

The Flying Fortress

By Arch Whitehouse
A Casket Crew Adventure

A Yank pilot said too much at a Paris estaminet, a British airman said too little on the way to the Front. And a battle that began at twelve thousand hurtled to a hangar door.

TWELVE thousand feet above the Lieve Canal, a grisly gash that trickled through the upper corner of northwestern Belgium, two men were staging a savage fight in the control pit of a Handley Page. The fact that they were fully forty miles inside the enemy lines, and that their ship was carrying nearly two tons of high explosive, apparently had no place in this savage argument.

The wheel control wavered back and forth in front of Lieutenant Graham Townsend's knees as he tried to stand and exchange blows with his bomber officer, Lieutenant Phil Armitage. The nose dipped perilously, making Andy McGregor, up in the front gun-turret, hang on for dear life. The two Rolls-Royce engines snarled as the ship dived and zoomed according to the snatching guidance of Townsend, who was taking a battering about the face from the snarling American on the other side of the cockpit.

"Damn your eyes!" husked the British pilot. "I don't—don't care if you are the bombing officer. I'm going to find Somergem, if it takes the last gallon of gas we have. Take that!"

Armitage took it, amazed, smack in the teeth. He fell back and nearly went over the edge, but his toe caught under the instrument board and he just saved himself. The Englishman, snarling like a trapped tiger, lunged at the wheel again and brought the careening Handley out of a sideslip. McGregor climbed up from his knees and started to crawl along the top of the coaming, his Black Watch kilts streaming over him like a battered parasol.

"Gen'l'men! Mister Aaarmitage!. . .Mister Toonsend! Ye'll be killin' us a'!" he screamed,

trying to get between them. He stood a fine chance of rolling off and dropping into a Belgian cabbage field.

"Get back there, Mac!" bellowed the American. "We'll settle this!"

But Mac stayed perched on top of the dancing cowl, like a man trying to sit an inverted canoe while shooting the rapids.

"Ye canna do ut! Ye canna do ut! Ye'll bash us a' tae smithereens!"

"Get back there, Mac!" screeched Townsend. "Leave this to us!"

But Mac gripped his bare knees harder and braced himself. The Handley went into another wild dive. Armitage lunged across at the Englishman and found his leather-clad chin with a wicked right. Townsend crumbled at the knees, his mouth opened and his chin dropped into his fur-piece. He folded up over the wheel and took it all the way under the instrument board.

The Handley nosed down farther and stayed there. McGregor screamed at the top of his lungs. The engines tossed in their bellow of rage. Armitage swore, spat out blood and dove at Townsend again. He struggled, while lying on his side against the instrument board and tried to pull Townsend off the main controls. Mac, holding on with one hand, aided all he could, but against that slipstream he was almost helpless.

"Get him off! Get him off, mon!" raged the little Scot gunner, "It'll be Kingdom Come, if ye don't."

GRADUALLY Armitage dragged the inert bulk of the Englishman off the wheel and hurled him across into the other side of the pit. Mac came over the top and sitting with his feet inside the cockpit, he helped get Townsend into the co-pilot's seat. He lay there like a fighter who has just been dragged to his corner after a knockout. He was out cold.

During the few seconds that McGregor took over the weight of the Englishman, Armitage slipped into the seat and began to draw the monstrous Handley out of her wild dive. He tried to glance at the altimeter but Mac's legs covered it. He raised his foot and shoved the Scot's leg over and saw that the dial registered three thousand feet.

"Judas Priest! We certainly were diving!" he exclaimed. "The damn fool. What got into him?"

McGregor rammed Lieutenant Townsend well into the far corner of the cockpit with the sole of his flying boot. Handley Page environment has no respect for rank. Especially at three thousand feet, forty miles inside the enemy lines. He, too, was wondering . . . wondering what the devil had got into this Damon and Pythias of the Independent Air Force. Townsend and Armitage fighting like stevedores in the cockpit of their beloved Number Seven miles inside Hunland.

"Come here, Mac!" roared Armitage. "You take the sight. We'll bomb Gontrode and beat it."

"But I thought—thought we were heading for Somergem—" started the Scot.

He was yelling into Armitage's earpiece.

"No!" crashed out the American. "I'm in charge of this barge. We're going to Gontrode! You take the sight. Sit on his lap. Go in and tell Ryan to take your signals. Understand?"

Mac looked speechless. He gulped and nodded a puzzled O.K.

Giving Townsend another push with his knee, McGregor went through the narrow companionway, dropped down a step and fumbled his way into the bomb cabin.

He found Sergeant Ryan bracing himself against the toggle board. Harry Tate was flat on his face on the catwalk—waiting for the next display.

Mac growled the new orders into Ryan's ear and watched the amazed expression trickle across the Celt's homely dial. Had Mac explained that they were going to try for Berlin, he would have shown no greater astonishment. They had started out with the express intention of bombing the new Zeppelin sheds at Somergem. Why the sudden switch to the Gotha aerodrome at Gontrode?

"What, by the name of the Saints, was happening out there?" barked Ryan.

"Fightin'," answered Mac. "Both on 'em. Fightin' lak a pair o' Tipperary towzers. Disgraceful . . . fre tae see officers and gentlemen actin' as such." Mac wagged his head dolefully.

"Armitage and Townsend fightin'?" gasped the Irish sergeant bomber. "The Casket Crew has gone to hell completely!"

The unbelievable announcement had completely floored him. Armitage and Townsend, fighting!

"Weel, ye'll tak ma signals, eh? Ah'll try tae hit somethin' wi'in four mile on the sheds," growled the Scot. "I'll be oop there."

MAC started up the catwalk to go back to the control pit. Harry Tate, the toggle-man who had been out of hospital but a week, was scrambling to his feet near the lower bomb racks. Suddenly the whole cabin was lit up from below by a garish glare of white light that trickled through the white belly of the Handley, splashed through the framework of the racks and catwalk, to paint broad-stroked designs in black and white on the three-ply roof. The catwalk went over with a lurch. Tate went sprawling into the jangling bomb chambers. A trickle of blood started from a gash across his forehead. Another scar of war! Ryan hung on to the toggle board and tried to grab at McGregor. The Scot went to his knees and rolled over on his back. Down the catwalk he went like a bundle of leather and plaid tartan. He wound up against the spluttering Tate and added his bit to the chorus.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Snooping Sarah, the famous Gontrode searchlight, had found them. And Randy Rudolph, her Ack-Ack partner, was plastering them with high explosive. Randy and Sarah were a dirty pair, as the Casket Crew had learned many times before.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Over the Handley went again. This time to the other side. A crunching shell went off not far from their wing-tip and almost upset the flying apple cart. Her joints creaked, the struts strained and the wires twanged. To it all, Armitage was adding his bellowing rage at the absence of McGregor, who was supposed to be bending over the bomb sight and preparing to give the toggle-men the signals.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The American bomber officer, piloting old Number Seven, was swinging the great ship about like a Camel. The glaring light from below stayed with him though, no matter how he banked, sideslipped or twirled. Randy Rudolph, the foul-mouthed Q-F gun, snapped, spat and filled the sky with whining shrapnel. Most of it seemed to find a berth in the struts, longerons or spruce racks of Number Seven.

“Mac!—Mac!” screamed the American. “Where the blazes are you? Come up here!”

But Mac could not hear. The only answer was a gurgling snort from Townsend. A fine spray of scarlet gore came from his nostrils like perfume from the Devil’s atomizer.

The Gontrode field lay below them. Strange gigantic sheds housing the devilish Jerry bombers that were making periodic raids on the east coast of England and the back areas of the northern part of the line. Number 109 of Squadron of the Independent Air Force had been brought up from Nancy to Loon-Plage, behind Dunkirk, to handle them.

At least that was Armitage’s interpretation of the move. Actually their orders tonight specifically stated that the new Zeppelin sheds at Somergem were to be the objective. Somergem had been screened by a low-hanging layer of chalky mist, and Armitage had decided, as commanding officer of the ship, that they had better switch to Gontrode and take no chances. He had other ideas about Gontrode, too, which apparently had led up to the bitter argument Townsend had staged with him.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Randy Rudolph was spouting again. Armitage had tried to gain a little height, but now he was S-turning back and forth, waiting for McGregor. Why the devil didn’t he come up and take that bomb sight?

At last the staggering Scot came through the companionway and glanced at the American.

“Get over there on that sight!” signalled Armitage. “Can’t sit up here all night!”

Mac nodded in resignation, heaved Townsend over deeper into the corner and leaned over the bomb-sight. He adjusted the knurled knob for their height and checked their ground speed with the stop-watch. He turned and nodded. “All set!”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Randy Rudolph’s recital again.

Then from behind came a new terror.

IN the rear gun-turret Digger O’Neil, the new Australian gunner, who had been trying to figure it all out, began barking with his Lewis. His cone of fire sprayed a Pfalz and steered it off. The cyclopiian orb of Snooping Sarah found them again and painted the Handley Page in a sheen of blinding silver. The sky became an ethereal madhouse. Tracers flicked out tricky designs like a mistimed electric sign. Gigantic belches of lemon-colored flame were hurled at the welkin. Great gobs of lamp-black appeared as though thrown by some lurking urchin.

