



EARTHBOUND ACE

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

An Auto Racer Takes to the Sky and Finds That He Has a Lot to Learn—But . . .

LIVID SPARKS BELCHING from exhausts, the Spad was roaring down the moonlit tarmac of the Twenty-second Pursuit Squadron. Already it had traversed fully half

the length of the field and, headed into the wind, had gathered flying speed. Yet, like some bird reluctant to fly, it still clung with its wheels to the ground.

Lieutenant Steve Bentley, his whole body tensed like

a spring ready to snap as he sat at the controls, cursed himself with a half sob beneath the yammering roar of the motor.

Damn it, why couldn't he let go? Why did he hold the stick back, keep the tail down, making the speeding plane hug the earth? Could he never get it through his head that a Spad didn't have to go ninety miles an hour to take off, that flying speed was no more than seventy?

Besides, every moment was precious now—already his best friend, Jim Allen, was way out in the night sky, flying to certain doom! Jim Allen who had bunked with him for months, become his inseparable buddy—and for whom Bentley was now defying orders, desperately determined to go out and try, at least, to help Allen in his fatal mission. Defying orders—

AS THE Spad hurtled along the moonlit ground, Bentley still holding back that stick with a stubborn instinct stronger than his will, he caught a vague glimpse of pilots surging from the messhall, rushing out into the moonlight, among them the familiar, tall figure of Major Greaves, the C.O. All were waving toward the Spad, signaling it to stop—gesturing that Bentley was crazy.

He must get off, Bentley repeated to himself with growing frenzy. The Spad was moving with the speed of a missile now, but, with the stick kept back, the tail could not lift. The ship vibrated from nose to tail, straining as if to snap from its impotent efforts to fly, and Bentley felt a cold dread that the twenty-pound bombs tucked under his fuselage would be shaken loose, and blow him to atoms.

And then, still more dire peril, he saw the dark blur of trees looming—the end of the tarmac! His earthbound plane was rushing toward those oncoming trees hell bent, head-on. Desperately, gritting his teeth, Bentley managed to master his muscles at last. He forced his unwilling hand to push the stick forward, to neutral.

Instantly the Spad, its terrific pent-up energy released, popped into the air like a cork out of a soda bottle. Upward it shot, high over the trees. A gasp of heartfelt relief escaped Bentley as he zoomed into the starry sky, heading east—toward Hunland.

He was in the air, and once in the air he could fly with the best of them. He opened the throttle wide, hurtled forward, steering by compass while his eyes strained from behind their goggles to peer through the darkness ahead, searching for signs of Allen's

crate—Allen's crate which all this time must have been speeding toward its objective, toward the German power plant at Brenz.

That power plant had to be destroyed tonight. Two weeks ago G.H.Q. had ordered it to be wiped out. Its destruction was the sole means of thwarting the German offensive which was to be launched tomorrow. The Germans had managed to cripple the Allied supply bases: the only retaliation was to cripple their power—stop their mills, their factories, their electric transportation and war machinery. And the burden of this power was supplied by the huge Brenz plant.

THE Twenty-second Pursuit had been given the job, and the Twenty-second had failed—utterly. Night after night the best aces had gone out in the hope of sneaking through—for it would take the bombs of only one plane to set fire to the whole plant, if properly placed. But none of those flyers had reached their objective—all had been gotten before they were near the place. For the Germans had been wily enough to protect their one huge source of power with an impregnable defense.

Not only was the plant situated in a strategic location—on a spot of land surrounded by jagged ravines—but the approaches to it were fortified by a solid mass of anti-aircrafts and searchlights. To get to it one had to fly through this deadly gauntlet—and thus far none had succeeded.

And then tonight, with the deadline drawing close, Major Greaves, the Twenty-second's C.O., had asked for another volunteer. And Steve Bentley had been the first to speak up, to ask for the mission. But he had not gotten it. Jim Allen, who had spoken second, was chosen.

