



BULLET PROOF

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

Silent Orth, Crack Flyer, Goes Gunning for Stefan Weldman, Invincible Ace of the Boche, in this Hell-Busting Story!

SILENT ORTH—who'd got the nickname in the beginning because he had been anything but silent—stood stiffly at attention before his squadron commander. His face scarcely changed expression as he received the grim ultimatum which had come by many hands out of the depths of Germany.

There was a dew of perspiration on the upper lip of the major. If the Germans made good on their boast he, the major, would lose one of the most renowned American flyers on the Western Front.

Silent Orth had made an enviable record, in the face of one of the worst beginnings—a beginning which had been so filled with boasting that his wingmates hadn't been able to stand it. But Orth hadn't thought of all his talk as boasting, because he had invariably made good on it. However, someone had brought home to him the fact that brave, efficient men were usually modest and really silent, and he had shut his mouth like a trap from that moment on.

HIS face never smiled. He did his jobs with surety and skill. He was deadly with Vickers, a master at the stick of almost any crate that flew. His name was even better known in Germany than it was on his own side of the lines. For men had died in German skies, before his ranting Vickers, trying to prove to their own satisfaction that they were a match for the calm-faced killer who once had talked not wisely but too well.

"There may be nothing in it, Silent," said the major, his voice shaking a little. "But I'm inclined to believe it. The Germans are thorough, and you have killed quite too many of them. This Stefan Weldman has a reputation in Germany as great as your own. They say of him that he is bullet proof, that no bullet will ever be moulded with his name on it; that he always gets his man, never flies back unless his enemy is dead. And they've brought him to the Staffel across the line for the express purpose of knocking you down. He's there now, awaiting his opportunity."

Silent Orth's face didn't change expression. He didn't say a word. His eyes merely rested on the major. That worthy rattled some papers nervously and licked his lips with a dry tongue, Orth knew without the telling that the major thought a lot of him. It would be tough on the Old Man if Silent Orth went West, for Orth was the backbone of his command.

"And that isn't all, Silent," went on the major. "The Germans mean business this time. They're not underestimating your skill, nor overestimating that

of Stefan Weldman. Weldman gets the first chance at you. But there are others to follow. There are four men, almost the equal of Weldman, who have been flying with him further north as a separate and distinct—and a thoroughly deadly—unit of German Air. They have been brought to the same Stafiel with him. If Weldman fails they will come after you, singly or all four of them together. What have you to say about it?"

Orth considered for a moment. Then he extracted a cigarette from his blouse pocket, lighted it. The major noted that his hand did not tremble in the slightest. He wondered what Silent would say, if anything. What he did say, after a time, amounted to almost nothing.

"Is that all, sir?"

The major's eyes widened.

"*Is that all!*" he snapped. "In God's name, what else do you want? *Is that all!!!* Well, yes, I guess it is all. Where are you going?"

FOR Silent Orth, immediately the major had made his statement that there was nothing to follow, had turned toward the door. At the threshold, answering the major's last question, he turned and flung the fateful words negligently over his left shoulder. "I'm going to get Weldman." Just that, no more. The major leaned back, sighing. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. He knew what it would mean to any flyer to try to get Weldman—an epic fight in which anything might happen. No matter who had tried conclusions with him in the past, it had always ended in just one way: with Stefan Weldman winner, and the victim crashing to earth in a Naming funeral pyre. And Weldman was one of the deadliest men with Spandaus in all German air, the most masterly of flyers.

The major stepped to the door of Headquarters office and watched the tall form of Silent Orth stride across the tarmac. Greaseballs, evidently in answer to some signal Orth had made on quitting the office, were wheeling out his Spad. It was trim, grey, and as deadly as Orth himself. The major sighed again, returned to his office.

He thought of grounding Orth for an indefinite period. But that wouldn't do. If Orth were kept out of the air for a week, Weldman and his men might knock down most of the rest of "B" Flight, to which Orth belonged. Orth must stay in the air to serve as a buffer between Weldman and his wingmates.

The Hisso roared as the prop was spun.

Orth, carefully examining every strut and brace

of his crate, lifted his eyes once to gaze away toward Germany. His lips moved.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "if this is the time I get mine. I don't, somehow, feel it in my bones, as I always thought I would if my number were really being lifted."

