



# JINXED JOYSTICKS

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

*On any other day Tom Dillon would have thrilled at the yammer of those Spandaus—would have leaped to his guns as the pair of green-trimmed Fokkers dived by. But on this one day, when death came nearer than ever before, his hands froze on the Lewis grips—and he could not fire.*



**A** MERCILESS SLEET OF LEAD streaked through the fabric of Captain Bill Kelly's ship as he slipped off on a wing. His right goggle was splintered, and a thin trickle of blood flowed down his cheek.

Again, his flight of the "Bull Eagle" squadron had hurled itself into a Hun formation twice its size. They fought like devils possessed, their Spads darting and plunging like angry hornets, as they struck. Guns flaming, Hissos wide open, they fought to sweep the sky clear of this notorious Boche formation.

For upwards of an hour, the fight had continued, or so it seemed, in a sky inferno that was awe-inspiring to thousands of watchers below. And then, crippled but victorious, Kelly's flight kicked around. Four bullet-riddled Spads, they were, whose pilots now sagged exhausted against the rims of their cockpits.

But in spite of the triumph, Captain Kelly was worried. The bullet graze on his face did not bother him, nor did the strain of the long, desperate fight. Slumped in the cockpit, fingers tense on the stick, he swept his three companion ships with flaming eyes. There were but four Spads in the formation. Five had left the tarmac. From the corner of an eye, Bill Kelly had glimpsed one turn out and streak to the south.

Tom Dillon, Bill's right-hand pilot, whose record in the sky lanes was climbing to enviable heights, had again cut out on him. Dillon, the debonair, fearless young Yank lieutenant, had failed him once more. It made a hard story to take back to Major "Brimstone" Durand, C.O. of Seventy Squadron, who looked upon even the smallest violations of discipline as breaches of a sacred code. The brimstone in Durand's make-up would fuse plenty when he found out that Dillon had cut out of a patrol again.

Kelly growled out an oath, and clipped a piece of black plug tobacco with his strong teeth.

"You fool, Tom," he soliloquized. "I pulled you clear when you slipped off A.W.O.L. to Boulogne for a binge. But I can't clear you this time. The best sky-buster I've got, and by the eyeteeth of Buddha, you had to cut out on me. They'll get you, just as sure as shootin', and you'll go down the road when Brimstone spots this last stunt."

Bill's mind raced with his motor while the flight waited for final orders to steer for the drome of Seventy Squadron's tarmac. He had to figure out some way of giving that likable young Dillon one more chance to save himself from the wrath of Brimstone.

With a sudden wave of his right arm, he signaled

to his flight. The four Hissos roared wide out, and the Spads cleaved sky, props at the southwest. Kelly went on ahead. There was a special reconnaissance Wing was anxious about, which was his personal assignment.

For the balance of the daylight period Bill soloed over Brailly les Monchey. He dodged archie and flaming onions, flying low to make his observations. He fought off a fast Fokker scout, then dived again to pin-prick his map with spots that would convey the picture to Wing Headquarters. Satisfied at last, he kicked around and hurled his Spad on toward his million trio of flight members.

He sighed heavily as he caught up with his boys again, and jazzed his ship up to the lead. This time he headed the flight directly back to Seventy tarmac. The afternoon had been full of nerve-racking exploits, but Bill Kelly dreaded far more his meeting with Brimstone, and his explanation for the absence of Tom Dillon.

It came, the moment his wheels scraped the runway. "Well, Captain Kelly!"

Kelly winced at the biting words of greeting. Brimstone Durand was standing by, a hand on the cockpit rim.

"You're not all present, Kelly." His voice was ominous. "Young Dillon's—"

"Yes, young Dillon's what?" cut in the major.

"Before you go any further, captain, let me tell you I'm fed up with Lieutenant Dillon. I have a report that he didn't join your patrol. Anything to say about that?"

Bill Kelly felt a cold shudder frolic up and down his spine. So Durand knew! For a moment the flight leader was silent. Through narrowed lids he measured the major with a burning glance, meeting two fierce barbs of light from the C.O.'s eyes.

