

Flight Deck Fury

A “Buzz” Benson Adventure by Arch Whitehouse

What happens when men who must obey are commanded to do the absolutely impossible? To utter oblivion went the three crack sky fighting squadrons which faced that dilemma. And when Buzz Benson roared forth in a Navy Northrop to pierce that sinister veil, his headsets rang with—the same command!

REAR ADMIRAL BATES, senior officer of the 6th Pacific Battle Squadron, listened intently as he sat at his massive desk for the sound of an aircraft motor. He had been listening thus for what seemed hours with no reward for his vigilance and the San Diego station had been trembling with expectancy.

“Where is he, damn the man?” snorted the Admiral for the fifteenth time. “He started an hour ago!”

The table was piled with telegrams, memos, and scrawled charts, and a young Flag-Lieutenant busied himself with a code book as he attempted to fathom the mysterious scourge that had struck the service.

“Anything new, Fields?” the Admiral barked.

“No, sir! Not a trace of them anywhere. Three Patrol squadrons have returned from an extensive search of the plotted area, but no sign of any of the missing planes has been found.”

“Twenty-seven planes take off on routine tactics—three complete units—and not one plane returns,” the Admiral blurted at the ceiling. “Not one is found, not even a wing—not even a splotch of oil. Naval Aviation, bah!”

“Sorry, sir! But this is more than an ordinary incident,” the young Flag-Lieutenant replied. “Planes don’t just disappear like that.”

“Oh, they don’t? Well where the devil are they? Answer me that, Fields! They carried fuel for approximately four hours—probably less. But more than thirty-six hours have passed. Am I a Base Commander, Fields, or am I the man who sweeps up?”

The Admiral was very angry.

“You forget, sir,” young Fields broke in, “that the radio man aboard the Memphis reported picking up a message from the carrier Ranger ordering the three fighting squadrons to report to her deck.”

“Forget?” thundered Bates. “What do you mean, forget? How could I forget it? Where is the Ranger, Fields?”

“Doing night speed tests off Newport News, sir,” young Fields answered faintly.

“Right! More than three thousand miles away! And what did I say the fuel time of those fighters was?”

“About four hours, sir.”

“So you want me to believe that? Oh, hell! Where the devil is that man Benson?”

“Left the Northrop field at Ingleside exactly an hour ago, sir.”

“And the new Northrop fighter does what?”

“Two hundred and sixty top, sir. She cruises at about 210 and has a terminal velocity of 450,” rattled on the young Flag-Lieutenant in answer to his superior.

“And he can’t cover about 120 miles in an hour? Ye gods for the old 30-knot destroyer days! Something happens to everything in this damn Navy! Particularly where flying machines come into it. Terminal velocity of 450, bah! I hope he hits the water that hard. Ought to wake him up a bit!”

WHILE the Admiral sweated and fumed, Billy “Buzz” Benson, aviation reporter and undercover man for the Secret Service, was thundering along in a new Northrop XFT-1 fighter that was zipping out 200 at less than three-quarter throttle. The 750 h.p. “Twin-Wasp” was new and he did not wish to burn it out. He was heading southeast toward San Diego at the command of Rear Admiral Bates.

Buzz had expected that call. He’d seen the sketchy newspaper reports on the strange disappearance; he sensed that he would be dragged into it somehow. But for the life of him, he could not make head nor tail of any of it.

Three fighting units on a routine show completely disappearing. It made no sense. But down inside him, Buzz feared that something unusually menacing was behind it all. A premonition told him that if the power that had completely blotted out all trace of twenty-seven fighters was not destroyed—destroyed quickly—the whole Pacific Fleet stood a grand chance of being completely wiped out.

He pondered on the whole situation as he tried out the various gadgets and instruments on the new fighter. There were two Browning guns, one slinging 30-cal. lead and the other bored for heavy 50-cal. ammunition. The equipment included an inflatable life raft, deck arresting gear, a full set of navigating instruments, and a two-way radio. He was enjoying the thrill of the ship when suddenly his eye caught a formation of single-seat fighters diving down from the clouds.

“Hello!” he said to himself. “What’s this? Those are Navy Grummans. Must be on exercises.”

Then he sat spell-bound as the nine fighters tightened their formation and hurtled for him spitting lead from every machine gun!

Buzz swerved, then took the only move left. He roared smack into them, forced them to split up. As he shot inside the first Vee, he caught their squadron markings.

“Good lord! They’re from Fighting Squadron Nine! That’s one of the units supposed to be missing. What the hell is the idea?”

He tore through the second Vee, looked at the sides of the fuselages again. He was certain now. There were the markings—9-F-6, 9-F-7, and 9-F-8.

But the first Vee of Grummans had swerved around to the left and had reformed. Buzz charged into the rear triangle of death and bashed through setting his gun gear with one hand as he again glanced at the squadron numbers.

He waved at the leader of the third step—and got a splash of lead for his trouble. Then he twisted, got into a safe position in the middle of them, and stared across at the men in the cockpits.

Every man wore a strange black helmet of a design Buzz had never seen before!

He held his position, glanced about. The leader of the original three was slamming across at an acute angle, trying to pick him off. Then, for the first time, Buzz noticed that this individual wore

an ordinary brown leather helmet and regulation goggles.

They all broke up, formed a fighting circle, and tried to get a clean shot at him. Buzz huddled near two Grummans, held them off without firing a shot. But he realized that this sort of thing could not go on for long.

“Terminal velocity, 450,” he repeated, remembering the instructions the chief test pilot at Ingleside had given him. Buzz knew he’d need it. His stick went forward and the throttle followed. The Northrop nosed down almost over the vertical and Buzz let her have it. The needle of his air-speed indicator crawled well past the 350 mark. He shut his eyes.

His head swam, his brain throbbed. The blood seemed to be trying to burst through the veins about his temples. Still Buzz counted and hung on. The pressure was beginning to ram him so hard into his seat, his backbone threatened to collapse.

At last he gingerly got his hand across to the throttle and eased back. The stick seemed to be frozen fast but he managed to overcome the great pressure and get it toward him. Every ounce of strength he had was required, and as the Northrop came out the blood drained out of his head and as a result he went blind.

More by instinct and feel, now, he flew on, fighting to overcome the force of the dive. His eyes responded slowly at first and the instruments on the board seemed to be upside down. He squinted, gulped in his breath, and stared again. He was racing along at breakneck pace now, not ten feet off the water of the Gulf of Catalina. He swung over hard and tore inland, peering back to see if the Grummans had followed him.

They were nowhere to be found.

Completely exhausted Buzz eased back on the throttle and let her ramble at about 175 until he picked out Oceanside. Then he steadied himself, checked his controls, turned down the 101 Highway, and clipped along for San Diego.

He tried to figure it all out, but somehow his ideas would not jell. He knew he had seen the machines of Fighting Squadron Nine and that they had ruthlessly attacked him. But it didn’t make sense.

ADMIRAL BATES received the weary Benson most cordially and after a once-over by the base medical officer, a light but sustaining

meal was served him in the Admiral's quarters while he explained what had happened.

"But," the Admiral remonstrated, "how could that be? Those machines only had fuel for about four hours and they left more than thirty-six hours ago."

"Is there a carrier anywhere in these waters at the present time?" Buzz asked, knowing full well how foolish it sounded.

