



THE JERRY CRACKER

by C.M. MILLER

You Can't Graft Wings On A Prison Bunk, Or Bars Won't Make A Fuselage—But Ralston Wanted A Crack At The Huns And No Prison Built Will Hold An-Ace-To-Be.

IT WAS NASTY WEATHER outside. Not flying weather at all. But when Emmett Ralston got his orders to report as a replacement to the 32nd, near Senlis, he flung his helmet into a corner of the long barracks, and yelled for a ship. Damn the weather, he was going to get that long-hoped-for crack at the Germans!

He tooled out of a low, heavy ceiling, and set down on the 32nd's field. His was the only Spad in sight. All the others were in their hangars, where his should have been.

The usual procedure of reporting over, a burly

lieutenant unceremoniously thrust him through the door into the long squadron room with a "Find yourself a cot and flop, soldier. No flyin' today."

The room was a medley of sounds, smells and smoke. Men lay around on their cots. Snoring, reading, writing or just lying.

A banner hung above one of the cots. Five Maltese

crosses on it. Here, a broken prop. Over there a piece of scorched fabric nailed to the wall. From a flamer. The tail section of a Fokker. An aileron from another. A white goat blatting for cigarette papers. A jabbering parrot, and a chattering monkey no bigger than a squirrel. The Squadron Room!

The smell of cognac, tobacco smoke and sour wine hung heavy on the air.

It was plain that this was no flying weather.

The Guy looked up from a torn copy of *La Vie Parisienne*, "New guy, eh?" he grunted. "What's your reason for tryin' to win the war, soldier?" He grunted "U-uh." The Guy put in again. "Grab yourself a cat and flop like that guy said, soldier, for as soon as this weather clears old Snickerfritz and von Jagon will be on your tail and you'll need rest bad."

The Kid looked up. His faded blue eyes, vague and old, his straw colored hair a mat on his head. He took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Aw, hell," he blurted. "Don't mind him. He's been up here six weeks and ain't put a shot in a Jerry yet. It's made a fuzzy taste in his mouth, and he can't wash it out."

The Guy snorted. "Yeah! You only got four Heinies, and they laughed themselves to death just watchin' you do your crazy maneuvers. And you won't be doin' them much longer if you don't throw away that white helmet of yours and paint out that nose-thumbing cartoon of Uncle Sam you got on your fuselage. Von Jagon knows you and he's after your blood ever since you knocked down that kid brother of his."

The Kid went back to sucking his pipe. The Guy repeated his question to Emmett Ralston.

"What makes you want to win the war, soldier?"

EMMETT RALSTON picked up his duffle bag and looked around for an empty cot. "Why," he said haltingly. "I guess it's the same reason you are here. We can't allow these Huns to run the world, and I bet I won't be six weeks getting my first piece of cold meat out of 'em either!"

He was warming up to his subject. His blue eyes crackled indignantly. Smooth face drawing into a mask of hate. "We've got to teach those Germans a lesson!" he cried.

The Guy stuck out his tongue. "A-h-h, *phurlp*," he blurted. "You been readin' books. The Heinies ain't such bad guys. I seen lots of 'em here. Eatin' at that table right there. Drinkin' at the zinc bar over there in the corner too."

He went back to his magazine. "You got a lot to

learn, kid," he said slowly. "The Heinies are just like everybody else. Most of 'em are pretty decent guys." He waved his hand. "There's a cot over there in the corner. Hanley had it day before yesterday, but he won't need it any more, and kid, he didn't down a single German ship either."

Emmett Ralston's brow wrinkled. Something was wrong here. He started down the line of folding camp cots. He had been reading a lot back in the States. The papers were all full of Hun atrocities. Then the Guy blurts out like this!

Emmett Ralston shook his head in puzzlement, dropped his bag on the empty cot, and began unpacking for his final, most important, and nasty lesson in the art of war as she is. Not as historians had told him it would be. But it would be his crack at the Huns. That was all that counted, right now. It was sundown two days later before the sky cleared and the ceiling raised. Captain—old Snickelfritz—Beard came into the squadron room and posted the next day's patrols.

Emmett was assigned to Beard's flight in Hanley's place.

Beard rumbled sharply, "You birds hold yourselves ready to jump. No one's been in the air for three days now, and no telling what will pop. Be ready for it."

It was just 11:27 p.m. when *alerte* snapped everyone up with a jerk. Captain Beard barged through the door into the squadron room.

