



MARTINET

by ARTHUR J. BURKS

Frank Tracy ruled the Third Flight with an iron hand and they hated him for it. But they learned that the heart of a martinet is not always as hard as his orders.

HE'S A GLORY GRABBER and a medal snatcher; he's a show-off and the biggest Big-I man in the Thirteenth Pursuit Group!" snorted Lieutenant "Egg" Bacon, the squadron sea-lawyer. "He rules us as though we were a flock of recruits just reporting for

our first duty in uniform. And the hell of it is, the Old Man backs him up, approves to the letter everything he does. Either the Old Man's having the wool pulled over his eyes or Frank Tracy has him buffaloed."

Bacon seemed to be voicing the opinion of the entire Thirteenth, and especially that of the Third

Flight, which Captain Frank Tracy commanded. He usually voiced the opinions of any group in which he found himself, since he voiced his own so often that his wingmates began to believe they were their own. Sea-lawyer! That's what Bacon was, but if you had accused him of it he would have punched your nose.

"Keeps us together as though he were afraid we'd get lost away from his wing," snorted Herman Dane. "At least that's the idea he seems to be trying to put over. My personal opinion is, though, that he keeps us around him because he's afraid that something will happen to him if he's left alone for a moment."

The six members of the Third Flight scuffled dirty shoes in the mud and slime of the tarmac. All this was akin to mutiny, especially where Frank Tracy was concerned, for the Old Man backed Tracy so assiduously that a recommendation of Tracy that a man be court-martialed was as good as an actual court-martial, since it meant exactly that. Besides, Tracy's fame had traveled to Paris headquarters, where his judgment was also regarded as sound. No two ways about it, a member of Tracy's flight had two strikes on him before he even came to bat.

"Cheese it, here he comes!" said Dane.

Then the flight flushed guiltily. They were acting as though they were afraid of Tracy, and knew it, and were ashamed of it.

"I don't like to run from him," said Bacon grumpily. "And I won't, either. If he just gives me an opening—"

Frank Tracy, the youngest of his flight, yet their senior by reason of his rank, stopped before his flyers and looked them over carefully. There was no expression on his sunburned face. His blue eyes held glints of ice—and other things his men could not understand. He was straight as an arrow, six full feet of him—and his hair was sandy and unruly.

ORDERS have come for a patrol of seven planes.

"We're to dash into Germany fifteen miles to reconnoiter what is reputed to be a concentration area that distance directly east of Masmunster. Do you understand?"

Nobody said anything.

"The flight," went on Tracy, "will keep together. Our chance of returning intact depends upon it. No one will break formation except at a signal from me, even though he sees an opportunity for a victory. Broken up we not only have no chance of returning, but the individuals separated from their wingmates stand an excellent chance of being ganged by the Germans—"

"Rot!" burst out Bacon. "You know, I know, we all know, that when an attack catches us, and outnumbered us, behind the lines, the surest way of getting back is to scatter and fly like hell for home. Or are you afraid of flying alone?"

Tracy stared at Bacon for a moment. His lips quivered a little, but his eyes remained hard. His flight noticed that when he placed a cigarette to his lips his slender white hands did not tremble in the least.

"You will do as you're told," said Tracy dispassionately.

"Disobedience means a recommendation to court-martial."

THEN Bacon lost his goat. His face went fiery red.

"Damn!" he said contemptuously. "Do you always have to back your orders with threats of a court-martial? Why the devil can't you back them as a *man*? If you were the right sort we'd follow you through hell and high water if *none* of us came back. You're too high and mighty to be an officer. You think because you're the third generation of soldiers you know it all—"

"What," interrupted Tracy, "would you like to do about it?"

Bacon hesitated.

"I don't know exactly," he said. "Yes, I do, too. I'd like to know if there's really something to you. I'd like to know if you were a man. If I found that out I'd be able to stand for the rest of it."

"You doubt my courage?" asked Tracy softly. "No, don't answer that. I doubt my courage myself, much and often. And I know you all despise me. For myself I hate the guts of every last one of you, but it's my duty to take you there and back, and I'm going to do it. Threats of court-martial seem the only way to get anything out of most of you."

Bacon gritted his teeth. He knew he put himself into jail for ten years with the next words he spoke, for there were five witnesses besides Tracy, but he'd gone too far to back out—and when it came to a showdown and he was court-martialed, his friends would probably lie like gentlemen. So he didn't feel like a martyr when he spoke the biting-bitter words through white lips, across set teeth.

