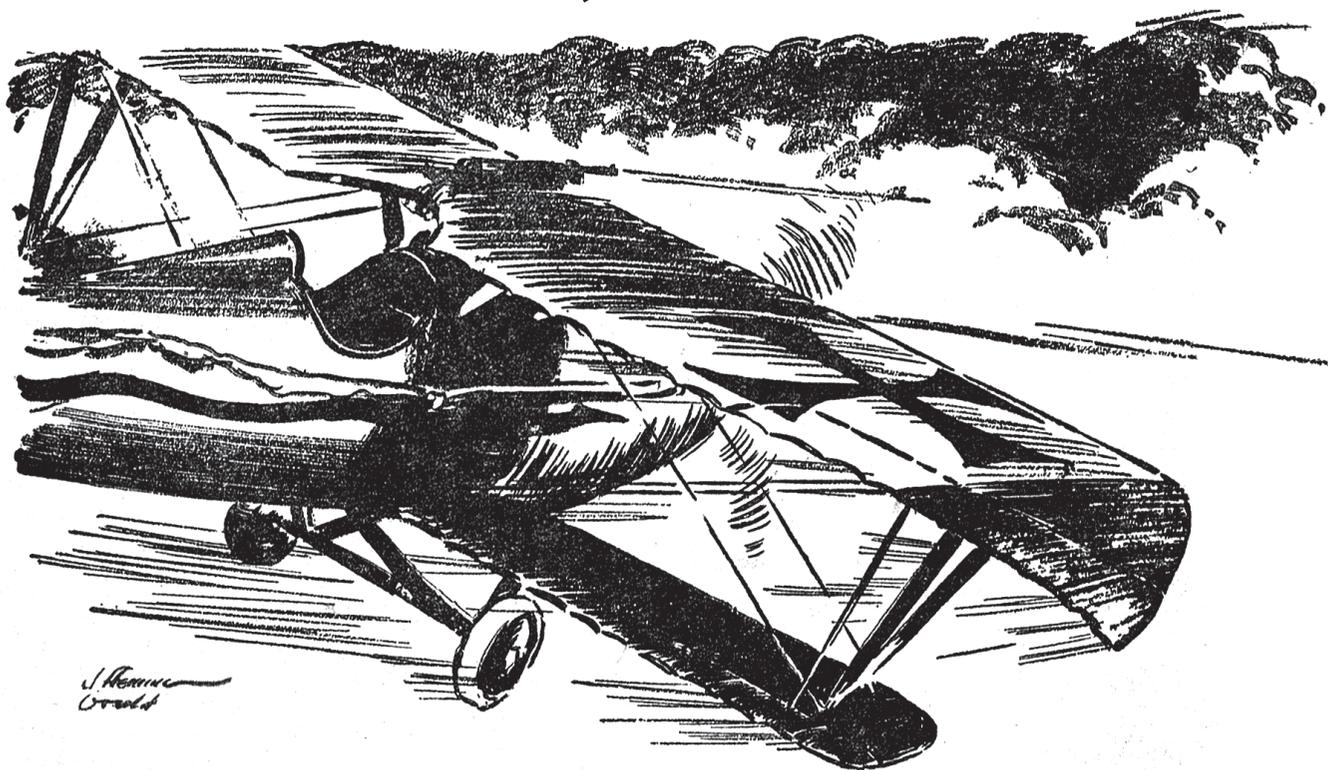


THE ADVENTURES OF
The **THREE** 
MOSQUITOES™



THE RIDERLESS PLANE

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

Here, gang, is one of the great mysteries of the late war revealed at last! The hair seemed to rise beneath Kirby's helmet, while a chill sensation of horror drove needles into his spine. He almost stalled the Spad as he kept staring, looking at that incredible sight—expecting to find his eyes deceiving him. The cockpit of that all-red plane was empty. It was the riderless plane!

THROUGH THE CLEAR TRANSLUCENT SKY the Three Mosquitoes drove their three Spads, flying their usual morning patrol between Remiens and Rois. As always, they kept their perfect V-shaped formation, with Kirby, their impetuous young leader, at the apex, and “Shorty” Carn and the lanky Travis flanking him on either side and to the rear. Smoothly the trim little ships droned along, their wings flashing in the brilliant sun, their forward machine guns glistening hungrily.

But it was not with their usual reckless carefree spirit that the Three Mosquitoes were looking for battle now. They were hardly the fearless trio of dare-devils who had laughed at all obstacles and blazed their way through the most overwhelming odds. Their goggled faces were grim and sober, and they were bending fiercely to their controls, nerves taut, muscles tense. For, like every other pilot in the service, they were shaken to the very depths by the most uncanny and hair-raising mystery this war had yet produced—the riderless plane.

The riderless plane! The mere thought of it sent a cold chill coursing up Kirby’s spine. It was all right to pit your skill and wits against an enemy pilot who, after all, was just a human being like yourself. But to face a freak plane which flew of its own accord, with its cockpit utterly empty—that was asking too much of any man. It seemed incredible, preposterous, this horrible machine without a pilot, shooting through the air like a streak, doing its deadly work, and then mysteriously vanishing. And yet, incredible as it was, it had taken its hold on the entire Allied air force and was slowly but surely breaking down their morale.

All sorts of theories had been advanced about the riderless plane, every possible explanation ranging from the supernatural to the superscientific. The emotional French swore that it was a ghost ship piloted by the invisible spirit of the late Richthofen himself, and they offered as evidence the fact that this plane, like every ship flown by *Le Diable Rouge*, as they had called Germany’s greatest ace, was all red in color except for its black-cross markings. The Americans, with their common sense, tried to explain the phenomenon in simple and practical terms, but thus far they had racked their brains in vain for a satisfactory conclusion. The conservative British stoically refused to believe in the thing at all, despite the fact that several British ships had been definitely marked down among the riderless plane’s victims.

As for Allied G.H.Q., which combined the best

minds of the French, Americans, and British, their attitude was one of absolute disbelief. With typical military logic, they insisted that what could not be explained could not be. Only two days ago they had issued a general statement.

“Of late there has been a wild rumor, absolutely unfounded, that an enemy airplane without a pilot has been operating on our side of the lines.

“This is merely propaganda spread by a desperate enemy who is fighting with his back to the wall and therefore will resort to any tactics.

“No sane-minded person will put any stock in this absurd myth. There is no plane, and there can be no plane, which can fly without a pilot to control it.

“The rumor must be stopped and discouraged wherever it is spreading. Airplane pilots are requested to keep their heads and not allow their imaginations to deceive them into believing in this impossible riderless plane.”

Such was the bulletin issued by G.H.Q. But against their word were the statements of those who swore they had actually seen the riderless plane. Few had seen it closely and lived; but these few all agreed that there was nobody in it, that no human guided its controls. It was the similarity of all the testimony which made the thing so damnably convincing. Mere rumor invariably brings widely conflicting stories. But here every one said that the ship was bright red in color, that it looked like a Fokker biplane, that it had a new engine of unheard-of power, and that it could fly about twice as fast as any known ship.

Just how the riderless craft got its victims, no one knew for certain. Most of the planes credited to its list had been shot down while flying alone, and their pilots had not lived to tell the tale. But there were a few cases where the rear plane of a formation had been picked off, and most of the surviving flyers agreed that the red ship had come diving down much as any ordinary plane would dive, that its guns had blazed of their own accord, and that after getting its prey, the thing had swept out of sight before pursuit could be started. Finally, there were the anti-aircraft gunners, who had seen the unoccupied red machine streaking overhead and had tried in vain to range it; it flew too fast, they said.

In short, no statement from G.H.Q. could dismiss the riderless plane from the minds of the aviators. To them it was no myth, but a grim stark reality which

struck fear into their hearts and put their nerves on edge. It was the subject of every mess, the blight of every binge, and the ruin of every night's sleep. Even the most hardened war birds half believed that the sky was haunted, and when they flew, it was with that timorous overcaution which always means a disadvantage. Consequently enemy squadrons had been scoring as they had never scored before.

And now the Three Mosquitoes were flying their patrol in an area where the riderless plane had often been seen. And all three of them were wondering, as they had wondered these past few days, if they would actually see the weird red craft. Many times Kirby had tried to picture that plane in his mind, but somehow he could never construct a clear or complete picture. He could see the plane itself, with its gaudy red coloring, streaking through the air; but always he saw a pilot, too, hunched up in the cockpit. The moment he tried to take the pilot out he couldn't see the plane flying through the air. It was natural enough, for such a thing was impossible to imagine. He had told himself several times that he didn't believe the riderless plane existed, and yet somewhere within him was a vague cold dread of it. He was like a man who doesn't believe in ghosts, and yet is afraid of them.

Now, as he mechanically led his comrades through the sky, always keeping his eyes alert, he wondered just how he would react if he should really meet this riderless plane. Suppose, for instance, it should suddenly dive out of the sky upon him and his comrades. The thought made him glance upward, apprehensively. Nothing there but blue. Or then again, suppose the riderless plane should appear in the distance and come whizzing straight for them. What would happen? Would they be able to keep their nerve and come to grips with this ghostly machine? He glanced from side to side at his two comrades, glimpsed their tense, goggled faces. He caught their eye then, and they both grinned at him cheerfully, gamely. He grinned back. Yes, they were all right, even though they were slightly worried. Damn it, but it would take more than a riderless plane to daunt the Three Mosquitoes. And anyway it was all the bunk, that vacant, empty ship.

On moved the three Spads, sailing serenely above the blurred relief-map earth. The sky remained infinite and blue, with streaming golden sunshine. The air was still, and the drone of the three engines had a lazy monotonous sound. There was nothing in sight, nothing but empty sky and——

Rat-ta-tat-tat!

The shrill clatter, deafeningly loud in the comparative stillness, almost made Kirby jump out of his skin. It was a full moment before he realized that Shorty Carn had fired that burst from his twin guns. The mild-eyed little Mosquito was waving his arm, pointing excitedly upward and behind. Kirby jerked his head around and looked. A sharp exclamation broke from him.

DOWN FROM THE SUN in whose blinding orb they had been hiding, plunging like plummets with black smoke trailing from their exhaust stacks, came four enemy Pfaltzes. They were diving right upon the tails of the Three Mosquitoes, and even now their Spandau guns stuttered into blazing life, and jagged tongues of flame licked from their muzzles. A stream of tracer drew a smoky line right past Kirby's cockpit and brought a berserk oath from his lips. With his free arm he waved a hasty signal to the two Spads on either side of him, while his hand on the joy-stick moved down to the trigger controls.

Madly, in their usual breathless fashion, the Three Mosquitoes whipped their Spads around in unison, broke apart, and zoomed to face their attackers. At once the riderless plane was forgotten. This was a dogfight now—a dogfight with ordinary enemy planes whose helmeted pilots could be seen protruding from the cockpits. And as soon as they forgot about the riderless plane, the Three Mosquitoes recovered all their former recklessness and devil-may-care spirit. Again they laughed at the odds against them. Four against three, and the four already had the advantage of that surprise dive. But the three had the advantage of being the Three Mosquitoes.

The Pfaltzes had leveled out of their dive now, and were seeking to fasten themselves upon the tails of the Spads. But the Three Mosquitoes, their guns blazing in defiant answer to the enemy's, mixed right in with the Jerries and commenced to weave in and out among them as if in some mad snake dance. Collisions were missed by scant inches. There followed the usual fierce mix-up, with every plane diving, zooming, banking, as it tried to fix its sights on an enemy. Guns stuttered and blazed, motors roared and thundered. The sky, which a moment ago had been so calm and peaceful, was now a churning mass of ships and a riot of noise. The black smoke of exhausts and the yellow-gray smoke of tracers stained the translucent blue. Wings flashed in the sunlight as they banked at incredible

angles. And then, out of all this confusion, one of the Pfaltzes went hurtling earthward like a dead stone, its pilot crumpled by a well-aimed burst from the guns of Travis. The lanky Mosquito had scored.

Three against three now. The inevitable happened. The fight changed from a confused mix-up to an orderly pattern. Planes paired off, choosing partners as if at a dance. Each pair waltzed off by themselves to settle their own private feud. Before he knew it, Kirby had practically lost sight of his two comrades. Dimly he could make out the specks that were their Spads dancing around two other specks that were the two Pfaltzes. He leaned grimly on his controls then, as the clatter of a Spandau rose above him. His own Jerry partner had managed to swing onto his tail. For a moment he heard the ominous tick of bullets through his fuselage. But only for a moment.

"All right, Fritz," he shouted eagerly. "You're asking for it, and you're going to get it."

And with perfect ease he half-rolled out of the German's gun sights, and then whipped around in a skid turn which seemed almost to raise a cloud of dust. The Jerry tried to zoom, but already Kirby, in another half-roll, was on his tail. The Mosquito pressed his triggers, and his guns vibrated and blazed. With grim satisfaction he saw bits of wood and fabric leaping from the Pfaltz' tail assembly. The desperate Jerry tried to Immelmann then, but he was a little too slow. Kirby whipped right around and forced him on the outside arc of the turn. Relentlessly the Mosquito closed in, his guns beating out a steady tattoo.

The Jerry never finished that Immelmann turn. The Pfaltz, caught half-over, staggered drunkenly. A livid tongue of red leaped from its engine, went licking greedily down its fuselage. And in the next instant the Pfaltz was a flaming torch which plunged earthward in a curving trail of dense black smoke.

Grimly Kirby watched it crash, saw a tower of flame and smoke proclaim its landing on the blurred earth below. The true war bird's compassion for a vanquished foe rose to the surface.

"Poor devil," the Mosquito muttered. "But it was either him or me."

He snapped right back to his former hardened self then, pulled up his Spad, and scanned the sky for his comrades. They were nowhere in sight, nor were the two Pfaltzes with whom they had been engaged. He could not find any specks this time. But he was not worried, for he knew Shorty and Travis could handle their fights as well as he had handled his. He'd find

them back at the drome, doubtless. With this thought in mind, he banked over and headed for home. But he had not gone far when there came to his ears a roar so powerful that it almost drowned out the sound of his own motor. The very sky seemed to vibrate with it. Wondering, Kirby looked in the direction from which it seemed to come. And then he was sitting rigid, his nerves stretched taut, while his heart seemed to have stopped beating.

Off to his right, a little below him, shooting through the air like a missile which was headed directly and unwaveringly toward the German lines, was a streaking shape of red. It was a biplane painted a brilliant red from nose to tail. It passed so close that Kirby could see it clearly, and yet it seemed unaware of his presence, for it did not deviate the slightest from its straight and unwavering course. With eyes horribly keen, Kirby took it all in, looked to see if——

The hair seemed to rise beneath his helmet, while a chill sensation of horror drove needles into his spine. He almost stalled the Spad while he kept staring, looking at that incredible sight over and over again, and each time expecting to find that his eyes were deceiving him. But his eyes were not deceiving him.