"Snap out of it! Get out and get up. Lookouts report Zep raid on Paris. Two Zeps, escorted by Fokkers, crossed the lines due south of Compiègne." The Guy bellowed to the Kid. "Better leave that white helmet of yours here. The von'll be in his green Fokker an' escortin' those Zeps. They've comin' right across this field."

For answer, the Kid defiantly snicked the straps on his white helmet and jumped for the door. Emmett Ralston was right behind him. The blasting noise of warming Hissos hit their ears.

The Kid cautioned above the roar. "Better hug some of the other guys pretty close, Ralston. You haven't been over this ground before. Easy to get lost when you don't know the landmarks."

Ralston wet his dry lips, and nodded. His first time up! And at night! The damned Huns were going to bomb defenseless women and children in Paris! But then, he remembered hearing one of the men tell about getting lost when he was on a bombing raid on Laon too.

The Kid reached his Spad with the nose-thumbing Uncle Sam painted on its fuselage. He gave Ralston an

encouraging pat on the back. "It ain't so bad as long as you don't get a tracer in the tank. Remember—keep close to somebody."

Ralston nodded again. His throat felt full. He found his ship. His crack at the Heinies was coming up!

The skipper roared them up off the field before the Hissos had a chance to thoroughly warm. *Alerte* was still wailing like a lost soul. Ralston found a place in the V and hunched tautly in his pit.

Night combat! Coming! This was what he had been training for!

Restless fingers of light were probing the sky. They picked up the Spads, blinding the pilots with their glare. Followed them for a moment, then sliced a new swath in the velvet night.

Emmett Ralston wet his lips again. The slipstream whipped them dry. He looked around. Sputtering exhaust flames ringed him. Ghostly shapes with wings. Spads, manned by veterans.

A snap of fire blossomed ahead and to the south. Another. More of them. A-A, bawling into the night. Searchlights probed that way. Swinging back and forth. Drawing tracks on the clouds.

Ralston remembered he had heard that Zeps liked clouds to hide in. The Spads changed course. Their noses were boring toward the crackling snarl of high bursting shrapnel now.

Another searchlight caught them. Held for a moment. Swung back to the clouds. A-A fire blanked off a second later. Spads were in the sky! The ground gunners would leave it to them.

By now Emmett Ralston had no idea where he was. In the sky, and above France, headed on a line almost due east and west. That was all he could tell. No wonder the Kid had cautioned him to keep close to someone else.

Then a searchlight caught a silver fish swimming high in the sky. The fish changed course, heading for a black cloud bank. The exhaust flames under the Spads lengthened out as their throttles prodded the motors to full speed.

Emmett Ralston's eyes jerked over his instruments. His Vickers. Belts threaded and ready to feed. Here was what he had waited for. Sky combat with the Huns!

And with a suddenness that was startling it was around him.

New exhaust flares. Hundreds of them, it seemed. Blurring black dots that shot down the night sky. Orange red streaks of snapping tracer.

The Spads were tangling with the Fokker escort.

The searchlights were whipping around the sky in wide arcs. Searching, sweeping, probing. Emmett Ralston saw twin streaks of tracer slash across his right wing. He chandelled in frantic haste.

A blur of exhaust flames were spinning a web around him. How was a man going to tell whom to shoot at? How could he tell Spad from Fokker? Try it, that was all.

Something shot past his wing tips. He lanced after it. Peering overside. Trying to make out whether it wore a cocard or a Maltese cross.

The wings were dark. Not silvery like a Spad's. He tripped the Vickers. A harsh snarl bubbling through red snouts, broke out on his cowl. Hammering and bucking. Tracer lancing an intermittent streak of fire ahead.

The black wings shot into a bank. Lost in the clouds. Ralston pulled up, and looked around.

He was hopelessly lost now. The exhaust flares were working south. Searchlights that way were swinging restlessly. A red glare lighted the sky. Sparks flying from it. Flaming fabric fluttering in a comet's tail behind a ball of flame. Some poor cuss had gotten it!

Again a searchlight found a blob of silver high overhead. Ralston could see the crosses painted on its side. He jerked his Spad around, heading for it. A Zep!

Up, up and up. His prop winding him higher and higher. The light held. Now he could see the motor nacelles. The glitter of a whirling prop.

He crushed his trips. The Vickers took up their jumping pound. Tracers slicing up, but far short. He remembered his instructor's orders. "Don't be a fool! Wait until you are in range before you begin firing."

