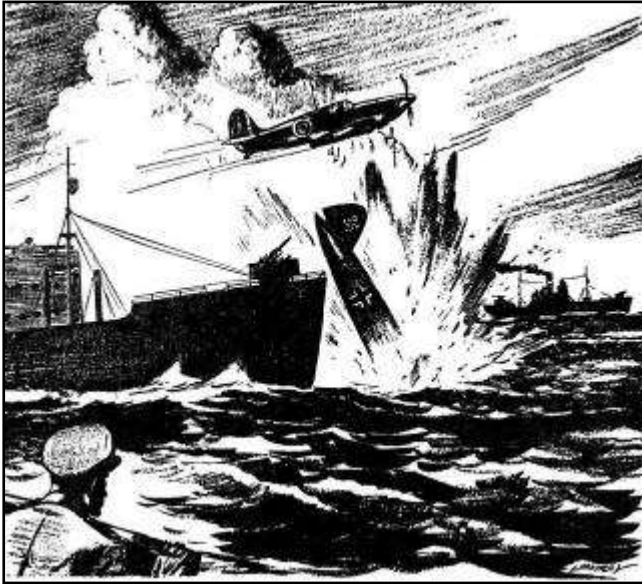


# SKY ROUTE TO HELL

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

*Assigned to escort an Italy-bound convoy, the Sky Devil and his Brood roar into death-dealing battle!*



SQUADRON LEADER BILL DAWSON, the Sky Devil, sensed the tension in the taproom of the little south of England pub. He glanced across the room filled with husky sons of all branches of the services. Especially he was watching a couple of non coms who seemed about to tear into each other. One was his own Flight Sergeant “Bat” Hennedy of the 71st Fighter Squadron, the other a petty officer of the Navy.

Nearby, at another table, sat a big-framed officer of the Merchant Marine, his face surly with frown.

Bat Hennedy had served with the Sky Devil in two wars. He was an Irish-Yank, whose loyalty to his fighter station was exceeded only by his savor of a good scrap. From the attitude of both talkers such a scrap was dangerously imminent.

As the petty officer snarled vituperative comment, Bat scraped back his chair and lunged. Simultaneously Bill Dawson leaped in and flung himself between the two huskies. A little barmaid squealed, men looked up from their tables.

Trouble had been brewing for some time. When men of the several branches of the war services became irritable through

misunderstandings, rivalries, jealousy, they had to let off steam some way.

Thudding, vicious blows were being exchanged between the combatants before the Sky Devil succeeded in separating them. Firmly, he was holding each by the front of his tunic.

“Okay, boys,” he said calmly. “Now suppose we settle this by arbitration. You, Sergeant Hennedy, open up. What’s the trouble?”

The big merchant marine officer, a skipper by the gold on his coat sleeve, lumbered up and scowled at the Sky Devil.

“Why, sir,” Bat exploded, “I’m not standin’ off an’ lettin’ no barnacled gunlayer muck up the name of our squadron! He—”

“Pipe down, you oversized grease monkey,” the petty officer growled, squirming in Dawson’s grip. “Why, I ain’t said half enough. Your outfit let us down—caused the death of the skipper’s youngest son! So you think that’s nothin’ to squawk about!”

The Sky Devil winced, as he realized the significance of this outburst. A mistake had been made, but it was something these hardbitten deepwater men didn’t quite understand. The 71st, Bill Dawson’s Squadron, had not been responsible for the damage by Nazi dive-bombers of a couple of ships in the convoy lane. Nevertheless, the stigma was there and unless it was wiped out, these men of the Merchant Marine would never forgive.

The skipper now loomed up alongside Dawson.

“I’m Cap’n Stalway of the ‘Monsoon Queen,’ Squadron Leader,” he gruffed. “Don’t get any ideas my petty officer was sounding off at half cock. I lost my youngest son because some blasted young Johnny got his wires crossed. Dan, my boy, was first mate of a tramp which was bombed an’ sunk because we failed to get the aircraft support we were promised. The 71st was supposed to cover us at the time. I had to watch my boy an’ many others drown like rats—”

THE big fellow broke off. He had caught the steely glint in the eyes of this scar-faced squadron leader, had glimpsed the decoration ribbons on the left breast of his tunic.