"Sure there is," Admiral Bates replied. "The Saratoga has been working with the Pacific Fleet for several weeks. But we have been in touch with Captain Hastings and they haven't seen anything of the missing planes."

"Tell him about that radio message, sir," young Fields interposed.

"Oh that, bah! One of the radio men on the Memphis reported picking up a message signed by the skipper of the Ranger—that's the new aircraft carrier, you know. It was something about ordering those three fighting squadrons to report to the Ranger's deck."

"What does the skipper of the Ranger say to that?" asked Buzz.

"Nothing. You see the Ranger is off Newport News on night speed maneuvers."

"Wait a minute!" snapped Buzz. "Where were these three fighting units from?"

"Nine and Twelve were from the Saratoga. Squadron Eight was from the Santiago Base. Why?"

"Well, sir," Buzz went on. "Those pilots couldn't have made a mistake, could they? I mean, the Saratoga could not be mistaken for the Ranger, presuming that the Ranger was in this area?"

"Hardly. You see, the Ranger has but a small island control tower and her smoke is carried off through small, tilting funnels set low along the sides of the flight deck. The Saratoga has her funnels amidships and they form part of the control tower island on the starboard side."

"You're sure the Ranger is off Newport News?"

"Positive! We checked her."

"Well, sir," continued Buzz, "presuming that the men flying these Navy ships were suddenly ordered to report to the deck of the Ranger at such and such a point, would their discipline be such as to respond to that order, even though they were certain that the Ranger was not in these waters?"

Admiral Bates frowned, tugged at his mustache. Then he jerked around to the Flag-Lieutenant: "Tell me, Fields. What would you do in a case like that? You're a young Navy man."

"Well, sir. I think I'd obey at least to the point of looking for the Ranger at the point designated, and if I found her there, I'd land. After all, things like that have happened in the Navy. I mean, ships have turned up at the most unexpected places."

"Um . . . I see your point, Fields. Yes, I suppose a good sailor never questions an order."

"All right," broke in Benson. "Then it is evident that these men received such an order and obeyed it. That means that there is such a ship in these waters—or at least a ship that looks like the Ranger."

"But the Ranger is the only ship of that type in the Navy," Admiral Bates remonstrated.

"Ah, yes, sir. In our Navy. But let's look into Jane's Fighting Ships."

The Flag-Lieutenant brought the big volume over and Buzz flipped the pages. After a lengthy examination of the aircraft carriers of the naval powers, he suddenly stopped, placed his finger on a page near the middle of the book.

"Get it? Three tilting funnels on each side. It's a trifle smaller in length and tonnage, but in general lines they're so much alike it's not funny. A fake control tower here where they have a bipod mast, and there you are."

Admiral Bates went white. His fingers clenched.

"But my men know the silhouettes of all carriers. They would never make such a mistake as that?"

"No? Well, a mistake has been made somewhere. And if I know airmen going down for a landing, they have more to think about when they are heading for a deck than minor details of silhouette. Besides, how many of your men have actually seen the Ranger? She's been in Atlantic waters only, so far. All they have seen of her are photographs."

"I agree. But somehow, Benson," the Admiral floundered, "it does not seem reasonable." He glared at that tell-tale illustration in *Fighting Ships* with all the hatred of a man who knows treachery when he sees it.

"What's the time?" asked Buzz.

"Nearly noon," the Flag-Lieutenant replied.

"Okay. Those Grumman's went back to that phoney carrier. She's somewhere within two

hours of where I met them, west of Oceanside. I'm going out to find her. And now, where's the Saratoga?"

The Flag-Lieutenant pointed to large map on the wall. It was dotted with colored pins. "That's the 'Sarah'," right there," he smiled.

The pin was stuck in at a point about fifty miles from San Diego and about twenty miles south of the southern tip of San Clemente Island.

"I can make that in less than half an hour, but I won't get there, if I know what I think I know," Buzz grinned. "Look here. I'll leave at 2 o'clock. Advise every vessel in the Battle Fleet and tell the deck officer of the Saratoga to look out for me. Straight message, no code stuff, understand?"

The Admiral nodded, but he was plainly puzzled.

THE gleaming Northrop was refueled on the dot of two. Her holes had been plugged and every cable and control checked.

"Don't worry, sir," Buzz explained to the Admiral as he climbed in, "if you don't hear from me right away. I figure I'll see some fun within an hour or so. But have every vessel and plane standing by for at least twelve hours. I'll call if it turns out that I need them."

The Northrop raced away into the afternoon sky and Buzz climbed her for the upper reaches long before he left the coastline. Before him he had a chart of the area and a check-mark showed where the Saratoga lay. But he made no real move to head in that direction. He cut farther to the southwest and listened while the station operators flashed out his take-off report.

"It's a gamble," he muttered, checking his set again and listening as he climbed. "They might figure I can out-dive them and try another gag. I hope they do."

And then his call letter began thumping into his ear-phones.

"Calling Benson off San Diego. . . . Calling Benson off San Diego," the message came. "Admiral Bates' office calling Benson. Come in, Benson!"

Buzz smiled. The call did not contain the code signal "Hastings."

He picked up the hand mike and answered: "Benson calling San Diego. Okay, San Diego—Go ahead."

"Plans changed, Benson," came the reply. "Saratoga has changed station and is out of range.

Make contact instead with Ranger joining Pacific Fleet at 30:10 N. by 117:40 W., or approximately 75 miles north of Guadalupe. Repeat, please."

"Okay, San Diego. Join and make contact with Ranger at 30:10 N. by 117:40 W., approximately 75 miles north of Guadalupe. Thanks."

"All right, Benson. The Admiral's compliments and he hopes you contact Lieutenant Hastings. Signing off!"

Buzz leaped in his seat at the name "Hastings." That was the code letter they had decided on. Then that was from San Diego—from Admiral Bates' office. What the deuce did that mean? Was the Ranger really in that area, after all?

"That clouds it completely," Buzz mumbled. "I figured someone would order me to land on a Ranger—but not the Admiral. What a Navy! I thought the Ranger was off Newport News."

ACROSS the turquoise Pacific a gleaming aircraft carrier sped north, a white "bone in her teeth." Ten minutes before, she had been an exact replica of one of the Sterling Line cruise ships with strings of colored pennants fluttering from her masts. But on a signal from the bridge the two silver and black funnels had dropped away below decks, and her superstructure, a false framework of light steel and canvas cunningly painted, had folded flat and slid over metal rollers to open slits arranged along the scuppers. The bridge itself swung around on its port base and now assumed the outline of an island control tower.

The change had taken less than three minutes—three minutes of skilled scene shifting carried out by a disciplined crew, every man of which had his name on a "wanted" list somewhere in the world. Every man a skilled artisan in his line.

As the bridge swung around, five men moved out of the small, but comprehensive, chart house and took their posts along the rail of the elevated control platform.

The tall British-looking man in the trim Navy type uniform stared out from under his peaked cap. Three years before he had been drummed out of the Royal Navy because of a collision in the Mediterranean that had resulted in the loss of a British submarine. Aboard the pirate carrier he was known as "Crunch" Carrisbrooke. He spoke in clipped speech to the small deformed man at his side whose claw-like fingers clutched at the painted rail of the control platform. The little

hunchback was Prof. Franz Marben, noted German chemist and metallurgist. He had betrayed a trust with Krupps by selling a bullet-proof steel formula he had devised to a hostile foreign nation that sought it.