A Fokker darted down from overhead. A green Fokker. It looked almost black in the glare of the searchlight. Ralston caught the snap of leader ribbons on its strut. Von Jagon!

Then tracer hit him—hard. He seemed to be in a miserable net of the stuff. It slashed and pounded at his ship. Rattling off his cowl. Pinged off his guns. His instrument board was merely a mass of broken glass and bullet-splattered metal. His Hissos coughed, spitting red fire from its exhaust. God, this was horrible!

The searchlight blinked off. He was blinded by the sudden darkness. But so was von Jagon.

Emmett Ralston was throwing his Spad around in sharp, jerky maneuvers. Suddenly he realized that the tracers were gone. So was the Fokker, and the Zep. Where?

Where was the gang? Where was everybody?

ONE BY ONE the searchlights blinked off leaving the night black again. The raid, was it over? Had the Zeps turned back, or gone on to Paris? And where was Paris, and the front, and the field?

Everything up here was black night, and blacker clouds.

He fumbled in his pockets. Found matches. Struck one on the bullet-battered dash, and shielding it with his hand, looked for his compass. It had gone out. That burst had shattered everything on his board. He didn't even have a gas gauge!

Wonderingly, he looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Twenty past twelve, midnight. He had been in the air almost an hour. He would still have gas for some time. But where would he go!

There was no sense in aimlessly cruising the sky until his tank was dry, then crashing in forced landing in the dark.

He might as well go down now, while he had gas to climb away from an obstruction if it suddenly loomed in his path.

For an hour he hugged the ground. Zooming away from a suddenly spotted tree. Darting aside as a white blotch, that might be a building, jumped out of the dark at him.

By now his face was moist with a damp perspiration, and his nerves were ragged and jumpy. He wasn't even sure that he was still in France. Desperation glinted in his straining eyes. He had to get down, even if he washed completely out doing it!

"I'll set her down in the next spot I hit," he muttered. "No Man's land, France, Germany, or hell, she's goin' down."

He dropped, feeling his way in. A long low building loomed on his right. Light filtered through drawn curtains as people inside heard his motor, and hurriedly lighted lamps.

Those buildings looked like barracks. Maybe they were! He might be landing on some training field! He sliced off more throttle. Settling lower. The trucks bumped. Bouncing along. The Spad coasted to a stop. He cut off the motor.

Doors popped open in the long buildings. Men were pouring out. Off in the dark there were cries and yells. Unintelligible, too far away. He couldn't make out what they were saying.

But the voices close at hand! They were guttural. Words that he knew from college days! German voices! He had landed in Germany!

He whipped back to his controls. But too late. Half-

dressed Germans were swarming around his Spad. Besides, his motor was cut.

The shouts off in the dark were getting more and more excitable. More men were coming. Someone climbed up beside his pit. A young man with a smiling face. A German officer, dressed in the uniform of a pilot in the German air-service.

"Hello, *Amerikaner*," he greeted in very good English. "This is some place for you to be setting down. Lost?"

Emmett Ralston pushed up his goggles and nodded. "Yes, lost," he admitted. "I suppose I'm in Germany now, huh?"

The young pilot laughed. "Not in Germany, but in a German officers' prison camp. My name's Jagon, air service too. Been here two weeks."

"Jagon! Jagon!" Ralston repeated slowly. "Prison camp! You're not von Jagon's brother, are you?"

Young Jagon nodded eagerly. "You have met him? My brother! Perhaps he put these holes in your ship! One of the men of the 32nd—the Kid—brought me down. Do you know the Kid?"

Ralston nodded, "Yes" to all the questions. The shouts in the dark were coming closer. Hurrying. Faces were dim white blobs as they crowded around the Spad.

"I wonder," Jagon was talking again. Eagerly, impetuously. "I wonder if you would let my brother know, that I am alive, and well. Von Jagon, you know. He, and my mother, think I am dead. You'll let them know, won't you?"

RALSTON wiped a smear of castor oil off his cheek. After all, this fellow was like anyone else. He didn't look like a wild-eyed guy that would ruin the world. And he talked good English, too.

Von Jagon's brother! His hand gripping the coaming. White knuckled, and eager.

"You will, won't you?" he urged again.

Involuntarily, Ralston nodded.

Jagon dropped to the ground. "I'll write just a short note—there isn't much time. We did it—before I was sent down. That is we flew news of a man back to his field. I took over two notes myself."

His head popped up again. He thrust a ball of paper into Ralston's hand. "Here. Just a couple of words to my mother. Let her know I am all right!"