Bill Dawson released his grasp on the two men and turned to Bat Hennedy.

"Better take the boys to station, Bat," he said quietly.

"Okay sir, but I'll be seein' this deep-water man again. And if he's of the same mind about the 71st, I'll ram a prop boss down his barnacled throat, so I will!"

The petty officer made a lunge, but his skipper laid a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Pipe down, Truscott," Stalway commanded. "Back to your table an' cool off. Mebbe the squadron leader would like a chat."

The belligerent non coms shoved off, as Captain Stalway motioned an invitation to Dawson to join them at his table.

Quietly, they sat and sipped their beers, two men who were still bitter, but with enough sense of proportion to talk things over soberly.

"Ye see how it goes, Squadron Leader—uh—what was the name?" Stalway grunted.

"Dawson, Bill Dawson," the Sky Devil replied.

"Daw—uh, not the Sky Devil himself? But ye must be. The scar—excuse me. I—Then you're in command of the 71st, by god!"

Their eyes flashed in an exchange of meaning glances.

"Right, skipper, I am in command of the 71st, but seconded to command of a special independent flight, known as the Sky Devil's Brood. I know all about your charges against the 71st. They're unfounded.

"Blast it all, man! We don't make mistakes like the one which caused the tragedy in the convoy lane you speak of. I'm sorry about your son. I can understand your feelings because—because I have a son of my own, flying in my special flight."

The Sky Devil broke off long enough to take a couple of sips of his beer.

"You've been getting it tough in convoy, I know. But before you sound off too deeply about the Air Force, remember this. We're fighting a desperate and clever enemy. It was his cleverness that caused the loss of your ships a month ago—and not any mistake on our part."

Captain Stalway's weather-bitten face twitched sharply. He'd lost his son, somebody had bungled. He'd been promised aircraft coverage which had failed to show up. Beyond that, he wasn't amenable to any explanation.

"It was clever enemy wireless interception and faking that pulled the 71st off course," the Sky Devil went on.

Captain Stalway shrugged and drained his glass. He rose to his feet, took a glance at his watch.

"Got to be shovin' off," he grunted. "Goodnight!"

Their eyes met in a saberlike glance.

"Good night, skipper," the Sky Devil replied. "If you're warping out shortly, you'll be seeing us. I and my special flight have been assigned to the job of riding herd on all Italian-bound convoys until you pick up destroyer and cruiser escort. And listen, sailor—my boys don't make mistakes!"

Before the skipper could make the retort that rushed to his lips, the Sky Devil spun and strode into the blacked-out street.

At his station quarters, Bill Dawson had scarcely time to settle at his desk before his deputy, Flight Lieutenant Tom Hanson, entered. The Sky Devil's Brood had accepted a rookie replacement who, this afternoon, had been up for aerobatics practice with Hanson. Now the flight lieutenant was ready with his report on the newcomer.

"Find him okay, Tom?" the Sky Devil asked.

"Keen as mustard, skipper. A bit anxious, though. Lost a brother recently—Sunderland pilot—off Dover. You'd best have a talk with him. He's like a young colt that likes to get the bit between his teeth and run things in his own way. Shall I send him in?"

"Right. Sure."

Minutes later, young Pilot Officer Daly entered the Sky Devil's hut.

Bill Dawson conned him sharply—a tall, blond youngster with steady, smoldering eyes.

"Have a seat, Daly. Smoke if you wish," Dawson suggested as he waved at a chair. "Flight Lieutenant Hanson has just given me a report on you. Cigarette?"

DAWSON smiled softly as he handed over a pack.

"Thank you, sir. Very decent of you. I—I want to tell you, sir, just how honored I feel at being accepted by you and your flight. I want to do the job right for you, sir."

"Good, Daly. You can, I'm sure. Hanson tells me you've got what it takes at the controls. But, Daly, it takes something else."

Dawson lit a cigarette.

"My flight, Daly, depends for its success on the close adherence to orders, on the fullest measure of co-operation. In a day or so, we're scrambling out over the Channel on convoy protection duty. This, very often, can be a heartless, monotonous job. On your first few trips, you may not see a single Jerry, let alone encounter one. There'll be sloppy, intermittent fog and cloud. The first lesson you'll have to remember is that my flight flies formation until or unless otherwise instructed. You understand?"