Armitage screamed and rammed the wheel forward. Mac put his right knee into Townsend’s stomach, raised his left hand and hung on with the right. The field came up to them like a blown-in movie screen. The outline of the first shed lay in line with his bomb sight wires. His hand went down.

Inside the companionway, Sergeant Ryan caught it, slapped Harry Tate on the shoulders and two toggles were yanked.

Swish! Scrawnch!

Two 112s went out lazily. The Handley leaped at the release of the weight. Still the ship was kept at it. Andy’s hand splashed down again. Two more toggles inside were pulled. Again she leaped at the release. Then a new jerk came. The upheaval of gigantic concussion. The first two bombs had struck!

Wher-o-o-o-o-m! Wher-o-o-o-o-o-m!

Digger O’Neil, from his rear turret, saw the twin spurts of flame. They had belched out smack on the strip of tarmac that faced the great doors of the shed. The doors went in with a crash, blowing whatever was inside to smithereens. They continued on like the pistons of a square pump, until everything had been pressed against the rear wall, like gigantic fruit in a press.

Wher-o-o-o-o-o-m! Wher-o-o-o-o-o-m!

Two more struck within a few seconds, finding the outer walls of the end hangars. There was a volcanic display of fire, heaving earth and splintered lumber. Knife-bladed tongues of flame snarled savagely, biting out great chunks of wooden partitions, eating beautiful man-made

birds and leaving a seared scar across the trembling walls.

Into the craters blasted out by the gigantic steel eggs toppled the trembling foundations. Crumpled concrete gave up the ghost and went over like a powdery cascade into the yawning chasm that smoked and reeked of burned explosive. New damp earth lay in chocolaty mounds, puffing smoke as if aghast at the tragedy that had smitten it.

All this and more was spotted by Digger O'Neil, peering down the fuselage between the biplane tail of the Handley. The bomber was in a wild climb now, hoiking for the sky again and curling around for another thrust. The little Aussie braced himself. His chest was throbbing with pain from the beating he had taken during the wild fight a few minutes before. Being bashed about within the cold metal ring of a Scaarf mounting was something like going over Niagara in a barrel.

Old Snooping Sarah swung around and sought them again. Her beam caught Digger full in the eyes and he was blinded—blinded long enough to allow a Pfalz to sheer in from the inky blanket beyond and rake the Handley from turret to turret. The Australian sensed the burst by the trickling vibrations that ran along the longerons. He cursed and swung around, taking the gun with him—just in time to catch the Jerry scout as it screamed across the top plane of the bomber.

Ber-at-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Digger's gun was true. It spat its load full into the dirty white stomach of the Pfalz. The ship screwed away, as if in agony. Strips of fabric fluttered off like the feathers from a duck. Another burst followed and the ship threw its wheels up as if clawing for something to steady itself by. No use. . . .The telltale trickle of flame began to seep along the slashed belly. A few streamers of flaming petrol flicked away and were carried toward the Handley by the scout's dying slipstream.

There was a booming roar and the ship disintegrated in midair like a trick film that has been run backward. Digger had scored.

ARMITAGE was screaming at Mac to get set. He was going down again. The searchlight came around once more and with a bellow of rage the American eased the big bomber over and

suddenly twisted her nose around and shot down the beam.

Andy was blinded. There was nothing to set his sight on, but . . . His arm went down twice.

Two more toggles were yanked by Harry Tate, who was standing on one leg, steadying himself with a foot hooked around a strut.

Two more jerks and two sandy-yellow eggs went out with a scrawnc. The guides rattled and squeaked as they were released of their burden. A chunk of shrapnel pounded through and tore a hole in the side of the cabin a foot square. It went out of the top with a bellow of rage.

Ber-o-o-o-o-o-m! Ber-o-o-o-o-o-m!

A splintering design of flame, a thud of concussion and the single orb of Snooping Sarah went out. Armitage drew his wheel back just in time and the Handley went through a swirling column of smoke that left them cooking.

"Give 'em the rest!" Armitage hammered out, with his hands on the cowl.

They were skimming across the tops of the burning hangars. Andy caught the American's signal and began pumping his arm wildly. The forty-pounders went out like spawn from some winged monster.

Behind, Digger O'Neil was spraying a wagon-wheel gun mounting. His chattering Lewis sending metallic chants up the fuselage. Armitage swung the great ship over and peered down. Amid the torrent of spluttering fire, whining shrapnel and curling smoke he could see the extent of their venom. He grinned for an instant, but suddenly the grin changed to a fiendish scowl. He screwed around farther in his seat and glanced again.

"Damn! Missed it!" he spurted out of one side of his mouth. "The one I wanted of the lot—and it got away!"

But there was no time for contemplation now. Another Pfalz had charged into the dizzy screen and was lancing across the horizon with a trickling trail of tracer that was being lurched around in the direction of the Handley. Andy McGregor yanked the stop watch out of the bomb sight, slipped it in his pocket and gave Townsend another glance.

The Englishman was slipping down in his seat again. He snorted again and snuffled. Andy hoisted him up again and stuffed him into his corner, dropped to his hands and knees and started

crawling through the forward turret tunnel to get back into his own gunpit.

The rear gunner was fighting off the Pfalz and exchanging tracer with gusto. A new but less efficient Sarah was attempting to get a bead on Number Seven, but Armitage swung his ship clear. Up front Andy took up the fight and between them they held the Pfalz off until the Handley was well over Lopheim. From there on until they reached the line at Furnes, they would get little opposition.

Into the inky night went the wide-winged raider, leaving three shattered hangars, a pock-marked landing field and fully a score of casualties.

They were hurtling along at six thousand when Townsend came to. Mac was standing up watching over his top plane and Armitage had just made another check on their position. The shapeless heap of leather stirred once, trembled like a bilious porker and finally stuck out its arms and legs. Armitage noticed the move and glared across the cockpit.

Townsend's eyes opened—one at a time. He blinked for a few seconds and finally whirled in his seat and grasped the leather-paddled edge of the cockpit. Another painful twist and he was staring back under the lower wing—at the glowing pile of wreckage that marked Gontrode.

Like an accusing ghost he turned back slowly and leered at Armitage through half-closed eyes. The American returned the glance and turned back to his wheel.

“You rotten sport!” husked Townsend. “You ducked Somergem and went to Gontrode. You slipped me a oncer. What the devil is your game?”

CHAPTER II

Round Two

THEY were clear. Armitage took the lower course in and ducked the curtain of enemy scouts that had come up to intercept them between Ostend and Nieuport. They slipped through at Clerken and cut in to Houthem with nothing but a few desultory shots from sleepy Archie gunners.

Up front, it was cold, and Andy McGregor settled down beneath his gun mounting and pulled his short flying coat around his thighs. Armitage stayed with the wheel, exchanging icy glances

with his buddy, Townsend, who sat nursing a fifty horsepower grudge. Mile after mile they raced but with each furlong gained, the bitterness of reflection slipped lower and lower down the thermometer of friendship.

Down inside the gloomy cabin Ryan and Harry Tate sat and pondered. They hunched together for warmth, bracing their backs against bomb racks and steadying themselves with their feet on the opposite side of the catwalk. For half an hour after the raid, they were silent, both thinking hard and trying to unravel the mystery of the battle between Townsend and Armitage.

“Wot's up, matey?” asked Harry, nudging closer to the bomber sergeant.

Ryan drew the short clay pipe from between his stained lips, spat across into the jangling racks and rammed his thumb into the cold clay. He never smoked it aloft, but drew rare comfort from its short tusk-bitten stem.

“Ye got me, Harry. Bin funny things happen about here ever since they both got back,” he replied, cupping his hands over Tate's ear-pieces.

Tate squinted his Cockney eyes into an interrogating scowl.

He had been away, nursing a Spandau slug in the stomach for several weeks, but he had squawked so hard that to keep peace in the R.A.F. they had allowed him to return as soon as the wound had healed. He'd even foregone his regular leave to get back to the Casket Crew.

Several things had happened during his stay in hospital. For one thing, both Townsend and Armitage had been awarded the Military Cross for their part in the Metz raids. With the decorations came the usual fourteen days of leave. But this time, Armitage had spent his in Paris instead of going home with Townsend to England. In the past they had gone to “Broadmoor,” the Townsend home on the bleak downs of Devonshire. There they usually spent their leave rambling over the tors and cattle tracks that intersect this notoriously bleak morass. It was quiet, and they had plenty of chance to soothe taut nerves and regain their strength for another three months of aerial insanity that only flying men knew. The house was a gaunt sandstone affair, up to date and comfortable inside. There were horses, a couple of motor cars and always a few pleased companions. It was ideal as a retreat for war-

weary flying men. But this time, Armitage had passed it up. And without questioning the American's motives, Townsend went home and left him on the best of terms.

"Townsend came back in a glorious fit—wearing a black band on his arm," rumbled on Ryan.