Ralston took it, shoved it in his pocket. Snappy voices were flinging orders at the edge of the crowd. American voices. Yanks plowing their way through the crowd of German prisoners.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing landing a plane in here? Don't you know it's against orders! This is a prison camp, not a flyin' field."

It was daylight when Emmett Ralston lifted his Spad off a level place outside the prison camp, and headed for the 32nd's field. He had spent a hectic two hours explaining himself after that episode. Then there had been telephone calls, and still more calls to verify his story before he was allowed to leave.

Questions had been fired at him like a barrage. It had been so hot that he had forgotten all about the note in his coat pocket.

When Emmett Ralston got back to the field the gang was gone. Out on a search for von Jagon's men, he was told.

He wiped the back of his hand over his sleep-heavy eyes and ordered his Spad serviced. "Dammit, I come up here to kill Huns and I'm goin' lookin' for 'em."

A GRIZZLED sergeant protested. "But the lieutenant is a new man, and Captain Beard always sees that new men are well covered until they break in!"

"Well," Ralston grunted. "He's out there, I guess that's coverage enough. Wind her up. I'm goin' out to get me some cold meat. That's what I come up here for, and I didn't get any last night."

As Ralston jerked his Spad skyward the sergeant shook his head dolefully. "Damn fool to go stickin' his head into Jerry territory, green as he is."

And Emmett Ralston was green. He hadn't even seen the trenches! He didn't know the landmarks to find his way home by. He didn't even have a compass, or a gas gauge. But he did have guts, and a tremendous eagerness for a crack at the Jerrys.

The thought of Jerrys made him think of that note. He pulled his Spad higher, headed for the general direction of the Front, and fished the balled up piece of paper out of his pocket.

He spread it out on his knee. Hurriedly written in German, yet easy enough to read by using his college-gained knowledge of the language.

It was a bald statement of the fact that young Jagon was still alive and well. That was all.

Ralston fished a small wing bolt out of his pocket, wrapped the paper around it and stowed it away where it would be easy to reach.

He felt a bit guilty about that. Dropping notes in Germany just was not the thing to do. Yet for the life of him he couldn't figure how this one could hurt anybody. Besides the kid was young, terribly young,

and he seemed like a decent sort. Then too it was the custom for one field to let another know when its men had been shot down.

Maybe the Kid hadn't flown over a note after he had downed young Jagon. Evidently not, for the Guy said that the von was after the Kid hot and heavy. If he knew that young Jagon was alive and safe, he might drop the feud. It might be a good thing; dumping out this note. It might save the Kid's life.

Long jagged scars were in the ground underneath now. Trenches! The front lines! Ralston's eyes searched the sky. He wanted Fokkers. Huns!

High overhead cottony balls of clouds were making white splotches in a blue sky. Splotches that could hide death on Fokker wings.

Ralston eyed them, half eagerly, half nervously. What was in there? Apparently nothing, for nothing came down. Nor did he see anything dodging from one ball to the other.

He bored on over the lines. Eyes jerking this way and that. Back and forth. Up and down. Below, were white puffs of artillery banging away at hidden gun emplacements and troop concentrations.

A-A fire snarled up. Black, crackling balls of death. Ralston bored a crooked path through. Huns! Where were they? He couldn't spot a single ship in the sky.

He swung east. Rolling along. Where were they? Where was Beard and the rest of the flight?

Again he changed course, cutting deeper and deeper into Germany. Then he spotted von Jagon's field. A broad, flat spot with camouflaged hangars. One or two ships on the ground. The rest were either in the sky or the hangars. He couldn't tell which.

But the field made him think of the note. He fished it out of his pocket. Touched his trips to warm his guns. He'd nose down, drop the note, then shoot hell out of things.

He searched the sky back of his tail. It wouldn't do to have von Jagon drop on him now. He pushed the stick forward.

Screaming wires. Wings were beginning to vibrate and quiver. Going down! Going to start this damn war off with a bang!

Men on the field were running now. Dashing about in a frenzy. One of them was winding the prop of one of the Fokkers. A pilot was racing across the field for its pit. The hangars were looming large now. Close!

He held his hand over the side of the pit. Dropped the note. Get the damned thing out of his hands so that he could use them.

The paper unwrapped from the bolt, and went fluttering down like a big, white leaf. They couldn't help but see that!

Then Ralston tripped his triggers. The Vickers took up their wild, chanting cry. Slugs slashing at hangar roofs. Riddling them, and the ships in them.

