



BURNING WINGS

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

Follow "Streak" Davis on the Perilous Pursuit of A Fiendishly Cunning German Super'Spy!

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CHAPTER I
FLAMING HELL

THE SEETHING, LIVID BATTLEFRONT spread out like an infernal arena beneath the trim Spad which was hurtling speedily toward Hunland. Over the side of his fuselage, Lieutenant "Streak" Davis, famous ace of the U.S. 34th Pursuit Squadron, caught a bird's-eye glimpse of slime and mud and bursting shells.

Grimly, his goggled eyes came back to the two belts of bullets which were trailing from the breeches of his twin, forward Vickers. Ugly, blunt-nosed bullets, filled with phosphorus, which would burn through even asbestos once they got started. Incendiaries!

Streak Davis gave an involuntary shudder.

Hardly a quarter of an hour ago, in response to a frantic phone call from Chaumont, he had stood in the Operations shack of the 34th. Major Hopkins, grizzled C.O. of this crack flying outfit, was talking, his voice tense with haste:

"You'll have to fly like the wind, Davis! You'll have to break all records! Even so, it will be lucky if you can make it in time! Now here are the bullets you'll have to use in your guns—"

Davis' reckless features had clouded as, mechanically, he buttoned his flying togs.

"I don't like it, Skipper," he said squarely, eyeing the incendiaries. "It's dirty—has a bad smell to it."

"There's no one else who could fly fast enough to undertake it!" the C.O. had barked, the worry-lines deep in his war-hardened face. "I tell you, every second is precious! But it must be voluntary on your part—I can't order you to go, knowing that if you should make a forced landing in Hunland with these bullets—"

But this had only brought a reckless snort from Lieutenant Davis.

"Don't worry—I won't. It's not my hide that I'm thinking about."

"Then there's no reason for hesitating," the C.O. had said. "You know exactly what you are to do?"

Streak Davis had nodded. "I'm to shoot straight across the lines and intercept a black Albatross which is flying to German Corps Headquarters at Staffletz. I'm to give the Kraut a dose of these incendiaries, and make sure he burns—poor devil!"

The C.O. shook his head.

"Devil, yes—but not in that sense, Streak!" His voice was grim, hard. "You're going after Erich von Hartwig, Germany's master flying spy—the craftiest and most underhanded Boche in the war! He just murdered three of our officers at Chaumont in cold blood—then made off with a dispatch cylinder containing most vital information of our troop movement.

"You've got to get him, Streak! Now take these incendiaries and get going. Follow the route I outlined and you'll head him off. And above all," he rapped out, his pounding fist emphasizing each word, "burn that Albatross—burn it in the sky so there's no chance of those papers falling into German hands!"

THESE were not the usual incendiary belts, with mixed bullets—one incendiary to five plain and tracer bullets. To make sure that the Albatross of von Hartwig would be burned, both Vickers were loaded with rounds of pure incendiaries, while the customary spare rounds of plain and tracer bullets were stored in the ammo box.

Streak Davis had straightened then, steeled himself to the mission. His face hardened, and, though he loathed to touch them, he picked up the incendiary belts, swung the long snakes over one arm.

"I'm off, Skipper!" he had clipped then. "And don't worry. I'll do the job!"

NOW, the roaring Spad was past the front lines, nosing into Hunland. Streak Davis' face was grim as he hunched over the stick. It was not going to be easy, he thought. This von Hartwig was all the C.O. had said. Gruesome stories of the man's diabolical exploits had spread throughout the western front—stories of underhanded tactics, of merciless killing.

And yet a sense of chivalry seemed to be worrying Streak Davis. It was bad enough to kill a man or knock him out of the sky with a burst of plain Vickers lead—but to have to burn a man with these ghastly incendiaries which could bring only the most agonizing kind of death—!

Davis broke off from these unpleasant thoughts, looked over the side again. Down below, the battlefield was already behind his tail as his Spad raced into Hun skies. His eyes were wary now behind their goggles. He was scanning the heavens on all sides, to make sure no lurking enemy patrols were aware of his presence.

Off to the south, he saw a Drachen floating in the

translucent blue like a huge, bloated sausage, its black crosses standing out from the grey bag. His keen eyes also saw the artillery fire which the captive balloon was directing, and a surge of rage swept through him.

