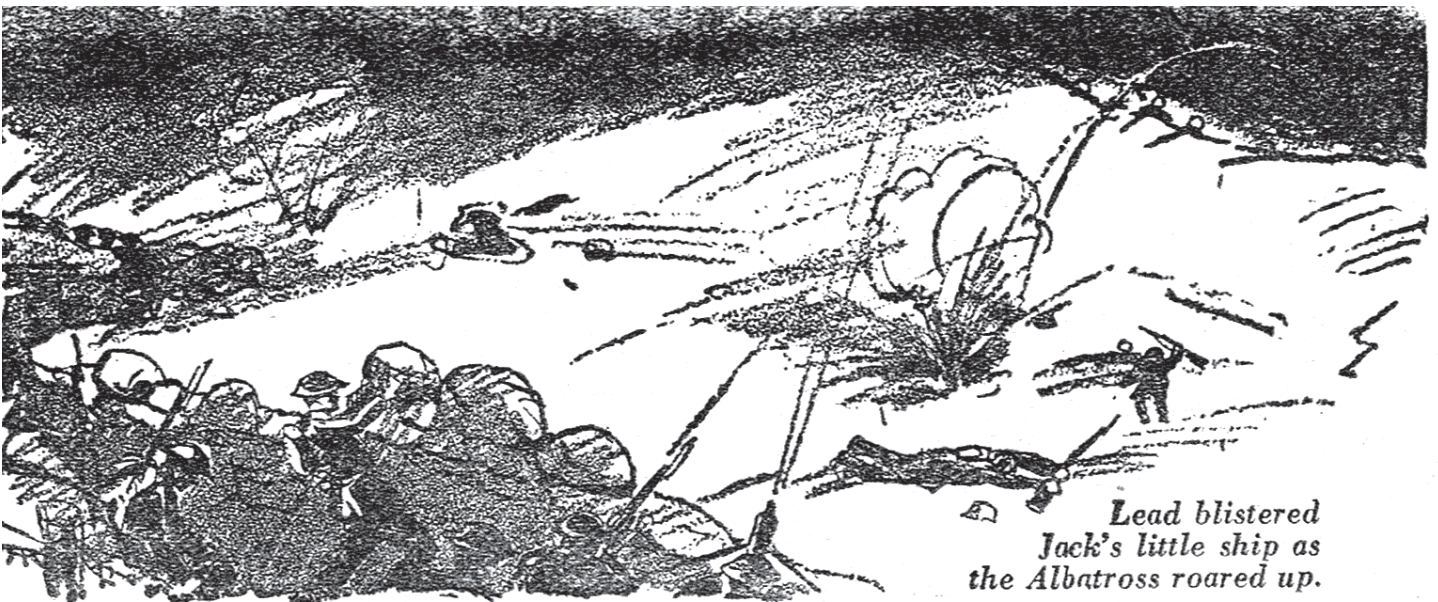


THE BROKEN PAROLE

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

Flying high in a blood-red sky, von Sternberg had taken toll of the lives of many men. Over the brothers Cord he had thrown an even grimmer shadow, for he had robbed one of his honor, the other of the right to fly. But wings can be built that are too strong to be broken.



*Lead blistered
Jack's little ship as
the Albatross roared up.*

BROKEN WINGS! Broken wings! Broken wings!

The pound of a mechanic's hammer as he worked on a Nieuport behind the hangar seemed to drive that haunting phrase into Jack Cord's brain. It had meant so little just a few short nights ago when a withered hag had held his hand in an estaminet and pretended to read his fortune.

She had cackled of "broken wings" and he had laughed at her. He had figured that she was playing the probabilities, as all fortune tellers do; that she was making her guess on the basis of broken wings being a very logical thing to expect where an aviator was concerned. But the withered hag had called the shot.

Jack Cord's wings were broken.

As he paced up and down the line on Seventy-seven's drome and waited for his brother to come back from patrol, Jack Cord reflected bitterly on the breaking of those wings. It would have hurt him less if the hag's prophecy had come true in the air; if his wings had parted and sent him crashing to a pilot's death. But it hadn't come true in the air; it had come true on the ground, and before a court-martial. His wings had been broken with a bob-tail discharge, and now he was a disgraced officer, a flight leader whose fellow officers had found him guilty of gross cowardice.

Jack Cord's nails bit into his palms as he thought of the bitter ignominy of it. His slicker was fastened tightly so that no one could see the stripped uniform that he wore—sans buttons, sans stripes, sans honor.

In a few minutes his brother would come in and they would say good-bye. That good-bye would be Jack Cord's farewell to the air and the army and the war, a farewell to all that mattered. His eyes sought the high blue. Roger Cord was up there somewhere—and so was Captain the Baron, Otto von Sternberg of Bavaria.

Jack knew a great surge of hatred for the great German. Von Sternberg had struck him the hardest blow that a man could strike another. When Jack's blue Nieuport flight proved well-nigh invincible, the German leader had set a trap. He had caught Jack Cord and his flight in front of the American lines and in view of the whole army. From the ground it had appeared that there was a solitary German two-seater protected by two scouts. Actually, that baited trap would have been snapped from four directions if the Americans had moved in to attack. Too smart to fall for German guile, Jack Cord had passed the trap, and

he'd paid with his career. To the kiwis it had been rank cowardice, and they broke him for it. Somewhere, von Sternberg had the last laugh.