"Dillon is quite all right, sir," he said evenly. "I purposely sent him on that special reconnaissance D.3, to the south. He may have had engine trouble. Anyhow, you can depend on him to return shortly and report. And, major—I don't quite like your tone. When Dillon fails to report to me and I, in turn, to you, it strikes me that'll be lots of time to start riding. Doesn't that sound a lot like the proper form of military discipline, sir?" Bill Kelly's voice was barbed, cold, and full of ironic meaning.

For a long moment Durand stood and bit hard at a sharp, bristling mustache.

"Very well, Captain Kelly," he barked. "I'll accept your statement for the present. But I want a report direct from Dillon as soon as he returns."

Bill saluted smartly and watched the major stride back to his office. "I wonder just how much he knows," he muttered under his breath. Then he waved to his mechanics and set off for his hut. He had plenty of dried blood to wash from his face, and he wanted to be alone to think a way out of the jam Dillon was in.

SOON THE ROAR OF A HISSO blasted the quiet of the drome. Bill jerked open his door and streaked across the tarmac. As the Spad came to a halt, Kelly plucked at the pilot's shoulder.

"Beat it, Tom," he barked. "Over to my billet and wait for me. Hustle! Don't let Brimstone see you before I have a chance to talk with you."

Tom Dillon eased his tall, angular frame overside. For a moment he hung unsteadily, then dropped to the ground and pushed back his goggles. He peered uncertainly at his flight captain.

Kelly started as he glimpsed in the half-light the youngster's red-rimmed eyes. Dillon had been hitting a hard pace again. Bill led him to the hut, determined to make one more bid to straighten the young buzzard out. Bill Kelly thought plenty of Tom Dillon and his fighting fury of days gone by. Somewhere, beneath this tarnished surface, Kelly hoped to find the old brilliance. At the hut, the skipper swung the young pilot round. "Now, you young fool," he thundered. "What happened? Don't you realize there's a war on, or have you declared a private armistice on your own? The C.O.'s all set to pass you out to Blois, and by God, you can't blame him. What happened, kid?"

Tom Dillon broke away. Reaching for a towel, he, moved to a wash basin and gropingly sloshed his face and neck with cold water.

"Bill," he jerked out, "I wouldn't have let you down for all the world. You know, I reckon, that it wasn't funk that cut me out of your patrol today. You know all about how I got mixed up in that flurry down to Boulogne. You remember the little blonde who read my palm?" He hesitated.

Kelly bit hard at his lip. Dillon was partly drunk. This was going to make it just twice as tough with Brimstone, who was strictly temperate. The skipper chafed under Dillon's story, but he let him go on. This raw kid must have been easy prey to a professional fortune teller.

"She had proof, Bill," resumed the pilot. "She warned me to be cautious on the ninth of each month. Showed me that dark shadows would cross my trail on that day. And, Bill, I just couldn't face those sky lanes

today. It wasn't funk, but a sort of—say, what's the idea? You're making a joke of it, huh? All right! You can all go to the devil—you and Brimstone Durand, and Blois, and—"

Bill Kelly caught him by the sleeve as he wheeled. "Easy now! I wasn't pokin' fun at you, kid. But—this is only the eighth of the month. The eighth, get me, the eighth!"

Tom Dillon recoiled. His face went blank. He passed a hand before his eyes and strode to a wall which held a calendar. When he turned, a thin, shamed smile parted his lips.

"Well, I'll be cockeyed, if you aren't right, Bill." His voice shook. "What a mess I'm making of everything. Bill, I believe I'm slipping—losing the old nerve." Bill Kelly caught at a lump in his throat. Dillon was partly right. He had used up a lot of his reserve nerve strength in the sky trails. The kid had been on the verge of a crack-up from the strain of his tireless fighting. Kelly had to pull him back, somehow.