The cockpit of that all-red plane was empty. The ship was absolutely unoccupied; there was nobody in it. It was flying without a pilot, flying of its own accord. It was the riderless plane!

Kirby scarcely knew what he was doing. Instinct alone guided him, the instinct of a war bird who spies an enemy. Without any hesitation he kicked his rudder, banked around, and then, opening his throttle wide, he went roaring straight after that unoccupied red ship, which by now was miles ahead. He was giving chase to the riderless plane.

All too soon he realized that he might as well have given chase to a rocket. He was hopelessly outdistanced. The red plane, sticking as straight to its course as an arrow, was streaking through the air at a speed which made the record-breaking Spad seem as slow as a snail. The riderless craft was shrinking in size even as Kirby pursued it at breakneck pace. It was growing smaller and smaller in the blue distance. But nevertheless the Mosquito stubbornly refused to give up the chase. Madly he opened his throttle to the very last notch, fed the engine all the gas she could take, until she began to scream in protest.

The Spad literally tore ahead now, every strut vibrating, every wire shrilling its complaint. The wings shook as if the strain must tear them off. The

propeller was totally invisible in its whirling fury. The blast of wind was so terrific that it almost ripped off Kirby's helmet and goggles. And still the red plane was gaining. Still it was constantly widening the gap between the Spad and itself. Soon it was only a red dab against the blue, and the dab was steadily shrinking to a speck.

Cursing this weird machine, which not only flew without a pilot, but flew at a speed which no plane with a pilot had ever attained, Kirby fought anew with his inadequate Spad. He was desperately determined not to let the riderless plane get out of his sight. At least, if he could not come to grips with it, he must see where it went and what it did. He coaxed his Spad on as a jockey coaxes a race horse. He used every trick he knew to make it go still faster. Since he had altitude to spare on the red plane, he declined his nose just a trifle, so that he could harness the power of gravity to pull him ever more swiftly through space. Hellbent, the Spad went racing down this slight incline, threatening at every moment to break to pieces from the strain. And now Kirby's hopes rose. The red dab was still gaining on him, still shrinking in the distance, but it was not gaining so fast now. It would be a long time before it could fade out of his sight.

Without realizing it, Kirby was crossing the lines now. The seething, pockmarked battle front, with its zigzag trenches, was sweeping below him in a smoky panorama. But he did not notice it. He streaked right into Boche land, into enemy sky. He passed straight through the usual storm of anti-aircraft fire without paying any attention to it. All he saw was a distant speck of red which kept drawing him on like a magnet, luring him mile after mile into German territory.

BUT WHILE HE WAS RACING his Spad after that speck, Kirby's mind was not inactive by any means. Having now actually seen the riderless plane, he was trying, with Yankee common sense, to fit some logical explanation to it. The one fact which thus far had impressed itself most strongly on his mind was that the riderless plane stuck to a straight line in its flight, never veering from its course in the lightest degree. Why? That was the question Kirby asked himself while he kept urging more speed out of his protesting ship. Was it that, the riderless plane could only fly in a straight line?

And then, in a sudden lucid flash, it came to him. By God, but he thought he had the solution of this baffling mystery at last. Why, of course, it was simple,

so simple that he wondered why no one had suspected it before.

You could take any decent plane, set its controls in neutral, and under normal conditions it would fly on a straight course, hands off. Given a ship specially designed for this purpose, the thing could be made infallible. Why, then, couldn't a Jerry agent take such a ship up from some secret field in Allied territory, set it heading for the lines at full throttle, and then abandon it with a parachute? The deserted plane would fly straight to Boche land, where it would eventually crash when it ran out of gas. That meant a new ship each time, a ship which somehow had to be delivered from Boche land to the secret field in Allied territory.

The riderless flight could be worked only from the Allied side of the lines to the German, or else the plane would crash in Allied territory, where it would be found and the trick discovered. It seemed extravagant, this constant sacrifice of ships, but the shrewd Germans must have figured that it was well worth their while. The effect of having a plane appear in the air without a pilot would be to terrify the Allies and shatter their morale. And morale was a decisive factor in any war.

As for the incredible speed of the craft, the Germans must have invented some new super engine of revolutionary design. Instead of equipping ordinary planes with this engine—perhaps they could not afford to do so—they were using the motors solely on the ships which took their turn at becoming the riderless plane. In this way they made the riderless craft seem even more uncanny and mysterious. In short, they had spared no effort to make the phenomenon as convincing as possible. A bright red ship which shot through the air at a terrific speed and had no pilot was enough to frighten anyone. And yet, unless Kirby was all wrong, there was nothing at all to be frightened about.

There was just one hitch in his solution, just one loose thread which stubbornly refused to be tied with the rest. How did his theory account for the many victims which the riderless craft was credited with shooting down? The answer was simple; it didn't. But wasn't it possible that these victims had met their fate by some other means, and that the imagination of those who had been unnerved by the actual sight of the riderless plane had done the rest? A rumor had spread, and with each retelling had been more and more exaggerated. The molehill had become a mountain.

Such was Kirby's final conclusion. He was confident now that his explanation was the correct one. A feeling of triumph came over him. Yes, he had solved the mystery. He had discovered the trick which all others had failed to discover. And now, if only he could catch up to that red plane by some miracle, he could prove the thing for certain. If it was just an abandoned plane flying along in neutral, it would be Child's play to shoot it to ribbons.

Again he urged his Spad on, though she was straining in every fiber. Again he peered ahead at that distant red speck, and then his eyes lighted in sudden surprise. By God, he was gaining! Instead of shrinking, that red speck was growing now, growing quite rapidly. He was gaining, and yet he knew he could not be going much faster than he had been going before. The riderless plane must have slowed down. Something must have happened—a missing spark plug, a stoppage in the feed line—any one of a number of things might have caused it to lose its breathless speed. And now, swiftly, Kirby was beginning to creep up on it. Larger and larger it grew, assuming clear shape and outline once more. Kirby kept racing toward it hell-bent, determined to catch up to it swiftly, lest it should suddenly dart forward again.

Presently, when he was at least twenty miles within Bochelant, the riderless plane was looming right before him. There it was, with its incongruously vacant cockpit, still sailing along on a straight line. Kirby sped on. The gap was closing, closing. The Mosquito was already beginning to finger his stick triggers. A tense excitement held him in its grip. His heart was thumping like a sledge hammer.

In spite of his confidence, he remembered all those stories about the riderless plane's gruesome exploits. He became suddenly cautious. He throttled down from his breakneck speed as he drew nearer the tail of the red ship. The riderless craft stuck unwaveringly to its straight course. Kirby began to creep up behind it, at first timidly, then with determination. The bright red tail assembly loomed large and distinct before him. Closer and closer. He leaned forward to his sights. In an other moment he would be in range, in just another moment—

A cry of frenzied terror tore hoarsely from his throat, and his face drained of its blood. He sat back in his cockpit, frozen, aghast, his eyes dilated with unspeakable horror.

For there, before him, he saw the impossible and ghastly miracle take place. He saw one wing of that

red riderless plane suddenly tilt in a bank. He heard its engine roar with sudden deafening power. With a movement that seemed hideously mechanical in its precision, that weird vacant machine swung around in a reinversement. And then, swiftly, inexorably, it came straight toward Kirby.

The Mosquito sat like one paralyzed before this supernatural horror. He made some futile mechanical move of his controls, but only to avoid collision with the red thing which loomed gigantic before him. Then—

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

Good God, they were firing, those twin Spandau guns on the riderless plane! Jagged streaks of flame were belching from them. They were aiming, shooting with no hand at their triggers, with no eye at their sights.

B-r-r-r-rip! The shattering burst of lead through wood and fabric showed that those guns were firing with deadly accuracy! Bullets were pumping into the Spad. In a frenzy of horror, Kirby half-rolled as the infernal machine shot past him in a blurred red streak. It was behind him now, but it was turning again, coming back. God, he must face it, must fight it. But there was something so inevitable in its machinelike approach that Kirby felt helpless in its presence. He was actually dizzy with terror and horror, and his hand on the joystick was clammy and weak. His knees were trembling, and his feet could scarcely move the rudder bar. He was like a bird hypnotized by a cat. He was like a damned kiwi, he who had not flinched from combat with the greatest German aces. But, good Lord, they had been men, not inhuman machines.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! They were firing again, those unmanned guns. *Crash!* The dashboard in front of Kirby became a mass of shattered glass and broken instruments. A bullet ripped through the upturned collar of his teddy-bear, another grazed his cheek and left a searing pain there. God, he was being shot to ribbons. Even now the red thing was banking over his head, to swoop down in a dive that must finish the Spad. Sheer desperation lent Kirby strength, and he pulled up frantically to defend himself. Blindly, crazily, he fired at that red shape. But he was too late.

There came another withering burst of fire from the guns of the riderless plane. The Spad floundered, lurching as if drunk from the bullets which filled it. Kirby was struggling futilely with a joystick gone suddenly limp. He saw the blue sky and the blurred earth incongruously change places, and then he was

hurtling downward in a dizzy screaming tailspin which took the breath from his lungs. Down, down, down, with the Spad twisting and careening in its sickening plunge.

Nausea overcame the Mosquito. He sat weak and helpless in the cockpit while the earth came spinning toward him with breathless rapidity. Vaguely he glimpsed gray-clad figures with coal-scuttle helmets looming below, swarms of them. Then the ground seemed literally to leap up at him. Instinctively his arms flew before his goggled face. There was a rending, shivering crash, a groan of twisting metal, a smashing of wood and a ripping of fabric. Three times the Spad somersaulted over the rough stubble field before it finally came to rest—a pile of crumpled, twisted junk.

Somewhere far above a bright red plane with an empty cockpit streaked away, to vanish in the blue.

THE TRIM *OBERLEUTNANT* stood stiffly before the desk occupied by a stern-visaged *Oberst* of the Imperial army. It was late morning, and the sunlight streamed through the French windows into the spacious room of the captured chateau, which was now German military headquarters.

The *Oberst* was absently ruffling some papers before him. At length he looked up. His tone was curt. "Is he wounded?"

The *Oberleutnant* smiled grimly. "It was really a miracle, *mein Herr Oberst*. His plane crashed to splinters, but he was hardly scratched. We pulled him out of the wreckage, and he was able to stand on his feet immediately."

A slight shadow crossed the *Oberst's* face. "Wasn't he frightened?"

"Ah, yes, indeed, sir," the lieutenant hastened to assure him. "He looked as if he had seen a ghost." His voice filled with awe and reverence. "The red machine must have terrified him."

The *Oberst* leaned back in his chair contentedly. "Bring him in."

"Yes, sir." With a smart salute, the officer turned on his heel and strode swiftly from the room. The *Oberst* thought a moment, then reached for his phone. "Give me two eleven." His fingers drummed impatiently on the desk top. "Hello. Von Steitz?" He leaned forward. "Well, he is alive after all; we have him here. What is that? You will be right over? Oh, do not worry, I shall keep him here. Good-by." He put down the phone, leaned back once more, and waited.

Presently the *Oberleutnant* came back into the

room, stood by the door, and barked out an order. Two sturdy infantrymen with coal-scuttle helmets and bayoneted rifles marched in. Behind them, followed immediately by two more burly guards, his shoulders slouched and his face still drawn and pale from his ghastly experience, came Kirby. An ugly scratch still bled on the cheek where that bullet had grazed him. Otherwise he was unscathed. But his nerves were raw. He could not shake the horror of that diabolical plane from his mind.

They brought him up to the desk. Two of the Boche soldiers stood guard at the door of the room. The other two took positions at the big French windows. The lieutenant remained beside Kirby, covering the Mosquito with a long-barreled Luger. There was no possible escape. A false move would be absolute suicide.

The *Oberst's* keen eyes appraised the prisoner before him. His English was precise but slightly metallic. "What squadron are you from?"

A look of sullen defiance came over Kirby's features. "None of your damned business," he grated.

The *Oberst's* eyes narrowed dangerously. His voice was as cold as steel. "Let me warn you that it will go better with you if you answer my questions. As it is, you are lucky to be alive. Now will you tell me the number of your squadron?"

"The only thing I'll tell you," Kirby blazed, "is to go straight to hell."

An angry growl broke from the watching *Oberleutnant*, and his Luger came up menacingly. But the *Oberst* waved him off. There was a tolerant smile on the high officer's lips. "I see that you are in an overwrought condition, so I shall not press you now." He gave a grim chuckle. "Our little red machine must have unnerved you, indeed."

"Yeah?" Kirby spoke with hot defiance. He was not going to give these Germans any satisfaction if he could help it. "Do you think that fool thing frightened me?" he snorted contemptuously. "If that's your idea—trying to scare us with some tricky contraption—you might as well quit. You'll never win the war that way."

The *Oberst* sighed wearily. "Typical Yankee bluff. But a few months in a prison camp ought to take that out of you."

Kirby winced. Prison camp! For the first time since his ghastly crash, the realization that he was a captive far within enemy lines struck home to him. God, he was out of the war now, he was through.

"Of course," the colonel went on, pursing his lips,

“there are several kinds of prison camps. Some are really terrible, but some are not bad at all. Prisoners who willingly answer our questions seldom find their internment uncomfortable. But prisoners who are insolent, stubborn and——” He broke off, for at this moment a newcomer suddenly entered the room. The *Oberst* rose from his desk, a smile of welcome spreading over his stern face. “*Wie geht’s*, von Steitz? I hardly expected you to arrive so quickly.”

“I did not have to come far and I hurried,” was the reply, spoken in a voice high-pitched and almost staccato. Kirby regarded the newcomer, who was also a colonel but who wore the insignia of the Imperial flying corps. He was a little undersized man with a hawklike face and beady greenish eyes in which Kirby could read cunning and cruelty. One look at this von Steitz, and the Mosquito hated his guts. He didn’t have the slightest idea who the man was, or what he did, but he was certain that this little hawk-faced runt was a vicious, scheming devil.

“Ah, so this is the prisoner.” The cruel eyes pierced Kirby with their gaze. The little Boche made an exaggerated bow, and a smile which was really a sneer came over his thin lips. He spoke flawless English. “Good day, Captain Kirby.” The Mosquito started in surprise. “Oh, do not be alarmed. I knew you the moment I saw the insignia on your Spad. For though you may not believe it, I am the man who brought you down.”

Kirby stared at him with wide-eyed incredulity. “You?”

“Yes, I!” The high-pitched voice filled with boatsful triumph. “Sitting in a captive balloon, miles away, I operated the controls and the guns of the machine which caused your downfall.”