If only he could use his incendiaries to get that balloon, burn the Drachen so the artillery slaughter would be stopped. That would be different from burning a plane; for to burn a balloon was a natural, ethical act of war—and it might save scores of those doughboys!

But he knew he could not take the time, nor could he risk the precious ammunition. If he did, von Hartwig would surely get away.

Even now the spy must be getting closer to his goal, to German Headquarters. Spurred by the thought, Streak Davis once more bent to his mission. On, on, he raced his roaring crate, and as he went deeper into Hunland his eyes were straining through their goggles, peering into the blue sky ahead.

And suddenly his big frame tensed in the cockpit, his eyes narrowed to slits.

A speck! A tiny black dot against the blue, moving due east, on a diagonal line from Davis. Slowly it assumed shape, grew larger. It took on the fleet, slender-nosed fuselage and tapering, bird-like wings of an Albatross D-5. A pure black Albatross, save for the squares of white to offset its Maltese crosses.

Streak Davis had found his quarry! In the cockpit of that black Albatross, he knew, sat Erich von Hartwig, Germany's ace of spies. And somewhere in that plane the Boche was carrying a cylinder containing information which, unless destroyed, might turn the whole tide of the war!

Even now that Albatross was but a few miles from Staffletz and German Corps Headquarters. Streak Davis had come none too soon!

THERE was grim, hard determination on the Yank's goggled face as, with a gritted oath, he sent his Spad slicing right for that Albatross, hurling toward it at a diagonal, striving to cut the German off from in front.

The black Albatross loomed. Davis was almost in range when von Hartwig at last must have seen the Spad coming like a winged fury from hell. Immediately black smoke belched from the exhaust jet atop the slender-cowled Mercedes, and the Albatross leaped forward in a sudden rush of speed which showed the power of its fleeting wings.

Von Hartwig obviously wanted no fight, wanted only to get to Staffletz with the goods!

STREAK'S eyes became narrowed slits, and he coaxed his Spad as only he could coax it. He shifted the angle of his attack, no longer trying to cut in front of the Albatross, but hurling straight in from the side as the Jerry crate spurted ahead. He bent to his sights.

He saw the graceful profile of the Albatross grow monstrous in the ring, and he reached for his stick-triggers. He saw a knob-helmeted head turn in the German cockpit, glimpsed a hard face peering out at him from behind its goggles—the intelligent-looking face of Erich von Hartwig, the face of the man he was going to burn alive! And his fingers hesitated, as if not quite able to close on the triggers. God, it was hard to do—hard! But then——

With a sudden, savage oath, he forced his fingers to close on those trips, squeezed them. The twin Vickers vibrated on their mounts, and from them came a peculiar, hissing clatter. The hiss of incendiaries! Streak Davis saw them cascading from the twin muzzles in two streams which looked like liquid fire, like flaming hail which glowed a livid red against the clear blue.

But the fiery streams missed their mark wide!

For during that one moment when Streak Davis had hesitated to press his triggers, von Hartwig had not been idle. The Albatross had suddenly flecked deftly out of the line of fire in a rolling bank which now brought his slender nose momentarily facing the oncoming Spad. Jagged streaks of flame leaped from its Spandau muzzles, and the familiar grey thread of tracers penciled the blue on both sides of the Spad.

Streak Davis heard the rip of fabric in his fuselage, saw bullets ricochet from his cockpit and engine cowl, heard one slug singing a hymn of hate past his very ears. His mouth clamped into a tight line. Von Hartwig was no kiwi!

The black Albatross flaunted its tail at the Yank and made another dash to get on to Staffletz. But Streak Davis, cursing himself savagely for his former hesitation, sent the Spad arcing around in a lightning skid-turn which drew a curve of black exhaust smoke across the sky. And this time he succeeded in cutting directly in front of the German crate.

A withering burst of Spandau fire met him broadside as he banked, and the slugs rioted in his fuselage like pebbles inside a huge, shaking rattle. Guns blazing, the German was trying to break past the Spad which stood between him and his goal.