He surged on the stick. Machine gun fire was drumming up. Riddling his whistling wings. Making smoky streaks past his ship.

The Fokkers were taxiing out to take off. A greaseball was winding up the other ships. Ralston came around on his wing tips. Shooting for the Fokker that was raising. Hit him! Damned Huns! Here was his chance! Now!

But a silvery streak shot past him. Tracer vomited from its nose. The Fokker lurched, quivering. Then it dropped to the field with a rending, splintering crash. It flamed there on the ground.

Ralston looked up with a start. That was a Spad. Captain Beard! And he was waving him home! Just when he was getting started on a party of his own!

But Beard's wave was incisive. Emphatic. Sharp. Ralston looked up. The rest of the flight were up there. Winding around in tight turns, waiting. He yanked savagely on the stick and started up.

Captain Beard rode right behind him. Stayed right on his tail until he fell into his place in the V and pointed home.

Emmett Ralston was sore. Sore as the devil. He hadn't had his crack at the Huns yet! That fight last night didn't count. He had only had one Fokker in his sights for a split second, that was all. He hadn't even reached the Zep.

Back at the field Beard stalked toward him. The captain looked angry and suspicious.

"What did you drop on von Jagon's field?" he demanded sharply, his voice menacing.

Emmett Ralston's eyes widened and an icy prickling feeling tingled his spine. Beard had seen, and was suspicious! Suddenly something seemed to grip his brain. The skipper thought that he had dropped information! His eyes showed it. His manner was demanding, and suspicious.

Emmett Ralston swallowed and wet his lips. He was in a tight spot! Well, he'd tell 'em, even if they wouldn't believe.

The Kid was standing there, sucking on his pipe. His eyes half closed. His face was expressionless and unfriendly.

"Well," the skipper snarled. "Out with it. What did you drop?"

Emmett Ralston plunged. "It was a note," he said hoarsely. Then the whole story came out.

Captain Beard stood with legs wide spread, his eyes hard, his thumbs hooked in his belt. "You're a liar, Ralston. That story won't hold water. It's thin as hell. We know the Kid downed young Jagon, and we know you landed in that prison camp. We know that, from the phone calls that came in last night. But we don't know—and you can't prove it—that you didn't go there on purpose. We don't know that that note was what you said it was. It might have been important Information, and it probably was.

"Ralston," he went on evenly. "You're in a dirty hole. They shoot spies and spy couriers, you know. I'm placing you under arrest right now. Come in the office."

Fire seemed to sear Emmett Ralston's whole body. He stiffened. "Listen here," he gritted. "That's my story, and I stick to it. As for arrest, I'll see you in hell first. I'm not—"

A Colt had suddenly appeared in the captain's hand. It was dead center on Ralston's heart. "Go ahead to the office," the skipper grated.

FOR A MOMENT Emmett Ralston faced the gun. Sullen rage in his eyes. His heart pounding in his ears. The Kid kept his pipe gurgling monotonously.

Ralston shrugged. "Right," he snapped. "But I'll—" He bit off as he realized that there was nothing more to say.

In the office Captain Beard motioned Ralston to a seat and called for an armed orderly. When the orderly had taken his position at Ralston's back, the captain phoned Intelligence and poured the whole story into their ears.

The Kid was sitting on the corner of the desk, thoughtfully swinging his foot and sucking his pipe. But he said nothing.

The captain forked the receiver, and looked up. His face was hard. "Ralston, charges of aiding the enemy will be filed against you. Intelligence is sending a man down, he should be here by dark. They will make further investigation, and it's up to you to prove your innocence, though God knows how you'll do it. In the meantime you will be confined to my room, and a guard will be stationed at the door. His orders will be to shoot to kill if you try to escape."

The captain's room was a partitioned-off section of the same long building that made up the squadron room. Emmett Ralston heard the door click behind him, then he sat down to think things over.

He should have given that note to the skipper. But the flight had been out, and he had been in too big a hurry to get out after them. He knew now that Captain Beard had had the flight up in the clouds all the time. Had been keeping a protecting eye on him, or else using him for bait in hopes of getting von Jagon to drop on him.

Oh, he was green, and a fool! But he wasn't licked. Not yet!

Some one fumbled at the door. The knob turned and the Kid walked in. His pipe gurgled damply. The Kid sat down on the skipper's cot.

"Sweet mess," he grunted. "But I believe you. I should have dropped a note about the youngster. Might have avoided all this, but I forgot it. The von was riding me pretty hard after that. Still is too."