"I'd like to knock that face of yours into something human!" he said. "If only you didn't hide behind your rank."

Tracy hesitated. He looked at his watch.

"We have nine minutes before take-off," he said calmly. "Shall we go?"

Amazement overspread the faces of the flight as Tracy led the way around behind the hangars. They trooped along. Dane snapped a command at the ground man.

“Don’t come back here or allow anyone else to do so. If the Old Man shows up, speed up the motors of the Spads as a signal.”

SEVEN flyers whose nerves were strung to piano wire tautness followed Tracy behind the hangars. There he doffed his helmet and gloves. Carefully he removed his wrist watch, emptied his pockets of whatever might break. Bacon did the same, wondering, his heart pounding with excitement. Bacon outweighed Tracy by twenty pounds, was short and chunky and with arms like the limbs of yew trees.

“Who’ll hold the watch?” asked Bacon.

“Why hold a watch?” retorted Tracy. “We’ve got seven minutes now. That should be long enough.”

They faced each other. Bacon lunged in, his teeth exposed in a snarl, his eyes wild, filled with the lust to maim and destroy. Tracy stood his ground calmly. When Bacon was close enough Tracy sent lightning lefts and rights to his face. Blood came from Bacon’s lips. His left eye developed a mouse. A right to the chin spun him halfway around, but he snapped back into position like a steel spring and resumed the attack. His superior weight drove Tracy back. Tracy contested every inch as he backed away. Bacon lunged in, drove a hard left to the pit of the stomach. Tracy bent double. Bacon crashed a hard right to his jaw, and Tracy fell like a shot beef.

NOBODY counted, for already Tracy was struggling up, shaking his head to clear it. His jaw seemed to be hanging askew. His lips drooled redly. Bacon stood back, panting. The rest were silent, motionless. Tracy climbed to his feet—and Bacon charged. Tracy met him with stiff, jolting rights and lefts. Tracy seemed to realize that he hadn’t a chance against the bigger man, but his face expressed determination. His left hand smacked again and again to Bacon’s face, which became mottled and splotted with bruises and ridges.

Another blow to the jaw drove Tracy back. His knees buckled and he almost fell, but he didn’t. He lunged forward instead, his head dancing crazily, as though his neck were broken, before the vicious rights and lefts of Bacon. Tracy fought his way into a clinch. Then, as though ashamed that he had done so, he fought his way out again—and his flight heard him

curse himself for his momentary weakness. They stood toe to toe, battering away. Tracy dug in his toes to keep from being driven back. Little sobs, which were not of pain or of fear, but of determination, burst from Tracy’s throat. But he fought on. His left eye was all but closed. Blood from his cracked lips fell down to dye his shirt front.

But he wouldn’t stop. He had Bacon staggering. Then, with bewildering suddenness, Bacon dived in, drove a brutal left to the stomach and a right to the throat, and Tracy went down, his face twisting in agony. As though his fall had been a signal, the roaring of motors came from the tarmac beyond the hangars. Tracy was completely out, but the motor drone seemed to signal to his befuddled brain. He stirred himself, while his men suffered agonies, fearful that the Old Man would coma and see this thing which might send them all to Leavenworth.

TRACY staggered to his feet, looked at his watch.

“Into your clothes,” he mumbled through his broken lips. “Time’s up. When we come back—”

But he didn’t finish that. They never knew ahead of time that they would come back. Tracy went on.

“This doesn’t change anything, Bacon,” he said. “I still command the flight. You still obey. Get going. My orders stand as given.”

Oddly silent, the seven men circled the hangars to the deadline. The Old Man, a major of the old school named Bartholemew, met them there. He stared at Tracy and at Bacon, but his face was blank. His eyes wandered over the other five, who quaked in their boots as they looked at Tracy, expecting him to tell what had happened.

“We’re ready, sir,” shouted Tracy to be heard above the roaring of motors. “Is there anything, sir?”

The major shook his head. If he had seen the crimson stains on either Tracy or Bacon, he gave no sign at all.