The short wiry man at the platform telephone was Pierre Gibbard. Less than a year before, Gibbard had escaped from Devil's Island. No one knew or inquired about his past. The fact that he was a skilled electrician and a gunnery officer was all that mattered.

The tall slender man leaning against the outside of the chart room had a long thin face, deeply scarred, revoltingly sinister. There were many on board who declared that this man—Ivan Noulamin—was the most powerful figure in the group, but that was because they did not really know Ghazni Kabul, the giant Mongol who stood at his post on the control platform, a veritable god. Ghazni Kabul was one of the long line spawned by the great Jenghiz Khan, historic raider, pirate, and killer.

"He should be here now," Carrisbrooke frowned, fingering the focusing wheel of his binoculars.

"The man is too smart, Carrisbrooke," Pierre Gibbard muttered, slamming the ear-piece back on its hook and closing the water-tight door.

Noulamin closed his eyes, pressed his long fore-fingers to his temples. "He will come," he said in a monotone. Ghazni Kabul strode along the platform and spat. "Yes, he will come. The spawn of a pole-cat!"

"I shan't be easy until he does," Crunch Carrisbrooke muttered, raising his glasses. "That blighter spells trouble in any language."

"He is coming," clacked Franz Marben, pointing up to the peak where a seaman sat with a microphone. "See, Wetzel has caught him."

"All right," barked Carrisbrook. "Clear deck for landing. Raise forward slat-shield!" The deck crew took their positions, signal pennants fluttered up the stub mast, and Carrisbrooke took station at the signal panel mounted at the front of the control tower.

"Landing officer take post!" he ordered.

Out of the north a silver, low-wing monoplane glided down and S-turned for position while the carrier eased around so that she was heading into the wind at about 25 knots. The landing crew huddled along the retaining net. Then a spurt of steam jetted out of a pipe in the deck and

Carrisbrooke barked orders until it streamed back parallel with the black guide line that split the deck.

They watched with avid eyes the movement of the Northrop as it circled, then nosed around for the lip of the landing deck. The Flight Officer raised his guide flags, the pilot brought her skillfully into the wind, steadied her, and then let his arrester gear drop out of the tail cone to take up the check strips.

Buzz shut off the motor, drew back the sliding cowl, and raised himself up to salute the tower from which fluttered a Rear Admiral's flag. The salute was not completed for Buzz Benson found himself staring at two blue-black Bren guns held by Ghazni Kabul and Pierre Gibbard.

"Thank you, Mr. Benson," called Crunch Carrisbrooke. "That will be all. Will you please come direct to the chart room?"

There was nothing to do but obey, and even before the Northrop had completely slipped away, Buzz saw the control tower swing around again into its forward position. The folding sides of the false superstructure creaked up out of the slots and blocked in the deck. The two funnels came up from nowhere, telescopic masts were hoisted at a rakish angle, and the cruise pennants again fluttered to the breeze.

Benson watched it all, interested and not a little amused. He knew now why this carrier had been able to move about in the Pacific without hindrance.

"This way, Benson," Carrisbrooke ordered from the top of the bridge companionway.

Buzz went up, smiled at the men who frowned at him over the muzzles of the guns. "Put that hardware away," he grinned. "I've nothing more deadly on me than a little change and a pocket manicure clipper."

But he was covered cold all the way into the chart room. The wheelman glared at him over the binnacle with a lone watery eye. Carrisbrooke took his position on the outer wing as bridge officer.

The chart room was compact and fitted with every device known to navigation. They led him through a doorway into what turned out to be the Captain's cabin.

"Sit down, Benson," the little hunchback ordered in a guttural tone. "Take that junk off. You won't need it again, unless."

"Unless what?"

"We'll have a long talk first and then you can decide," Gibbard growled.

"A pretty smart outfit you have here," Buzz commented sitting down in a comfortable chair. "The Navy would like to look this thing over. It has real possibilities."

"Shut up! We'll do the talking," the little German barked.

Buzz stared at the big Mongol, then turned his attention on Noulamin. He found a strange fascination in the man's eyes, struggled to keep from trying to fathom the hidden mystery that lay behind them.

"What was the idea of trying to get on board this vessel, Benson?" Marben demanded. "You were heading here without our slipping that 'Hastings' tip-off into our message."

"Cut the gagging!" replied Buzz. "What have you done with those Fighting Squadron pilots? Say, you must have got that 'Hastings' tip from Fields in San Diego. I'll put the screws down on him."

"We won't waste any time with you, wise guy!" Marben snapped. "Come on, Ivan. We'll show him what he's up against."

The big Mongol shoved Buzz out of a door with a black gun in his ribs and they went out on a small open deck sheltered by portions of the false superstructure. Then they came to a metal door which was yanked open by Gibbard, who stood aside and let Benson through.

They went down another narrow companionway and reached what Buzz sensed was the "Ready Room" of the carrier. He walked in puzzled at the strange air of stillness that pervaded the quarters.

"There's your pilots, Benson," cackled Marben. "What do you think of them?"

BUZZ glanced in, saw several rows of men sitting bolt upright and staring ahead with eyes that apparently saw nothing. They were in the typical undress garb of Navy flying men. Some had slacks, others wore rough denim overall trousers and heavy sweaters. But one and all, they wore those strange black helmets that Buzz had noticed on the pilots of the Grumman that had attacked him that morning.

"Attention!" barked Marben.

The pilots shot to an erect position like automatic men. But the expression, a dumb dog-like expression, did not change.

"Twirl your mustaches!" Marben snapped.

One and all they flipped their right hands up and went through the movements of tipping the waxed ends of mustaches. The effect was startling, for only three of the men that Buzz could see had moustaches.

"What the hell is the idea?" demanded Benson.

"Stand at ease. You may all whistle!" Marben snapped to the pathetic assembly.

They relaxed, folded their hands behind their backs, and opened an insane chorus of tuneless whistling. It was awe-inspiring, yet pathetically ridiculous. Buzz could not take his eyes from those strange black helmets. Here were twenty-seven skilled pilots of the U.S. Navy obeying the ridiculous orders of a small but cunning hunchback. He even recognized one or two of the men.

Buzz turned on Marben, but the big Mongol jabbed him in the ribs with the black gun.

"You must move with more care, Benson," he warned.

The insane whistling went on.

"What have you done to those poor devils?" Buzz cried, glaring at the little German. Then he found himself switching his gaze across to Noulamin, the Russian with the strange penetrating eyes.

"That's all!" snapped Marben. "You may sit down now."

The whistling ceased and the pilots seated themselves like strange dolls that moved by hidden clockwork.

"Seen enough?" Marben asked with a leer. "We'll go back to the bridge now and talk—talk what you call *turkey*."

"How would you like to lead those men, Benson?" Marben asked when they got back to the cabin behind the chart room. "We can fix you up like that in no time, you know."

"We can even make you lead them on any sort of a show we desire," Gibbard added. "They'll follow their leader to the death—even as they would were they in their right minds. It's automatic with them now, thanks to the splendid training and discipline they have absorbed."

"That's the most damnable thing I have ever seen!" stormed Buzz.