WHEN, satisfied that his crate was in readiness, that its guns were perfect, every strut and brace in the best possible shape, every instrument exactly in tune, Orth took time to scribble something on a piece of paper, weighting it with a bullet, thrusting it into his pocket with his cigarettes. He stuck a dead cigarette between his lips, and clambered into his pit.

So far everything was pretty much routine. What happened across the lines—well, the future must take care of that. He signaled for the chocks to be yanked free. His motor roared as he gave his crate the gun. The Spad started rolling.

ORTH shoved the stick forward, concentrating on one thing at a time, preparing now to take off. The ground became a blur under his scudding wings. The crate had flying speed. Back came the stick as the Spad lifted smoothly into the air. No circling for altitude with Silent Orth. He was off one second, away in the next, heading for his contemplated rendezvous with death. His crate jumped away to fifteen hundred feet, headed then, straight toward the German field.

Over the lines the Archies opened with their usual mad splurge in the attempt to do the almost impossible—smash an airman down by direct fire from the ground. The crate rocked and rolled a bit, but was in little more danger than it would have been had the German Archies not opened at all. Orth was flying too low. Through the Archies, he began to scan the sky, seeking German flyers who might be depended on to make the going difficult.

His crate was known through all this sector. Once a Fokker dived on him. Orth watched the German coming, calmly. He didn't alter his course, didn't swerve, didn't crawl for the sky. He merely watched, and when the Fokker was almost close enough for a burst, he looked indifferently to the front. The Fokker sheered off without firing a shot. Orth grinned tightly to himself. He was accustomed to the enemy sheering off.

It didn't mean that the enemy was frightened, but only that the Germans were careful. Why lose men when it wasn't necessary or discreet? Or maybe, on

this particular morning, all hands had been warned to leave Silent Orth for the great German killer, Weldman.

Now Orth could see the outline of the German field. Of course it was possible that there was no such flyer here as Weldman, but Orth had a hunch the Old Man had pretty straight dope on him. Orth knew Weldman's reputation in other sectors, and it seemed reasonable that his peculiar talents might be turned against the thorn in the side of German air in this section of the sky-front, Silent Orth.

Other German crates, some singly, some in formations, passed close to him. They offered him no opposition. They knew his crate. Orth flew on. And now the German field was swimming under him. Orth licked his dry cigarette once, fingered in his pocket for the weighted note he had written, found it, dragged it forth. He had said:

Well, Weldman, let's get it over with. Shall we say over the lines between our two fields? Immediately?
—Orth.

THAT was short and to the point, the succinct challenge of one great fighter to another great fighter. Orth looked down. His lips tightened. Near one end of the field were five Fokkers painted a dead black. The Old Man had had the right dope then—for Weldman's flight used Fokkers painted black. Even to the numbers, the major had been right. Orth could have surged down and perhaps fired all five crates with his bullets, but that wouldn't get Weldman. The German would merely use other crates. There was just one way to settle this—in combat to the death. Orth was ready.

He dropped the note on the field near the five black crates. Then he circled the field. At first bracketed Maxims had blazed away at him, but these had ceased when his note struck the field. It was as though all the German field had become immobile and silent, to watch and listen.

A tall man stalked out from the crates, onto the field. He waved his arms. Orth grinned. The German had used the semaphore system of signaling, and he had signaled just one word:

"Okay!"

ORTH'S challenge had been accepted. He watched the tall man stalk back to the rank of black crates, clamber into the pit of one of them. The black Fokker rolled out into the field. Orth started toward the lines, disdaining to dive on Weldman's ship as it took off.

His pride wouldn't permit such tactics. He didn't even look back. He knew that Weldman, about now, was smashing down the field for the take-off. He would be rocketing on to overtake Orth at the lines, where battle would be joined.

And when, above No Man's Land, Orth suddenly zoomed for altitude, he looked back to find that Weldman was almost close enough to have opened fire—that, indeed, Weldman might have dropped him with a lucky long shot with little danger to himself, but hadn't even opened fire. Pride again, perhaps. Airmen with records of long successive kills were proud of those records, and of their sportsmanship.

Orth lifted his hand as Weldman started circling up to his level. Weldman waved negligently back.