"Someone snuffed it?" inquired Tate.

"Didn't know at first. Told us later it was his father," bellowed Ryan. "Must have bin something fishy about it though. He was as sore as Paddy's pig. Unbearable!"

"What about Armitage?"

"A damned sight worse!" roared Ryan, letting Tate have it full in the ear-piece. "Cum back blindo. . .drunk as a lord! Some Tommy dispatch rider picked him up and dragged him in. Half his buttons gone. Hadn't shaved in days. Muck from head to foot. And him just gettin' the M.C., mind you!"

"S'truth!" husked Tate, staring into the racks.

"For two days he was b'ilin' out in his billet. He finally turned up for duty when old Number Seven had got her new motors. Moses, but you couldn't even look at him, without getting your head bitten off. The major, he tried to argue with him, but no go. So between the two of 'em. . .him and Townsend, we had a bloody fine packet to handle. Yer saw what happened tonight."

"I can see I've come to a blinkin' fine show," mused Harry. "Nice how-d'-yer-do. Me jist out of 'orspital wiv arf me guts in curlers and them two blokes stagin' a Bandsman Blake versus Bermondsey Billy Wells out there in the cockpit. Wot the 'ell 'as the Carsket Crew come to, anyway?"

But Ryan was bellowing in his ear again.

"You take my word for it, Tate. There's going to be ruckshions aboard this barge before it's all over. When two buckies like them two suddenly take a nark at one another, out of nowhere, there's somethin' up."

"But wot is it, matey?" answered Tate. "Wot's got up their blinkin' backs?"

"What can have happened? They didn't go on leave together. They didn't see one another from the time they left until Armitage was dragged in blotto. It's a bit of a banshee that's got into 'em. One won't speak. . . the other wants to fight at the glance o' a man. An' two weeks ago they were

arm-in-arming it all over the blinkin' aerodrome like a couple of University dons. Now they're biting one another's gullets out!"

That was all. For the rest of the way home, Ryan and Tate sat and stared at the jangling racks, trying to solve the mystery of the two pilots. Behind in the rear turret, Digger O'Neil, the wizened-faced little Aussie, lolled back against his gun, stared along the top of the fuselage and contemplated the queer combination of bombing airmen fate had joined him with.

"When it comes to pickin' 'em," he grinned to himself, "it shore does take a Digger. A couple of nice choosey lads up front staging a battle royal with a Handley load of bombs at twelve thousand. Whew! Wonder what chances are of transferring back to my little wet home in the trench."

NUMBER SEVEN came rumbling in about two-thirty, flapping her splintered struts, flailing snapped flying wires against taut fabric and groaning under the battering she had received over Gontrode. She would be inside for several days.

The ground flares were lit and the pungent odor of burning waste crept across the Loon-Plage field, making mechanics rub their sleepy eyes all the more. Major McKelvie, shivering beneath his burly British-warm, was seeking the comfort of an outsize in Dunhill's. He strode up and down in front of the moldy group of hangars that had been allotted to them. He frowned at times, pondering on two items of interest that had come to his attention during the last few days.

One, of course, was the matter of the dispositions of his two crack pilots, Townsend and Armitage. He couldn't fathom that at all. He sincerely considered making a personal investigation of the two furloughs that had evidently seen the causes of these remarkable transformations. Had he done so he could have saved the Casket Crew a lot of trouble. The second item was a confidential message from R.A.F. Staff Headquarters in Hesdin concerning a delicate situation that had arisen concerning the loss of a new ship.

His meditations were interrupted by the distant booming of two Rolls-Royce engines. He cocked a weather ear and listened. For a minute or so he stood and studied the droning hum. Finally he was

satisfied, packed the Dunhill again with an air of satisfaction and continued his self-appointed patrol.

The Handley Page came into view at last, her riding lights gleaming now as she hurtled through friendly air. Captain Leslie Pierson, a De Haviland commander, recovering from a bad crash, was getting in a few weeks of light duty acting as recording officer. He came up along the crumbling tarmac swathed in a lengthy woolen scarf, a Lovat's Scouts balmoral hat, a relic of his old regiment, and a grease-streaked trench coat. He sported a ragged Gold Flake from his cold lips.

"Getting in, Major?" he inquired.

"Sounds like it. Must have come in from the south. Rather expected they'd plop down on the sands at Dunkirk and wait to come in by daylight. Wonder if they got through."

"Let's hope so. The Staff certainly were dead nuts on getting Somergem, weren't they?"

"Well, the blighters are too close to the coast there. Cheeky lot. Taking a chance like that. We could fork them out of there like spearing fish in a barrel."

"Only trouble is," observed Pierson, reflectively, "that the Lieve Canal valley is always bathing in fog. I know it. We've done a few shows in that area."

"Um. . . . Perhaps that's why they took the chance, eh?"

"But this Bourges business, sir," went on Pierson in a hushed whisper. "What do you make of that. Bad business, eh?"

"Bad, yes!" husked McKelvie. "We had high hopes riding on them. The blighters will copy it, of course. They sneak everything. Everything they've got they swiped. Look at the Fokker tripe, the Pfalz, the Gotha and the two-seater Albatross. Every one a copy of a British ship. All they ever invented was that dizzy looking N-strut!"

"Where do you think they'll take it?"

"Hard to say. To Gontrode, eventually, of course. We've lost track of it so far. Probably hidden in some quiet sector until they can chance moving it up to where those Jerry engineers can go to work on it. You can't do that in any hangar, you know. Requires a lot of careful dismantling, checking, measuring and testing before they can really get anything out of it."

"Well, what's the big trick about it?"

The major frowned.

"Not certain, but I understand it's a fighter bomber capable of one-twenty-five at ten thousand and will carry fifteen hundred pounds of bombs. Can be thrown about like a Bristol Fighter. It'll displace the Handleys, of course. They're planning a mob of them for a raid on Berlin. It'll be a heller!"

"Whew!" whistled Pierson. "One-twenty-five miles at ten thousand feet. Why, that bloody thing will be able to fight Fokkers at fifteen hundred!"

"Right you are. . . . Well, here they come. We'll have to see what happened."

THE Handley Page rumbled over the field once, flipped its signal for the landing flares and curled round for the glide in.

Mechanics and riggers stood at the smoke pots, waiting to douse the burning rags the minute her wheels hit. Old Number Seven straightened out, nosed down gently and came in like a mother gull. There was a booming rumble of olios, then the plowing slash of the tailskid as she settled down. Armitage ran her up to the hangar door and signaled "All O.K."

The gunners unshackled their weapons, piling up the drums and making their way out of their turrets and toward the narrow metal ladder placed against the trapdoor in the throat of the machine. There was none of the usual cheery horseplay. No back-slapping. No bellowing over the side at ground pals. McKelvie stood off and watched this grim return, still puzzled.

Mac came down the ladder, his bare legs flashing beneath his short flying coat and kilt. He mumbled something to the Armorer and handed over his gun. Digger O'Neil came next and waddled off without saying a word. He even refused an offer of a cigarette—an event in any epoch of flying.

Sergeant Ryan's rubber-soled feet came out of the trap-door next. He dropped to the tarmac without a word and glanced around anxiously until his eyes fell on the Major. Harry Tate followed him, a queer, gargoyle grin masking his features.

Something was up!

Then it exploded. From somewhere up above.

Hoarse voices growled out in staccato sentences. Oaths, volleys of accusation. Threats and counter threats. Then a lull—the lull before the storm.

Armitage came dawn first, stood at the bottom of the metal unbuckling his helmet and stuffed his goggles into his pocket. Townsend came next, whirling like a tiger as he reached the bottom. The semicircle of mechanics and riggers were caught unawares and before any of them could make a move to climb up into the ship to begin their overhaul, Townsend and Armitage were on one another.

Short panting growls mingled with the thud of knuckles against flesh. Someone tried to part them, but Major McKelvie barked an order and the semicircle of wide-eyed air-mechanics widened a trifle.

It was not a fight in the ordinary sense of the word. It was scientific slaughter. Both men were as equally matched in height, weight and power as the laws of physiology would allow. It was not a battle of a boxer and a fighter. There was no evidence of the dancing master versus the ape-man. It was a terrific battle between two almost perfect physical machines that operated from the same motor, the same springs, the same cogs and cams, the same pistons and governors. Flying coats were discarded as they drew away from each flurry of blows. Lancing jabs slit opposing eyes. Crashing right crosses pounded and bruised opposing cheeks, chins and chests.

Scientific slaughter!

They stepped in, fainted, jabbed and uppercut. They rolled with punches, took light taps to get in stiff-arm jolts. They danced and dropped flat-footed to get power. In five minutes they resembled nothing but butchered men who were staggering through the corridors of an *abattoir*. Other officers gazed on the mad scene chalk-faced and with nauseous twinges at their stomachs. A few turned away. A chunky pilot screamed for someone to stop them, but his cry only brought gurgling, panting remonstrances from the two fighting madmen.