"Nerve, nothing!" he snapped. "It's the drink, boy. Your nerve is second to none. And forget those forecasts made by that blonde in Boulogne. Tom, you made a name for yourself on American records. That name is known and feared deep into Germany. There's a big slice of war to clean up yet. You're going to pull yourself together, before it's too late! Now—brace up."

Kelly grabbed pen and paper and laid them on a table. "We've got to lie like hell to square things with the major. Come on. Here's my report on that special reconnaissance patrol. Copy it. Make it snappy, or Brimstone'll be fusin' over. Copy it, as if it were your own. D'you hear me, lieutenant? I'm your flight commander."

Dillon picked up the proffered pen and commenced to write.

"This is mighty white of you, Bill," he said slowly. "But I hate to pull a cheat on the major. For all his temper, he's a pretty square old soldier. I'd sooner face him with the truth and—"

"Get sent down the road as a result," interrupted Kelly. "Sign that report and I'll endorse it. None of my flight are going out in disgrace while I'm alive. Tomorrow, Tom, I've got to fly a two-seater Bristol camera ship over to photograph that special D.3 area. I'll be piloting that ship. You'll handle the camera in the back office. Together we'll blast out that palm reader's jinx for keeps. Now, let's go see the brimstone fizz."

Shoulder to shoulder, they marched to the major's office.

"You're a little late getting in, Lieutenant Dillon," jerked the major, in his iciest tone. "This is the report? Thanks." His sharp eyes ran down the page. "Hm—a splendidly prepared report, Dillon. One would almost think it was one of Captain Kelly's meticulous jobs. Most comprehensive, indeed. But you have omitted a very important feature, sir. Altitude. Most important, with the fickle visibility of these days. Just fill it in, will you?"

As he passed the report sheet over, Durand's thin lips parted, and he shot a meaning glance full into the eyes of Bill Kelly.

Tom Dillon gulped. His throat went dry. The game was up.

"Awful foolish of me to forget that, major," he stalled desperately. "That, sir, is the difference between Captain Kelly's meticulous style and my own. I—"

He broke off short, wincing as he felt a boot heel socking into his instep. First three taps, then five more. Bill Kelly's heel was giving him correct altitude for clear visibility. His pen scratched.

"Here you are, major," he jerked, passing the completed report over. "Thirty-five hundred, sir. Stupid of me to have omitted it."

Brimstone's eyes narrowed. His face purpled. This was no guesswork. Tom Dillon's altitude compared correctly with the official meteorological report. Brimstone was stumped. He had hoped to catch the lieutenant on this one little slip. With a shrug, he got to his feet and dismissed the flight officers.

"Thank you. That will be all, gentlemen," he grunted. "Tomorrow, I understand, you are taking the Bristol over the D.3 zone, Captain Kelly. I'm sure Lieutenant Dillon will be glad to accompany you as photographer. Good-night. I shall not be at mess tonight. You will take my place, Kelly, if you don't mind."

The junior officers saluted smartly and strode outdoors. Tom Dillon squeezed Kelly's arm.

"I'll never forget what you've done, skip," he said. "I only hope that blasted ninth-of-the-month jinx doesn't crowd me tomorrow. It's a long time since we flew double, Bill. I'd hate to let you down. It would be ghastly if—"

"Aw, pipe down!" snapped the skipper. "Get your back up and don't touch a drink! Ninth day or not, you're sitting that back seat with a pair of Lewis guns on the Scarff mounting. If you fail tomorrow, then God help you—I'm through. You'll sleep in my hut tonight, Tom."

"But I had a date for tonight, Bill. Swanson of 18 and I were goin' to buzz down to—"

"You'll buzz into a deep snore right after mess if I have to hog-tie you to the bunk." They strode on to mess in silence. Bill Kelly had primed the other members of C Flight. They would shut up like clams. Shocked as they were by Dillon's letting the skipper down today, they would make no reference to it.

THERE WAS A GRIM EXPRESSION on Kelly's face as he revved his motor up the following morning. Tom Dillon climbed aboard the back cockpit, his face drawn blankly. A shudder rippled along his spine, and he fought hard against that impelling force which told him that this was the ninth of the month.

