

# The Nippon Nightmare

A Buzz Benson Adventure by Arch Whitehouse

*The moment Buzz Benson flew over that landing field near the Mississippi River, he knew that something strange, something ghastly, had happened. A weird glow filled the air, and a white dust coated the field like snow. And on that tarmac, where men lay huddled and telephone bells remained unanswered, nothing moved—nothing stirred. Yet it was not death that had claimed them.*

IT'S more than 1,800 miles from San Diego to Pensacola, Florida, no matter how you jump it. If they induced you to do it in a Curtiss F11C-2, as they did Buzz Benson, it would have taken you fully twelve hours.

And that's just what it took Buzz Benson, the flying reporter of the Los Angeles Mercury, on this his latest Secret Service job for Major Norton—a job that had left the country stunned, and a big chunk of the population under the lethal influence of "Sleep Snow".

The F11C-2 is jocularly known as the Navy Goshawk. It has a 575 h.p. Wright "Cyclone" motor that gives it a top speed of 193 and with both tanks full, it has a range of about 590 miles. The lower can, fitted beneath the fuselage, may be dropped at will, if things get hot. The Goshawk is designed to carry two Browning guns and 1,200 rounds of leaden death. There are racks to cart 470 pounds of bombs, which may be released from any angle up to and including the vertical.

It could be called a single-seater Helldiver, if you like. To the trade, it is known as a shipboard fighter, but when Buzz Benson got through with it a lot of sinister gentlemen were calling it something quite different.

They had every reason to—but not before the Army, the Navy and a host of diplomatic gentlemen had experienced half a week of helpless agony; not before every living and breathing thing within 150 miles of the Mississippi delta had been put to sleep for more than forty-eight hours; not before millions of dollars worth of damage had been done; and not before an unknown power had almost split the

nation in two by taking command of the Mississippi River.

The world will never know, and would never believe it if it were told, that a man known as "Lugata of the Lethal Lungs" had almost succeeded in capturing the key point of the Gulf of Mexico and planting a force near New Orleans that would have meant the complete capture of the United States for the *Nippon Kokumin Shakaito*, the mad Blood Brotherhood of Japan.

You will probably remember that an unusual plague of what was called sleeping sickness was reported from St. Louis all the way down to Baton Rouge last summer. Well, figure it out for yourself.

Buzz got the first inkling that something was wrong when he received a wild message from Flag-Lieutenant Yancey W. Wilberforce, who was at Pensacola. The message ordered him to pick up a Goshawk at San Diego and head for the noted Florida air station.

"Avoid New Orleans, if possible," Wilberforce had added.

But Buzz had not avoided it. There was too much of a lure about the whole show for the flying reporter to do that. If there was something going on at New Orleans, he wanted to find out all about it, and the best way to find out was to stop there. Then, too, his tanks were almost dry by the time he had swept across Grand Lake and was hurtling on toward Lake Salvador. He had to stop at the Menefee landing ground, for the new American Airways' station on Lake Pontchartrain was not as yet completed.

But the moment he sat above the field, he knew something was wrong. The strange, opaque

glow that had marked the area about the whole southeastern portion of Louisiana became more apparent as he dropped lower and waited for a signal to land. The field seemed to be dusted with a strange whiteness, as though coated with a light film of snow.

“What the devil!” he growled. “What have they been doing around here? Why doesn’t that bird in the tower give me the flag?”

He sniffed, sensing a tingling sensation in the air.

Then he hoiked the Goshawk up and climbed with the last few ounces of juice in his tank. With another glance down, he reached inside the fuselage cupboard and drew out a box-respirator. Slipping his helmet off, he drew on the mask, clamped the nose-piece over his nostrils and placed the rubber-tipped tube in his mouth and drew the face mask tighter about his face.

“I won’t take any chances,” he beamed, peering through the round eye-pieces. “There’s something queer going on down there, and I want none of it.”

He ignored the strangely silent control-tower and prepared to go down. Glancing at the watch, he saw it was getting on toward ten a.m. With a strange flick of his helmeted head, he prepared to drop the Goshawk on the runway. As he went down, he noticed that there were a number of ships standing in unusual positions on the con-loading platforms; there were men, too, reclining in easy positions everywhere. But nothing seemed to move!

“This is the wildest thing I’ve ever run into. What’s the matter with them?” he grumbled to himself, feeling strangely cold and lonely.

HE had to give his attention to the bouncing Goshawk now. At last, he put her down, flicked his tail around, and headed for the main hangar. Behind him he left a sharp trail of two wheel tracks and the wobbling narrow line drawn by the tail-skid castor through the sugary whiteness that covered everything.

“Good Lord!” he gasped. “I was right. They’re all gassed! Look at them—lying about the place like a lot of dead cattle.”

He left the Goshawk on the open bit of tarmac and shut off the “Cyclone.” Then he scrambled out, slipped out of his parachute harness, and

began an investigation. Men were sprawled out in all positions. A big Condor stood on the concrete, her props silent. Through the windows, Buzz could see the two pilots, limp and sprawling. In the cabin a number of passengers were still in their seats. A woman and a man were in a relaxed position down the aisle.

Buzz opened the cabin door and climbed in, sucking with a whistling sound on his rubber mouthpiece. He was prepared for a ghastly scene when he got inside, but, to his amazement, no one seemed to be in any particular agony. They were all breathing easily.

“Asleep!” he muttered, staring around. “What the devil hit them?” He climbed into the cockpit and peered into the faces of the two pilots. They, too, were sleeping like children.

“Hey!” roared Buzz into his mouth-piece. “Wake up! Pull out of it!”

He shook them both by the shoulders, but received only a dull grunt in response. He went back into the cabin and tried to rouse the hostess, who lay peacefully against the pantry door. She responded in no way to Benson’s shaking.

“They’re all asleep,” he muttered again. Then he went back up into the cockpit and noticed that the tanks were empty, the switches on and the throttles set to idling positions.

“They brought her down,” his voice tinkled into the tube, “and while she was idling, the pilots went to sleep. She ran until all the gas was gone, and here she is.”

Nothing moved. Nothing stirred. Mechanics lay about with tools in their hands. Traffic men sprawled across benches or against wheels with their check-in reports lying dusty by their sides. More mechanics were found reclining against greasy bench legs. Some lay flat on their faces; some were curled up like puppies. The waiting room was another chamber of sleeping mystery. Fully a dozen passengers, with their bags at their feet, were curled up in various attitudes in the easy wicker chairs. Telephone bells rang, but no one answered. Machines clicked in the operations room as the teletypes chattered away, pounding out messages and pleading for information.

Buzz wanted to take up one of the phones and answer it, but he was afraid to remove his mask. He thought of answering by typing a message over the teletype, but decided to do nothing.

“Only get everyone up in the air. Let ‘em sleep. They seem to be all right. I’m heading for Pensacola!”

He made another hurried inspection through the shops and operations room, where men and women lay back in their chairs like weary dummies or were slumped down in strange attitudes on the floor. There was no explanation for it all. He tried to arouse one or two more, but with no success. Finally he went out to the concrete apron again. Still nothing moved but the listless wind-sock on top of the control-tower.

WITHOUT further investigation, Buzz lifted the hatch of a gas pump and drew out the hose. Then he filled his gas tanks, replenished the oil and wound the inertia starter.

“I’m going to Pensacola as fast as this boiler will take me there,” he growled, slipping back into his harness and seeing that his flying helmet and goggles were handy.

He climbed in, kicked the inertia starter, and listened to the motor whir. Then, just as the engine caught and set the little Goshawk trembling, something moved nearby.