A solitary speck appeared suddenly in the lightening sky, then another. Four Nieuports out of five coming home. As graceful as gulls, they swooped over the hangars and sped across the hard brown earth to the line, floating like feathers to the earth and discharging four smiling youths who became suddenly grim in the knowledge that one ship had not come back. Jack Cord's heart hammered against his ribs. Roger was the missing pilot.

"If anything has happened to him now! God!"

It was almost a prayer. He looked again eastward. The fifth Nieuport flashed out of the clouds, grew larger as it roared toward the drome. Over the field it rolled recklessly out of a loop, cut sharply across the hangars and came in with the engine roaring. Not till he was over the middle of the field did the pilot cut the gun; then he killed everything, stalled his bus for a fractional second and literally floated down to the line under perfect control.

Jack Cord wiped his forehead. Roger always flew like that, but the elder brother could not get used to it. Jack was of a different stripe—the kind of man who flies with his brain rather than his senses.

WITH EASY GRACE, Roger Cord swung down from the cockpit. He waved cheerfully to his mechanics, started for the mess and then stopped at the sight of his brother. Jack's keen eyes saw that, despite the bravado of his landing, the Kid was not his usual self. He was white to the gills, and there was a strained look about his eyes. Not until the first greetings were over, however, did the elder brother speak of it; then he came direct to the point.

"What happened to you, Kid? Have a close shave?"

For a second, Roger hesitated; then he fumbled for a cigarette. "Hell, yes!" he said fervently. "Let's stay out here till I tell you about it. I don't want to see them at mess. I'm a bit shaky. Got the wind up, I guess."

The Kid had not spoken of his brother's plight, nor had he proffered sympathy. That was sufficient evidence that he was disturbed. There was further evidence, however, in his shaking hands and the slight quiver about his lips.

"I got a licking today, Jack," he said. "One fine German got on my tail and stayed there—a shiny devil in a Pfalz with a crisscross insignia."

Jack Cord's nails bit into his palms. "Von Sternberg!"

“Is that who it was?” Roger seemed to grow a shade whiter. “No wonder he licked me. Man! He whipped me in two laps when I chased tails with him. Got on my tail and blistered me. I spun out and—”

“Ruddy fool! Don’t you know any better than that?”

“I do now. He followed me right down, socked a little more lead to me and stayed on top of me. I couldn’t shake him off; then my gun jammed.”

Jack’s lips felt tight, drawn. He knew von Sternberg. “Why are you here?” he asked hesitantly. Roger shook his head.

“I shouldn’t be,” he said. “The German let me go when he could have finished me. I didn’t have guns to fight him and he let me go.”

Roger was trembling now as the reaction set in. It is not easy to look into the mouth of eternity and come back. Men are seldom the same once they do that. For his own part, Jack Cord was slowly crushing his cigarette. This was a new one on him.

Von Sternberg had had a man at his mercy and had let him go.

JACK CORD shook his head. “I don’t get it, Kid,” he said. “That’s not like von Sternberg.”

Even as he spoke, there came the deep drone of a Mercedes engine out of the high blue. Puffs of white appeared in the sky as the fingers of archie probed for the invader. A Pfalz hung dizzily among the drifting clouds for a second and then plunged down in a mad, shrieking dive. Right over the field a streamer of white fluttered out behind a weighted cylinder and the Pfalz doubled on itself, bouncing against some invisible cushion and rocketing back in a roaring zoom that took it out of sight and range between two ticks of a watch.

As one man, the two brothers raced for the message. Roger was first, and he spread the paper out dazedly, his eyes racing through the scrawled message. Over his shoulder, Jack read the words that a German hand had penned.

*“To the Pilot with the Crossed-Swords Insignia:
GREETINGS:*

Today it was my pleasure and privilege to confer life rather than death on a fellow pilot. I owed your life to the Fatherland, but I held my hand.

This note is to inform you that I consider you on parole, a man reprieved. At my will you would have been dead and would have fought no more. At my will, you live. As a man of honor, on his

honor, I call upon you to do what my guns could have compelled—fight no more against me and my countrymen. On your honor, you are a dead man and I have no wish to fight dead men in the air.

There is neither honor nor luck in a broken parole.

Von Stebnberg.

“Rot! You didn’t ask for his parole. It’s a trick of some kind. Maybe his guns jammed, too, and he couldn’t shoot.” Jack Cord’s face was dark with anger. Von Sternberg was an open wound to him. Roger hung his head and kicked idly at a pebble.

“His guns didn’t jam,” he said softly. “He fired ‘em to show me that they didn’t. It’s as he said, Jack. I’m dead except for the fact that he spared me.”

“You don’t mean that you are taking this seriously—thinking of quitting at the command of a German? Are you crazy?” Jack’s hand gripped his brother’s shoulder and he shook viciously. Roger pulled away. His eyes looked haunted and the drawn look about his mouth had become intensified.

“No, I’m not crazy,” he choked. “I’d rather fly than eat. If I have to quit all this, I’d just as soon die. But you didn’t face what I faced. I saw his guns, saw his face. Death was touching me, and that German spared my life. Now if he calls it parole, he has a right to call it parole.” Roger’s voice was breaking in sobbing spurts.

Jack’s fists clenched. “Buck up, Kid. Don’t you see that it isn’t a parole? He has no right. He didn’t give you a chance to refuse his proposition, and you don’t have to—”

Something that he saw in his brother’s face stopped Jack Cord in mid-sentence. His hand shot out and the lean fingers closed again on the youngster’s shoulder. “You didn’t surrender to him, did you?”

