

# Roaring Motors

Featuring The Three Mosquitoes by Ralph Oppenheim

THE door of the “Three Mosquitoes” bunk burst open with a bang which startled the trio right out of their deep sleep. In the doorway, his figure just revealed by the first furtive gleams of daybreak which came through the window, the C.O. was standing.

“Up fellows! Snap out of it!” he said excitedly. “Up and into your teddy-bears! Quick!”

Dazedly, the three men stirred, in their cots, rolled over, blinked, and tried to piece together their senses. Kirby, the young, impetuous leader of the trio, was the first to sit up and plant his feet on the floor. The lanky Travis, oldest and wisest of the three, was next, but “Shorty” Carn, being stout and of a lazy disposition, was reluctant to surrender the luxurious comfort of bed.

“Come on!” the C.O. urged, and he spoke as one speaks when trying to sober up a drunk. “Get dressed in a hurry. And while you’re dressing, I’ll tell you what’s what!”

Still bewildered by the shock of the thing, the three men reached for their clothes and began to dress mechanically in the darkness. The air was cold and chill, a fact which enabled them to get into their togs with furious speed. The effects of sleep were rapidly leaving them—especially Kirby, whose mind was clearing and who was becoming more and more alert. A feeling of nervous yet keen anticipation gripped the young Mosquito. Something big was doing, that was sure. For only something big could cause the C.O. to come over and rouse the Three Mosquitoes himself. Such things seldom happened. Nor had Kirby ever seen the grizzled old colonel so agitated. He was a hard-boiled veteran, the colonel, and he usually took things pretty coolly.

“Are we going right up, sir?” Kirby asked.

“Immediately!” the C.O. snapped. “Sorry there’s no time for breakfast. Just get out as fast as you can. Hell,” he laughed—a peculiarly harsh and slightly nervous laugh, “it’s about the craziest stunt I’ve ever assigned to anyone, but I have a hunch you fellows can pull it off. You’re the only ones who could. Now,” his voice lowered tensely, “listen, while you dress, and I’ll

give you the details as quickly as I can.” He paused a moment, as if to gather words.

In the stillness the cough of engines rose on the field outside, and the heavy breathing of the men in the cold room. At last the C.O. spoke again, his tone low but his voice still rasping.

“Intelligence has informed me that Number 44, one of our greatest spies, has just fallen into the hands of the Germans while attempting to cross the lines with valuable information. Both intelligence and staff are on pins and needles about it, because they can’t afford to lose this man and, worse yet, they’re afraid the Germans will get the information. 44 won’t talk; he’s tighter than a clam, but he has a paper concealed somewhere on his person, and unless he gets rid of it, the Heinies are sure to find it even if they have to use microscopes or X-rays. However—Hey!” He broke off, glaring at Carn. “Don’t sit there listening to me like a dumb statue! Keep dressing. Hurry!” Obediently, Carn resumed the business of putting on clothes.

“Owing to the excellence of our spy-system,” the C.O. pursued, “our agents have been able to find out just where the Germans have this captured man and where they’re taking him. Thirty miles across the lines is a town called Meures. German intelligence headquarters is there. They intend to convey Number 44 to that town, examine and search him, force him to talk if possible, and then summarily shoot him.” He drew in his breath sharply, glancing at the window.

The light was increasing, growing steadily brighter. “Even now they’re probably leaving with him. Every second counts. Now here’s the course: they take him in a closed staff car; along road 147—you know the route well. The road runs through forests and along the Aisne River, and there are three open stretches near Meures. There’s a chance—a slight chance anyway—that at least one of these open stretches is unguarded.

“The Germans will credit us with too much brains to suspect that we’ll try to pull off the job I have in mind. Of course, if they’ve learned that we’ve found out what they intend to do, they’ll change their plans. Then, too, the information we have may prove to be

false. But, assuming that neither of these conjectures is true, the stunt is possible.” His eyes narrowed. “It’s a tall order, but it can make us, fellows—put us in good with staff and intelligence. It’s a chance to play a really big part in this war.”

THERE was another pause. Swiftly, yet deliberately, Kirby was buttoning up his teddy-bear. Finally he spoke, and his voice was cool.

“I think I get you, sir. You want us to go over to road 147, hang around and watch those open stretches until we spot the car—then make a try to rescue that bird. Right?”

“Exactly,” the C.O. replied. “What do you think about it?”

Shorty Carn smiled faintly. “It’s original, anyway,” he conceded.

“And interesting,” drawled the lanky Travis.

The three were almost ready to go now, attending to the last details of their dress.

“Now if you’ll give us the layout sir,” Kirby began.

“Yes, yes,” snapped the C.O. “This is the scheme. You know that road like a book, and I’ll give you maps also. Two of you will fly your usual pursuit Spads. The third will take a Bristol two-seater which I’ve had brought out. There will be ballast in the rear cockpit on the way over, to be discarded when you take on the passenger. The whole thing’s got to be a quick and daring hold-up.

“You must force that staff car to stop from the air, and then the two-seater must land either on the road or on an adjacent field. The two pursuit ships will keep protecting the Bristol from the air. The spy himself will have the quickness of mind to cooperate in every way. Get him aboard the Bristol somehow and streak back for home.

