

One Blue Flare

By O. B. Myers

When the Blue Flare tore through the skies, no pilot ever failed to answer the signal for help. But sometimes someone answers it who shouldn't. Then a baited trap is the only answer.

STEVE McCray swept the sky with a long, careful look. Not empty; but nothing close enough to be dangerous. A few more minutes, and they'd have these three Salmsons safely across the lines; in spite of the pace which, to Steve in his Spad, seemed maddeningly slow. He hoped fervently that the plates, somewhere inside the bulky fuselages of those photo ships, would turn out to be good; they had absorbed enough hell getting them. Suddenly he sat bolt upright in his seat.

From the cockpit of the Spad ahead he saw a hand extended straight up, palm flat to the rear. That was Tony Farness, his C.O. and best friend; the signal meant, "Stay where you are; don't follow." Almost at once Tony's Spad whirled on a wing-tip and shot away toward the east. In a long, slanting dive it dwindled rapidly into a mere speck toward the neighboring sector. What had Tony seen?

Steve glanced at Bill Heston, in the third Spad. It was up to them now to get these photo-ships safely home to the drome occupied jointly by the 18th Spads and the 83rd Observation Squadron. Well, only two miles to the lines; but there was a rumor going round that von Graueheit, the cold-meat killer, was in this sector. Would the notorious Boche who specialized in jumping lone two-seaters risk the resistance of two Spads, or not? Couldn't these Salmsons speed up a bit, damn it!

STEVE was peering downward when the spurt of tracer streaks whizzed up past the tail of the second Salmson. He stiffened with surprise and apprehension, and looked again. A Fokker—and off to the left one other. That was all; only two. And down below to start with.

He whipped his Spad into a dive with spitting guns. The nearest Boche dodged, wheeled sharply, and went into a spiral. From above Steve followed, with the advantage of position. His jaw tightened, his fingers caressed the trigger grips in readiness. Suddenly he remembered something. Orders. Duty. His job was to get those Salmsons back safe, not to go careening off in individual combat. How did he know there were not

other foes lurking near—the cold-meat killer waiting for the escort to be lured away? An old trick, but a good one.

With a growled curse he forsook the Fokker, and wheeled back toward the formation. Bill Heston was hugging one flank; Steve raced to a position on the other, filled with bitter disgust. The record of the 18th in confirmed victories had suffered lately from too many of these damned escort missions. Here was a chance to add one to his score. He never even considered losing a fight. He dared not take it!

The Salmsons ploughed on their way. Off on the flanks the Fokkers wheeled like vultures, spitting occasional long-range bursts, but careful to keep a safe distance from the Spads. Not a chance in a million of a hit at that distance; the firing was merely to annoy. In that it succeeded; Steve itched to reply. The lousy Boches; they wouldn't dare bait him that way if it weren't for the Salmsons. By God, if they'd only stay within reach until the lines were crossed. . . .

But of course they didn't. No sooner had the first two-seater pushed its nose over allied territory than the Fokkers flipped tail-to, and flew swiftly away into the north. With grinding jaws Steve watched them go. They had carried no insignia at all; he would probably never see them again to know them. Well, he'd done his job anyway.

Separating to land, the five planes slid down toward the field. The Salmsons landed first, and lumbered across the tarmac toward the big, oblong hangars on one side; the Spads settled neatly before the smaller square hangars on the other. Steve vaulted to the ground.

"Where'd Tony go to?" asked Bill Heston, stretching his legs.

"Don't know." Steve was peering anxiously at the northern sky, where now a speck appeared. "Maybe that's him. Let's wait."

The speck grew into a Spad, and landed gracefully. From the cockpit leaped Tony Farness, a look of triumph making his black eyes snap. He shouted a question as his feet met the ground.

“Get the Salmsons back all right, Steve?”

“We did that,” grinned Steve. “Played with a couple of Fokkers on the way.” He described the tantalizing tactics of the enemy.