Seven flyers, with Tracy on the extreme right, climbed into the cockpits of seven Spads. Rendezvous was at eight thousand, over the field. Then, at Tracy’s signal, the flight into Germany, in formation—and the formation must never be so badly broken that it could not be reformed at Tracy’s signal. Tracy was the master—and his crushing fistic defeat at the hands of Bacon seemed to have changed him not in the slightest.

DANE looked across at Bacon when they made rendezvous above the field. Bacon was looking straight

ahead. If he glanced to right or left it was out of the tail of his eyes. Tracy, leading the flight, did not look back. Pointing the V, he did not have to worry about position, as his flight had to guide on his Spad. Dane could see the crimson stain on his tunic, across the abyss.

Seven motors roared that song so beloved of fighting airmen. Even though the Spads might be held together by twine and chewing gum, the power sound of the motors was quieting on the nerves, suggesting vast reserve which might be called into being at need. Tracy gave the signal.

The seven planes swung directly east. Tracy let his Spad full out. The other six guided on him. The motor drone mounted to a shrill whine. Dane looked over the side and down at the shellpocked earth, far below, where brown ants and gray ants fought to the death for possession of bits of soil which not one individual among them, from private to highest general, really wanted. Far below them blossomed huge black flowers as German archies tried to range them for fatal hits. The seven Spads scarcely noticed the disruption of air caused by the soundless explosions.

The seven Spads deadheaded on.

Now every member of the flight knew that telephones were jangling, sending the word into Germany that seven Spads were smashing eastward from Masmunster on some unnamed mission, certainly of death and destruction. In a few minutes their way would be disputed by the air might of Germany. But they must get through to their objective and bring back the information they were being sent to get. It seemed unusual to send seven planes on such a mission, and it was probable that there was something else. But Tracy did not always tell his flyers the full extent of their orders—another thing for which they hated him. He was so sure of himself, so high-hat—so patronizing. He felt his rank and “pulled” it on his wingmates—and that was worse than if he had been a bully who handled them roughly with his fists.

What did he think now about his defeat at the hands of Bacon? No one would ever know, probably. Tracy was forever like a man sitting in an endless poker game, trying to hide his lack of hope and his exultation. Dane looked at the other flyers—at Frank Bisson, Joe French, Fred Kellerman whose parents had come from Germany, Larry Jensen—all lieutenants under twenty-one, but already veterans of a score of fights over the lines against Germany’s best flyers.

THE Third was now fully three kilometers behind the German lines. They still had about thirteen miles to go to reach their objective, and the deeper they went into German sky the more foolish seemed their undertaking. One plane might have made it, for seven it was impossible. They might just as well have advertised their mission two weeks in advance.

A flight of planes was visible against the horizon to the north, another to the southeast, both converging on the Third with the top speed of Fokker pursuits. Dane estimated the total number already being arrayed against them. Already they were one against two, at the very least, and the German woods would be flushing themselves of planes as wild ducks are flushed by the hunter.

TRACY had spotted both flights with quick side glances. He looked down into his pit, studying his instruments on the dash. He tested out his Vickers, signaled for his flight to do the same; but he did not change his course by so much as a fraction of a yard. Nor did he look around at his flight. He knew they were following, because it was in the blood of flying men to follow through.

Whatever they thought of Tracy, they would follow him, because his command in the air was next to God’s.

Then Tracy stiffened, ever so slightly. For out of the woods ahead of them, five miles due east, suddenly, as though rocketed up by many catapults, came fully a dozen planes, recognizable by their lines as speedy Fokkers. That would be flyers from the Steindorph drome. Steindorph! Named the Butcher. He didn’t fight in the front line staffels. He kept back, to do the cleaning up on venturesome flights which came in too far; he was the mopper-up, the swamper—the man who did the dirty work in war’s slaughter-house. And he was coming to dispute the way with Tracy’s men.

The Vickers were tested out. They were right; they always were when the ground crew selected by Tracy had finished with them. The Spads themselves were in the best possible condition. Tracy gave a brief signal.

The seven Spads formed in the shape of a semi-circle, bulging out toward the oncoming Fokkers.

Dane glanced right and left. The flight in the north and that in the southeast, having spotted Steindorph’s oncoming fighters, were resuming their flight to the front—and that spoke volumes for their belief in Steindorph’s ability to handle these futile seven.

A matter of seconds—the Fokkers were bulking

larger and larger. In the air, traveling at top speed of Fokker and Spad, in opposite directions, distances meant little. Tracy did not yet look back. But Dane could tell by the stiffness of his back that he had forgotten everything— everything except the necessity of estimating the exact moment to make his play to attain the greatest effectiveness.