"Yes, sir, of course. I—I'm a bit keen, though, sir—to close grips with a Jerry and, as you say across the Atlantic, pay off for my brother's loss. I promised his wife I would."

Slowly, the Sky Devil rose to his feet and the scar on his face began to dance.

"We're all as keen as that, son," he clipped. "We all want to square accounts for your brother and for all the countless other skymen and sailors and soldiers. But we have to fight our share of this war in such a way as to be of the greatest general aid to the cause as a whole."

The Sky Devil almost winced as he said this. Deep in his mind strong resentment still pulsed against Captain Stalway for the charges he had made. That barnacled old deep-water skipper would have to be shown just how the Brood of the 71st functioned on assignment. Dawson's brows suddenly flicked up sharply as he eyed the young rookie.

"One thing you must always have in mind, Daly, is that the Jerry fliers are clever. Make one single mistake and poof! you're out like a light. Something you don't hear explodes, and you go down in flames without the consciousness to wonder, because—you're dead, Daly. That's all, son. Try and remember what I've said and—good luck! Good night!"

"Good night, sir, and thanks no end. I'll do my best."

When the youngster had gone, the Sky Devil resumed his seat at the desk and began scanning the roster of his fighting personnel.

Flight Lieutenant Hanson, the tall redheaded deputy leader. Flying Officers Chuck Martin, a dyed-in-the-wool Canuck, and Don Calway, a scrappy Aussie. Pilot Officers Eric Tanner, formerly of the Norwegian Air Force. Alex Montreith, a chubby Scot out of Edinburgh. And last, but not least, Pilot Officer Bill Dawe—the Sky Devil's son.

Now was added the name of Pilot Officer Daly, a likely enough looking replacement

"As good as any combat formation I ever—"

The Sky Devil broke off and looked wistfully into the distance. He was thinking back to his old flight, the Brood of the Sky Devil—1918 model. The work of the old Brood was a hard target for any formation of 1944 fighter pilots to shoot at, but the Sky Devil knew his present Spitfire pilots measured up well. Of course, there was still Daly, who would have to take the test in combat.

Bill Dawson's lips moved, but his words were not audible. He was making a vow to himself, although it was more a declaration to Captain Stalway of the "Monsoon Queen."

"I'll make you swallow your charges with a chaser of your own deep water," was the Sky Devil's vow.

The Brood was in formation off the south coast of England and the Sky Devil sat weaving over the control column, muttering to himself as he coned the sloppy fog. It seemed that the sky gods had arraigned themselves with the enemy these past few days. For whirling fog and cloud masses favored sneak dive bomber raids on the British and American Italy-bound convoy in command of Acting Commodore Captain Stalway.

In the lanes farther out to sea, destroyers and corvettes, and a single cruiser were sweeping the submarine zone. It was the work of the Sky Devil's Brood to give the convoy coverage until the Navy escort took over.

Scraping frost from his hood the Sky Devil swore bitterly. He wondered how soon heavy wing icing would force one or more of his fighters out. Suddenly his radio came alive.

“Ops to S.D...S.D...Bandits in your zone,” came the warning.

Bill Dawson acknowledged, and then almost immediately received a further warning from his deputy, Tom Hanson, who was flying rear-end Charlie position in the flight

Dawson drew his Brood up a point off to starboard and his lips suddenly parted. He had glimpsed two ghostlike shapes sheer past his line of vision. Then cloud obscured everything, even his own flight’s aircraft.

AS THEY drove on through intermittent banks of fog the Sky Devil became increasingly worried about his charges, the convoy below. Although he hesitated to use his radio, he felt he must and straightway he coded a signal to the commodore of the merchant fleet. Captain Stalway signaled back an “All’s well,” and Dawson felt relieved.

Presently he glimpsed the gray shapes of his own craft. There was young Daly in position on the starboard quarter. Dawson wondered if the youngster had sighted those ghostly Focke-Wulf shapes.

Shifting his attention forward, he was still wondering about the young rookie when Daly’s ship suddenly became obscured by writhing fog. It was a pity the Sky Devil couldn’t have seen what happened in the next few moments as the young replacement kicked his Spitfire out and down on the tail of a diving Focke-Wulf 190.