Dull splatterings of earth, peppery concrete and dust began to flick up. Buzz cocked his head a minute and stared down. Then with a jerk, he flipped the throttle forward and made the Goshawk leap. The flickerings were from the spinning stems of machine-gun bullets that were being showered down on him from above. Someone else had found the field of Morpheus!

Without looking up, Buzz headed the Goshawk around and ripped her into the wind and went pounding down a runway and hurtled into the air. As she made her height, Buzz glanced back and saw a powerful seaplane. He’d been studying these Jap ships carefully of late, and he decided that this machine was an Aichi seaplane—a single-seater—powered with a 450 h.p. Jupiter motor. She was nothing to play with, even though she was a seaplane, lugging two pontoons around with her.

The Aichi smacked another spray of lead at him that rattled around the dural tubes of his tail-section. Buzz quickly tried his controls and satisfied himself that all was secure.

Then, forgetting that he still wore the gas helmet, he tried to stage a battle with the darting

seaplane. It had now begun to ease away toward the gulf, but Buzz was making the best of his climbing ability and trying to get up to the foreigner.

“There you are,” he growled, watching the Jap ship keep its height and continue to edge away to the open water. “He’ll keep away from me, now that he has missed with his first effort.”

By now the two ships were definitely heading for the open sea. Buzz tried to get in a couple of long-range bursts at the fleeing mystery ship, but succeeded only in making it wriggle its tail a trifle.

For fully fifteen minutes this went on, and then they began to reach a gossamer grouping of cirrus clouds. Buzz knew it was all over. The pursued machine would take advantage of that shield, and probably duck back toward the mainland.

“This damn gas mask,” he grunted again, running his finger under the face-mask and raising it a trifle. “I’ll take a chance on it. Ought to be clear now.”

With a last glance up at the fleeing Aichi, Buzz wrestled with the tight-fitting mask, while he held the stick between his knees. He had to pull the loop harness over his head, and get the nose-clip away from his nostrils. It took several seconds, and finally he was able to slip the mask into its pocket and ram the box-respirator into the narrow cockpit cupboard. Then he quickly drew on his own leather helmet, adjusted the goggles, and took a new view of things.

The first thing he spotted was the Aichi coming dead-on at him, two guns blazing like those of Hades. He had been caught napping badly.

The inferno of tracer, lead, and fire smashed into the roaring Goshawk and seemed to stop it in its tracks. Buzz ripped his ship over, risking a burst through the fuselage, and hoped for the best.

The best he got was the fact that the Jap ship failed to come on. That gave Buzz his only chance. With a wild swerve he drew back his throttle and let the Goshawk claw up into a stall. Then, setting his stick and rudder, he let her fall away into a spin.

Three whirls, and she was slapping through a layer of cloud. Buzz drew her out of the spin. Hopefully he leveled off and turned out to sea again.

For several minutes Buzz continued to whirl around within the shelter of the cloud, and then, satisfied that he had eluded his foe, shot out, and rammed his blunt nose down the blue-white skyway between two bulging piles of cumulus.

"Well, I'll leave him for now," he muttered, "but I'll be back, Mr. Aichi. I'd like to know where you went, though."

Before he could make his turn back toward the mainland, Buzz caught sight of a flashing-winged seaplane dropping down on the water beside a two-stacker Blue Funnel Line ship. He caught the outline of the Pacific tramp at a glance. With a smile he eased back into the shielding cloud and headed for Pensacola.

"So you had to go to New Orleans, eh?" snapped Flag-Lieutenant Wilberforce, when Buzz had been brought across from the hangars to the Operations Office of the Navy depot. "It's a good thing I didn't mention not diving down on Fujiyama. You'd have tried that. Well, you got in. What did you see? I suppose you know you are the only man to come out of Menefee for hours? Are they all dead?"

"No. Just sleeping, so far as I could make out. Some of them were snoring beautifully. How long does it last?"

"We don't know. The whole area is covered. How come you had a gas mask with you?"

"Been reading too many books on the next war, I guess. I go nowhere without one now. Anything can happen these days."

"Well, how'd they get that stuff in there? They've covered a big area all around the mouth of the Mississippi—about up to Vicksburg, as far as I can make out."

"Yeah. It looks as though they've had a young snowstorm."

"We've tried to get doctors in there out of Mobile, but we have no masks—that is, none that these birds seem to be sure of. What is it?" went on Wilberforce.

"How do I know? They're all sound asleep. They'll wake up, I guess, none the worse for wear."

"That's a report we got an hour ago from an Army doctor who took a chance up near Biloxi. He calls it Sleep Snow. But how did it get there?"

"See my bus?" asked Buzz. "A Jap Aichi took a whack at me over the field. He came down on me while I was taking off."

"Where did you shoot him down? I'd like to have a look at that bus."

"I didn't. He nearly scattered me all over the Gulf of Mexico. You can't fly in a gas mask, Yancey. Don't try it, unless you have to."

"What happened to him?"

Buzz explained how the Jap sea-plane had apparently gone down alongside a Blue Funnel Line tramp, and how he felt that this ship had been dropping the Sleep Snow on the area around the mouth of the Mississippi.

"Blue Funnel Line ship—with two funnels," barked Wilberforce, snatching at a shipping chart and running his finger down the list of ships. "That must be the *Hako Maru*. She's heading for Savannah, out of Tokyo. I'll have her nabbed!"

"No. Take it easy. I'm going back in an hour and find her myself. If I'm not back by dark, you can do what you wish. Get the idea?"

"Suits me, Buzz," agreed Wilberforce. "But we've got to stop them. If they can drop gas that puts people to sleep for twenty-four hours or more, there's no telling what they might be up to."

The door opened and a tall man in blue and gold came in. Wilberforce leaped to his feet and then glared at Buzz.

"Anything new, Wilberforce?" asked the man anxiously.

"Mr. Benson here—this is Rear Admiral Cummings, Benson," began the Flag-Lieutenant again. "Benson has found a Jap seaplane in the area, and it returned to a tramp that we believe to be the *Hako Maru*, somewhere out in the Gulf off New Orleans."

BUZZ told his story again.

"Um," the Rear Admiral muttered when Buzz had finished. "I have been in touch with Major Norton in Washington. It's ghastly, Mr. Benson. We've got to do something to stop it. The devils have hit us at a sore point, you know. The Atlantic Fleet is still in the Pacific, and it will be several days before we can get them around here into the Gulf."

"Will the Atlantic Fleet be necessary, sir?" gasped Wilberforce.

“Most certainly! Don’t you realize what they are getting at?”

“Well, frankly, I can’t quite see their aim.”

“It’s very simple, Wilberforce,” went on the Rear Admiral. “There is more than a Jap seaplane and a Blue Funnel Line tramp to this. Somewhere hidden among those damnable islands and channels of the crazy Mississippi delta there must be something else....”

“What?” asked both Buzz and Wilberforce.

“Well,” explained the Navy officer quietly, “they are not gassing the Mississippi Valley just for an experiment. They are planning to gain control of the river—probably up as far as St. Louis.”

“Using submarines?” chimed in Buzz.

“They can’t do that,” stormed Wilberforce. “The current flowing out of the delta is too strong for submarines to tackle.”

“That’s where you are wrong, Wilberforce,” chided the Rear Admiral. “Did you see that United Press dispatch from London the other day that said that the Japanese Navy had been holding more experimental maneuvers in connection with aircraft in the Inland Sea of Japan? It stated that the Japs have a new-type submarine that can handle mine-laying in that deep, swiftly flowing water—something that has never been attempted before. If they can buck the Inland Sea, they can dawdle through the delta and probably take control of the river. It also stated that they have developed a new gas which can be sprayed from submarines. Coming in contact with the water, it emits a new and dangerous tear gas.”

“Whew!” gasped Buzz.

“They can cut the United States in two by that means.”