That moment came. It seemed long delayed—as though Tracy were deliberately giving the Germans every opportunity to blast them out of the sky before he gave the signal to open fire. Then he suddenly rocked his wings, a barely perceptible movement. The Third instantly resumed the V formation. Tracy tilted his nose over and dived—dived under full gun—leaning forward as though to increase his speed. But his eyes were on the German flight as he did so, as were those of his flyers. Now their cockpits were under the guns of the Fokkers, where they could be sprayed at will.

FOKKER noses were dipping. In a moment Spandaus would wither the seven with hail upon hail of hot lead. Then Tracy jerked his stick back into his belly. His nose came up with a rush, as though he had hit the ground at top speed and bounced back into the air again—while behind him his flyers bounced, too. The movement came just ahead of the opening of the many Spandaus.

“Take it an’ like it, you *blat deutscher schnapps-fressers!*” yelled Dane.

Vickers were chattering. It was suicide for the Germans to tilt on over, when already Vickers lead was stitching holes in a dozen bellies, with smashing volleys of lethal destruction. Tracy led the way directly up into the midst of the German flight, his guns screaming, stick between his knees, thumbs holding the triggers down. His guns sprayed a cockpit belly with death. The Fokker suddenly dipped a wing and sideslipped down the stairways of the sky, smoke rising from her body in ebon plumes. Tracy slipped away just enough to allow the Fokker to slide past him. He glanced indifferently into the German pit as the Fokker went past.

A GRAY uniformed figure sat there, head leaning back against the coaming, right hand dangling out over the side, blood dripping from the fingers to be washed away in the slipstream. The man seemed to be sleeping, but his eyes were open, staring unseeing at the sun. He had managed to perform an instinctive action. He had shoved his goggles up on his forehead.

Now he was going down, dead, shot through and through from below, a horrible way to go out—but a swift one. Tracy seldom missed.

The German flight was scattered. Tracy looked at his wingmates for the first time. They had come up with him, breaking through the Fokker formation as a school of fish breaks the surface of the sea.

Three Fokkers were sailing down. The rest were scattered, but a savage Steindorph, recognizable by the commander’s streamer on his plane, was signaling his gentlemen back into the fray. Tracy signaled his flyers to fly on. They were two miles from the Germans, flying in formation, when Steindorph took up the pursuit. Tracy knew that no other Germans would attack, just yet, in any case. Steindorph was too egotistically proud to ask or signal for help.

Now Dane noticed that they were seven miles behind the lines. Panting with the exertion of the brief brush with the Germans, Dane shoved back his goggles and looked over the side. His wingmates were doing the same, their sharp eyes searching for signs of a huge concentration of *feldgrau* under *pickelhaube* helmets. Tracy may have looked, too, but his eyes seemed to be seeing only directly ahead.

Now behind them the Germans were opening with chattering Spandaus. Tracy did not even look back. The Germans were still too far behind for effective shooting. Several minutes must pass before they were, for now they were following the Spads, not flying to meet them. Tracy was drawing the thing out, taking a chance that a stray bullet or two might get one or more of his flyers.

MENTALLY the Third was making notes. They had studied maps of these back areas until they knew them by heart. They memorized the things they saw. They estimated the numbers of motor lorries, guessed at the numbers of troops which congested the roads—and in the mind of each was the thought:

“Steindorph will call for help to smash us down before even he will allow us to get back to our lines.”

Determination showed in the set lips of them all—in the stiff back of Frank Tracy. They had scarcely begun. All, even Bacon perhaps, had forgotten the fight at the hangars. That seemed to have happened yesterday, ages ago even—in another life. Now there were only the Third, Steindorph’s gentlemen—and a mission to perform. Now all knew why so many flyers had been sent to do it. If one died there were six to get back—if two, five—if three, four. If even one flyer

succeeded in getting back with even approximately correct information of this concentration, it would be worth the lives of all the others—and might save the lives of thousands in the Allied lines, in the trenches.

And Tracy had been entrusted with the mission!

Ahead they saw the vast area out of which, as from a lake which sprouts rivers—rivers of gray, rivers of trucks were forming and flowing endlessly westward. Many planes were there, some of them taking off, some of them merely resting, and waiting. If only the Third had been equipped for bombing! But that would come tonight, perhaps, when the Third got back with its report—if it did—and special bombers would have the job.

