



ORTH'S FLIGHT AGAINST TIME

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

*Follow An Intrepid Fighting Pilot Over the German Lines on a Perilous Mission
in this Exciting Story of the War-Torn Heavens!*

SKY FIGHTERS (V6N2) AUGUST 1934

IT WAS AS THOUGH the squadron to which "Silent" Orth belonged were entirely surrounded by highly charged wires. And the men all walked, or stood, as though expecting the wires to fall down and entangle them—and burn them alive.

Haunted eyes stared into the east toward German-held skies. The skipper himself paced the field, ever and anon lifting his eyes to gaze eastward, and to run his hands through his tousled hair. At such times he cursed in a low, terrible voice, in which there was agony that seemed to be torn from the very roots of his being.

A Spad came down and landed. The flyers watched it come in—and shook their heads. It wasn't the Spad they were expecting, and it came from the west instead of the east. The man who stepped out was Silent Orth, just back from some peaceful mission behind the lines. He turned his crate over to the greaseballs and strode across the field to the group of flyers who were watching and waiting.

"What is it?" he asked. "A wake?"

A lieutenant answered him profanely.

"It might be, at that," he said. "Too bad you weren't here. If you'd gone in place of Lieutenant Perry, we wouldn't care a damn whether you came back or not."

Silent Orth's lips twisted sardonically. Once, not so very long ago, the fellow would have said the same thing and would have meant it from the bottom of his heart. Now it was so much apple sauce.

"What's happened?" Orth merely asked.

"Special mission. A hurry-up one. Perry volunteered. So did the rest of us, but the Old Man picked Perry because he'd worked on Salmsons. And the job was a peach. A big ammunition dump to be bombed, thirty kilometers behind the lines. A one-man job—a suicide's job. Perry, should have been back an hour ago—if he's coming back."

Silent Orth nodded grimly.

"Yeah, if he comes back. And suicide is right."

Now the rising drone of a motor could be heard, directly overhead. All necks were craned as the squadron tried to locate the ship which seemed to be hidden in the heart of the noon-day sun. The skipper yelled to the ground-crew of the bracketed Lewis.

"Man that gun, you buzzards! Get the lead out of your shoes. That's a Heinie coming down!"

The ground-crew raced for stations.

The squadron spotted the diving Albatross, which was spinning crazily down because its pilot obviously expected to be shot at. The flyers stepped back, into the shelter of the buildings.

The Lewis began to chatter. Major Apperson swore. "Fools!" he said. "Crazy fools! Opened fire when he was still a mile away."

But the Albatross was trawling fast. By the time the major had finished his complaint, the crate was flattening over the field, traveling at top speed. It zoomed fifty feet above the ground, and was fifteen hundred feet aloft in a magnificent leap into space.

Something had dropped from the crate as it swooped over the field, something that struck the field and bounced. For a moment the bundle looked as though it were the legs of a man—and there were faces among the watchers which went suddenly pale. But then they noticed it wasn't legs. but a pair of boots. And even halfway across the field it was plain that the boots had been charred by fire.

An orderly raced for the bundle. The Lewis had ceased firing. Apparently it had done no damage whatever.

The orderly brought the bundle. There was a note brief and to the point attached to the boots:

LIEUTENANT PERRY, OF YOUR SQUADRON, WAS SHOT DOWN FIFTEEN KILOMETERS BEHIND THE GERMAN LINES, TRAVELING EASTWARD. HIS PLANE BURNED. HE WILL BE GIVEN MILITARY BURIAL.

(SIGNED) GLOECHNER.

The major swore deeply again. His lips were bloodless. "I knew it could not be done," he said. "I told that buzzard with the eagles on his shoulders it couldn't be done, not by the whole squadron. And this is the answer."

THEN the major looked at Silent Orth. "What the devil are you staring at?" he demanded. "And what do you think about it?"

"I think if I were the colonel at Wing, I'd try it again," said Silent Orth quietly.

"Yeah? Yeah? Well, maybe you could do it."

"I wouldn't try it with a Salmson, sir. A fellow needs speed for that job. I'd fix up bombracks under the wings of my Spad—"

Major Apperson's eyes narrowed. He sucked in a deep breath which whistled through his tightly locked lips.