"It works, too," Marben added. "You saw them this morning, working out on you when Carrisbrooke led them. Only for the fact that that Northrop could outdive them, you would have

been feeding the fish by now. As it is, we realize we would have made a grave mistake. We believe we can use you.”

“How? What can I do that would fit in with this pirate outfit?”

“Well, we have all the fighting single-seaters we want,” Marben went on. “Now, to complete our work, we require a few torpedo-carriers. A dozen or so complete with pilots and observers.”

Benson’s brain raced at top speed. “Where do I come in?” he asked.

“You go back and induce Admiral Bates to allow you to lead a formation of twenty or thirty Martin torpedo carriers, presumably to destroy this ship. Understand?”

“But instead, I give them a false order to land aboard this vessel and you—you take them over?”

“You’re getting the idea, Benson.”

“What do I get out of this?”

“The Five Falcons—that is the name of our syndicate—realize that we need an American—for obvious reasons. You are just the man we require, Benson. We have a big job on our hands, but when it is done you will have a position in the new Scarlet Empire, a position that no white man today enjoys.”

“The Scarlet Empire?” Buzz frowned.

“That’s what we are aiming for. If all goes well, we should complete our plans within eighteen months. By that time we can obtain complete dominance of the world by overcoming the five major powers,” Marben went on.

“Very interesting? What’s your first move?”

“The destruction of the greater part of the American Navy and the capture of all naval bases in the Pacific. With the loss of naval strength, we automatically win the dominance of the air. All trade routes will be at our mercy and we can dictate our own terms and place our own men in the chief government positions of the present great powers.”

“I think you’re all crazy!” snorted Buzz.

“Of course you do. They all will, but that belief happens to be one of our greatest weapons. As long as they believe us crazy, they will not take us seriously—until it is too late. Every great uprising of this kind was once considered crazy. Take your own American Revolution, for instance. Who believed that a minor colonial uprising would result in the vast power that is now the United States?”

“I still think you’re crazy!”

“You’re crazy if you don’t join us. How would you like to become a dictator—the Emperor of North America, Benson?”

“I wouldn’t take the job as a gift!”

“You’d rather become one of those poor devils down there? It will only take a few minutes, you know. We can make you stand to attention, salute, roll over, and whistle our tune.”

And now Buzz caught himself again staring at the eyes that blazed from the face of Ivan Noulamin. A strange fear crept into his heart and he felt the muscles of his stomach constrict. He forced himself to turn away.

“Somewhere . . . somewhere hidden away in various cities of the world, Benson,” Marben went on, “we have one hundred thousand men—picked men ready to move in and take over the chief governments of the earth. You can be one of the greatest men of the era—or you can become a sniveling moron, sentenced to obey our orders to the death. What’s the answer?”

“To hell with you all!” raged Buzz. “You can’t frighten me into an insane plan like that.”

Marben got up, gave Ghazni Kabul a knowing look. They both nodded.

“All right, Benson. You get until midnight to make your decision. That’s all.”

They tramped him away down the companionway, locked him in a small compartment. The door clanged behind him and Buzz Benson was left to ponder his plight.

BUZZ lost track of time mulling over the strange power of the man with the penetrating eyes. He tried to figure out the course they were taking so that he would have some idea where they were. The pirate carrier was plunging on at top speed.

The cell in which they had thrust Benson was a small, steel-sided room on the starboard side of the carrier, apparently a few feet above the waterline. He had a metal bed that folded up against the wall when not in use, so he made himself comfortable on a thick layer of warm blankets.

After what seemed hours, a rattle came at the door and a Navy man brought in a tray of food. Two guards with heavy side-arms came in with the mess orderly, lit a dusty electric bulb, and leaned against the door while Buzz settled back and made the most of the nourishment. No one spoke. Everything was studiously efficient.

“Which way are we heading?” asked Buzz, in an effort to start a conversation.

“North,” the tall dark sailor said with a grin.

“South,” added the other, with a knowing wink.

“Oh, I get it. We’re going west, eh?” prodded Buzz.

“Yeah. Toward Alaska. Nice and hot up there.”

“Thanks. You’re a big help. Hate to bother you with items, like this,” Buzz went on, “but I’m thinking of giving those guys up there on the bridge a warm evening. Of course, if we’re going to Alaska—”

“Shut up, punk. You only got a short time to sit and gab. After that, they’ll put Old Gimlet-Eye Noulamin on you and then they tighten the screws.”

“Shut up, Bingo!” the small tar growled.

Buzz tried to slip the knife from his plate and get it out of sight under a blanket, but the big sailor caught him and retrieved it.

“We want that cutlery,” he cracked, “you’d only go and hurt yourself playing with things like that.”

Buzz grinned, sat staring about the cabin without remonstrating. He saw that many important pipes, conduits, and lead-covered cables that were evidently part of the great control system of the ship, ran along his walls. That, at least, gave him an idea and he hurried with his meal and got his guards out of the room.

Then he fumbled in his pocket, brought out a small nail-clipper they had forgotten to take from him. He folded the blankets carefully and climbed up so that he could feel one of the heavy lead-covered cables.

Half an hour later the whole electric system of the ship suddenly went out of order.

Buzz sat back, listened to the scurrying about of heavy boots and the clatter of officious voices. Men ran up and down the companionways. Machinery clanked, chains rattled, and manual equipment went into action.

Then there was a rattling at his door and finally it opened. Ghazni Kabul, carrying a lantern, charged in screaming. Behind him was Noulamin and Gibbard.

“You swine! Did you tamper with anything in here?” they demanded in one breath.

“What are you talking about?” replied Buzz with feigned amazement. “It’s dark in here. Why, what happened?”

“Bring him up forward,” Noulamin snarled. “I’ll work out on him. Get a helmet.”

Up the dark companionways they went, shoving Buzz ahead of them.

Dim lanterns were swinging idly from gimbals. More chains clanked. It was evident that something radically wrong had happened.

“I don’t know whether he did it, or one of the others who may have come out of it,” Noulamin growled to Gibbard.

“They’re not supposed to come out, are they?” Gibbard demanded.

Marben shuffled off. “I’ll go down and look them over. Bring a lantern, you.”

In the cabin behind the chart room they shoved Buzz rudely into a chair. Then the Russian leaned toward him with a menacing leer.

“Now then, Benson,” he opened. “What did you do down there?”

“Nothing. What could I do? I was in darkness.”

Noulamin swung a heavy punch at Benson’s head, knocked him over backward. Buzz sprang up, caught Noulamin with an uppercut before the big Mongol could floor him again. The Russian hit with a heavy thud against the wall and Gibbard helped him up.

“Go on. Fix him up, Ivan,” the French crook snarled.

Ghazni Kabul yanked Buzz back into the chair, then reached over to a sea-chest and took out one of the strange helmets. Buzz caught a close glance at it, saw that two screw lugs were fitted into a plate near the temples and another protruded low in the back where it would meet the base of the skull.

He turned back, saw Noulamin staring into his eyes. The Russian was making hypnotic passes at him and muttering: “Come on Benson . . . Come on Benson . . . we want to know . . . what you did to that cable. Come on Benson . . . Come on . . .”