NOW holes were beginning to appear in wings and fuselages of the Third, bullets to snap about the ears of the seven. Tracy did not even look back. There was no time now for a fight. Steindorph could engage them and keep them pinned to this strip of sky until all the other strips were filled with Fokkers, Albatrosses and Pfalzes, who could make sport of the mere seven as they shot them down. Tracy was running away from a fight, in order to complete his mission. He dived and the six with him, dived under full power.

And he was loosing his Vickers on the ground troops! Why? To make them think this merely a strafing mission, instead of a reconnaissance? The Third did not know; it merely dived and fired, fired until its Vickers were hotter than the hubs of Hades, as empty cartridges poured, smoking, out of swiftly emptying belts, through the breeches of white hot Vickers.

Below was disorder. Men and officers were running wildly in all directions. Planes were taking off. They swerved, the Third, a moment to send lead into two Albatrosses which were just leaving the ground—and the two took fire and plunged back to become funeral pyres for their pilots.

The Third whirled, riding on dizzy up-and-down-tilted wing-tips, circling the concentration area—into which trains were constantly emptying yet other brigades and divisions—and pouring lead into the oceans and rivers of gray. But really the eyes of the Third were busy, gathering information, salting it away, planning to carry it back. It needed a great armada to do this right, and they must provide information for that armada when it was formed for the destruction of this place.

Down out of the skies above the Third dived a

Fokker—Steindorph dropping down alone, glad of an audience of his own countrymen to whom he could prove his greatness by destroying the Americans one by one. His Spandaus chattered their song—and a burst went into the back of Dane's head, changing all his head to a crimson horror which mercifully slid to invisibility in his own cockpit.

THE Spad, already headed for the earth, went on down and crashed. Its gas-tanks went with a roar which caused the six remaining Spads to shiver in the air—and Egg Bacon, brother in blood of Dane—for the two of them were inseparable—forgot everything, forgot the mission, forgot the war, forgot Tracy—and broke formation to attack the contemptuous Steindorph.

He banked out, temporarily demoralizing the flight. His guns came to bear on Steindorph's Fokker—and began their evil, vengeful song. Steindorph slipped easily out of line of sights, and Bacon went after him as after a mad dog, as though he himself were mad. Now nothing was important to him except vengeance for the loss of Dane.

But what was this? A Spad flashed across the front of his plane, going bullet swift—and a hand waved at him preemptorily. The hand was the hand of Frank Tracy, who was obtruding himself between Bacon and his prey, waving Bacon back into formation. For a moment Bacon's brain cleared with the shock; but beyond Tracy he saw Steindorph's Fokker again and madness returned.

IN A split second he could free himself of Tracy forever. Just a soft pressure on the trigger of his Vickers; then he could down Steindorph in his own way—and the Third would be forever rid of Frank Tracy, the rank pulling martinet. His Vickers spoke, but Tracy was out of his line of sights. He resumed his attack on Steindorph, only to have Tracy smash in between them again, flying like a fool to perform the impossible, waving Bacon into formation.

Now even the Third sided with Tracy—and Bacon resolving that nothing would ever make up to him for all this, finally swung back into line, giving over his suddenly made feud with George Steindorph.

Not one of the Third would ever recall in exact detail the nightmare of the running fight home. The Germans, so many that their shadows hid the sun at times, chased them home—and how the six reached there alive none could ever explain. At the lines they

were met by Nieuports and Camels, everything that would fly—and the Germans plunged through them like rats through cheese to keep on the tails of the Third.

BUT the Third got home—and one Spad of the flight fell to pieces on the tarmac the moment the switch was cut. A second waited for its pilot to quit his cockpit, then broke into roaring flames. The war sometimes worked such miracles.

And when the six who remained were standing at the deadline, Egg Bacon, whose face never would be whiter when he was dead, walked up to Tracy without a word and smashed him on the jaw, while the whole squadron not on duty looked on. That blow would have sent Bacon to prison for ten years. It sent Frank Tracy to the ground, down and out for the second time that day.

Tracy got back up and attacked Bacon—but was suddenly grabbed and held by his wingmates, at command of Bartholemew.

“Bacon,” said the major, “you’re under arrest in quarters. You will be recommended for trial by general court.”