ON and on it went for what seemed an hour. Major McKelvie moved up closer, his flinty eyes betraying the cold, calculating pose of his jaw. The still-streaming Dunhill. Captain Pierson stood

beside him, his long fingers clenching and unclenching. His shoulders swung, twisted and trembled as he followed the moves of the two Handley Page pilots. McKelvie gripped his sleeve and steadied him.

“Let them finish it. It’s the best thing now,” he whispered.

They did. It was almost impossible to recognize one from the other now. McKelvie snapped a short order to Townsend’s orderly who had come up with a vacuum bottle of hot coffee. The orderly went off, reluctantly, to prepare two beds.

They were swinging like weary turnstiles now. Both were blinded with streaming gore and closed eyes. Their lower jaws hung like broken doors on an old barn. Their knees wobbled and they stood still and took it blow for blow, rather than risk a step that might start their stumbling downfall.

At last it was all over.

The mind was willing but the spirit had departed. They flipped their arms like the wings of dying ducks. They tottered together, locked heads over shoulders and began a pathetic drum fire intended as infighting. Together they staggered about supporting one another. But while the power was no longer there, and blinded eyes saw nothing, they struggled on, fired by two different scenes.

Armitage visioned a smoky, ill-smelling *estaminet* in a foul corner of Paris. There was a sticky table, with concentric designs stamped there by the bottoms of many sloppy glasses. Opposite him sat a strange little man who liked to talk.

Townsend squinted through the mist and saw a venerable old room, dimly lit. There was the odor of hothouse flowers. In the center of the room stood a casket and in it the stiff, stark figure of an English gentleman.

“THAT’S enough!” snapped Major McKelvie. “You take Armitage, Pierson. I’ll grab Townsend. Get them into Townsend’s cubicle!”

They drew them apart. There was no further struggle. Their heads dropped to their chests and they had to be practically carried away. The ring of mechanics began to close in.

“All right, men!” went on McKelvie. “You have had your fun and a good fight. Now forget it.

They both fought like gentlemen and there need be no further mention of it. Get these wings folded back and drag her in. Good night!”

“Good night, Major,” they husked, hollowly. He was a good scout, they knew. But tonight he had proven himself a true sport. They would never speak of it, but they knew they would never forget it.

Across the scuffed-up tarmac, saturated with the blood of the two airmen, the great Handley Page went lumbering into her shed. Mac, Digger, Ryan and Tate went to the Recording Office and prepared to make out their reports, but Captain Pierson came out and waved them off to bed.

“The morning will do, Sergeant,” he explained. Then he asked what had happened over the line to result in all the carnage. Ryan told him.

“S’truth! Went to Gontrode, eh? Then Armitage was taking something on himself, eh? What was the matter at Somergem . . . fog?”

“Yes, sir. I have an idea Mr. Townsend wanted to hang about until it had lifted or moved. He wanted to find his objective, all right!”

“Um. . . I’m beginning to see the idea. Well, pop off, you chaps, and get some doss. Bung into the Recording Office about elevenish, will you?”

The four noncoms of the Casket Crew stalked off with gloomy “Good nights.” Ryan herded them into their Nissan hut and they sat about, hands in their breeches pockets, trying to make it all out.

“This looks like the end of the Casket Crew, boys,” finally cawed the gloomy Ryan. “We’ve been through some smutty spots, but when our pilots get to fighting in the cockpit in midair over Hunland, it’s time to chuck it. I wish the blasted war was over!”

Tate kicked a dixie across the floor and started to pull his flying boots off. Digger O’Neil lit a fag and rolled over on his back without saying anything. Andy McGregor, usually the dour silent one, got up and strode up to the tin stove, raised the lid and spat.

“Ye can’t tell me,” he opened. “There’s summat between them two that neither wan o’ ‘em realizes. Ye’ll see, it’ll straighten itself before we know it. Yon twa buckies are too good tae let summat gie ‘em the needle like this for long. But what a fight!”

With that he flung his coat across the bed, flopped under it and went to sleep without removing another article of clothing.

CHAPTER III Counted Out

IT was getting on toward noon the next day before there was any semblance of activity about Lieutenant Townsend’s cubicle. For nearly ten hours the combatants of the early morning battle lay sleeping the sleep of the exhausted. They lay stretched out on opposite sides of the bare-walled room, their rickety folding cots trembling and swaying with the volume of their deep-chested breathing. Outside of the odor of disinfectant, soothing salves and new gauze, there was little in evidence to show that the two men who were now sleeping together, had been battering one another to ribbons, a few hours before. Their beds were neat and orderly. Their uniforms and flying kits were hung up. The small foot-rugs lay square and clean. The folding active-service wash-stands and tables were as trim and spruce as the day the Wing Commander inspected them.

But the faces of the two men were a dead give-away. No matter how well the cubicle batman had trimmed the room, there was little he could do about those two swollen, battered, grotesque heads that lay on the khaki air-pillows.

Townsend had a broad band of white encircling his forehead. Another strip held a pad of cotton against one ear. The bridge of his nose was a throne for a square of pinkish-white gauze secured by three wide strips of surgeon’s tape. His left hand, flung back over his head was swathed in billowing bandage and padded across the knuckles with cotton.

Across the room Armitage lay in a shapeless heap, his blanket adding to the pile in the middle of the squeaking bed. His chin rested in a nest of cotton and gauze that was swinging in a cradle of bandage hung from the top of his head. One eye was almost covered with an awning of gauze and plaster and his upper lip appeared to be struggling to hang to his nose by a supporting scaffold of surgeon’s tape.

What was not covered with gauze and bandage, was painted a delicate greenish blue. They were bloated, swollen and sore.

Armitage was the first to awaken. For several minutes he rolled about in his bed trying to get comfortable. It was no use. He grunted and struggled to his knees, which caused his blankets to go billowing across the floor. Painfully, he raised his head, wondering who had tied the anvil around his neck, and peered out of the window. Activity was normal outside, so far as he could figure out with his punished optics, but gradually he drew a clearer focus and noticed Sergeant Ryan and Andy McGregor talking to Major McKelvie on the steps of the Recording Office.

“Hello!” he grunted. “What’s up out there?”

Then like a shaft of lightning it all came to him. He sat back on his haunches and stared at his bruised and lacerated hands. Slowly his fingers went to his face and ran across the uneven topography of his countenance. Like a man waking suddenly from a nightmare, he stared at his pillow as he tried to piece this paddy puzzle together.

“Whew! What the dickens happened to me. . . crash?” he mumbled slowly.

Then the light began to seep through. He turned and stared across the room. He realized at last that he was not in his own cubicle. They had put him in Townsend’s. Sure! There was Townsend across there in the other bed. He clambered to his feet and realized that the lower half of him did not feel anything like the upper portion. His legs felt as though they were carrying an enormous chunk of lead.

He staggered across the room and dropped his hands on the edge of Townsend’s cot. The rickety affair lurched and squeaked as he leaned over closer to stare into the Englishman’s face.

“Whew! What a night!” he whispered. He tore himself away and the cot swayed and creaked again.

Townsend woke up and started a series of those ridiculous squints that all sleeping men display upon being roused.

WITHOUT waiting for further explanation, Armitage went across to a small mirror that hung between the two tiny windows. One look was enough. He went back to his cot and sat down.

“What the devil are you doing in here?” growled Townsend sitting up. His voice sounded

like dried peas trickling across a sheet of sandpaper.

“You’ve got me. Believe me, I don’t want to be here. Where the devil’s my batman?”

“Bless me! Look at your dial!” gargled the Englishman.

“Look at your own! You’re no beauty. Look like an ad for cotton batting.”

Just then the door opened and in stalked McKelvie. He was stern of mein and he went to work without any formalities. Armitage and Townsend started to climb out of bed.

“Never mind, you two. Lie there and listen to what I have to say. A fine pair of beauties, aren’t you?” barked the C.O. He was up to his ears in it by now. He bellowed on:

“This affair last night was the most disgraceful thing I have ever heard of in my career as a soldier. It’s the end, and you two are packing up today. A nice bloody affair! Officers and gentlemen! Fighting in a cockpit over Hun-land with four of the finest kids—men if you like—packed in that damned crate with you. All because of some paltry fancied grudge, you two risk their lives and the lives of four others. Then to top it all off, you come back and stage another scene smack on the tarmac in front of your commanding officer and the men under you!”

“But it wasn’t a paltry or fancied grudge,” started Townsend, who was beginning to see the light.

“Shut up! I’m talking!” roared McKelvie. “You two had your say last night. It’s my turn now. Gentlemen and officers! Just awarded the Military Cross! . . . I’m not saying you didn’t earn it, but last night’s affair is worthy of a court martial. It’s the last. The last, I tell you!”

McKelvie had ripped his trench coat off and had flung it across Armitage’s feet. He dropped his cigarette and rammed his heel into its glowing ember.

“You are leaving One-O-Nine tonight. Both of you.”

Both Armitage and Townsend jerked up from their elbows.

“That’s right. You two are through. I should have done it long ago. You’ve been too long at this game. You’re due for a rest. I blame myself, in a way. I should have sent you back for light duty some time ago.”

