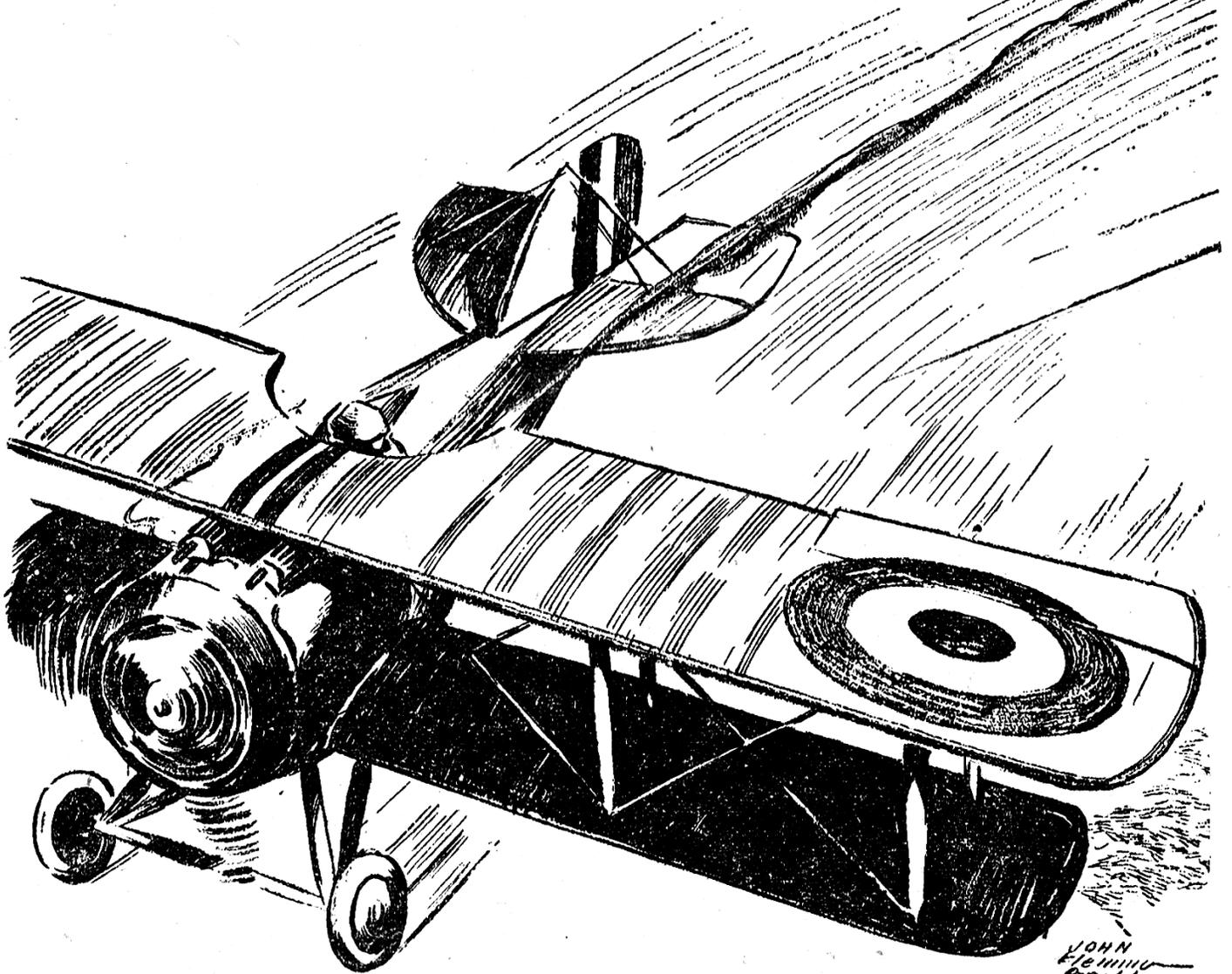


THE ADVENTURES OF
The **THREE**
MOSQUITOES™



MOSQUITO LUCK

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

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Hordes of gray-green troops were being moved up to the Front in broad daylight, yet Allied intelligence had failed to find out how. That was the baffling mystery the colonel set before the "Three Mosquitoes." And Kirby answered the challenge with their famous war whoop: "Let's go!"

AN OTHER WORDS," the stern-visaged staff colonel at brigade headquarters was concluding, "the Germans must be moving troops in broad daylight. And unless we are absolutely wrong, they must be moving them here"—his finger dabbed the map on his desk, indicating a winding red line—"on road 27."

The Three Mosquitoes, who stood attentively before the high officer's desk, shook their heads in puzzled mystification.