As the Sky Devil’s ship suddenly burst into the clearway, he squinted into his rear-view mirror to con the position of his craft astern. He nodded as if signaling to young Daly—then lightninglike galvanized into action, giving his Spit the gun and hurling her into a terrific zoom.

The sky ship staggered from a sharp burst of enemy fire, as Dawson kicked her over onto a wing. Grave damage had been done, and despite his predicament, flashlike, he realized what had happened. In a port in the fog, young Daly must have glimpsed a decoy Jerry and cut out to join battle. Into his place had slid a clever enemy skyman.

Precious seconds were being lost. The heat was on, and Dawson must give Captain Stalway a call. At any moment, now, he was doomed to hit the silk. But at least there was a chance, if Stalway

was tipped off in time, of his being picked up in the Channel.

Unbearable heat filled the cockpit as the Sky Devil fumbled with his radio set. He sent a call away just as a tongue of flame licked out to barely touch his face. He was in a small cloud bank as he rolled his ship, and the cockpit hood was already back. There was a muffled stutter of machine-guns as he leaped. His boys were in action, he knew, but what of Daly?

Down—down—Dawson felt the jerk at his ‘chute harness and smiled grimly as he looked up into the taut mushroom shape of his parachute. Now the uninviting Channel water was rising to meet him in steady white-capped swell. He wondered if Stalway had picked up his message.

Suddenly he was startled by a familiar, but unwelcome sound—the sound of aircraft zooming down to its end. His heart plucked sharply at its moorings as he watched the flame-enveloped mess go by. Which ship?

All at once as the craft fell apart, Dawson glimpsed a Maltese cross. A deep sigh of horror shook him. One of his boys could tie a knot in his scarf.

Nearer, nearer, came the sea, and the Sky Devil realized that there would be no rubber dinghy to cling to. He would have to rely entirely on his Mae West and the good graces of the gods.

He struck water and fought valiantly against the drag of his ‘chute. At least he managed to unsnap the cords and cut her free. As he bobbed in the cold gray water he wondered if this was to be his finish. Endless moments dragged and still he heard no thunder of expected sky bombs. And then, after what seemed an eternity of waiting, his ears caught the chug-chug of a small boat’s motor.

The boat was circling the sector, and as the fickle fog lifted its shroud, Dawson realized he had been spotted.

It was a grim trick of fate, Dawson thought, as the small craft chugged slowly toward him. For emerging from the fog, he could now make out the name of his deliverer. It was the “Monsoon Queen,” Stalway’s ship!

Presently, the Sky Devil was being hauled over the stern rail of the craft, flagship of the convoy. And looking down from the bridge was Stalway himself.

Across the small cabin the Sky Devil cast a sharp glance at the deep-water skipper who had affected his rescue. Stalway was in no friendly mood. His whole attitude was ice-coated, and in no uncertain manner he was voicing his opinion of the Air Force.

“Ye see how it is, Dawson,” he was saying. “That’s the sort of thing that started the trouble at the pub. Not that I’m blamin’ ye personally, because I know your record. But somethin’ slipped up, an’ if there’d been Jerry dive bombers topside with yon Focke-Wulfs—” He broke off, shrugged significantly, and grunting his disgust, proceeded to gnaw off a sizable quid of chewing tobacco.

Bill Dawson had no comeback. For the moment there was nothing he could do but accept Stalway’s castigation. After all, the deep-water man had justification for his mood. Things could have gone very badly for the convoy had there been Heinkels with the Focke-Wulfs.

Heinkels! The thought made the Sky Devil grit his teeth sharply. The danger was not yet over; in fact, it hadn’t even begun. Most likely one or more of the Jerries had gotten away. And they would carry with them to their bomber command location of the Allied convoy—a prize if there ever was one.

BILL DAWSON didn’t attempt to make any amends. He could only hope that his radioed message for a Sunderland rescue craft, would be answered, so that he could be flown back to reorganize for further action.

A radio man knocked, entered the cabin, and handed over a message to the skipper.

Stalway grunted and looked up at Dawson.

“Your Sunderland will be in within the half hour,” he announced. “Ye’ll be lucky to board her, though. The fog’s thickenin’. Ah-h-h—it’s bad stuff. It’s slowin’ us up an’, by God! those lads in Italy are needin’ what we’re carryin’. We’ll be standin’ by helpless if those Focke-Wulfs bring in a bomber formation. We’ll get a goin’ over, Dawson. D’ye realize that?”