The cause of Kelly's grim expression was the fact that he had not given Dillon all his plans for the photographic shoot. Kelly never did rely much on information gained from photographic plates. He believed in getting down, down into the very crater of hell, if necessary, in the search for information. And information on those German super-guns was necessary. Even more vital was the information on the secret dump which held tons of poison gas of a new formula. It was up to Kelly to get that information, and he was never more determined.

"Visibility's almost perfect this morning, Captain Kelly!"

Bill started at the sound of the major's voice. Brimstone was standing by.

"Yes, sir. With luck we ought to make a bit of history today," returned the skipper.

"Never mind the history, Kelly," was the crisp return. "Confine your efforts to your geography. We want location on those guns, and that gas dump. Luck to you both!"

Bill opened the throttle wide. His C Flight Spads stood by on the deadline, pilots at their sides. Bill had ordered them not to go up until later. Right now, he wanted to fly the Bristol out alone. The grim purpose in his mind called for solo action. He didn't want the sky cluttered with ships. He was going to take Tom Dillon down into a crater of hell, burn the jinx out of him, cauterize his frayed nerves and heal him up. If he failed, then death would be welcome—swift, certain death. Tom Dillon's end would be Kelly's, too.

They cleaved the morning sky like a flaming arrow. Soon forward Vickers and rear Lewis guns were yammering as Kelly and Dillon tested their respective charges. Kelly signaled that he was going to stunt the

two-seater, and, at three thousand feet, he put the Bristol into a variety of maneuvers.

Dillon at first thrilled. He hung his head overside to catch the blast of the slipstream, which fanned his head invigoratingly. Then he pulled in quickly and slumped into a crouch. His heart commenced to thump. This was the ill-fated ninth of the month.

Kelly leveled off and put the Bristol into a steady climb, her nose set at altitude in the eastern sky. He turned in his seat and shot a glance at Tom Dillon. The young lieutenant was slumped well down, his chin on his chest. His face was pale, his mouth drawn. A deep sigh bulged Kelly's big chest.

The sudden chatter of sky guns brought Tom Dillon's head up with a jerk. But there was none of that former keen light of battle in his eyes now. He did not instinctively spring to the grips of the twin after-guns. Instead, he stared blankly at the back of his skipper's neck. His nerves crawled sickly at the sound of guns.

Tom Dillon was an ace. Six weeks ago he would have thrilled at the yammer of those Spandaus—and now they brought a shudder of misgiving through his frame. He would have yearned for the sign from his skipper—that doubled fist which meant action. But today was the ninth of the month. And Tom Dillon was cowering back in the cockpit, in his heart only a sudden hatred of the man who had brought him up this morning.

Up came Kelly's doubled fist. A pair of green-trimmed Fokkers were converging on the Bristol. Kelly turned and grinned, pointing to the two Hun ships. A snarl answered him. It was the only response he got from the youngster aft.

Dillon kicked savagely at a case of photographic plates on the floor of the pit. His hands clenched and unclenched. Now his gaze shifted to the spare control stick in its rack. A sudden desire took control of his spinning brain. He must get out of this spot, and there was only one way.

Grasping the stick, he leaned forward. The back of Bill Kelly's head presented a target he couldn't miss. One blow would be sufficient. Then he would screw the stick into the rear socket and take over the controls.

But Dillon let the stick drop from his mittened hand. He couldn't do it. Was there still some of the old fire left in him? Or was his feeling a sudden twinge of fear that Kelly might fall forward and jam the controls?

Kelly had seen that a speaking tube arrangement,

seldom otherwise used, had been rigged in this ship. He was calling to Dillon now. Tom could hear the buzz of his voice, but it seemed only to add to the general element of chaos, rather than pull him out.

"Why the hell don't you get busy with the Lewis?" urged the skipper. "I'm giving you a last chance to find yourself. Shoot, damn you, shoot!"