“Don’t let it get your goat. The morning wasn’t wasted.” He led the way into his office in headquarters as he talked. “I caught a blue flare in the east; distress signal. I’d seen those two Fokkers below, but figured you and Bill could pull the Salmsons through. So I jumped over into the next sector to answer the flare. A pair of observation ships from the 44th, protected by three Spads from the 14th, had been jumped by half a dozen Fokkers, and were having tough sledding. Well, I was lucky enough to knock off a Jerry before it broke up.”

“Swell!” exclaimed Steve. “But say, the 14th Spads; that’s Brick Donovan’s outfit, isn’t it? Was Brick with them?”

“In person,” nodded Tony. “I saw his ship; number 4.”

“Boy, won’t he be sore! Grabbing a Boche right under his nose, and in his own sector, too!” Steve’s look of joy abruptly faded to one of concern. “Listen, fella, you’d better watch out for that guy. We’re the only squadron that’s giving him a race for high-scoring honors, and he’s got the rep of being a mean rival. Tough and dangerous.”

“What are you trying to tell me, that Brick might shoot me up?”

“Well, not that exactly. But you watch him, just the same.”

SOME time later the door opened to admit the photo-section sergeant with sad news. Two of the Salmsons had brought back beautiful pictures of the tops of archie bursts. The third camera had contained good clear plates—all of which had been ruined by a bullet-hole straight through the middle. Net result—complete failure.

“A bullet?” demanded Tony. “You don’t mean an archie fragment?” No; the sergeant produced the bullet itself for proof. “Damn the luck!” swore Tony. “A long-range pot-shot from one of those blasted Fokkers, I suppose. Wait till Hurry Cane hears this. He’ll blow up.”

Reluctantly he took up the phone, and made his report to Colonel Cane, at Wing. “Where in hell were you?” demanded the colonel brusquely. An emergency, explained Tony; a blue flare, the S.O.S. of the air, which was the only permissible excuse for breaking orders.

“Whew!” said Tony when he hung up. “The way that tough old bird snaps at you! No wonder they call him Hurry Cane. It’s O.K., though.”

But within fifteen minutes the storm broke. Tony had gone out to the hangars, leaving Steve alone in the office. The phone rang; Steve picked it up and gave his name.

“Where’s Farness?” demanded a gruff, malevolent voice.

“He’s out on the tarmac; shall I call him?”

“No, just tell him he’s through. Under open arrest, pending court-martial. I’ll teach him to break orders, leave an escort.”

With sinking heart Steve leaped to the defense of his friend.

“But colonel, it was necessary, he saw a blue flare—”

“A lie!” thundered the voice. “He went to get a Boche. Just talked to Donovan. Says no blue flare fired. That’s enough. Squadron rivalry—good. But Farness knows the orders. That’s all!”

Bang, went the receiver at the other end. Steve, groping for words, turned to see Tony entering the door, and blurted the message.

“Of course I saw a blue flare,” insisted Tony. “Plain as hell. But what’s the use? He won’t believe me. I’m sunk. Court-martial—”

“By God, I see it!” cried Steve. “It’s Brick Donovan; he’s the one who’s lying. Ashamed to admit his escort had to call for help. Besides, if you’re court-martialed, that’ll take the best man out of the 18th, and he knows it. We can’t let him get away with this, Tony!”

But Tony only slumped on a box, discouraged, shaking his head. Steve stared at him in dismay. The terrible injustice of it! Tony, the squarest, cleanest guy that ever opened a throttle, court-martialed for another’s lie. It was incredible, ghastly. There must be some way out; but not through appeal to Hurry Cane. A rough and ready soldier of the old school, who expected just two things of his men. Fight like hell, and obey orders. All else was between themselves.

“By God, I’m going to do something about this, if you aren’t!”

Tony raised his head. “You? Now don’t you go and get mixed up—”

“Leave it to me,” said Steve briefly; and would add nothing more.

HE flew the noon patrol; but twenty minutes after landing took off alone, saying nothing of his destination. Straight north he flew, until he was out of sight of the field. Then he curved sharp east, into the next sector, and was shortly landing on Brick Donovan’s drome.