“Most certainly. We have been badly fooled this time. We are always looking for trouble on the west coast. This time they have matched us with a new twist that, if successful, will mean more than an actual landing on the California shore. They’ve got to be stopped.”

“Then you think, sir,” broke in Buzz, “that these seaplanes are dropping Sleep Snow in this Mississippi area so that some hidden war craft can rush up and take the strong-points along the Mississippi?”

“There can be no other reason for all this. They’ve got vessels of some sort—probably

submarines of the *Kaigun* type, which are capable of crossing the Pacific and returning without refueling. These ships also carry a folding-wing submarine. If they have a fake mother ship nearby, there’s no telling how far they can go. The Japanese War Office will deny it, of course, and blame it on the *Nippon Kokumin Shakaito*, but they never explain how these devils get these ships that are always off on “secret maneuvers!”

“Well,” Buzz snapped, getting up. “There’s no time like the present. Let’s be hopping. I’ll get that *Hako Maru* if I have to dive down her funnels. I think if we stop her, we can stop the whole works.”

“Splendid spirit, sir,” the Rear Admiral beamed. “Nothing must be left undone to stop them.”

“All right,” said Buzz, moving over to get his parachute harness. “I’ll try and get this tramp steamer and see what it’s all about.

“Now you have Army and Navy planes patrolling this area to stop any Jap ship that might get away. Keep in touch with them by radio and if I do not get back or report within three hours, send them out to get this two-funnel baby.”

With that, Buzz shook hands with the Rear Admiral and headed for the door.

THE Curtiss Goshawk was all ready for him when he got back to the field. Light bombs had been placed in the racks. Both tanks had been filled again, and all damage to the fabric and motor hurriedly repaired.

All around him there was a general buzz of anxious activity. Two-seaters, single-seaters and three-place bombers were being tuned up. Navy pilots were answering emergency-siren calls and rushing to the Operations Office, dragging their flying suits, helmets, and ear-phone equipment. Lewis and Browning guns rattled as they were tested. Motors roared, and inertia starters whined and growled.

Buzz wasted little time in getting off. He remembered the mad picture Rear Admiral Cummings had drawn of the death and destruction wrought by the amazing Sleep Snow. There was work to be done this time—if ever.

With a wild climbing turn off the concrete, he hurled the little Goshawk up into the air and raced out across the bay and headed for Port Eads on the

tip of the Mississippi delta. It would take him an hour to get there and another half hour to search the area where the ship might be. He made a careful study of every surface craft below him and was certain that no Blue Funnel Line craft had come within his vision. Off to the left, when he got his height, he could see the dirty-white scar that marked the area covered by the mysterious Sleep Snow, and wondered how long it would last. Already he was beginning to notice definite spots where it seemed to be disappearing. But he could not get the mad picture out of his mind.

The first hour droned by tediously. The sea below was slaty smooth except for the dull wakes trailing the shipping that crept across the Gulf.

Then off deep into the Gulf, Buzz caught the unmistakable outline of a tramp steamer, with a high forecastle, a sharp prow, and the deep cutaway well aft of the bridge. It was a Blue Funnel Line craft.

“But she’s a three funnel job,” he muttered. “What the devil? That’s the same ship as before, but this one has three funnels. What’s a tramp steamer doing with three funnels?”

With a quick flip of the wrist and a dab on the rudder, Buzz screwed the Goshawk around and shot out for this strange craft.

The booming little Goshawk bore into the air and nosed down toward the three-funnel ship idling along through the easy swells. The closer Buzz got, the more certain he was that something queer was brewing. There seemed to be no nautical neatness about the vessel. The decks were strangely cluttered, for a ship at sea. There was a dim hint of strange design to the whole thing, and there seemed to be an air of unusual activity about her.

He boomed in and swung over to get a better view of the craft. Everything seemed out of place. One funnel, for instance, seemed unnecessarily close to the aft mast. The whole structure, as viewed from above, brought doubt and misgivings, with its crude layout and shapeless masses.

“I’ll bet a buck this baby has been disguised. There’s something queer about that rear stack. It doesn’t look as if it were used much. By golly, they have tried to camouflage her with a false funnel—that’s it! They have put up a fake stack.”

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

Before Buzz could complete his argument with himself, the little Goshawk trembled under a bitter flailing of lead. Something banged under her belly. A wing trembled, fluttered, and began to wobble. He eased back on the stick and then drew the throttle to cut down the thrust of the prop. Still she fluttered and wavered. A bitter gunfire opened up again from above and behind, and with a final effort, Buzz shot his ship through between the two masts and tried to drop a bomb down the funnels. It was no good, for the two fragmentations hit the edge of the deck, blasted themselves to bits and hurled a sprinkling of shrapnel all through the lifeboats, leaving Buzz high and dry.

“Now I’ll see who’s aboard this boiler,” Buzz growled as he dumped the rest of the bombs and yanked the lever that released the extra gas tank. “I’ll save this crate if I can, anyway.”

But again those two Jap hornets came down on him, spattering the sea water all about him. With a final swerve on the last ounce of power, Buzz slithered the Goshawk over closer and dropped her gently on a heaving roller that took most of the shock. His flotation bags were already inflated, and the Curtiss took to the water like a duck.

By the time the ship had settled on the water and Buzz had climbed out to sit on the top wing, the blocks and falls of a boat were screaming and creaking from a davit at the stern. A boat, with a gleaming bronze screw flashing at her stern, was lowered into the water, and the motor started. A party of solemn-faced Japs manned her under the orders of a small, portly officer who wore the curl and ring of a sub-lieutenant of the Japanese Navy. All had dull black guns in their Navy belts. As the boat got under way, they lined up facing the disabled Goshawk, while the two Aichi seaplanes roared about overhead.

The boat was maneuvered along side, and Buzz was helped across the wing and pushed to one of the cross seats.

“You are taken in the name of Lugata,” clacked the sub-lieutenant. “You are a prisoner of the Nippon Kokumin Shakaito. You understand?”

“I understand,” snapped Buzz. “It’s getting to be an act!”

The Jap sailors exchanged puzzled glances, but while Buzz had put on a front of indifference, he was none too satisfied with his position. The Navy

boys might come out and get him, and, on the other hand, they might get him into a whale of a lot of trouble.

NOW the boat was run back under the stern and, with the hoisting tackle hooked into the rings, she was lifted clear of the water again. A line had been put on the floating Goshawk and brought to the deck. Evidently they intended to salvage it if possible.

On the aft deck, Buzz was taken in tow by an armed foursome of Japanese Marines, who led him down the boat deck to the companionway that went up to the bridge. As he sauntered along under the Nipponese taunts of the seamen, who stood by covered guns and tarpaulin-protected stacks of mysterious tanks, he gave the strange third funnel a keen glance.

"I was right," he said to himself. "That third tube is a phoney—a telescopic thing. But not bad—not bad. It would fool anyone looking at it from sea level."

Up the dull, brass-bound steps they pushed him, with pistols rammed into his ribs. Along the bridge wing he went, and then, with a sharp turn, into the charthouse, through another narrow passageway and into the cabin of Lugata—he of the Lethal Lungs.

The man was sitting behind a long mahogany table strewn with maps, charts, message forms, almanacs, and navigation instruments. On each side of him were armed sentries, stiff as ramrods. Part of a meal still remained on a lacquer tray. Nearby, a decorated bottle contained sake, the Japanese high-power beverage.

