too fat, sir. Weighs down the ship—gets stuck and can't turn his tourelle—all that sort of thing. The major can just imagine how much use a fat man is in the Air Service.”

There was a moment's silence, while poor Tubby's heart sank lower and lower.

“Carry on as you are at present,” the major's distant voice commanded sharply. “I'll make any necessary changes in personnel after I've had a chance to look things over.”

“But this excess baggage, sir—this Tubby Gorkin. He’s so fat I have to fly with my stick halfway—”

“That’ll do. Captain Ryder,” interrupted the major. “Carry on with your orders. There’s no time for changing officers about just now. I’ll see to it when I arrive.”

“Very good, sir.”

Ryder hung up, whirled to the others and began snapping out orders.

IN twenty minutes Tubby found himself again in the air. Ryder led the flight of three Bristols straight up to ten thousand feet and then headed for the German lines, every pilot and observer in the formation keeping a lookout. But no bombers appeared.

“What the hell?” complained Ryder through the voice-tube. “I’m right where I was ordered to be, and the time’s right, too. The major’s secret service stuff must be haywire.”

At last gas was running low. Reluctantly Ryder turned his ship and led the flight homeward. They had done nothing but patrol aimlessly through many miles of German skies.

Then, far below, Tubby caught a glimpse of white wings against the brown fields. He focused a glass with hasty fingers. Black crosses showed up plainly.

“Germans down there, Ryder,” he announced.

Ryder looked, saw the German—saw, too, that she was no bomber, but a small two-seater of the type used for reconnaissance and camera work.

He snatched up a Very pistol and fired a green star, meaning, “Disregard movements of flight leader.” Then he put forward his stick and threw the Bristol into a screaming dive.

He’d missed the bombers, but Squirrel Ryder meant to come back with one Boche scalp to his own credit, anyway.

The German pilot saw him coming and tried frantically to escape, but he’d seen the diving menace too late. Tracers from Ryder’s forward guns lashed the air with flame. The German dodged, came around and up in a climbing turn, firing in his turn. Tubby heard bullets rip through the right wing, heard a splintering sound as they found, for an instant, the edge of the forward cockpit. Then his own guns came to bear, as Ryder swung away, and he poured twin lines of

flaming bullets right into the German fuselage at short range. He saw the stick stop turning, saw the German’s nose go down. Now he was facing the German observer.

“Say!” said Tubby aloud. “I’m sorry for that poor guy!”

For the German observer was as fat as himself, and was as stuck in that cockpit as Tubby had been on the previous flight.

Tubby could see him yanking and twisting at his Spandaus, trying to turn himself around to face his enemy. Tubby could have riddled him with bullets, but he held his hand. Somehow he couldn’t do it. And the German plane was doomed to a forced landing in Allied territory, anyhow; Tubby’s first burst had put the engine out of commission.

Down she glided toward a fortunately available field. Ryder followed right behind, and landed alongside the German almost before the latter’s wheels had ceased turning. From the reserve trenches which bordered the field a swarm of cheering doughboys were pouring out.

The German observer lifted his great bulk from the cockpit and dropped to the ground. His collar badge indicated that, like many German observers, he was a sergeant, not an officer.

His pilot, a small sour-faced lieutenant, was there before him.

“*Schweinhund!*” he yelled, and ran at his observer and kicked him heartily. “*Ach, Dumkopf!*” The fat sergeant stood there, unresisting, apparently taking the abuse as his due.

Ryder didn’t stir, but Tubby Gorkin rolled out of his cockpit, took three strides and grabbed the German officer by the shoulder, spinning him sharply around.

“Let that man alone,” he growled. “ ‘Twasn’t his fault. He got stuck.”

“Fat pig that he *iss!*” the German pilot raged. “In the cockpit *always* he sticks. Such grease-tubs in the air no business *haf!* Now I am prisoner because *Herr* Colonel me a fat sow of an observer *gifs!*”

“Oh, yeah?” The sergeant came suddenly to life. “If you had the brains God gave a flea, you wouldn’t fly so low over the enemy lines, you Prussian sausage!” he announced. He walked over to the gaspingly astonished officer. “I’ve been

waitin' for this chance a long time, *Herr Oberleutnant* von Strum. How'd you like a poke in the snoot?"

One big arm shot out, and the *Herr Oberleutnant* von Strum sat down on the brown grass abruptly. The dough-boys raised a cheer.

"Hit him again. Fatty! Put the boots to him, big boy!"

The sergeant stepped forward, thus encouraged, but Tubby thrust out an arm.