WHITE-FACED with anger, Bentley had burst into the C.O.'s office shortly after Allen, having received orders, had left to get his Spad.

"Yes," the C.O.'s voice had rasped, and the lines in his stern face were hard. "I knew you volunteered, Bentley. But I had to choose the one man left who could *fly*." He gave the word a grim emphasis which made Bentley wince. "Allen is the only real flyer we have left: if he can't perform the mission no one can. Why, it's no wonder we've failed with a squadron like this. Flyers you call yourselves, when half of you can't make a decent bank or keep a formation.

"Take yourself: you can't get over the fact that you

were an auto racer before the war. You think you're in a racing car when you get into your plane. And because an auto goes ninety miles an hour without leaving the ground, you're afraid a plane won't take off unless it goes faster. Twice you've crashed because of those delayed take-offs of yours. I'm not denying it takes guts to be an auto racer, Bentley—but you've got to know how to fly to be a good pilot."

Humiliated, Bentley had been stung to fierce self-defense. "Eddie Rickenbacker was an auto racer," he had protested.

"Yes, and I know you used to race with him at Indianapolis. But Rickenbacker had the good sense to forget his autos—and learn about planes. That's why he's an ace where you'll never be one."

And despite Bentley's further protests, his pleas not to have Allen sent on that fatal mission, the C.O. had remained adamant.

Allen had taken off.

But now, some ten minutes later, Bentley was following the trail he knew Allen must have taken toward Brenz. It had been a simple matter to sneak out a Spad, load it with bombs, and rev up on the far end of the tarmac. And, although he had made just such a delayed take-off as the C.O. had attributed to his habits as a former auto racer, Bentley had gotten safely into the air.

HE OPENED his throttle still wider. He was streaking like a missile through the night sky now—already the livid line of the battiefrent was sweeping toward him out of the murk below and ahead.

But though his eyes were still straining he saw no sign of Allen yet.

God, he must hurry; he must catch up to Allen. Perhaps then, between the two of them, they could get through that hell of defenses which protected Brenz.

The twisting battlefront swept below—in the darkness he could just see the calcium zigzags of the German trenches. In enemy skies now—still hurtling toward Brenz. Still straining his eyes for sight of Allen's Spad.

And then, at last, he discovered a tiny flickering dot of red, in the sky ahead—the flame of a plane's exhaust! His heart leaped, as, goading his Spad to another furious spurt of speed, he saw the outlines of bird-like wings gradually appear where that red exhaust flame showed. Allen's crate! Still speeding toward its objective, but not yet in the defense area. Bentley could still catch up to him, join him.

HE FOUGHT to get still more speed out of his hurtling, roaring ship, fought to close the gap between himself and the plane ahead. And steadily he gained, gained. Only about half a mile now and—

A cry of sudden alarm tore from Bentley's throat. For even then the thing happened. Even then, the dark earth beneath Allen's Spad seemed to awake from its sleep with horrible abruptness.

From every part of the ground giant searchlights came on like so many opening eyes. They sent their stabbing beams into the dark sky, until the sky looked like some carnival, with streamers of white waving and criss-crossing each other. There must have been hundreds of those lights; never before had Bentley seen so many.

And though Bentley, speeding on, was still beyond the fringe of the area of waving lights—the Spad of Allen, ahead, was right in their midst! With anguished horror Bentley saw that other Spad suddenly come into glaring relief; like the deadly tentacles of some huge monster, those waving bands of light fastened on its flanks, held it. Futilely the plane dipped and dived and zoomed—a dancing moth in the blinding light.

In a frenzy Bentley was hurtling his own Spad on toward that area, his only thought being to get to his friend, though he knew Allen was beyond help now. And before he himself reached the fringe of the tentacles of light—

Boom! B-room! B-r-r-room!