Roger’s eyes stared away into the distance. For a few seconds he did not reply; then he nodded his head wearily. “I guess so. I had no guns, nothing with which to fight. I threw up my hands. I couldn’t help myself. I saw his guns and I threw up my hands.”

JACK GROANED and his hand dropped. The Kid had surrendered to von Sternberg and the German had a right to dictate terms. A man’s honor bound him to the terms of the conqueror in such a dilemma as this. No decent man could use a life thus saved against the man who spared it. It made no difference that von Sternberg was tricky, that he had probably spared the Kid on an impulse and thought of the parole idea

later; the stark fact remained that if the Kid broke that parole, he would be going into the air with a feeling of dishonor in his soul and with a lack of confidence in his heart. Men die who go to the sky thus.

Momentarily, all of Jack Cord's personal bitterness had been swallowed up in consideration of the Kid's dilemma; now the bitterness came flooding back. As he looked at the drooping, white-faced Roger, Jack Cord seemed to feel the dark shadow of Pfalz wings. Von Sternberg had thrown his grim shadow over the Cord family. Flying high in a blood-red sky, he had taken toll of the bodies of men. By some trick of circumstance, he had struck a more deadly blow at the brothers Cord. His trick had stripped Jack Cord of his honor and his uniform. And Roger?

If Roger acknowledged that parole—and there seemed no way out—he, too, would be branded. Men who did not understand would rate him yellow. They would say that he had been licked and that the licking had broken his courage. They would dig up the record of Jack Cord, and the two brothers would be tarred with the same stick.

Jack's eyes blazed. He sucked a deep draught of air into his lungs and his right fist smashed into his left palm. "Kid," he said hoarsely, "no fight is a good fight unless somebody is bucking odds. Von Sternberg has grounded the two of us, but we'll lick him yet and lick him good. When is your next patrol?"

The youngster looked up dazedly, a gleam of hope in his eyes. "Not till dawn show tomorrow."

"Good!" Jack's voice rang with the old assurance, the will to command which had made him a crack flight leader. "Well, just tuck that parole in some handy fire and then run into a door in the dark or fall into a bomb-proof or something and bang your face up good."

"Bang my face up?"

"Righto. Do the kind of a job that takes a lot of bandages and tape; then meet me at the smallest estaminet in the village after dark."

"But—"

"Leave the buts to the goats and do as I tell you. We're making medicine for a Bavarian and it will be bitter brew. See you tonight."

With long strides, Jack made for the road and the little village beyond the trees. As he walked, he kept hitting his left palm with his right fist. "One more crack," he muttered. "One more crack and some more wings for the breaking. If only the fates are kind!"

DURING THE NIGHT the Germans launched their big offensive and the world rocked to a mad fury in the dawn. The little Nieuports that throbbed on the line in the morning mist were like tiny moths of war—doomed to go out to the flame with the odds against their return. Tiny figures moved like wraiths about them.

In the unreal gray of before daylight nobody questioned the tall, well-built chap with the bandaged head who climbed into the cockpit of the Nieuport that bore the crossed-sabers insignia. He looked like Roger Cord, and it was Roger Cord's ship. That was enough. Jack Cord, cashiered officer, was going back.

Jack trembled as he fumbled with the familiar gadgets and ran up his engine. The Kid's career was riding on his wings and his guns. His own career was finished, but if he could meet von Sternberg, if he could capture the man or run him foul, he would balance the books for the Kid and bargain for that parole. Roger had to go back into the air. He couldn't quit. It was bad enough to have the black shadow of the bobtail on one member of the family; it was unthinkable that it should hover over two of them.

Find von Sternberg! Find von Sternberg! The engine seemed to sing the refrain as another engine on another day had sung of broken wings. Jack Cord's jaw set hard. The wings had been broken, but the man lived on. Today he would find von Sternberg as he was setting out to do; he would find him in the great inverted bowl of the sky and he would come to grips with him. After that? Well, he could not afford to lose, with Roger sitting in a hotel room in a dishonored uniform that was not his own.

The leader was taxiing out into the wing. His ship wobbled and bounced as he came about. Like waddling ducks, the other ships came around in line. One after another, they raced down the fairway and wheels spurned the earth. Last of the line, Jack roared away to the blue and the earth hazed out beneath him. Dark shadows settled over the drome.

No action presented itself until the flight had covered half its patrol. The sky was cloud-filled and the ceiling was low. The terrific, thundering assault of the guns below was covering the earth with black masses of smoke that hung on the dead air, waiting for a breeze to disperse them. It was hard to see what was happening below.

Suddenly the leader's hand went up. A silver A.E.G. two-seater was pushing its nose back toward Germany after a little excursion over the American lines. It was

a thousand feet below and a perfectly setup victim for the Nieuports. In the same flash that revealed the two-seater, however, Jack saw seven Pfalzes—and the leader bore the crisscross insignia of von Sternberg.

Jack's jaw set hard. Then, like the very hand of Fate itself intruding between Jack Cord and his foe, the hand of the flight leader went up and spread out. The fingers clicked off a signal to the men behind him. He was going to try to hold the seven Pfalzes while two men went down and got that two-seater which was returning with information from the American lines. And Jack Cord was one of the two men that he was sending down after the A.E.G.