"But, sir," protested Kirby, impetuous young leader of the famous flying trio, "I thought you said no troops have been seen on this road."

"That's what I understood," little 'Shorty' Carn agreed. "Surely you don't mean to tell us, sir, that troops moving on a road could be made invisible."

"Unless," suggested the lanky Travis, eldest and wisest of the trio, "they moved only by night."

The colonel shook his head. "I tell you they are moving in broad daylight," he insisted. "Otherwise, how can we account for the sudden arrival of reinforcements in the German lines, right in the middle of the afternoon? Our whole attack yesterday was repulsed because we never expected the, enemy's reinforcements to arrive at this unusual time." Lines of worry deepened in his stern face, and a haggard look came into his eyes. "Unless we can trace this mysterious movement of troops and do something to cripple it, our present offensive is likely to fail."

There was a little silence. The Three Mosquitoes shifted uncomfortably. The worried colonel sat lost in gloomy contemplation. Then Kirby, glancing at the map on the desk, spoke again.

"You say, sir, that you know the Germans must move up through this forest here to get from their back areas to the Front." The colonel nodded. "Well," the Mosquito pursued with increasing eagerness, "why must they be using road 27, which cuts right through the forest? Couldn't they have built a secret road under the trees, so that the branches and leaves conceal it from above?"

The colonel gave a mirthless laugh, as if the suggestion were absurd. "Impossible. Remember they have to move big trucks and heavy artillery. They must have a real highway; they could never manage to build it under the trees so that it would be

concealed. It would have been spotted in no time by the scores of aviators who have searched that terrain in vain. No"—he shook his head hopelessly—"we've considered every possibility. We've even thought of an underground tunnel; but that's absolutely ridiculous. Fifteen miles of tunnel under that marshy earth full of tree roots? It would take the Germans years to build it, and they have been in this French territory only for a few months. In short, there remains only road 27, which has always been there. And yet, though we know the Germans must be moving on this road, we have never seen the slightest sign of them. The road has always been reported empty and utterly deserted."

He paused, and again the mystery of the thing baffled the Three Mosquitoes, made them shake their heads.

"The worst of it is," the colonel resumed bitterly, "we've got that whole road and everything near it ranged by our heavy artillery. We could probably tear it to pieces with one great barrage. And yet we cannot afford to send a concentrated barrage on an empty road. We've got to catch the troops moving on the road, too."

His eyes suddenly went to the faces of the three men before him. He studied the trio appraisingly.

"You three," he admitted with frank sincerity, "are the best flyers we have. If anyone can spot troop movements on that road, you're the ones to do it. That is why I have called you for this special mission." Again he pointed to the map, and he spoke slowly, emphasizing each of his instructions. "I want you three men to fly over road 27 as low as you can, and look for troop movements. You may meet with ground fire or enemy aircrafts; but do the best you can. You will start at once, and continue the reconnaissance until you are out of gas. Then come back for more, and keep repeating until you have either discovered the troop movements or have found that the Germans must be using some other stratagem.

"All three of you will be equipped with Very pistols containing green rockets. The moment you see any troop movement anywhere on road 27 one of you will fire a rocket. Our artillery will be watching for the signal, and exactly ten minutes after it is fired, the barrage will be laid on that road. The ten-minute margin is just a precaution, so that you will be able to

make safe distance and altitude; for the barrage will be quite terrific. Now, is everything clear?"

The Three Mosquitoes nodded slowly, soberly. And then a look of eagerness came over Kirby's face, as his fighting spirit rose to the surface.

"We'll go right over, sir," he assured the colonel. "And we won't miss anything that moves on that road—not even an ant. Right, fellers?"

And Shorty and Travis responded with their usual exuberant cry, the famous war whoop of the Three Mosquitoes. "Let's go!"

Something in their tone must have impressed the colonel, for he smiled eagerly. "Go to it," he urged. "And I'll be damned if I haven't a hunch that you'll succeed."

Soon afterward three trim Spads moved leisurely through, the clear translucent sky, fifteen miles in Bochelant, but only five hundred feet above the ground. With their customary reckless abandon, the Three Mosquitoes were ignoring the desultory ground fire which molested them from time to time in the form of anti-aircraft shells or machine-gun bullets. Calmly, in their usual V-shaped formation, with Kirby at the apex and the other two flanking him on either side and a little to the rear, they sailed directly over a long wide ribbon of brown which wove its way through a forest. That ribbon was road 27.

Thus far, their reconnaissance had been absolutely fruitless. Twice they had gone back for gas, and now they were starting the third lap. They had covered every inch of that road and they had seen nothing. Not a sign of anything moving. Not even a German plane in the sky. Nothing but an empty road, and a few scattered anti-aircraft defenses in the clearings of the wood on either side.