"Then what are you waiting for?" he snapped. "I don't think the Heinies knew what Perry was after. He'd only got halfway to wherever he was going when the Germans got him. I hope you get further!"

"So," said Orth, "do I. And if that's an order, I'm on my way."

Orth's greaseballs had already serviced his crate. They always did that as soon as he landed, for one never knew when the dynamic flyer would take off again. All the ship had needed was gasoline, and that had been poured into its tanks.

Orth strode to the crate, snapped brisk commands at the sergeant in charge. The sergeant raced for a hangar, came out with materials. His eyes were glowing. His men got busy, moving at top speed under the lash of his tongue.

The rest of the squadron gathered around. The major stared wordlessly at the back of Silent Orth as the flyer superintended the changes he was having made in his crate. Orth's wingmates took a hand in the preparation.

Small bombs, handled with extreme care, were brought out and hung in the racks under the wings. Wire controls were run back to the pilot's pit. And at last, Orth climbed into his "office."

He waved airily to his comrades, but they were not fooled. Orth was setting forth on the most dangerous, the most nearly impossible mission he had ever undertaken. The chance that he would be able to do it and get back was one in a hundred.

The motor roared as Orth revved her up. Chocks were yanked free at his signal. He blasted the ship's tail off. His wingmates stepped back, their eyes on the small bombs swung under the wings. If one happened to drop free as the plane got under way, the Spad would be smashed to bits.

The tail was off, weaving from side to side. Orth came back on the stick and his wingmates sighed with relief. The Spad veered away to the east, not circling for altitude.

MAJOR APPERSON watched it go.

"I was wondering about something," he said to nobody in particular, his face a study.

They didn't ask him what he was wondering, but he volunteered.

"Did anybody," he went on, "notice whether Orth wore boots?"

THEY gasped. It was a sort of omen. The skipper himself didn't expect Orth to come back. He was expecting his boots to return, as Perry's had.

Orth didn't look back. Already, even before the opposing lines came under his wings, he was concentrating with all his mind and body on the task ahead. He didn't even look down when the Archies

opened, and their black death-flowers blossomed in the skies above his head. He knew that even one small piece of shrapnel, touching one of the bombs, would utterly destroy him, but he refused to think about it.

Then he was inside the lines. He came back on his stick, climbing to ten thousand—and his keen eyes were watching the way ahead, looking for the wings of the Albatross which had brought to the squadron the grim reminders of the death of Lieutenant Perry. Orth had nothing against the man particularly, except that he was a German, but he did not wish him to get back with any information whatever.

Fifteen minutes ticked off. Orth knew that he was at least as deep in German territory as Perry had been. It was then that he saw the wings of the Albatross he sought. They were perhaps a kilometer ahead of him, just dropping out of a pile of cumulus clouds. Had he not spotted them, or had the pilot spotted Orth sooner, the German might have trapped him and shot him down. But now the German was loafing along, believing himself utterly safe so deep within his own lines.

That he would be challenged at any moment, Orth had known from the moment he crossed into German skies. It might as well come now as any time. He gave his crate full gun, and pointed his nose down on a slanting dive under full power.

The German drew backward into his ring-sight. Orth didn't even clutch the stick with his knees to give free play to his hands on the trip. He meant to take this German in his stride. He roared down on the German's tail.

He was almost within range when the German sensed that death hovered—like a black eagle—in the air above and behind him. He suddenly whirled and looked back. But now Orth was in range, even as the German wildly started to roll out of line of sights.

ONLY then did Orth realize something that hadn't come to him before. He couldn't maneuver with those bombs under his wings. They might shake loose, their sensitive noses might touch something under his wings, and that would be the end. So he had to get his man, now—this instant—before he could slide out of line of sights and come up under Orth's belly with Spandaus flaming.

Orth didn't even give the German a chance to close his mouth, which was opened wide in surprise. His Vickers were flaming the instant his enemy discovered him. Orth had to make the kill. There would be no second chance.

Orth glanced to either side, even as he saw his tracers end in the German's cockpit. The sky was empty of enemy planes, at least within reach of him. He had several seconds. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Albatross go over on its back, hover for a moment like a shot bird, then begin a crazy spin to the ground.