The scar on Bill Dawson’s face twitched grimly as he rose to his feet.

“Okay, skipper,” he clipped. “I’m grateful for your rescue job. I’ve taken your going over pretty calmly because I realize you’ve got a lot to put up

with. But get this, you spume-drenched old barnacle. If that Sunderland doesn’t stall, I’ll be back, I’ll be seein’ you. I’m never one to play the merits of one branch of the service off against another. I’m a skyman and know something about conditions topside you don’t understand. By the way, did you by any chance spot one of my ships go down—possibly a flamer, some time before I hit the sea?”

“Yeah, a ship did come down, Dawson,” the skipper admitted. “One of yours, huh? That was one before the Focke-Wulf hit in? We caught a glimpse of her and kept a sharp lookout for a possible survivor. But she sank immediately, Dawson. One of your boys?”

The Sky Devil nodded sharply.

“Yeah—a young kid, first trip up. He’d lost a brother, and stole out in the fog, behind my back and—got it. A keen-as-mustard young lad with promise. But in spite of my orders, he took the bit between his teeth and—that’s why I’m down. A Jerry slid into his place in the fog—Why, blast it, you don’t know what—”

The Sky Devil broke off as the radio operator entered again, this time with a message for him.

“Stan’ by message, sir,” the man said. “Your Sunderland will be here in a few minutes. There’s a footnote. One of your flight members was lost, another slightly wounded. Three Focke-Wulfs destroyed.”

Dawson shot a sharp glance to Stalway, was about to speak, thought better of it, and turned abruptly to follow the wireless man out and up on to the deck.

The blunt shape of a Sunderland Flying Boat loomed through the wretched mist. Grimly Bill Dawson watched the pilot maneuver her expertly alongside the “Monsoon Queen.”

As they lowered a boat for him, the Sky Devil turned to Captain Stalway standing by.

“Thanks a lot Cap’n,” he said.

Their eyes met in an unwavering stare.

“Luck!” the skipper grunted.

Dawson nodded and turned to board the small boat swung out on its davits.

Bill Dawson continued to glow with resentment at Stalway’s attitude as the Sunderland made its way toward the English coast. Yet despite his anger he could not but admire those hard-bitten old deep-water men even when they

sounded off. Theirs was a pretty tough lot. Their one purpose in life, it appeared, was to get their precious cargoes of essential munitions, oil and equipment to the gritty land troops now so hotly engaged.

He suddenly thought of young Daly. Whatever the kid had done, he couldn't hate him. Instead, he felt his loss keenly.

Now the Sky Devil was anxious to get ashore and to the hospital, for he wondered who was hit, and how badly. Of a sudden, he became aware of the shooting pains in his face. Evidently the scorching he had received in the plane was worse than he had believed. It must have seared that old scar tissue on his face for it seemed as if a thousand tiny daggers were stabbing his cheek.

At the hospital an hour later, Dawson discovered, that it was Pilot Officer Alex Montreith who had been hit.

The chubby Scot smiled and held out a hand, as the Sky Devil entered the ward.

"Sorry, skip," he said. "I—I'll have tae lie on my middle for a few days. Not much pain, but I couldn't just sit at the controls. Ye see, sir, I got it in the back and—that's how it is."

A surgeon entered, examined Montreith's dressing and then noticed Dawson's face. He insisted that the burns should receive immediate treatment.

"Okay, but I'm not staying long," the Sky Devil sounded off. "I've got a very special job to finish."

One of the most important things Bill Dawson had to do was test out a replacement Spitfire. And before dusk he was taking the crate over from Bat Hennedy and spiraling her up into the failing light, throwing her through all the aerobatics he could think up. He was in a savage mood, for Captain Stalway's accusations had rankled him deeply. Yet he was calm enough to realize that a big job lay ahead. There would be trouble at the convoy lane with the coming of dawn.

Down again, he entered his hut and at once strode to his telephone. He called up an old friend, Squadron Leader Jerry Carlton, of the Mosquito Fighter-Bomber Command.