But the formidable layout of sentries, guards, guns, and gleaming pistols did not startle Buzz so much as did the appearance of the man behind the table. He was a grotesque, monstrous thing, hardly a real Jap—more of a giant Mongol who had somehow found himself under the banner of the Rising Sun. But those who know Oriental history realize that much of the Japanese militarism may be traced to the Mongols who have wormed their way into the inner circles of Nippon,

It took Buzz several minutes to take the man in completely. He had a high, sharp crown, thatched with stiff bristly hair. His tall, narrow forehead was distorted by a scar above the right eye, as if

from a crushing blow, that ran down, like a miniature cleft in a rock, to an empty eye-socket. The left eye peered out with all the cruel hatred of a blue-steel pistol barrel.

"You're a beauty," reflected Buzz, as the guards backed to the door. Then Buzz saw the hands of the man—hands that seemed affixed there by some god with a sense of the ridiculous. They were long, beautiful hands, of artistic proportions. The backs were clean, smooth, and as dainty as a woman's. The fingers were slim, slightly tapered, but elastic and active. They were the hands of an artist socketed into wrists that a swordsman might envy.

"Ah, I see you are an artist, too, *Mistaire Benson*," the man's twisted mouth finally said. "You admire my hands. Not like my face, eh? You wonder, yes?"

"Look as though a good day's work would do them good," Buzz flashed back at him. He didn't mean this, but he had to say something to keep up the conversation.

The man stiffened as though a hot iron had been placed at the base of his spine. He rose, placed the palms of his hands on the table and bent over toward Buzz. His face became bitter, and a scowl carved new and hideous lines in the mask of hatred he so suddenly assumed.

"I've done many a good day's work," he muttered, "but getting my hands on you today is the best I've ever done."

"That's a swell compliment to me," rasped Buzz.

The man whipped himself into a more thunderous rage. The guards moved forward, but he barked at them and sent them back.

"You may well crow now," he bellowed. "This is your last chance. By midnight, you will have seen the downfall of the country you have worked and fought so hard to save. After that glorious scene, you'll wind up in the waters that have played you so treacherously."

"I've heard all this before, from half a dozen bandits like you—and all with the same result," taunted Buzz. "What's your gag, anyway?"

"Lugata wields the breath of hell. You have heard, of course. We have put two states to sleep. The rest will be easy. The hidden fleet of the *Nippon Shakaito Kokumin* will swarm up the great

river and take your key positions. There will be no one to stop us.”

“Oh, yes, there will,” smiled Buzz. “You’ll get the surprise of your life, the minute they find I’m behind time.”

“Ah, but we know of all that. A Commander John Dowling will lead a formation of Berliner-Joyce OJ-1’s to look for you. We shall keep our false funnel up. That will make them land to investigate, as we are the only Blue Funnel Line steamer in the vicinity.”

“And when they do,” taunted Buzz again, “you might as well pack up, because they’ll blow you out of the water,”

“Not so fast! Not so fast!” said Lugata. “As I said, they’ll drop on the water alongside to come on board and inspect our papers. We’ll greet Commander John Dowling with all the politeness of our race. His planes will lay off into the wind. Into the wind, *Mistaire* Benson. Do you understand?”

“You devil!” stormed Buzz. “You mean you’ll lay down a cloud of gas and attempt to stop them?”

“Exactly!” Lugata laughed boisterously. “Then we’ll—well, we can use those ships tonight. Isn’t radio a wonderful thing, *Mistaire* Benson?”

Buzz was silent. He was picturing the scene of the formation of OJ-1’s lying off from the *Hako Maru*, which had been disguised as the *Mitsu Maru* with the aid of a telescopic funnel. Then in the darkness and evening mist a gas would be released that would envelop the pilots and observers before they could get their masks on. The rest was a mental nightmare to Buzz.

But Lugata was giving orders again. One man stripped Buzz of his parachute harness and pack. Another removed his overall flying outfit, leaving him in his civilian tweed suit.

“I am sending for your supper, *Mistaire* Benson,” beamed the one-eyed devil. “You will eat it here and talk to me. There are many questions I would ask.”

“Wasting your time. You know enough already,” Buzz growled. “But the grub will come in handy. Look out I don’t cut your throat with the knife.”

Lugata smiled grimly and looked back at the two statuesque sentries who stood on each side of him.

“I wouldn’t take the chance, if I were you.”

THE guards who had brought Buzz in retired, and only, the two slant-eyed sentinels behind Lugata’s desk remained. A few minutes later a member of the galley brought steaming tea and some California fruit.

With a signal from the one-eyed man, Buzz sat down to eat.

“I am wondering what I will do with you, *Mistaire* Benson,” Lugata broke in as he watched Buzz. “You would, make an admirable lieutenant, working under me—when we have succeeded. We shall require a specially trained air force. You are the man for the job.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” snapped Buzz, “You’re going to need it—for running!”

Buzz was just drinking the last of the hot tea when the door opened suddenly and a chalk-faced seaman came in. He garbled a sentence or two and Lugata leaped to his feet, grabbed a speaking tube and rattled a series of orders into it. Then, turning back to the orderly, he spoke again. Buzz stared at the man a minute and noticed that he was well armed and carried a gas-mask from a loop around his neck.

“I’m sorry,” went on Lugata in his clattery English, “but your friends are arriving, and I’ll have to cut off your meal. This guard will take you to the ship’s strong room, Good-by, I’ll see you later—with some startling news!”

“It probably will be,” Buzz answered. “Well, let’s go. You’ll need a lot of luck, old top.”

But as he was guided out of the cabin, through the narrow passageway and out of the chart room, Buzz sensed a sinking feeling. He wondered how successful Lugata would be in his scheme to capture the flight of Navy seaplanes.

Down the brass-studded stairs to the fore-deck the man led him, and grunted a command to turn left and take the port-side turn. It was dark by now, and the deck, which had been washed down, was slippery. Once Buzz skidded and was saved from falling only by the quick grasp of the guard. Buzz sensed an opportunity.

Biding his time until they were in the dark section of covered deck that ran past the fore superstructure, he slipped again. The guard made another grab for him, and, in doing so, slipped himself.



From that minute a lot of things happened. There was a scuffle of feet and the swish of an arm. One figure stiffened and fell forward. The other dived for it, and they both went down. What appeared to be a one-sided struggle went on for several minutes. A coat was ripped away and then something that looked like a large tomato can on a webbing strap. There was much breathing and groaning, and finally they arose together and staggered toward the rail. The man in the seaman's cap and pea-jacket gave a sudden lurch, and the other figure, sickeningly limp, went over the rail and hit the water with a leaden splash. A guttural voice yelled something, a gun banged twice, and the man in the seaman's cap went running down the deck.

A group of deckhands came around the corner of the cabin and rushed to the rail. The man bellowed again and ran along the deck, pointing down into the water as the limp figure went floating by on the foam-flecked swell that rolled, from the bulbous sides of the tramp steamer.

It was evident that something had happened. The prisoner had escaped over the rail into the water. But what chance had he? They were miles out from the shore.

Seamen ran up and down, clacking their excitement. Voices from the bridge bellowed orders, and a dull glow of light blossomed out from a deck light. It swept the water for several minutes, but there was nothing to be seen, although one excited gunner opened fire with a rifle at a water-soaked cask that bobbed off about two chains' length away.

The man known as Lugata came along the bridge wing and stared over, bellowing and fuming. Again the man known as Benson had evaded him, even though he had evidently courted death to do so. He ordered a search-light out, and a powerful beam slashed back and forth across the inky waters, but nothing showed. He ordered the ship about, and cut a wide circle about the spot where the man had gone over-board.

"Bah!" he spat. "Where's Hao-Tsu? I'll draw his nails for allowing that white devil to get away. Where is he?"

Then began another search for a Jap seaman, but nowhere could he be found.

"He went that way," one explained, chattering with fear.

"No. Down the deck that way," remonstrated another.

"I saw him last making for the aft boat deck. He was shooting at the man in the water," explained another.