Orth snapped a glance over each shoulder in turn. Several German crates, in formations loafing up toward the lines—as though conserving their power for the fights they must have been contemplating—were cutting out of their formations, circling widely, getting up speed, to dive on this fool American who had the brazen effrontery to hunt Germans so far within their own lines. Orth grinned thinly.

"I wonder if there'll be any excitement on this trip?" he asked himself. His lips puckered into a wry whistle and he turned back to watch for a moment the fall of his victim.

The crate crashed in under full power, going into a clump of trees, out of which came, next instant, plumes of black smoke shot through and through with orange flames. Orth knew then that German foot troops down there would be racing to the scene, and that if telephones hadn't already jangled their warnings into Germany, they now were frantically advising all and sundry that an American lunatic was moving straight into Germany, swerving neither to right nor left, knocking down anybody that got in his way.

"The party," murmured Orth, "should begin at any moment."

He studied the sketch the major had given him, showing the location of the spot in Germany he must find. His glance studied the ground, and his eyes were thoughtful. He was already looking ahead, planning on how to escape the planes which now seemed coming from everywhere to see that whatever he had in mind should not be accomplished.

HIS altimeter said four thousand feet. He grinned wryly. He hadn't even thought to pull out of the planing dive by which he had destroyed the boot-carrying German. His wings were almost bowed back with the speed he was making.

He estimated that it was probably ten kilometers, still, to the place he wished to bomb. The trees below were scattered, but not too scattered for the working out of the scheme which had come to his mind in a flash of inspiration. He was grinning.

He wouldn't even use his guns again, he decided,

until he had dropped his bombs—and had dropped them as nearly on the spot they were supposed to strike as was humanly possible.

He dropped lower and lower. The sound of wind through his struts and braces was like the wailing of a host of banshees, a high shrill shriek that never ended, that rose to a keening crescendo. It hammered against Orth's own eardrums, so that they seemed to throb with the sound.

ORTH glanced at the wires which had been strung back so that he could trip the bombs. They were vibrating in the wind of his passage like the strings of a huge harp. He studied them with some concern. It was quite possible that the pull of the wind might release them.

He was glad that each of the six bombs had been connected with a separate wire, so that if he dropped one, the others still would remain intact. And one bomb would wreak as much havoc, if it landed properly, as a hundred. Once a fire started in a dump, or an explosion occurred anywhere within it, the place could be written off instantly as a loss.

Now the pursuing Germans were getting closer. Orth counted six ships and was sorry there were not a dozen. The more there were, the more they would hamper one another. In the excitement and thrill of the chase, they apparently hadn't thought of that, but his own life depended on his thinking of everything, overlooking nothing that would contribute to prolonging his life until, at least, he had reached his objective.

If he died afterward—well, Wing should be satisfied, he told himself wryly, because its orders had been carried out.

But he must not die yet.

Now the tops of trees, so far behind the lines that they had not even been blasted by shellfire during the endless years of the war, were almost directly below his landing gear. He grinned and dropped even lower. The branches loomed ahead of him. He breathed something that might have been a prayer for the security of the bombs below him, and prepared to lead the Germans such a chase as few of them had ever before experienced.

THEY were above him now and three had opened fire. He stared at his wings. So far, the Germans had scored complete misses.

"And now I'll give 'em something to shoot at," said Orth to himself calmly.

He looked ahead carefully, making sure of the proper direction. Then, without seeming to tilt his wings at all, he began to use the tree-tops for cover. On the point of smashing into a tree, he lifted above it, like a hurdler taking a hurdle in stride.

The pattern of his flight was almost a zig-zag, so sharply did he turn and duck, missing this tree and that, all but touching this one with his right wing or his left, jumping over another—but driving forward, in general, in the right direction, still with his motor full out. If he were to crash in now, his motor would go a good ten feet into the ground—

“And they’d pick me up,” Orth told himself, “if they picked me up at all—on a mighty small piece of blotting paper!”

But that only added to his excitement. The speed of the thing caused his blood to tingle. The trees were a green blur which he avoided at the last minute, a green river flowing backward at express train speed.