They understood each other. Orth wouldn't fire on Weldman while he climbed, though by all the rules of war he had every right to do so. But this fight, representing Allied and German air, was bigger than individuals. So much might hinge on its outcome. So Weldman didn't even watch to make sure that Orth didn't trap him.

And when at last they were on the same level, at nine thousand feet altitude, Weldman grinned at Orth. Silent Orth could see the white gleaming of the man's teeth across the abyss. Then the smile vanished to signal the end of mutual courtesies.

Weldman wasted no more time. He suddenly slanted in to the attack, already leaning over his ring-sight, already with his hands reaching for his trips. No stunts, no acrobatics, just an efficient lunge in to the kill. Orth appreciated the business-like manner of the great German. He appreciated it more when the first burst from the German's guns, coming even as Orth started to roll out of line of sights, smashed through his turtleback behind the cockpit, so close that the Yank's back cringed with the painful vibration of the Spad.

Orth, rolling out, looked back. There was a hole in his fuselage big enough to admit a man's balled fist. Weldman's bullets had been amazingly bunched. Had they struck Orth in the midsection, they must certainly have cut him almost in two.

Orth grinned. Maybe his face was a little white; for this fellow Weldman was good. Orth knew that afresh next instant, when a burst smashed through his fuselage again, this time just ahead of the cockpit, jarring most of his instruments out of true. Orth could smell the powder of the bullets.

HE DECIDED on a plan. He would wait Weldman out. It was dangerous, but by so doing he would concentrate everything on flying, while Weldman must both fly and fire his Spandaus. Orth kept his guns silent. He rocked and rolled through a series of aerobatics. He didn't even glance at his ring-sight, didn't even reach for his trips. Let the German shoot his bolt. Every bullet he fired—and missed—meant that much less in the odds against the survival of Silent Orth.

Orth flew like a man inspired. Weldman passed him so close, in a savage side thrust that missed by inches, so that Weldman's left wing almost touched the left wing of Orth's Spad, that Orth could see his face—set in a mask of puzzlement. What sort of man was this who didn't use his guns?

Weldman wasn't, however, the sort of man to worry. He was out to shoot a man down. He concentrated on that. Orth waited, and while he waited he avoided the savage thrusts, the deadly charges, of Stefan Weldman.

THE man was a miracle worker. His bullets came smoking the second his sights were aligned on Orth's crate. They smashed into wings and fuselage. Orth's wings were riddled. Bits of fabric slatted in the wind of his passage. A flying wire stood straight out behind the Spad.

The motor coughed spasmodically. Orth figured that some lead had found an almost vital spot on the laboring Spad. But next moment the motor roared as sweetly as before—and Orth continued his waiting tactics.

But as Weldman fought on he seemed to increase in surety, to be more daring in his attack. Bullets smoked about the ears of Silent Orth. Still he held his fire. Once again Weldman passed him close, and Orth showed his teeth in a confident grin. Weldman didn't smile back. He was still puzzled as to the sort of tactics this American was using.

"I'll get him with one burst, and it must be good," Orth told himself. "If I miss once, I'll never get another chance. This guy is good at flying. If he turns the tables on me, after I fire a burst, and starts waiting me out, I doubt if I can stand the gaff as coolly as he is standing it."

For five minutes—which were five eons of time to the two flyers, and to the thousands of men in khaki and grey on opposing lines below who watched the epic battle—the sky fight continued. Orth was estimating the number of bullets Weldman had left.

But that was no go. He might have plenty of extras which he could use at any moment. Weldman wasn't one to fight his way through and end up weaponless, especially against a flyer like Orth.

"Just one burst," reiterated Orth to Orth, "and I'll go home to get ready for the other four ships."

The black Fokker was a perfect target. It stood out against the crossed wires of Orth's ring-sight like the side of a barn. Once or twice Orth snatched a quick glance to make sure. But neither of those times did he see Weldman exactly in line of sights—and that was absolutely necessary to his plans. Weldman was cagy. His Fokker might get in line, but Weldman was watching out for his own body.

However, in time he must grow desperate—and so the fight continued for five more minutes, an unbelievable space of time for a sky fight.

WELDMAN was forcing the fight, Orth retreating, maneuvering, taking his time, waiting his opponent out. His time would come. If, when it came, his guns wouldn't work—but he refused to harbor that thought longer than it took it to come, and for him to cast it from his mind. He mustn't let irrelevant thoughts hinder the smooth action of his mind.