From the ground came livid flashes of red—as a whole score of anti-aircraft guns cut loose, hurling up a barrage at the Spad which was so neatly framed for them in the searchlights. A barrage so thick, so solid, that nothing could possibly have escaped it.

A seething eruption of shells which spotted the dark sky with lurid sheets of flame.

And the cry which broke from Bentley then came from his very soul, wrenching his heart with it. For there, before his eyes, he saw one of those bursting flashes break directly beside Allen's plane. He saw a wing break off in shattering debris, to fall like some amputated limb from the glare-illuminated Spad. He saw the Spad then—a stumpy fuselage with up-bent lower wing, threatening to crack—spinning giddily down, down, until it was lost in the darkness—while the tentacles of the searchlights still continued to wave, as if lusting for another victim.

"Jim!" Bentley was sobbing hoarsely, hysterically. "Jim—damn them—they got you!"

BLIND with his frenzy, he was still hurtling his own Spad toward those waving beams of light. And in another instant he would have gone to his own doom—only the instinct of self-preservation made him bank away just beyond the fringe of the area, made him realize that to commit suicide would not help the situation in the least. He banked in a slow circle.

Allen had failed—the C.O.'s last hope. And unless Brenz was destroyed by tomorrow—

At the edge of the lighted sky, coming around in another circle, Bentley strained his eyes over the defense area. Through it, miles ahead, he saw the dark drop of a ravine; beyond that, on a rise, a squatting cluster of buildings which he knew to be the Brenz plant. The plant itself had no defense at all; it lay open—if only he could reach it.

BUT how could one reach it when all around was this field of searchlights and anti-aircrafts? And the only approach was by plane; one had to fly to get over the ravine which surrounded the factory—drop the fatal bombs. One had to fly, and anything that did fly would be shot to hell by the anti-aircrafts.

Bentley let his Spad lose altitude, still keeping beyond the fringe of lights now. He was leaning over the fuselage, scanning the terrain with its dots of searchlights. He noticed that the terrain was wooded with heavy, tall trees—he could see their dark foliage. And then—

Across the ground below, cutting through the wooded section, was a narrow band, lighter than the rest of the dark earth. A road. It led directly through the anti-aircraft and searchlight area, all the way through, and emerged near the ravine before the power plant.

A wild, reckless plan took shape in Bentley's head then, grew on him. That road was wide and straight. There were no anti-aircrafts on it, and it was lined by trees on either side. And though the anti-aircrafts and searchlights could be trained on anything in the air—it was obvious they couldn't very well be trained on the road amid the trees; the trunks and foliage would prevent that.

Suicidal—Bentley tried to tell himself. Yet the more he thought of it, the more it obsessed him. In his mind he heard the acrid voice of his C.O.: “. . . an auto racer—but you've got to know how to fly.” An auto racer! By God, his teeth suddenly gritted, maybe an auto racer could yet be of good use to the air service!

Maybe the very habit which had made him a washout as a flyer would now enable him to attempt the mission which flyers had found impossible—which had cost Jim Allen his life!

And even while his mind cogitated, his muscles had already come to decision: he was pushing his joystick forward—his Spad was swooping downward. Cutting his engine, half-gliding, as unobtrusively as he could. The dark landscape, still outside the fringe of searchlights, loomed swiftly toward him.

He saw the widening band of road where it entered here in front of the defense boundaries. He headed for it, banking to get his ship parallel with it. In this portion it was deserted, he was grateful to see.

Lower, lower—a ticklish flying job, yet he did it confidently, for as long as he was in the air he could do anything with a plane. The road loomed, and on either side, rising like fatal shoals, loomed the stretch of tall trees. He maneuvered between them—he saw them rise on either side of his wings and the space between them and his wing-tips seemed only inches.

HE WAS directly over the road now, his lower wings between the trees, his Spad moving forward—toward the boundaries of the defense area. But he could not stay in the air like this—even at this low height the anti-aircrafts could still get him over the trees.