“But Major. . . I—I don’t—don’t want—” started Armitage.

“I said, shut up!” bellowed the major again. “You two are going back. Armitage I’ve arranged for you to do instruction work—a ground job at Cranwell. Townsend, you’re to join the ferry staff at St. Omer. There’ll be a lot of work for you to do within the next few weeks when the new bombers come out.”

The two battered airmen stared across the room at one another. There was no glint of animosity in their eyes now. They looked like men who had been sentenced to death. They wanted sympathy. The fight of the night before was obliterated. The major went on:

“While this is discipline for last night’s actions, I also want you two to know that I feel that you have actually earned a soft berth for a time. Later on you may come back again, but I don’t suppose we’ll be flying Handleys then.”

“Not flying Handleys!” barked Armitage and Townsend together.

McKelvie shook his head.

“No. The bombing will be done with the new Boulton and Paul Bourges ships. They’re new and faster. Smaller and more able to take care of themselves. They’re the key to the bombing of Berlin.”

“But, Major! Why can’t we stay here? We’ll call it quits and walk the chalk line,” pleaded Armitage. He turned to glance at Townsend as if to beg acquiescence. But Townsend was staring across the foot of his bed.

“St. Omer ...” the Englishman said, talking aloud to himself. “Ferry pilot job. Back and forth across the channel. That’ll be great!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” screamed the Yank. “You willing to bust up the Casket Crew? You actually want to quit like this?” He leaped across the room and grabbed Townsend’s shoulders and jerked him around. “You wouldn’t quit us, would you?”

“It will be better ... I can get him better that way,” went on Townsend, his eyes covered with a strange film.

ARMITAGE gripped Townsend’s shoulders again and stared into his face. Suddenly he whirled around and faced the major.

“Cripes, Major! This is awful. He’s loopy. I must have injured him. His head—out of his mind! He wants to quit the Casket Crew! Judas Priest! He can’t quit us like this!”

Major McKelvie was serious himself, now. He went over to Townsend and sat on the side of his bed. Gripping the Englishman by the arm, he jerked him around and stared into his face.

“Pull out of it, Graham.” It was the first time he had used Townsend’s first name. It was an indication of anxiety. He shook him again, but Townsend was babbling on.

“That’ll be great!” he mumbled in a monotone. “I’ll get Von Schrader that way—on my own. No bloody bomber officer to interfere with—”

“Von Schrader!” gasped Armitage.

“Von Schrader!” echoed McKelvie, leaping to his feet.

CHAPTER IV Von Schrader

AS the two exclamations crashed out, Townsend jerked, and the mad light suddenly went out of his eyes. Puffed as they were, a new glint could be noticed. He pawed at his padded nose with his bandaged left hand and shook his head like a fighter who has stopped one on the button.

Armitage was staring at McKelvie. The major returned the glance with one of interrogation.

“Sorry! Sorry!” gagged Townsend. “Silly of me, but I was—well, just thinking.”

“Thinking, eh?” replied McKelvie quietly. “What were you thinking about, Graham? This Von Schrader man, I mean.”

Armitage turned away and pretended to be taking off his pajamas in preparation for dressing. He poured some water into his wash stand and soused his head in it—bandages and all.

“Nothing. . . er, nothing,” replied Townsend. “It’s all right, Major. Just felt a little faint. Old Armitage can hit, you know. Golly, it must have been a shindy!”

But McKelvie was not to be put off.

“Shut up. I’ll talk again,” he barked. “Sit down there, Phil. I’ve got a story to tell you.”

Armitage, puffing like a grampus, was drying his face and dabbing at the dripping bandages. He

grabbed his British-warm and slipped it over his shoulders. McKelvie went on:

"I was telling you about these new Boulton and Paul ships. Townsend's mentioning a man by the name of Von Schrader brought something to my mind. It is supposed to be confidential, but I'll tell you two for a special reason. You can figure it out for yourselves.

"This new bomber, a ship that will revolutionize long-distance bombing, has just been finished. By the way, has either of you ever heard of it before?"

Townsend replied in the negative. Armitage did not answer. He was staring out of the window. McKelvie went on:

"Well, anyway, it doesn't matter. The important point is that the first one was flown across and handed in at St. Omer for testing and instruction work. Mainly for the gathering of squadron flight-sergeants who had been called there for explanation of its peculiarities. The whole affair was a secret, and it was hoped that it could be kept so until at least three night-bomber squadrons could be equipped with them. There are several important aerodynamic points about the ship that need to be kept a secret. You know what the Huns are. They grab our ideas and build duplicate types as fast as we can. Look at the Handley Page and the Gotha for in-stance. They stole the first Handley and were turning out Gothas as fast as we were Handleys. They're damned smart in that way. Great on fast production, once they get an idea."

Armitage was still looking out of the window, but Townsend was taking in every word.

"Two nights ago," continued McKelvie, putting a wax Vesta to his pipe, "this new Boulton and Paul Bourges was stolen from the shed at St. Omer. Don't ask me how, but we found out that the Germans had it. They flew it across to an emergency drome outside St. Quentin. Last night, according to our agents on the other side, it was to be flown up to Gontrode to the experimental shed where they have the equipment to solve the details of this new ship. Within two days, if they are lucky, they'll have taken every measurement, weight and detail and will have made a set of working drawings from it. Within twenty-four hours from that time, it's a hundred to one, they'll have duplicate ships in production!"

"Well?" snapped Armitage, whirling around. "Where do we come in? We can't do anything about it while teaching quirk pilots how to drop bombs in a class room at Cranwell."

The major grunted.

"I'm not interested in you. I was wondering how Townsend here knew of a man by the name of Von Schrader. It so happens that a Captain Von Schrader was the chap who stole the Bourges!"

The Englishman leaped out of his attitude of interested attention and steadied himself.

HE glared at McKelvie for a minute or two and then relaxed again, supporting himself with his hands behind him.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I do not believe this can be the same man. The man I was thinking of was a Zeppelin Johnnie."

"Hm! That's queer," remarked McKelvie pointedly. "This Captain Von Schrader is a Zeppelin man too. Brought down in England several months ago. He escaped from Donnington Hall—the place where they keep German officer prisoners. Have you ever met him?"

"No," answered Townsend, his eyes assuming that steely glint again, "but God knows, I'd like to!"

Both Armitage, who had turned around from the window, and Major McKelvie studied the quiet Englishman with silent interest.

"Look here, Major," finally broke in the American. "When do we pack off? . . . I mean, leave the squadron."

McKelvie considered.

"Sometime tomorrow. . . as soon as the papers come through."

"O. K. Then we can still do a show tonight, eh? How about Townsend and I making a shot to get that ship back. I think it can be done."

"You mean—destroy the shed—and the ship?"

"No. I mean get the ship back intact!"

"And Von Schrader with it!" barked Townsend from his bed.

"The beating you both took last night certainly has affected your heads," remarked McKelvie dryly. "No, you'd both better put in your time bathing your bruises and making yourselves look respectable. You'll frighten those poor quirks at Cranwell to death if you arrive like that. They'll think the war is getting tough."

He got up and started to draw on his trench coat. There was an air of finality about it all.

“Look here, Major,” battered Armitage again. “I can see a way in which we can get the ship, anyway.”

“If we can get the ship, we can get Von Schrader, and I want him!” broke in Townsend again. His voice was strangely low and convincing. McKelvie turned and studied the Englishman for a minute.

“Just why are you so determined to get this man, Graham?” he asked.

“I—I can’t tell you, now, Major,” he choked. “When—when we bring him back. What do you say?”

McKelvie turned on Armitage: “Why the interest in getting this particular ship back? Know anything about it?”

“Only what you have told us, Major,” answered Phil. “But I do have a—well, I’ve got to get that barge back, and that’s all there is to it. What’s the good word?”

“Draw up your plan, bring it to me in my office at two o’clock and I’ll let you know.”

“Right! Get Number Seven ready. Just a few forty-pounders. About half a dozen. Two or three extra gunners—to take a ride. Come on, Graham!” bellowed Armitage, heaving off his British-warm.

Blindly puzzled, McKelvie watched the two airmen leap about and get dressed. As he climbed into his breeches, Armitage was laying out a small table with protractor, compasses, pencils and graph paper. Townsend staggered about like a drunken man, pulling on his uniform, flying boots and babbling something about “Von Schrader!”

AT one-fifty-five on the dot, the squadron got a shock that put the smoothly running machine back fully an hour. The mechs and riggers were just returning to the hangars from the mess shack when two astonishing figures in khaki, oily leather and billowing bandages came rumbling up the cinder roadway from the officers’ quarters. They were locked arm in arm, conversing in subdued but excited tones.

One had a sheaf of papers in his free hand, the other a helmet, as if he might be going somewhere. The gentleman with the papers was Lieutenant Armitage, of the Long Island Armitages. The astonished mechs could tell that.

They knew his coat. But had a member of the Long Island Armitages spotted him, he would immediately have been cut off with the proverbial shilling. Nothing quite like this had ever disgraced the grand old name of Armitage before.