He spoke slowly, carefully. Buzz realized what was happening to him. He tried to fight it off, but they held his shoulders. He had to fight off the power of this fiend. He tried to close his eyes, but somehow the lids would not work. He struggled again, but turn and twist as he might, he could not get away from those two needle-point eyes.

“Come on, Benson,” the man cooed to him softly. His long fingers stroked Benson’s forehead and seemed to be charged with delicate impulses of soothing vibration. Benson sensed that his brain was constricting and that he was slowly but

surely coming under the amazing influence of the man's hypnotic power.

"Come on, Ben-s-o-n!" Noulamin cooed.

SOMETHING flashed through Benson's mind. He knew he must overcome this power—somehow. He tried to close his eyes and think. He remembered somewhere in a story by Kipling—that was it, Kim—something about reciting the multiplication table to fend off hypnotism.

But he couldn't think of a multiplication table.

"What did you do, Benson," Noulamin went on quietly. "Come on now, Benson. What did you do?"

"Er . . . Er . . . nail . . . No! . . . No! . . . Er, clip—No! I won't tell," Buzz struggled and chattered on. He knew he had to get out of there, somehow. A motor burst into a bellow of power somewhere outside.

"Come on, Benson," snarled Noulamin. "Come on . . ."

"The swine has a rare constitution to stick it out like that," he heard Gibbard say. "The others went off easier. Get that helmet ready, Kabul."

"Constitution," muttered Buzz. "Constitution . . . That's it, Constitution . . . We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America . . ."

"Article 1, Section 1:—All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives."

"What the hell is he talking about?" Gibbard snapped.

". . . the House of Representatives shall be composed of members chosen every second year by the people of the several states," Buzz went on in a numb monotone.

Noulamin moved back, puzzled, then fell into a fit of mad rage.

"He's got something. Something that baffles me."

"He's reciting the Constitution of the United States," Gibbard finally caught on.

". . . and the electors in each state shall have the qualifications requisite for electors . . ." Buzz churned on.

"The swine! I'll kill him," Noulamin roared, flinging himself at Benson.

There was a scuffle, a lantern was upset, and they were suddenly in darkness. Buzz leaped to one side, just as a gun flashed. He heard a scream and he knew that Gibbard had been hit. He crawled along the wall, made for the door. The big Mongol tried to block him off, but Buzz crouched and threw himself at the man's knees. Ghazni Kabul went down and his gun went off again, this time through the ceiling. Buzz leaped clear as he fell.

Next he vaulted the railing, dropped to the deck, and for the first time realized that it was again cleared for flight. He saw his Northrop trembling on the deck and there was someone in the cockpit evidently preparing to take off. Buzz hugged the control tower wall, then suddenly darted into the open just as the fighter began to move down the deck. He had to take a chance.

Hurling himself across the moving Northrop's fuselage he hung on. Shots rang out around him and the pilot turned and saw him, but it was too late to halt the ship now. It was too near the lip of the deck, so the pilot gave her the gun and the Northrop leaped away.

Buzz hung on for dear life as the pilot tried to shake him off. He braced his foot against the stub radio mast, hung on to the open pit cowling. The pilot, handicapped in his tight quarters, could do nothing. He had climbed clear and was scrambling for more altitude and now Buzz realized that he was out to toss him off in a wild dive or a loop.

Benson snatched down, grabbed the man's helmet. The Northrop skated all over the sky. Buzz ripped the man's goggles away, then snatched at his eyes. It was life or death now and the two were fighting like tigers.

The man rose in his cockpit, tried to hold Benson's arm. He was half blinded by now. Then Buzz switched suddenly to his throat. For what seemed hours, he hung on to the man's windpipe and clutched madly. The Northrop danced, swayed, across the sky. Then Buzz got his arm under the man's chin. He gave a quick jerk and sensed a cruel snap. The man fell limp.

Then began a mad struggle with a dead-weight body. The man had carefully fastened his safety belt, too. Buzz straddled the cockpit, eased the stick around so that the Northrop would continue on in an easy climb. Then he leaned down and

snapped the belt catch. From then on it was easier. He dragged the man clear, rolled him over the edge, and let him hang by his legs. Buzz jerked the rip cord ring and allowed him to flutter down.

Then, as the man fell away, Buzz realized for the first time that the pilot was Carrisbrooke.

"I hope I didn't break his neck, but I'm afraid I did. Anyway, he should float a reasonable length of time in that kapok jacket. They might pick him up eventually," Buzz reflected.

Then, he slipped into the cockpit and looked around for the carrier.

It was nowhere to be seen!

THE full force of the situation struck Benson a breath-taking blow! In the first place he had no idea where he was.

"Judas! That guy might have been taking off for a scouting flight," he reflected. "The tanks are full and I can do about three hours, but that vessel has been steaming full tilt since about 4 o'clock this afternoon. It is now nearly 11:15 p.m. I may be miles from land or a Navy vessel."

Then, he realized that they might send a flight of Grummans up after him piloted by those idiot Navy men.

He decided to call San Diego!

The Northrop was just as he had landed her on the fake carrier deck except for the fact that she had apparently been completely refueled. He felt behind him, thankfully discovered his helmet which he had stowed away. He pulled it over his head, plugged in the telephone jack, and called San Diego.

It seemed hours before he raised the Navy base operator.

"All right, Benson," an operator finally responded. "The Admiral's compliments and will you report, please?"

"Plug the Admiral in on this, please," Buzz pleaded, "and get it straight. I can't waste much time. And have him check Flag-Lieutenant Fields."

"Just a minute. The Admiral is listening now."

"All right," snapped Buzz keeping the Northrop in a wide circle, "but first get a compass bearing on my signals and let me know where I am. Can you work it with the operator at Long Beach?"

"Go ahead. I'll have the second operator check you."

"Thanks. Now get this. I'm somewhere off Guadalupe. The last check point I can give you was 30:10 N. by 117.40 W. But I must be somewhere within seven hours steaming from that point. In what direction, I can't say, for I have been held aboard a foreign aircraft carrier since about 4 o'clock this afternoon."

"The Admiral is listening, Benson. Go ahead."

"The pilots and machines of those three squadrons are aboard that carrier. They are alive but under a hypnotic spell of some sort. I saw them and it is damned serious. Go ahead, check me."

"Okay, Benson. The Admiral wants to know what the carrier is. Go ahead."

"It's apparently a Japanese carrier. Most likely the Amagi which was supposed to have been badly damaged in the Kobe Dockyard fire that followed that last earthquake. This Scarlet Empire syndicate must have bought it up, somehow. But get this—she is fitted like the old Q-ships and looks like a cruise ship of the Sterling Line. She has two fake funnels set behind an open well. The superstructure slides away into slots, and the bridge swings around to the starboard side and becomes a control tower exactly like that carried by the Ranger. Go ahead, Check!"

"The Admiral orders you to find her and stick above until you can direct surface vessels to her, Benson," the San Diego operator replied. "We'll have your position in a minute."

"Check! The only trouble about finding her," Benson explained, "is that I fouled her electric system and she doesn't have a light . . . but wait a minute! I think I can see her. There's a flash from her starboard funnels. She's steaming like hell. She's heading south. Quick! Get me my position!"

"Here it is, Benson. Say, you're miles away—26:15 N. by 117:20 W. That's about 250 miles due west from the Bay of Ballenas off the coast of Southern California. The Admiral thinks they are holing up at Punta Abreojos just off the tip of Ballenas. Check!"