Teeth clenched, he cut his motor a little more, keeping the stick in neutral now. The Spad settled.

The habit which made him delay his take-offs worked just the opposite when he landed: he landed fast, almost as soon as he lost flying speed. His wheels bounced on the road, then held. His Spad was on the road, between the crowded trees.

AND directly ahead on either side was the defense area with its searchlights and anti-aircrafts.

A reckless gleam came into Bentley's goggled eyes. With a fierce, gritted oath, he pulled back his joystick, opened the throttle almost full.

Roaring, the Spad shot forward, its propeller whirling, making the leaves and dust fly on the highway. Down the road it hurtled, faster, faster, yet not taking off because its tail could not lift with Bentley holding back the stick. Holding back the stick, and keeping his feet rigid as iron bars against the rudder pads, keeping the wings between the tree-trunks which rushed by.

Faster and still faster—until the plane was streaking

down that road like a missile, rushing straight into the defense area—with the searchlights and anti-aircrafts on both sides beyond the trees.

The Germans became aware of this mad earthbound Yank then. Several searchlights swung their tremendous beams down from the sky, tried to turn them on the road. But just as Bentley had shrewdly figured, the heavy foliage of trees placed a solid screen before their glare—and also prevented the anti-aircrafts from swinging on him.

Coal-scuttle helmeted figures rushed out to the road ahead from both aides then, leveling rifles wildly as the plane, wheels on the ground, came tearing by in a roaring rush.

Crack! Crack! The rifles blazed—bullets began to whistle past Bentley—one or two ripped through fabric and wood.

But Bentley ignored them. There was an almost savage exultation in his heart as he sent his earthbound Spad careening on, on. He almost forgot that he was in a plane, though mechanically he was still careful to keep his wings from hitting the trees. Mentally he was back on the race-track in Indianapolis, in a high-powered racing car—giving her all she would take, chewing up the road, striving for the goal—the finish! He was in his element at last!

On, on he hurtled—at a speed which strained every fiber of the ship and made it struggle to lurch into the air. But he held it down, knowing that to fly meant to expose himself to the deadly searchlights and anti-aircrafts.

And then, suddenly, he could not ignore the Boche trying to stop him on the road any longer—for suddenly now he saw peril looming ahead!

A group of coal-scuttle helmeted Boche soldiers had dragged a light machine-gun to the center of the road, were training it on the oncoming Spad.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

JAGGED flame spat from that gun, and even though he was not yet in range Bentley could hear the terrific head-on whine of the bullets. God, they'd get him—shoot him to ribbons if he went on in their midst. If only he could use his own guns—but his own guns, being fixed on the engine, were pointed upwards as was the fuselage of his earthbound plane.

Rat-ta-tat-tat!

Again the gun ahead blazed—this time he heard the tick of bullets through his ship—felt it shiver; then, out of sheer desperation, Bentley suddenly cut

his throttle—and as the Spad slowed a trifle in its mad speed, he forced himself to inch the joy-stick momentarily forward. Instantly the tail of the plane flipped up—its nose came down. Only for a few seconds did he hold it that way—but in those few seconds he pressed his stick-triggers, pressed them and pressed them.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

HIS twin Vickers vibrated and spat. The Germans on the open road were caught in his fire, mowed down like wheat. The Boche gun was silenced. Luckily, though, there was sufficient space around the gun of the sprawled Jerries for Bentley to guide his wheels through—his wings were high enough to pass over the cluttered part of the road. Tail down again, he was streaking on once more. Going on, hell-bent, striving to get through the anti-aircraft area—to get past, where it would be safe to take off and fly, reach the Brenz plant.

But now the Boche resistance was becoming more and more serious. Germans were pouring through the trees ahead on both sides of the road, bringing machine-guns and rifles. The night became rent with the staccato clatter of the shrill cracks. The air around Bentley grew dense with flying, screaming lead.