“I’d like to send more planes, but that would probably spoil it all. The Heinie pilots would only spot them and keep them from carrying out the scheme. Of course,” he added darkly, “if there are enemy planes around, or too many Germans on the ground, you can’t carry it out. But,” his tone grew even harsher, “I’m not going to tell you, as I always have in the past, not to take serious risks. In fact, I want you to spare no efforts, despite any dangers, to snatch that man from the Germans. It’s our only possible chance of getting him back. Is that clear?”

“Couldn’t be clearer,” Kirby said tacitly. “And of course I’m flying that two-seater.”

“What’s that?” Carn asked sharply.

“Now listen here, I’m the one who flies that Bristol,” drawled Travis, insistently. “So that’s that!”

“The hell you say!” Kirby exploded.

He was determined to assume the most daring part of the stunt himself, rather than expose his comrades. For he realized well enough that landing a Bristol thirty miles in Germany was pulling the very whiskers of death.

“I’m telling you—”

The C.O. cut him off with an impatient sigh. “Don’t stand there arguing when time is so precious!” he barked angrily. “I’ll settle this business right off the bat. The first one who gets into that two-seater—which is standing on the tarmac—can fly it. O.K.?”

The reaction was startling. In a flash, all three men leaped towards the doorway, almost knocking the surprised colonel off his feet. At the door they all collided, cursed, grunted, pushed and shoved. Shorty Carn almost got through, but Travis pulled him out by the collar and squirmed forward, only to be yanked out by Kirby, who resorted to football tactics. Tackling his comrades with a mighty lunge, Kirby got through and, followed by the others, rushed down the hall of the barracks as fast as he could.

The noise of the running men aroused other pilots throughout the building. Shouts of: “Dry up, for cripes sake! Let a guy snooze! A little less noise there, you sons! Cut your guns and spin out!” rose from various quarters, but with little effect.

Presently Kirby was dashing out onto the field. The eastern sky behind the camouflaged hangars was just getting pink with the rising sun. The field was misty and gray. A few shadowy planes squatted on the tarmac, and Kirby’s keen eyes at once spotted one a little larger than the rest. The Bristol! Determinedly, Kirby rushed towards it. Travis was close on his heels, for the lanky-legged man could run! Shorty Carn, however, didn’t have much chance. The stout little man was puffing as he plodded stubbornly after his comrades. The only one he was ahead of was the C.O., who was not running, but walking briskly in the rear.

Furiously, Kirby kept running across the field. Suddenly his foot caught on a mound of earth. He tripped, stumbled, fell. Cursing, he sprang to his feet, and saw that Travis was a good twenty yards ahead of him. Kirby ran as he had never run before. Travis was almost up to the plane now, getting nearer and nearer. But then Kirby, redoubling his efforts, commenced to gain. The gap between the two men grew smaller. The plane was now about twenty-five feet from Travis. Summoning all his strength, Kirby hurled himself forward in one final spurt. He gained on Travis, caught up to him and, leaping madly, passed him.

A moment later and he was sitting in the cockpit of the Bristol, winded but serenely content.

Travis was a good sport. He merely shrugged and swore softly, while Carn grinned and said with mock pride: "Well, at least I came in third!"

THE C.O. came up beside the Bristol, and Carn and Travis stood behind him. The engine was already revved up, and the propeller was turning over smoothly. Mechanics bustled about, looking for more work to do.

Kirby fastened his helmet, then examined his instruments. The Bristol was a good ship—better than most two-seaters. In speed and maneuverability it was almost as good as a single-seater. And when flying with pilot and observer, it was, in some ways, even better than a single-seater, because there was a rear, flanking machine gun as well as the two fixed forward guns which were synchronized to shoot between the blades of the whirling propeller. However, as far as Kirby was concerned, the rear gun would be useless: he could not reach it. He would have to regard the ship as a single-seater, at least on the trip over. There were only sandbags in the rear cockpit.

The C.O. was handing him a roll-map. "You may need it," the colonel shouted above the roar of the engine. His face looked just a little haggard, and the lines in it seemed deeper. "Now is everything straight?"

"Everything's O.K., sir!" Kirby reassured him.

"Well, get right up then!" Kirby thought the man's harsh voice shook just a trifle. "Good luck!"

"Right!" said Kirby, and then turned to his comrades. "You guys can catch up to me and we'll fly usual formation." He pulled down his goggles. "Let's go!" He waved an arm to the mechanics, who jerked the wood-chocks from in front of the Bristol's wheels.

Carn and Travis shouted something which was lost in the deafening bark of the engine, for Kirby had opened his throttle wide. The plane moved forward, bounding out across the misty-field. Kirby took her off with his usual thoughtless ease, and climbed her through the morning haze. In the east the sun was a red ball which was slowly turning to gold. Up Kirby climbed, and the air grew clearer and bluer. Soon there was little mist, and at five thousand feet he leveled off and headed straight for the rising sun—and Germany.

He had not proceeded far before two other ships swung gracefully in on either side of him, a little to the rear. There they remained—two trim, slender Spads which bobbed and swayed gently as they kept pace with the larger and less graceful Bristol. Kirby opened his throttle to the highest notch, getting all the speed he could out of the two-seater, and they raced towards their objective.