Dillon rose in his seat. Tracers were screaming by. He turned, but his hands seemed to freeze on the Lewis grips. He was staring up into four eyes of red flame. Bill Kelly was pointing the Bristol's prop at the sky, hoping, praying that Tom would accept the chance and begin action.

Sagged against the gun mount, the lieutenant fought for self-control. A Boche slug nicked the side of his head, rocking him over against the cockpit rim. For a split second his every sense seemed to leave him. Then a million lights danced before his vision.

Hard, steel-jacketed bullets were ripping fabric. A sliver peeled from a starboard strut. Still Bill Kelly continued on down, taking a chance with death, hoping that the boy would come back. But Tom Dillon's brain refused to function. He hung like a drugged man. Blood trickled down his face. At its taste his heart gave a sudden leap. He turned to appeal to the skipper, but Bill Kelly had given up hope and was smacking the Bristol up in a hard zoom.

Tom Dillon dropped to his seat. For a moment his true consciousness returned to him. He had let his leader down, and now they were forced into battle. There was no way out of this jam save by fast, ruthless action. Kelly had cut clear of the diving Huns, but the Fokkers were smart ships, with a greater maneuverability. It would take superhuman flying to get clear.

Crouched above his stick, his head weaving from side to side, Bill watched the play of the two Fokkers. For the moment he forgot his disgust with Dillon, and all else save that he must find some way out of this jam.

Both Fokkers came up and over in tight Immelmanns. Bill fell off on a wing, half-turning in the pit as he did, to point for Dillon. As he turned, a blast of Spandau fire staggered the Bristol. A slug scored Bill's head above the left ear. He slid back, hands lying limp against the cockpit rim.

Like a crippled eagle, the two-seater heeled over into a spin.

TOM DILLON SEEMED POWERLESS to act. Half-standing in the pit, he stared at the slumped form



of his skipper. He leaned forward, but was jerked violently back as the Bristol took a heavy lurch. Boche fire was now sizzling by, pattering on the spinning Bristol's sides. Dillon attempted to yell, but his voice clogged in his throat. The hot breath of Spandaus fanned his neck. He was already hit, and a thin rivulet of blood coursed down his face. Below, the wretched battlefield was rushing towards him like a fantastic pinwheel blur. Death stared him in the face—a horrible death, and at his back rode vultures poised for the kill.

With a sudden hoarse croak, he snatched at the spare control. Pushing a box of photographic plates out of the way with his foot, he stooped, and with trembling fingers began to screw the stick into its socket. Gradually, Tom Dillon's nerve fibers began to tighten. His eyes were slitted, lips drawn to a hard line. He was waging the fight of his life, fighting himself and a host of clamoring fears that harassed his brain.

In a crouch above the stick, he began to ease the Bristol out, handling the controls cautiously, firmly. He suddenly struck a slap at left rudder, and the two-seater groaned over on her back. Tom fished her out level, then put her nose down, in power.

The sudden zoom which followed pulled Bill Kelly out of the fog of unconsciousness. For a moment he stared into a blank void. Then his senses cleared. He swung in his seat and gave a roar of triumph. Dillon was streaking up for action! The old sky hellion had retrieved his red fighting color.

Now Kelly leaned back over the coaming. He signaled to Tom that he was ready to take over the controls. He pointed to the rear guns, and Tom nodded his head in acknowledgment.

In a few seconds Bill was again in full control of the ship. And he raced to action with a greater confidence now. He split the two Germans wide open, then heeled over on his right wing tips, to go down in a straight dive.

"Now's your chance, Tom," he breathed. Would Dillon stay with it? Bill Kelly was giving him a chance to play the Lewis.

But as he shot a glance over his shoulder, the skipper almost despaired. Tom seemed to have fogged out again. He was standing against the Scarff mount, while the two Huns were heeling over to attack. It seemed that Dillon was again powerless to thaw out his frozen nerves.