But recklessly he ducked low beneath his cockpit cowl, and drove on—on toward that finish line. And he was making it, he saw with fierce exultation. Not far now—just another good stretch and he'd be beyond the searchlights, able to take off. And then they couldn't stop him—from there to the Brenz factory would be clear, easy sailing. Easy——

His blood froze, and a cry of horrified alarm broke from him. For now, directly ahead, he saw a new obstacle. A whole crowd of Boche had dragged some heavy logs across the road, had formed a barricade behind which they crouched with rifles and machine-guns. God—panic swept Bentley—he couldn't get through—he was going to crash into that barricade head-on—somersault to certain destruction.

Swiftly now the obstacle grew in his line of vision—already the string of German guns behind it flashed in blazing reports. And then Bentley did the only thing there was left to do. He opened his throttle full—again was forcing his joystick forward. Again the tail lifted—and this time the whole plane lifted with it. In a soaring sweep it was whisking right over the barricade.

And even in that instant, as the ship soared above the road, Bentley was blinded by searchlight glares—

his ears were deafened by the terrific detonation of an anti-aircraft shell which seemed to burst right in front of him. Madly he cut the engine, to settle back down on the road—get down before he was shot to hell.

He heard a rending crackle then—in horror he saw that his right wing-tip had grazed one of the trees—wood and fabric was ripped, but fortunately the aileron was undamaged. And his wheels were on the road again then, once more he was safe from the anti-aircrafts, driving forward between the trees.

AND with sudden joyous relief he realized that the Boche rifle and machine-gun fire came from behind him—no longer from in front. The searchlights rose behind him, too. He was through! He had gotten through the area! Ahead was an unfortified stretch—then the ravine, beyond which was the unprotected power plant! Take off now—take off!

But it was then that the trait which had seen him through this hectic stunt once more turned itself against him. He had lost some speed, and with his right wing damaged, he was afraid to let the stick go forward just yet. Must get up more speed first. He opened the throttle wide. The Spad dashed on. A moment or so more now and he could make the take-off, make—

A cry of horrified alarm burst from him then, and instinctively he started to close the throttle. God, he had hesitated too long. Now the road, directly ahead, came to an end. And it ended in a sheer, precipitous drop into the deep ravine between here and the plant! Before he could possibly take off his plane would slew over the side of that ravine—into that sheer drop.

EVEN in that instant beads of sweat broke out on his goggled face. God, it would take a born flyer to make a Spad with a damaged wing take off over a cliff—risk letting her go into that sheer drop of space which doubtless contained treacherous wind currents and pockets. And Bentley was not a born flyer. He was an earthbound auto racer. The C.O. had been right—terribly right.

Sight of the looming cliff had made him cut his engine almost down to half, which, he realized now with a curse of fury against himself, only made the thing more impossible. Behind him now he could hear the Boche who were still giving chase, hear their rifles almost in range again. And then, once more turning his eyes ahead, he saw a sight which brought his panic to a frenzied pitch.

Streaking down from the dark sky swooping like a giant bird of prey, was a dark winged shape. Even in the darkness Bentley could identify its tapering outlines. A Fokker D-7—deadly German scout! It was coming for him, diving toward his Spad which was on the ground. And he knew that on the ground his plane would be totally at the mercy of the Fokker, for his Spad could move only in two directions where the Fokker moved in three. Unless he got into the air so he could fight back—

Desperately he drove on for the cliff now. But still his fear would not allow him to open the throttle wide. And then—

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

A rain of tracer slewed down from in front of him, whining like a death-song in his ears. Darker than the night itself was the shadow of the Fokker, roaring right down over him—with two streaks of brilliant flame snaking from its forward muzzles.

Rat-ta-tat-tat!