A strange objective! Up to this time, because of all the rush and bustle of the take-off, Kirby had not had a chance to realize the full significance of the stunt. But now, leading his comrades towards the lines, he felt a growing thrill of tense excitement. This was game, game indeed! To hold up a staff car thirty miles behind the German lines and snatch a prisoner out of the Boche's hands! It was stupendous?

The sun before them was climbing higher and higher now, and presently it blazed with all its morning brilliance. The sky was clear, a limitless expanse of blue and amber with straying wisps of cloud which whisked beneath the roaring planes. The rolling landscape below stood out clear and distinct to the minutest details. Kirby could see for miles and miles, could pick out forests, rivers, valleys. And looming close ahead was a great splotch of black smoke which rolled across the face of the earth. The Front! They were nearing the lines!

Kirby's eyes became keener, and he was thoroughly alert. He kept the two bobbing noses of his comrades' Spads beside him, watched the sky, the ground, and his map in turn. Tenser and tenser he grew, and his mind began to fill with conjectures. Would this wild scheme succeed? Would they spot the staff car? And would he be able to land without being captured or killed? Anything might happen, or nothing. Perhaps they were too late—a thought which made him struggle anew to get more speed out of the Bristol. Perhaps the Germans would change their plans. Or perhaps, learning through some uncanny source of the Three Mosquitoes' intent, they would set a trap for the trio.

It was the element of the unknown which made the thing so coldly thrilling. A gamble with death! Who would win?

On sailed the three ships, droning mightily on their straight unwavering course. Soon the battle Front was swimming below them in a confused welter of bursting shells, zig-zag trenches, artillery placements and tanks. Then they crossed the lines, and Archie, the antiaircraft, welcomed them with his usual unfriendly bark. But they passed through the zone of erratic firing, with the careless indifference which veteran pilots who have learned that Archie's bark is far worse than his bite come to assume.

Further and further into enemy territory they penetrated. Kirby continued to consult his map and the ground-marks, and kept them to their course. A river suddenly appeared below—a tiny winding ribbon which glistened silver in the sunlight. It was the Aisne. It meant that soon they would come upon the famous road 147—their objective. But that road, from its beginning to the town of Meures, was a good twenty

miles long. There was plenty of distance to be traveled. Could they make it in time? Doubtless, Kirby thought, the staff car was already well on its way. Every second counted. They must hurry, hurry! He employed all his skill as a pilot to make the Bristol fly faster. The big engine roared thunderously, and black smoke poured from the curved exhausts. The two Spads of his comrades, however, had no difficulty in keeping pace.

ON, on, on. A ruined village swung into view, and Kirby knew it was Dubonne. They were getting near that road now. Soon it would come into sight. Soon.

He broke off, drawing in his breath sharply. Nothing had happened—the two Spads were still bobbing gracefully in their places, and there was no sign of trouble. Yet some sixth sense seemed to be giving Kirby a faint warning cry. His whole body tensed, his hand closed more tightly about the joystick. Keenly he scanned the sky around him. At first he saw nothing.

Then he suddenly stiffened, his heart pounding.

Off to the right, moving on a course parallel to the Three Mosquitoes but in the opposite direction, were five gnatlike specks against the blue!

A Hun patrol! Kirby's lips drew up into a tight little line. He thought fast. If the Germans saw the trio, swung in this way—

Hastily, he signaled his comrades, waved to them excitedly. Carn and Travis waved back with grim understanding. They must change their course, rather than risk being held up by a battle. They must change their course before they were seen.

At a signal from Kirby, all three planes swerved over to the left, banking with wonderful precision and not losing their places in the V-shaped formation.

Then, at full throttle, they sped through the air on a course that took them away from the gnatlike shapes. Kirby's plan was to take a roundabout route. As soon as they lost the Germans they would swing back on their course.

But as he glanced back over his shoulder, picking out those shapes again, the blood drained from Kirby's face.

The German formation had turned. They were coming straight this way, advancing in swift pursuit of the three Allied planes. They had spotted the trio and, their job being to look for scraps, they were coming to give battle!

Again Kirby struggled to make his Bristol go faster. He realized too well how serious his position was. The Germans, flying scouts, could make more speed than the two-seater. Even now they were

gaining—the specks were growing, assuming shape. Worse yet, they had altitude on the trio, and when planes have altitude they can usually catch up to their quarry.

The three American planes roared on. The Germans, above and behind, followed relentlessly, stubbornly. They were gaining more and more.

A sense of furious helplessness came over Kirby. There seemed to be nothing he could do to prevent this attack. Under ordinary circumstances he would have accepted battle with the five German scouts, for the Three Mosquitoes could more than hold their own. But now, with every second precious, and with a big Bristol to fly and no observer, things were different. Frantically, Kirby racked his brain with conjectures. What to do? How to get out? Even now the Germans were spreading out behind and above, preparing to swoop down on a long dive. Then, suddenly, Travis was pulling right alongside of Kirby, signaling him hurriedly. The eldest Mosquito pointed to Kirby, then, towards the east. It took Kirby a moment to grasp what he was driving at. Abruptly, he understood. Travis was telling him to go ahead, to take the Bristol to the road and do the best he could, while his two comrades would accept the attack of the Germans and hold them off.

Kirby hesitated dubiously—hesitated even as the five German ships were just on the verge of diving. Up in the sun they were spread out—no longer black shapes but fragile-looking silver ships whose wings glinted in the sun. Fokkers.