For answer Bacon sentenced himself to yet another ten years by calling Tracy all the vile names in the calendar—and repeating them to Bartholemew for backing up Tracy.

“He kept me from fighting Steindorph so I could help him get his own useless carcass home!” seemed to be the burden of Bacon’s plaint. “And the blasted Dutchman got Dane, got him from behind—and Tracy made me let him get away with it!”

“If he hadn’t,” spoke up Kellerman, “none of us would have got home—maybe.”

“Shut up, Dutchman!” raved Bacon. “Is Steindorph a cousin of yours?”

Bartholemew signaled a sentry.

“Take charge of Lieutenant Bacon,” he snapped. “He’s under close arrest in quarters/”

“Please don’t, Major,” said Tracy, dully. “I understand how he feels. Let him go.”

“Go ahead, lock me up!” yelled Bacon. “I don’t want to have to thank that rat for anything.”

BUT Bacon was released from arrest—and when Tracy turned away to go to headquarters to make his report, he was choking. It brought a sort of lump to the throat of more than one who heard it—but they remembered all that had gone before and hardened

their hearts against him. Bacon went to his quarters, ordered that nobody molest him except on orders for a flight, and closed his door.

The rest of the day was routine.

At sundown an unauthorized Spad took off from the deadline. Tracy, sleeping fitfully, heard it. He jumped to his feet, knowing the voices of all the Spads in his flight, trying to place this one. He grabbed, automatically, for his flying togs—and found a note pinned to them. It read:

“I’m going alone after Steindorph. Why don’t you be a hero and come after me. You—”

And there was a fighting epithet, and the scrawled name of Lieutenant Bacon. For a moment Tracy’s lips quivered. He stared through the dirty window with eyes which saw nothing. He heard the voice of the Spad die away to the east. He raced out onto the tarmac, yelling:

“Kellerman, Bisson, French, Jensen!”

And his fliers came running. Ground men were already trundling out their Spads. But before they could reach the deadline Major Bartholemew came storming across the tarmac, yelling:

“What the hell you up to, Tracy?”

“Bacon’s gone crazy. We’re going to get him back. He hasn’t a chance.”

“No, he hasn’t—the fool! You all came back today, performing a miracle. Are you mad enough to think you can do it again? The whole German air force is aroused. If you were fifteen in number, or even fifty, you wouldn’t have a chance.”

The major stormed away. The ground men hesitated. Then they started the Spads back into their hangars. Tracy signaled them to wait, led the way into his quarters.

HE DROPPED blankets over the windows, lighted a lamp with a greasy chimney, looked full into the faces of his flyers—and every last one of them saw that his eyes were filled with tears.

“It isn’t easy for me to say I’m wrong,” he said. “Especially when I’m sure I’m not. You’ve all hated me for a martinet. I have ruled you firmly; but I didn’t do it because I hated you, as you all thought. I didn’t do it because I think I’m God Almighty. I didn’t do it for fame and medals; what the hell do I care for them? I did it because I was convinced that by so doing I’d make us last longer as a flight.

“You think I was heartless when I wouldn’t let Bacon fight Steindorph after the German had downed

Dane? Great God, fellows, don't you know that what I wanted most is to smash Steindorph myself—even if it became necessary to crash into him in midair, and go down with him, burning? But if I did that you'd all die, perhaps—for Germany wouldn't forgive the loss of Steindorph. I couldn't let Bacon do it for the same reason—and now the fool is committing suicide.”

FOR a long moment the Third could not speak. They looked down at their feet, shuffling.

“Maybe I'm wrong,” went on Tracy, his voice little above a whisper. “I leave it to you. I can't think of Bacon, off there alone, flying to sure death at the hands of German air, if not those of Steindorph. Why, he'll never get within miles of Steindorph! What do you say? I've counseled always for obedience, fought you all with my will to make you listen to me and do as I bade you; now I'm counseling disobedience—disobedience of the major himself. Will you override him with me and fly after Bacon?”

They didn't answer. They could not; but when he stepped out upon the shadowed tarmac they followed him, drawing on their gauntlets and goggles.

And they walked into trouble—in the shape of the entire ground crew, armed with bayoneted rifles held at the ready. At their right stood Major Bartholomew.

“Approach those planes, Tracy,” said the major, “and I'll give the command to fire. Don't forget that I'm in command here!”