Kirby, as he mechanically kept his two comrades in formation, watching the bobbing noses of their Spads on either side of him, was beginning to give up hope. It seemed useless, there were no troops to be seen on this road. The staff colonel must have been wrong. And yet Kirby knew that staff colonels were seldom wrong. There was something fishy about this whole business—something damned mysterious. Kirby glanced from side to side at his two comrades, whose goggled faces he could see clearly. He looked at them perplexedly and shrugged in puzzled mystification. They shook their heads, unable to offer any explanation. It was a baffling paradox. The Germans were moving troops up road 27, and road 27 was empty.

So puzzled did Kirby grow, that he began to

consider the most fantastic explanations. Had the Germans perfected some new kind of ray which could render their troops invisible? A slight shiver went through the Mosquito; but then he laughed outright. Imagine rendering trucks and artillery and regiments invisible. Besides, there was the road in all its details. Kirby decided to go still lower, so he could see it even more clearly. He waved a signal to his comrades and eased his joystick forward. Gracefully, in perfect unison, the three Spads dipped gently. Down, down—two hundred feet now. Somewhere to the right a battery of machine guns in an open patch of the woods blazed away at them furiously. Bullets whistled dangerously close. The Spads went right on, however, with Kirby leading them in a slight zigzag to throw off the Boche gunners' aim, but otherwise ignoring the fire. Again the Three Mosquitoes scanned the road, straining their eyes through their goggles. Nothing there. Nothing.

A SUDDEN shadow overhead; a roar of wide-open motors and a shrill of flying wires; and down from the sun in whose blinding orb they had been hiding, down in a furious attacking dive, came six Fokkers. They were plummeting like streaks, with black smoke trailing from their exhaust stacks. They were swooping straight for the three Spads, which were at a terrific disadvantage, not only because the odds were two to one against them, but because they were way down on the carpet, at two hundred feet.

A berserk oath ripped from Kirby's throat, and he waved wildly, frantically, to his comrades. At once road 27 was forgotten. With the Germans almost on top of them, the Three Mosquitoes pulled up together in a breathless zoom to get all the altitude they could. The shrill clatter of the German Spandaus rose over their heads. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* The smoky lines of tracers etched the air on all sides of the Mosquitoes. In the next instant the Fokkers, with a roar of engines and a thunder of guns, were pulling out of their dives and commencing to weave in and out among the Spads, blazing away at them. Kirby heard the bullets ticking through his fuselage, saw them ricocheting from the cowl of his engine. Furiously he half-rolled, and then again he waved to his comrades, whose Spads he could only glimpse vaguely in the confused mass of diving, banking, zooming ships. He waved the signal which meant, "Fight, fellers! Fight for altitude and the lines."

And eagerly they waved back the answer which meant, "Let's go!"

Whereupon the Three Mosquitoes fought as they always fought against overwhelming odds—fought like winged furies, like bats out of hell. They leaned to their sights and pressed their stick triggers, answering the Germans' fire with their own twin machine guns. They fought stubbornly for altitude, while the Fokkers kept whipping at them from all sides, peppering them with lead. The dogfight began to rise higher and higher now, until the mass of planes were far up in the sunny blue. Furiously, in the insistent lunging fashion which had won them their nicknames, the Three Mosquitoes were defending themselves against those six Fokkers.

They were more than defending themselves, for suddenly one of the Fokkers went reeling out of the fray, crumpled by a withering burst from the guns of Travis. A cheer broke from Kirby. Travis had scored. The Fokker was hurtling earthward in a dizzy fatal tailspin. But there were still five left; and these five closed in with a vengeance, enraged by the fall of their comrade. They cut the Three Mosquitoes off from the Allied lines, and commenced to crowd in on them from all sides. Slowly, but with deadly precision, they were walling those three Spads in a prison of crisscross fire. Frantically the Mosquitoes half-rolled, zigzagged, and turned to shake off the terrific streams of tracer. Thicker and thicker grew the bullets, until the air was dense with screaming, flying lead. And then Kirby's Spad was hit. With a shriek, the bullets went ripping into its engine casing. The motor sputtered, choked vainly for life, then conked out cold.

Kirby had been caught unawares, and before he could recover from his horrified surprise, the Spad had lost flying speed and stalled. Its wing drooped slowly over, its nose was pulled down by the force of gravity. Then Kirby was hurtling earthward in a screaming, sickening spin which took the breath from his lungs. Down, down, faster and faster, with the wind shrieking through the flying wires. Far above, farther and farther away, the other two Mosquitoes were still fighting it out with the five Fokkers.