JACK'S HEART SEEMED to come up in his throat. He had come to find von Sternberg, had found him and was being sent away after a damned two-seater. Rebellion flamed up in him, but it lived only a fraction of a second. He was being ordered down, and the other man who was ordered to go with him would go down. He couldn't let the man fight alone and he couldn't risk disobedience in the name of Roger Cord. Roger could be court-martialed for it. Besides, there might be a thousand lives on the ground affected by the information that the A.E.G. was carrying.

Jack's hands and feet were moving on the controls almost at the second the leader's fingers flashed the signal. His nose tipped upward, one wing dropped—then he was flashing down in a screaming dive. The wind was singing a wild melody along the wires as he turned his back thus on the man he had sworn to fight—a melody that ran from the low note of vengeance to the high shrieking note of broken wings.

Jack was cursing under his breath without being aware that he was cursing. His fumbling fingers tore the cover off his sight and his whole being concentrated on the two-seater. The Pfalzes could wait, and there would probably be some of them down on him in a few seconds. Those three Nieuports could not hold seven of them.

The awkward, silver two-seater was in his sights now, and his guns bucked. Tracers kicked along one side of the enemy cockpit, and his heart leaped. That had been heart-breakingly close. He had a flash of his fellow flyer off to the right. The man seemed to stand in the cockpit as he made a desperate attempt to ram his first burst home. The A.E.G. half-rolled from the menace of that burst, and Jack roared by.

For a few ticks of time, Jack could see nothing except the rushing haze of the sky; then he was

jerking the stick over in the corner and standing on the rudder. His nose whipped up and over and the silver ship stood in his sights. He rammed a burst with hands that felt hot and clumsy, and the tracers seemed like mere puffs in the sky, harmless little wisps of cottony substance that might not harm a fly.

Straight as a die, those cottony wisps lined for the German cockpit. A startled, agonized face turned for a second toward Jack, and the A.E.G. pilot brushed the goggles from his eyes with a frantic hand. Then his body jerked in a sudden convulsion and he fell on the stick. The Mercedes-weighted nose of the two-seater went straight down, and the roar of the engine drowned out the noise of the throbbing rotary. A wild, shrieking interval in the business of war—and the A.E.G. was gone forever into the battle mists that veiled the earth.

JACK FELT LIMP, as though he had taken that ride downward, but he had little time to think of his own reactions. Death was diving on him and he had little enough time to get out of the way. Like hell's own messengers, the Pfalzes were coming down.

No German ship of the war could recover from a dive as could the Pfalz. The green ships of the von Sternberg staffel simply flattened out in the sky. The tail surfaces, flat on top and convex beneath, were responsible for that little trick. A dead man could do it in a Pfalz, and a live man could make the trick a Nieuport-killer.

Bullets smashed the panel in front of Jack Cord and he half-rolled out of a destructive rain of fire. His lips bled from a splinter that had been chipped loose and hurled into his face. He could taste the salt of his own blood in his mouth and hear the music of eternity in his ears.

He had a flash of the attacker and was conscious of a sense of disappointment that it was not von Sternberg. It was not, however, a time to pick opponents. One fought for one's life in a mess such as this, and the slow man lost forever.

A dark-green shape flattened beneath him and he saw a blunt nose rise like the head of a snake that is about to strike. He let his own nose come down and he had the impression that he was hung there for eternity, waiting for that nose to drop sufficiently to give him a shot or for the German's nose to rise high enough to deliver death.

He saw a helmeted head and goggled eyes. His hand pressed the trips hard and there was a dryness in his

throat. The goggles seemed to stare into his very soul, and then his gun was bucking. Flame was dancing, too, on the muzzles of the German gun, but they danced less than a second.

The long, grim snout whipped down faster than it had come up and the green ship spun flatly. Jack's spine was cold and he saw that ship going around in the dead flat spin as he had often seen things in dreams. Then his own nose dropped and he lost the Pfalz.

"I killed him," he said hoarsely. He was redressing the controls automatically. It is a numbing thing to kill three men in two ships within a few seconds—an unreal experience. Swiftly the mood passed and he shook off the strange hypnosis that had come over him. The sky was full of Germans, and somewhere in the milling pack was von Sternberg. Jack's lips curled back in a snarl like that of a hunting wolf.

If other Germans could die, von Sternberg was not invincible.

A Pfalz was slanting for him and he shook the man off before the fellow could get the fatal tail position. The Nieuport could turn faster than any Pfalz in the world. Another Nieuport flashed briefly across the sky and guns flamed. The Pfalz slipped out of the picture sideways and then blew up in such a smashing burst of flame that Jack's eyes ached and he was temporarily blind.

In that moment of darkness that followed an excess of light, disaster struck.

A darting dragonfly of a ship that dived steeply and flattened out upon some magically invisible carpet came out of the nowhere and roared under Jack Cord's tail. Pinpoints of flame needled through the underside of the Nieuport and Jack threw the stick over instinctively while his foot walked on the rudder. The German pounced again as the American rolled, and the bony fingers of the Reaper seemed to be searching the cockpit.

Jack was blinking hard now and his sight was coming back. He threw a startled glance over his shoulder and he had a swift vision of crisscross insignia. His breath caught. Von Sternberg!