Suddenly, a wild idea stung Emmett Ralston like the zinging lash of a whip. He would get his crack at the Hun—then to hell with 'em all!

"Listen, Kid," he said hoarsely. "I've got to get a ship. You say you believe me. Well, here's your chance to prove it. I'm stuck in here with an armed orderly. I couldn't get my ship on the field if I wanted to, and I'll be taken away tonight. Got that?"

The Kid sucked on his pipe. It gurgled. He nodded, and a strand of straw-colored hair fell on his forehead. He said nothing.

Ralston went on. Tensely, hurriedly.

"You order your ship out to be warmed up. I'll get out of here somehow—make a break for it. Then I'll fly straight for Germany. The Heinies may get me, but—well, I'll get a crack at them, and if they don't get me, I swear I'll come back here and face the music."

The Kid grunted shortly. "They'll kill you. Either while you're gettin' away, or the Heinies will. You're green."

"They'll shoot me anyway," Ralston snapped. "I'd rather get it in a scrap. All you got to do is order your ship out. I'll do the rest."

The Kid shook his head. "Nope. It's a bad enough mess now. Better not."

Ralston grabbed his shoulder, his fingers digging into it. "I'll do it anyway," he said hoarsely. "I'm not going to set here like a pimple on a log and get shot for a damn fool mistake I made. I'm going to break for it. I'm going to have one real scrap, if I washout doing it."

The Kid scratched between the dog's ears. "Better not," he advised slowly.

"Listen to me," Ralston scratched. "I'm going. That's all there is to it. If you won't order your ship out, I'll

try to wind one up and get away myself. You nor hell and high water is going to stop me."

He wiped perspiration off his forehead and glared at the Kid with defiant eyes.

The Kid looked up. The pup wagged his tail expectantly. The Kid's eyes batted heavily.

"Will you order that ship out?" Ralston's voice was hoarse and scraggly with emotion.

For a long time the Kid sat like a statue. The pup kept licking his dangling hand. Finally he nodded.

"Right, I will," he said, jerkily. "But I shouldn't."

He got up and went out. The pup followed, wagging his tail.

Emmett Ralston began a restless pacing of the floor. Back and forth; back and forth. To the door, the cot, the bare wall, the window. Hasty glances at his wrist watch. Ears straining for the pop of the Hisso on the Kid's Spad.

The floor creaked under the guard's feet as he paced in front of the door. That man had orders to shoot to kill.

Back and forth. Heels thumping against the floor. The Hisso popped alive. Began purring. Ralston snatched a quick look at his watch. Give that Spad fifteen minutes, then—

Back and forth some more. God, the minutes dragged. He wiped sweat off his face with his shirt sleeve.

The skipper had a leather coat hanging there. Castor oil splotches on it. He'd take that. No helmet, no goggles. That didn't matter, he'd go anyway.

Ten minutes now. It seemed hours! The Hisso would be getting warm. He wondered where the Kid was.

He looked at his wrist watch again. Only fifteen seconds gone by. What was the difference! Why wait longer!

He ruffled his hair. Threw himself on the cot. Screwed his face into a semblance of a man suffering great pain.

"Guard!" he panted. "Guard!"

The man shoved his head inquiringly inside the half open door. "What's wrong?" he grunted.

"Come here," Ralston panted hoarsely. "Straighten me around—Pain—here in my belly. I think it's appendicitis—hurts like hell. Shooting and stabbing."

The guard backed up. "I'll call the doc," he said hurriedly.

"No—no—straighten me out first. Hurts like hell." Ralston was panting now. "Just put my legs on—the cot."

THE GUARD walked in. Edged cautiously forward. It was plain that he was taking no chances. Ralston groaned hollowly. The guard stooped to pick up his legs. Emmett Ralston straightened with a jerk. His fist flashed. The guard grunted. Staggered. Ralston was on his feet. *Sock!* The guard went down.

He grabbed the man's Colt from its holster. Swept the skipper's leather coat off its hook. Outside, the Hisso was snorting mellowly. Ready.

He flashed a look out the door. Men on the field. The Spad's wheels were chocked. He'd have to waddle over them. Almost everyone seemed busy. He jerked the coat on. Turned up the collar. Turtled his neck trying to draw his face inside the sheepskin collar.

The guard's feet stirred. Emmett Ralston stepped out. Started across the field. It seemed miles to that Spad. The one with the nose-thumbing Uncle Sam on its fuselage. That was the Kid's ship.