Madly Kirby fought with his controls as he saw the blurred earth rushing up toward him. By sheer skill, he got the Spad out of that spin and put her into a glide. He guided the motorless plane toward the allied lines at the shallowest angle possible. But he knew, to his despair, that he could never make the lines, could never get anywhere near them. The ground was looming up right below now. The green tree tops of that same forest spread before him. Closer and closer they drew, as the Spad settled. Vainly Kirby tried to

pull the Spad's nose higher, but he saw that she would only lose flying speed and stall again. God, he would have to land in Boche land; there was no getting out of it. He must find a place to land, or else crash to sure death on those tree tops.

His frantic eyes scanned the terrain. Instantly they fell upon road 27, which he had forgotten in all the excitement. The road was almost directly beneath him. There was no other place in sight where he could attempt a landing. He would have to land on the road, burn his ship, and try to sneak his way back to the lines. Luck seemed to be at least partly in his favor. There were no Germans in sight down there, no soldiers waiting to capture him. He had a chance—a fleeting chance, anyway.

Hastily but carefully he banked the gliding Spad until the road was coming up right under him, swiftly, swiftly. He held back the joystick tightly, keeping the plane's nose up. With expert skill he was making a deadstick landing in a crosswind, since he had to land with the length of the road. Down, down, lower and lower. The wheels of the Spad settled. They were whisking over the road.

A cry of mingled amazement and horror broke from Kirby's throat, as he felt that road actually give way beneath his wheels. There was a noise as of ripping fabric, and then the Spad careened crazily and took a brief but sickening plunge. It crashed, nose-first, into the hard firm earth below. And Kirby, still strapped in the cockpit by his safety belt, dazed and shaken, but otherwise unhurt, realized vaguely what had happened.

The road on which he had tried to land was made of canvas, stretched across the trees, and so painted and camouflaged that even from close overhead one could never have told that it wasn't a real dirt road. But the real road 27, the road that the allies knew had always been here, was underneath the canvas covering through which Kirby's Spad had crashed. That was all there was to it. The Germans had covered the real road with an artificial one. And the reason for this artful camouflage became apparent all too soon.

Even with the sunlight streaming through the gaping rent which Kirby's Spad had made in the canvas above, it was quite dark down here; for there were canvas walls on the sides, too. And suddenly, just as Kirby was unfastening his safety belt and starting to climb out of the wrecked plane, two eyes of light leaped out of the darkness. The Mosquito's nerves tensed like steel springs. Headlights! A truck was

rumbling down the road—a truck that seemed to be followed by scores of others. Jerries, moving up to the Front! Here were the troop movements he and his comrades had been looking for.

The driver of the leading truck saw the wrecked Spad in his path, at last, and jammed on his brakes furiously. The whole place resounded then with grinding brakes and skidding wheels, as every truck had to stop short behind the next. Vaguely Kirby saw Jerry soldiers with coal-scuttle helmets leap from the first truck and rush toward him, rifles trained. They were coming to make the capture. He was going to be taken prisoner. Already three of those Boche were almost upon him.

AND then a wave of savage recklessness swept the Mosquito. With a defiant yell, he whipped out his Colt while he still sat in his cockpit. Blindly he fired at the first of the approaching Jerries, saw the man drop. The two others immediately behind came toward the Mosquito with a rush, bayonets fixed. Scores of others followed them, shouting angrily. Kirby fired again and again. He dropped the second Boche; and then his face blanched as he saw the bayonet of the third lunging straight toward him.

The Mosquito was half standing in the cockpit now, unable to use his Colt at such close quarters. He ducked frantically as that flashing steel bayonet came toward him, and it slithered past, just grazing his clothes. The German momentarily lost his balance, and before he could get back his footing, Kirby hauled off with all his might and sent a terrific left swing to the man's jaw. The Jerry crumpled to the ground, out cold. But the rest of the soldiers were coming up now—an angry shouting mob of them. Madly Kirby leaped out of his cockpit to the other side of the plane, where the canvas tunnel seemed to be empty.

He started to run down the dark road. The crowd of Germans, scrambling over the wrecked plane, followed in hot pursuit. Rifles cracked, and bullets whistled over Kirby's head. The fact that it was so dark that his pursuers could not see him clearly was the only thing that saved him from being shot to shreds. Wildly he kept dashing down that covered road, knowing only that he was headed toward the Allied lines. The mob of Boche followed relentlessly, still blazing away.

Suddenly the Mosquito stopped short, his blood freezing. Abruptly the firing behind him had ceased. The reason was simple.