THE BAVARIAN WAS ROLLING with him and Jack banked desperately to throw his sights off. The lead was singing uncomfortably close to his ears. There was a numb feeling in his hand and when he glanced down briefly, he saw that it was covered with blood and that his little finger was off at the first joint. The German

was turning with him now and holding his fire. There was something demoralizingly confident in the way von Sternberg was hanging on without firing a shot. The man had fought Nieuports before, and he knew that a tail-chasing contest gave him top cards and dealt the Nieuport only a busted flush.

Jack knew, too, that he could at best prolong his few minutes of life only by staying in the vertical and trying to race the German to the kill position. He steeled himself to a desperate action and then half-rolled to break the dizzy circle of Death. Lead was spattering his punished ship as he dived out of the roll and made a wild break for freedom.

Von Sternberg was not fooled, nor could he be shaken off. He was on his man like a flash, and as he cut the wind in his shrieking, earthward plunge, Jack felt the nearness of Death's dark angel. The ground mist came up to him and he dared to risk it, rather than play the certainty of death that awaited any maneuver aloft. He had wanted von Sternberg, but he had never intended to spot him the advantage of choice position in addition to the fastest and the best ship.

"I've got to come through," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I've got to come through and get that Dutchman again when all the luck of hell isn't riding his wings."

He plunged into the mist and it was like going full gun into a tunnel. He cut throttle and pulled back on the stick. The Nieuport yawed badly, but the wings held and he rocketed into a patch of pale light, a hole in the fog. Even as he did, he was conscious again of the flack, flack, flack of machine-gun fire. The Baron had stayed with him.

The ground was very close, and there was a group of hangars back against a stream and half-hidden by the trees. Beyond the hangars stretched a shell-shattered field that looked like some forgotten crater of the moon.

"A German drome—and deserted, at that." Jack's breath was whistling through his teeth. He was close to the lines, he knew, and there was a lot of driving and counter-driving in this sector. There was no way of telling who owned this particular stretch of territory now. It was enough that the Germans had abandoned it as a drome. It provided sanctuary of a sort for a man who didn't dare to die, a man who was engaging in a mad masquerade in Death's own backyard and who was taking a name into the guns that was not his own.

"If I can just get a breathing space for a few minutes!"

KICKING THE SHIP around desperately, Jack skimmed the trees and bounced his wheels along the battle-ploughed field. Before the ship had stopped rolling, he was sliding over the side with the consciousness of von Sternberg's nearness and the man's habit of riddling ships on the ground.

Even as he leaped, he knew that he had made a mistake. No solid ground met his feet; instead, he plunged head over heels into a shell hole half full of water and nauseous with dead things that floated.

With a sickening gulp, Jack went under and was momentarily conscious of a roar in his ears that had not been caused by the plunge. He came up sputtering, and lashed out for the slippery sides of the shell crater. His mangled left hand was agony, but he struggled with every atom of his will to scale the steep and slippery sides of what threatened to be a watery prison.

After what seemed to him a century of effort and of pain, his hand slipped over the top and he drew himself up, spent and mud-covered, onto solid ground. As he did, he raised his eyes.

A grim Luger was pointing at his head, and behind the gun sat Baron Otto von Sternberg of Bavaria.

For a long ten seconds Jack looked into the murderous eyes of the German ace. Something that he saw there chilled him.

The German was speaking, slow, guttural, deliberate. "Zo!" he said. "You haf broke the parole."

Jack rose slowly to his feet with a cautious eye on the black Luger. "Why did you offer a parole?" he challenged. "Mercy isn't your card."

Von Sternberg's mouth twitched, but his eyes did not change expression. "A man who gifs up is better for us than a man who is dead," he said in halting English. "Other men, they talk uff him and they get scared. That iss goot. But you? *Schwein!* You haf broke the parole!"

The pinpoints of flame danced madly in the man's beady eyes and Jack tensed as the man's finger tightened on the trigger. For a second the American hung suspended midway between life and death; then the finger of the German relaxed on the trigger. Jack expelled the air slowly from his lungs, aware suddenly that he had been holding his breath as one does before diving into cold water.

"I am not the man you paroled," he said.

"No?" The German was startled. His whole body stiffened and he leaned forward incredulously.

Jack's body stiffened and his right fist zoomed upward like a streak of light.

There was a flash of flame as the Luger spat lead, and Jack felt Death brush his face; then the German was slumping, and Jack's fingers were closing over the black Luger. With a wrench, he possessed himself of the weapon and stepped backward. The German slumped heavily to his knees and shook his head groggily.

"As I was saying, I am not the man you paroled." Jack balanced the Luger neatly in his hand and watched comprehension come back to the flabby face of the German.

"Zo!" The German shook his head again and came lurching to his feet. "You haf tricked me and you are not the man I paroled. You fly his ship, swine of an *Amerikaner!*"

"Rather tough words to speak into the mouth of a gun, Dutchy." Jack shook the Luger suggestively. "Better take it easy. I don't like you at best. My brother flew this ship. I'm Captain Cord—ex-Captain Cord—the man who commanded the blue Nieuports."

"Blue Nieuports!" Von Sternberg spat and his eyes narrowed. Then he had a flash of comprehension. "Commanded? Ex-captain?" He rolled the words on his thick tongue; then he laughed. "Zo! I did make of you the coward and the Americans did make of you the broken officer. Zo! That iss goot. It iss better yet than the parole."