“Ahoy, there. Packer!” he hailed, “Where’s your C.O.?”

“Well, if it isn’t Steve McCray! Come on down and have a drink.”

Steve declined the invitation. “I’ll chew the fat with you later, Packer. Right now I want to see Donovan. Is he around?”

“Right inside headquarters; help yourself. See you after.”

Steve pushed open the door and closed it behind him. Sprawled in the only chair was a huge man with swarthy complexion, shaggy red hair, and features which might have been cut from stone. Cold gray eyes bespoke courage; the long line of his unshaven jaw betrayed a mulish stubbornness. A man of action, plainly, on whom subtle, diplomatic phrases would be wasted. Steve came directly to the point.

“Donovan, you’ve got to take back your lie.”

“Eh! . . . What the hell are you talking about?”

Steve told him who he was. “Tony Farness saw a blue flare, and you know it. But because you won’t admit it, he’s going to be court-martialled, broken, disgraced. It isn’t fair, Donovan, damn it! Just for the sake of—what? No, you’ve got to take it back.”

The big man spread his elbows on the table, and stared at Steve.

“So you’re telling me! I should call up Hurry Cane, and say, ‘Please, Colonel, I told a lie, I was wrong, and Farness was right.’ Is that it?” He paused, and his heavy lip curled in scorn. “And if I don’t—what are you going to do about it?”

Steve returned his stare without the flicker of an eye-lash. His fists clenched, and he measured the point of that blunt jaw.

“I might smash you on the button,” he observed coolly.

Donovan, a full fifty pounds the heavier of the two, almost gasped. But he could not quite conceal a gleam of admiration in his eye.

“Ha!” he snorted. “A lot of good that would do you!”

Just what Steve was thinking to himself. He might get in one good crack, yes. But after that Donovan would unquestionably beat him to a pulp, and quite within his rights, too. Besides acting in self-defense, Donovan was a captain, and therefore his superior in rank.

“I appeal to your sense of honor, Donovan. Don’t be a dirty sneak—this time. What has Tony Farness ever done to hurt you? Why—”

“Listen, you little squirt,” broke in the red-haired giant. “You got plenty of nerve, talkin’ to me like that. But you’re bangin’ your head against a stone wall. It’s no use. If you think I’m goin’ to make a fool out of myself to Hurry Cane, just to get your pal out of a jam, you’re crazy. What if he court-martialled me, huh?”

Bah! I ain’t got where I am in this man’s army by askin’ other people to do me favors. No, sir! What I’ve got, I had to fight for, and I’m goin’ to fight to keep it. Oh, I know what you’re thinkin’; it’s the Jerries we should be fightin’. Sure, and if he’s court-martialled, it won’t affect the war none, will it? The worst they’ll do to him is break him to a second looey, and shove him in some other squadron, where he can still kill as many Germans as if he was still with the 18th. Only the 14th will like that better, *compree*? No, sonny. Once and for all, the answer is—No! Go tell him that from me.”

Though discouraged, Steve was far from giving up. But he saw that to argue with Donovan was useless. He had turned and opened the door on his way out, when the other’s voice recalled him.

“Hey, there! What did you say your name was—McCray? You’ve sure got guts, for a little guy, McCray. Maybe you don’t like me now, but let me tell you the boys in the 14th swear by me. I’ll arrange a transfer, if you say so. Why not chuck that weak-kneed outfit you’re with, and come over here and join up with a good squadron?”

Steve’s face did not change, but his eyes snapped fire.

“Go to hell,” he said bluntly, and slammed the door.

Packer was waiting for him by the corner of the first hangar. Steve turned down the drink, but then stood talking for nearly a quarter of an hour. An idea had taken vague form in the back of his mind, and he could do with a certain bit of information about the operations of the 14th. His questions betrayed no more than a normal curiosity, but when he finally left he had found out what he wanted to know.