And what went for the Armitages went equally as well for the Townsends of “Broadmoor” on the Devon moors, for Phil’s pal presented as battered and bruised an appearance. Just a couple of social scions gone stevedore—and with a vengeance.

The mechanics stood spellbound, and entirely forgot to flip the regulation R.A.F. salute (a tug at a forelock with a greasy forefinger) as the two combatants of the night before, went staggering past them utterly oblivious to their surroundings.

“Well, I’ll be busted!” gasped a pudgy rigger. “Larst night them two was battering the daylight out of each other. This mornin’ they’re doin’ a Darby and Joan up and dahn the blinkin’ driveway. Potty! Balmy! Up the blinkin’ pole, I calls it!

*“Ow! Ow! Ain’t it a lovely wor!
Who wouldn’t be a soldier, eh?
Why, it’s a shyme to tike the pay.
As soon as Reveille ‘as gorn,
We feel just as ‘eavy as lead.
But we never gets up till the Sergeant
Brings ower breakfast into bed!”*

The wrench-wranglers went off singing, honestly convinced that the world had “gorn balmy.”

Into the Orderly Room they crashed, the creaky door swinging back on its hinges, threatening to tear the jamb away. The Orderly Corporal took one look, almost swallowed the Woodbine he was quietly drawing on, against orders, and tried to halt them before allowing them into the C.O.’s office. They neither saw nor heard him and continued on like a couple of love-sick elephants straight into McKelvie’s presence.

“Well!” boomed the C.O. But he could not refrain from a sly grin. These two would have made a cat laugh. “Get it over quick, because I’m busy, and I am expecting a visitor.”

AS he spoke a trim Camel slid across the top of the orderly room, blipped its engine once or twice and staged a hair-raising sideslip landing.

McKelvie turned, glanced out of the window and noticed the markings. He seemed pleased.

"We've got it all worked out, sir," opened Armitage, laying his papers down on the table. "We're going this afternoon!"

"What? . . . In the daylight?"

"Sure! They'll be working on the ship in the hangar then. We'll be sure of getting the Bourges and Von Schrader together. We'll be able to see what we are doing then. Just as it's getting dusk, you know."

"But it's madness, in daylight. You'll have to fight Fokkers all the way up—and back, if you get back."

"Leave that to us—Mac and Digger O'Neil. They'll take care of all the Fokkers in France."

"But I'm not sure that I want to risk Mac and Digger. This is no regular show, you know."

"They're Casket Crew, aren't they?" demanded Armitage and Townsend in a breath. No other decision could be considered by any stretch of the imagination.

"Yes. I know all that—the Casket Crew bunkum. But don't take advantage of this crazy tradition you've worked up. After all, life is sweet to those boys," said McKelvie sagely.

"But we can't do it without them—and a few others. Ryan and Tate and perhaps two or three more for reserves."

"You'll have to get them to volunteer. I won't order them to go."

"Give them the chance to volunteer. That's all we ask. They're Casket Crew, aren't they?" plugged on Armitage.

McKelvie grinned sheepishly. He knew that Armitage was right. Mac, Ryan, Digger, Tate and all the lot of them would go at the drop of a hat and ask no questions.

There was a rap at the door and the still astonished Orderly Corporal came in. "Lieutenant Osborn, sir. From Wing."

"Send him in."

A young pink-cheeked Britisher, helmet and goggles in his hand, came in and clicked his heels. Laying a large envelope on the table he said:

"The Colonel's compliments, sir. He hopes that you will have success."

"Thank you. Tell the Colonel that my lot is balmy enough to do anything. Good afternoon.

Mind the bloody wind-sock as you take off. We've lost things before to Camel pilots."

"Yes, sir. But I'm considered rather tame."

"Go on! I saw that landing. If you're tame, thank God we've got a navy!"

The youngster grinned, clicked his heels again, and departed.

"Well, go on with the story," growled McKelvie.

For ten minutes Armitage and Townsend fought, argued and pleaded. They drew lines, charts, and details. They showed how it was possible—in their way—to get the stolen ship out and swipe the guy who took it too. When they got through, their bandages had slipped, they perspired and their tongues were parched. At last the major gave in, reluctantly. Then he opened the large envelope and slit it.

"Since you are going to try and fly this thing out, you might as well know what you are flying. Here's some pictures of it, showing the instruments, controls and details of the throttle. This ship was fitted with the new compressed air starter—one for each A.B.C. Dragonfly engine."

McKelvie drew out several official photographs of the ship, a trim biplane fitted with two radial engines of a late type. It had a fuselage with a rear-turret gun well behind the wings, a front turret something like the Handley Page and behind it and just in front of the wings a single cockpit for the pilot. The wings were back-staggered, giving the ship a striking likeness to the dapper Sopwith Dolphin, only in larger proportions.

"You see," explained McKelvie. "You get in by getting on to the leading edge of the lower plane and climbing these two foot-slots. If you take a gunner, he'd better take the rear turret to protect you. He gets in from this side up this stirrup. They may have her circles painted over with Jerry insignia, and you'll have to risk getting back by staying under the Handley. From the looks of her, she'll fly much like a Handley, but she'll be a little more delicate on the wheel. She can stay in the air nine or ten hours if her tanks are full, but watch out and notice how much she has when you get in, and fly accordingly. If one engine conks, adjust your rudder from this wheel to compensate and fly in a gentle glide as far as you can."

“Great! What time can we leave?”

“It’s up to you. The ship is ready. All you have to do is to get a crew of nuts to go with you. I’ll stay here and prepare to advise your next of kin.”

Armitage sat studying the prints of the Bourges for ten minutes without answering. Townsend stood clenching and unclenching his unbandaged hand, staring without seeing, out of the window. McKelvie would have given a deal to know his thoughts.

Finally Armitage tossed the prints back and gathered up his charts, maps and papers. He beamed a battered grin of satisfaction, stuck his hand across the desk and, waited until the major took it.

“Never mind the next of kin! You be making out a set of papers to cancel those orders that we are to get funk-hole jobs,” barked the American. “We’ll be back—all set for a raid on Somergem which old Townsend is so interested in.”

McKelvie didn’t answer. He only stifled a knowing grin.

Armitage and Townsend went out—to tell a glorious story to a group of gunners, in hopes that they would volunteer for a berth aboard a winged fortress headed for Victory or Valhalla.

CHAPTER V Volunteers

NUMBER SEVEN was ready and on the cab-rank at three o’clock. In the hour that had passed between getting McKelvie’s sanction and the time to climb into flying kit, Armitage had outlined the mad plan to a group of gunners.

After twenty-seven words, he was swamped with anxious volunteers. He picked Bert Nelson, a wild Cockney, Hank Arnold and Jerry Blair, two Yanks who had been attached to One-O-Nine for gunnery training, and the rest of the Casket Crew except Harry Tate, who was in no physical shape to take a chance on this mad adventure.

Half an hour was spent in quieting down the rest who wanted to go, and outlining the plans of the adventure. Every man knew just what he was supposed to do and the plan was gone over again and again. Then they were sent off to the Armorer’s shed to collect their pet guns.

At three-fifteen the gang went up the ladder, drew it up after them and closed the trapdoor. The

engines had been whirling smoothly for about a quarter of an hour. They sounded sweet. In the racks were half a dozen forty-pounders, each labeled for a definite object. Major McKelvie sat in his office and watched the activity out of his win-dow. He picked up his phone and called a number.

“Colonel Lockwood? . . . This is Major McKelvie at One-O-Nine, sir. They are about to leave now. Yes, daylight. . . I know, but they have their own ideas on the job and I’ve given them free rein. I know them. They’ll do it if anyone can. Yes, sir. . . . You’ll get first word.”

He hung up—and sat staring out of the window.

TOWNSEND took the wheel and Armitage sat beside him. There was no startling gayety about the show, and they wasted few words. Their glances were brimming with the warmth and friendship that only men who fly together can know. They had dressed one another’s wounds and commented on their respective ability to take it. Suddenly, as they sat waiting for the red line in the thermometers to reach the desired point, Townsend whirled on Armitage.

“But look here, Phil!” he said anxiously. “How about this Von Schrader chap? How will you know him? There’ll be dozens of johnnies about that ship. We’ve got to get him—alive!”

“Leave it to me, I know him,” replied Armitage, going white under his abrasions and bruises. “I met the dog in Paris!”

“You—you met him in Paris?”

“Yeh. Come on, let’s go. I’ll tell you all about it later!”

Bellowing his clearance orders, Townsend waited until the chocks were removed and then eased his throttles forward. Old Number Seven went lurching away.

Mac was up in front, silent and dour. Digger O’Neil had the back turret and was sharing it with Jerry Blair, who was also designated to work from there when the fun started. Bert Nelson, Hank Arnold and Sergeant Ryan scotched down on the catwalk, their Lewis guns lying handy near the observation frame in the floor, just alongside the steps coming down from the control pit.