THE search continued, but the unfortunate seaman was nowhere to be found. Lugata sat in his cabin, wondering just what had happened. He was certain now that there was more to all this than had appeared to his slant eye. He was certain that Benson, if he had jumped overboard, had by some fantastic means managed to escape.

Then out of the north came the unmistakable boom of Wasp motors. The Navy pilots and observers from Pensacola, riding their Berliner-Joyce OJ-1's, were coming to the rescue. Lugata grinned.

"They come," he smiled coldly. "They come to rescue Benson, but he is not here. He was here—a perfect decoy. Now we shall see how they can take the breath of Lethal Lungs. Come, guard!"

They went on deck and stood on the bridge wing while the riding lights of the winged seamen winked menacingly and the boom of the motors increased in power and volume. On they came, roaring and thundering like a flock of winged giants, bent on revenge.

Lugata gave crisp orders to the men on the deck. Two large tanks were removed from the pile, carried to the stern, and fitted to what appeared to be stern hawse pipes. Then the men stood by, fingering their gas masks expectantly.

At last the Navy ships were over-head, circling and easing back on the throttles. A signal flare was dropped and lay on the water, sending up a red glow and emitting a column of white smoke that heeled over and went across the water to provide a certain wind-indicator. Lugata barked an order that brought the nose of the *Hako Maru* dead into the wind. Then from the rear cockpit of the leader's machine came the Morse signal "L," meaning in international code: "Heave to. Have something important to communicate."

Lugata smiled grimly, had his first officer return the "I undersand" signal, and drew the engine telegraph handle over to "Stop."

As the ship began to lose headway, the Berliner-Joyce ships lowered their roar and began to drop down behind the vessel. The leader hit the

water with a slithering splash, ran up to the side of the ship, and watched the seamen drop the Jacob's ladder over the side. Then, easing the single-pontooned seaplane around so that Commander Dowling could get out on the float and reach for the ladder, his observer took over the controls and allowed the seaplane to slide away. The Navy man came up the side, accepted the salutes of the deckhands and made his way to the bridge, where Lugata greeted him with feigned respect.

"May I see your papers, sir?" inquired Dowling. "I am seeking a two-funneled steamer of your line. I see you have three."

"Certainly. Come this way. Any trouble?" inquired the tall Oriental.

"Plenty! Have you seen a single Navy plane in this vicinity?"

"Won't you come into the chart room?" fenced Lugata.

Dowling went inside. Lugata slipped back quickly, leaned over the wing-bridge and saw that the plane which had brought Dowling had rolled back gently toward the other seaplanes lying off clear of the stern.

A quick order ran along the deck, and the men at the two tanks adjusted their gas masks and twisted a key. Then Lugata went inside and saw Dowling flat on the floor. A blow from behind had felled him.

FROM then on things happened fast. Men ran about the deck, adjusting gas masks. Others unshipped power lifeboats and swung them over the side. In five minutes the first sea-plane, with an unconscious crew in the cockpits, was brought up. The men were taken from their seats, hoisted over the rail, and dumped unceremoniously into an empty cabin. It was only fifteen minutes before all six ships were dragged alongside beneath a floodlight and had had their 122-pound demolition bombs removed. Lightning-fast fingers replaced them with long, metal canisters that had bomb like wind vanes set at one end. Within half an hour, men dressed as pilots clambered over the sides into the Navy cockpits, started the motors, checked the fuel tanks, and, where necessary, added more gasoline. Other men, in leather or heavy Navy pea-jackets and helmets, went over after them, took over the rear cockpits, and saw that the guns were loaded.

The radio room crackled with anxiety. More men came out of the hold and superintended the unloading of two Aichi seaplanes, which were hoisted up from below and lowered over the side.

In a few more minutes eight steel props were slashing the air, preparatory to the take-off. At the same time, six grim submarines, armed to the gills, crept out of a lone inlet hidden away on Chandelier Island, a sparsely inhabited bit of rocky menace to navigation. They were unhindered and unseen, for what few inhabitants the island boasted were still fast asleep as a result of the storm of Sleep Snow. This island, snugly squatting in Chandeleur Sound at the mouth of the Mississippi Delta, was a perfect hide-out for the submarines that had been secretly brought up around Cape Horn for this amazing and insane thrust at the heart of a great continent.

The seaplanes moved out in formation. Then down the Jacob's ladder went Lugata.

"Stand by until you get further orders," he snapped to his first officer, a bandy-legged Navy man in dirty blue. "We shall return for refueling within two hours. Have every man on the guns in case you are attacked from the air. Should you have to get under way, make for Timbalier Bay."

Then, as he went down the ladder and stepped upon the pontoon, which had been nosed around for him, the deck-light above suddenly went out. There was a metallic scuffling as Lugata clambered along in the darkness to the wing. Then there was a soggy splash, and a seaman gulped. Lugata went across the wing, saw that his observer was in the back pit and climbed up himself.

"Get the fool out," he swore. "The boat hook! Poor seamanship there. After all our rehearsals, too."

He watched the man on the platform ram the seaplane clear, opened up the throttle, and moved out between the bobbing ships that awaited his leader ship.

With a bark into his mouthpiece to the man behind, Lugata gave the B-J the gun and climbed into the air. The rest followed him, heading north in perfect formation.

The wings of Lethal Lungs were beating through an inky sky—heading for another Sleep Snow raid along the Mississippi.

MILE after mile they flew, until the lights of Pilottown at the extreme tip of the delta were winking at them. The man in the back seat wondered who had managed to get in there and man the navigation lights. Evidently someone had risked it, protected by a mask. At any rate, one or two lights were gleaming, to guide Lugata on. Lights meant for succor and safety were being used by a human demon to steer his course on toward the American mainland.

Then suddenly, from below, there appeared six lazy streamers of white foam that marked the backwash from the skulking submarines creeping up the delta past Pilottown.

The observer in the back seat of Lugata's ship stood up and watched the naval movements below. Lugata turned and stared at the man for an instant, then grinned and pointed, chattering something into the mouthpiece. The observer sat down quickly and reached over on his right for a black switch handle. There was a low hum as he turned on a wind-driven generator and began to set a wave-length.

Lugata caught the move, turned again, and stared at the observer. Then a flaming mask of rage swept across his face, he half-rose in his seat and tried to grab at the man's shoulder, but his face constricted into a new mask as he looked into the threatening barrel of a German Luger.

"Not tonight, Lugata!" the man in the back snapped. "I'm just tipping the diving bombers off at Pensacola. They'll be interested to know what's going on down there. They need a little night practice. Getting rusty."

"Benson! You devil!" yelled Lugata.

The whole ship seemed to tingle with the flaming rage that swept through Lugata's frame. He gripped the stick with all the ferocity of a man who has his fingers about the throat of his deadliest enemy. Buzz was barking into the mike, wondering whether any of the other observers in the captured B-J's had turned on their sets or had hooked in their headphones. His signal finally got response and he switched over to receiving, getting an okay from the flight officer on duty at Pensacola. Buzz flipped the switch handle over again and shot his load of information in short, staccato sentences. Then he called for a repeat of the message.

Satisfied that the message had gone through safely, Buzz turned his full attention to the big Oriental. Swinging in the ear-pieces and mouth-tube for speech with the Jap, Buzz began to give his orders.

"Now then, Lugata, you can make things a lot more interesting for yourself by heading around now and going straight up toward Pensacola. There you will be well taken care of. I've seen to that."

"Splendid," retorted the Jap. "And what will you do? You have no parachute. You will go down too, eh? A gallant gesture, but hardly sane. Come, let us make a deal. Why should we both go?"

"You head over for Pensacola. I'm not worrying about myself. I've explained everything. They know which ship I am in, and it will be given full clearance all the way in. You figured it was I who went overboard, eh?"