The Spad on the road shivered and vibrated from the impact of the bullets—flying bits of glass stung his cheeks like hornets. Helpless, he saw the Fokker pivot its dark wings in a breathless Immelmann—saw it coming again from behind, and knew it was the end. The Jerry pilot was diving for the kill—and even before Bentley could make the cliff at all—that kill could be accomplished, he'd be shot to ribbons as he sat in the cockpit!

HE HEARD the yammering roar of the diving German plane—the wild shrill of wires.

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

The staccato clatter deafened him, seemed so close in his ears he wondered that he lived even to hear it. And it was then he realized, with incredulous amaze, that the clatter did not come from the Fokker at all—but from the ground itself, from the side of the road! A machine-gun, just outside the border of trees was blazing and thundering.

And, with even more wide-eyed amazement, Bentley saw the Fokker stop in mid-air, like a bird surprised by a sudden wound. For a second it flew queerly, crazily. Then, as if a giant hand had picked it up and hurled it through space—it slid on one wing into the mass of trees to one side of the road—and a column of smoke and livid flame proclaimed its crash.

AND at the same time the incredulous Bentley saw a figure rushing from that gun at the roadside, rushing

toward his Spad—which he had already slowed almost to a snail’s pace.

And a shout of wild, frenzied glee broke from him.

“Jim!” he yelled. “Jim Allen! God, how on earth—!”

Almost sobbing with joy he brought the Spad practically to a stop. And Jim Allen, his buddy and squadron mate, was reaching the fuselage—he felt Allen’s hand patting his shoulder, heard Allen’s voice above the throttled engine:

“Good boy, Steve! It was a grand show! And what luck! My own crate crashed bad near this side of the anti-aircraft area—I glided it over while it was falling. I got out safe and sound, was trying to go on foot toward Brenz—a crazy idea, because you couldn’t get near that factory on foot. Then I saw this crate of yours coming along the road—knew it was you because who else does his flying on the ground?”

Jim laughed, but his laugh was affectionate. “Now just give me those controls—it’s a cinch to get off the cliff and sail over the factory, provided you stretch out on the good wing to balance the other smashed wing-tip.”

Bentley was all too eager. He wouldn’t have to take this damaged crate off the cliff now—Allen, a born flyer, one of the best, would attend to all that—and even the prospect of riding the take-off into the ravine. Gratefully Bentley started to unstrap himself and—

There was a furious rush of running footsteps—accompanied by guttural shouts and the clink of raising rifles. And right on the road behind the Spad came a whole horde of Boche—Boche who had caught up to the plane at last.

Dazedly Bentley heard Jim Allen’s voice shouting: “Take her off, Steve! No time to change now! I’ll stretch on the wing! Get going—hurry!”

Bentley’s heart went cold. He hesitated, even as Allen sprawled on the good wing, getting support with feet and arms on flying wires and struts.

The Germans came on, closer closer—holding their fire now and yelling for the Americans to surrender.

“Hurry!” Allen yelled from the wing. “For God’s sake, man-hurry! Don’t ruin it now! Steer for the cliff—I’ll tell you just what to do!”

AND then, even as the Boche were almost at the tail of the ship, Bentley gritted his teeth and ripped open the throttle lever. The Spad leaped forward, Allen lying stretched on its wing.

Crack! Crack! The German rifles blazed at the shrinking tail of the plane—bullets whizzed after the

ship. Then the cliff-edge loomed—and Bentley felt his heart constricting in his throat. His fingers itched to turn down the throttle—his feet longed to slew around the rudder to avoid that oncoming chasm of space; but Allen, clinging to the wing, yelled above the roaring motor:

“Keep going! All the speed you can make!”

And then, in one breathless rush, the brink of the cliff came—there was a sickening drop which seemed to leave Bentley’s stomach in the air.

His face was like parchment as he gripped the stick, as the Spad—still without flying speed—started to flounder.

“Dive!” Allen yelled from the wing. “Dive straight down! Hurry, or you’ll lose us both!”