A tight sensation seemed to close around Kirby’s collar. “You mean to say that——”

“Surprised, my friend?” sneered the little man. “It never occurred to you that such a thing could be done, did it? You and your numskulled countrymen, and all the rest! Where are your brains? We Germans are centuries ahead of you in the realm of science. While you have been fighting your trivial battles over pieces of ground, we have been perfecting inventions which will wipe you off the face of the earth.” His voice was shrill and piercing. His gloating face was like that of some leering demon’s, and a fanatical gleam was in his beady eyes. “We Germans, we alone could produce a plane which is worked by——”

“Von Steitz, are you mad?” In alarm the *Oberst* at

the desk held up a restraining hand. The *Oberleutnant* and the four Boche soldiers also looked worried. “Are you not making a grave mistake telling this enemy prisoner secrets which——”

Von Steitz laughed recklessly. “Let him know,” he said in English. “Let all of them know. It is my own invention, and I am not afraid that it will be copied. They could never fathom its secret; they are too dense, too far behind us. Tell them, so that they can see they have no chance against us. Listen, swine”——he thrust his gloating face up beneath Kirby’s——“listen, and learn. The plane which shot you down,” he shrilled, “was controlled by wireless.”

Kirby stood thunderstruck, while unbelief changed slowly to awe on his features. Wireless——so that was it, that was the explanation of this incredible thing.

“You couldn’t do it,” he protested furiously. “You couldn’t control a plane by wireless. That’s impossible.”

“Impossible?” A triumphant cackle broke from the little man. “That just shows what an ignorant swine you are. You cannot even conceive of such a thing. But it is true. Every movement that plane made was controlled from a station miles away. All over we have our control stations, in captive balloons, so that one of us can always see the plane in every detail through our glasses, and control it.”

His fanatical enthusiasm seemed to be carrying him away; he could not seem to stop talking on his one favorite subject. And yet somehow Kirby felt that the shrewd little man was well aware of all he was saying, and that his scientific but simple explanation was aimed directly at his Yankee listener.

“This is how we control the red machine. In our station in the basket of a captive balloon, we operate a regular joystick, rudder bar, and throttle. The maneuvers are transmitted by electricity to the wireless station, which converts them into wireless impulses and sends them over the ether. My secret receiving apparatus in the wireless plane simply picks up these impulses, and the controls respond just as if the operator were sitting in the ship. In other words, each move the operator makes from his balloon is duplicated by the controls of the plane. And no pilot could fly with such mathematical precision because he cannot watch himself fly, while we who control the wireless plane can always watch the maneuvers and perfect them.”

HE PAUSED, but only for breath. Kirby stood spellbound, breathlessly absorbed in this amazing

story. The stern *Oberst* at the desk shifted uneasily, while the Boche soldiers tried in vain to conceal their restlessness.

"Look," von Steitz went on, addressing Kirby more personally, "I will give you an example. To-day you were foolish enough to try to follow our wireless plane. It so happened, that we knew the gas was beginning to run low on our ship, so we were bringing it directly home."

Kirby cursed under his breath. "And I was thinking," he mused aloud, "that because it was flying in a straight line, it was just a plane which had been deliberately abandoned."

"A sad mistake—for you," sneered von Steitz, and then resumed his narrative. "We were bringing the red machine back as fast as we could. At first the operators in the balloons near the Front had to take it, but finally, as it got farther within our lines, it came to be my turn at the controls. Need I tell you that unless I had desired it, you would never have come near our plane, because it is equipped with a special secret motor of a new design?"

"But I saw you, and since by beloved plane was already safe in our territory, I decided it would be worth risking a dry gas tank to shoot down the leader of the Three Mosquitoes. So I reduced the throttle on the plane. I waited until I saw you catching up to the red machine. Then, watching carefully, I put my controls through all the maneuvers. The plane responded perfectly, as I think you will agree. I might add that, having been an ace in the flying corps before I turned to this new work, I am well equipped to put a plane through any encounter, even from a distance. In fact, all the operators of the red machine are former aces; that is the first and chief requisite."

Kirby shook his head. Good God, what devil was this hawk-faced genius who could invent such a device? The thing was absolutely staggering, so staggering that he couldn't swallow it yet. He tried with all his skill to pick flaws.

"But those guns!" he argued. "How could you aim and fire them so accurately?"

"By wireless, of course," von Steitz answered, as though the question were absurd. "Didn't I tell you that all the controls are worked in the same manner? I simply pressed the gun triggers in my balloon."

"But, damn it," Kirby insisted, "you can't tell me that you can aim guns with such accuracy sitting in a balloon miles away. That couldn't be done."

"Nevertheless, it was done," von Steitz boasted;

but then he became suddenly reticent. "And I have explained all I intend to. You don't expect me to betray the details of my secret, do you? There is far more to it than you will ever know. I have told you enough."

"And in my opinion," the *Oberst* at the desk chimed in, in German, "it has been far too much."

Von Steitz ignored the pointed remark. "Well," he was asking Kirby, "are you convinced now? Do you realize that you are trying to fight a war against the greatest scientists in the world?" Again he took to gloating. Again his voice rose shrilly. "Soon whole squadrons, mighty fleets of wireless planes, will be turned loose against our accursed enemies. We will wipe Paris and London off the map. We will shoot down every flyer you have, and though we may lose some of our wonderful ships, we will never lose a single man. Lives are not cheap, but machines can always be sacrificed. That is why you will have no chance against us. That is why you will come groveling to us on your knees, imploring us for peace. That is why," he ended on a shrill note of maniacal triumph, "the Kaiser and German *Kultur* will rule the world."

A ghastly shudder passed through Kirby as he saw all too clearly the vivid picture von Steitz' gloating words had described. Fleets of wireless planes, machines which would move relentlessly and feelingless through the sky, to scatter their mechanical destruction among human beings and then a sudden overwhelming rage surged in the Mosquito, and his face crimsoned. He had all he could do to restrain himself from leaping upon this cruel-eyed little fiend, to keep from bashing in that gloating, sneering face, despite the presence of all these watching and armed Boche. The words poured from his lips in a hot torrent.

"Damn you, you dirty Boche skunks!" he burst out. "You with your poison gases and your infernal machines. Why don't you fight a war cleanly, instead of with a lot of rotten inhuman contraptions?"

The Germans in the room all stiffened angrily; all save the sneering von Steitz, who smiled a smug complacent smile. "The time has not yet come," he remarked coolly, "when a Yankee can tell us how to fight the war."

"But the time will come," Kirby prophesied furiously. "Wait and see. If you can make a wireless plane, the Allies can make them, too. The only reason we haven't resorted to such dirty tactics——"

"——is that you haven't the brains!" von Steitz finished, with gibing mockery. "And now let me tell

you something else. Thus far, our wireless plane has frightened our accursed enemies more than it has hurt them. They are terrified by the mere sight of a ship flying without a pilot. Which is bad, believe it or not." His eyes lit up with cruel anticipation. "We are going to try a little experiment. We are going to send out the red machine with a pilot visible in its cockpit, so that our enemies will think it is just an ordinary plane, and will be caught unawares.

"Of course," he went on, in the most casual manner, "we could not use a German for such a purpose. After all, the man might be killed—which, of course, wouldn't affect the plane in the slightest. But it wouldn't do at all. No, no, we could not use a German pilot." He paused significantly, and a cold apprehension began to chill Kirby to the very marrow, while an indescribable fear clutched at his heart.

Von Steitz turned abruptly to the stern colonel at the desk. "*Herr Oberst*," he stated crisply, "as I told you over the telephone, I wish to take charge of this prisoner. I shall take him with me now."

The *Oberst* nodded. "Just as you please, von Steitz. You have full authority. But don't lose him."

"Never fear." Von Steitz' little green eyes flickered like those of a snake. "I shall turn him in when I am through with him, dead or alive!" He wheeled upon the *Oberleutnant*, who stiffened to instant attention. "Escort the prisoner out. Follow me."

DESPERATELY, like a furtive animal in a trap, Kirby looked about for one loophole, one desperate means of escape from the nameless horror he sensed was in store for him. But it was hopeless. Already the four husky Boche soldiers were flanking him on all sides, and the lieutenant, pointing his Luger at the Mosquito, was commanding officiously, "March, swine!"

Resignedly, Kirby walked with his escort out through the door, von Steitz leading the way. The little party emerged from the chateau into the brilliant sunshine outside. On the road before the entrance of the building a staff car stood idling, an alert chauffeur at its wheel and two armed officers in the rear. Von Steitz barked out an order, and Kirby was forced to climb into the back seat between these two officers, who instantly covered him with their Lugers. Von Steitz then dismissed the lieutenant and the four privates, and climbed into the front of the car beside the chauffeur. The hawk-faced little man gave another order. Before Kirby knew what was happening, a band of cloth was drawn tightly across his face, and he was blindfolded.

"Now, swine," the cold voice of von Steitz ordered, "sit still. Do not move. You are covered from every possible angle."

Helpless and blind, the Mosquito had no choice but to obey. He could feel the cold hard muzzles of the two officers' Lugers poking into his body from either side. He leaned back weakly in the seat, as the staff car moved forward with a sudden jerk. The Mosquito heard its gears mesh into second and high, and then felt the machine speeding and bumping along the road. His captors were all silent; not a word was spoken. Minutes passed, and vaguely Kirby wondered where they were going. Now and then he was thrown roughly against one of the men on either side of him, as the car lurched around a curve the blindfolded Mosquito could not see.

At last the car seemed to be slowing down. Then it commenced to bounce and lurch violently, and Kirby surmised that it had left the highway and was moving over rough ground. Abruptly, with a slight squeaking of brakes, the machine came to a stop. And then once more Kirby heard the crisp voice of von Steitz.

"Keep your hands at your sides, my friend. Do not touch your blindfold. We are going to help you out. Watch for the step, now." As he spoke, the two Boche officers were assisting Kirby out of the car, each of them gripping him firmly by the arm. The Mosquito's foot faltered from the running board, found the ground at last, and he stepped down. "All right," came von Steitz' voice. "Walk!"

Blindly, Kirby stumbled over the rough ground, where he thought he could feel grass and weeds. He tripped and would have fallen several times, had not the two Boche officers jerked him roughly up by the arms. After several minutes of this blind stumbling progress, the party halted. Kirby was certain he heard a door being opened, and as he was steered forward once more he sensed that he was entering some kind of building. He felt the hard smoothness of a wood floor beneath him, and then once more he was drawn to a halt. Von Steitz' voice came from directly in front of him now, and blindfolded though he was, the Mosquito could mentally see the little sneering man before him.

"And now, my friend, I must bid you farewell. I go to control station number ten, which is the one nearest the battle lines. I shall not forget you, my friend." He gave a shrill mocking laugh which made Kirby's blood run cold. "Bon voyage."

Kirby heard his footsteps move swiftly away, heard

the door close behind him. Then the men who still covered the Mosquito were forcing him to move once more. He stumbled on some steps, and was half lifted and half pushed down them. At length they had reached the bottom of the stairway, and Kirby heard the unmistakable groan of a ponderous metal door being opened. A sudden rough shove sent him stumbling into foul musty air which had a chill dampness to it. He got his footing on what seemed to be a stone floor, just as the door closed behind him with a dull reverberating slam. A bolt clicked into its place.

He seemed to be alone and free to move. At once his hands reached for the cloth which covered his eyes. He ripped off the blindfold, and then found to his horror that he was still blind. He could not see. It was a full moment before he realized that his eyes were all right, that he was just standing in pitch darkness. Cautiously he started to move around, groping through the blackness. He could hardly breathe in the dank foul air. His head brushed through cobwebs, and twice he bumped against low wooden rafters. Presently he came to a wall of jagged stone. He touched it. Something whisked across his hand and scurried across the floor— a rat. He followed the stone wall around and came to the door. It was of solid iron. He could not budge it.

He was evidently in the cellar of the building, and the Boche had made the place as impenetrable as a prison. In vain Kirby groped around for some passage of escape. There was no way out. And finally, tired and sick from the bad air, he sat down on a rude wooden box in the center of the place. Rats scampered around him in the darkness, but he ignored them. He was far too worried to think of anything but the future. What was going to happen? Why were they keeping him here?

Time dragged endlessly. Was it one hour or two? The suspense grew more and more nerve-racking. Kirby rose from his box and walked up and down like a restless animal in a cage, ducking to keep from bumping his head against those rafters. Damn it, if only he had a cigarette—anything to relieve the strain of waiting. But the Boche had taken his cigarettes, they had left nothing on him. He tried to divert himself by thinking back over the past. His mind went to his two comrades, and a wave of homesickness swept him. Shorty and Travis! God, it seemed like ages ago when he had led them into that dogfight, and yet it could not have been more than a few hours. How had they made out with those two Pfaltzes? Had they got safely back

to the drome? Of course they had! They could take care of themselves all right. They——

His thoughts were cut short by a sudden thunderous roar which penetrated even this thick-walled cellar. The very building seemed to shake on its foundations. Then the roar became a series of raucous barks and coughs, and Kirby knew that somewhere out side an airplane engine was being revved. He listened with expert ears, until the motor died to a steady idling purr which he could scarcely hear. The Jerries were warming up a plane, getting it ready for——

The bolt in the door clicked once more. There was a creak of rusty hinges, and then a shaft of light slowly widened as it came through the opening door. The vague bulks of four men loomed in the doorway. They came in, one of them carrying a lantern whose pale glow grotesquely revealed the dusty rafters and jagged walls of the bare cellar. Again Kirby found himself covered by ugly gleaming Lugers. Again he was blindfolded. Then he was forced into some kind of heavy coat. He could feel a fur collar on his neck. Something! soft was pulled down over his head and strapped beneath his chin. The blindfold was rearranged to pass outside this headgear. The Mosquito was marched out through the door and up those steps. A moment later he was gratefully gulping lungfuls of the fresh outdoor air. The throbbing purr of the airplane engine was clear and distinct now. It seemed quite close.

Once more they were pushing and dragging him over rough ground. The sound of the airplane engine began to grow louder, louder. It was coming closer. Its throbbing beat seemed to blend with the throbbing beat of Kirby's pulses. A feeling of panic was slowly coming over the Mosquito, and he fought down a wild reckless impulse to try to break from his captors and flee. It was no use; again he saw the utter futility of such a move. Before he could even rip off his blindfold, one of those Lugers that pressed so viciously against his body would be fired. He had to go on, had to let them lead him along.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of that engine, until it seemed to be right in Kirby's ears. He was halted then. And the next thing he knew, strong arms were seizing him bodily and lifting him upward. He struggled instinctively but futilely. He was plopped roughly into some kind of seat, and a strap was drawn tightly around his waist. His arms were jerked forcibly to either side, and on either side two cold hard bands snapped his wrists down securely. He could not move.

He felt the cloth on his eyes being loosened. It was ripped off, and the sudden brilliant flood of sunshine dazzled him. But before he could see, something was pulled down in place of that blindfold, and he knew at once what it was because he was so accustomed to its cool pressure—a pair of goggles.

He blinked his eyes behind the lenses and found sight at last. In one swift comprehensive glance he took in his surroundings.

Dressed in a full flying outfit, he was sitting in the cockpit of an airplane whose propeller turned lazily in front of him. His wrists were clamped to either side of the cockpit by curved steel bands which seemed to be fastened to the cowling itself. The usual safety strap was the only other thing which bound him, but it was enough. He could move only his feet and head.