In front of the Mosquito was a slow plodding column of infantry—a whole division it seemed. It was marching to the Front. Reinforcements were going up.

The men behind Kirby shouted, and the column in front of him stopped, to break up confusedly. Soldiers left the ranks and came dashing straight his way. Kirby was caught between two fires. The Boche were closing in from both sides.

There was only one thing to do, and Kirby did it. He dashed over to the canvas wall of the dark place, and crouched there on the ground, still as death. In the darkness he hoped that they would not be able to see him.

The Boche were looking everywhere for him now, swarming all around the place. Sometimes they came so close that Kirby could have reached out and touched them. At such times his heart pounded like a sledge hammer, and he dared not breathe. But they did not see him.

And then, to his horror, a score of flashlights opened up from all over the place, as Jerry officers produced them. They sent their groping white beams playing over the walls. Cold beads of perspiration broke out on Kirby's forehead. God, one of those beams was slowly sweeping toward him, coming down the wall. In a few seconds it would reveal him in its glare.

Frantically the Mosquito felt the canvas beside him. It gave. He reached under it and lifted it a trifle, then let it down in terrified haste as the daylight from outside came sweeping right in. If he tried to lift the canvas to crawl out into the woods, he'd be seen, anyway. And yet that groping searchlight was coming closer, closer. The thought that if he ducked out he might at least find some other shelter urged him to his desperate decision. With his heart in his mouth, he lifted up the canvas. There was a flood of daylight, and with a surprised yell, several of the Boche fired. But Kirby had already ducked out through the opening, and the canvas had dropped behind him.

He was in the forest now, but to his dismay the trees were not dense enough to enable him to lose himself quickly in their midst. And now the Boche were scrambling from under the canvas. They were coming out after him. Furtively, like a cornered animal, Kirby looked all about for some tiny path of escape. His eye fell upon one of the tall trees which supported the canvas covering. The canvas walls were tied to it by several coils of rope. Inspiration came to Kirby in that last split second, and even as the Germans were

swarming out of the canvas tunnel, the Mosquito grabbed that tree and climbed it with monkeylike agility, using the ropes as rungs. Below him he could see the German soldiers looking all around, searching through the woods with rifles ready. A tight little smile flickered over his lips. He remembered an old adage which said that people never look up to find things. The Germans didn't see him, though he was right over their heads.

But he couldn't trust that old saying too much. He was anything but safe here, clinging to this tree trunk. He climbed higher. The sun suddenly dazzled him as he reached the spot where the canvas roof of the false roadway was stretched across the trees. The top of Kirby's tree was still several yards above, and since there were no ropes there and the branches were far apart, he decided not to try to climb there. Instead, he twisted around, and lowered himself gingerly upon the canvas roofing, half fearing that it would give beneath him. It did give just a trifle, but he saw that it would easily hold him. He rolled out upon it and lay waiting. The jerries on the ground would never see him now. He would simply wait until things quieted down, and then he could descend into the woods and try to sneak back to the lines.

The Boche were still swarming around outside the wall of the tunnel, searching among the trees. Kirby, more and more confident that they would never find him, pulled himself to a sitting posture and began to look at the false road. It certainly was a good piece of work; if he hadn't felt it giving a trifle beneath his weight, he would never have believed that it was not solid earth. Vaguely he wondered how it ended, and where the Germans went in and out of the enclosure. Then he remembered that at both ends the road seemed to disappear beneath unusually dense trees. That was the explanation, of course. Special camouflage had been put at both entrances. Kirby marveled at the ingenuity of the Germans. The absolute simplicity of this stunt was what, made it so remarkably effective. No wonder the Allies had been fooled when, to all appearances, the road 27 they had known when it was on their side of the lines, was still here. Had the Germans camouflaged it so that there was no road to be seen, the trick would never have worked.

The Mosquito now peered down the road, looking for that gaping rent his Spad had made in the canvas. His eyes widened in surprise. It wasn't there. During these brief moments the Boche must have fixed that

tear, restored the roof to its normal appearance. They were taking no chances of some Allied flyers seeing that give-away hole from above. The thought of Allied flyers suddenly brought Kirby's mind back to his comrades. A pang of anxiety went through him. What had befallen Shorty and Travis, whom he had left in such a tight jam with those five deadly Fokkers? He glanced toward the sky, squinting in the glare of the sun. Nothing in sight. He could only hope for the best.