They streamed out of Loon-Plage and let the road to Dunkirk sweep along beyond their left-

hand wing-tip. There was no climbing for height this time. Townsend lifted her over the trees and leveled off. For a minute or two Armitage stared at his pilot, wondering what the devil had struck him.

A Handley Page hedge-hopping!

A tank performing S-turns! A steam-shovel doing a tango! A tractor on a hair-pin turn! All very well in a way, but a Handley Page hedge-hopping!

Dash my grannie's aunt's buttons!

But Townsend kept her at it. Sweeping wide of Dunkirk they streamed past the gaunt piles of Fort Castlenau and charged on to Ghyvelde. Below them, amazed Tommies ducked and crouched. Wide-eyed Belgians who had never been within half a mile of an airplane cringed as they glanced up at those massive rubber-tired wheels that swept over them, so close that they could read the white lettering on the walls of the tires. Their slipstream dragged a massive unseen rake across the parched fields and made the lowland hedges tremble.

Then came the war!

THE sweating ramparts that crept across the slimy end of Belgium. Deep water-soaked gashes in the earth, banked up with revette-work to hold the crumbling parapets. Communication trenches that looked like zigzag designs slashed in a muddy pie. The green slime of the flooded shellholes blinked up at them like the eyes of buried monsters. Mud-crusted men, teetering on pathetic duckboards, crouched against their shelters, wondering what new engine of evil this was that came bellowing across their slots.

Machine guns that had been nestling beneath dirty sandbags all night suddenly whipped up their one-eyed nozzles and spat. In reply a torrent of Stokes mortar shells went spinning over like lazy footballs and blew the machine guns to oblivion. All because two men wanted to capture another—forty miles away.

No Man's Land flickered under the booming concussion of the two Rolls-Royces. The slipstream flicked up a dirty spray from the stinking shell holes and showered rotting corpses. Deep into the back areas they roared, their wheels skimming across regimental headquarters and flipping the tiny pennants that fluttered from bamboo staves. Guns were trained on them, but

no gunner was fast enough for that rocketing fortress that went battering on, as straight as a winged dart.

Above, a flight of contour-chasing Camels saw the Handleys skimming over the signal wires that went creeping across country from front line units to the comfortable chateaus that housed soft-palmed staff officers. The scouts took one look and decided to try another section where the contour-chasing opposition was not so keen.

Furnes and the streaky Yser, in whose stagnant bosom lay the bodies of thousands of Britishers, Frenchmen and Germans who had fought and died there in 1915, came up next. This time the opposition from balking Archies was more prepared and shrapnel whirled and plunked. They bore through black blots of foul smoke but gave not an inch.

The Jerry drome at Ghisteltes came in for a startling surprise when a wide-winged Handley Page shot out from behind a clump of elders and screamed across the Fokker sheds before anyone knew what had happened. For ten minutes the Hun gunners lay on their bellies awaiting the explosion. But there was none and by the time they had realized that the joke was on them, the Handley Page was streaking up the traffic-choked road for St. Andre.

Not a shot was fired, but horses bolted, dragging frantic riders across stone walls by the stirrups. Transport nags that had seen war from all angles chucked it cold and went cantering through fences, spilling their supplies and ironmongery to the four winds.

Bloated colonels were unseated. Young captains lost their newly-won dignity and went steeplechasing against all rules and regulations. Route-marching infantrymen took the excuse to duck, find a funk hole and snatch a smoke. Caps were blown off. Newly polished leather was spattered with stinking spray from the rutted road as the Rolls-Royces puffed out their disdain. A gun or two was broken out, but before it could be loaded, the Handley Page was rumbling away over the tops of the traffic like a gigantic tank that had gone loco.

Mac, Armitage and Digger hung on like grim death. Townsend, wild-eyed and apparently insane, was flying like a madman. Over hedges, stone walls and flipping up to clear a line of wire,

he hurled her. He skirted villages to avoid smacking the inevitable church steeple. Down again as soon as the open country would allow, and that invisible rake swept through the waving grass and stubble. This was not flying—it was movement that recognized no element, mechanics or sanity.

Inside the cabin, Hank Arnold, Ryan and Bert Nelson were flat on their bellies hanging on to the cross strips of the cat-walk. The guns and drums were rolling about, clattering and clanking. The forty-pounders swung in the racks, and with every zoom or swooping dive rattled against their creaking guides.

Hank Arnold knew he had made a mistake in volunteering for this. Jerry Blair wondered what sort of flying they had been doing in A Flight. Certainly nothing like this had even happened to him. Bert Nelson was pawing at a gash in his chin and declaring that he had “joined up to fly and not to sit in a blinkin’ concrete mixer!”

BUT it could not last forever. St. Andre roared up at them, its steeples and smokestacks flicking out a warning of Bruges that lay beyond.

Over she went, the wing-tip almost ripping out a small sapling, and hell-for-leather they headed for Gontrode. Armitage had a hunch that that spell of instruction work at Cranwell would not be so bad after all—if they got back. He certainly never had experienced anything like this.

But as Gontrode and its battered profile loomed up he took a chance and leaned over to adjust his sight. He staggered into the bomb chamber and yanked at Ryan who was still on his face.

“Come on! Get up—all of you! Get those guns ready, Hank, and be ready to take Mac’s turret. We’re there—almost!”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

They were—and a new Randy Rudolph was there to greet them.

Back raced Armitage just in time to lean over his sight and whip his arm down. Ryan caught it and leaped for the toggle board and yanked once. A wagon-wheel mounting went skyward, the wheel spinning around until it hurled out every spoke. They curled over, barely missing the top of a hangar with their wheels, and Armitage whipped his hand down again.

Scrawnch! . . . Ber-o-o-o-o-o-m!

Another gun went out of action, blown over by the concussion of a bomb that landed ten yards away.

Armitage’s hand flipped down again and Ryan replied on the board.

Scrawnch! Scrawnch!

The new Randy Rudolph took it smack on the new concrete foundation and the barrel of the gun went hurtling through the air to slice out the corner of a hangar that had survived the raid of the night before. Digger and Mac were spraying insect-like figures that ran and staggered about.

“Right! Swing around and put her down!” bellowed Phil, cupping his hands around mTownsend’s ear-piece.

Then the new Casket Crew went to work.

The Handley slid down skimming over the wooden living quarters with inches to spare. Mac was taking another gun from Armitage and preparing to drop from the high snout. The ship landed, fishtailing madly to hold back, and finally dropped on the field, her broadside to the tall, corrugated-iron shed that stood second from the end. Most of the other hangars were gaunt wrecks.

“Right! So long, Townsend. I’ll see you later!” yelled Armitage. Over the side he went, minus his flying coat, and carrying a Webley pistol. Mac disappeared in a flurry of green tartan and bare thigh. Hank Arnold came through, scrambled under the tunnel, came up at Mac’s forward gun and began blazing away, covering his arc as planned. Behind, two guns were cutting off all access to the great metal hangar. Townsend took a gun from Ryan, braced it on the edge of the cockpit and began basting out short bursts at everything that moved.

Armitage and Mac, their limbs trembling, reached the great doors of the hangar. A few yards away, Andy, cradling his gun in his arm, let out a burst that battered the lock and retaining staple to smithereens. Out of the rear turret of the Handley went two spinning cylinders that struck the ground a few yards away and began spluttering a stream of sparks. These gave way to a billowing cloud of white smoke that curled up in two beautiful columns and began to creep across the field toward the living quarters. In a minute it had shielded the Handley Page completely. Armitage had figured the wind to a single degree.

THE great doors were rolled open with superhuman effort. Andy wheeled and swept a streaked cone of fire into something in the corner. Armitage stood a fraction of a second and saw the Bourges standing with its nose pointed toward the door.

“Wow! What a break! Wings on, props on, everything on. Now where’s Von Schrader?”

A rattle of fire greeted them, but Armitage plunged under the broad wings and bellowed for Andy. The Scot came up from nowhere beneath the fuselage and let drive, the clatter of his Lewis battering back and forth from the metal walls. Men screamed and groveled on the floor. Armitage advanced at the crouch, his gun still silent. Along the side of the hangar ran a broad white drawing board. A few sheets of paper were thumb-tacked on, and with a swoop, the Yank snatched the lot up and stuffed them inside his tunic.

“That’s some you won’t get, anyway!” he screamed, darting about. “Now where’s Von Schrader? Come on, Mac!”

Men lay about in all attitudes. A group huddled into a dim corner but Armitage went crashing across, upsetting horses and planks. With a bellow he seized a square-faced man in undress uniform. The others fell away and went down before Mac’s hose of hate.

“You—you hound! I want you, Von Schrader!” roared Phil. “Get in that ship and God help you if there isn’t any gas in it!”

With the gun in his back the little German went stumbling across the floor heading for the Bourges.

“Front cockpit, and sit high, so I can see your hands!” screamed the Yankee.

Mac was still spraying lead in all directions. Then he wheeled, drew out some small cylinders from his pocket and rubbed their tips across the harsh concrete floor. There was a reddish blaze and a plume of smoke. He tossed them one by one at the benches, tables and drawing boards. Men crawled away on their hands and knees, choking, gasping and spitting blood.