This time, hardened by what had happened, Streak Davis' fingers did not hesitate. They closed on the stick-trips, and his guns once more spewed out that fiery, flaming hail of incendiaries.

VON HARTWIG'S desperation to save his information seemed to lend him the wings of an angel then. The black Albatross half-rolled, pirouetted and split-aired, literally dodging and sliding between the crackling hail-stones of glowing phosphorus. But Davis pressed in grimly now. He knew it was only a matter of time. He knew he could not fail.

Just one of his phosphorus bullets landing almost anywhere on the German crate could do the trick. And even on the heels of the thought, a sudden shout burst from his lips. Suddenly he held his fire.

An ugly wisp of smoke was curling from the lower right wing-tip of the Albatross. And there, lodged at the apex base of the V strut, Davis saw the incendiary—a little, glowing white-hot ball, burning, burning, slowly igniting the fabric of the wing as the slipstream fanned and nursed it on. He saw von Hartwig peer out of the cockpit at it, saw the hard face of the German go white behind goggles.

The Albatross went mad in the sky then. It flipped over on its back and rolled over and over like a man will when his clothes catch fire. It side-slipped and went into falling leaf, it flicked its wings up and down like a mad see-saw. And Streak Davis, holding his fire, watched grimly, an involuntary sympathy in his heart.

A SHOCK of utter amazement then brought him bolt upright in his cockpit. For at that moment, with one supreme flick of wings, von Hartwig succeeded in dislodging the phosphorus bullet, flung that glowing ball of fire right off his lower wing into space!

And with that ever-burning phosphorus no longer there to nurse it, the fire was nipped in the bud. The smoke died out, and the only damage done was a black-rimmed hole in the wing.

There was a thin film of sweat on Streak Davis' goggled face. He must end it once and for all! Gritting his teeth, he sent his Spad thundering again for the Jerry crate, closed in like a grim executioner now, determined to finish the job.

The black Albatross fled before his guns like a frightened bird. Of a sudden it dropped its nose and went slicing down through space in a mad power-dive which seemed almost to bend back its tapering wings.

Streak Davis hurled after it, again cutting it off from Staffletz.

And then a cry of fresh surprise broke from his throat as the German plane, instead of going on toward Staffletz, suddenly lurched from its dive, spun

around like a black top in a breathless renversement, and sped at full throttle—toward the Allied lines!

CHAPTER II BALLOON BUSTER!

SO SURPRISED was Davis to see von Hartwig deliberately going back over the precious miles he had left behind him, that even as the Yank leaped in pursuit, the Albatross was shrinking in the west in a wake of exhaust smoke. Cursing, Streak Davis hurled after it.

If von Hartwig thought he could elude him by this tactic, throw him off and then go back to Staffletz, the German was mistaken! For even now the Yank who had been nicknamed for his arrowing speed was gaining, gaining on the fleeing, black craft in its flight toward the lines.

Suddenly the Yank whipped his stick over to bank with furious haste, as the Albatross abruptly swerved southward. And as Davis followed, as if his Spad were attached by a slowly-shortening cable, there swung directly into his view the big, floating Drachen he had passed before. Then Davis' eyes widened incredulously. By heaven, von Hartwig was headed straight for that Drachen! The German was streaking toward the balloon hell-bent! And even as Streak Davis continued to gain, the Albatross suddenly dipped once more—and like a darting dragon-fly it sped directly under the bloated bag of the Drachen. It was an exhibition of flying skill at which even Streak Davis had to marvel. Perilously, the Albatross flew right past the hanging cables, wings almost grazing them. The Jerry crate was sweeping right over the suspended, swaying basket of the balloon, where the tiny, grey-clad figures of three Boche observers stood with upturned, awed faces.

It happened then, happened while Davis was still above and to one side of the Drachen, still way out of range of the Albatross.

From the fuselage of the Albatross dropped a shining silver cylinder. It hurtled down and then its fall was slowed as the white spread of a tiny parachute blossomed over it. Down it went floating, directly into the basket—where all three observers hastily stooped to retrieve it.

The Albatross meanwhile catapulted out from beneath the other side of the bag, and zoomed like a bat out of hell.