His hands were opening and closing, and his big body was crouched. There was menace in his eyes, and Jack was wary. "You're picking a damned bad time to crow about it," he said. "If I didn't want more from you than your life, I'd just put a bullet in you and walk away. That's what you intended to do to me."

VON STERNBERG'S eyes narrowed to mere slits and he measured the distance that separated him from the American. Jack Cord's gun came up level and the muzzle covered the German's heart. "Don't do it," he warned. "I'm going to give you a parole. I'm going to take your release of that trick parole to my brother and I'll give your life back to you to balance the score. You did spare his life, after all, no matter what your motive was. I'll pay off."

The German relaxed and smiled contemptuously. "You are generous," he said. "I will make the bargain. I am worth more than two like him."

Jack stiffened. He hadn't thought of that angle. He was trying to save his brother's wings, and in doing so, he was turning loose a man who might cause the loss of a score of American lives. His face paled. He was being

quixotic. After all, he could shoot this enemy or burn his plane and leave him here. He could go back and tell Roger that the parole was off, and who would know?

As though he sensed the struggle that was going on in the American's mind, von Sternberg leaned forward. "An agreement iss an agreement," he said hoarsely. "I haf accepted."

"Right!" Jack's jaw closed with a snap. There was a glint of excitement in his eyes. "But you just said that you are worth two men. Well, Dutchy, you may be. Anyway, you'll sign a full statement of the conditions you fixed up for me that day I refused to fight your gang and lost my wings. You'll tell about that trap, the way it was set and what I would have walked into if I'd gone after your decoy two-seater. You'll do that and release my brother from that parole; then we'll see if you're worth the two of us or not."

Von Sternberg passed his thick tongue over thicker lips. His eyes were narrow, crafty, scheming. "Ja!" he said. "I haf a fountain pen und paper in the plane. I will write as you say."

Jack watched the man narrowly as he crossed to the grim Pfalz that stood a few paces away. The roaring hell of the offensive was flowing about them, but they seemed to be on an island of comparative calm in a world of fury. Shells were shrieking overhead but the flying field stretched empty and deserted except for the two ships and the two men. A flight of French two-seaters was flying high to the southward, but it had other work to do and would probably have little interest in the two planes on the abandoned drome.

Von Sternberg was chuckling. He waved a thick hand. "Ofer there are your brave Americans," he sneered. The hand gestured again to the far corner of the drome, where the trees grew along a creek. "Ofer there," he said, "iss one company of German machine guns. They hold the whole army of Americans while the army of the Fatherland retreats."

"Yeah?" Jack Cord shrugged. "But the army of the Fatherland is retreating, you know. Don't we get anything for that?"

He was still watching the German closely. He expected a trick to divert his attention while the German got a weapon from the plane. Von Sternberg, however, made no such attempt. Still chuckling in a mirthless manner, he fished a pad and a fountain pen out of the odds box of his plane and turned around. Deliberately seating himself on a rock, he wrote with obvious effort for several minutes and then handed the sheet to Jack.

"Hold on to it. I'll read it over your shoulder."

Warned by the gleam in the German's eyes, Jack wasn't taking chances. He slapped the gun against the man's back while he read the laboriously written parole release. It was okay and he pocketed the sheet.

"Now the story of the trap," he said. The German shrugged and bent over the pad. This took longer and Jack fidgeted uneasily. It was rather a perilous spot and, with victory in his grasp, he did not want to remain any longer now than he had to remain.

HE CAME BACK from that line of thought with a start as von Sternberg raised his head. The German had finished his account of the trap that had snared Jack Cord. Eagerly Jack reached for it; then he stepped back on guard.

"Hold it as you did the other one!" he said gruffly.

He stepped behind the German and leaned forward with the gun in readiness. As he did, von Sternberg pressed the catch of his fountain pen and a stream of ink caught the American squarely between the eyes.

Jack reeled blindly back and his finger tightened on the trigger. As the Luger roared, he knew that he had missed his mark; then a hairy fist crashed against his jaw and he went down. He was rolling as he hit, however, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that the old brawling trick was effective. He heard a guttural grunt as the German hit the spot where he had been; then he was lurching to his feet and pawing the stuff out of his eyes.

Von Sternberg was upon him before he could clear his vision, and a big fist crashed him again while the Luger was twisted from his grip. Jack lashed out with his right and felt it connect glancingly; then sight came back to him and he found himself once more on the wrong side of the Luger.

"Zo! You would make a fool of the Baron von Sternberg!" The German's eyes were gleaming maliciously, and once more there was murder in them. The man kept caressing a bleeding cut on his jaw where Jack's wildly thrown fist had landed. "Zo! March to your ship."

Jack looked bewildered. The German was smiling coldly. "In a few minutes I shall shoot you," he said. "Not dead. I will not shoot you dead. I will just hurt you so you cannot get out of your ship and then, my American pig—I will burn it."

Horror flooded Jack's soul in that minute and he turned, balancing on his toes. The German gripped the Luger hard and his lips thinned. "I am a big man.

I can lift you into the ship when you are hurt," he said grimly.

Jack crouched, but he was conscious of an overwhelming sense of dismay and something very like cold fear.

Von Sternberg was smiling coldly once more. "You are as good as already dead," he said. "Look!"

Jack Cord raised his eyes. Two gleaming black Albatross scouts were circling above the drome like vultures seeking carrion.