To be caught napping for so much as an infinitesimal heartbeat, against a man like Weldman, was to die the next instant. So Orth kept on waiting his man out. Eleven minutes. Down below no shots were being fired, so intent on the sky-battle were the Germans and Americans below. Many men in khaki, many in grey, had forgotten one another. They stood up on their parapets the better to see—and neither side took advantage of the fact to loose hails of lead.

The fight aloft claimed all their attention. When it was ended, lead would fly, and men would duck for cover—leaving bundles of dead on the parapet. But they weren't thinking of that now.

"Any minute now," thought Orth, "will be time enough."

He began to get ready.

He would bring Weldman into line of sights—

THERE came Weldman! This time the German was coming in to make the kill. He came like a streak of lightning. Orth, if he followed his previous tactics, would dodge away. But all at once he had ceased to dodge. He was going to back Weldman into a literal wall of lead; therefore it was only fair that he, too, should face such a wall.

So he suddenly banked straight into the path of Weldman's Fokker, nosed around until he had Weldman directly in his ring-sight. Then his hands leaped like darting snakes to the trips of his Vickers. His eyes were glued to the crossed wires of the sight. Through them he saw the blur of Weldman's propeller, and through that blur the bulky outline of Weldman himself, bent over his trips. He'd never again get a chance like this.

His Vickers screamed.

Bullets snapped past his ears. A flying wire went, with a resonant whine he could hear above the roaring of Hisso and Mercedes motors. His bullets, he knew, were going true; and luck had helped him a little when Weldman hadn't had time to estimate the swerving of the Spad's nose carefully enough to send a burst into Orth.

Orth instantly dropped his left wing down, fed full power to his crate, slanted away to his left. His wings moaned in protest. His motor coughed. But Orth wasn't even watching that, or hearing. He was looking back at Weldman.

Weldman flashed past. This time he didn't look at Orth. He didn't look at anyone or anything—unless he looked into the dread face of Death. For his head was tilted back on the rear of his cockpit coaming, rocking from side to side with the rocking and rolling of his plunging black crate. Blood dyed the side of his fuselage toward Orth.

Then the black ship nosed down, started for the earth with the motor full out—and Orth, feeling a great weight lift from his shoulders, looked over the side, down at the opposing lines which had witnessed the Allied victory. Both sides seemed stunned by the suddenness of the ending. But the Germans would be shocked. Already rifles and machine-guns were being brought to bear.

And Orth dived on the German lines with his Vickers ranting and raving, to drive the Germans undercover before their lead could blast the lives out of American doughboys. It was a break in favor of the Allies, for no sooner had the Germans seen their opportunity to get some of the Americans napping, than Orth's lead was driving them to cover.

RIFLES, bombs, machine-guns, howitzers, all were exchanging compliments as Orth swooped low over No Man's Land. Then, now that his friends on the ground were alive to the situation, and the surprise attack foiled by his quick thinking, Orth slanted away for home. The enemy bullets which probed for his

vitals as he went did no damage whatever. He was going away too fast, flying a too erratic course.

Behind his own lines Orth heaved a deep sigh. Weldman, the greatest obstacle he had ever had to hurdle, had finished his course, flown to his last combat—and Orth had chalked up another victory on his record. On the list of his descendus Weldman would merely be one more—while in Orth's mind, forever hereafter, Weldman would be thought of as his toughest antagonist, worth any two or three other Germans he had faced, ever would face again.

AND by this time Weldman's "gentlemen" would know that their leader had failed. In his mind's eye Orth could see the four—Farber, Steinholtz, Vaterkin and Vollmer—narrowing their eyes, setting their jaws grimly, tightening their belts, and resolving to succeed in the task which had marked the first, and last, failure of the great German whom the whole world had predicted would live to the end of the war without a scratch. He had, however, gone the way of all brave men who dare too greatly.

Orth slanted down for a landing. When he saw other flyers and grease-balls on the field to watch him shoot a landing, he knew that already the field had been informed of the death of Weldman. It made him feel a little sick. He hated to think of anybody glorifying the death of a brave man—a brave man, as Weldman had been.

He slanted down, touched his wheels in a perfect three-point landing, and stepped from his crate. Greaseballs and flyers surged forward. He waved them aside. Behind him as he started across the tarmac he heard the ejaculations of the men:

"Shot his crate to hell-and-gone!"