Should he leave his comrades to the attack of these five? Three against five was bad enough. But two against five! The line on Kirby's lips grew even straighter. In a case like this one extra plane made all the difference in the world, even if it was a Bristol minus its observer.

But on the other hand, there was that spy, who must not be lost, who even now was on his way to Meures, on road 147.

Firmly, Kirby forced himself to make the decision. And at the same moment that the five Fokkers nosed over and started to swoop down, Kirby waved his assent, leaned forward, and swung around to resume the course to road 147. Travis and Carn, on the other hand, pulled up their Spads and prepared to meet the oncoming Germans.

But it was too late.

The five Fokkers came plunging down like plummetts in a trail of smoke. And before Kirby had completed his turn, the Germans were upon the trio, and their Spandaus machine guns were blazing into life. *Rat-tat-tat* rose the shrill staccato clatter, shattering the drone of engines. *Rat-tat-tat!* And down

came the streaking tracer bullets, whistling past the Americans.

Kirby saw at once that he could not get out now. It was a fight, whether he wanted it to be or not!

THE Fokkers came out of their dives with a roar of engines and a thunder of guns, and in the next second, having leveled off, they were weaving in and out among the Three Mosquitoes as if in some snake-dance. Around and about they whipped, flashing silver things with helmeted heads protruding from their cockpits. The tracer bullets drew smoky criss-cross lines in the sky, and Kirby heard the tick of them through his fuselage, saw them perforating his top wing. Vaguely, he caught a glimpse of his two comrades' Spads, which were streaking about, their guns spitting in defiance to the Germans' fire.

There was a silver Fokker swooping down right behind Kirby, and its bullets were ripping holes through the Bristol's tail-fins. Hastily, Kirby swung his ship around, but, because it was not a single-seater, it was just a little too slow. The Fokker dove past, swung up beneath the Bristol's blind spot, and tried to send tracers into the American ship's belly. Bullets zipped upwards, whining unhealthily close.

And then, suddenly, an overwhelming fury seized Kirby, a deadly rage against these five Germans. Damn them, the dirty Jerries! Damn them for holding up the game, delaying the stunt—perhaps ruining it! By God, they'd pay for it!

His fighting blood thoroughly aroused, Kirby savagely shoved his stick forward, kicked his rudder, and nosed down towards the silver Fokker which buzzed like an insistent hornet beneath him. And in his rage, the Mosquito made that Bristol perform as it was never meant to perform. Perfect coordination of nerve and muscle gave it a new speed and grace. With a roar it swept down, until the silver Fokker was swinging before Kirby. The Mosquito was leaning to his sights, and his fingers closed on the stick-triggers. He pressed them. *Rat-tat-tat-tat!* His twin guns stuttered into life. A hundred rounds—he saw them going straight into the Fokker. The Fokker veered from its course, flew crazily, queerly for a few seconds, then fluttered earthward like a dead bird. He had scored! Only four silver shapes left now.

Cursing savagely, Kirby swung upwards, and waved with his free arm to attract his comrades. They caught the signal, and the two little Spads sped up to get into formation with him. Kirby at once led them into battle with a vengeance. Once more the Three Mosquitoes were fighting in the famous, lunging fashion which had won them their nicknames. Furiously, they took the weaving silver Fokkers head-

on, spitting tracers at them. They were everywhere among those Germans, turning, zooming, diving.

Travis scored next. His blazing guns caught a Fokker as it whipped upwards for an Immelmann turn. The Fokker slid down on its tail, rolled over and over, then burst into a mass of flames and went down in a trail of oily black smoke. The remaining three Germans fought with all their skill and strength. But then Shorty Carn, determined to equal his comrades, put a few rounds into one of the Boche's engines, and so disabled the ship that it was hardly efficient any longer. However, the German tried valiantly to help his two comrades all he could, and the three Fokkers kept fighting, refused to pull out.

Suddenly Travis managed to get close enough to Kirby to signal the young leader again. Once more he told Kirby to go ahead, speed to their objective. His two comrades now could hold back the remaining Fokkers.

This time Kirby did not hesitate. Quickly, he opened his throttle, straightened out, and raced away from the scrap. Looking back he saw the two Spads still streaking in and out among the Fokkers. But a second glance showed that there were only two Germans now. The one with the damaged engine must have fallen or retreated.

At full speed, Kirby raced on until the Aisne again swung below him. The fighting planes had now faded into tiny specks behind him—they seemed merely like a few atoms of dust dancing in the sunlight. Forcing himself to stop worrying about Carn and Travis, he threw himself once more into the task in hand. It was an even greater task now. Most likely his comrades would soon join him, but he might have to carry off the most dangerous part of the business alone. Well, he was ready.

The town of Dubonne again. The ruined houses receded below him, fell back. A little to the right now. Watching his compass and the ground, he banked slightly over. Then straight ahead once more, cleaving the air like an arrow. A forest appeared in a blur of dense green which looked fresh in the morning sunlight. And as he passed over the forest, and again scanned the landscape below and ahead, his eyes gleamed eagerly.

Road 147!

There it was, a long brown line which emerged from the forest, swung in beside the Aisne, and twisted and turned with the stream.

But, though he could glimpse many miles of the road, Kirby saw no sign of movement on it—no staff car. Undoubtedly the car was already near Meures, which was still out of sight. He would have to hurry, have to catch up to it.