Tracy hesitated. Then he shrugged and stepped forward, followed by the four. Rifles leaped to shoulders at the major's command, bolts slamming high powered cartridges home.

“I'm not joking, Tracy,” said the major. “I'll kill every last one of you. The Germans would do it anyhow!”

It was grim humor, and since the major stood in the shadow they couldn't see how white his face was—and that there were tears in his eyes, too. He knew exactly how torn and lacerated were the hearts of these five—but he meant exactly what he said—and he was wholly right. Tracy shrugged again.

“All right, sir,” his voice was dead. “Place me under arrest if you like. But these four merely obeyed orders, as they always have. I order them now to their quarters.”

A bit later the major came to Tracy as he leaned on the wing of a Spad, and patted his shoulder, without a word. Then he went to his quarters, while Tracy stood there, his dimmed eyes peering into the East. There he

stood when the moon came up, sprinkling the tarmac with shadow and eerie light.

HE LOOKED at his wrist-watch. His heart was dead; Bacon had been gone for almost an hour. And then—
What was that?

Out of the East it came—the shrilling of a Spad coming home, with motor full out. The chattering of Vickers—and of many Spandaus; the droning of many Fokkers through which came the voice of a Spad so thinly that only a flyer who knew all ships would have recognized it.

“God!” muttered Tracy. “Great God, please let him make it!”

The roaring grew louder and louder. Now the squadron heard it—and the major—and dark figures poured out onto the tarmac—many of them, including the survivors of the Third. But they kept away from the still taut figure which leaned on the Spad at the deadline. He had been through too much.

And so the mighty roaring broke over the tarmac. A plane was spiraling down, followed by many other planes. Streaks of fire flashed across the sky as half a dozen Germans tried to smash this upstart into the dirt of his own tarmac. There was no doubt that the man who was crashing in was Egg Bacon.

A hundred feet above the field the Spad took fire. The Fokkers, seeing their enemy doomed, circled the tarmac, spraying it with lead—but nobody paid them any heed. All were following a slender figure which raced for the spot where the Spad must crash in. Bacon was still in control, that was evident. He would make a landing, but he'd never live to walk away from it. The flames would trap him.

He pancaked, rolled to a stop—and the flames roared. The Third was well behind Tracy when the martinet dashed into the wreckage. He came out of it with his hair and his eyebrows in ruins—but he dragged with him a man who alternately cursed and sobbed, and cried like an hysterical woman.

“I got him! I got Steindorph! You can't take that away from me, Tracy!”

Tracy stood him on his feet. He stared at his wingmates.

“Where's that rat?” said Bacon. “Where is he? I want to tell him before even I thank the guy that dragged me outa that mess!”

“IT WAS Tracy that did it, Egg,” said Kellerman softly. Bacon whirled and saw that this was true. The

tableau was an eerie one, there in the circle of light cast by the burning Spad, dancing in the flames which had all but taken Bacon—and Tracy himself. Bacon choked. He stared at the burned eyebrows of Tracy, the scorched hair. His face worked strangely. But the words which came were not the words the Third expected.

“You were always right, Tracy,” said Bacon. “Always! I think I always knew it. There wasn’t any satisfaction in getting Steindorph! I roasted him like a pig. I know how it must have been, for I almost roasted the same way. Tracy, you ought to punch me black and blue. I would have jeopardized the whole outfit for the sake of my pride—and always you thought of us first, and never of yourself. If you would shake hands and call it square—”

THEN they waited, looking at the apparition of Frank Tracy. He didn’t put out his hand. He almost

lifted it, as though he would have driven his fist into Bacon’s face. Sparks flew up from the plane.

“Back to your quarters, all of you!” snapped Tracy. “I’m glad you’ve got enough sense to admit that you’re wrong, Bacon.”

Then they turned and left him, Frank Tracy the martinet—they couldn’t look at his strangely working face, so plainly visible in the light of the burning plane—for that his face showed so plainly, with tears that looked like pearls of blood, proved that their own faces must have shown the changed hearts behind them to Tracy in turn. His words were the words of the martinet; the tears of a strong man who—once in a lifetime—is not ashamed to show them when his heart is full.

The hearts of the Third were warm with a warmth that did not come from man-made fires, nor could be cooled by the coldness of night time—or the ice of the tomb.