"It's like this, Jerry," Dawson began, and went on to give Carlton a summary of events and possibilities. "You see," he added, "my squadron is shifting station, and I can't get any more help

there. Blast it! No matter what Headquarters feels, my special flight can't be expected to win the whole cock-eyed war on its own! I'm a couple of men short as it is. I might need you and your boys. How about it?"

"Right you are, son," Carlton replied. "Can't forget what you did for us off Scheldt when we flew old Wellingtons. Give me a buzz; we'll be standing by. Cheerio!"

THE Sky Devil smiled with satisfaction. He hoped he wouldn't have to call in Carlton and his boys, because they'd been up to the neck in action. At the moment they were grounded for a well-earned rest, after more than one recent trip over Berlin. But a strong hunch bore down on the Sky Devil. Action was brewing ahead, and as he had said—he couldn't be expected to sweep the entire Channel free of Jerries alone.

As he stared across the room into space, the scar on his face twitched sharply and he winced with the resultant pain. But he was visualizing tomorrow's dawn patrol, silently speculating on the outcome.

"Hanson, Martin, Calway, Tanner, Dawe—" As he tolled off the names of his pilots standing by to board their throbbing Spitfires, Bill Dawson hesitated at the name of his son.

The Sky Devil himself had changed his name to Dawson for the purpose of maneuvering his way into the service in the present war, but there was no mistaking the strong likeness between father and son—even to the scars. For young Bill, too, had collected a scar in action with the Brood—hotheaded action just such as had cost Daly his life. But the Sky Devil had steadied his son down, and young Bill now fought with the best of them.

There was no need to warn the Brood about breaking formation. These boys knew the answers; they knew their skipper. Again, Tom Hanson would fly rear-end Charlie position.

"Weather's clearing a bit out to sea," Dawson clipped. "Can't promise you action, but I can promise you Jerry isn't asleep. Okay, get aboard. It's time we scrambled."

Flight Sergeant Bat Hennedy, at the chocks of the Skipper's ship, grinned and stuck up his thumbs. Young Bill returned the salutation. There was a strong bond between these two. Suddenly

he waved to Bat, who jerked the chocks clear, and young Bill's Spitfire shot ahead, followed by the Flight. They circled their station once, received a meteorological check-up, and then the Sky Devil was leading them out to sea.

As he flew across the rim of the coast he got a relayed message from Stalway, whose fleet was now in that grim danger zone—the no-man's-sea between fighter protection and sea craft escort. It was a reminder to the Sky Devil that Captain Stalway remembered—and expected action.

Never had Bill Dawson been so keen on making good an assignment, charged with pride as he was for the service he represented. Captain Stalway had put him and the Air Force through the hoops, and if a mistake had been made, no matter whose the responsibility had been, it must be rectified. Redemption must be written off in blood and courage.

There was another strong reason why the Sky Devil was anxious to make good. He had wangled his way into the combat service by sheer manipulation, even though his past record had helped. Well over the borderline of age limit for fighter pilots as he was, the fierce speed of these Mark Nine Spits tested his nerve, physical condition, and coordination every time he dived them in action.

Never could he allow any extraneous thought to distract him. But such was the case this morning. It was hard to shake off the upsetting experience of yesterday. He shrugged and firmed his grip on the column, weaving from side to side as he conned the rifts in the fog for sign of the convoy fleet.

Astern, at five hundred feet above the flight, Tom Hanson was alert. It was his keen eyes which first spotted an almost infinitesimal speck in the sky, off to port.

His warning reached his skipper almost simultaneously with a call from base wireless.

As the Sky Devil signaled his flight and swung off to starboard a point or two, Tom Hanson wondered. Had he been in command, he would have pulled up for the cirrus in order to get a better spotting position above the approaching enemy. Still the skipper ought to know what he was doing; he always seemed to be right.

Suddenly a flight of enemy craft streaked across a whitish-gray patch of cloud stratum.

Bill Dawson glimpsed them, and his nerve fibers tightened.

"Decoys," he muttered.

They were Focke-Wulfs attempting to lure the British formation in on them, but the keen eye of the Sky Devil had spotted another formation of enemy ships. And not even when he received a vituperative explosion from Captain Stalway did he change his planned method of handling this emergency.

He swiftly pulled his Brood up for more altitude. The fog had almost lifted from the sea lane and Dawson saw the rise and fall of heavily laden hulls.