"You mean—mean you want me to lead my men to Pensacola and land them there?"

"Absolutely. They'll land there all right, once the boys see them. They'll land in heaps—burning heaps, Lugata. I'll take you in for a special souvenir."

"How do they know this ship?" pondered Lugata, without making any effort to turn. "It's no different from the others."

"No?" smirked Buzz. "What about the squadron numerals on the side? The last figure is different on each one."

"That shows how much you have been looking around," rasped the Jap back into his tube. "I had them all changed before they took off. They are all numbered the same. Take a look."

Buzz gasped. Then, turning around, he noticed that they were all marked I-T-7. They were the same identification numbers as those on the fuselage of Lugata's own ship. The realization struck Buzz a cruel blow.

"What made you think of doing that?" Buzz started to yell into the mouthpiece, but as he turned back to glare at the pilot, a talonlike hand gripped him from behind and drew him back toward the front edge of the harsh metal Scarff ring. He struggled and his gun went off, the blaze of fire passing over the top wing.

"Ha!" hissed Lugata. "You were fooled twice eh? Lugata is not such a fool as you think."

The long steel fingers tightened their grip about Benson's throat, and Buzz began to lose all control of his eyes. Strange lights flashed out in splintery gleams of reds, blues and yellows. He struggled to get a better footing, but the ship was dancing all over the sky. He flailed away with the barrel of the gun and tried to break the Jap's grip, but he was fast losing consciousness. There was only one way out, and he was taking a wild chance.

Steadying himself for a second, he brought the gun around, placed the barrel near the leather-covered arm that held him in the grip of death, and pulled the trigger. There was a deafening detonation just under his left ear—and then release. He slipped to the bottom of the cockpit, gasping for breath and struggling to regain his strength. Then, before he could get to his feet again, Lugata came diving over the top. Evidently the Jap had fastened the stick in some way to keep the ship on a reasonably even keel.

Again Buzz went down under the weight, and again he fought like a madman. He grabbed at the Jap's legs and heaved.

Lugata reached for Benson's face and clawed at his helmet. Buzz ducked and brought a short right hook up that found the Jap's jaw. Again they fell into a wild embrace, but Buzz was fighting tooth and nail, feet, knees, elbows, and head. Lugata withered under the battling and went limp. Buzz grabbed him about the waist and heaved. Lugata realized that he was facing his finish and fought back, kicking Buzz in the stomach and grabbing for his shoulders. But the flying reporter was tuned to the last ounce of battle now, and with a final wrench he dragged the Jap clear of all he was hanging on to. The ship heeled over once more, and Lugata went over the side, legs and arms flailing the air.

THAT was not all. Lugata had been disposed of, but there were seven other raging, flaming Lugatas to take care of. There was a lull in the mad drama set so high in the sky, and Buzz took every second to steady himself.

The ship was tossing about at half-throttle, the stick held between the strands of a heavy rubber band drawn across the cockpit. With a final glance around at the convoy of fighting ships, Buzz started to clamber over into the front seat.

That move was the signal for action. Three B-J's and one Aichi opened up with a leaden blizzard that made Benson's ship stagger from rudder to radial. He felt spinning-nosed hornets plucking at his blue sea-jacket and heard the sharp hiss of 30-caliber slugs slicing past his ears. But with a grunt of disdain, he cleared the Scarff ring and dropped into the seat, snapping the stick out of the retaining band and banging the throttle forward.

Over went the B-J with a screech as the steel prop bit in anew. Benson won a brief respite by slashing into the center of the lot and thus making it hard for most of them to identify him. The ruse Lugata had designed to protect himself in case of a surprise attack in the air had worked out—for the time being, at least—in Benson's favor.

"I've got to let them know again," he bellowed, fumbling about for the head-phone jack, as he laced his ship in and out among the puzzled pilots around him. "If I can only get help quickly, we can stop them and probably do the submarines dirty."

He finally found the jack and plugged it in behind him. Then, slipping his hand back into the observer's cockpit, he fixed the set for the service wave-length again. Without waiting to see whether he had caught the Pensacola station, he began chanting off a series of informative sentences.

"Captured B-J's heading on toward New Orleans. Rush defense aircraft there. Enemy submarines cutting into river mouth below Pilottown. Have taken over leader's ship. Leader thrown overboard in scuffle. Discover that all machines have been marked with same number, 1-T-7, but will try and display signal cartridge of green light to mark my plane. Ships now forming again under new leader. I am standing off clear. Hope to get as many down as possible. Will try to keep in touch."

Then, as an Aichi came over to inspect him, Buzz swung the switch over and caught the buzz of a signal coming in.

"Shore stations leaving temporary bases on Lake Pontchartrain. Hope to be able to intercept. Cannot be certain about position of reported submarines. Hope to engage...."

*Bang!* The set went out with a crackling thud. Another tempest of leaden hail splashed into the

B-J, rattling through the rear cockpit and continuing a metallic drum-fire on the dural pontoon beneath.

"That's that," moaned Buzz slapping the stick over and pulling back into the melee of ships that were attempting to form up again under a new leader. For several minutes there was a wild flurry of wings. A few bursts were fired, and then they suddenly whirled around and started back.

Buzz wheeled with them, keeping clear of all noses and watching every rear gun like a hawk.

*Brat-a-tat-tat-tat!*

A gun flamed out from somewhere above. Buzz whipped over and looked up.

"Hello! That bird in the Aichi is taking command and making them go back."

THE Aichi let fly again. Buzz whipped around, drew a slow easy bead, and let a short burst rattle out. The leading ship staggered, crawled up the sky, and fell off into a flaming spin.

In reply Buzz got a short burst from across the formation and had to slide across the nose of one of the Aichis to clear. That left seven machines in the air. There was still plenty to worry about.

But by now they were re-forming behind the Aichi that had tried to drive its former leader back. They were heading for the slimy delta that crawled out of the mouth of the Mississippi like a great black octopus.

Darting in and out, Buzz began to worry about the arrival of the Navy ships. He peered about for the cheering exhaust pennons that would herald the approach of the defense ships. There was nothing, and already they were over the lower end of the delta and getting blinking heliograph signals from the submarines that were racing up the muddy river's mouth.

"Got to do something quick now to delay them," he snapped, dragging his stick over and putting his sight on a churning B-J.

The guns rattled a short burst. A pilot went into a limp heap under the short, screeching hurricane of death. The rear gunner jerked and tried to get over the ring, but the pilot had fallen over the stick, and the B-J went down out of the picture with a final wailing scream of strained flying wires.

But that move was costly. From the three remaining two-seaters came the torrential fire of

captured Brownings. Again the masquerading flying reporter escaped by a hair's breadth. Slugs smacked into the steel struts and made the ship dance. He eased her around and put an Aichi between himself and the gunfire. Then he suddenly remembered the rear weapon in his ship, and wrenched himself around in his seat to find the pistol grip.

Before the amazed pilot in the Aichi could whip his barge out of the way, Buzz delivered a crashing burst smack into the belly of the bulging cockpit. The tiny single-seater broke up, blossomed out, and drenched the mad sky with flaming gasoline.

But the Aichi above had seen that there was no one in Benson's rear cockpit. With a wild hurtling dive he came down on him with two Vickers guns aflame. With these flaming fingers of accusation marking their man, the three B-J's went into action. Their guns opened up. The formation was forgotten in their wild effort for revenge. Buzz cleared the two lines of tracer that flamed down at him and curled around to slash his wings through a torrent of fire that splashed at him from one side.

"Now for it," he growled. "I'm marked now somehow."

The mad fight went on. Buzz put a short burst into a two-seater and then had to run for it. The darting Aichi got behind him and almost drove him into the fire from one of the two remaining B-J's. Tracers drew wild, sharp-edged designs across the sky. Through the lacy fire darted Buzz in his battered two-seater, avoiding every burst. Motors roared, guns chattered, and wings and wires screamed their wild song.