"That burst missed him by the width of a cigarette paper!"

"That burst missed his body by a whisper!"

A man barred his way—the squadron medico.

"Come in here a minute, Silent," he said grimly, leading Orth to the medical unit. "You may be hit and not know it in the excitement."

Ready hands helped Orth to strip. The medico looked him over swiftly, shook his head in bewilderment.

"Not a scratch on you, even from flying splinters, Silent," he said. "You must be as bullet proof as Weldman was supposed to be—and patently wasn't."

"I'm no more that way than he was. I'm merely lucky," said Orth grimly.

He slipped back into his clothes, strode across the tarmac to Headquarters office to make out his combat report. The major stuck out his hand. Orth didn't even look at him as he took the hand. Neither man said anything, but the handclasp spoke volumes. The C.O. had never expected to see this pilot again, and so it was as though he had returned from the dead to shake the major's hand.

Orth wrote out his report. It was short and to the point.

"Met Stefan Weldman over No Man's Land between German and American fields, and shot him down with one burst after eleven minutes of maneuvering. Orth."

THAT was all. No elaborations. Nothing, except the fateful words which marked the passing of the mighty Weldman. Orth looked at the major as he handed him the piece of paper.

"You know what this means, Silent? It means—"

"I know. His gentlemen will be after me from this moment on."

"If you'd like a couple of days in Paris—"

Orth's face clouded so quickly that the major swallowed whatever else he would have said. Orth, he knew, would never stop until this affair was settled; until either he was dead or he had slain the rest of Weldman's outfit—or forced them out of the air. There could be no quarter asked or given.

Orth strode back across the tarmac to look at his crate—and had to marvel himself at the close escape he had had. At least four bursts had come so close to him that, if he had sucked in his breath at the moment they had struck his crate, he would have been hit for a certainty. Luck had been with him—luck and incomparable flying—and the fact that his tactics had driven Weldman to desperation as he saw his reputation going on the wings of Orth's scudding Spad.

ORTH studied his crate, saw what had to be done, estimated that two hours would be needed to put his Spad into shape again. Then he retired to his hutment, and was almost instantly asleep.

While he slept, four black crates came over, their motors savagely drumming, to strafe the field. They probed in all the hangars and hutments for the life of Silent Orth—and when they had gone there were bullet holes in the roof of Orth's hutment, but Silent Orth had escaped again. The strafe had wakened

him for a minute or two—but when he heard the wings of the four Fokkers whirl away in the distance, heading into the east, he slept again, setting the alarm clock of his mind to waken him at three in the afternoon. Then he would go hunting again. This time he might not come back. But as he roused himself at three o'clock, and sat on the edge of his bed, he had that old feeling again: that today was not to be the day, that again he must emerge victorious. It was somehow written in the cards of fate. If he had been destined to die he would have known it; though he knew very well that plenty of Allied airmen, not expecting to die, planning trips to Paris just at their take-off, hadn't come back, had gone down in flammers or jumped to keep from roasting. And yet, his hunch had never failed him.

It seemed to simmer down to this: that he either live, victorious, or die in magnificent failure—putting up a bloody fight to the very finish. Not all the crates in Germany could jump him without knowing they had been in a fight, he told himself grimly.

Then he dressed for the air and went out onto the tarmac. The major was there, his face very grave. Some of his wingmates looked at him with weak, uncertain grins. They didn't believe, he saw, that the man lived who could joust so casually with fate over an indefinite period. They would have bidden him good-by with handclasps if to do so hadn't been airman's bad luck. But he could almost read their minds. They didn't believe, this time, that he would come back. When his wings vanished into the east on this take-off, they would have seen them for the last time.

Their faces told him their belief.

He looked at his watch, spoke briefly, allowing himself what might turn out to be one last hint of boasting:

"Kill the fatted calf at four o'clock. I'm allowing twenty minutes to make contact, and ten minutes for each of the four black crates—one minute each less than it took for Weldman."

AND they didn't think him immodest or a braggart that he put it that way. They thought of it as the last gesture of defiance of a man destined to die with his boots on.