Bullets snapped past his ears. Some German was coming close. He dared to bank to the left sharply. He looked back, fully expecting that one of his bombs might have crashed into the woods, causing debris to geyser skyward.

But his men had fastened the bombs securely. The wires which held them were still vibrating. Orth fancied he could almost hear the music they made. But it mingled with the music of the wind through struts and braces, and became merely part of the banshee wailing that throbbed and rang in his ears.

The Germans had to change direction a little, and so Orth gained a few precious yards. Every yard meant split seconds, and split seconds meant the difference between life and death. The speed was terrific.

The Germans refused to take a chance on coming so close to the ground, or playing hide and seek with him amidst the green. They were not in the desperate situation of Orth himself. He had to take chances to save his life. They did not. They were so many against him, they must have thought, that the man was mad to think he had the slightest chance of getting through.

But every second brought him closer and closer to his objective. He looked at his watch. Time, and certain landmarks on the ground he watched for, told him that the dump must show ahead of him within a matter of seconds. And he would need altitude for his job when the time came.

AHEAD was a small clearing. He put his nose down into it, to take advantage of some thirty feet or so of

skyroom, and his motor roared its loudest as he dared to dive almost all of that thirty feet. With his wheels almost on the ground, he yanked the stick back into his belly, and the ground fell away as though the whole forest had been dropped suddenly from some high mountain.

He looked back again, grinning. The Germans were rising to him, apparently sure of themselves now that they had flushed their quarry. But Orth shook his head. They were seconds, and yards, too late and too far astern.

He looked ahead. The devil with the people behind him. Nothing now could keep him from reaching the dump which he saw directly ahead.

His leap into space had netted him some fifteen hundred feet of elevation. With this to satisfy him, he pointed his nose directly at the vast clearing which appeared to be piled from side to side with every sort of ammunition container the gods of war could have devised in their diabolical workshops. Projectiles with savagely pointed noses were piled up like cordwood. Boxes, barrels—which probably contained high explosives—were everywhere. Sentries patrolled the area carelessly.

BUT even as Orth spotted the sentries, they saw him. They dropped to their knees and flung Mannlichers to their shoulders. Orth shook his head.

“You buzzards shoulda dashed for the woods. It’s going to be hot down there in exactly two seconds Mex by the clock.”

His hands went to the outside of his fuselage on the right, over the cockpit coaming. The slipstream ripped at his suddenly exposed arm. He looked back as the dump came under him. The Germans were slicing down on his tail—three Fokkers—as though desperately racing in to keep him from doing the job they must now have seen that all the flyers in Germany could not have stopped.

Orth grinned.

Directly ahead of his nose, a thousand feet down, was the nearest edge of the huge sprawling pile of war material. He calculated the speed of his crate in the space of a heartbeat. He yanked the first wire. The first bomb, its phalanged tail spinning slightly, was smashing down for the pile of projectiles.

IN A second he would be over the pile. He dropped his second bomb, fearful that it would overshoot. At the same instant the first bomb went in, almost in the

center of the pile. A great geyser, filled with everything the mind of man could imagine, apparently, with black smoke all around it, black smoke shot through and through with tongues of flame, reached avidly for the sky.

Orth heard the deafening explosion above the roaring of his motor, above the keening of his wires. It drowned out all other sounds. It was like the very crack of doom. And its debris was already falling back, like the oddments picked up and dropped again by a hurricane, when his second bomb went in.

The second bomb missed the pile—but after the explosion Orth looked down at the spot, even as he was tightly banking to come in—and where there had been two kneeling sentries there was nothing at all but a gaping hole.

And the second explosion did things to Orth's Spad. The air seemed to suck out of the sky—and the Spad dropped like a stone. Then the air blowed out, almost at the same time, and the Spad turned over and over, jumping almost straight up toward the sky. How the bombs held was a miracle, but they did. The crate was entirely out of control. Even the roaring of the Hisso was uncertain, as though it had been a sentient being which had been shocked to breathlessness.