Streak Davis no longer pursued the German plane. Savage realization had come over the Yank's face. That cylinder—it must contain the information von Hartwig had stolen from Chaumont! And von Hartwig, fearing doom at the hands of Davis' incendiaries, had obviously decided to transfer his precious cargo to the balloon basket.

That meant these observers would open it, telephone its contents right back to German Corps Headquarters! Perhaps even now they were doing just that!

THE thought stirred Streak Davis savagely to action. Forgotten momentarily was the Albatross, streaking somewhere off to the south. The Yank must change his mission now; change it from the hateful task of burning a German in mid-air, to a task he had longed to do just awhile before. It had become his patent duty to use his incendiaries on this *Drachen!*

Even with the thought, Streak Davis was zooming his Spad to the attack position, was straightening in the sky well above and beyond the *Drachen*. He didn't waste a second. With one swift glance he measured his distance, judged his time. Then, with a berserk oath, he slammed his joy-stick forward.

The nose of the Spad dropped precipitously, and Streak Davis was hurtling down like a meteor, Hisso wide open and every wire shrieking—as he plunged straight and true for the bag of the *Drachen!*

HELL itself came up to meet him. It came up from the throats of a hundred anti-aircrafts which belched simultaneously, and whose deep, rasping coughs were punctuated by the shrill *rat-tat-tat* of pompoms. The Archie bursts blackened the sky around the diving Spad; shrapnel flew like rain; machine-gun bullets whizzed.

Streak Davis was literally blasted off his course by that hellish spew of ground-fire.

He could scarcely see the balloon surface as the anti-aircraft fire, which was skillfully aimed to avoid the vulnerable bag, swept over the *Drachen* like a thickening screen. But he did see that the balloon was descending. The Boche at the winch on the blurred ground below were pulling the *Drachen* down as fast as they could!

The sight spurred the diving Yank to insane recklessness. He must get that *Drachen!* His teeth gritted, and once more he straightened his dive, plunged on blindly through that maelstrom of fire.

Crack! An outer bay strut splintered as a piece

of shrapnel sliced at it viciously, and the wing it supported creaked, threatened to buckle. A flying wire snapped with a shrill musical *ping* like a tweaked mandolin string. The Spad was being battered to hell, smashed by shrapnel, perforated by bullets!

But cursing, Streak Davis held to his plunging course—and even now the surface of the descending *Drachen* was looming once more, out of the thick curtain of smoke. Another instant and he knew he was in range—and this time there was no hesitation. Streak Davis was pressing his stick-triggers, holding them down, firing madly, furiously, a light of hell in his goggled eyes.

His incendiaries cut two livid lines of flame through the black smoke. A savage exultation swept him as he saw the flaming phosphorus streams going right into the surface of the balloon—but then he was cursing. For the balloon was failing to catch fire!

The flaming phosphorus bullets he was pouring into it seemed to have no effect!

He realised then that his whizzing bullets had no place to lodge in the soft-bagged *Drachen*: they went tearing right through the envelope and out of it, so fast that the slow-smouldering phosphorus balls had no time to take hold. The only possibility of making them take, was to fire them at close range, so they would enter the balloon while they were still burning and sparking in full incandescence.

WITH this desperate thought, Streak Davis held his Spad in its mad dive. Down, down, he plunged on through the hell of anti-aircraft fire which was tearing at his plane from all sides. Down, down, his Vickers still pumping streams of incendiaries into the balloon, until the two steel guns grew red-hot from the heat of the phosphorus, until it seemed they must melt their own muzzles.

Now the balloon surface was almost right under him. Not one of his shots had missed that bag, yet the balloon stubbornly refused to burn.

Half-crazed with desperation, Davis kept arrowing straight for it, plunging down on top of it, until even the anti-aircraft fire ceased. The Spad was so close to the bag that the Boche dared not shoot now for fear of hitting the *Drachen*.

BUT Streak Davis was hardly aware that the battering maelstrom had stopped. His shot-up Spad was still lurching wildly. He was sweating from the sheer frenzied effort, and his ears were ringing.

“Burn, blast you!” he gritted, almost sobbing, as, right on top of the balloon, he continued to fill it with ever-decreasing incendiaries. “Burn. Burn!”