Cursing his plane for not going faster, Kirby banked again to get above the road. A mile overhead, he began to follow that brown line, searching keenly. The Bristol was chewing up the distance in no time, shooting along with its engine hitting at top speed. But there was still no car in sight, and Kirby's hopes were beginning to fade. Certainly he should see the car by now, if it was on that road. Vainly he kept straining his eyes, watching, waiting in suspense for the single object which meant so much.

A MINUTE more, and then came a sight which made him groan. Out of the hazy distance appeared the signs of another town. Meures! The town where they were taking the spy! Kirby was almost there, and since he still saw no signs of the car, he could not help assuming that the Germans had already reached the spot. He was too late! The delay caused by the Fokkers had spoiled the trick.

He shook his head and cursed disgustedly, bitterly. Still, he might have known that the stunt was too big to pull off. In fact, when he really tried to think of it in terms of logic, it seemed ridiculous. A wild goose-chase, in which only a miracle or a lucky coincidence could bring success. It was silly to try such stuff. It was—

He broke off, stiffening from head to foot. Was he imagining things, or did he actually see that tiny speck on the road ahead? Eagerly he wiped his goggles with his free hand to get a clearer glimpse. And then his hopes rose once more, and the gleam reappeared in his eyes.

For, as he gained on that tiny speck, he saw that it was indeed real. From his position now it looked like a black beetle crawling painfully along the road. But he knew it was a car—a closed staff car. And by the cloud of dust which rose behind it, he realized that it was going fast. Doubtless that cloud of dust had concealed the car from his view up to this time.

Once more the tense, thrill was creeping through him, and his blood tingled. But he remained the cool, expert soldier. With his usual quick precision, he was sizing up the situation. Meures was about three miles ahead—the road was open down to the town. On one side was the river Aisne, with a few widely separated bridges across it. On the other were trees and a few wheat fields.

He would need those wheat fields. Landing on the road with a Bristol would be impossible, despite what the C.O. had said. For the road was rough and narrow.

His course was obvious. From his position a mile above, a shallow dive would take him right down on the car ahead and below. He must time his dive so that

he could carry out the hold-up near one of those wheat fields.

Gripping his stick and planting his feet a little more firmly on the rudder-bar, he watched keenly, impatiently. The car was just starting to crawl past one of the wheat fields. Kirby drew a deep breath, steeled himself for the great effort. Then, with a grunt, he shoved his stick forward.

The nose of the Bristol dipped. And in the next second the ship was rushing downwards like a streak, shooting down a long hill of space. Down, down, down, straight for the car which crawled on, unawares. Faster and faster, with the wind shrilling through the flying wires, and the Bristol shaking, lurching as if the strain must jerk it to pieces.

The staff car loomed swiftly into clearer focus. It was a large but slightly dilapidated limousine, and it was tearing along the road hell-bent despite the fact that it hardly seemed to be moving to Kirby's eyes, because of his own breathless speed.

At five hundred feet the Mosquito leaned once more to his sights, and his fingers groped for the stick-triggers. He had his plan, and he intended to carry it out to the letter. He was swooping down right behind and above the car now, and he began to level off. Then, carefully, he fired, sent two streams of tracer streaking over the car and into the road ahead of it.

That ought to stop them. It was harmless, but it would show them what he could do.

By this time the Bristol, having lurched out of its dive in response to Kirby's pull on the stick, had swept past the car, and Kirby zoomed up for an Immelmann to get behind and above the German auto once more. But as he zoomed up, a furious oath broke from him. The car had not stopped. On the contrary, it was putting on more speed, racing ahead. And now it did seem to be moving.

Coming out of his Immelmann, Kirby peered down with narrowed eyes to determine what he must do next. And as he looked this time, a head suddenly protruded from a window of the car, glanced up at him. By his cap, Kirby saw that he was a German officer. He seemed to be staring up at the plane with mingled awe and terror, and presently he was pointing a Luger up at the ship. Kirby heard the shrill crack of the revolver, but he merely laughed at it. It took more than a revolver to plug an airplane.

The car was still streaking along at full speed, and Kirby had managed to keep behind it by circling once or twice. He must stop that auto! But how? If he shot directly at it he might hit the spy, and his work would be worse than useless. On the other hand, they had paid no heed to his threat, which only proved how

determined they were not to be interrupted in their journey to Meures.

Meures! The thought of that town made him desperate. For it was closer now, so close that he could see the buildings clearly. And they had passed all but one of the wheat fields! Only one more, looming ahead. Only one more possible place to land! He must hurry!

Furiously, he nosed down and this time made his threat even more ominous. He tripped his guns and circled the car with a ring of bullets. This he did three times. And at least he saw that he had them scared. The car careened a little in its course, swerved giddily, as if the chauffeur was getting finicky.

But the machine did not stop! It went right on, and already it was going past the last wheat field. In a few seconds the field, which was lined with trees, would be gone!

KIRBY realized then that the only thing he could do was to take the extreme chance, regardless of its consequences. It was the only way. And perhaps his wonderful precision and skill in aiming an aerial gun would help.

Again he climbed and Immelmanned to get behind the car. Again he nosed down, gently. Eyes to sights, he sought to frame the hood of the car in the little ring. Then, with his heart in his mouth, he fired.