He regarded the cockpit in which he sat. It was a strange cockpit—strange because of its utter bareness. There were no controls in it, and there was no dashboard. Just the cushioned seat to which Kirby was strapped, and a windshield. But in front of the windshield, in their usual place, were two fixed forward machine guns which glistened in the early afternoon sunlight.

He seemed to be utterly alone; there were no signs of the men who had brought him here. The plane was standing at the end of a small and rather rough field, surrounded by a dense woods. A secret field, all right. Somewhere in the trees Kirby could make out the dim outlines of a small cottage, and he knew that it must be the building he had come from. His captors had probably darted back into the house before he had had time to see them.

The Mosquito's eyes now roved over the plane itself, from its churning propeller, down past the rugged contours of its powerful engine, down past its sturdy yet graceful wings, to its birdlike tail. It was a small and speedy-looking scout plane, and it was painted a pure and brilliant red.

It was the riderless plane.

KIRBY CLOSED HIS EYES as a slow wave of horror went coursing through him. The thing he had dreaded and yet hoped against was a hideous reality. Von Steitz was carrying out his cruel threat. The merciless little fiend was putting a pilot in the red machine.

The idea of being strapped in this infernal machine whose controls were worked by wireless drove Kirby into a frenzy. He writhed frantically in the seat to which he was bound, and his wrists tugged and jerked

to free themselves. But the steel bands only dug cruelly into his flesh. He kicked with his feet like an infuriated child, and stamped wildly on the flooring. But it was futile, absolutely futile. As if mocking his efforts, the propeller continued to turn over lazily, and the motor kept up its idle puttering.

At length, exhausted and panting, he sat still. And as he sat there, something suddenly caught his eye—something in the sunny blue above the surrounding forest.

Like some immense sausage, a captive balloon floated lazily from its cable, swaying gently with the breeze. And Kirby remembered the gloating words of von Steitz. "All over we have our control stations in captive balloons." This must be one of them.

The red machine continued to stand idling. Kirby sat waiting, helpless and in nerve-racking suspense. A minute passed, and another. God, but it was lonely here, all alone in this infernal machine.

And then, suddenly, from the basket of that captive balloon, there popped a flaming red rocket which went streaking across the sky. Kirby saw it clearly. Clearly, too, he saw the answering red rocket which shot up right from that dim building in the trees. A signal! Did it mean——

The shattering roar of the engine in front of him almost burst his eardrums. There came a blast of wind which flogged his goggled face and sent his fur collar flying backward. He felt the machine in which he was bound tremble like a live thing from nose to tail. Black smoke belched from its exhaust stacks. Its wings rocked. It began to move. It was bounding forward. A sense of utter helplessness overcame Kirby as he was borne relentlessly across the rough field, faster and faster. Again he struggled wildly, futilely. His muscles involuntarily tried to function as they would if he were a pilot in a moving plane. He could not move his hands, but his feet were jammed against the floorboard as they would be jammed against a rudder bar. His legs were as tense as steel. As if he could have the slightest influence over a machine which was controlled from a captive balloon!

Faster, ever faster now. The rush of Wind became terrific. The plane stopped bouncing, and its wheels began to skim smoothly over the field. Slowly, inexorably, the tail behind Kirby lifted, and his cockpit rose like a seesaw to a level position. The plane was leaving the ground and sweeping into the air.

Kirby was more scared than a novice on his first flight. He felt a sinking sensation in the pit of

his stomach as he saw the ground rapidly receding beneath him, saw the tree tops whisk past and seem to just miss the undercarriage. He felt giddy as the red machine's nose lifted abruptly and pointed toward the sunny blue at a sickening angle. Up, up shot the little plane in a roaring, breathtaking climb, higher and higher. Below now, and off to the right, Kirby saw that captive balloon once more. With an uncanny shiver he imagined a man sitting in that basket, operating a joystick, rudder bar, and throttle, every move of which was magically translated into action by this incredible plane. Even now the red machine was straightening out, and this time Kirby saw its elevator fin move weirdly and mechanically, as if of its own accord. A second later, the ailerons above him swung slowly on their hinges, and again he felt that horrible sinking sensation as the machine careened in a sharp bank. It swung around, and then at terrific speed it headed straight for the lines. The red machine was off—off with a Yankee war bird helplessly bound in its cockpit.

Hurling through the air as if carried by a projectile, deafened by the ear-splitting noise of the engine, and numbed by the terrific blast of wind, Kirby wondered vaguely whether he wasn't in the throes of some lurid nightmare from which he must soon gratefully awake. Was it possible that he could actually be imprisoned in this fantastic machine which obeyed the will of an operator miles away? And yet it could not be a dream; it was all too real, too vivid in every detail. Even now Kirby could pick out the familiar smoky terrain of the Front, looming from the distance—looming swiftly, for the red machine was chewing up the miles in no time.

Another captive balloon suddenly swung into view, off to the left. This was the only one in sight now, and again Kirby remembered von Steitz' words. "I go to control station number ten, which is the one nearest the battle lines." The crafty little fiend must be in this balloon. He must be taking over the controls of the red machine even now. The Mosquito shuddered. God, he was at von Steitz' mercy, and he knew that von Steitz was absolutely merciless.

On, on streaked the red plane, hell-bent. And soon it was whizzing right over the Front, and the seething battlefield was slipping past beneath it. Again the zigzag cuts of trenches below. The red machine was crossing the lines. Allied sky now!

Below was friendly ground, but it was of no help to Kirby now. On the contrary, it began to send scores of anti-aircraft shells in his direction. The white bursts

which distinguished the Allied arches from the black of the Jerry shells filled the sky. But none of them came anywhere near the darting, streaking red plane which sailed right on unperturbed. Deeper into the Allied lines now. On and on, farther and farther, until——

Kirby's heart leaped to his throat as the nose of the plane took an unexpected sickening plunge. The red machine went into a screaming, roaring dive that seemed to leave Kirby's insides behind. The plane seemed to plunge so fast that the Mosquito's body could not keep up with it, and he was being dragged along. The rush of wind almost knocked him senseless, and he lost his breath. His ears buzzed, and the air seemed to push their drums inward. Down, down, down, dropping like a stone. Below, the earth was looming up in a vague blur, and then the blur suddenly cleared, and a column of moving khaki on a road came into focus. A cry of horrified alarm broke from Kirby's throat. Doughboys! His own countrymen. The red machine was diving straight for them.

"No!" the Mosquito gasped hoarsely, frenziedly. "No, you don't. No—no!"

Again he was straining madly against the bonds which held him. Again his feet were jamming against the floorboard, and he was trying to jerk his wrists free. But the bands of steel only cut deeper into his flesh, and ironically, the more he struggled to get out of them, the more tightly they secured him, for his raw wrists grew swollen beneath the clamps. And now that column of doughboys was directly below, coming up with a rush, so close now that Kirby could see the men clearly, with their tin hats, their shouldered rifles. Simultaneously the doughboys saw the plane swooping upon them like a monstrous hawk. Confusion. The column broke up. The terrified men hurled themselves to the ground. They——

Kirby actually screamed as the twin guns in front of his face blazed into sudden shrill life. Helplessly he saw them vibrating before him, saw the belts of ammunition passing swiftly into their feed blocks. The red machine, coming out of its dive with a roaring lurch, went streaking right along the road over that mass of khaki figures, sending a deadly rain of tracers down upon them. Anguished sobs tore from Kirby as he saw doughboys leap upward, clutch wildly at the air, and fall inert! Some of the Yanks were trying gamely to fire rifles and revolvers at the red monster above, but their bullets went hopelessly amiss. Relentlessly the red machine roared all the way down the line, scattering its

terrible destruction, killing, wounding, maiming. And all the time Kirby writhed futilely in the red plane's cockpit, the tears streaming down his face and his features contorted with agony and horror.

AT LAST it was over. The red machine had reached the end of the column, leaving a score of victims in its wake. With a triumphant roar the red plane streaked upward in a long breathless zoom. And Kirby, beside himself, jerked his head back toward the German lines, back where a captive balloon was still clearly visible as it swung against the blue. The Mosquito's face turned livid, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

"Damn you, von Steitz," he shrieked at that sausagelike shape, "you'll pay for this! God!" The veins swelled on his forehead, threatening to burst. "If I could only get my hands on you, you dirty little rat, I'd break you in two. I'd smash every bone in your body."

As if in mock answer to this threat, the red machine whipped around in a sweeping breathless bank, straightened out, and headed full speed for a new objective.

About a mile or so ahead was an Allied captive balloon. It was a French "cow," so called because of the peculiar udderlike underpart of its hydrogen filled envelope. The red machine went speeding toward it. The frantic Mosquito's left foot pressed so violently against the floorboard that he almost cracked the wood. Again he was instinctively pressing an imaginary rudder bar, trying vainly to steer the red machine away from that balloon. But the red machine went right on. And in just another moment, having climbed at a slight angle into the concealing eye of the sun, it was directly above the cow.

Kirby could see the balloon below in every detail, see its swinging basket with the tiny figures of the two French observers, see its cable running down to the winch on a crowded truck. And then again the breath was ripped from the Mosquito's lungs as the red machine plunged once more into a screaming power dive. Down it shot, straight and true, for the cow. Swiftly the gray bulk of the vulnerable envelope loomed before Kirby's wide horrified eyes. Again the Mosquito writhed and cursed and sobbed. Again the steel bands dug excruciatingly into his swollen bleeding wrists.

But this time the red machine did not attack without meeting resistance. The Frenchman below had caught sight of the diving plane now, and they sprang into instant action. At once the balloon began to

descend, as they pulled down the cable with surprising rapidity. And at the same time a score of guns opened up on the ground and commenced blazing away for all they were worth. Anti-aircrafts coughed, and the coughs were punctured by the shrill clatter of machine guns and pom-poms. Bullets began to whine about Kirby's ears, unhealthily close. A shell burst to his right, and its showering shrapnel fell just short of his cockpit. For one wild moment he prayed that this infernal machine would be hit and disabled, even though he'd have to go with it. But he knew only too well that it was more likely they'd get him and not the plane, which would do no good.

Heedless and indifferent, the red machine plunged right through that blazing barrage. Kirby's teeth clenched fiercely. What did von Steitz care? He wasn't risking his own dirty hide; he was only risking a machine which he could probably duplicate easily enough, and a Yankee pilot. And yet Kirby was borne down through that maelstrom of lead unscathed. Down, down, until the top surface of the descending balloon loomed gigantic before his eyes, a blur of gray.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Again those guns in front of him set up their infernal clatter. Again he saw them vibrate, saw the flame leaping from their muzzles. Down streaked the smoky lines of tracer. Straight and true they went into the soft vulnerable surface of that balloon. And leveling off, the red machine raked the whole top surface of that cow with burst upon burst.

A spurt of livid flame burst from the gray surface, spread with terrible rapidity, and then rose up in a tremendous conflagration as the highly inflammable hydrogen was set off. Dense clouds of black smoke rolled in great waves from the balloon, which slowly crumpled. From the basket two figures went catapulting grotesquely into space, until two white mushrooms spread out over their heads and they were drifting slowly down on their parachutes. But not for long. To Kirby's anguished despair, the flaming balloon, falling with ever-increasing speed, dropped down right on top of those two parachutes, and the two Frenchmen were swallowed in its blazing midst.

Again the red machine was zooming triumphantly away, zooming safely out of the anti-aircraft fire, and then, down from the clear sky, down in a sweeping graceful dive, came a speedy little French Nieuport. Evidently the French pilot had seen the destruction of the balloon, and now he was determined to avenge his countrymen. Down he swooped, hell-bent. And at the sight of the trim Nieuport with its red-white-and-blue

circular markings, Kirby could not suppress a hoarse cheer. He forgot momentarily that he was in the red machine. He only knew that something was being done at last, some attempt was being made to crush this infernal mechanical monster.

Then the Frenchman's guns ripped out a shrill shattering burst, and a line of tracer streaked so close past Kirby that he could hear the whistle of the bullets. The Mosquito's momentary elation turned to panicky alarm. God, the Frenchman was aiming deliberately at him! It was natural, since one always tried to aim at the pilot of the plane; for if you hit the pilot, the job was done. But not in this case. Not here, where the pilot was only a decoration, a live dummy.

The red machine did a sudden half-roll which made Kirby's stomach swing as if on a pendulum. Like an elusive eel, the red plane slid right out of the descending Frenchman's sights, and circled away. But it circled slowly, and the roar of its motor lowered to a drone that was only half as loud. At first Kirby wondered at this, but then the realization came to him, hideously. Von Steitz, that scheming devil, was luring his victim on, drawing him into a fatal trap. He was trying to assure the Frenchman that this was just an ordinary plane, no better than the Nieuport. And the Frenchman was assured; though he saw an all-red plane, he saw a pilot in its cockpit. That was enough. Unafraid, he circled right after the red machine, the wolf in sheep's clothing.

"Look out, you fool!" Kirby screamed out, jerking his head furiously around until he could see the Frenchman's eager goggled face. "Look out, for God's sake! Keep away!"

But the unsuspecting Frenchman did not hear, nor did he see the Mosquito's frantic ashen features. He came right on. Cruelly, teasingly, the red machine kept circling away. The Nieuport followed. Around and around they went, like two puppies chasing after each other's tails. High in the blue, their flashing wings tilted in a perpetual bank, they played their ring around a rosy, the one with an eager Frenchman in its cockpit, the other with a helpless fettered Yank who writhed vainly and shouted futile warnings.

The red machine at first kept the Nieuport directly on the opposite diameter of the circle, and thus neither could bring their fixed forward guns to bear. The Frenchman strained his engine in his effort to gain, and tried to creep up on the red plane's tail. And then again the cunning crafty operator of the red machine lured his victim on. The red plane deliberately slowed

down still more, and the Nieuport was gaining, creeping up around the circle, nearer and nearer now. The Frenchman, convinced that he had his victim cold, was already leaning eagerly to his sights. Kirby, straining his neck as he twisted his head around, yelled at the top of his lungs, yelled wildly, frantically, "Look out, you idiot! Look out or——"

EVEN BEFORE HE COULD FINISH his shrill warning, the engine of the red machine burst once more into its deafening, full-throated thunder. And taking the Frenchman completely by surprise, the red plane literally leaped around that circle and came up right on the Nieuport's tail. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* For the third time the guns in front of Kirby were vibrating and blazing, and the Mosquito winced as if their bullets had hit him instead of the Nieuport. He saw the tracers tearing right into the French plane, saw the Nieuport's tail assembly fly into a thousand pieces. The French machine twisted and writhed like an animal in a trap as the bullets kept ripping into it. The Mosquito had to close his eyes; he was unable to endure the gruesome spectacle. When next he looked the Nieuport, shot to ribbons, its pilot stretched out limp and stiff in the cockpit, was plunging earthward to crash in a heap of shattering debris.