But the Spad finally rose almost above the pile of ammunition, and Orth was thankful for so much. Two of the German crates had been almost over the spot where the first explosion had occurred. One of them was gliding down to some landing place Orth could not see, and its wings were a mass of slatting canvas. The second crate stood, tail in the air, vibrating as the bomb-control wires had vibrated, at the edge of the clearing, all too close to the rest of the dump.

The dump itself was letting go. Bullets, Orth knew, were spearing out in all directions.

He slid back over the dump the second he had reasonable control of his crate, glanced down. His airspeed indicator told him that, because of the pranks the explosion had played on the atmosphere, he was making almost no speed forward. He put both hands over the cockpit coaming, allowing the stick to bang in whatever direction it would, and yanked the wires with both hands—like a fisherman taking in a seine.

The last of his bombs started down, straight for the center of the dump. The loss of their weight seemed to fill the Spad with a fresh exuberance, a fresh zest for action. It handled easily now, as though glorying in its freedom, as though released from some deadening travail.

Orth slanted away from the dump before the bombs struck, caring not at all that he slipped directly toward the nearest of the German planes. The sky seemed suddenly filled with them, but Orth grinned. Here, at least, was one ammunition dump which hadn't paid dividends to the holders of German bonds.

The dump let go. But Orth was in the clear.

AND the Germans, gone berserk by this near view of the havoc wrought so far behind the lines by a single one of their enemies, plunged at Orth from all directions. Calmly Orth studied them. He tested his controls to make sure that the concussions hadn't injured them. He fired a very brief burst to test out his Vickers. He couldn't waste lead. He would probably need every bit of it before he got back.

Everything seemed to be in working order.

He looked at his enemies with a new interest.

One man was directly ahead of him, flying an Aviatik. The fellow was in position to let go a burst. He would, ordinarily, have been Orth's proper target. But on the very point of loosing a burst at him, Orth banked directly to the right, where an Albatross was coming down to take advantage of the fact that Orth must first rid himself of the Aviatik. The Albatross pilot, surprised beyond all possibility of evading the unexpected issue, never had a chance to realize his mistake.

ORTH gripped his stick with his knees. His eyes glued themselves to the crossed wires of his ring-sight. His Vickers chattered a shrill burst, and it was almost as though they laughed—shrill, maniacal laughter. The tracers ended beyond the propeller of the Albatross, through whose blur Orth could see the bulky outline of the German pilot.

The Albatross' propeller suddenly became visible. The Vickers' bullets had smashed squarely into it. That ship, whatever else happened, was out of the running. And, with a winging buckling maneuver, Orth got the falling ship between himself and the next nearest German.

And he kept it there as the Albatross spun in, while the Germans dazedly tried to reach his Spad. A thousand feet from the ground he let his motor full out again, dived under the spinning Albatross, and headed for home.

Again he had gained on his enemies, precious feet and yards—but it was thirty kilometers back to his home tarmac. Would he ever make it?

It wasn't going to be easy. Never in his life before had Orth been compelled to take up so much skyroom to battle against odds. He hedge-hopped for four kilometers, at a guess, until the pursuing Germans, despairing of getting him from above, and knowing that they faced disgrace should they return to report failure, took their lives in their hands and dropped down to hedgehop with him at top-speed.

His answer to this maneuver was simple. He nosed over, roared his motor full out, and zoomed for the skies, going as nearly straight up as possible, until the pull of gravity threatened to choke down his motor. Then he looked over the side. Three Fokkers were circling up after him, keeping close together.

HE COULD almost read the minds of their pilots. Now, they thought, they had him. They had flushed him from covert, had outlined him against the sky. And even as they figured this out, he was coming back.

And the advantage of altitude was with Silent Orth. His enemies, three of them, were under his wings, under his guns. And those guns were going as his speed mounted. He crouched low in his pit. His eyes held on his enemies. His white-knuckled hands patted his mounted guns which were growing white-hot as bullets fed through them. He must not maneuver. He must strike and get away, to keep on striking when they crowded him again.

The nearest Fokker seemed suddenly to strike an invisible obstacle, and to stop almost stockstill. Then it dropped its right wing and started spinning.