"Better not," he said. "Better take it easy. Where'd you learn to speak such good English?"

"In Cincinnati," the sergeant-observer replied. "I lived in the States most all my life. I was just over visiting the old folks when the war busted out and they grabbed me for the Kaiser's army. Hell, I didn't want to fight—till the good old U. S. A. got in, and then I wanted to fight with 'em."

AN infantry corporal and two men were lifting Ryder out of the cockpit.

"Your pilot's badly wounded, sir," the corporal announced. Ryder was groaning, and blood was dripping from his right sleeve. They laid him on the grass and the corporal went to work with a first-aid kit, after sending a runner scurrying for the medical officer.

"I'll be all right," Ryder managed to say as Tubby bent over him. "Get to a phone somehow and have 'em send up a pilot to take the ship home."

"I can fly her home," Tubby suggested.

"You can like hell—not my plane! Do as I tell you," Ryder ordered. "It's bad enough not getting the bombers without having you crack up my pet bus."

Tubby straightened up wearily, caught the German sergeant's eyes on him, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks like a fat man can't be trusted with anythin'," Tubby complained.

"Come here a minute," said the sergeant. "Lookit, lieutenant. The way I figger it, us fat guys oughta stick together a little. What was that your pilot said about bombers?"

Tubby told him about the secret service report.

The other nodded. "Yeah. That's what I thought. They were all talkin' about it at our drome before we took off. It's a phony, lieutenant. They let that spy get away on purpose. The real

raid's comin' two hours later, and they're goin' after your big ammo dump back of Penthières!"

"What?"

"Sure's you're born, that's the dope," the other replied earnestly.

The German lieutenant, now held fast by a couple of infantrymen, supplied sudden confirmation.

"*Verrdter!*" he yelled. "Pig of a traitor—" He fought to get at the sergeant, but his captors held him fast.

"I owe them Prussians one, anyhow," the plump sergeant-observer went on. "Promised me I wouldn't never have to fight against the U. S., and they double-crossed me; so, damn 'em, now I've double-crossed them. But I don't guess I'd have done it if you hadn't been a fat guy like me, and stuck up for me like you did. You better be telephonin' your skipper. You ain't got much time."

Tubby was thinking the same thing, as he looked at his wristwatch. Two hours difference, most of which had been wasted. The German bombers ought to be taking off just about now.

"Telephone lines are all cut by shell-fire, sir," the corporal put in.

Then it was up to Tubby.

"I'll take the ship by myself," he decided.

Ryder sat up, propping himself on his good arm, his peaked face twisted into a snarl of rage.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" he protested. "That's my ship. I order you to leave her alone."

Tubby shrugged his thick shoulders. "Got to do it, Squirrel," said he. "Got to get those bombers."

He turned, toward the waiting Bristol.

"Some of you fellows bust a hole in that German ship's tank and get the gas out," he ordered. "I'll need it. And thanks, sergeant, for the dope you gave me."

"Stay away from that ship!" squalled the bandaged Ryder. But no one paid him any attention. The doughboys made a quick job of transferring the German gas, they swung the Bristol into the wind and held the wing tips while Tubby got into the front cockpit and set the switch.

The corporal went to swing the prop.

"Gorkin, if it's the last act of my life, I'll have you court-martialed for deliberate disobedience of orders!" yelled Ryder furiously.

“Contact!” said the stolid Tubby. “Let her go!”

The motor wheezed, popped, roared into thunderous life, and the Bristol swept down the field, lifted and was off.

FOR all his ignoring of Ryder’s threats. Tubby knew he had no right to do what he was doing. Ryder was his superior officer, and Tubby was deliberately disobeying his orders. But he’d made up his mind. He’d get those bombers first; afterwards they could—and probably would—court-martial him.

But he shivered a little as he remembered the tones of Major Brisk’s voice, as heard over the telephone.

Up and up he climbed. Now he was well over the lines again, sweeping the sky with anxious eyes.

What was that? Two specks—yes, planes—and steering for Penthires! Tubby opened his throttle wide, heading for them. They increased in size swiftly. Twin-engined German bombers—Gothas! Tubby’s hand fell on the unfamiliar firing-grip of the forward fixed guns. Maybe he wasn’t so hot with the Lewis, but he’d show ‘em what he could do with a Vickers. At least he had room to move around a little.