Suddenly, to his joy, the Germans below were reentering the canvas enclosure, ducking back under its wall. They had evidently given up the search for Kirby. Doubtless they had other important things to attend to. This fact was soon borne out when a sound reached Kirby's ears through the canvas roof—the low clattering rumble of trucks. The big parade below had started once more. The wrecked Spad must have been cleared out of the path. The troops and supplies were moving to the Front. The Mosquito suddenly remembered the instructions of the staff colonel—the instructions he had all but forgotten during this hectic period. "We've got to catch the troops moving on the road. Exactly ten minutes after the signal is fired, the barrage will be laid on that road."

Kirby's hands went beneath his tunic, felt the thick squat barrel of a Very pistol. In that pistol were green rockets. And Kirby knew that the sooner one of those rockets was fired, the greater would be the chance of wiping out those moving troops below. He must climb down from here at once. The woods were deserted now. He must climb down, and as soon as he was far away, he must fire that green rocket into the air. Quickly he moved toward the tree he had climbed before.

SUDDENLY he stopped, his whole body stiffening. He was listening with ears horribly alert. Mmmmmmm! The steady, beelike drone drifted to him. Louder and louder grew that familiar sound. An airplane was approaching somewhere above. Fear clutched at the Mosquito's heart. God, was a Jerry pilot going to come along and spot him on this false road where no man should be? He scanned the sky fearfully, again squinting in the sunlight. Then his heart leaped.

High in the blue, streaking straight for the Allied lines, was a lone Spad. And as Kirby dimly made out its insignia, a wave of frenzied joy surged through him.

"Travis," he shouted, and then remembered with a shock that if the Germans underneath heard him his goose was cooked. "Travis," he whispered this time. "Good old Travis."

Sure enough, it was the lanky Mosquito who piloted that Spad. Travis had just come from one of the hardest dogfights of his career, and his goggled face was drawn and ashen. Scarcely a few minutes after Kirby had been shot down, Shorty's plane had floundered and limped off like a crippled bird. Travis was left alone with five Fokkers. In sheer desperation he had done for one of them, and then he had sat and waited for the end. But luck was with him. A squadron of seven French Nieuports had dived suddenly from the blue. The result was a slaughter in which Travis had grimly participated. Every one of the Fokkers had been shot down. And now, having left the Nieuports to continue their private patrol, Travis was heading for home and wondering what had happened to Kirby and Shorty.

Almost instantly a wild idea had come to Kirby. Off to one side he could see a fairly large clearing in the forest. It was level enough for a landing. If he could get Travis to see him, get him to come down and pick him up——

The Spad was almost directly overhead now, and it was moving fast. With frantic haste, ignoring the risk of it, Kirby got to his feet. The canvas sagged beneath him, again threatening to give. He did not care. He strode right into the middle of that sagging roof and commenced to wave furiously at the plane as it was passing overhead. Surely Travis must see him, since he was the only object on this empty road.

But by a cruel irony, Travis was no longer looking at the road. He had forgotten all about it. His mind was on Kirby and Shorty. He was hoping against hope that they had managed to get their crippled ships safely across the lines. His only desire was to get home as fast as he could, and find out. So he concentrated on his controls, and his goggled eyes peered straight into the space ahead of them.

Frantically Kirby kept waving. Despair gripped him as he saw the Spad passing by, saw his one opportunity slipping, slipping.

"Travis," he called again, no longer thinking of the Germans beneath. Fortunately the noise of the trucks prevented them from hearing. "Travis, for God's sake look! It's Kirby." His voice choked. "Can't you see me, Travis?"

But the Spad went right on, smoothly, unwaveringly. Kirby sobbed in utter frustration. God, what could he do?

Suddenly a change came over his face, and a strange light shone in his eyes. His hand reached beneath

his tunic once more, and again he fingered that Very pistol. By God, Travis could not help but see a green rocket if it was aimed properly. And if Travis saw a green rocket, which would also be a signal for that barrage, the lanky Mosquito would certainly come down to investigate, knowing that he had a full ten minutes to spare.

Kirby would be taking a frightful risk. If Travis failed him, he was doomed to certain death. He would never have time to get out of the path of that barrage which, the staff colonel had explained, would wipe out the road and everything near it. Ten minutes. How far could he go?

But there was no time for hesitation. The Spad was moving away now. Soon it would be too far gone. Kirby reached his decision. He snatched out the Very pistol. He aimed it in the air—aimed it at the space in front of the Spad, so that Travis could not miss it. He glanced at his wrist watch. It was exactly ten minutes past two p. m. At two-twenty, then——

He drew a deep breath, paused a final split second, and then, with reckless abandon, jerked the trigger.

A flash of brilliant green fire leaped from the muzzle of the pistol and climbed in a streaking line to the sky. The aim was true. The rocket passed almost directly in front of the Spad's nose, all but hitting the plane.