Bentley, feeling dizzy, plunged the stick forward with all his might. He felt the furious rush of wind—saw jagged rocks at the bottom of the ravine rising like sharp, hungry teeth to engulf them. Allen clung to the wing valiantly—so valiantly that Bentley was ashamed of his own fears.

“ALL right—pull up! You just have flying speed—you can make it!” Allen’s voice seemed to come from miles away—through a wall of shrieking wind. Then, with sudden wild alarm: “No—wait! Keep diving!”

And simultaneous with that last shrill shout, Bentley heard a yammering roar above the roar of his own engine. Wildly he jerked up his head—and his heart stopped. Two of them—two swooping, coffin-nosed Fokkers! Both of them diving right on top of the Spad, with spitting guns.

Confused, Bentley started to pull back the stick. But immediately came Allen’s frantic yell: “Don’t pull up now—you have no speed to zoom, and they’ll shoot us to blazes! Keep diving—the only hope! Dive—dive!”

And again Bentley forced his muscles to keep down the stick. Headlong the Spad was plunging like a plummet toward the depths of the ravine—with Allen clinging on the wing for dear life now. Sweat covered Bentley’s body. The rocks below were rushing toward him, horrifyingly near.

And all the time he heard the Fokkers above—glimpsed one of them following on his tail. Down, down—until the rocks were so close now that he thought surely it was the end—the crash must come. And then—

“Pull up!” came Allen’s voice. “Pull into a zoom! Quick—and let’s pray that the bad wing holds!”

And with his whole body Bentley was pulling back the joy-stick, pulling it back to his very chest. He saw

the rocks below suddenly swing down, as if they were all on some downward folding trap-door. He heard the terrific smash of his own wings against the air—the almost solid impact made the Spad lurch in every fiber. There came a deafening crash—a crash of wood, metal and fabric against rock. But dazedly Bentley knew it was not his Spad—for his Spad was climbing—he saw the stray starry sky before it.

“Good boy!” Allen’s voice came from the wing. “You bluffed one of those Jerries into diving too low—he crashed! And our plane is okay—my weight’s keeping it balanced! My——”

HE BROKE off, as the shrill clatter of Spandaus rose overhead. The remaining Fokker, enraged by the fall of its comrade, was attacking now like an infuriated vulture. But then a reckless oath broke from Steve Bentley—Steve Bentley who felt a new, glorious confidence now. And with a firm hand he sent the Spad zooming straight underneath that Fokker—sent it zooming while his fingers pressed the stick-triggers.

Rat-ta-tat-tat!

The Fokker was caught dead in that withering burst. It slewed over. A tongue of flame leaped from its fuel line, licked greedily along the fuselage. And then, bursting into flame, the last Jerry plane crashed like a fiery torch into the ravine.

AND Bentley, eyes gleaming, zoomed his Spad safely out of the ravine—zoomed her, with Allen shouting encouragement from the wing, clear over the rise beyond—over the cluster of squatting buildings, the steel towers, which were the Brenz power plant. On all sides the searchlights reached their tentacles out in vain now—the Spad was within the unprotected area.

And as the Spad swooped over the vulnerable power plant—and Bentley found the bomb release, he jerked it—once, twice. And from the Spad’s rack, two pear-shaped missiles of steel detached themselves went shrieking down through space.

Boom! B-room!

Geysers of flame and livid smoke shot up amid the buildings below. One of the towers tottered, fell—and simultaneously there was a blazing blue flash, as of lightning—as the live, high-tension wires were short-circuited. And again and again the Spad swooped—a determined Yank at its controls, with another Yank who shouted encouragement on its wings. Bomb after bomb was released, and each further completed the devastation of that power plant.

With a hissing roar a whole section of buildings burst into flames now, apparently from another short-circuit. Swiftly the holocaust spread—the whole place became a shambles, covered with roaring flame and billowing smoke.