Half way there now. Sweaty and tense. A shout behind. The guard was standing in the skipper's door. His knees wobbling. Yelling too. Men looked around, wondering what was wrong.

The guard yelled. "Stop him! Stop him!"

Ralston broke into a run. Racing for dear life—for his crack at the Huns. For—for—

His clutching fingers grabbed the coaming. He swung up. In the pit! Men running toward him. Clutching hands that would hold the ship back! He blasted the tail up. Shot her full throttle. Waddled over the chocks. Just barely clear of hands that would have grabbed his wings. Back stick! Flying! Going up toward the Front. Now for that crack at the Heinies. The one he had promised himself all during those long months of training.

He felt for the safety belt. Started to fasten it, but something was in the seat. He wriggled aside, felt under him and drew out the Kid's white helmet and goggles. He slid them on. It was good of the Kid to throw them in the seat.

He held the Spad in a steady climb, always toward the Front. His eyes ranged over the instrument board, the Vickers ready.

If he could only get a crack at von Jagon! The von was experienced at sky battle. He was green. But he felt a surge of wild self-confidence through his body. Like the warm feeling a good slug of cognac would make.

He had nothing to lose. The game was played out either way it went, so what was the difference.

The Vickers bawled "ready" when he touched the trips. The trenches were just ahead and below. He

searched the sky. Clouds up there, but no ships in sight. Nevertheless he had learned that clouds were not always innocent balls of fluff. The skipper had used them to hide in, and they had served him well.

The sun glinted dully on something high above. A Fokker wing reflecting light as the ship banked. Von Jagon's ship was green, he had learned that too. Green wouldn't reflect light, not like that anyway.

Emmett Ralston pinned his eyes on that ship, and started climbing toward it. Then smoky death cracked down on him. He jerked up with a start. Green wings flashed past. Going down in a dive. The Fokker stopped with a jerk and started back up.

Von Jagon! Here! Now! Coming up under him. The first burst had been off a bit. Had spewed nasty holes through his right upper. But this one looked like it would be closer.

Emmett Ralston threw his weight against the controls. A wild lurch that flung the Spad on its beam ends. There were two other Fokkers up there now. Tooling around in tight circles. Waiting for von Jagon to finish him off. But why didn't they come down?

Then with a start Ralston remembered his ship. It had the Kid's nose-thumbing Uncle Sam on its fuselage, and he was wearing the Kid's white helmet. Von Jagon wanted the Kid because the Kid had sent down his brother!

That was why this would be a duel! Von Jagon didn't want those Fokkers down here. He wanted to do this job himself! Very well, he'd get the chance!

Emmett Ralston had wrenched the Spad out of von Jagon's zooming burst. Now the German was dead on his beam.

Ralston jerked the Spad's nose up in a wild zoom. There was a desperate recklessness in that maneuver. A sharpness that would not have ordinarily been there. The force of circumstances accounted for that.

He dropped the nose. Going down in a steep dive. The ground straight in front of his prop. And von Jagon down there too. He tripped the guns. They began their bouncing dance.

Feathery tracers slashing out at von Jagon's ship. Cutting holes in its fuselage. But the German was wily. He slid out easily and dropped on the Spad's quarter.

The Spad quivered like a frightened colt. The whole ship seemed to shake. That burst was nasty and hot. Sweat popped out on Emmett Ralston's face. He'd have to do better than that!

He slammed on right rudder. Skewered around in a skidding turn. Pulled up. Von Jagon was coming in

for more. Ralston whipped the Spad's nose around in a head-on charge.

Belts writhing through his Vickers like tortured snakes.

The oil-throwing Hisso made a perfect shield against Spandau lead. His slugs were snaking past von Jagon's green fuselage in a smoky path.

He kicked on the rudder to jerk them over.

What if they crashed! But what difference did it make to him? He was getting his crack at the Huns, and if he went back to the field—

Von Jagon zoomed.

Emmett Ralston whipped aside. The von would drop on him if he held that course. It had happened once, and the burst had been nasty.

But von Jagon didn't! He rolled out of the zoom, dove, then slashed up under the Spad's belly.

Slugs rocketed around it. The floor boards danced. Split into splintered pieces. A slug pinged between Emmett Ralston's knees. Sliced a smoky path directly in front of his nose. Stank of phosphorous. Like wet matches!