Kirby watched in nerve-racking suspense. The Spad was still moving on. God, if Travis had not seen, he was lost.

Then he almost sobbed in his frenzied relief. The Spad was banking over sharply. It swung right around. Its nose dipped. Down it came, streaking straight for the spot where Travis had calculated that the rocket must have come from. Down, down, closer and closer. Again Kirby was standing in the middle of the false road, waving frantically. The Spad was swooping right over his head now. He saw the helmeted head of his comrade leaning out of the cockpit, saw him peering down. He waved anew, waved every familiar signal of the Three Mosquitoes.

And then Travis was waving, too, waving with wild joy. He had recognized the khaki-clad figure on the road. He made a gesture which clearly said, "Wait. I'll get you." The nose of his Spad dipped still more, and the plane was coming down.

"Not there, Travis!" Wildly Kirby screamed out the warning, the expression on his face changing from joy to horror. For he saw that Travis meant to land right on what he believed to be road 27. It was natural. The

lanky Mosquito knew nothing of this false canvas artifice. He was making the same mistake Kirby had made.

In a frenzy of desperation, Kirby went dashing down the sagging canvas. Travis was just beginning to cut his motor now. He had passed Kirby, but some intuition must have prompted him to look down and back at his comrade. Kirby waved madly, shook his head, then pointed to that near-by clearing in the woods, Travis did not grasp what he was driving at. The lanky Mosquito merely thought Kirby was still cheering him on, and he waved back enthusiastically. He went on gliding for the road. But again he turned to peer down at Kirby. This time the leader of the Mosquitoes, in a near panic, resorted to desperate tactics. Deliberately he began to jump up and down on that canvas roof top. It sagged horribly, began to rip. But madly, like a clown bouncing in a circus, Kirby kept jumping, jumping.

And then at last Travis saw the supposed road sagging and giving beneath Kirby's feet. The engine of the Spad suddenly roared back into full life, and the plane pulled up, to circle overhead. Again Travis peered down, his goggled face blank with astonishment and awe. Again Kirby pointed to the near-by clearing in the woods. Travis nodded, understanding at last. The Spad veered off and headed for that spot.

Gasping and panting, Kirby glanced at his wrist watch. It was fourteen minutes past two. Good God, four minutes were gone already, and only six remained.

WITH frantic haste he staggered across the canvas roof, and threw his arms about one of the trees on the side. He twisted himself around, and again using as rungs the coils of rope which fastened the canvas, he let himself down as fast as he could. Vaguely, through the tree tops, he glimpsed the Spad gliding for that clearing. Then he had reached the ground at last, and scrambled madly through the woods. He glanced again at his watch. Another minute gone; five left.

He redoubled his efforts. Now, through the trees ahead, he saw the Spad whisking over the ground, saw it rolling to a stop. It was waiting, with its motor ticking over. Kirby ran as he had never run before. But then his feet got tangled in some underbrush. He tripped, stumbled, and fell. Cursing, he pulled himself up and dashed on. There were only four minutes left when he burst into the clearing. He galloped frantically

toward the waiting plane. Travis was leaning out of the cockpit, shouting excitedly, "Come on! Hurry! That barrage will hit this field, too."

But Kirby needed no such urging. He literally hurled himself toward that plane. He reached it, jumped up on the wing.

"Go on, Trav," he yelled. "Take off, and fly like hell. I'll ride the wing."

Travis nodded and reached for his throttle lever, as Kirby crouched beside the fuselage between the two wings, gripping a strut for support. The Spad's engine roared. The plane began to move.

But before it had moved a foot, a mob of howling Boche came bursting through the trees. They had come out of the canvas enclosure. They had seen the roof over their heads sagging, and then they had heard the unmistakable sound of a plane coming down to land. Now they were swarming onto the clearing, and already their rifles were blazing away at the Spad. Bullets sang wildly in the ears of the two Mosquitoes. Furiously, while Kirby whipped out his Colt and fired wildly at the Boche, Travis tried to continue the take-off.

But the Germans, determined not to let these two Yanks escape, had already reached the tail of the Spad, and were seizing it. There were so many of them that they were actually holding the plane back. Futilely Kirby blazed away at them from his wing until his supply of cartridges was exhausted. God, it was no use. They were done for, Travis and himself. The Germans had them trapped like rats. And worst of all, a furtive glance at his wrist watch told him there were now less than two minutes left.

And then, suddenly, everything changed.