And then, even as it seemed he must ram into the thing head-on, hell-bent—it happened!

There was a hissing roar, and across the grey surface of the *Drachen* licked a red tongue of hungry flame. Just in time Streak Davis lurched his shot-up Spad out of its wild dive, and was pulling up, avoiding collision by bare inches, as that tongue of flame suddenly burst into a mighty sheet of fire which columned into the blue sky.

The *Drachen* crumpled as it dropped, faster and faster, in a mass of consuming fire which left a billowing cloud of dense black smoke in its wake. And then, horrible to see, the flaming, crumpling balloon collapsed right on top of the men beneath, swallowed them in its fiery midst. The whole mass fell to the ground—a smouldering, crumpled rag which landed in the midst of the anti-aircraft battery, exploding several of the loaded guns while the crew scampered away like frantic rats.

And Streak Davis, still climbing his battered Spad from the scene of devastation, knew he had done the job, thoroughly. He noted, too, with grim satisfaction, that the swathe of artillery fire way across the lines had stopped now, as if by magic. No longer could the Boche guns range those doughboys, with no balloon to direct them.

Davis had saved those troops, as well as having destroyed von Hartwig’s information, the information which had been passed to the *Drachen*.

He broke off from this very thought with a sudden, sharp cry of fresh alarm. For now, as he straightened his battered Spad and glanced down once more toward the ground, he saw a whole swarm of grey-clad Jerries running to one spot, well off from the flaming remains of the *Drachen*. And in that spot, Davis’ keen eye saw something which glinted silver in the reflected sheen of the sun.

The cylinder! One of the dying balloonists, in a last patriotic effort, must have managed to hurl that dispatch tube down there, safely out of the way of the plunging, fiery *Drachen*!

Which meant the information was still intact—and even now the Boche on the ground were about to retrieve it!

CHAPTER III TO THE DEATH!

WITH A FRENZIED OATH, Streak Davis flung his protesting plane into a fresh dive, plunging down toward the spot where the Jerries crowded. There was no anti-aircraft now; the crews had deserted the few guns that had escaped the flaming balloon crash. Only a few ineffectual rifles blazed as he roared down like a winged fury.

But even as he went down, he saw something which made him check his mad dive. The Boche had picked up that metal cylinder now—and Davis was close enough overhead to see one of the Jerries, apparently an officer, open the dispatch case. He saw him reach into it, then shake his head.

That cylinder was empty! There was nothing in it!

STREAK DAVIS’ first thought was that the balloon observers must have already taken the papers out—and the papers had been destroyed in the fire. But that did not fit at all. That cylinder had obviously been hurled down beyond the wreckage deliberately: it would never have dropped there of its own accord.

A sudden, chilling apprehension swept Streak Davis then. Out of his dive now, he zoomed his battered Spad upward. His eyes scanned the sky to the east desperately.

And way in the distance, so faint it was almost invisible, he saw again a tiny black speck against the blue. A speck he knew so well—the black Albatross of Erich von Hartwig—which was heading straight and true once more toward Staffletz and German Corps Headquarters!

And there came from Streak Davis a curse which almost brought the blood to his throat. Tricked! That wily, diabolical Boche ace of spies had duped him by a cunning ruse! It was all clear now, hideously clear!

The flying spy had dropped the empty cylinder to the *Drachen* as a decoy, so he himself could get away from the incendiary-equipped Spad! The German must have simply removed the precious papers from the dispatch tube, and now he was going right on with those papers to Staffletz!

Streak Davis cursed himself with scathing self-fury. He had fallen for it, fallen for it like a baby taking a sugar-coated pill!

Cursing wildly, he bent fiercely to his controls, and forced the shot-up Spad to his will. Somehow he was coaxing speed out of the ship again, was slicing after that speck. He was going to catch von Hartwig if it was the last thing he did! He was going to catch him, and this time he wouldn't hesitate!

He felt no trace of pity for the crafty Boche who had calmly and deliberately let the enemy burn a *Drachen* and kill its observers just so he could get away himself. By God, Davis' teeth gritted, he'd burn that German with his very first burst of incendiaries now, burn him as he could have burned him before, and—

HE CHECKED the thought with a sudden cry of horrified realization. For now his glance had gone once more to the breeches of his twin Vickers—and he saw something he had failed to notice in his excitement until now.