THE following morning, after flying the early patrol, he made his way across the field to the hangars of the 83rd without saying a word to Tony. Here, with only the wish for a joyride as an excuse, he borrowed a Salmson. After playing around over the field for fifteen minutes or so, he landed it, for no apparent reason, close to the hangars of the 18th, instead of by the 83rd where it belonged. When Tony strolled toward him from headquarters, he asked casually:

“By the way, Tony; you’ve got a pair of binoculars, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Down in my trunk. What the devil for?”

Muttering an unintelligible reply, Steve wandered away.

Tony gazed after him in puzzled curiosity. “That guy,” he murmured to himself, “he’s got something up his sleeve. But what?”

Steve found the glasses, for which a pursuit pilot had no use at any time, at the bottom of the trunk. He

buttoned them under his jacket, and without hurrying walked back to the tarmac. He looked on all sides for Tony, but more as a man looks who would rather not see what he is looking for. Tony was not in sight; Steve called to the sergeant to start up the Salmson. He took off, to spend another ten minutes stunting lazily over the drome, letting the wind drift him gradually toward the north. Then quite casually he changed to level flight with the throttle at cruising speed, headed straight for the lines.

"Funny," he muttered. "This ship seemed nose-heavy at first; now she's tail heavy. Just my imagination, I guess."

Without hesitating he crossed into Germany. Then he pulled out the binoculars, and carefully studied the groups of specks which were visible. But it was some time before he saw that Fokker, cruising alone, on its side painted a crude butcher's knife, whose point dripped red.

"The cold-meat Killer!" he murmured. "Come on; here's your meat!"

His maneuvers, after that, were very carefully planned and craftily executed. He was almost directly over the imaginary line dividing the sector of the 18th from that on the east; just as he had hoped. He swung into Germany, swung back, eased in again, a little deeper. All the time his eyes were glued to that lone Fokker, up above, except for brief glances at his watch. It wheeled in dignified aloofness against the distant blue; whether its pilot saw him or not he could not tell. He ventured a little deeper.

Suddenly Steve let out a gasp, which became a cry of joy. The Fokker had tipped up, was rushing down. The cold-meat Killer was plunging to the attack! The deadliest of the German aces, who specialized in two-seaters, was diving on him; he was alone in an unprotected Salmson, with no observer to handle his rear guns—and yet he cried aloud for joy!

HIS FLYING at once showed signs of a definite purpose. Though he sat in a Salmson for the first time in his life, he handled that ship as if he had been born in it. First a rush to the south, then a sharp twist to the left; then a short dive. The Fokker darted nearer and nearer, began to spit short, nasty bursts. Coolly Steve dodged, up, down, sideways. A one-turn spiral, then another frantic lunge to the south. When the Boche tore in from his flank, Steve whipped through an Immelmann. At this maneuver the Fokker was immeasurably faster, but its unexpectedness, from a two-seater, caught the German unprepared. He actually lost ground, as Steve whirled into his next bank.

The Salmson continued its mad dodging, with the Fokker darting closer and closer. More than once those Spandaus spoke, but never did Steve allow his antagonist to get set for an aimed burst. The bullets tore ribbons from his wings, and made a sieve out of his tail surfaces, but came no nearer than an arm's length to the vital spots. The Boche, however, was growing angry at this unusual resistance, in addition to discovering that the rear guns were silent. He was lunging recklessly for the tail now; his bursts were longer; the smoking steel raked Steve's fuselage viciously; perilously close.

Steve's calculations were drawing to a climax. He had lured the cold-meat Killer well into allied territory, on the border line of the two sectors; now his eyes were directed anxiously eastward. Seven o'clock start, Packer had told him; a two-hour patrol; his watch now said five of nine. Ah—he saw something! A double group, coming out of Germany, one layer above the other. Salmsons, covered by Spads. He seized the Very pistol from its holster, thrust it over the fairing, and pulled the trigger. A brilliant blue flare arched across the sky, leaving a trail of smoke.