Orth shifted the nose of his crate, deliberately, with dreadful concentration, to bring the motor section of the Fokker into his line of sights. Then—another brief burst. Smoke burst from under the enemy's motor-housing. Orth nodded his satisfaction.

IN THAT same instant he jumped over the burning crate, banked slightly to the left, grabbed his trips once more—and it was almost as though his Vickers hadn't even stopped their chattering. This time the broad startled face of a German pilot was so close that he could almost see the man's expression—his dead-white face.

But his bullets changed the whiteness of the German's face to crimson. A right arm flung up, and Orth knew that his enemy—gallant as all decent airmen are gallant—had tried to do the brave thing in the last split second of life left to him. He had tried to deliver the traditional salute to his successful enemy.

The Fokker, out of control, suddenly flew wild across the face of the forest.

Orth turned his attention to the third Fokker, but that pilot had seen enough. He banked away, racing toward a formation of planes which was coming swiftly on to join in the chase.

And Orth flew on. He hoped that his gasoline would last. It couldn't be over twelve kilometers now to the home field. If his guns were to fail him in a crisis—but they couldn't! Fate wouldn't treat a man like that—allow him to reach the heights, only to plunge him down when he had reached them.

Not that Orth thought like that. He didn't believe much in fate that wasn't controlled by the hands, feet and brain of Silent Orth himself.

He was going home again. Now he would try the trees once more. If the enemy chased him there, they'd have to break formation, which meant that their shots would of necessity be scattered, and their chances of hitting him fatally lessened.

They were coming down by the time he had reached the tree-tops. But he was now so accustomed to this kind of game—which these new enemies had not yet tried out—that it scarcely thrilled him any more. He looked back.

One German had cut out of the formation and was riding straight down on his tail. Orth could sense the man's desperation, knew that he was ready to sacrifice his life to see that this mad American didn't get home.

"If he feels that way about it," thought Orth, "why shouldn't I be regular and help him be a dead hero?"

HE YAWED from right to left as the German, over-eager, sat on his tail and started his Spandaus to yammering. Orth, grinning to himself, dropped his wings lower and lower, lessening his speed not at all. He glanced ahead, picked out a tree which loomed above the others—blotting it out for the German behind him with his own wings. He kept on yawing. To yaw meant that he lost some speed, and the German crept up on him.

Orth desired exactly that.

The tree came toward him as though shot from a gun. Orth continued to zig-zag. And then, when the tree was almost under him, Orth dived straight for the ground, motor full out, knowing that the German would do the natural thing, because he must believe that now he had his man.

Orth glanced sharply back. Yes, the German had nosed down, bringing his guns into play again. In a

second he would fire—but that second never came. For even as Orth nosed down, he nosed up again, almost buckling his wings as he pointed his tail at the ground and literally kicked his rail-surfaces out of the dirt with the power of his madly roaring Hisso. It was too fast for the German.

And when Orth looked back again, the German was gone—and smoke was rising out of the tree over which Orth had swooped with inches to spare. Orth grinned.

He looked ahead. The lines were just there. He would be over them in a matter of seconds.

And the Old Man, probably forewarned by intelligence, was out to escort him home, for half a dozen Spads were high-tailing it toward Germany, and toward the man who was coming home with half the German air force in pursuit.

The Germans started to give back. Orth could feel their rage and disappointment reach out to engulf him as the lines passed under his wheels. Then his own squadron passed over him, so many streaks of death and destruction, and he had won his way clear. He

breathed a sigh of relief. He cut his motor. He flung his arms wide in a magnificent stretch. His mouth gaped open as he yawned.

“Must be hungry,” he told himself.

He set his crate down in a perfect three-point landing. The greaseballs took charge. Orth, without a mark on him, stood beside his Spad and watched his wingmates come back.

MAJOR APPERSON came across the tarmac toward Orth. He was grinning a little. And as the squadron landed, other flyers joined Apperson. The major said:

“Well, what kept you, Orth?”

Orth looked at his watch.

“A celebration,” he said. “At least, a sort of one.”

“Exciting?”

“Nope, not much.”

“How many crates did you knock down?”

“Didn’t count ‘em. You ought to know they don’t credit you for crates that fall in Germany. Can’t I ever teach you guys nothing?”