The two incendiary belts were gone—used up entirely! He had spent the last of those phosphorus bullets to get the stubborn *Drachen!* In those last red seconds, with his ears ringing, he had failed to hear his own guns go silent as he kept pressing the triggers.

Now he didn't have an incendiary left!

Von Hartwig's ruse had worked even better than the German could have hoped. Streak Davis had no "burners" to shoot into that Albatross—even though now he so desperately wanted to burn it out of the sky!

Madly keeping up his pursuit of the German plane, he held the joystick between his knees, fumbled for the ammo box in the cockpit and took out the belts of plain and tracer bullets he had at least had the good sense to bring along.

In seconds he loaded his empty guns.

This was the way he had wished to go out before: to meet the German with ordinary lead. But now, ironically, he wished it no longer.

It required a miracle of flying to make his already damaged plane gain on the streaking Albatross. But this miracle Streak Davis was accomplishing, by the sheer flying skill for which he had become known. In minutes, minutes which meant miles, the desperate Yank was once more catching up to his quarry. He was closing the gap between his nose and the fish-like tail of the black Albatross. And fiercely, eyes full of hate and purpose, he was leaning to his sights as he swept in behind von Hartwig!

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

There was no hiss now in the metallic clatter of his vibrating Vickers, as he opened up from long range.

He saw the grey threads of his tracers—tame-looking in comparison with those earlier, flaming streams of phosphorus—going toward the German's tail-assembly, making bits of wood and fabric fly.

From the Albatross cockpit, von Hartwig turned back, and his hard, goggled face peered with surprised fury at the Spad behind him. But he did not remain surprised long. With expert skill, he half rolled the Albatross out of the tracer-streams, and put down its nose for Staffletz.

As if a demon inside of him were guiding him on, Davis cut the German right off, planted his battered Spad in the way—and began cutting loose with both Vickers.

VON HARTWIG evidently saw that he could not avoid the showdown. He was forced to fight it out to get through.

Like a black hawk he hurled to the attack, both Spandaus spitting. The already damaged Spad lurched wildly with the impact of a whole fusillade of bullets which smashed into metal and wood and sang wildly in Davis' ears.

Cursing, the Yank tried to remain the aggressor—he took von Hartwig head-on, and answered shot for shot. He sprayed bullets as fast as his rapid-firers would pound them out. High in the sunny, blue sky the black Albatross and the battered khaki Spad were fighting it out, circling, diving, twisting like two monstrous birds.

And Streak Davis was losing——

THE Albatross, not having gone through any hell of ground-fire, was the swifter and flashier of the two ships. In minutes Streak was almost thoroughly exhausted, his Spad was literally shot to pieces, and the crate was responding sluggishly to controls. He had all he could do to hold it together, much less make it fight. Nevertheless, utterly desperate, he kept forcing it clumsily to the attack, kept firing burst after burst of tracers.

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! There came such a terrific fusillade of Spandau fire then that the Yank wondered that his own body was not riddled. The instrument board in front of his face was shattered to bits; control cables broke—and his Spad floundered and lurched into a stall as he struggled with half-limp controls. And then he saw the black Albatross starting to streak right past him overhead. Von Hartwig, having fired the telling, crippling burst, was leaving the floundering Spad—passing it to go on to Staffletz.

Streak Davis knew, in that agonizing second, that he'd never be able to stop the German once he was past him. He'd never be able to pursue the fleet, black ship in his crippled Spad now. In another instant the Albatross would be gone, leaving him limping helplessly behind in the sky.

But in that instant, the Yank threw all his ebbing strength and skill into one last, supreme effort. Back he jerked his joy-stick, to his very chest. Sluggishly the nose of the floundering Spad lifted, fifted—until the fish-like belly of the passing Albatross was swinging into his sights. And Streak Davis pressed his triggers, pressed and pressed them—even as the Spad stalled again, its nose sinking.

There was a sudden, screaming rush of air off to his side. And hurtling down past the Spad like a stone, plunging earthward, screamed the black shape of the Albatross. Its engine was battered and dead, and sprawled over its stick was the bloody, riddled figure of von Hartwig.