At the same instant a blast of steel carried away his instrument board, showering him with splinters of broken glass. In desperate haste he hurled the Salmson into a turn; the smoking tracers pursued him relentlessly. The Fokker was hard upon his tail, its pilot furious at being so long balked of his prey. The Spandaus sputtered redly, one burst after another; the bullets beat a tattoo of death on the Salmson's taut fabric.

But Steve was equal to the necessity. Hand and foot moved together, timed to the split second. The clumsy two-seater leaped like a Spad. A zoom, a lightning twist, and a curving slip—and as if by magic it had eluded its grim pursuer. Steve shot a glance overside, and elation warmed his veins. From that home-coming formation to the east, a Spad was rushing to his rescue, in answer to the S.O.S. Like a meteor it tore across the sky, guns vomiting crimson death. In the twinkling of an eye it shot past his wing-tip, to plunge at the Fokker. Steve caught the number on its side—number 4! Brick Donovan!

His scheme had worked. A grin of triumph crossed his drawn features. He had deliberately gotten himself into a jam, and lured Brick to come to his help, leaving an escort to do so. The rest would be simple. He had fired a blue flare; but who was to prove it if he denied it? Proof?

Deliberately he reached down, grabbed the Very pistol, and hurled it into space. How could he have fired a distress signal, if he hadn't even had a Very pistol in his cockpit? Simple!

He brought the Salmson around in a wide circle, and turned his head. This was as far as he had laid his plans; of what was to happen next he had not the slightest premonition. If he had thought about it at all, he had half expected that the cold-meat Killer would turn and flee on the arrival of a Spad. But with something of a shock he saw that the German was doing nothing of the kind. The Fokker and the Spad were going to it, hammer and tongs. Whirling about each other in a tight spiral, burst answered burst, and stunt followed stunt.

For Steve to hasten away to safety at this moment would have been easy; was perhaps, the obvious thing to do. But the raging struggle fascinated him; he forgot that he was in a two-seater, alone and well-nigh helpless. He forgot everything but the terrific combat at which he was a spectator. His slow bank continued, while he gazed at the two contestants. Brick Donovan and the German.

Up, down; over and under; first one on top and then the other. Both superb flyers, and both supremely confident. Between the Spad and the Fokker there was little to choose; except that the latter had a trifle the best of it when it came to a zoom. It was this infinitesimal advantage which with startling abruptness turned the scales.

Up careened the Spad; up went the Fokker in pursuit. From the upper limit of his zoom Brick Donovan curved left, with straining motor. The Fokker did likewise, but fifty feet higher. That fifty feet told the tale. Ducking swiftly, the German gained just that extra margin of speed which Brick's Spad had lost. Brick's dive was prompt, but not prompt enough. A hail of steel belched from Spandau muzzles. Hissing, smoking streaks stabbed at camouflaged fabric, crept like darting demons the length of the Spad's fuselage. Came a sharp crack, like the report of a pistol held close to one's ear. A cloud of frayed wood was for an instant visible in front of the Spad, then vanished. Where its prop had been a spinning circle, was now nothing. The ship went into a vertical side-slip, and dropped like a stone.

Steve found himself frozen to his controls, stupefied with surprise. Such an outcome to the battle had never entered his head. Of course, as far as his scheme was concerned, it made little difference. Brick Donovan was going down; not killed, but merely to a forced landing on allied soil. The rest of his plan could still be carried out as intended, with the added pleasure of a good laugh at Brick's expense. He started to grin—then suddenly the grin vanished.

A DEADLY hail of bullets raked through his center section. To say that he was caught utterly unawares

seems absurd; yet such was the case. In thinking of other matters he had completely forgotten himself, and his position, now become threefold precarious. Brick Donovan's unforeseen defeat left him unprotected. He was alone; the cold-meat Killer was upon him!

With numb fingers he jerked the controls. The Salmson answered, but slowly, clumsily. With a lightning twist the Fokker flashed past his tail, and zoomed to rain a hail of lead from above. The bullets splattered through his cowl, demolishing what was left of his instrument board. Steve gave tongue to a cry of despair.