Suddenly, he gasped. Three Heinkels were peeling off out of a cloud. The Sky Devil hadn't known that a tanker was steaming far ahead of the main convoy lane. It was toward her the Heinkels were bound.

He signaled his flight and heeled over, his face grimly set, his thumb quivering over his fire button like a serpent's tongue.

NOW! He shoved his stick down and felt a wave of nausea momentarily overcome him, a near blackout. Then he recovered and looked down.

Below, a geyser of salt spume obscured the tanker. Bill Dawson held his breath. He despaired of ever seeing that hull again, but—there she was! She was plowing out of the broth of an almost fatal near-miss.

The Sky Devil's eyes were slitted as he conned the back of a slanting Heinkel through the cross hairs of his sights. Suddenly his thumb pressed. A three-second squirt struck the bomber amidships, but she recovered and whirled up and over. Dawson emulated her action, came over on a wing and pressed his fire button. This time the burst was shorter, but a deadly effective squirt.

Out of the upper altitudes tumbled a formation of Nazi fighter protection craft, and the Sky Devil scarcely had time to watch the plunge of his bomber victim to the sea.

His boys, who had spoiled for action for a week, blazed into the thick of the hottest combat action they had seen in some time.

As he out-manuevered a Messerschmitt, Bill Dawson wondered if that old salt of a sea captain was following this sky drama.

He chandelled away, went into an amazing half roll off the enemy guns, then suddenly zoomed to squirt a short burst into the Jerry's belly.

Now there was nothing left to distract the Sky Devil. Only the strong motive charged him—to give the best account possible in this hellish business of bloody sky warfare.

Hanson signaled that he was turning out to engage another bomber attack. The enemy force was becoming much greater than Dawson had first observed. And these Jerries were good.

Bill Dawson took time out to convince himself as he suddenly shoved down on the tail assembly of a Heinkel whose sights were set at the "Monsoon Queen" herself.

The Sky Devil was ready to trip his guns when suddenly, from the deck of more than one freighter below, there spurted the flame of anti-aircraft fire.

H.E. burst all around the Sky Devil's Spitfire, and he felt the shock of lead striking his ship's fuselage—lead of ack-ack machine-gun bullets. Dawson was almost forced to abandon his attack on the bomber, but the "Monsoon Queen" was cold meat. He slid down on a wing, leveled momentarily, then dived his Spit and pressed his fire button in a prolonged burst which sent the Heinkel plunging, hissing into the Channel with her full bomb load.

The resultant explosion was terrific. It hurled the bow of the "Monsoon Queen" high, almost standing the heavy tramp on her stern.

As the Sky Devil zoomed into the clearway, he sent a quick radio message below.

"S . . . for Shark . . . You blistered old shellback . . . How do you like those potatoes? Cut your ack-ack . . . cut your ack-ack."

Bill Dawson chuckled softly. If only the "Monsoon Queen's" operator received that message and conveyed it, verbatim, to Stalway.

But now the Sky Devil became sternly grim again. As he cast a sharp glance at his fuel gauge. There was still plenty of action ahead of him, but his gas couldn't be expected to hang out much longer; nor his ammunition.

He turned out and wirelessly to Jerry Carlton, giving his exact location. It had to be done. This convoy of valuable cargo must be saved, no matter what the cost.

Now he signaled to his flight for action in line and then in echelon formation. They whirled around the convoy of rolling ships now under full steam ahead. Now and then, the Sky Devil peeled off on a wing to intercept a bomber coming in out of the clouds.

Bill Dawson was forced to cut his flight in half, to engage the enemy fighters. He, with Martin and Calway, were all that were left to handle the bombers.

To those sea-dog watchers below, on the decks of the freighters, it seemed impossible that those six trim little fighters of the R.A.F. could be expected to stand off the overwhelming odds against them.

Suddenly a puff of white showed in the sky. Bill Dawson gasped. As he watched the Spitfire rolling down to the Valhalla of the deep. One of his pilots had been forced to hit the silk. It was Hanson, and Dawson wondered how badly, if at all, Tom was hit.

Gradually, the enemy was closing in, their numbers manifesting their strength and forecasting the ultimate outcome.