The red machine streaked calmly and speedily away, while Kirby once more screamed and sobbed curses at that German captive balloon—which was still clearly visible in the distant sky—and at the cruel fiend who was conducting this orgy of horror and destruction. The Mosquito's face was bathed in perspiration, despite the chilling blast of the wind. He was weak from the rending emotions which had passed through him in successive waves. Again he had the feeling that this must all be some hideous dream. But God, if it were a dream, why didn't it end? Why was he still bound helplessly in this demon plane which kept streaking through the air?

Suddenly he noticed that the red machine had slowed down once more from its wild speed. It was high in the sun now, and it was moving along at a leisurely pace. Why? With his heart full of fearful misgiving, Kirby twisted his head and looked all around. Nothing. He strained his neck and leaned over the cockpit, peering down. Then he drew in his breath sharply.

At least two thousand feet below, moving smoothly and serenely through the air in a graceful V-shaped formation, were five British Camels. The red machine was trailing them directly above, concealed from their

view by the blinding orb of the sun. It was trailing them like a buzzard. It was waiting, watching patiently.

The white-faced Mosquito moaned. He knew only too well what was coming, though he prayed fervently that it would not happen. God, if only those Britishers were aware of the sinister monster which lurked above them! Again Kirby screamed out futile warnings. "Look out! Look out—watch your formation. Stick close together, for God's sake!"

But the British planes did not look out. Carelessly they sailed along. The red machine kept trailing them patiently. Kirby's nerves stretched to the snapping point. God, what agony, to sit up here in this diabolical machine while it lurked above an unsuspecting Allied squadron! The Mosquito felt that he must go mad. His teeth clenched, and his muscles heaved and strained anew. If only he could do something, anything to thwart von Steitz' bloody machinations.

And then, just as Kirby had feared, the British squadron below began to lose its tight and perfect formation. Its pilots grew more and more careless as they saw no battle in sight. They did not bother to keep their exact positions, and the V shifted grotesquely and became sloppy and lopsided. The Camel on its right rear end fell back a full hundred feet from the rest. And then——

Like a hawk after a chicken the red machine swooped. It all happened with such breathless swiftness that Kirby could only follow it vaguely. He saw a Camel loom gigantic below him, heard the clattering burst of the guns in front of his face, and then saw the British plane twisting and careening earthward in a mass of flames. The rest of the Britishers wheeled around furiously to attack the enemy craft which had picked off their right-end man. For a moment the air was full of planes, darting and racing. But before they could fire a shot, the red machine zoomed out of their midst at such a speed that none could follow it. It left them miles behind and below, as it straightened out and again went streaking triumphantly through the air.

Kirby, sobbing with frenzy, wondered how he had been able to go through this whole frightful escapade without cracking. Von Steitz, as if boastfully showing off his marvelous machine, had put the red plane through a complete repertoire. He had divided its rampage among the Americans, French, and British. It had ground- strafed, balloon- strafed, shot down one plane in combat, and picked off another from the rear of a formation. Certainly now the bloody exhibition

must be over. By this time the red machine ought to be running short of gas and ammunition, and even if it wasn't, von Steitz must be satisfied with his little experiment. He had successfully tried out the red machine with a pilot visible in its cockpit. Now, surely, he would call it a day and bring Kirby to earth again, and though it would be German earth and a prison camp, the Mosquito would welcome it.

But Kirby, though he had judged von Steitz the most vicious of scoundrels, had underestimated the extent of the German's demoniac cruelty. For von Steitz was not yet through. His lascivious appetite for blood was not yet appeased. He had reserved one more ghastly horror for his climax—a supreme horror. Not until the red machine was again plunging earthward in a hurtling, breath-taking dive did Kirby realize it; and then one piercing agonized shriek came from him.

Below loomed the field and hangars of a big airdrome. Its tarmac was crowded with mechanics, and pilots who had just returned from a patrol. It was the airdrome of the U.S. 44th pursuit squadron. It was Kirby's drome. By the cruelest of ironies, he was diving in a plane which was bent on strafing his own airdrome, his own squadron.

Exhausted, his strength sapped by the terrific emotional strain, his wrists numbed and seared beneath the cruel steel bands which held them, the panic-stricken Mosquito could not even gather sufficient energy to struggle now. He was physically worn out, sick and shaken. He sat limp and helpless, and he felt that he was going to faint as the airdrome loomed closer and closer below. God, his own drome, his brother pilots on that field, perhaps his own comrades, Shorty and Travis!

Again now, machine guns and anti-aircrafts were opening up from the ground. But their fire was ineffectual, hopelessly amiss. Over the camouflaged tent hangars swooped the red machine, raking them with incendiary bullets. Hangar number three caught fire, and became a mass of flames and smoke. But Kirby did not even see it. All he saw was the looming tarmac, with its crowd of pilots and mechanics. The red machine went right for them. Again and again its guns blazed. Pilots and mechanics dropped like flies as they rushed futilely for cover. And as each one dropped, Kirby groaned in anguish and wondered whether the victim wasn't Carn or Travis. The red plane zoomed, banked breathlessly, and dived again on the helpless men. Two planes on the ground were burning now, and the engine of a third was shattered

as the red machine's guns blazed anew. More pilots and mechanics crumpled and lay inert. And again the red plane pulled up to make still another dive. It was going to slaughter the whole squadron. Kirby yelled and cursed. And he prayed.

"Oh God," he beseeched pitifully, "why must this keep up? Why can't You stop it? Kill me if you have to, but please," he moaned, "don't let this machine slaughter all my buddies, my pals!"

As if in answer to his fervent prayer, one of the Spads on the ground that had not been scarred by the fire, suddenly streaked forward across the tarmac, swept breathlessly into the air, and pulled up in an air-splitting, breakneck zoom that all but rivaled the red plane itself. And at the sight of that Spad's insignia, Kirby gave a wild hysterical yell.

"Shorty, Shorty, you little son of a gun! Shorty!" Over and over again he shouted and sobbed out the nickname of the little Mosquito, as the Spad came roaring up, up. "Shorty, Shorty!"

For the first time in its career, the red machine seemed to be taken unawares. Von Steitz had evidently never expected this Spad to come streaking up toward his craft. And before the red plane had time to move, the Spad was roaring up right beneath it. And in the cockpit of the Spad sat a determined little Yank, a Yank bent on vengeance, not only for his comrades on the ground, but also for his leader, who had disappeared this morning. Up, up he came, and his guns ripped out a long deadly burst. And then again Kirby's joy faded to cold horror; for, like the Frenchman of that Nieuport, Shorty was aiming not at the red plane itself, but at the figure in its cockpit, whom he believed to be its pilot. His bullets almost grazed Kirby. He was shooting to kill his own captain, his own leader, though he never knew it.

KIRBY'S DESPERATION brought a sudden spurt of strength to his limp muscles. Again he began to struggle like a madman. His numbed arms tugged with such might at those steel bands that he almost tore off his hands. If only he could get free to signal Carn, to tell him to shoot at the plane and disable it, instead of just killing the pilot. He writhed madly. The red machine was springing back into action at last now. It pulled up into a shivering stall. The Spad shot by, so close that Kirby could clearly distinguish the round goggled face of his comrade.

Kirby twisted his head around and turned his own face so that Shorty could see it.

"Shorty!" he yelled again. "Shorty! It's me, Kirby! Look at me, Shorty——" Sobs choked his screaming voice. "Don't you know me?"

He was praying that Shorty would recognize his features despite the German helmet and goggles. But Shorty did not even dream that the figure in the cockpit of the red plane could be a Yank, much less his own leader. And though he looked squarely at Kirby as he streaked past, he did not recognize him at all. Instead, by an irony which tore Kirby's heart, the little Mosquito mockingly thumbed his nose at his captain. The Spad was past then, and was banking behind the red plane, to come back.

Now at last von Steitz seemed to have gotten his weird machine back under complete control. Once more, to Kirby's horror, the red plane circled away from the Spad with deliberate teasing slowness. And Shorty fell for the bait just as the luckless Frenchman of the Nieuport had fallen. He started circling right after the red machine.

Kirby struggled anew until his muscles almost burst. Shorty was opposite him again now, right on the same diameter of the circle. Again Kirby looked right across that gap of space and tried to identify himself to his comrade. He twisted his head and rubbed it against his shoulder in a mad effort to push off the concealing goggles. But he could not touch them. Frantically he kept shouting, screaming.

"Shorty, look out—you're going to get killed! Look out! Don't fall for this lousy trick, Shorty!"

But it was useless; his voice was more than, drowned out in the roar of engines. And now von Steitz was repeating his former stunt. He was letting the Spad creep up around the circle. He was letting Shorty get absolutely confident of victory, so that he would fall an easy prey. Closer and closer now; it could only be the same gruesome story. Kirby, almost insane with grief and horror, kept screaming out futile warnings until his voice cracked and failed him altogether.

"Shorty!" His lips kept forming the words, and his breath kept forcing them out. "Shorty, look out—look out!"

The roar of the red machine's engine burst with all its ear-splitting suddenness, and he felt the plane spurt forward. And then something seemed to snap inside of him. The roar of the engine became a roar in his head. His brain whirled, and everything became blurred and distorted and unreal. He did not know what was happening. He did not know that another Spad had

suddenly streaked off the tarmac below and come zooming up madly—a Spad whose pilot was the lanky Travis, his other comrade, the third Mosquito. He did not know that the red machine, instead of going for Carn, had discreetly turned tail and fled, with the two Mosquitoes giving furious chase. He did not know that now, having already shaken off and lost its pursuers, the red plane was streaking hell-bent for the German lines.

He did not know because, though he was still conscious, his senses had mercifully deserted him. There was a vacant, almost glassy stare in his eyes. A dab of foam flecked the corners of his lips. And as he found his voice again he burst into a wild, hoarse fit of hysterical laughter. He cackled insanely. He roared with maniacal glee. He chuckled as if enjoying a huge joke.

The strain had been too much. His nerves had cracked at last.

“Let’s go!” he yelled exultantly, as the red machine kept streaking through the air at its breakneck speed. “Let’s go!” As if he were leading his two comrades into battle—“Come on, guys! Waco! Let’s——” And the vague sight of a captive balloon across the lines, close now because the red machine was heading in its general direction, seemed to strike some responsive chord in his unbalanced mind.

“Von Steitz!” A maniacal gleam came into his eyes. “Von Steitz, I’m going to get you, going to choke the life out of you.” A laugh of horrible ecstasy gurgled hysterically from his lips. “I’m going to kill you, von Steitz.”

Thus he went on, ranting, raving, babbling, laughing and sobbing in crazed hysteria, until——

Click! As if by magic, as if for no reason at all, the two steel bands which held his wrists snapped wide open. His arms were free. At first he could hardly move them, but then his numbed muscles slowly responded. He brought his hands in front of his face and stared at them dumbly, stared at the awful bleeding welts on his swollen wrists. He began to wave his arms in the air then, with more and more gusto. Free! The shock of it served to bring back his disorganized senses. Things became normal at last. He saw that the red machine was rapidly approaching the Front now, nearing the lines. And yet, for some inexplicable reason, his hands had been freed.

He did not stop to puzzle over it. His trembling fingers instinctively went to the safety strap, the only bond which now held him in the cockpit. His wrists

burned as if on fire when he moved his hands, but he ignored the pain. Wildly he tore at the buckle of the safety strap. It yielded without any trouble. Yes, he was free. Crazily, as if he did not realize that he was whizzing through the air a full mile above the earth, he stood upright in the cockpit, though the terrific rush of wind almost hurled him out of the speeding plane.

His very first thought was that he must try to do something to this machine—disable it, cripple it, anything that would bring it down while it was still over Allied territory. He must locate its controls or whatever device obeyed the wireless impulses. With feverish haste he began to look all over the cockpit. Nothing, absolutely nothing. He turned to the seat, determined to pull out the cushions behind it and get a look into the fuselage. But no sooner did his eyes fall upon that seat than they widened in blank surprise. What he had thought to be an ordinary cushion, the thing he had been sitting on all this time, was a bulky fabric package, replete with a mass of straps. It was a parachute!

Could it be true, was it possible, that von Steitz was deliberately releasing him, letting him go? It seemed ridiculous. He dared not hope for such consideration after the merciless cruelty which the crafty little Boche had shown all throughout this ghastly exhibition. Certainly there couldn’t be a spark of compassion in von Steitz. Certainly this parachute would never work if Kirby tried it, or if it did, the red machine would doubtless turn on him as he helplessly descended, and shoot him to bits. And yet——

There was no time to question. The red machine was coming right over the Front now. In another moment or so it would be over No-Man’s-Land, crossing the lines. A fleeting opportunity of escape was being offered to Kirby; if he did not grasp it at once he would only drop into Boche-land. He cursed bitterly. Damn von Steitz—the cunning fiend had timed this whole thing with his usual cold precision. He had placed Kirby in a position where the Mosquito would have to choose instantly between continuing his examination of the plane, and taking a chance on the parachute and jumping for freedom. And the desire to get out of this horrible machine which had caused him so much anguish and terror was enough to urge Kirby to his decision.

The Mosquito reached hastily for the straps of the parachute, and with great difficulty, groaning from the pain of his wrists, he got into the harness. There could be no hesitation. Quickly, by a terrific effort, he pulled

himself out of the cockpit onto the lower wing. The terrific blast of wind tried to push him right off, but he held onto a strut for dear life until he got his finger hooked in the release ring of the parachute. He drew a long breath, wondering whether this was going to mean life or death. Then, with his heart in his mouth, he hurled himself into space.

Down he went hurtling, tumbling head over heels. He jerked the ring with all his might. Panic seized him as he still continued to hurtle and tumble downward. Then a sudden violent jerk under his armpits lifted him roughly to an upright posture, and over his head the white silken spread of the parachute mushroomed out. He was drifting, slowly down. He was——

A cry of abject terror came from him as he heard that familiar deafening roar in his ears again. The red machine! It was circling around him as he slowly descended, circling so close that he was fanned by the slipstream of its whirling propeller. Again it was the riderless plane with an empty cockpit. Breathlessly it wheeled around the Yank who was suspended helplessly in mid-air. God, had the bloodthirsty von Steitz released Kirby just so that the Mosquito, too, might fall a victim to the guns of his infernal invention? They were glistening evilly, those guns, and their muzzles seemed to yawn hungrily at Kirby. If they fired just one burst——

Three times the red machine circled around the slowly descending parachute, and then, with startling abruptness, it veered off in a furious zoom and streaked away into Bocheland, where a sausagelike shape still swung lazily in the blue. And Kirby, sobbing his wild relief, was floating down unmolested.

Minutes later the grimy Yankee crew of a seventy-five millimeter gun were astonished to see a man come floating into their midst on a parachute. In awe they watched him land on the ground, saw him stumble and fall with the parachute collapsing on top of him in a tangled heap of ropes and silk. The doughboys rushed over and helped extricate the Mosquito, who got dazedly to his feet.