It looked hopeless. They ringed him in and slashed wicked hurricanes of fire at him from all angles. How long could it last? Buzz fought grimly, holding his fire until his target was dead in his sights. Movable guns were ranged on him from two rear pits, and their venom blasted chunks of dural from his wings. His controls strained against the ceaseless battering.

Then came a break, when the skies seemed their darkest and the flaming guns screeched their mightiest. Out of nowhere came the winged devils of Pensacola!

A THUNDEROUS blast of enraged Wasps, bellowing away in the front of a flight of Boeing F4B's, crashed into the mad picture. A B-J in front of Benson folded up with an ear-splitting crash and blew up in midair. The Aichi tried to dart away and get clear, but two Boeings caught him in their converging fire. His wing folded back on one side and he went down—a warped, wrecked thing—to hit with a foamy splash 3,000 feet below. Another B-J, trying Benson's trick, crept up near the flying reporter's wing tip, as if for protection, but Buzz whipped around in his seat and brought the movable Browning into play.

The burst was terrific. It cut the ship in two between the pilot and the observer. The pilot stamped on the rudder pedal and tried to get away, but the strain was all that was needed to complete the hacking job. The plane split dead through the middle, tearing dural tubes, fabric, plates, and gussets, and slapped her wing tip up against the fin.

Down she went in a grinding flat spin, and was lost only when darkness enveloped it in its inky shroud. Buzz suddenly realized that he might be next. When those hell-tearing Navy pilots tasted victory, there was no stopping them.

With a bellow of motor, he brought the B-J around.

There wasn't a Boeing in sight!

"Where the devil did they go to?" he gasped.

Above and below he peered, but no-where was there a sign of a Navy single-seater. A new fear trickled up his spine, and he wrenched the stick over again. At any minute he expected to feel a death-drenching from those guns that had wiped the Japs from the sky. But nothing came.

He stared at his instruments, checked the fuel, and decided to try to get to Pensacola to see what actually had happened. Then something caught his ear again and he whirled around in his seat. The sight that greeted him was horrifying. At least a dozen Boeings were riding in tight formation dead over his tail. Buzz shut his eyes and waited for the cyclone of fire that would blot him out—but it never came.

Instead, he could see the arm of a flight leader flashing up and down over the edge of the trim Boeing cockpit, waving him on. On—on to where?

Then Buzz caught the idea. They had recognized him and wanted him to lead them on to find the *Hako Maru*, where the pilots and observers of Torpedo Squadron No. 1 were still prisoners. Evidently they were more concerned about their flying mates than they were over the flotilla of Jap sub-marines that were crawling up the Mississippi.

"Those tin fish will never get back," Buzz mused, winging over and heading due south again, with his flashing aerial armada behind him. "They'll be waiting for the gas men to come along, and they'll be too late to get out. The effect of the first deluge of Sleep Snow will have worn off within an hour or so, and the river garrisons will be ready for them."

BUZZ set himself for the race back to the *Hako Maru*, wondering how he would get down and get aboard. Those Navy pilots were right. They had to get Dowling and his men off. They were important, valuable men who could not easily be replaced. It would be a neck-and-crop game this time, but these pilots behind him, who were flying land machines would be unable to get down to help him, outside of sweeping the decks with gunfire. How much that would help was not quite clear at this time.

"But I'll do it," he growled, staring at the low needle of his fuel gauge. "I'll get aboard somehow. I wish I had a gun. That Luger ought to be in there somewhere."

The next twenty-five minutes were stark realism for Buzz. He was leading a glorious formation of the hardest-punching fighters in the world, but his position was far from enviable. How was he to get down, scramble aboard the *Hako Maru*, and capture the crew?

"If I land alongside, they'll spot me and probably pop me off when I try to make the Jacob's ladder. If I signal and order them to stop, they won't take any notice. The lads behind can give them a belting of bombs, but we'll be putting Dowling and the rest of them in a tough spot."

At last they picked up the riding lights of the Jap tramp, and Buzz sensed that she was lying to, with full steam up and ready for any emergency.

Wheeling around in his seat, Buzz caught the eye of the Boeing formation leader and pointed down.

The Navy man nodded, sliced his open palm forward, and indicated that he wished Buzz to carry on.

“All right,” replied Buzz, mostly to himself again. “We’ll have a try at it. But for the life of me, I can’t see how we can make it.”

He eased back on his throttle and nosed down toward the steamer. The Boeings kept their relative height while Buzz continued on, intending to drop a “Heave to” signal. He scribbled a note on the dash pad, slipped it into a message streamer and went screaming between the two mast-tips, clearing the radio aerial with his pontoon by inches. He let the streamer go over the right side and saw it bounce off the chart-house roof and roll down to the bridge, where it was scrambled for by a group of seamen.

Curling around, the Boeings still over him, Buzz waited. But instead of slowing down for boarding, the *Hako Maru* fumed madly at her stern, her screw slashing wildly at the black waters to throw out a new milky plume of backwash. At the same instant, two machine guns were broken out, and a lacing fire was directed up at the ships that had come screaming back at the tramp.

One Boeing staggered, trembled like a drunken eagle, floundered madly on her back and then went down with a splash into the water, twenty feet behind the churning stern.

The *Hako Maru* was making a run for it—with Commander John Dowling and his flight mates as prisoners, facing a death more terrible than any they could suffer in the shattered cockpit of a B-J.

The fight for the *Hako Maru* was on in deadly earnest now. Two machine guns were blazing away from the open well at the stern. Another was spitting forward and a three-pounder was belching away like a mad organ of Hades.

Then, as Buzz swept over, blasting a splash of fire into the gunners at the stern, his eye caught something that had slipped his memory entirely.

“It’s a chance,” he gloated, grinning into the gun-sight. “I might get away with it. They are not wearing their masks. I might do it, at that”

THE Boeings were lancing in and out, wildly trying to pick off the gunners. Now and again a burst would sweep through the gun crews, but new yellow-skinned devils would crawl out from

behind stacked hatch-covers, drag the dead away and take their places. Still that flaming, deep-voiced three-pounder continued to blaze away and hurl steel.

The Boeings flashed in and out, spitting death, and accepting it in turn. One single-seater went down on a stern gun, both Brownings blazing. It raced into a geyser of lead that was directed up at it and dived clean through its wings which were cut as though by an unseen cleaver. The metal fuselage, a man-directed torpedo, continued on, rammed its spinning prop into a gun crew, sliced them to gory pulp and blew up with a roar that blasted every vestige of gun, rail, crew, and ammo-cases into oblivion.

Buzz saw the insane tragedy—and gulped. Only one man and one machine—but they had taken a four-man gun-team and a grisly weapon.

“I’ll take care of the other,” he scowled. “I’ll get that baby—and the whole damned ship!”

Cutting clear, he went off a few hundred yards and then turned back. He slipped his Jap gas mask over his face, tightened the neck-strap and felt for the bomb-toggles. Then with a last glance around to note the position of every ship in the sky, he went hurtling at the *Hako Maru* broadside.

The three-pounder had her elevation lowered. They blasted two shells at him as he came on, but Buzz took no notice of them. He eased back on the throttle, let her glide in, and nosed dead on for the superstructure aft of the bridge. On he went, while a trio of Boeings shot down over him and laced a bitter fire into the bridge. Then, just when it seemed as if he must crash into the rear mast, Buzz screwed the B-J over, just clearing the bullet-slashed mast with but inches to spare, and let the gas-bombs go.

The ship lurched as the containers went, and they struck full on the steel deck, enveloping the rear gun crew in the misty fumes. Then curled back and went headlong toward the ship again.