He tried a tight spiral. The Fokker whipped inside his turn, and raked him viciously. He dropped in a sideslip; the Boche pounded him with crushing effect. The German, cheated of his prey, was determined not to let it escape him now. His guns blazed a song of death; his Fokker was a flashing sword of destruction.

With a frantic wrench at the stick Steve hauled the ship out level. His hope was gone, for doom stared him in the face. Defense was as impossible as escape. It was too late to signal for help now, even had he been able to do so. There were some specks, far to the west, which might be Spads. But his Very pistol was gone; he couldn't even shoot a blue flare if he wanted to. He dodged a rattling burst from behind, and knew that the next would finish him. He slumped over the controls, hoping only for a quick and painless death.

Suddenly a sound came to his ears that sent a surge of astonishment through his numb frame. The crackle of guns, but not the Spandaus of the Boche! Other guns—closer—behind him! He jerked upright, and twisted about in the seat. His eyes widened at what he saw. The rear cockpit of the Salmson was no longer empty. Against the swiveled Lewis guns crouched a figure in familiar leather coat; the guns themselves were slamming out a double stream of hissing tracers. For an instant the figure turned—it was Tony!

In the next second everything seemed to happen at once. Tony's sudden blast of fire disconcerted the German, who had thought that rear cockpit empty; he made the error of dodging downward and to the right. A fresh wave of hope gripped Steve; he straightened up, shoved on the stick, and began a turn to the right. Before he realized it, he found his sights sweeping along a high-backed, narrow fuselage, marked by a painted replica of a cruel-looking steel butcher's knife. With instantaneous reaction his fingers clamped down on the triggers, and his front guns spoke. For the first time that day—and the last.

His very first bullet must have found the mark. The Fokker never dodged at all. It slid up on a wing, slowly went over on its back, with Steve's tracers tearing at its cockpit, and then fell drunkenly into a

spin. Down went the cold-meat Killer, with Steve in hot pursuit. Halfway to the ground it seemed to right itself, as if its pilot had suddenly recovered consciousness. Steve, diving as if he were in his Spad, cut loose another burst. The Fokker continued down, now in wide, careening circles. With a rending crash it struck a tree-top, somersaulted, and lay still.

PULLING out of his plunge, Steve peered downward. He saw that the Fokker lay, a wreck, on the edge of an open field; also that in the middle of this same field stood a Spad without a propeller, bearing on its side the number 4. That last was what he wanted to see; with a quick movement he put the Salmson into a glide. As he side-slipped in to land, he saw from the tail of his eye a movement among the wreckage of the Fokker; the pilot was crawling out. He rolled to a quick stop, and leaped down. From the side of the Spad a man ran toward him; a big, burly man, with a broad grin on his homely face.

"Great work, Salmson!" cried the voice of Brick Donovan. "You should be in pursuit. Come and take your prisoner. I wish—" He stopped suddenly, and his grin faded. "You!" he gasped. "And Farness!"

"Yes, Donovan, it's me," answered Steve. "Forget about the prisoner, for the moment. I've got you where I want you, now."

"Got me?" stammered the big man. "What—what do you mean?"

"Just this. A short while ago you left your formation to come in answer to a signal of distress, didn't you? But get this, Donovan. I didn't fire any blue flare! There isn't even a Very pistol in that cockpit; look and see if you doubt me. Do you understand?"

Brick Donovan nodded his big head in helpless wrath.

"There's a P.C. just over there, with a phone in it," went on Steve doggedly. "You're coming over with me, and call the colonel, and tell him you were mistaken; that you've found, on inquiring, that one of the Salmsons in your escort yesterday morning fired a flare of distress. Either that, Donovan—or by God, I swear that the same court-martial will try you both for the same offense. How about it?"

For a moment Tony Farness, standing silently to one side, thought that Brick was going to tear the smaller Steve limb from limb. But suddenly the big man burst into a laugh, and confessed himself beaten.

"You win, McCray. I'll do it—on one condition." He glanced over his shoulder. "That I get credit for bringing down von Graueheit."