Up front Armitage was hounding the little German up the stirrups and forcing him at the point of the Webley to get into the front cockpit and stand there.

“Come on, Mac!” he yelled. “Get up here and take my tail. We’re off!”

He gripped the throttles.

Outside, the Handley gunners were keeping up the rattling fire in all directions. The drome was a garish patchwork of smoke, flame and zipping tracers. Men crept across the field and tried to get a gun in action, but Hank Arnold pounded them. They lay quivering over the dismantled gun.

“Cripes! What the hell’s keeping ‘em?” growled Townsend, flinging another burst across the field to where a group of gray-clad soldiers were trying to get a gun going from the cover of a shattered hangar.

Then two bellowing screams of power belched out of the metal shed. They were blipped on gradually, Armitage taking the devil’s own time to warm them. The ship began to rumble out of the doorway, and for a minute the men in the trembling Handley Page stood still in wonder and awe at the sight of the beautiful machine. They saw it come clambering down the slight incline. They opened fire again, but their eyes were not on the sights. They followed the slow movement of the stolen bomber.

Ryan pointed.

“Look! Mac’s not aboard yet. What’s he doing?”

“Can’t you see? He’s ripping off the sheets that cover the cocardes on the lower wings! Those Jerry crosses are only pasted on lightly. Good old Andy!”

The Bourges sat out on the Jerry drome, as if preening itself for the flight. At last Mac clambered aboard, rammed his gun into the Scaarf ring shackle and whirled it around—for action.

The fire and rattle of musketry was increasing. Bullets whined and spat. Then, like a proud condor, the Bourges came rumbling across the field, passed the grim snout of the Handley and lifted its wide undercarriage into the air, as if in salute to the gallant ship that had effected its rescue. Speed and surprise had won.

Townsend answered Armitage’s wave and sat back—glaring with an icy glint at the little man in green-gray who stood in the other ship’s front cockpit. The Rolls-Royce engines opened up and she rumbled away through a torrent of hail that flamed out anew.

CHAPTER VI
Escape

THE Bourges came around beautifully and slid under the wingtip of the mothering Handley. Townsend glanced down and watched the man in the front turret, through knife-like slits that spat hatred through his goggles. He studied him as they climbed over Bruges and headed for the coastline.

The guns of Bruges spat, howled and crashed, but Townsend kept his nose straight, watching the little man below him like a hawk.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sky flamed and took on a new countenance. Blots of smoke stamped patches all around them. Snarling steel whanged and slit their fabric. Below, the Bourges was dancing in and out as Armitage enjoyed himself with this new toy. It flew rings around the Handley to stay back. It flipped its heels as if in joy at its release. A beautiful bird snatched from a grim retaining cage.

Crash! Bang! Crash!

Cordite flamed and snarled. Chunks of hot metal set their teeth into the longerons and spars of the H-P. She staggered under the pounding impacts. Still Townsend sat and glared down at the man in the green-gray, who stood up in the turret of the Bourges like a stuffed scarecrow.

More shrapnel whined. Bullets came spinning out of the sky.

Then—

Black spots. . . .

Andy McGregor caught them first—a flight of coast-defense Fokkers. He nailed the first with a cone of lead that bit the motor out of the leader's tri-plane.

Digger O'Neil whirled and spotted them as the flaming wreck went past him. He whirled—just in time to stop a chestful of lead and drop like a sack of dough down on the rear-turret platform. Jerry Blair cried out, and rolled the gasping Digger away with his feet. He took up the nickel-flecked gun and blazed into the lot blindly. Mac, from below, chipped the aileron of another and it went off in a wide spin, to recover two thousand feet below and head off home.

Ryan sensed something wrong when the cabin suddenly became a hive for snarling metal bees.

They lanced and stung. Their buzz echoed back and forth inside the rumbling chamber of horrors. He dropped to his hands and knees and started to crawl up the catwalk, dragging a metal first-aid kit with him.

Digger was on his back, feet up on the platform. He was kicking and flailing his arms. Blood spurted out of his mouth and trickled across his face and trailed under his helmet. Ryan steadied himself, slipped a hand under the leather flying coat chest and drew it out again, a mass of gore. He dragged Digger away and laid him out along the racks.

"Uh!" he grunted. "He'll never see Sydney harbor again. Poor old Digger!"

Outside, the madness continued, with the remaining Fokkers darting in and out at the two British ships. Still Townsend made no effort to display any of the maneuvering qualities of the Handley Page. He simply sat there and took it while he glared down at the man standing in the front turret of the Bourges.

Suddenly, he jerked in his seat. A dirty green Fokker shot across his nose and trained its double guns on the snout of the Bourges.

"No! . . . No! . . . He's mine!" wailed Townsend. "Get away from him—damn your eyes!"

He swung the Handley over like a Camel and went after the Fokker, screaming at Hank Arnold to get him. Hank lurched around, planked a bead and let drive. But he was too late. The Fokker had battered the nose of the Bourges into a colander. The little man in gray-green went down in a welter of lead—battered beyond recognition.

The Fokker jerked into a zoom, staggered at the top, fell away under a battering fire from Arnold's Lewis, threw away its wings and gave up the ghost.

Townsend went stark raving mad.

"The dog! That was my man! My man, I tell you! Only let him hold out until we get down!"

The Handley went mad too. Back and forth, in and out, she crashed, scattering the remaining Fokkers as a mastiff scatters a litter of terriers. They crashed through and headed for Ostend. A calm, smiling, satisfied man at the controls of the Bourges, and a raving madman at the wheel of the Handley.

AN hour later they limped in to Loon-Plage, escorted by a squadron of S.E.5s sent out to pick them up by Colonel Lockwood. They were battered, weary and worn. But the scouts put up a triumphant show all the way home. And Loon-Plage and Hesdin knew half an hour before they landed that the Casket Crew had been successful again.

They landed almost together down the lane of glimmering petrol drums. Armitage brought his bloody cargo in gently, hoping against hope that Von Schrader was still alive. Mac tried to get out, but he was all in and tumbled headlong out of the rear pit, and lay, a billowing pile of green plaid and oily leather. Major McKelvie picked him up and carried him away himself.

Townsend leaped clean out of his cockpit, raced across to the Bourges and scrambled up the stirrups.

“No use, Graham,” advised Armitage. “He got a packet in the dome. He’ll never swipe another ship, or talk to drunken flying officers.”

“Talk to drunken flying officers? . . . What do you mean?”

“Just this. . . I’m the guy who tipped him off about the Bourges. A wise guy, I was. Drunk in Paris telling the world. This bimbo got me in a corner, and with a few drinks I spilled the beans—telling him all about it and where it was. What a sap I was! No more leaves to Paris for me.”

“But how did you know?”

“The guy who owns the *estaminet* told me the next morning. How I’d spread the news and how this guy was not a French gendarme, as I supposed, but was a German spy. They had been looking for him an hour after I went to sleep. I realized what I’d done, but didn’t have brains enough to tip off St. Omer.”

“But Gontrode? How did you—?”

“I realized at once what would happen. They’d take it to Gontrode and go over it with a microscope. I wanted to smash the place up. I realize now that I was a damn fool and that I didn’t actually know where it was.”

“But it’s O.K. now. You got it back. You’re in luck!”

“Yeh! I’m lucky, I guess, at that,” agreed Armitage. “But how about you? What was Von Schrader to you? And why the worry about getting Somergem yesterday?”

Townsend steadied himself on the step, gripped the edge of the Bourges cowling, and stared ahead.

“Von Schrader—Von Schrader,” he stammered, “Von Schrader killed my father!”

“Killed—killed your father? I thought he died.”

“No. Von Schrader, an escaped Zeppelin commander, was fleeing across our downs early one evening. He ran into Dad—and killed him—without a chance. I arrived home on leave just as they brought him in. We kept it quiet, hoping to get the man before he got out of England. No go.”

“Then. . . He killed Dad Townsend, skipped across the channel somehow and nailed me for the information on the Bourges in Paris. And got us two into the craziest brawl. I wanted to get him at Gontrode and you were after him at Somergem, thinking he’d go there. What a queer war!”

“Yes. His being both a crack Zeppelin and Gotha man fooled us. But it’s all the same now. He got his—probably better than we could have handed it to him—the poor devil!”

“WELL, what do you think of the Bourges bomber?” inquired Major McKelvie, coming up.

“Pretty good,” grinned Armitage. “When does Townsend go back to flying them?”

“What a laugh!” replied McKelvie, stuffing in his Dunhill. “He can fly this one to St. Omer if he likes, but you don’t suppose I was serious about that transfer business, do you?”

“Why! Weren’t you?” growled Armitage and Townsend together.

“Of course not. The Staff wallahs wanted the Bourges back, and that was the only way I could think of to get it. I knew you’d fall for it.”

With that McKelvie stalked away.

“But if he only knew,” said Armitage, gripping Townsend’s hand.

“He never will,” replied the Englishman, dropping down to the turf. “Come on, let’s get a drink. There are no Jerry spies around here—only dead ones.”