"Got it! But cripes, we're too far south for anyone to help us now, aren't we? It will take hours to get anything in that area, won't it?"

"The Admiral is afraid so but wants you to do something . . . somehow," the operator replied. "What's that?"

"Gunfire!" rasped Buzz. "They're hammering away like hell now. Just spotted me."

“Can you get back here?” the operator asked anxiously.

“Not from here. Well, I might be able to make it, but we’d lose her. Listen, tell the Admiral to chase her from this point south. I’m going back on board and hold them up. There’s twenty-seven Navy pilots aboard that tub and they’re not going to get away with that!”

“The Admiral orders you to return, Benson!”

“Tell the Admiral to go to hell and send assistance fast! So long! And be sure to nail that guy, Fields!”

Buzz flipped the switch, swung around and sought the raider. She was still racing at top speed and her guns were thundering at him from every turret.

“Okay! You set the stage,” Buzz muttered to himself. “I’ll show you something!”

His helmet was uncomfortably tight and he flipped it off. Then he hesitated as he rubbed his temples to smooth the uncomfortable pressure stiffness away. “I wonder,” he mused as he flipped back and forth over the pirate raider. “That guy hypnotized them, then used those helmets—helmets with screw-pieces . . . I wonder.”

He let them fire another burst at him, then he staged a beautiful barney. The Northrop rolled over on its back and struggled to right itself again. Buzz hung in his belt, let her fly upside down over the raider carrier, then hurtled on for several hundred yards. They blazed three more salvos at him and he jerked her over and let her glide on for nearly a quarter of a mile. Then he set her down gently on the water, dragging her tail through the rollers to kill her forward speed.

She flopped in with a thud and began to settle. Buzz climbed up on his seat, released the quick-detachable fairing behind the cockpit, and unshipped the inflatable life raft. He screwed in the carbon dioxide air bottle, twisted the pet-cock. The raft inflated quickly. He slipped the short oars into the canvas loops and let it slide overboard.

In three minutes he was rowing away from a flaming wreck. A match in the right place caught the drain of gasoline from the three-way cock and the machine burned like a winged torch.

Buzz and his life raft disappeared into the wind.

“Now, if you’re as curious as I think you are,” Buzz reflected, “You’ll come up to the windward side and put a boat over, just to make sure.”

He was right. Within fifteen minutes the raider came up and rammed in reverse while a surf-boat was put overside to investigate. Benson allowed the raft to slip back under a friendly breeze until it bobbed gently against the streaked sides of the enemy carrier. Then he clambered up the links of the anchor chain and disappeared through the massive hawse pipe hole. He was again on board.

AN hour later things had settled somewhat aboard the raider and Buzz was able to creep out of the gloomy chain room and make his way through dark corridors toward the sleeping quarters. The vessel was still racing southward at top speed and he realized that he would have to work fast.

He found one of the prisoners’ bunk quarters unguarded and the Navy pilots sound asleep. Only a few points of the vessel seemed to be equipped with lanterns and he was able to slip past two sleepy guards with little trouble. Once he got into the sleeping quarters he was comparatively safe.

He darted from one pilot to another until he found one he knew by name. He had met several of them during his many trips to San Diego and realized that if he could find one who knew him, his task would be made a little less difficult.

At last he found one—Barney Ruttledge, who had worked with him on a former job. He took a good look at him in the dim light, then went to work. First he took a small pocket tool set which he had retrieved from the Northrop when he was unshipping the raft and loosened the set-screws that were fitted into the temple plates of the metal helmets. Thus he was able to remove it and begin rubbing the man’s forehead to bring him consciousness.

“Wake up, Barney,” Buzz whispered. “Wake up, man.”

Ruttledge stirred uneasily, then opened his eyes. He frowned and blinked. Buzz continued to massage him carefully.

“Come on, Barney! Wake up!” Buzz encouraged again. “It’s Benson—Buzz Benson. You remember me, don’t you?”

“Benson? . . . Benson? . . . Sure, I know a guy named Benson.”

Buzz rubbed harder, then slapped the man’s cheeks. He sat up, stared about.

“What happened, Benson?” he asked sleepily.

“Wake up, Barney. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Where are we? Aboard the Ranger?”

“No. Now listen carefully. You guys came down on this tub that was disguised to look like the Ranger—and you were all captured.”

“How did you get here?”

“Don’t ask questions. Just listen,” Buzz answered. “They got you all aboard and then some Russian guy hypnotized you.”

“I remember him, now. A guy with . . . with eyes. Say, he gave me the willies!”

“All right. You got that much straight. Now look here. He mesmerized you and then they kept you in that state by putting on these helmets. Look! See these set-screws? They were tightened so that certain prefrontal lobar pressure was applied at important points of the brain and you just stayed that way and did whatever you were ordered. I once read something about such a case, and the idea has been worked on you.”

“Holy cripes! How long have we been here?”

“Quiet! Take it easy. We’ve got to get the rest of them free of those damned helmets and get them on their feet. We’ve got to get off here somehow.”

“I’m begining to get it, Benson. What do I do?”

“You take one of these wrenches, go around quietly, and get those helmets off while I try to bring them around. Feel all right?”

“Sure. Guess I’ve had a long sleep.”

“All right. Now remember, we’re all on board a pirate carrier and we’ve got to get these guys off and destroy this barge. Understand?”

“I get it. Gimme one of those wrenches.”

Then for half an hour they both worked on the sleeping pilots and got them on their feet. Buzz aroused them to a fighting fury and instructed them how to get the rest up. They all worked silently. Finally they had about fifteen pilots conscious.

“All right, Barney. Take two or three of these guys who seem to be most awake and go in and arouse the others. I’m going to try to break into the magazine and get some guns. I’ll be back soon, but whatever happens play safe and lay low.”

THE damage inflicted on the main electric system by Buzz and his nail clippers would keep the electricians of the pirate carrier busy for hours yet. Buzz smiled as he recalled again how he had cut a circular section out of the all-important lead

cable and then jabbed and cut at the colored strands inside until there was nothing but a fuzz of copper and waxed insulation. Then he had carefully plugged the circular hole up with a nickel from his pocket and covered it all over with dabs of dust from the floor corners.

By now, however, they had rigged up several temporary lines that fed lights through the forward companionways and over the hangar hoists.

There was plenty of activity going on all over the ship and Buzz had to move carefully to get around. Finally he made his way into the Ready Room unobserved and hid between two banks of steel lockers.

A ship’s lantern glimmered on a table and for several minutes he huddled in his hide-out and glanced about carefully. Then he found what he wanted—a framed diagram screwed to the wall on the opposite side of the cabin.

He listened carefully, then darted across the room, grabbing the lantern as he went. He held it before the diagram of the ship, picked out several key points, stowed them away in his mind. Then he turned and found himself face to face with a man in a Navy pea-jacket and peaked cap. He saw the man’s hand slide toward a holster at his hip. Buzz, had to move fast. He swung his lantern with a wicked swish, and his left fist curled in with a resounding crack on the man’s chin.