Kelly gasped as Spandau lead again began to sleet by. He was about to hurl the Bristol back in a zoom,

and trust to his forward gun to get them out of this spot, when he caught the sudden mad chatter of the Lewis. The twin guns aft were dancing on their mounts. Tom Dillon took the play, his tall frame crouched over the grips. He was snarling, cursing, as he poured a drum of ammo up into the belly of one of those diving Fokkers.

Bill Kelly let a cheer escape him. His conquest today would be the greatest in his career. He had saved the best flyer he ever had from himself. He was sure of it now. The man at the rear guns was proving himself a living blaze of courage.

Tom Dillon had quickly changed drums. His body was wet now with sweat that was wrought of true action, and not nerves. He adjusted the fresh drum and swung his guns off a point, as the Fokker he had blasted attempted to escape.

The guns thundered. It took only another ten rounds to bring a black-red gout of oily flame from the Fokker's engine area. Then Tom punctured her gas tanks. With a horrible cough, she leaped wide, then screamed down in a twisting inferno of flame and smoke.

Instantly Bill Kelly zoomed to as tight a loop as he could get out of the Bristol, and then his own forward Vickers stuttered. The German pilot staggered against the side of his pit. He recovered, and limply slipped his ship off. Before Kelly could round the Bristol out for another stroke, the crafty Hun pilot had pulled out, and was gunning his Mercedes wide out for the German lines. At full gun, the American ship followed, but her speed was no match for the Fokker's.

With a wide grin splitting his grimed, blood-streaked face, Kelly took hands off and turned, to give his gunner the high sign—hands gripped above his head.

Tom Dillon grinned, and Kelly pointed down to the woods. At a nod from Dillon, he shoved down on his stick, and Tom began to roll the camera round on its mount. For the first time in many days, his brain seemed clear. In spite of his head wound, he felt strangely happy. For a second or so, his glance fell on the rear control stick, and a shudder passed through his body at the horrible thought of how close he had come to using that stick on the back of his pal's head. God! He shook violently. Bill Kelly must never know how deeply into the pit of chaos Tom had actually dropped.

His thin lips tightened again. The serious part of their assignment was about to begin. It was imperative

that American headquarters get accurate information on the location of those murderous guns and that huge dump at D.3 sector.

Bill Kelly was streaking down in a dive directly for the woods. At any second a terrific bombardment of archie could be expected. With veteran skill, Kelly managed to dive down under the anti-aircraft fire, and get below point-blank range. It was a great piece of pluck, but the whole venture was just that. The trip into hell's crater had an out only if the gods were kind.

The ghost of a fear touched Kelly's mind as the ship plunged on. Had he completely restored Tom Dillon to his former fighting fettle, or was there a chance that in going any further with his daring plan, he was carrying the cure too far? He could back out now. It wasn't necessary to get much lower down for perfect results in photography. Dillon was already shooting with the camera. He made a perfect shot of a four-gun secret battery actually in action. The thing Wing had been seeking for weeks now lay in Dillon's camera box.

The blast of a dirty ball of shrapnel smoke brought Kelly's right foot onto the rudder bar. The quick-fire guns were beginning to strafe him. He must go down now.

DOWN, DOWN THEY WENT. Tom Dillon suddenly signaled that he wanted the dump. He was pointing groundward to a point off to starboard. Kelly winced. He knew what to expect as soon as he swooped down over that forest area. It came. A batch of flaming onions splashed the sky off the port wing tips. Kelly rocked the Bristol off right, then swung her left again. He was forced to zoom clear as a battery of ground Maxims began to sleet lead at them. To make matters worse, the pilot was forced to bring his ship around over the massive dump, in order that Dillon could get the lighting at his back.

Poised over the rim of the cockpit, Dillon braced himself for the most important shot of all. A bullet cut through his right sleeve. He was facing a terrible fire, but he never flinched. Bill Kelly had been good enough to risk his life in an effort to break Dillon's jinx. Tom owed him plenty. He was giving all he had.

The camera clicked. A feeling of exultation surged through his being. He had a perfect shot. It was one of the greatest close-ups ever made of enemy earthworks. He turned to Kelly, to signal all out. But Kelly was pointing the ship down. To his horror, Tom felt the Bristol yawing—plunging earthward.