The bombers saw him coming; they drew closer together, and as he came within range, their rear-gunners started firing at him. He dived, came zooming up beneath them and fired one long clean burst right into the left-hand Gotha. She staggered under the ripping impact of the bullets. Tubby swung away, came up and around in a long, climbing sweep, and attacked the other Gotha from above, before her rear-gunner could collect his wits enough to swing around his Spandaus.

He saw the pilot crumple in the cockpit, saw another figure scrambling to take the controls. Then the rear gun was flaming vengeful bullets at him, and Tubby flung his Bristol into a spin, fell five hundred feet, pulled out of it and watched the Gotha he had first attacked go whirling down past him, a roaring mass of flames.

Up again Tubby urged his Bristol, her motor laboring and spitting as she tried to absorb the unfamiliar German gas. The Gotha swerved clumsily. Tubby raked her with tracers, climbed above her and fired another burst that wounded

the rear-gunner. The Gotha whipped over and began to fall, jerking this way and that as the one remaining member of her crew fought with the controls. Tubby swooped upon her, guns blazing. One more burst of flaming tracers, and she was done for. Flames wrapped her as she fell.

Tubby heaved a sigh. He’d done the trick—the bombers were accounted for. Now to go home and find out what happened to second lieutenants who defied the orders of a captain and flight leader. Now to face Major Brisk.

“If I got a guardian angel anywheres,” soliloquized Tubby, “I’m sure gonna need his services right now.”

WHEN he landed on his own tarmac, he saw an ambulance standing in front of the squadron office, and he guessed that Squirrel Ryder had already arrived.

As he approached the office, he was sure of it. The shrill tones of the crotchety little pilot could be heard all too plainly through the open door.

“He took off anyhow, orders or no orders. Wait till I see the major!”

Tubby walked in.

Ryder, propped up on a stretcher, was there; so were the adjutant, half a dozen pilots, and a couple of M.P.’s with the two German prisoners.

To the German sergeant Tubby nodded his acknowledgments. “Got the Gothas,” he announced. “Both of ‘em.”

“I’ll say you did, boy,” the adjutant put in, “About six infantry outfits have phoned in confirmation already.”

“Makes no difference,” howled Ryder. “You disobeyed my orders and I’ll hang you for it.”

“The major’s in there,” the adjutant said, nodding toward the door in the flimsy partition which shut off the C.O.’s private office from the orderly room. “He’ll be out in a minute.”

The adjutant grinned as he spoke. Tubby saw nothing amusing.

“Yeh! And then we’ll see about this tub o’ lard,” announced Ryder loudly. “We’ll see whether a little bull luck will protect him. It all goes to prove what I’ve always said—a guy that’s got so little self-respect as to let himself run to fat has no business in the Army, let alone the Air Service. Can’t depend on ‘em for an instant.”

The door of the private office opened suddenly.

Framed—or rather, wedged—in the opening stood an officer wearing the gold leaves of a major on his shoulder straps, and Air Service insignia on his collar.

Tubby gaped at him. He was fat—fatter than Tubby had ever thought of being. He was, in fact, the fattest officer Tubby had ever seen in uniform.

“That will be about all, Captain Ryder!” said the well remembered sharp voice of Major Brisk. “I don’t pretend to be a flyer, but, by God, I know how to run a squadron, and you’ll find out when you come back from the hospital. I’ll try to find you enough to do to keep you from any danger of running to fat.”

There was an instant of silence. Ryder sat with his mouth open, unable to utter a sound. Then the major turned to Tubby.

“As for you, Lieutenant Gorkin, I consider that you displayed commendable initiative and sound judgment in disregarding the orders of Captain Ryder. There are times when every officer is faced with such an alternative. Your success has justified your conduct. The adjutant tells me you wish to become a pilot?”

“Ye-yes, sir,” gasped the astounded Tubby.

“Very well, adjutant, you will prepare at once, for my signature, a recommendation for this officer to be transferred to the Pursuit School at Issoudun. If they say he’s overweight, I’ll take up the matter personally with the chief of Air Service. Any pilot that can get two Gothas in two minutes is efficient enough for all practical purposes.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Tubby.

“No thanks due. You’ve earned it. That’s all.” The major turned back into his office, slamming the door behind him.

“I told you us fat guys oughta stick together!” spoke up the German sergeant.

Tubby grinned at him—then suddenly reached for the telephone. “Gimme the mess sergeant,” he ordered. “Hey, sarge, this is Lieutenant Gorkin. You got any o’ those creamed potatoes left you had for lunch? Yeh? Well, I didn’t get time to eat right. Warm me up some, will ya? And sarge, how about a big hunk o’ pie? Swell! I’ll be right over.”