*Rat-tat-tat!* The stream of bullets zipped down. Breathlessly, Kirby watched.

They fell in front of the car. Too far over. He must nose down a bit more. Gently, he eased his stick forward, kept firing. The wheat field was streaking past, and the woods were looming closer, closer. Inch by inch, responding to Kirby's expert control, the nose of the Bristol came down, and the stream of bullets moved along the road, moved towards the car. They touched the hood. And then, with triumphant fury, they were tearing into the car's engine.

It happened in a second. The car swerved dizzily towards the wheat field, and Kirby saw that he had gotten the engine. But what he saw next was unexpected.

A spurt of livid red leaped out of the car's hood and went licking down along the body of the machine. Fire!

Kirby's incendiary tracer had done that! A pang of fear seized the Mosquito as he circled close overhead, scarcely twenty-five feet from the ground. If the spy was caught in those flames—

He broke off, for suddenly the doors of the car burst open, and figures began to stumble out confusedly. Kirby watched, waited. There were five

figures. One was a chauffeur. Three were German officers. And the other, Kirby knew, was number 44.

The man had a khaki uniform on, so he was easy to identify. Besides, Kirby saw, he was handcuffed, and two of the officers were dragging him roughly with them. Suddenly the spy—who was a small, slight figure—looked up at Kirby's plane. He must have spotted the Allied tri-colored circles, for he tried to wave his cuffed hands at Kirby. Kirby waved back quickly. At least he had the man's attention now.

All this had taken place in a few breathless seconds, quicker than any telling could be. Now, hastily, Kirby was sizing everything up. The staff car was just a mass of flames and smoke now on the road. The four Germans and their prisoner were stumbling in terrified haste onto the wheat field. Kirby saw at once that they were trying to make for the woods close by. In the shelter of those trees they could escape this monster of the air which roared over their heads.

For a final second Kirby paused to make sure that he had everything straight. Yes, there it all was. The road, the wheat field surrounded by trees, and on the other side the Aisne with a bridge running across it.

Then, before the Germans had time to get to the woods, Kirby nosed down straight after them. He nosed down, but he did not fire for fear of hitting the spy. But he was certain that he would not have to fire now to scare them. Though they had seen the spy try to signal Kirby, certainly they could not guess what Kirby's true intent was. Strafing staff cars was not an uncommon business.

Sure enough, they were scared—scared as rabbits. One and all they flung themselves face down on the ground as the plane roared right over their heads. The slight figure in khaki also threw himself down, but he turned his face up towards the Bristol and again managed to signal.

Kirby worked fast. As he passed right over number 44's head, he cut his throttle down low. He leaned out and shouted above the shrill of wind: "Will land on other side of field! Run there! Run like hell!"

At the same time, Kirby illustrated what he was saying by gestures. He pointed to his plane, then across the field. Number 44 nodded, and seemed to be shouting something back. But Kirby could not hear him. While a pilot can make himself heard to a man on the ground, the shrill of wind in his ears usually makes it impossible for him to hear any reply.

Kirby had now passed over the group of figures, and as he whipped furiously around to sweep back, he saw them getting confusedly to their feet. Two of them fired revolvers at him, and this time the bullets came a bit closer, for Kirby was low. But he ignored the firing, and watched. The khaki-clad figure seemed to

attempt a break; Kirby saw him leap forward. But the other four men caught, him, and were dragging him with; them towards the trees. Hastily Kirby nosed down for them again. This time, to make sure that he would scare them!—for, by now they must know what he was after; he had given himself away—he sent a spray of lead pretty close to the group.

Again they all dropped. No, not all. 44 kept on his feet. He started to run out across the field. One of the officers, placing duty before fear, leaped right up and was after him. Kirby kept firing his guns, as near them as he dared. The spy suddenly wheeled upon the officer, who was about to strike him on the head with the butt of a Luger—for they wanted the man alive, and they probably figured that if they knocked him out they wouldn't lose him. But 44 was quick, though handcuffed, His arms rose above his head, and came down right on top of the officer's skull. The metal handcuffs did the trick. The officer collapsed, and the spy continued to run. Now he was away from the group, safe enough away to give Kirby the chance he needed.

As the other three Germans started to leap up, started to train Lugers on the running spy, Kirby dove straight for them, and this time aimed for them. Down went the streams of bullets. Two of the men were dropped like flies, and lay inert. The third managed to get in the shelter of the trees, and as Kirby looked there his heart sank. Where they had come from he did not know, but there, concealed behind the brush, training their rifles, were about twelve Boche soldiers. The man from the car who had run towards them had evidently told them what to do. They were firing, not only at the running spy, but also at Kirby's plane—and several of their bullets nicked into the Bristol.

GLANCING around, Kirby saw the spy still running. He resolved not to try to land until the captured man was at a safe distance from these Germans. Meanwhile, Kirby would make pursuit impossible.

He whipped the Bristol around, dove for the trees, spurning them with his undercarriage. It was risky, yes, but the only way. Down he went, his nose headed towards the gray which showed through the green. He opened up his guns and literally rained lead upon those men down there. He could not tell whether he had scored, but of one thing he was sure—he was preventing them from pursuing 44.