The men in the Boeing above halted their fire for a split-second to stare on the next amazing move. They saw the two-seater nose down, as if about to make a landing on the water alongside the tramp. But just as it seemed that the pontoon would strike, Buzz drew the stick up, flipped his switch and porpoised the B-J smack into the rear funnel—the camouflaged affair that was composed of telescoping framework and painted

canvas. The fake funnel took it beautifully, folding gently in the middle. It became a perfect crash pad for Buzz.

There was a splintering of wood, a ripping of canvas, and the whole mess collapsed, letting the B-J down on the upper deck with comparatively little damage. Buzz clambered out of the cockpit and raced across the boat-deck to the stern companionway.

His mask was in the way. Once he tripped over a tangled mess of cordage and went down—just as someone let fly at him with a pistol. He continued on down the steps and tore up to the huddled group of Japs around the Lewis gun. With a quick move, he unshackled the tripod mounting, slapped on a new drum, pulled the cocking handle twice and started down the deck.

THE Boeings were still peppering the decks, and lead spattered off metal, screeching and wailing. But Buzz clambered on over dead and wounded seamen, and others who were crawling about, fighting to get their gas masks on. He came around the bend of the deck and swept the forward well with a chattering burst. The three-pounder crew folded up. Then, making certain that there would be no more trouble from that quarter, Buzz slipped behind a donkey engine and forced the forward gun crew into a scrambling heap. Running forward for cover again, he crawled past a stack of hatch-covers and grabbed at a number of Lewis drums that had rolled away from the forward gun.

A Boeing came down again and poured a wicked fire across the deck. Buzz only just managed to get beneath a winch-drum in time to avoid a complete hosing. Then, from his new position, where he could command a full view of the bridge, he started to stitch a seam of lead from one wing to the other. Glass went out, men screamed and tried to run. Others crawled along the edge and took pot shots around the opening of the companionway. The fire now was terrific, the Boeings slashing it in from all angles, while Buzz tried to pick off the Japs who were still attempting to hang on.

His gun rattled and fought to get away from him, but he hung on and sprayed lead into the bridge until it seemed that it must be chopped to matchwood. Still a shot or two came, and

threatened Benson's position. All this time, the ship was heading south at a wild rate, and Buzz realized that something had to be done, for the Boeings would not be able to stick around much longer.

"I'll get 'em," he growled again, fumbling with his gas mask. The ship rumbled madly now as it fought to get away from these wild hornets above. "They'll blow her boiler tubes if they keep this up."

As if in response, there came a dull thud from somewhere below. The engines seemed to struggle, and gradually slowed down to a standstill. A great plume of steam came up from the open hatch behind the bridge and billowed skyward. Men screaming and fighting for breath—men seared with live steam—came struggling up the corkscrew ladder and tottered out on the deck. Buzz yelled and ran out, driving them before him as he made for the bridge companionway.

In three strides he was on the bridge, letting a series of wild bursts splash at the dim figures that came rocketing out of the chart room. More men went down, tumbling head over heels down the steps, and tried to crawl away. A few got to a davit and started to lower a boat. Buzz hung back a second or two and let them get it under way. When the lifeboat hit the water he charged into the chart room and nailed three Jap officers who stood with their hands up, backed to the wall, under the flickering beam of a swaying lantern. He removed his mask.

"Who's in charge here?" snapped Buzz, bending over his gun.

They all pointed at a figure on the floor.

"Dead, eh? Well, who's next?"

The little Jap on the end nodded feebly and stepped forward.

"Right. Get a signal pistol and three green cartridges."

The man turned around, opened a chart-table drawer, brought out a signal gun, and selected three cartridges.

"All right. Come out here and fire them, one at a time—and no monkey business!"

The little Jap nodded seriously, stepped out on the bridge, and carefully fired the green lights, one at a time.



As if by magic, the battling Boeings drew off and circled calmly.

"Your boiler gone?" asked Buzz, lining the Jap up again.

"Yes," replied one of the Japs. "Many tubes gone. No can get up steam. No answer from engine room."

"No. Your black gang just went over the side. Took to the boats. You give in now?"

"Yes," nodded all three. "We give in. Too many upstairs."

"Okay. Sit down. You, No. 1, tie the other two up—hands behind the chair. Then I'll tie you. After that, we can sit here and wait for Uncle Sam to come along and tow us in to New Orleans. You'll get a swell welcome there."

THERE was nothing much to do but wait. For what seemed hours they sat there—three Japs laced to cabin chairs, and Buzz Benson, cradling a Lewis gun. About dawn, a Coast Guard cutter came alongside, and Buzz explained the situation. The man in oilskins who answered him was Flag-Lieutenant Yancey W. Wilberforce.

"We picked up three boat loads of Jap firemen, about five miles north of here," announced Wilberforce.

"How about the subs?" bawled Buzz.

"Tell you later. Too long a story. You'll get the idea when you see this morning's papers. I'm coming aboard to help you take care of Dowling. How is he?"

"Don't know. They're all locked up asleep somewhere. I couldn't leave these guys up here in the chart room. Come aboard and bring a gang to look around. I hope they're all right."

Before Wilberforce and a boarding party of gobs could get aboard, a big Navy seaplane swept down out of the sky and tied up alongside. A number of Navy pilots clambered out and joined Wilberforce. In a few minutes they were all on the deck with Benson, running in and out of doors until at last one grinning gob yelled, "Here they are. Sleeping like a kennel of pups!"

The rest ran in, anxious, but a quick examination by a Navy M.O. disclosed that none were any the worse for wear. They were still sleeping off their Sleep Snow doses.

"They'll be all right by the time we get this barge towed in to New Orleans. Leave them here for now," the doctor said.

Wilberforce introduced Benson to the Navy men and then explained several of the incidents that had brought them together here on the *Hako Maru*.

"And this lad, Buzz," went on Wilberforce, "is Lieutenant Billy Wardlaw, who led the Boeings last night." He said you did a nice job."

"So you're the guy who got me out of that mess, eh?" demanded Buzz. "Well, tell me one thing. How could you tell my ship from the rest of them?"

"It was easy," laughed Wardlaw. "You see, your ship's numerals were clear and sharp. The others, which had evidently been painted on a few minutes before they had taken off, were blotched and smeared by the slipstream. The paint was still wet, you see, and while this Jap guy had a smart idea to protect himself in case anything went wrong, he forgot that the paint would run. By the time we got there, they were so messed up that it was hard even to tell them, but your I-T-7 stood out as plain as day."

"Well, I'll be darned!" gagged Buzz. "I never thought of that."

"From what I can see, you had plenty of other things to think about. By the way, I brought a late paper in with me. Care to look at it?"

Buzz took the morning newspaper and there across the front in bold type read:

**MISSISSIPPI VALLEY SUFFERS FROM FUMES**

*Strange Explosions Believed to Have Brought Up Gaseous Mud from River Bottom*

**MANY OVERCOME BY UNKNOWN CHEMICAL FUMES**

*Forest Fires Spread Land With Ashes*

Then followed an interesting description of a temporary gas attack that apparently had been caused by strange explosions at the bottom of the Mississippi River. This the Federal government was about to investigate. It explained that a number of people had been overcome and were seemingly put to sleep by fumes which had been caused by some strange chemical reaction.

Buzz smiled as he read it. "So they got the tin-fish, eh?" he asked.

“Got them when they tried to get out,” smiled Wilberforce. “You missed some fun.”

“You think he missed some fun, eh?” growled Billy Wardlaw. “Good Lord, if you only knew! We’re the ones who missed the fun. I’d give next month’s pay to have had the smack at that dizzy-looking funnel. It was the funniest thing I ever saw.”