And up above, the Spad banked like a victorious eagle, while Allen, still sprawled on the wing, yelled: “The best damn show I’ve ever seen, guy! It was worth it! Worth the prison camp we’re due for now—if we’re not shot to hell first.”

Bentley, hearing this last, thought that Allen was joking—and he even began to laugh heartily. But the laugh froze in his throat, as suddenly, with a shock, he saw that Allen was stating the bare truth!

Death or prison camp was their inevitable fate now!

All around the devastated plant, on all sides of the ravine, there still remained the waving searchlights—the impregnable defense area. And though, by a reckless stunt, Bentley had come here through that area, he knew he could never go back the same way; even if the Spad had enough fuel and strength—the Jerries would have the road blocked by now—have all other possible routes blocked, too, after what had happened. No, they could not go back by land. And even more certainly, they could not return by air—no one could fly through those searchlights and live!

They were marooned—marooned over the plant they had destroyed— marooned and surrounded with death or prison camp awaiting them.

A CHILL panic grew upon Bentley. God, why hadn’t he thought of this hitch? Why hadn’t he realized that, though he could get to the plant, he could never get away again? Why——

“It was worth it—we’ve ruined the German offensive,” came Allen’s voice from the wing—a voice cheerful and without a tinge of fear. “And now what do we do? Commit suicide in the anti-aircrafts or land and fight it out when they come to get us? Take your pick!”

And the cheerful coolness of Allen brought shame to Bentley, shame for his own fears. For he realized that Allen must have known all along that this was a suicidal stunt—yet, without hesitation, he had ridden that wing, encouraged Bentley. And if Allen could face it—so must he; they must face it together, like the comrades they were.

AND suddenly Bentley’s panic was gone, and in its place was a calm coolness. His voice rose gamely, vibrantly:

“We’ve still one more bomb—and just to make a perfect job I’m gonna drop it on the only building I see standing—that small one down there which the fire hasn’t touched. And then—by God—we’ll at least go down fighting!”

“Good boy!”

And with a grin Bentley once more sent the Spad swooping down—down over the sole remaining building. And once more his finger pulled the bomb-release.

B-R-O-O-M!

In one terrific upheaval of flame and debris the last building was blown to atoms—to scattered ruin. And zooming once more, Bentley yelled:

“That makes it thorough. And now to fight it out until they get us and——”

He broke off, as Allen gave a shout of wild incredulous glee. “Look, feller! Look what’s happened! Look! The searchlights——”

And Bentley, looking, felt momentarily all the awe that one feels in the presence of a miracle.

For the sky on all sides of the devastated plant had suddenly become dark; every single searchlight had gone out. And then, with a dazed shock, Bentley realized—realized what must have happened.

“That last building! It was the power house which supplied those searchlights! When we bombed it we blew ‘em all out!”

And, peacefully he headed the Spad straight for Allied territory. Peacefully they soared over the anti-aircraft area—absolutely safe now, for without the lights to frame them, the anti-aircrafts were as harmless as if they contained blank charges.

And just as the first streaks of dawn were in the air, the two Yank friends, tired but happy, stood before the desk of an equally tired but happy C.O. in his headquarters.

“I tell you it was the most clever and nifty stunt anyone ever pulled,” Allen was enthusing. “I wish you had been there, sir, to see Steve——”

BENTLEY broke in angrily. “How many times must I tell you that if it weren’t for you, Jim, the whole thing would have flopped? If you hadn’t been on the wing, telling me how to make that take-off—that dive—the power plant would still be functioning! But that flying lesson was all I needed,” he added confidently. “In that one take-off I learned enough to make my brain a flying encyclopaedia.”

“Bunk!” Allen retorted. “Why, no one but a born flyer could have done any of the things you’ve done! Gosh, Colonel, you may not know it, but you’ve got a real ace in this guy Bentley.”

The C.O. beamed. And then he said with warm pride: “Well, it’s only natural; he used to be an auto racer. You know—like Rickenbacker.”