Was the skipper hit again? Dillon sucked in his

breath. His hand reached for the stick, but he checked up short. He saw that Kelly was awake, and fighting the Bristol. But she was doomed to go down. Down to a landing, plunging to certain capture. . . .

Amazed Boche scuttled to cover as the American ship dived in on them, the forward Vickers blasting a swath in their ranks. Dillon held his breath. What in God's name was Kelly trying for? And then, the two-seater's tires smacked the turf of a small clearway almost directly alongside the towering, camouflaged dump.

Tom stretched his long frame forward, and tapped the skipper on the shoulder. The motor was still humming, even though the Bristol had pulled to a stop.

"What's gone wrong?" bellowed the lieutenant. "Feed line gone?"

Bill Kelly leaned back, and cupped his hands. "Get a close-up of that dump, quick! It'll be a scoop. Get it, then man the after-guns. Cover me with the Lewis and we'll hold them!"

Tom Dillon swung round. A bullet seared his right shoulder, rocking him back, but he bent in and swung the camera on the dump. Lead was flying in a clattering hail, as he clicked the camera trigger on the greatest piece of photography in the history of the war.

A grin drew his dry lips back from his teeth as he lurched to the Lewis guns. About eighty yards distant, he glimpsed a Lanz gun crew rushing their pieces to a point of vantage atop a mound of ammunition cases. Dillon swung his guns, and pressed the trips. Men began to fall. Chaos reigned in the dump area. German officers stormed and raged, threatening, cursing, but the fire from Dillon's Lewis twins stopped those gunners.

It seemed to Tom that Kelly was taking a long time fixing what he had to fix. Ammunition was getting mighty low. Only one fresh drum remained, and there was still the flight home, through treacherous skies—if they ever got clear.

Tom twisted. He saw Kelly's grimly smiling face. The skipper was half-turned in the front seat, leaning back, calmly watching his man in action!

Now the Bristol's Rolls Royce roared wide open. Dillon felt a sudden lurch. He passed a hand before his eyes to clear the thick red mist which had fogged his vision. In the brief instant he had taken his hands off the Lewis, a venturesome Boche gunner had established a light Lanz machine gun in the open. He was squatted at the breech when Tom spotted him.

As the Bristol cleaved the sky, Dillon's Lewis fire met the Lanz splurge in mid-air. With slugs searing sky all about him, the new Tom Dillon continued to fire until his drum of ammo chugged herself dry. The next drum was the last.

He sagged back in the pit, hard against the belt webbing. It was now up to Kelly.

KELLY REALIZED THIS, as well. Ahead of the flight, there now hung a dense wall of drab black smoke. The archie gunners were applying strategy. Kelly winced. There seemed no port through which to streak.

"You damn fool," he cursed himself. "You should have let well enough alone, and not pulled that last move. If I don't get him back, I hope to frizzle in hell!"

Kelly was infinitely more proud of his success with Dillon than with the scoop he had helped to make. The cure was final, he knew now. And in spite of the hazard ahead, between him and his lines, he found himself tapping a tattoo on the rudder bar, an accompaniment to a tune which whistled through his set teeth.

A sudden poke at his shoulder brought him round with a start. Tom Dillon's ashen face was peering at him. Dillon half-turned. He was pointing topside, toward the rear.

Kelly groaned. A flight of five planes was cutting in on them. They were only blurs, as yet, but he knew them to be German Pfalzes. He was trapped. His mind worked at fever pitch. Two fire-strewn paths lay open to him. There was the chance of running the gauntlet of that archie fire ahead and above, or of dipping down in below the anti-aircraft fire, and daring the ground fire for miles of a run above the German lines.

He shot another glance over his back. His eyes smarted as he saw Dillon stagger to a position at the Lewis guns. For the first time, the skipper noticed that one of Tom's arms hung limp. A low cry escaped him, as he swung to his front. He must get the youngster in, at all costs.