A dazed cry tore hoarsely from Streak Davis' throat. That last desperate burst had gotten von Hartwig, and apparently his engine too. Straight down the Albatross was plummeting—in a dive which must surely smash it to bits, set it ablaze!

CHAPTER IV BATTLE FOR LIFE

DESPERATELY struggling to hold his faltering Spad, Streak Davis watched that swift descent grimly. Another instant and the crash would come—

A fresh cry broke from him then, a cry of frenzy. For at that last instant the Albatross suddenly flattened from its dive. The riddled Boche pilot had somehow managed to pull back the stick! The slender nose of the German crate lifted, spurning the ground. And the Albatross settled in a safe landing, on even keel, despite its dead engine. Even as Streak Davis bent anew to his own crippled controls and recklessly sent his Spad staggering downward, he saw the bloody figure of von Hartwig lift itself out of the Albatross cockpit, sprawl to the ground, and raise half up with what seemed a terrific effort.

The German was lifting a long-barreled Very pistol. There was a spurt of red—and a rocket streaked from the muzzle, making a fiery red stripe in the clear sky.

Von Hartwig's figure dropped then, lay sprawled. But the crafty Boche had shot off a rocket to attract his countrymen to the scene of the crash! In the distance, Streak Davis could see German infantry—tiny waves of grey which at once began to close in toward the stubble field below. In a few moments they would be there, and they would rescue the information——!

TOO desperate to care what risk he was taking, Streak Davis was forcing his battered Spad down as fast as he could, forcing it down while it seemed to be breaking to pieces. The stubble field loomed—he was lurching over it, determined to land, get hold of that information before the Boche infantry arrived. He struggled madly to hold his ship together as he let her settle.

His arms flew instinctively before his face as there came a rending impact, a shivering lurch which threw him violently against the crash-pad. The Spad had literally fallen apart as soon as its wheels hit the ground, so badly was it shot up. Its wings buckled, and it settled like a pile of useless junk.

But Streak Davis, though bruised and shaken, was otherwise unhurt. He crawled out of the wreckage, panic in his heart. He had lost his ship, was stuck in Germany! But, blast it, he gritted, he'd still get that information, destroy it. Recklessly he was hurling himself across the stretch of ground toward the squatting black Albatross.

“Stop, Yankee!”

The voice, harsh with pain and effort, but speaking perfect English, froze him in his tracks. And the blood drained from his face as he found himself staring into the cold black muzzle of an ugly Luger automatic—a Luger held steadily by Erich von Hartwig!

LIKE some ghastly apparition risen from death, the riddled Boche had managed to get to his feet again. And now he was covering the Yank, his hard face hawk-like, vicious, his eyes murderous.

“Do not try to reach for your gun!” The finger on the Luger tightened as the Yank began a furtive move. “I have you, and I will not hesitate to kill you if you make a false move!”

Streak Davis knew the German meant what he said, and could carry it out. A terrible will-power was sustaining the wounded Boche, giving him strength to aim that Luger steadily, unwaveringly.

“You are clever, my friend—” there was a grudging admiration in the harsh voice now. “I did not think

you would see through my little ruse. But it will do you no good. The troops will be here in the next minute or so. They will get the information. And you, my friend, will go before a firing squad. Those at the balloon will have telephoned the number of your Spad, and testified that you used the verboten incendiaries.”

A chill wave of horror and despair coursed up Streak Davis spine. Even now he saw the grey swarms of Boche infantry coming in like an engulfing tide from all sides of the field. In just minutes——

Sheer desperation came upon Streak Davis then. Still standing as if resigned, he watched the German covertly, like a cornered animal. There came a moment, a single instant, when the riddled Boche swayed just a trifle——had to recover. But in that moment, with a reckless oath, Streak Davis leaped forward. Flame spat from the Luger, but the bullet went wide as the Yank, in one mighty sweep of his arm, knocked the gun aside. And he had to do no more. For von Hartwig, as if the effort had finally exhausted his last, ebbing life-energy, collapsed to the ground and lay where he had fallen, dead.