Suddenly the khaki-clad prisoner attracted Kirby's eye again. He was way out on the field, and he was waving for Kirby to come down. Kirby decided to do so; and banked breathlessly. No time for getting into

the wind or anything like that. He must swoop straight down and land as near to that spy as possible.

But, as soon as he ceased molesting the Germans in the trees, they came pouring out on to the field, rifles cocked. There were five of them now—five gray-clad figures with coal-scuttle helmets. They were rushing after 44. Kirby nosed down to get more speed out of his dive. He could not bother to strafe them again. His only hope was to land close to 44 before they reached him.

Down, down, down he went. The ground loomed up below him. He saw 44, still running, waving frantically. Kirby timed his landing as best he could. But even a super-pilot cannot hope to land right next to a man. And when the Bristol finally settled, bounced, came to rest, Kirby found himself about a hundred yards from the running spy, and not more than five hundred yards from the Germans, who were rushing across the field, trying to intercept 44 from a right-angle as he turned to dash for the plane.

Tearing off his safety-strap, Kirby jumped out of the front cockpit, plopped into the rear, where there was the flanking machine gun. He got the gun in his hands, swung it around and trained it on the advancing Germans. This he could do, for the spy was not between the soldiers and the Bristol; the group of soldiers, the spy, and the plane all formed the corners of a triangle, though the corners were slowly converging.

As the khaki-clad figure kept running towards the plane, Kirby pulled his triggers, sprayed the group of soldiers mercilessly. Instantly they flung themselves to the ground, but they were still using their rifles. Bullets zipped through the air, whining unhealthily close. Kirby shouted at 44, urged him on. He was scarcely thirty yards away now, coming, coming! Already Kirby had tossed out the sand-bag ballast, and was making ready for him.

“Come on, you little son-of-a-gun!”

Kirby screamed at the top of his lungs, above the muffled bark of the throbbing engine. “Hurry up, before they—”

He stopped. An anguished groan broke from him. Abruptly, he saw 44 stagger, saw the man's features contort. God, they had hit him! The spy lurched forward, sprawled on the ground.

Dead? The blood left Kirby's face. If they had killed him it was all over.

They hadn't! A sigh of overwhelming relief came from Kirby. The wounded man was moving! Valiantly, he was crawling, wriggling towards the plane. He seemed to be waving his cuffed hands as if to assure Kirby that he was all right.

His hopes revived, Kirby again gave himself to the business of spraying lead at the German soldiers, who still lay on the ground, partly concealed by the short wheat-stalks, and firing their rifles. *Rat-tat-tat*, Kirby's flanking gun kept clattering, while the spy made snaillike movements to get to the Bristol. He was still a good twenty-five yards away, wriggling inch by inch. And the soldiers, though kept at bay by Kirby's gun, continued shooting. Any moment they might hit either 44 or Kirby.

Twenty-four yards! And then Kirby's momentary relief vanished. The spy waved his bound hands tiredly, shook his head. And Kirby, in anguish, saw him collapse again, to lie inert.

Too well did Kirby realize the awful predicament he was in. Here was the man he wanted to rescue, lying unconscious—perhaps dead—scarcely twenty-four yards away. Not far, yet if Kirby jumped out of his plane to get him, the Germans could mow them both down in no time. For the moment they were no longer imperiled by Kirby's machine gun, the Heinies could rush forward and shoot with deadly accuracy.

Dazed and bewildered, his brain whirling, the Mosquito did the only thing he could—crouched over his gun and kept pouring lead towards the soldiers in the hope that he would finally annihilate them. The spy still remained inert. Luckily Kirby had plenty of ammunition with him; he could hold out quite awhile anyway, before they got him.

*Rat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat!* For a few seconds things remained exactly the same. The soldiers in the wheat were still moving: they were evidently too low for Kirby to reach them directly. Yet, by continuing to fire, he could hold them powerless for awhile, spoil their marksmanship. But how much longer could this go on?

The question was answered in the next second. And the answer came to Kirby like a blow which crushed out every last shred of hope. It came in the form, of a swarm of gray-clad figures! On the other side of the river, across the road, a company of German infantry was running straight for the bridge! Evidently the news of Kirby's landing had been relayed to them, and they were coming to nab the plane!

They were still out of range, but they were almost up to the bridge now, running as fast as their legs could carry them. And Kirby, though he clung to his gun and continued to hold the handful of soldiers down in the wheat, realized that it was all over. His goose was cooked! The stunt had been a dismal failure. And with success so nearly won! A sob choked him. If only that spy hadn't been hit!

He shook his head resignedly. The German infantry men had reached the bridge. They were starting to run across it.

THEN a cry of frenzied joy broke from Kirby's dry throat, and he was screaming at the top of his lungs, dancing around in the Bristol's cockpit like a man gone mad.

"Travis—Shorty!" he yelled; his voice shaken by hysterical sobs. "God!"

And joyously he watched the two little Spads which had just plunged out of the blue, which were swooping down like birds of mercy. His comrades! Good old Shorty and Travis! They had never failed him yet, and they were not going to fail him now! They had evidently finished that dog-fight, and here they were! And cripes, how they were needed!

"Come on, you hell-fired bums!" Kirby cursed at them lovingly, wishing they could hear. "Come on! We'll pull this stunt yet, if only you size things up!"