He gasped, and did a sloppy renversment. But von Jagon cleverly caught him in the sights again. Slugs whipped around the Spad in a cloud. A strut was sawed almost in two. They rattled off the cowl. Slashed at the fuselage. Split a longeron. Poked holes in the elevators, and vertical rudder.

Emmett Ralston was filled with a desperate fury. He was green! And von Jagon was fast, and good!

He gnawed at his tongue with the grim resolve of a man that sees no hope for life, but who will fight to the last ounce of his strength.

Somehow he snaked the Spad out of von Jagon's tracers. Went into a jerky falling leaf. Spinning and tumbling. Whipping against the safety belt until he felt nauseated.

Then he jerked out and swiveled sharply up. Von Jagon had followed him down. Expecting and looking for trickery. But the desperate whip of the wing-weakened Spad must have surprised him. For Emmett Ralston cracked down on him like the scream of doom.

Ralston was crouching like a taut tiger. Hunched against his belt. Chin almost touching the wind break. Eyes red-rimmed and staring into the ring with just a touch of madness gleaming in their blue depths.

IT WAS NOW or never! The falling leaf, and the snap out of it had made his wing pins creak with an ominous finality. He couldn't do that again. They would fold back next time.

There was green fabric in the ring now. Fokker fabric. Von Jagon's fabric!

Ralston slammed down on the trips. The Vickers leaped eagerly. A hail of belt-fed lead spewed from their bucking snouts. Slashing at the Fokker. Riddling the fuselage. But always back of the pit.

Emmett Ralston was shouting now. But he didn't know it. He was flying as he had never flown before. A doomed man riding terribly weak wings. But they held. The gods of the sky lanes must have helped him. They creaked and groaned and fluttered, but they held.

Suddenly he jerked his face away from the ring. Looked up in surprised wonder. Von Jagon was crippled! His ship was wobbling into a spin. Going down!

Emmett Ralston felt suddenly weak. His eyes refused to focus. He blinked them. Then he saw the uselessly flapping horizontal elevator. The vertical rudder was half gone, too. Vickers slugs had taken heavy toll of the control wires on the Fokker.

Von Jagon was expertly fighting her down. Spinning one minute, flat, and steadily sinking the next. But always going down.

The ships that were with him were diving revengefully on Emmett Ralston's tail. With a start he remembered them. He looked back, then jammed the nose of his ship toward the ground, and dove.

DOVE UNTIL his weakened wings held only by the grace of God. Dove until the ground leaped at him like some mighty shell-pocked wall. Dove until the earth seemed to fill the universe.

The Spad, held together by nothing but the thin threads of courage, pulled out of the dive, and bounced on the ground. He was down—somewhere.

A hundred yards to the right was a broken-winged Fokker. Khaki figures circling curiously around it. Yanks! He was behind his own lines! And charges of aiding a spy against him!

Von Jagon was there. Slim, straight, calm eyed and smooth faced, a thin trickle of blood from a small cut over his eye. He was an older edition of the anxious-faced kid in the prison camp.

An officer slapped Emmett Ralston heartily on the shoulder. "Nice work," he praised. "Want him, or shall I ship him back to a prison camp?"

"I'll take him," Ralston said slowly. Then he added, "To the field. I've got a date with an Intelligence officer—there."

"Right," the officer grunted. He waved his hand. "There he is, and luck to you."

Ralston's face quirked. "Thanks," he said dryly. "I'll need it."

He ushered von Jagon through a wide-eyed gang of pilots and into the office. Skipper Beard was there, cursing and raving. The Intelligence officer was there too. And a guard with young Jagon from the prison camp. The Kid was there and the Guy with a half smile on his lips.

Von Jagon cried, "Joachim! It's you! I got the note, and it was a tremendous relief."

Hope spurred Emmett Ralston. He grabbed von Jagon's arm. Spun him around. "You have that note—with you? Have you?"

Von Jagon looked surprised. "Why, of course," he said.

He fished a crumpled ball of paper out of his pocket and gave it to Ralston. Ralston smoothed it breathlessly. Yes, it was the same!

He snapped erect and handed it to the Intelligence officer. "Here—here's the note I dropped. It's the same one." The officer glanced piercingly at it. "It's the same," he said, shortly. "I have seen his writing before, and this is the same. I guess, captain, that closes our case; this obviously is not code. It's just what it appears to be." The Guy edged forward. "Well, you met the Jerrys. What you think of them now?"

Emmett Ralston wiped a smear of castor oil off his cheek. "They're not such bad guys after all. And I had my crack at 'em too."