"Done!" cried Steve promptly. "Come on to that phone. Tony, keep your eye on that Boche till we get back, will you?"

SIDE by side the two contrasting figures strode rapidly toward a dugout on the edge of the woods where telephone wires could be seen. Five minutes later they walked slowly back. On Steve's face was an expression of weary satisfaction; Brick was grinning contentedly. They found Tony trying to converse in sign language with the Boche.

"It's all fixed, Tony," said Steve. "No court-martial. How's this prisoner of mine—I mean, of Brick's?"

"A bullet grazed his scalp, stunning him," said Tony. "But he seems to be all right now. Lucky guy, at that."

"Old Hurry Cane wants me to bring him to Wing, for questioning," said Donovan, who plainly had lost no time in advising the colonel of his unmerited claim to victory over the German. "So he and I will be on our way to the nearest road." He paused, to draw Steve to one side. "By the way, McCray, about switching to the 14th. That offer still holds. How about it?"

Steve gave him a look of cool scorn. "Under a C.O. who snatches other men's victories? No, thanks."

Brick Donovan flinched visibly, and reddened to the roots of his hair. But then he laughed harshly, turned aside, and strode across the field behind the still silent and dejected German captive. Steve and Tony climbed into the Salmson and flew home.

It was after dark when the call came from Wing; Steve, sitting in headquarters with Tony, heard with curiosity his C.O.'s half of the conversation. "Yes, sir. . . Yes, he is. . . Yes, we will, sir." Tony hung up with a look of puzzled surprise.

"The colonel," he explained. "He wants me to come to his office at once—and to bring you with me."

"Me!" exclaimed Steve, "Why, I didn't think Hurry Cane knew anything about me! What's he want me for?"

"Don't kid yourself," muttered Tony, reaching for his overseas cap. "That old bird knows something about every man in his command—and more than you'd suspect about most of 'em. What now, I wonder. . ."

A quarter of an hour later the car put them down in front of the main building at Wing; they were admitted at once to Colonel Cane's office. Side by side they entered the bare room, saluting stiffly. From behind his littered desk the grizzled colonel glared at them silently.

There was a long moment of utter silence. Then, from his side, Steve heard a strange voice begin

speaking rapidly in German. He turned his head. Half behind the door, placed so that they would not be seen by anyone entering, stood Brick Donovan and the Jerry, von Graueheit. Brick's expression was one of surprise; the Boche, however, seemed to have found his tongue. Steve understood nothing of his words, but the colonel apparently knew German as well as English.

"Ha!" he barked, when the German finished. "Something rotten in Denmark. He says, Farness, that Donovan didn't shoot him down at all. Says it was you two. In a Salmson. Explain that."

Steve went cold all the way to his fingertips. He had thought everything all set—and now it was the German, of all people, who was upsetting the story. A totally unexpected snag in his plans, but one which, because of its truth, was going to be difficult to surmount. He heard Tony begin, "Sir, he must be crazy—" but saw from the colonel's beetling brow that out-and-out denial would not do. Steve stepped forward, a complicated explanation forming in his mind; but before he could open his mouth. Brick Donovan's voice was heard.

"The Kraut is right, sir," blurted Brick. Whereupon, with outspoken bluntness, the big man proceeded to make a clean breast of the whole business, omitting no detail. When he finished, he seemed to feel a lot better; almost cheerful.

The colonel heard him through, his shaggy brows drawn into a heavy frown. Then he glanced from one to the other, and in his steely eye was a gleam of something that might have been pleasure. At last he opened his mouth to pronounce sentence, in gruff tones.

"Good thing, rivalry," he growled. "Like to see you fight, but fight the Germans—not each other. Donovan; three days on the ground to think this over." Brick gasped audibly at the lightness of the punishment. "Farness, the same for you. And I suggest you spend them together, in a bistro, getting drunk. Do you two good to get better acquainted. That's all. Get out of here!"

With one movement the three turned toward the door.

"Don't bother writing out a citation for McCray," shouted the colonel after Tony. "I'll attend to that myself."