With a thunderous roar, a plane came plunging down from the sky, plunging straight for the Boche who were holding back the Spad on the ground. It was also a Spad, this plane; and at the sight of it Kirby and Travis cheered insanely. It was Shorty Carn who was coming down—Shorty Carn, the third of the trio. The mild-eyed little man had also had a hectic experience. He had made a forced landing on a deserted wheatfield in Bocheland, and had managed to fix his crippled engine. Then he had taken off again and streaked through the sky to rejoin Travis, should the latter still be in that hopeless dogfight. As he had passed overhead, he had seen Travis' plane on the ground. He had come right down, and in a flash, as he glimpsed the khaki-clad figure on the wing of the plane, he had grasped the whole upshot of the business. Now he was diving to the rescue of his two comrades.

Rat-ta-tat-tat. The guns of the descending Spad were spitting flame, sending down a rain of deadly tracers. And behind the guns was Shorty Carn, who was known as one of the best marksmen in the air service. His bullets never came near Kirby or Travis, and yet they showered right down on the Boche at the tail of the Spad. Several of the Germans were dropped like flies, and the rest scattered in terrified confusion. But there was only one minute left now, Kirby saw. God, could they make it, could they possibly make it?

Again Travis opened his throttle wide. With a roar, the Spad, free from the Germans' grasp, moved forward once more. Shorty Immelmanned overhead and swooped down to strafe the Boche anew. He was clearing the way for his comrades. Their Spad was whisking across the field now, faster, faster. The blast of wind from the propeller almost pushed Kirby off the wing, and he had to hold on to that strut for dear life. But he was hardly aware of the wind. He was concentrating on the hands of his wrist watch. The seconds of that last minute were ticking off, passing, passing.

Then, with a sudden lift, the Spad was in the air. Skillfully Travis cleared the tree tops, and then climbed at as sharp an angle as he could without endangering Kirby's position on the wing. Shorty Carn followed. Up streaked the two planes, like birds exulting in their freedom. Higher and higher they shot, leaving that field farther and farther below.

"Keep climbing," Kirby yelled into Travis' helmet above the roar of the engine. "Shorty is following us, thank God. We've got to get as far away as——"

He said no more, for at that moment it came. It came with a low whine which rose almost instantly to a piercing shriek.

B-r-r-r-rooom! Boom! The Mosquitoes looked down incredulously and saw those scores and scores of shells bursting upon the road and the surrounding forest. Gigantic puffs of smoke rose all over the place and fell in slowly mushrooming debris. The terrific concussions made the two Spads sideslip and wobble, and Kirby was almost hurled off his wing. The canvas road was fast crumpling now. Grotesque open patches in it revealed wrecked trucks underneath, full of gray-clad figures, some of whom were writhing and squirming, but most of whom were lying still. The field Kirby and Travis had just left was struck right in its center, and every Boche on it was killed or wounded.

The Mosquitoes kept climbing, until the concussions no longer rocked the Spads. Then they

circled, watching that ghastly pageant of destruction. They watched until both the false road 27 and the real one had been reduced to a smouldering jagged gash of shell-torn earth and debris. The job was finished. Road 27 and the troops on it had been wiped out.

Side by side, the two Spads moved toward the Allied lines, with the pilot who should have been leading them clinging to one of their wings. The trip home was uneventful. There were no more Fokkers. And presently the wheels of the two Spads were settling on the tarmac of the airdrome, and Kirby was gratefully jumping off the wing onto solid ground.

Soon the Three Mosquitoes stood once more before the staff colonel at brigade headquarters—a smiling, grateful staff colonel, this time.

"It was wonderful," he was exclaiming enthusiastically. "The wiping out of those troops and supplies has been the decisive factor in our push. We can't fail now." He beamed upon Kirby. "I certainly must congratulate you on your skill, captain. I still don't see how you ever discovered that the road we have been watching was only a covering over the real one."

Kirby shifted, with slight embarrassment. "But, sir," he explained truthfully, "I'm telling you it was just luck. If I hadn't had to make a forced landing——"

The colonel waved him off with a laugh. "Like a true hero, you are naturally modest, aren't you, captain? Just luck," he snorted. "Do you expect me to believe that?"

"But here are the guys who really did the dirty work," Kirby insisted; and now it was the turn of Shorty Carn and the lanky Travis to shift uncomfortably.

"All three of you deserve the highest praise," the colonel concluded. "And I still refuse to believe that it was plain luck that——"

"All right, damn it," the impetuous leader of the Three Mosquitoes burst out, forgetting his rank. "Have it your way. We'll say it wasn't luck. I landed purposely on that false road to see if it wasn't made out of canvas. I found out that it was."

And his comrades agreed vehemently, "You sure did."