The Sky Devil realized his predicament, and steeled himself for the sky duel that would probably mean his finish. Yet if his time had come, he and especially Captain Stalway would know that hereafter, no man could stand up in a little smoke-filled pub and sound off against the Air Force.

Martin's ship swept across the Sky Devil's bows. Martin waggled his wings, and together they went up into a tight zoom. All their guns tripped simultaneously and a Heinkel burst into flame.

A MAD splattering burst of enemy fire shattered the Sky Devil's instrument panel. Something cut his forehead and he was momentarily blacked out. In that split instant he felt his Spitfire stagger under the shock of another burst of enemy fire.

He spiraled his ship up into a terrible loop. His head swam as the Spit came out of it in an acute vertical, but he had the back of an enemy pilot squarely in his ring sight. Grim-faced, his tongue tasting his salt-tinged blood, he bided his time. Now, with a half snarl, he thumbed his button, held it down until his Brownings sputtered



themselves dry. Still he held his thumb down and kept on in his deathly dive above a flaming Messerschmitt that was plunging terribly into the sea.

As he realized the passing of his ammo, a low groan escaped the Sky Devil. He coiled his Spit up for altitude. If his belts were dry, then so must be those of his Brood members, or nearly so.

But the sky fight was not yet over. In the clearway, alone for the moment, Bill Dawson wondered if he had made location clear to Carlton's radio man! The Mosquitos should surely have been in here by this time.

Now he glimpsed one of his pilots in difficulties. It was Calway, sparring around helplessly—out of ammunition.

The Sky Devil thundered his ship down, and swept across the bows of a Nazi craft. He zoomed, pulling the enemy off a deadly line of fire and the Nazi tracers streaked past their target. Despite empty gun belts Bill Dawson had saved his friend from almost certain death.

Martin was coming down, signaling that he was out of ammo.

Dawson swung his ship around in a wide circle, while he coned the upper altitudes. All at once, he tensed, every nerve tending with a thousand fires. Peeling off were two Heinkels, supported by three Focke-Wulfs that were turning out, diving.

The Sky Devil shot a glance downward at the rolling shape of the "Monsoon Queen."

"O.K., blast you, Stalway!" he clipped. "I hope you'll be well satisfied, for this looks like the end for us. But watch us, first, and then spout what you see into the foam of a pint of beer in some little pub."

Lips grimly set, the seared scar on his face dancing in its smear of blood, the Sky Devil gunned his Spit and went streaking up to set his prop into the nose lane of a diving Heinkel.

It was this bit of sheer, suicidal action that confronted Squadron Leader Jerry Carlton as he dived his Mosquito flight from a patch of cloud stratum.

He slid off on a wing and pressed his cannon and machine gun buttons.

To the Sky Devil's amazement, the Heinkel he was set to crash suddenly broke apart as if hit by forked lightning. Dawson turned out and half

rolled. When he recovered it was to see a terrible Mosquito zoom like a rocket.

"Carlton—Thanks, pal," Dawson breathed.

He climbed and called in his boys—Calway, Martin, Tanner and Dawe. They gathered about him in formation—crippled falcons, with the scent of blood in their nostrils.

They watched the fierce action below, wincing now and then as those terrible craft of Carlton's swept the skylanes free.

Now Dawson wiped his face with a piece of cotton waste and grinned broadly.

He wirelessly a message to Carlton, advising him that gas was low. Then he wagged his wings, a signal to his boys to hit for home. But first, he must contact Stalway for word of Tom Hanson.

After what seemed an age, a message began crackling in from below.

"S . . . for Shark calling S.D . . . Hanson safe aboard. Only slightly nicked, left arm . . . S . . . for Shark will be buying a lot of drinks . . . Sends his deep thanks. Hopes you understand . . ."

The Sky Devil gulped hard.

"Message received," he radioed back. "Advise S . . . for Shark. I'll be matching every drink he sets up and wish luck. . . . Cheerio!"

With a last glance around him, the Sky Devil settled himself over the controls and lapsed into deep reverie as his Spit carried him swiftly across the Channel with her last few quarts of gas.

He was smiling softly, as he thought of Stalway and their next reunion, for meet again they would. It was in the cards. And Bill Dawson was looking forward to it eagerly. For secretly, he admired, and was proud of the big old deep-water man—and all men like him!