"Well, I'll be a——" The burly sergeant of the gun crew was staring incredulously at the khaki uniform that was visible beneath Kirby's German coat. "If it ain't a Yank in Jerry disguise! Where the devil did you drop in from?" His tone changed as he noticed Kirby's sickly appearance. He became suddenly respectful, as befit his rank. "Are you all right, sir?"

Kirby stared at him dumbly. And then a hoarse, mad cackle broke from the Mosquito. "All right?" he

echoed, and his lips trembled, while his face took on an almost greenish hue. "All right?"

"Grab him!" In alarmed haste the burly sergeant and two or three others leaped forward just in time to catch the falling Mosquito. For now that it was all over, the sudden release of the tension had brought its inevitable reaction. Kirby had passed out cold.

They eased him tenderly to the ground, and some one held a flask to his lips.

"Gosh," the sergeant said softly, "look at them wrists! Looks like he'd been wrestling for a week in a pair o' handcuffs."

SOLEMN AND STERN, they sat at the long shining table, the mighty chieftans who guided the destinies of the Allied armies. There they were, all the renowned generals whose names had become household words, whose pictures had appeared in every newspaper and magazine. There they were, they who had refused to believe the thing which had now caused them to call this very special meeting.

"And you say that you were helplessly bound in the cockpit while this wireless plane went through its exhibition, and then you were mysteriously released?"

The words were spoken rapidly, in clipped and precise English. It was the great French marshal who had spoken, the generalissimo of the Allied armies. He sat in the center of the table, his keen eyes worried and stern, his long gray mustache bristling.

The broad-shouldered young American who stood before him, in a flying captain's uniform whose trimness was slightly marred by the bandages which protruded from beneath each sleeve, nodded slowly.

"That's gospel truth, sir," he said respectfully but firmly. "And I'm willing to swear to it."

The great French general shook his head skeptically. He turned to the man beside him—a man who also wore the uniform of a general, but whose collar bore the letters, "U.S."

"General," the marshal inquired tersely, "how does this story impress you?"

The commander-in-chief of the A.E.F. frowned. "Coming from anyone else," he replied, "I should not believe it. But I can't help thinking that it comes from reliable authority." He smiled. "Suppose we let his own commanding officer speak for him."

The grizzled C.O. of the 44th pursuit squadron jumped to his feet. "Gentlemen," he stated, like a lawyer presenting a case, "Captain Kirby has never brought in a false report. I am willing to vouch for

every word he says. I myself was present during the strafing of our drome which he described." His face filled with pain, and a haggard look came into his eyes, for he had lost half his squadron in that strafe. But then he stiffened and went on crisply, "others have corroborated the rest of the red plane's atrocities, as well as the fact that Captain Kirby landed on a parachute. Finally, there are the man's wrists; one can see that they have been cut by steel clamps. To me the evidence is sufficient. I can see no room for doubt." And having had his say, he quietly resumed his seat. Kirby gave him a grateful glance, and the C.O. looked back at his ace-high flyer with unconcealed pride and affection.

The general of the British armies, who had remained in a thoughtful silence thus far, was the next to speak. "But I say, this is all impossible," he insisted with stubborn English conservatism. "A plane could never be controlled in such a fashion as the man describes. I do not believe——"

The French marshal held up his hand, as if in a plea. "Wait, please. We shall take that up immediately. Among us is one of the world's greatest experts on wireless—a colleague of the great Marconi himself. No man could be more thoroughly equipped to discuss the scientific aspects of this case." His keen eye went down the long table. "Colonel Franschini!"

A small, wiry man, gray-haired and gray-bearded, rose from his place. He wore the uniform of the Italian army.

The marshal addressed him earnestly. "You have listened to this story, colonel?"

"I have heard every word of it," the Italian replied in slightly accented English.

"Well, now," the marshal demanded sternly, "is this thing which has been described a scientific possibility, or not?"

Colonel Franschini pondered a moment. Then he said, "if you mean, is it within the realms of science? I should say yes. I have no doubt that in the future a plane that is controlled by wireless will be a practicable thing."

"But we are talking of the present," the marshal snapped impatiently.

"In that case," the Italian announced with flat finality, "the answer is no. Wireless has not reached such a stage of development. Ten years from now, perhaps. But now?" He shrugged and threw up his hands in the characteristic gesture of his race. "Impossible!"

The marshal's face was grim. "But if, by some miracle, the Germans have actually managed to perfect such a device?"

"Then," Colonel Franschini finished for him, like a judge pronouncing a sentence, "we might as well lay down our arms and surrender."

The marshal's mustache bristled, and his eyes blazed fire. "What do you mean, surrender?"

"I mean," the Italian went on somberly, "that if the Germans could really produce such a plane they are so far ahead of us scientifically that we shall not be able to fight them. They will surely win the war."

Silence descended over the table—a long, ominous hush. Every face was drawn and lined with worry and anxiety. And Kirby, shifting where he stood, heard the gloating voice of von Steitz ringing in his ears. "That is why you will come groveling to us on your knees, imploring us for peace. That is why the Kaiser and German *Kultur* will rule the world."

And then, in the silence, the marshal's crisp words rang out as clearly as the blows of a hammer. "The war will never be lost while we still have the strength to raise an arm, wireless plane or no wireless plane. And in the meantime we shall fight this menace, whatever it may be, with all our power! We shall start with an aerial offensive to wipe out every German captive balloon that can be found. Of course, if this plane is really controlled from so many stations, the measure might not have much effect. But it will show our enemies that we do not intend to remain idle, and that above all our morale is not impaired.

"Otherwise," he continued, "we shall take common sense precautions to protect our flyers. Hereafter no plane will be permitted to fly alone. And squadrons will have to fly in more than one formation, so that they can provide themselves with absolute protection. Now"—he glanced up and down the table—"are there any suggestions?"

"Yes, general." It was the Italian wireless expert again. He turned to Kirby. "You have seen this plane, captain. Don't you think that it could possibly be disabled, shot down?"

"Oh, yes," Kirby assured him. "I'm sure it could be disabled if its engine, propeller, or gas tank were hit. I'm sure that if it were trapped, so that it couldn't get away with its superior speed, it could be shot down."

Colonel Franschini's eyes lighted eagerly. "Well, now, if we could only force this plane down on our side of the lines, then we could actually take it apart and study it. We could find out how it works."

The marshal nodded. "A splendid idea, colonel. We shall try to devise some stratagem to trap——"

"Pardon, general." Impetuously Kirby broke in on the marshal's words. The Mosquito's face was flushed now, and his eyes were shining with sudden eager enthusiasm. "I can't help feeling that I've got a personal score to settle with this red machine, if not with the man who invented it. I'm asking you to give me a chance, sir. Here's my idea. I'll fly my Spad around the place where the red machine usually appears, right near the lines. I'm sure the machine will attack me, because your order will prohibit any plane from flying alone, and it will be only too glad to find a victim. Then——"

"One moment, one moment." The marshal spoke through pursed lips. He smiled quizzically. "Are you not a little overambitious, young man? Do you actually think that you are capable of handling this red machine all by yourself?"

"Oh, no, sir," Kirby hastily explained. "I wouldn't flatter myself that much. I know the red machine is too much to fight alone. But I didn't finish telling you," he rushed on, with ever-mounting enthusiasm. "You see, I've got two buddies who can fly like hell—excuse me. Anyway, they're good pilots, aren't they, sir?" This to his C.O.

"To be truthful," the C.O. replied with a grin, "they can fly like hell."

"Well," Kirby resumed, "those two guys can hide way up in the sun, as high as they can climb. Then, when the red machine attacks me, they can come down on it before it can get away. It will be the old decoy game, and I'll be the bait. We'll get the red machine in a trap, and we'll cut it off from the German lines and surround it, so it can't out-speed us. Don't you see, general?" he concluded enthusiastically. "It can't fail."

The marshal's keen eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He leaned back in his chair and stroked the ends of his bristling mustache. Then, with characteristic abruptness, he turned to Kirby's C.O. "Colonel, what do you think of this idea?"

Kirby's eyes pleaded with his C.O. so fervently that the grizzled old colonel hesitated. "Well, the idea is all right," he conceded at length, "but—well, to tell the truth, I'm afraid that Captain Kirby is in no condition to fly for several days at least. In fact, the squadron doctor has grounded him until his wrists can heal."

"Damn my wrists! I mean my wrists are all right," the impetuous Mosquito insisted. And to prove his

point he held up his two hands and turned and twisted them all around, and his face did not show a flicker of the pain it cost him. "See, they're absolutely O.K. I can fly better than ever. Please, general," he implored, "give me this chance. I'll guarantee to bring down that red machine."

The Marshal regarded the Yank before him with something close to awe. He spoke with frank admiration, as was rarely his wont. "You are a courageous young man, Captain Kirby. One would expect that after your experience you would never want to see that red machine again."

"On the contrary," Kirby corrected vehemently, "I'm all the more anxious to see it again." His eyes blazed with sudden anger. "I just can't wait until I get a crack at it."

The marshal shook his head. "These Yankees!" he murmured, and then turned to the Yankee commander-in-chief. "What do you think, general?"

The American general smiled. "I think that such spirit deserves a chance. I know Captain Kirby is well aware of the risk he will be taking to play bait. But if he is brave enough to volunteer, why not let him?"

And five minutes later the flushed and contented Kirby and a proud but slightly dubious C.O. were climbing into the C.O.'s waiting staff car. Already seated in the auto were Shorty Carn and the lanky Travis, who greeted their leader warmly.

"Well," little Shorty wanted to know, "what did you tell all those brass hats?"

Kirby grinned. "Not much. I just told 'em that the three of us are going to bring down the red machine in Allied territory, so they can take it apart."

The wise Travis frowned. "But I thought you wouldn't fly for a week with those wrists," he said in his familiar drawl. "You letting him, colonel?"

"Letting him?" The grizzled C.O. laughed with acid mirth. "What the hell have I got to say about it?"

FIVE THOUSAND FEET in the clear sunny sky, Kirby wheeled his Spad in great slow circles. For three days he had been doing this by the hour, waiting, praying that the red machine would come. And yet, with all his hope, there was a certain cold dread which he could not suppress. He had not fully recovered from the shock of his ghastly experience. The red machine and the leering, gloating von Steitz haunted his dreams and robbed him of his sleep. His nerve had been badly shattered, and once a pilot loses his nerve he is usually finished. Kirby was not flying the way he

had flown in the past. He did not have that feeling of thorough mastery over his ship, of complete control. His judgment was not so keen, and the controls of his plane did not have the old familiar feel.

For all this he blamed his wrists, which were still sore and painful. But he knew it was more than his wrists. And yet he refused to give in. He was stubbornly determined to see this thing through, to settle his score with the red machine and keep his promise to the great marshal of France.

He glanced up toward the sky, blinking in the glare of the sun. Somewhere up there, concealed in that blazing orb, two other Spads must be lurking, waiting even as Kirby was waiting. He could never see them, and always there was the vague cold fear that perhaps they were not there, though there was no reason why they shouldn't be. They could not fail him, Shorty and Travis. They would be ready to dive straight down as soon as the red machine appeared.

But would the red machine ever appear? All during these three days it had been reported active, but somehow it had never come Kirby's way. It was still carrying on its gruesome raids, in spite of G.H.Q.'s precautions. The order that no plane should fly alone, and that squadrons should fly in group formation, had not daunted the diabolical machine in the slightest. It still continued to pick off end men from formations and send them hurtling to destruction. Nor had the order to strafe every German captive balloon brought satisfactory results. The strafing was done, was still being done, but there were always more balloons, and evidently there were always control stations to handle the red machine.

Worst of all, the news that Kirby had brought back from his nightmarish trip had leaked out, as news will. The whole Western Front knew now that the riderless plane was supposed to be controlled by wireless, and the thought of such an ultrascientific contraption added fresh luridness to its horror. Allied morale kept slumping, not only among the flyers, but even among the soldiers on the ground, who felt that they were fighting against a bunch of wizards who could wipe them out wholesale with a lot of fantastic machines. It was even rumored that a minor Franco-American offensive had failed because of the weak morale of the men. Things would get more and more serious, unless something was done at once.

Kirby thrust that grim thought from his mind. He remembered the words the French marshal had spoken. "The war will never be lost while we still

have the strength to raise an arm." If only he and his comrades could get the red machine now, so it could be examined and its mystery definitely explained. Then perhaps things would clear up. Perhaps the Allies would learn a secret which they could copy and turn against its originators. Yes, the red machine must be brought down! Everything depended on it.

Around and around the Spad kept circling, with Kirby peering constantly toward the German lines. Across them he could see two captive balloons now—those inevitable balloons that popped up like the numberless heads of the mythical Hydra. They swung lazily against the blue sky, a sky that was utterly empty.

An involuntary shout broke from Kirby's throat as he saw a speck suddenly materialize out of that empty sky. The speck grew rapidly larger, until it showed red against the blue. It was streaking straight this way, coming through the air in its usual breakneck speed. The red machine at last!

The Mosquito's raw nerves tensed like springs. His heart pounded. With furious haste he banked his Spad, and cursed his wrists because his hand on the stick was not so steady. But neither were his feet steady on the rudder bar, and there was nothing wrong with them. He clenched his teeth. He must buck up now, must go through with this stunt in blazing style. It was the opportunity he had been waiting for. And his comrades, who must be above, had been waiting for it, too.

Deliberately he headed his Spad toward the swiftly approaching red machine. He cut his throttle, and at an altitude well below that of the red plane, he sailed along leisurely, to all appearances blissfully unaware of the approaching danger. But in reality he was fighting down an inner panic that grew even as that red plane grew before his eyes, assuming all its familiar details. The sight of the weird ship with its empty cockpit brought back all his horrible associations, and a sense of helplessness, of weakness, began to assail him. He glanced up at the sky again and again. God, if his comrades were not up there, ready—

Closer and closer loomed the red machine, until it was almost directly overhead. Again the terrific roar of its engine reached Kirby's ears above the roar of his own Spad. He steeled his nerves. Damn it, he must hold on now. He mustn't give in to his weakness, his giddy fear. He must bait the red machine so that it could most certainly be trapped. And so, though his true impulse was to flee, he kept sailing along leisurely, right under the red machine's nose.

Suddenly the nose of the red machine dropped precipitously. With a mighty roar, the plane came plunging down in its breathless, attacking dive. Kirby still feigned ignorance, though it was nerve-racking to sit tight and let the mechanical monster dive right on top of him. Down it came, a red streak which drew itself through space like a flash of lightning. And then again Kirby saw its twin guns blaze into life of their own accord. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* At last the Mosquito could stop feigning blissful oblivion. He pulled up frantically, and half-rolled to elude the smoking lines of tracer. But due to his nervousness, he half-rolled too slowly, and his blood ran cold as a burst of lead went ticking ominously through the Spad's fuselage. The red machine came right on, guns blazing.