He went down like a log. In the darkness, Buzz quickly stripped him of his jacket and cap. He pulled the jacket over his own suede leather wind-breaker and rammed the peaked cap onto his head. He quickly relieved the man of his gun and belt, then dragged him across the room and stuffed him in an empty locker. Before he slammed the door shut he bound his hands and gagged him with ripped pieces from the sleeves of his shirt.

“Now for the magazine,” he growled.

He moved about the ship in the half light of the lanterns, avoiding the few electric lights that had been rigged. Finally he found the ship’s magazine. He flipped a match and saw that weapons of all sorts had been piled in careless heaps all over the floor.

“They certainly got a lot of stuff from somewhere,” he observed.

Then he selected a number of automatics, strung them together through the trigger guards with a length of heavy cord, and slung them over each shoulder. From another pile he picked up

two Bren machine guns. Then he started back to the sleeping quarters of the Navy pilots.

No one intercepted him and he found Barney had practically every man sitting up on his bed, slowly coming out of it.

"Here! Distribute these around, Barney," Buzz ordered quietly. "Make the men lie down as though nothing had happened. I'm going back for some more—and the ammunition to go with them."

In another half an hour every man was in the clear, armed to the teeth and anxious to start something.

"Now what?" they demanded.

"You got me," grinned Buzz. "Here we are. Your ships are all fueled in the hold. Now how do we get them out and get off?"

"I knew there was a catch to this, somewhere," one disconsolate Navy man moaned.

"Wait a minute!" snapped Buzz. "Who knows torpedoes?"

"I had plenty of 'em," one tall lean man replied. "What about 'em?"

"Look here," Buzz snapped. "A torpedo weighs more than half a ton, doesn't it?"

Several of the pilots came forward with information and Buzz soon had two complete crews for his job. He explained that the raider carried four sets of 21 inch torpedo tubes.

"Now here's the idea," he went on.

They listened carefully, a little dubious at first, but as Buzz enlarged on his plan and charged them with his own enthusiasm, they gradually warmed up to it. By the time he was through, twenty men were arguing for posts in the various crews.

Buzz and Barney selected the men and one by one they crept out through the darkness and made their way to their assigned posts.

GHAZNI KABUL, the big Mongol, paced the chart room, a black glare shadowing his massive face. Before the chart table, his eyes glued to a set of tide tables, sat Franz Marben, tired, weary, yet fiendishly bitter. Ivan Noulamin stared out of the brass porthole, watched a long silver something dangling from a twisting cable. It fascinated him as he watched it rise high above the level of the bridge deck, then swing over out of vision.

"What's that torpedo being swung over for?" he asked impassively.

"What torpedo?" snarled Marben looking up.

"A torpedo was just hoisted up on the arm of our stub mast. It must be swinging directly over the bridge by this time."

Both Kabul and Marben leaped toward the window, stared out.

"You say it came from below? That's the No. 3 tube chamber down there. Who gave that order?"

Kabul wrenched a phone out of its prongs on the wall. "Give me the No. 3 torpedo room!" he barked.

A door crashed open and they all turned and stared.

Ghazni Kabul vomited a cruel oath and dropped the telephone instrument. Noulamin gasped, then bared his teeth. Marben just spluttered: "Benson!"

The flying reporter covered them all with two big automatics.

"Line up there. Under that telephone," snapped Buzz. "I'll take that gun, Marben."

"Where in the name of God did you come from?" Marben gasped.

"Up your anchor chain. Now get busy. Clear those decks and order those machines up. You, Marben! Take the phone!"

"And suppose I don't?"

"Well, there's a 21-inch torpedo dangling a few feet above the roof of this cabin and it's got about 500 pounds of T.N.T. in the nose. On top of that the fuse is set for direct contact and it's not a nice thing to be playing with."

"I saw it . . . I saw it!" bleated Noulamin, his long thin hands shaking.

"All right, Noulamin. Try and use your stuff on that and see where it gets you. Go ahead, Marben. Clear the decks and order a change of course. We're heading for the north again—into the wind. Get it?"

Kabul fretted, stamped his feet in frustration. Buzz was afraid of him.

Death meant nothing to that swine, and he knew it. He realized that he had to take care of him at once.

"Look here, you yellow pig!" Buzz warned him. "One move out of you and I'll drill you so hard you'll bounce ten feet off that wall. Get it?"

"I die . . . you die!" Kabul screamed leaping forward. "You not get off here alive!"

Buzz pressed one trigger. A bullet caught Kabul in the shoulder, spun him around so hard he crashed face-first into the steel wall of the cabin. He dropped to his knees, tried to get at Benson's

legs with his long arms. There was no use in fooling with this madman. Buzz darted to one side, brought the butt of one gun down on the big Mongol's head with a terrific crash. Kabul grunted, flattened out on his face and lay there quivering.

"There's the story, Marben. Now act nice and put your pirate crew to work, or that winch drum below there will slip and you'll flutter off into dust. Clear that deck and order those machines up."

"Then what?" Marben demanded.

"We simply leave—leave you to your fate, as the saying goes."

"The crew won't obey any such order as that. They'll think it's treachery."

"Don't worry. There's twenty-seven guys down there with hardware who'll see that they do—and for your benefit, Mr. Noulamin," Buzz smirked as he twirled a gun. "Not one of them wears an iron hat. Get it?"

"You . . . you got them out . . . out of the spell?" grasped the sallow faced Russian.

"Yes, I was wise to that game when you tried to screw me into one of those tin toppers. Now get busy. We're beating it."

Marben barked orders into the phone and Buzz listened carefully to make sure the German chemist did not pull anything queer. He felt the bridge swing around, saw that the stub mast derrick still maintained its relative position over the bridge.

The two fake funnels collapsed and camera-shutter fillets closed the circular slits so that the deck was flush again. The superstructure trembled, creaked, then slipped away through the scupper spaces. Buzz watched the amazing transformation through the chart-room window which now looked along the cleared flight deck.

"Lift crew at posts!" Marben ordered. "All single-seat planes on flight-deck for take-offs!"

The amplifiers working off a temporary current cable squawked the orders from the bridge and Buzz saw the lift drop and leave a "T"-shaped gash in the deck. One by one, the Grummans and Boeing F4B4's came up and were trundled to their positions.

"What are your intentions when you leave this ship, Benson?" asked Marben, glaring at Buzz.

"We are leaving you to shift for yourself."

"Of course, you will have to stay with us, won't you?" sneered Noulamin.

"That remains to be seen," grinned Buzz. "There are one or two matters I must take care of below first."

"But there are only twenty-seven planes and you have twenty-seven other men to get off. Who's staying behind—you?"

"Perhaps. I said I have one or two things to take care of," Buzz grinned. "All right, Barney, take the first flight off and stand by!"

Nine Grummans moved out slowly. One by one they raced down the deck and climbed into the sky.

Then nine Boeings eased forward from the rear lift and prepared to leave. Buzz watched the group above slip into tight formation and roar back over the deck.

"All very well for them, Benson," taunted Noulamin. "They can get away all right, but what about you?"

"You're pretty worried about me, aren't you?" laughed Buzz.

"I know you'll never get off," Marben snarled. "I'll see you in hell before I let you go, Benson!"

"Oh, I'll get off, Marben," said Buzz in a maddening tone. "You worry about you getting off."

"But there are only twenty-seven planes," growled Noulamin.

"And there are twenty-seven pilots," added Buzz. "You said all that before."