Kelly made a swift decision. He chose the lower run, in the face of ground machine-gun fire. He must beat those Pfalz ships to the American lines.

Now he gunned all out, and raced his Rolls for every ounce of power she could give. Archie gunners struggled to lower their elevation sufficiently to bring a hail of shrapnel down on the scudding American ship. They almost succeeded. Several pellets of one burst crashed through the upper wingspread, but Kelly dived his ship ruthlessly. Maxim lead seethed up at them. Some of it pattered against the belly of the ship. Kelly

was flying as he had never flown before. With only a few meters of altitude in which to operate, he jockeyed his ship with a skill that brought shouts from the very men who fired on him.

But, at the rear, those deadly Pfalzes streaked in like the wind. Tom, too, saw those planes. A sick pain gripped him. There was danger of his fogging out. He had lost plenty of blood in the last little while. Blindly, he hung on, bracing himself by his chest against the gun grips.

Now a low gasp escaped him. The enemy ships were coming on into the dive. He swung his Lewis twins up and opened fire. Spandaus replied, but Dillon had gotten in a spiteful burst ahead of the Huns. He had split the formation up. For a moment, they looped off.

Bill Kelly watched through flashes of action in his dash mirror. "Let 'em have it, kid!" he crowed. But his jubilation was short-lived, as he glimpsed two of the Pfalzes slip off sheer on a wing. They were falling off to outguess the rear gunner, to come up under the belly of the Bristol.

Kelly acted fast. He pushed down on his stick and for a few meters screamed earthward. Then recklessly he back-sticked, and pushed the two-seater up in a hard zoom. This was Dillon's cue. As the Pfalzes flashed up, Spandaus aflame, Tom cracked loose with the Lewis. One of the Huns sheered off, then heeled over to spin earthward.

Bill Kelly was at a loss to know what to do next. He was still climbing. There was no further threat from archie, now that the Boche ships were in close.

Suddenly, the Yank skipper's brows jerked up and a scream of pure rage came from him. He was staring into another formation of ships! His thumb went to his stick trigger—but he never pulled, for he suddenly glimpsed the cocardes of Spads. C Flight was coming on down, hell-bent for murder.

Of course! He had ordered them out for this hour. In the heat of his engagement, he had forgotten. His lips parted. His big frame was convulsed. Now he pressed home his throttle, and with a wave to his pilots, he cut clear of the German lines, and set his nose for the home tarmac.

In the rear pit, Tom Dillon sagged hard against the belt webbing. He was out, blissfully out, in a merciful tide of unconsciousness. . . .

TOM DILLON AWAKENED to blink about him, owlshly at first, until his fogged vision cleared. Then he recognized the grinning face of Captain Bill Kelly,



who hung over him, his head heavily bandaged. Dillon lay on a stretcher in Kelly's hut, where they both awaited transportation out to hospital. Bill's hand seized Tom's good hand and their grip held.

"You were swell, Tom. You beat that little blonde's jinx, son. And say—you should see those close-up shots you got. They're—"

"Oh, say, that was your work, Bill. It was you who risked your neck to get in so close. But tell me something. On the level, now, were you forced to land back there at the dump, or—"

Bill Kelly pressed a fist gently against the puzzled, dirty face.

"You have the answer, son," he grinned. "Of course I wasn't. But, I was damned determined that I was going to pull you clean out of the fog your nerves had dumped you into, or get us both blown to bits. Tom, here's something funny. Today is the tenth of the month, not the ninth."

"What? But that's wrong, Bill. Didn't you show me your calendar yesterday? It was the ninth then, as plain as—"

Bill Kelly snatched the calendar down from the wall and held it in front of Dillon's dilated eyes.

"This is a 1917 calendar, Tom. I kept it because it was the last thing given to me in Yank territory. See that U.S.A. mark?"

But Tom Dillon was past seeing anything. His eyes were oddly blurred. Then he grinned. Ninth or tenth, it had been a great day—the greatest in his life.