And then a hoarse, frenzied cheer came from Kirby. As if by magic, two Spads had dropped out of the sky above, and now they were diving like meteors, with black smoke trailing from their exhaust stacks. Straight down on the red machine they came, as it was busily engaged in shooting at Kirby. And the operator of the German plane, whether it was von Steitz or some one else, was taken completely unawares. Before he could pull up his craft, Shorty and Travis, coming down with a vengeance, were right on top of the red plane, and their guns were stuttering into life. And again Kirby cheered wildly as he actually saw their tracers going into the red machine, drilling through its wings.

With a roar, the red plane pulled up and attempted to flee. But the Mosquitoes had planned their decoy carefully. Shorty Carn and Travis had already planted their Spads between the German lines and the red craft; and Kirby, still trying to overcome his tremors and get better control of his Spad, had pulled up a little tardily to attack the red machine from behind. All Three Mosquitoes blazed away, seeking to wall the red plane in a fatal prison of cross-fire. And for a moment it looked as if they certainly must succeed. The red machine, blocked at every turn, shut off from every escape, was writhing like a helpless thing in the midst of its three attackers.

For a moment the Three Mosquitoes were themselves again, fighting in their old breathless style, in the insistent lunging fashion which had won them their nickname.

BUT ONLY FOR A MOMENT. For then, like a cornered beast, the red machine suddenly became more deadly than ever. It stopped writhing helplessly and began to split-air with a sort of reckless abandon,

hurling itself at its attackers. Straight for them it went, and they had to swerve wildly to avoid collisions. They began to lose their confidence, and the thought that this riderless plane was just a machine, and that the man who was controlling it was not in danger and therefore would not stop at ramming if it was necessary, preyed more and more on their minds. Kirby, already in a shaken condition, was especially affected. Twice he had been in a position for a perfect shot at the streaking red machine, and twice his aim had been hopelessly amiss. God, he was fighting like a kiwi again! He was almost as inadequate as he had been the first time the red machine had attacked him.

The riderless plane seemed to grow more and more powerful as the Mosquitoes' confidence kept waning. Its guns were blazing a steady constant stream, scattering lead in all directions. A burst tore a gaping hole through Travis' rudder; Shorty's instrument board was struck and shattered; and Kirby saw one of his struts splinter and crack. The Mosquitoes fought anew, fought against this machine which seemed to be outwitting them. But a wizard was evidently guiding that red plane, a wizard who could make it perform as no plane had ever performed before. It must be von Steitz, Kirby was telling himself fiercely. It must be von Steitz who operated the controls from his distant station. Von Steitz, the fiendish inventor, the former ace.

The red machine, its motor roaring full blast, now made another attempt to pull out and head for the German lines. Stubbornly Shorty Carn cut across its air path and blocked the way with his Spad. The German plane, as if enraged, charged like a beast, guns spitting. A gasp of anguished horror came from Kirby as he saw the bullets literally smash Shorty's engine to pieces. The little Mosquito's Spad floundered, lurched drunkenly. By sheer skill, Shorty managed to get her into a glide and head for the earth. His comrades could not follow his descent, could not see what happened to him. They had to continue the fight.

The red machine roared on toward the German lines. But Travis was still in its way, and Travis met its charge with a withering burst of lead. Kirby cheered once more as he saw the lanky Mosquito's tracers going right into the red plane. But evidently they did not touch a vital part, for the red craft roared right on. Kirby pulled up behind and tried frantically to bring his guns to bear. But he was flying more sloppily than ever now, and his shots again went wide by several yards. Damn those wrists! Damn——

Again he gasped in anguish. Good God, Travis' ship had been hit now. It was flying queerly, crazily, like a wounded bird. It fell off into a stalling sideslip. It nosed over, and then it was dashing earthward in a spin. Kirby, overcome with horror, dared not look after it. All he could look at was the red machine. Again his senses were threatening to desert him. He saw the red plane, as if through a blur. It was not fleeing now. With only one lone Spad left, it was coming eagerly to make the kill. It was looming before Kirby's eyes—red, blood red. Again that helpless terror held the Mosquito paralyzed. He began to roll his Spad clumsily, futilely. *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* The red plane's guns were blazing again. Kirby heard the bullets beating a rattling tattoo on his tail fins. He stared dazedly at the Spad's upper wing, where a blue patch of sky showed in place of the taut khaki fabric that had been there a second ago. He was getting shot to hell, just as his two comrades had been shot before him.

And then, suddenly, a fierce volcanic rage overwhelmed him. The looming red plane became a red mist in front of his eyes. His goggled face turned livid, and his teeth clenched. The red machine had shot down his two comrades. It had frustrated the whole game and gotten out of the carefully laid trap. Why? Because it was just a frightful mechanism which scared the wits out of a man and paralyzed his muscles so he couldn't find the strength to fight it. By God, it was not going to frighten Kirby any longer! Damned if he'd bow before any mere machine, controlled by a Boche fiend miles away!

He forgot all his former fears, forgot his sore wrists. He forgot that he had lost his old flying skill. All he remembered was the anguish and horror this devilish craft had caused him. All he thought of was revenge. Revenge! And as he saw the red machine coming toward him, he opened his throttle wide, pulled back his stick savagely, and roared up into a breathless Immelmann turn. The red machine with its superior speed rushed to force him on the outside of the climb. But a demon was inside of Kirby now, a demon which enabled him to do next to the impossible with that Spad. He was flying superbly now, better than he had ever flown before. He came out of the pivoting Immelmann, and to his triumph, found the red plane below him. Furiously he nosed down and went straight for the riderless craft. With eyes narrowed to slits, he leaned to his sights. With fingers steady and cool, he squeezed his stick triggers. His guns clattered and blazed. A wave of savage exultation swept him. He was

hitting the enemy plane. He saw fabric and wood parts leap from its tail assembly.

The red machine rolled furiously and then, as if in wild rage, it zoomed up right beneath the Spad, guns belching. But Kirby laughed recklessly at the bullets.

"Come on," he urged defiantly, "come on, von Steitz. Do your damndest. Put your machine through every trick you know. It won't do any good. It can't. I'm going to get your plane, and I'm going to shoot it to hell!"

And he rolled right out of the red plane's range, and then hung his Spad in a shivering stall. The red machine, before it could slow down from its wild speed, was carried by momentum right past the Spad. That was just what Kirby wanted. Eagerly the Mosquito banked and found the red craft right in front of him. Again he leaned to his sights, and fired. Again, to his wild triumph, he saw his bullets tearing into the riderless plane.

The red machine, not to be outdone, pulled into an Immelmann of its own. It performed the maneuver with breathless precision, before Kirby could force it out of the arc. It dived with renewed fury upon the Spad, and its guns rained down a withering burst of tracers. Bullets ricocheted from the cowl of Kirby's cockpit, and again he heard them smashing through the fuselage.

But the sound of them only added fresh fire to his burning rage. Cursing, he half-rolled, and then hurled his Spad once more at the red machine.

And then the fight began in earnest—the most fantastic and spectacular fight of Kirby's whole career. The riderless craft went through every possible trick, every gyration, every turn and twist and maneuver. But Kirby had seen its whole repertoire before, and he knew how to checkmate each move. The Mosquito was always on the defensive, because of the red plane's superior speed. But though he was ever on the defensive, he nevertheless was leading the fight, taking full advantage of every opening, never missing the chance for a shot. He was matching wits with the crafty operator of the riderless plane, and he was matching his own machine against the machine which fought him. On they fought, chasing each other all over the sky, circling, diving, banking, zooming.

"Come on," Kirby kept shouting with mad defiance, "come on, von Stietz! Is that all you know? Let's see a thing or two!"

As if in answer the scarlet craft suddenly went roaring up and over in a furious tight loop which was

intended to bring it down right on top of the Spad. Kirby roared with laughter.

“Atta boy, von Steitz,” he howled gleefully. “Split-air! That’s just what I’ve been waiting for.”

And as he yelled he crossed his controls and hung the Spad in another shivering, trembling stall—a stall which would have spelled sure disaster to almost any other flyer. He actually held the plane still for a moment, and thus he was not in the place where the red machine expected to find him as it came diving out of the loop. Instead of landing on top of the Spad, the red plane landed in front of it. And Kirby, with calm precision, slowly pulled back on his stick, raising the nose of his plane, gently, gently, almost inch by inch. Up, up, up, until the outline of the Boche craft was framed in the middle of his ring sight. And then, with a berserk yell, he pressed his triggers.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! In frenzied joy, Kirby saw his tracers smashing into the engine of the red plane. The red machine paused in its flight like a bird surprised by a sudden wound. Frantically it tried to pull out of the withering stream of lead which pumped it and pumped it. And then, even as it started to zoom, its bullet-riddled engine suddenly conked out. The riderless craft stalled grotesquely as it lost flying speed. Its wings turned slowly over, its nose was pulled down by the force of gravity, and it fluttered earthward like a dead bird.

KIRBY’S EYES almost popped out of his head. Good God, had he actually disabled the red machine? Had he actually put this infernal contraption out of control, so that it was no longer able to obey the wireless oscillations sent by its operator? It seemed impossible, and yet there was the red machine, twisting and careening toward the earth in wide uncontrolled curves.

Wondering, Kirby dived after it and followed it down, ready to spring back into action at a moment’s notice. Perhaps this was only a ruse to put him off his guard. He could not trust the red machine after what he had seen it do in the past. He could not trust it until it was actually down on the ground, in Allied hands.

And as the red machine was drawing closer to the earth, it looked for a moment as if Kirby’s suspicions were well founded. Suddenly the riderless craft was straightening out. It was getting into a shallow glide, for its engine was not running and its propeller hung idle. Kirby’s eyes narrowed, and he was seized by an impulse to dive upon that gliding plane and shoot it to

ribbons, so it could have no chance to play any more tricks. He would feel no qualms about doing such a thing, since he was dealing with a soulless machine and did not have to show the sportsmanship that he would show to any human adversary.

However, on second thought, he realized that such a move would be foolish. After all, he saw now, the red machine could not avoid falling into Allied territory; the German lines were miles away, and the red craft was sinking lower and lower, settling, settling. The Mosquito decided, too, that the riderless plane must still be out of its operator’s control, for otherwise the wily von Steitz would certainly crash it to earth rather than allow it to settle this way, where it might land quite intact. There was no use shooting at it. Kirby would simply watch it, see that it did land on Allied ground, and hope that it would not smash when it landed.

His hope was fulfilled. By what seemed like a lucky coincidence, the red machine settled its wheels on a wheat field and rolled to a stop, on even keel. Kirby, performing one of the fastest split-air landings of his career, came down after it and set his Spad scarcely a hundred yards behind it. The Mosquito leaped hastily from his cockpit, even as a crowd of doughboys came swarming across the field and were gathering around the strange unoccupied red craft, looking at it with awe and horror. Excitedly Kirby pushed through the crowd. They saw that he was an officer, and they made way for him respectfully. His face was flushed with wild triumph.

“We’ve got it,” he told them enthusiastically. “We’ve got the red machine at last!” A burning curiosity made him feverishly impatient. “Look out, guys! Let me get a look at this. I want to see what I can see.”

The doughboys obediently spread out from the red machine, leaving it standing in a wide open space. It looked incongruously harmless now as it squatted motionless on its wheels, its deafening engine silent, its propeller still as death. Nevertheless Kirby approached it with trepidation, as one approaches a dead venomous snake. He walked around it several times, scrutinizing it from nose to tail. Then cautiously, almost furtively, he reached out and touched it, half expecting to receive an electric shock or some other uncanny hurt. But nothing happened; it felt just as any other plane would feel.

The doughboys, impelled by their curiosity, could not resist the temptation to draw closer to the plane again. They began to crowd up behind Kirby, matching him in awed silence. The Mosquito, confident now that

there was no danger, had seized the tail fin of the red plane and was trying to move it. It would not budge. He could not move the rudder either. He paused to consider a moment. Perhaps now he ought to leave the machine alone and wait for the wireless expert to look at it. But somehow he couldn't leave it alone. He was too eager to find out the center of its control, the thing he had been looking for the other day when he had been forced to abandon the craft in that parachute. He reached his decision. He would take a look into that fuselage now. Surely it wouldn't hurt. In fact the sooner the center of control was found, the better—and safer.

He borrowed a trench knife from a willing doughboy, and went up beside the fuselage. He tried to cut through the red fabric, so he could make a hole and look through. But his knife met a solid surface and was stopped. There was steel beneath this fabric. The fuselage was well protected. Kirby could never penetrate it this way. But there remained another way.

Again the Mosquito paused reluctantly. Then he shrugged with sudden abandon. Deliberately he hoisted himself right into the cockpit of the red plane. A slight shudder went through him as he again found himself in the place which had been such a horror to him the other day. He winced as his eyes fell on those steel bands, which were still on either side of the cockpit, but hanging loosely open now. Then he turned and started to pull away the cushions behind the seat as he had started to do the last time.

In the meantime the doughboys were getting more and more bold in their curiosity. They were beginning to touch the plane now. Some, emulating Kirby, tried to move its tail fin and rudder. Others found different things to play with. They swarmed all around, trying this, trying that.

Kirby had just pulled away one cushion, and was starting to remove still another that he had found behind it, when the thing happened. Just how it happened he never knew. He was only vaguely aware that one of the doughboys had been toying with the red plane's propeller, tugging at it like a playful kid. And then——

An ear-splitting roar, a roar that was all too familiar in Kirby's ears. A roar which drowned out the scream of agony from the doughboy as he fell with his skull gashed by the wooden blade which had whirled suddenly in his grasp. With a fierce lurch that threw Kirby off his balance and made him plop right down in the cockpit, the red machine had leaped forward.

In terror, the soldiers scattered from its path as it charged straight for them. Several were hit, knocked flat by its whisking wings. And before Kirby had time to do a thing, before he could even try to jump out, the red machine literally shot into the air, spurned the surrounding tree tops, and zoomed skyward.

The Mosquito, instinctively getting straight in the seat of the cockpit, cursed in a frenzy of rage and despair. Below him was a giddy drop of space which kept widening with breathless rapidity. Damn it, here he was again, back in this infernal streaking machine. Here he was again, unfettered this time, but without a parachute. He sobbed in utter frustration as the red machine banked and went shooting straight for Boche land. He sobbed and cursed as he saw those two captive balloons across the lines. Von Steitz must be in one of them—von Steitz, laughing his sides off, gloating over his clever stunt.

Still, Kirby was telling himself, it must have been more a matter of luck for von Steitz than anything else. Evidently the engine of the craft had not been seriously damaged by Kirby's bullets, after all. It had just been stopped. That had been enough to force the red machine to land. Then that fool doughboy had tugged the propeller, damn him, and the engine had started once more. Now the red plane was speeding for the German lines, and to make its triumph complete, Kirby was in it, by his own doing.