And Carn and Travis did size things up. At once they saw Kirby's predicament, saw the Germans in the wheat, the inert spy, and the infantry which was now halfway across the bridge. Streaking down, the two Spads suddenly separated. Travis' plane swooped straight for the bridge. Carn's plane roared down upon the soldiers in the wheat.

Kirby, still foolishly firing his own gun, watched with baited breath. He heard his comrades' guns clatter into life, saw the streaks of flame leaping from the noses of the flashing Spads. A glance at the bridge and he saw that Travis was raising hell. The third Mosquito was preventing the Heinies from crossing the river. He was mowing them down like flies. Their columns split: men sprawled on the bridge and tumbled into the water like frogs with their legs spread apart. Carn, on the other hand, must have finished the men in the wheat, for he was speeding to join Travis now, and help him. It was Kirby's chance. Furtively, the Mosquito glanced around to make sure that he would not be exposed to an unseen attack. Nothing in sight.

With a leap Kirby jumped out of the cockpit of the Bristol, got his footing in the wheat, and made a dash for the spy. He reached the inert figure, stooped over, felt hurriedly for heart-beats. Yes, his heart was beating, thank God, and he was still breathing. Gently, Kirby lifted him up. The man felt very light in Kirby's arms; he was a small little fellow, with a young and sensitive face. And as he stumbled back towards the Bristol, with his precious passenger, Kirby for the first time realized the hell this fellow had been through. It was no joke to be captured and taken in a staff car with the knowledge that a firing squad was awaiting him. A

brave guy, to stand the gaff so well. Damn the Krauts for plugging him!

Reaching the plane, Kirby tenderly lifted 44 into the rear cockpit, and strapped him securely in place. Carn and Travis were still strafing the bridge, and also trying to prevent the Germans from setting up machine guns on the other side of the river. Hastily, Kirby sprang into the pilot's cockpit of the Bristol, started to fasten his safety strap.

And at that moment there came such a deafening report of guns behind him that he thought he was surely done for.

Fearfully, he turned. Then he froze in utter horror.

Rushing right up behind the plane, having come out of the trees back there—probably they had cleverly sneaked around—was a new group of Germans. They were firing over the heads of Kirby and the spy, demanding surrender. And they were so close that even had Carn and Travis seen them they could not have come to Kirby's assistance in time. In just a second they would be up to the plane, before Kirby could possibly get up enough speed to take-off.

Desperately, the Mosquito half-stood and turned to reach the rear cockpit gun. He couldn't reach it, couldn't possibly touch it. He plopped back in his seat, and determined at least to fight until the end. With a curse he started to open his throttle. The Bristol's engine roared. But even above the roar, Kirby heard the shouts of the Germans back there, and a sudden tug on his rudder told him they had hold of the plane. God!

*Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!*

At first, when that hellish clatter rose right behind him, Kirby didn't know just what it meant. And when he looked, he could hardly believe his eyes.

The little spy was clinging to that flanking gun, pouring lead right into the faces of the Boche soldiers! He had come to, and he was saving the day! The Germans who had seized the Bristol's rudder were sprawled in a gruesome heap. The others were falling back, their ranks thinning.

Eagerly, Kirby re-opened his throttle, and in the next moment the Bristol was roaring across the field.

Then the Bristol's wheels left the earth, and the ship, under Kirby's expert control, climbed like a bird exultant to be free. Up they soared, further and further away from that spot of hell. Abruptly, Kirby felt the touch of a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to see 44 smiling wanly at him. The spy held out his hand, and Kirby seized it.

And while they shook, the Spads of Carn and Travis came swinging in on either side of the Bristol once more.

Both pilots waved to Kirby excitedly, joyously. And both held out their arms and made the gesture of shaking hands, figuratively, with number 44.

Home! This time Kirby took a very roundabout course.

NOT long afterwards, a group of men were standing on the field of the American airdrome, standing near a bullet-ridden Bristol and also near a stretcher over which the squadron's doctor was bending.

"He's absolutely O.K.," the doctor was saying, as he examined the spy. "Just a little wound in the hip. We'll take him into the infirmary shack and fix him up in no time."

"You've sent for an I.M. man?" 44 suddenly queried, looking up at the C.O. who stood near the doctor.

"He's due any minute," said the C.O. tersely. Then the colonel grinned. "Lucky to be able to give him the information, hey?"

The little man smiled cheerfully. His eyes suddenly went up to the Three Mosquitoes, who were also close at hand.

"Yes," he said. "And believe me, I appreciate it." He nodded to Kirby. "You saved my life more than once."

"But if you hadn't saved mine," returned Kirby grimly, "it wouldn't have done a hell of a lot of good, would it?"

Number 44 chuckled. "I don't like to praise you three fellows in the presence of your C.O.—he might get sore and accuse me of spoiling his men. But," his tone was eager, "if there's anything I can do for you, I'll be damned glad to do it! What say?"

Kirby started to shake his head, but Travis quickly stepped in.

"I happen to have a bit of Scotch blood in me," he drawled. "And I'd never refuse an offer like that. Captain Kirby, make our demands—whatever they may be."

Kirby thought hard. At last his face lighted up. "Well, I guess there is one thing you can do for us. And that is," his glance wandered over to the bullet-ridden Bristol, and he spoke slowly, earnestly, "and that is, don't get yourself captured again!"