"Do you think you are going to make us head this vessel back north to be taken by the Sixth Battle Fleet?" demanded Marben in a squeaky voice. He was trying to figure out just what Benson's game was.

"Not me!" Buzz replied. "Not me. You don't suppose I want to be on board when the gunners of the Sixth open up on this barge. They're too good. They won the Pacific trophy again this year, remember."

Noulamin and Marben exchanged glances.

"When these planes leave this deck—you are leaving too?" they asked anxiously.

Buzz did not answer, he leaned over the rail and gave the signal for the second flight to get away. One by one they raced down the deck and hoiked off the lip into the night sky. High above them Barney Ruttledge led the first flight carefully back and forth over the pirate carrier.

The night lights flitting across the sky, the streamers of flame from the exhausts of the Grummans, and the glow from the six stubby

funnels provided an eerie scene. The heavy jawed helmsman crouched over the wheel, watched Buzz with stark hatred in his eyes. He was thinking of that live torpedo that dangled a few feet above the wheelhouse roof. Marben and Noulamin crouched near the rail looking over at the squadron of Boeings as they thundered down the deck and joined the roaring pageant of Grummans above.

“YOU keep this vessel on a true north-east course, bosun!” Buzz warned suddenly, “and we do twenty-eight knots from now.”

“You said north, before,” the helmsman growled letting the spokes slip past his gnarled fingers.

“Sure, but the current changes a trifle about here,” smiled Buzz. “You keep her on a dead north-east course!”

Both Noulamin and Marben tried to fathom the meaning by staring at Benson. That business of currents had them guessing. What the devil did currents have to do with getting single-seaters off a flight deck?

Buzz glanced quickly at the Trident log dial, saw that they were making just over thirty knots. He grabbed the engine-room telegraph handle, called for less speed, and watched the needle drop to 28.

Both Noulamin and Marben eyed him, their hands trembling, their lips drawn tight across their yellow teeth.

“You’ll never get off this craft, alive, Benson!” Noulamin growled, shoving his long thin hands into his sleeves.

But Buzz only strode to the edge of the bridge again and jerked the panel signal cord. The last flight of Grummans began to thunder and move to the center of the flight deck.

Buzz took the signal flag in one hand, held his big automatic with the other, and sent them away. Marben and Noulamin watched anxiously until there was but one left. Then they realized for the first time that there was no pilot in the cockpit.

“So you’re sacrificing one of your men, eh?” sneered Marben. “The great Buzz Benson takes the last plane and leaves one of his men to pay the piper.”

“That’s what you think, Marben. That’s what you would do. But this is the United States Navy, Marben—and you wouldn’t understand.”

“There’s one man still aboard, somewhere!” shrieked the German.

“Stand by that plane!” Buzz ordered over the side to the mechanic who had started the motor.

“Sure. Stand by, so that the great Benson can make his escape,” smirked Marben again.

“Get away from that rail, Marben!” Buzz ordered. “Both of you get over here by the chart-room door. That’s right. Now the first one of you who moves, or even opens his mouth, gets a bullet between his eyes—and that goes for you, bosun! Keep your eyes front, your wheel on that north-east course, and leave the rest to me.”

He went to the wall-panel phone, took down the water-tight receiver. “Give me No. 3 torpedo room,” he barbed into the phone. “Hello! No. 3 Torpedo room? That you, Gammage? Okay. You can pull those two tin fish whenever you like.”

Buzz glanced at his wrist watch, then at the man at the wheel. “All set? Fine! Let her go, Gammage—and beat it. You’re ship’s all set.”

And Buzz hung up the wall phone and steadied himself as two low coughs made the bridge quiver.

Buzz watched the helmsman, then moved across to the glass windscreen. He waited a minute, then called Marben and Noulamin over. They saw two milky-white curves streaking away from the No. 3 Torpedo room directly below them.

“Get it?” Buzz asked casually. “The current had to be right for that.”

“But . . . but what are you firing at?” asked Noulamin.

“I see . . . I see!” Marben wailed. “Look at those streaks. Those torpedoes are set to follow a curved course. They’ll strike us in a minute!”

“Fifty-eight seconds, to be exact,” grinned Buzz. “Our torpedo expert, Lieutenant Gammage, has set the directional vanes so that they will strike this vessel about 640 yards ahead. He’s pretty hot with torpedoes, too. I expect a lot of him.”

There was a bellow of an airplane engine and Buzz ran to the other side of the bridge. He saw Gammage taking off in the lone Grumman. Marben could hardly believe his ears, but his eyes were fixed on that curving white streak that was now turning back toward the raider.

“What are you going to do?” cried Noulamin.

“Stay here until they hit. Your helmsman might get gay with that wheel, and then—”

“Then . . . what?”

“Well, then I would be compelled to let the torpedo that hangs above the bridge drop through the wheel-house—and that would make a mess,” taunted Buzz.

“Here it comes! Here it comes!” cried Noulamin.

Buzz darted to the helmsman, rammed his gun into his back.

“Hold her there! Hold her there!” he ordered.

Buzz turned, watched the twin streaks of milky-white churned sea creep toward them. He moved away slowly, kept his gun on the helmsman.

Both Noulamin and Marben turned and glared at him, fear distorting their features.

“Hold it! Hold it!” Buzz cried. “Don’t make a move!”

Then it came with a thunderous roar!

BER-R-R-R-RONG!

The pirate carrier seemed to leap out of the sea. Noulamin and Marben fell flat on their faces and the helmsman was hurled across the wheelhouse. Buzz clutched the bridge rail, hung on as a sheet of flame cut off all vision for a minute. Then he pocketed his gun, vaulted over the rail, and dropped to the flight deck, running to the black center-line.

He huddled in the smoke and listened. Out of the blackness above came the drone and whine of a plane. Buzz dropped to his knees, crawled across to the bridge base, and waited. Men were shouting, guns roared, but the whine and drone of that plane came through it all.

There was a retch of oleo cases and something silverish came along the deck through the smoke. Buzz saw it, darted across the deck. Someone yelled and two guns barked, but Buzz was clutching the wing-root of a Grumman.

“Go ahead, Ruttledge. I’m aboard,” Buzz screeched.

“Hang on!” the Navy pilot bawled.

“What a swell job Gammage did, eh?” Buzz yelled.

“Thought he’d blow her so small there’d be nothing left to light on,” laughed Ruttledge.

“Let’s go!”

And the roaring Grumman took the bit in her teeth again and raced down the last few dozen feet of flight-deck. Barney nosed her over the lip, eased her up from the grasping rollers, then climbed aloft.

THEY circled closely and took up normal formation. Below, they could see the pirate carrier wallowing in her own wake and settling by the nose. They could see the pirate crew taking to the boats and rafts.

“She won’t ape the Ranger again,” grinned Buzz.

Something was slapping at the fuselage near his head. He looked up and caught a glimpse of Barney’s hand, waving something toward him. He reached for it, saw that it was a message pad. Hanging on with one hand, he read it by the glare of the 700 h.p. Cyclone.

“Carrier Saratoga about hour’s flight away. Can you hang on that long?”

Buzz grinned, nodded back.

“The Sarah will look like the Ritz-Carlton to me,” he muttered, getting a stronger hold on the leading edge of the lower wing.