The sight of those two grim ships above him killed the last hope in Jack Cord's breast. He was going to die—and die dishonored. In the dying, he was going to take his brother's name down with him to the depths of disgrace. So be it, if it had to be—but he would sell his life and not give it away. The German would not get it cheaply.

He was leaping out of his crouch as he made the decision. His lips were curled back hard from his teeth and the fingers of his one good hand were knotted into a fist. Von Sternberg had a split second in which to stop the tornado, and von Sternberg had been very confident. He had allowed his attention to stray to the circling Albatrosses above him, and his finger hesitated a fractional second long on the trigger.

Point blank he fired, and in the booming of the automatic he heard the fall of his own plans. Jack Cord felt the whistling rush of the bullet past his ear and then his right fist was rocketing to the German's wide-lipped mouth.

In a snarling, fighting pile the two men went to the ground and the German lashed out with the heavy weapon in his hand. Blocking with his mangled left, Jack Cord slashed his right home again and again to the German's face, fighting for breath as the booted legs of the German tightened about him in a punishing scissors.

ALL THE ANVILS OF HELL were banging in Jack's ears and there was a roar of diving Albatrosses out of the sky. At the far corner of the field, machine guns were hammering. Von Sternberg was still beating with the heavy gun and Jack's left was too stiff to close over it and take possession.

"Swine!"

The German spat a bloody froth at his foe and with a heave of his body threw the American free. The man seemed to have forgotten that he had a gun. His rage demanded that he kick this man to death or tear him apart.

Staggering groggily to his feet, Jack was not sure but that the man could do just that. Punch-drunk and wobbly, he saw his foe through a dim haze and moved toward him.

As he came in, the German suddenly remembered his gun. Jack saw the gun arm coming up and the grim, bony hand of the Reaper seemed to be reaching over the shoulder of the German. Summoning every atom of strength in his body, Jack fought to rally his faculties against the menace of that grim black weapon.

Like a weighted shaft, Jack hurled his right into the German's face and he felt something give under the fury of the blow. With a scream of rage and pain, von Sternberg dropped his weapon and Jack kicked it out of the way.

He had no time now for gun play or for finish fights. The black shadow of Albatross wings menaced him and he had a million-to-one chance of survival. Even that was better than he had had a few brief seconds ago and he was grateful. Necessity brought his strength back and he raced like a shadow to his plane a few short yards away.

As he raced, he looked for the Albatrosses and gave a grunt of relief. The Germans had not come over the drome because they had seen the two planes; they had come to help out the machine gunners. Even now, there was one of them diving on the Americans beyond the trees, while the other hovered above him ready to go down.

"A chance! By the gods, I've got a chance!"

With frantic haste, Jack heaved on the propeller. Four times he jerked it down before the engine caught. Behind him he heard a snarl of rage and then he was racing to the cockpit. Von Sternberg had found his gun and he was coming up shooting.

The bullets were plucking at his clothes as Jack swung into the cockpit, but he trusted to the gods that had brought him so far. His thumb caressed the coupe button on the stick, and soon he was roaring down the field and away.

AS THE WHEELS of the little Nieuport spurned the earth, one of the black Albatrosses flashed above the trees and banked steeply across the drome. The other Albatross roared down to the fight beyond the creek.

The Albatross that had come over the trees saw the Nieuport getting off and it roared up in a zoom that would put it in a position to attack. Jack had only one chance and he took it.

With the stick against his stomach, he lifted his finger from the coupe button and felt the surge of power as the Nieuport kited for the blue. Up and up and up—then he was flashing over in the sunlight and the black Albatross was coming at him with a rush. He had got away with the first hazard, but life could be very short when an Albatross was diving.

Lead blistered Jack's little ship as the Albatross roared in, but Jack was rolling out of the way and the path of death led through his wing rather than the cockpit. A touch of top rudder and the Nieuport went up and over. The German was trying desperately to come out of his dive in a hurry, and that was one thing that an Albatross was not built to do.

Jack's lips flattened in a fighting snarl as the German yawed badly; then the Nieuport dropped, and as the Albatross half-rolled desperately to get out of the way, Jack rolled with him and held him in the sights. Then Jack's Vickers bucked and the muzzle flamed. Like a war-weary eagle, the Albatross rolled over on its back, spun flatly for half a revolution and then hurtled straight down toward the hard surface of the abandoned drome.

Jaek Cord passed his hand across his eyes and sucked the air deep into his lungs. He felt as though he had been fighting forever on land and in the air. His left arm was throbbing agony and he was weary to the point where everything was unreal—a mist and a delusion in which enemy ships did not exist and there was no war. The awakening was swift and startling.

In a swooping, lead-splitting rush, another ship came into the action. Lead sang past Jack's ears and something crashed into his left arm and clanked with a high metallic ring against some part of the gun or engine. With the instinct of the hard-hit, Jack kicked into a half-roll and blinked to clear the film that was threatening to form over his eyes.

Through a mist of agony, he saw a green Pfalz with crisscross insignia, and he knew that again the Fates had favored von Sternberg. He had taken off while Jack was fighting the Albatross, and now the German had the commanding position once more against a man who was tired and wounded and spent.

The Pfalz was rolling, too, but Jack threw the man's sights off as he sent the Nieuport over on its back. The Pfalz was turning with him as he went into a vertical, but Jack gained on the German as they climbed. His nerves steadied magically and his head cleared. There would be another Boche in the game in a minute, but he had to get von Sternberg first.