CLOSER and closer swarmed the waves of Boche infantry. But the reckless Streak Davis was bending over the dead German spy and with grim fingers was searching the body. In seconds he knew for sure that the papers were nowhere on von Hartwig’s person. They would be bulky things, and he could not have missed them. They must be in the plane.

Davis darted to the German plane which stood with engine riddled and dead. He searched the cockpit frantically, despair seizing him. There was no trace of papers, anywhere! He rushed to the battered engine, lifted the cowl. Not there either. His heart sank like a leaden weight.

The German must have found some way to dispose of the information after all——some other cunning trick. All Davis’ efforts had availed him nothing, and now he was only going to be captured and executed for his pains.

He broke off from the thought, eyes lighting frenziedly. For as he looked into the Mercedes engine once more, he saw that the engine was intact, though its cowl was battered! The Albatross was in good condition. Von Hartwig must have simply cut the switch when his plane dropped in a dive. Hang it all, Davis thought desperately, at least he might save his own hide now——

Even as the Germans were so close that he could

hear their heavy, running feet, Streak Davis leaped back to the Albatross cockpit, switched on the twin magnetoës, and darted to the propeller. Rifles barked as the infantrymen came swarming in furiously, yelling at the khaki-clad Yank to surrender while they sent a fusillade of shots whining over his head. But at that same instant, Streak Davis leaped aside as the propeller whirled from his grasp, the Mercedes roaring back into life.

Without chocks to stay its wheels, the Albatross started to slew forward of its own accord. Davis, just managing to avoid getting run down, grabbed its fuselage desperately, swung into the cockpit like an agile monkey. Revolvers and rifles clattered in unison——bullets zipped toward the cockpit. But Streak Davis, cursing, ducked beneath the cowl and sent the German ship slewing forward.

A born flyer, he had the alien plane under his control in scant seconds. The clinging Jerries were flung off its flanks like flies. They scurried aside frantically before its charging path.

And Streak Davis, with his last ebbing energy, sent the ship sweeping into the sky, and was free!

TWENTY minutes later, in a state of utter exhaustion, he was gliding the German plane down for his home tarmac, while anti-aircrafts and machine-guns of his own squadron-mates cut loose at the black-crossed ship. He got through them before they could hurt him, and landed.

Mechanics and pilots rushed up with leveled automatics. Streak Davis cursed at them wearily as he climbed out. “Put up the guns,” he gritted. “It’s not a Jerry——just a dumb Yank!”

Cries of welcoming recognition rose then. Major Hopkins, the C.O., burst through the crowd.

“The information!” he barked at Davis. “What about the information? Good Lord,” he stared at the Albatross, “that’s von Hartwig’s ship! How come you flew it here? What happened?”

“Before I tell you, and get my wings clipped, let’s have one more thorough search of this crate,” Streak Davis said grimly.

It was thorough, all right. They all but dismantled the black Albatross. And just as Streak Davis was ready to give up in frustrated defeat, a cry broke from one of the working greaseballs.

He held aloft a silvery cylinder, a cylinder he had found neatly cached in the very tail of the slender fuselage. The C.O. seized it eagerly, opened it, and

pulled out a sheaf of papers: the papers which had been stolen from Chaumont!

Streak Davis stared dazedly. By heaven, von Hartwig had been even more wily than he had thought. The Boche spy had not removed the papers from their original cylinder, but had forearmed himself with another, dummy cylinder to use as decoy in case he had to. When he made the transfer of the dummy to the *Drachen*, he had not even touched the papers!

The C.O. was beaming.

“It’s incredible!” he cried. “You go out to burn papers, and instead you bring ‘em back in a nice, late-model Albatross which the Allies will be delighted to get! Why, next thing we’ll be finding out you destroyed that *Drachen* across the lines which our own balloon-observers reported went down in flames—saving a lot of our troops!”

But Streak Davis, who could have flabbergasted the jesting C.O. by announcing that he had shot down that *Drachen*, was strangely silent. It wouldn’t do to let the major know he had fallen for von Hartwig’s bait like a green kiwi.

Nor would it do to let the C.O. know that now, after all was said and done, Streak Davis was glad he had gotten von Hartwig without incendiaries, downed the Boche with ordinary lead in fair combat!