And then a fierce gripping determination came over the Mosquito, and he gritted his teeth. By heaven, the red machine would not get across the German lines! He, would find its controls this time and cripple them somehow. He didn't care what happened to himself. He would send this damn thing down to Allied ground so it would stay down, even if he might be committing suicide in doing so.

Madly he stood up in the cockpit, ignoring the flogging blast of the wind. He turned, and again he pulled at those cushions. No sooner did he begin, than the red machine, with frightful unexpectedness, rolled right over on its back, and Kirby felt himself being loosed into space. Wildly the Mosquito's hands clutched out, groping for some support. By sheer luck a strut came within his grasp. He seized it, clung to it with all his might. He was suspended by his arms now in space. The strain on his sore wrists became so unbearable that he almost had to let go. But he held on like a drowning man clutching a straw, until, to his blessed relief, the red machine righted itself, and he half fell, half jumped back into the cockpit.

The devilish craft flew level again, as if satisfied to let its attempt on Kirby's life pass as a grim warning. But Kirby did not heed this warning. His brain was a riotous tumult of anger. His mind was occupied only by the thought that he must stop this machine from getting back to the German lines. Again he pulled at the cushions, and he was just getting away the last one when the red machine rolled once more.

BUT THIS TIME Kirby was prepared for it. Even as the plane started to tilt over, the Mosquito grabbed each side of the cockpit with a leechlike grip. He held on, held himself in while the plane turned upside down. And as soon as it straightened out he was working again. To his relief, the machine did not roll any more then. It was coming right to the Front, and apparently its operator felt that it would be within the German lines before Kirby could do any damage, so he did not bother with the Mosquito.

But Kirby, far from daunted, was working with redoubled efforts. He got that last cushion away, and then found that the fuselage was still closed off by a panel of wood, which was strong and tight. He pushed and punched at it viciously. It did not budge. He gripped the sides of the cockpit, hauled off, and kicked at it with one foot. It creaked, seemed to give a little. The Front was swimming below now; in another moment the plane would cross the lines, and then Kirby would never bring it down in Allied territory. Guided by sheer desperation, he hauled off with all his might and gave that panel a tremendous kick that almost broke his foot. The wood splintered, cracked. A gash appeared in the panel. Encouraged by the sight, Kirby kicked once more. The panel gave way, collapsing in splinters.

There was a shrill report, and a spurt of flame seemed to leap right up, just missing Kirby's face. A gasp of surprise broke from the Mosquito, a gasp which turned to a roar of savage rage. His face grew livid, and a light of hell came into his eyes. Heedless of the danger, heedless of everything, he plunged down into that open fuselage, and with a berserk yell of hate, he was hurling himself upon the snarling, screaming little German who was sitting inside that fuselage on a seat, a joystick in his hand and a rudder bar beneath his feet.

"Von Steitz!" And the Luger went flying out of the Boche's free hand as Kirby leaped upon him. The Mosquito did not stop to ask questions. He did not seek any explanations. His two hands went straight

for von Steitz' throat, and tightened in a murderous clutch. The red machine began to flounder crazily as the German writhed, and the controls moved with him. But Kirby did not notice or care.

"Wireless plane, eh?" Fiercely, like bands of steel, the Yank's hands closed tighter and tighter around the German's throat. "Wireless plane, eh, you dirty lying rat! Captive balloons control stations, wireless plane!" He laughed with a bitter mirth, as he felt the German going limp in his clutch. He would have kept choking him even then, would have kept throttling him until there was not a spark of life left in his body. But then, at last, he noticed how the plane was floundering, twisting and threatening to go into a spin.

He came back to a more normal state of mind then. With frantic haste, he unbuckled the safety strap from the limp German, and pulled him out of the seat, into the cockpit. He had no trouble reaching into the fuselage and putting the joystick at neutral. The rudder straightened itself. Kirby managed to find the throttle lever, and he turned it down halfway. The plane, though it was now over the German lines, flew along smoothly and on level keel.

And then Kirby's eyes fell on those steel clamps on either side of the cockpit. They were open. He reached over and shut one; it snapped shut. But as it locked, Kirby, just by chance, saw a lever move inside the fuselage. He reached for the lever and pulled it. Instantly the clamp on the cockpit clicked open again. He smiled with grim understanding.

"All right, von Steitz," he muttered at the unconscious Boche sprawled beneath him. "We'll see how you like these things. And I hope to hell you come to, so you can appreciate them."

As he spoke he was hoisting the German into the seat of the cockpit, the seat which now had no back—for Kirby had not replaced the cushions that would shut off the fuselage. Roughly the Mosquito jerked the Boche's limp hands to either side, and snapped the steel bands over them. He strapped von Steitz in the cockpit by the safety-belt.

Then, climbing over the small figure of the German, he himself ducked into the fuselage. It was cramped in there, for a man of his size. He swore. Only a little runt like von Steitz could fit in it comfortably. Nevertheless, Kirby managed to get into the seat and take the controls. And he was absolutely amazed at the strange devices and instruments he found at his disposal.

Though it was inside the fuselage, this place

was so fixed that a pilot could look at the outside surroundings as clearly as if he were sitting out in the cockpit. There were two periscopes in front of Kirby's face—one for front vision and one for rear. There were also periscopic sights for the machine guns. In addition to these glasses, the walls of the place, which were of steel plate, were full of sliding shutters on every side, and above and below. With these numerous peepholes open, one could look in every possible direction.

At first all these peculiar devices confused Kirby, and he had a hard time straightening them out. But once he knew what each thing was for, he managed well enough. And as far as the actual controls were concerned, he had no trouble with them. They responded perfectly. He had already banked the ship around and now, looking through the front-vision periscope, he saw that he was headed right back for the Allied lines. He opened the throttle wide and heard the motor roar its response. Back he went streaking, piloting the red machine with its inventor strapped in the cockpit he had so craftily designed to be vacant.

Even as the plane was crossing the lines, von Steitz began to stir. The little Boche came to with a shock, and cursed frenziedly as he discovered his predicament. Kirby saw him writhing and twisting and squirming, heard him cry in pain as his wrists were cut by the steel clamps which did not show any discrimination. The Mosquito, who could feel no mercy for this fiend who had been so merciless himself, laughed relentlessly.

"Enjoy yourself, von Steitz," he shouted, above the engine's roar. "Enjoy yourself while you can. Soon we're going to land, and it will be the firing squad for you."

Von Steitz screamed forth maledictions upon his tormentor. The German began by threatening and cursing, but then, overcome by terror, he began to whine and whimper for mercy. "*Gott*, let me free," he begged. "Let me die by my own hand. Let me jump out. Don't let them get me. They'll tear me to pieces!"

"And what if they do?" Kirby yelled back. "You're just a dirty sneaking little skunk, and you're going to pay for every lousy thing you did. You're——"

He broke off, and the German screamed in sudden alarm. Through the shutter above him Kirby saw the diving Spads—five of them, which came down hell-bent, straight for the red machine! And as Kirby caught their insignias his heart jumped. They were planes from the 44th, his own squadron.

They must have been out on a patrol when they had seen the red plane streaking below them. And now they were coming down with a vengeance, coming down unafraid because they saw a figure in the red craft's cockpit. They did not know it was the famous riderless plane, even though it was all red and had this unusually powerful engine.

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! Down came the streaking tracers on all sides. Kirby half-rolled frantically. God, he had no way of signaling them, no way of telling them not to attack this plane he was trying to bring in. He was stuck here in this cubbyhole, where he had to stay at his controls.

The Spads came out of their dives with a roar, guns blazing. And then Kirby heard von Steitz scream again in piercing agony. The Mosquito looked, and he saw. The German had been hit, was being hit even now. Bullets were riddling his body. The pilots of the Spads, thinking that he was the pilot of the red plane, had been aiming for him. By an irony of fate, von Steitz was being shot to hell while he sat strapped helpless in the cockpit of his own horrible machine. Kirby could not suppress a shudder. As much as he hated von Steitz, he couldn't help feeling a wave of compassion as he saw the German writhing in anguish. It was enough; von Steitz was paying the penalty in full.

But now Kirby began to realize that he was apt to get shot himself if he did not do something to shake off these persistent Spads. Thus far, all that had saved him from their bullets was the steel wall which surrounded him, and the fact that they had aimed at von Steitz. The German's head was now slumped forward over his chest. Surely, Kirby figured, the pilots of the Spads must see that. The Mosquito took instant advantage of the fact.

He plunged his joystick forward, putting the red plane into a furious dive. Down it went streaking. To all appearances here was a plane whose pilot had been shot and had slumped forward over his joystick, pushing it forward. And to Kirby's blessed relief, the pilots of the Spads assumed that such was the case. They stopped firing, though they followed the red plane down. The Mosquito waited, waited until the earth was looming right before his front-view periscope. Then, madly, he jerked back his stick. The red machine lurched out of its dive and leveled out, all but grazing the tree tops.

The Spads above, seeing that the plane was still under control, started to come down to attack anew. But Kirby, hedge-hopping furiously over the trees,

had already found a small field which would do in this emergency. Without bothering to head into the wind, he streaked right down and made a perfect landing. The Spads wheeled overhead, and again their pilots held their fire as they saw the German plane on Allied ground. Kirby leaped out of his cubby hole, climbed over the limp form of the German, and jumped to the ground. Excitedly he waved to his squadron brothers in the air. They saw his khaki uniform, and realized at once that he was a Yank.

“WE KNOW EVERYTHING now, so you might as well talk. It will make things better all around. It will make us feel that we shall not have to conduct any reprisals.”

Crisp and firm, the words came from the keen-eyed colonel of U.S. intelligence. He was standing beside a cot on which lay a dying German. Near by stood a doctor. There were four others in the room. One was the grizzled C.O. of the 44th pursuit squadron. The other three were the Three Mosquitoes—all three of them well and happy in their reunion. Shorty and Travis had managed to land their disabled Spads safely after all.

Slowly, with painful effort, von Steitz was nodding his head as it lay on the pillow.

“All right,” he said, and his voice had the peculiar harshness that pain brings. “I shall tell you, since I have nothing to lose.” And while the others listened in awed silence, the German told the whole story in halting, jerky phrases which were often broken by spasms of coughing.

“It was all a hoax—a hoax by which we hoped to crush your morale. It was my idea that some kind of plane could be devised that would strike terror into our enemies, and make them think we had secrets of science which would surely bring us victory. That is, how I happened to create the red machine. Fortunately we had just brought out a new powerful aerial engine, and I thought that a red plane with an empty cockpit, coupled with this wonderful engine, would surely terrify the enemy. The fact that I was an ace myself enabled me to make my plane still more effective against its adversaries.

“But we wanted to strike a really vital blow, not just a few tremors here and there. We must strike at your own general staff, and make them feel that we had them hopelessly outwitted. Something had to be done to impress them. If we could take an enemy prisoner, strap him in the cockpit of our plane, and then

put him through an experience which would shake him to the very depths, he would report on it all so convincingly that the staff must believe it. Of course, this would have to be a man whom the Allies trusted and relied upon.” His eyes flickered across the room to Kirby. “I was more than delighted when this American, whose fame has been exploited through the Western Front, fell into our midst, by my own guns. Here was some one we could use, and I made my plans in great haste.

“A scene was staged for his benefit in the office of our military headquarters. I made a speech to him that I had carefully planned, a speech that would convince him that our plane was controlled by wireless, and that it was destined to wipe out our enemies. There was only one time when I slipped up a trifle. The prisoner suddenly surprised me by challenging me about the guns of the plane, saying that no guns could be aimed and fired accurately from a distant station. This fact being perfectly obvious, I was at loss for an answer. However, I managed to cover the whole thing up by changing the subject.

“We took the American to the secret field where we kept our ship, and I told him I was going to one of our control stations. In reality, while he was imprisoned in a cellar, I was preparing the red machine for its special trip, putting on my little device of handcuffs which I could open from my own seat. Finally, when all was in readiness, I unlocked the panel which closed up the fuselage and climbed into my place. What happened after that, you already know. After I was thoroughly certain that I had impressed my prisoner with a horror which he would never forget, I released the clamps from his wrists. I knew he would find the parachute I had placed on his seat, and I knew he would use it. He would land among his countrymen and tell them just what had happened. That was all there was to it.”

“But,” Kirby suddenly put in with slight puzzlement, “what about all those balloons—especially the balloon which was right near the secret field where the plane took off?”

“The balloon at the secret field was there on purpose,” von Steitz replied. “We sent it up just for effect, and arranged to shoot off those rockets, which of course meant nothing. As for the balloons at the Front—they are always there for the use of the signal corps.” He sighed wearily, and his breath began to come in spasmodic gasps. “There is nothing else. As I said, it was all a big hoax.”

Then his tone changed, and his greenish eyes

stabbed out toward Kirby with a blighting malice that would not leave the German even in death. "And it would have worked, if it weren't for this *verdampft* insolent pig. It was working already—already the Allies were beginning to lose their morale. If we could have gone on with it just a few more months, we could have achieved real results." His tone became bitter then, with the bitterness of absolute frustration. "But it failed. And now it is finished." And, as if suddenly resigned because life was no longer worth living for him, he fell back on his pillow. Minutes later a rattling noise began in his throat, a tremor passed through his body, and he lay still.

The doctor leaned over him. He listened to the man's heart. Then the army medico rose and faced the men in the room, and nodded slowly.

There was a moment's silence, in respect for the dead—even though the dead man had been a cruel, bloodthirsty fiend. And then the colonel from intelligence broke the silence. He shrugged.

"Well," he said, as if dismissing an unpleasant event, "that is that. The whole thing is over. Allied morale will shoot right up as soon as we broadcast the true story of the red machine. And what's more," he added eagerly, "we have this new German engine from the red plane, and our experts will doubtless learn

many things from it." He turned to Kirby. "Captain, I certainly must congratulate you on the way you've handled this whole affair. It was splendid work."

And Kirby's C.O. and his two comrades agreed warmly. Kirby smiled modestly. "Still," he said, "I can't help feeling that I was somewhat of a damn fool." He reached into a pocket, drew out a circular which was almost a week old. He showed it to the others, and they all read.

"Of late there has been a wild rumor, absolutely unfounded, that an enemy airplane without a pilot has been operating on our side of the lines.

"This is merely propaganda spread by a desperate enemy who is fighting with his back to the wall and therefore will resort to any tactics.

"No sane-minded person will put any stock in this absurd myth. There is no plane, and there can be no plane, which can fly without a pilot to control it.

"The rumor must be stopped and discouraged wherever it is spreading. Airplane pilots are requested to keep their heads and not allow their imaginations to deceive them into believing in this impossible riderless plane."

"You see," Kirby said, "G.H.Q. isn't so dumb after all. They told us how this damned plane worked right at the beginning. The only trouble was we didn't believe them until we found out for ourselves."