AROUND AND AROUND in the mad quadrille of death went the two ships, and Jack forced himself to forget the menace of that other Albatross that was somewhere around. He concentrated on his banks and played his percentage. He was gaining on this enemy. Von Sternberg was over-anxious and mad with rage.

Jack's lips tightened back. He had a flash of the other's cockpit dead in his sights. At that second, von Sternberg seemed to sense the cold presence of Death at his shoulder. He threw one startled look back and half-rolled to break away.

In a flashing, perfectly executed maneuver, Jack was after him, and his guns found the cockpit again. The Vickers snarled once more and the Bavarian jumped convulsively. The Pfalz leaped like a shot rabbit, and then the Albatross came hurtling up out of nowhere.

Jack saw him as he zoomed to get into fighting position. The nose of the Nieuport dropped and Jack's hand tightened on the trips. Tracer spurted across the sky and the grayish wisps hung for a fractional second in front of the Albatross nose.

Fighting to quiet the wild jumping of his nerves, Jack pulled his tracer back slowly. The Albatross yawed desperately as the pilot sensed his danger; then the tracers were biting into the cockpit. There was a sudden burst of livid flame, a cloud of greasy smoke, and Jack's senses reeled as he jerked the stick to leap the flaming coffin of an airman who had dared too much.

Off to the right was the Pfalz of the Baron von Sternberg. It was flying in a crazy, erratic circle as though Death itself had taken over the controls. Jaek wiped his hand across his eyes.

"One more," he whispered hoarsely. "One more, and that one is von Sternberg."

He felt the papers in his pocket and moved his left arm only with the aid of his right. He was sick and groggy, and von Sternberg did not seem important. He could go home now, and Roger would be all right, and he could probably clear his own name with this statement of the Bavarian's. If he stayed in the air much longer, he might pass out at the controls or run into more Germans. Then all his work would be undone, his suffering vain. Maybe von Sternberg would die, anyway. He had hit him. He knew that.

Again he passed his hand across his eyes and sucked the air into his lungs. His teeth clicked. "I started out to do something and I'll finish the job," he growled. "Let's go!"

THE NIEUPORT SEEMED as tired as he was when he brought the little ship around to attack. The engine sputtered and choked and he had to run on the selector. With a clattering roar like that of an ancient motorcycle, he put-putted across the sky.

Von Sternberg's Pfalz seemed to flatten out and hover as he came to it. It was as though the German, half-dead, had been conserving his energy for one last try for his enemy's life.

With a slight advantage in altitude, von Sternberg dived. His guns coughed flame and Jack had a swift vision of a white, blood-streaked face as the Pfalz roared down. Then Jack was banking to present a thin target and climbing into the German full gun behind the protection of his own engine.

Von Sternberg saw the danger into which his miss had thrown him, and the Pfalz flashed over on its back as Jack fired. It was the shortest possible burst and Jack missed. With a curse at his own clumsiness, Jack pulled up, shot again and missed. As he roared past the Pfalz, he saw his enemy again. There was death in the Bavarian's face, but his teeth were flashing in a snarl.

The hag of the estaminet seemed to perch again over Jack's engine. She was shaking a skinny finger and croaking at him. Over the wild fury of the guns on the ground and the chattering noise of his own sick engine, he could hear her shrill cackle.

"Broken Wings! Broken Wings! I see broken wings!"

The wind seemed to pick up the sound and whip it around Jack Cord's ears as he whipped into a series of figure eights with a faster ship. Had he cheated his destiny so far, only to fail in the end? Was he going down with his wings shattered after stretching out his hand to grasp life and honor?

"What are you crabbing about?" he growled. "You wanted it in the sky, didn't you? Well, go in and get it."

He wiped his hand across his eyes again, straightened back into cockpit, wet his lips and then hurled his Nieuport across the long loop of the eight.

It was suicide, and von Sternberg should have blazed him down in the second that he broke the tightening loop. Von Sternberg, however, had set himself for the moment when the superior speed of his ship would give him the advantage. He could not untrack in time, and he wavered in the face of the American's fast maneuver. His indecision ruined him.

Jack Cord came across the sky like the flashing sword of the Fates. His guns flamed once as he leaped the gap, and the Pfalz reeled. Von Sternberg kicked his ship around in a wild effort to ram the mad Nieuport that was blazing down on him. For a second that seemed eternity, his snarling face was in Jack's sights, and in that second the American pressed the trips.

Even as the shattering burst went home, the Pfalz was on the point of dissolution. There was a sharp hiss like the warning spit of some monster reptile, and a solid sheet of flame enveloped the cockpit with its dead passenger. The crisscrossed wings flew off and spun over and over down the sky. Like a flaming plummet, the stripped fuselage went straight down—a blazing messenger from the blue that crashed thunderously into the woods where a German machine-gun company was trying to hold an American army.

In his cockpit, Jack Cord laughed with sheer relief and fingered the papers in his pocket. Death was gone from the skies, and the old hag of the estaminet no longer rode his engine. He was alive and he had won, and somewhere the wings that he had lost were waiting for him. He passed his hand across his eyes and pulled the air deep into his lungs.

"Broken wings," he muttered. "Well, maybe that old girl could see them. Maybe she could. Lots of 'em around to see." He was pulling over on the long, straight plunge toward his own drome across the lines, and he settled down into the cockpit wearily. "But that old sister," he said softly, "must have been looking at everybody's wings but mine."