His crate was ready. No note, this time. There would be no need of any note. The four black-crated pilots knew, would know, why he came when he flew over their field. He didn't map out any plan. To have done so would have been to have it knocked into a

cocked hat the moment he contacted the four black crates. They would be waiting for him. The second of contact would be time enough to make plans.

He lifted his right hand. His wing-mates stood back, staring at him. The last thing he noticed as he climbed into the pit was the forest of little black crosses on his fuselage, one each for the bullet holes. Weldman had left him as souvenirs. They were the black notes of Weldman's swan-song. How many more notes would be inscribed on his fuselage when, and if, he came back from this impossible mission?

OUT of the tail of his eyes he saw the major moving forward, his face white and strained. He read the major's mind. At the last minute he was going to call off the flight. He might or might not have had a communication from the four black crates. It didn't matter.

The issue was clear-cut as the edge of a sharp razor.

Orth didn't give the major a chance. He gave his crate the gun, started rolling down the field. His tail was off. Then as he came back on the stick, his wheels left the tarmac.

Orth was fresh from one fight in which he had learned much. The "gentlemen" of Weldman would doubtless fight much as their leader had done, for he must have been their idol.

Orth slanted away, heading, the second time that day, for the field of the black crates.

He had a fight on his hands. The four Germans were honor bound to succeed where their master had failed. They would fight him. They would be ready and waiting.

The Archies, this time, didn't even open as he crossed the line. Maybe that was an ominous circumstance. He didn't know, didn't care. Nothing mattered but himself and the four flyers of the black crates.

Now he saw the field and slanted down toward it. The sun was a ball of fire, low down in the west. An hour would make all the difference in the world. He grinned as he thought of having told his wingmates to prepare the fatted calf—and recalled with some regret that he hadn't so much as stopped for a cup of scalding hot coffee.

TWO thousand feet above the field, Orth suddenly straightened, his face a mask of puzzlement. Only two black ships were on the line. Where were the other two? He glanced around, searching the sky for their

ebon wings, and did not see them. Then he dived on the field.

He saw men racing for the black crates, saw ground crews leaping for their bracketed Maxims. He grinned tightly, wondering still.

It was then that the other two crates appeared. They came out of clearings at opposite ends of the tarmac, flying up to his height as fast as though they had been shot from catapults, reaching his level in twin leaps that were bullet swift. Orth grinned, recognizing their tactics for what they were worth. Two were attacking, trying to get him in a deadly cross-fire, to hold him there until the other two could come up to finish the business.

Orth didn't wait. He selected his first man, thankful that the Germans had planned to do just what they were doing.

He slanted down on the first one with his guns going. No maneuvering as against Weldman, for he had to shoot and shoot straight, miss no bets, and make every bullet count. The two black crates on the ground, like evil black beetles, were scudding madly along the field for their take-off—which Orth was resolved would not work out as they had planned.

His bullets were going into the motor housing of the first black Fokker as he concentrated on the spot where damage would be final and absolute—and when telltale smoke and flames leaped forth, he knew that he had one less enemy with whom to deal. The German tried desperately to cut away when he saw with what deadly suddenness his mute challenge had been accepted.

But he must have seen that he didn't have a chance of any kind, for he did a last brave thing: he turned his nose directly toward Orth's Spad and let his motor full out, thus hurling a flaming arrow at Orth's vitals—which he would never live to see land. For even as he changed his Fokker's direction, the German stepped nonchalantly to the cockpit coaming of his crate and plunged into space.

Orth stood on his tail to let the smoking, shrieking, burning Fokker flash under him, so close he could feel the heat of its flames. Then he banked swiftly, disregarding the flaming crate, to bring his guns to bear on the second Fokker.

Two crates in four hours. Could he stretch it to five crates in the period of a single day?

HIS Vickers were ranting and raving. His bullets were probing for the life of the second German, who,

having witnessed the swift end of his fellow, was diving straight toward the other two crates, now just rising from the field.

"Fool!" said Orth. "Why doesn't he take me as far away from them as possible, to give them a chance?"

There was none to answer him, and he dived like a falling stone on the tail of the second black Fokker. His bullets smoked through the arc of his propeller. His ring-sight was dead on the back of the German. That German suddenly went limp, started to fling up his arms; but those had gone limp, too, and were too heavy for his dying will.

The two Fokkers taking off realized what had happened, and swerved madly to right and left to escape the plunging crate of their dead comrade. All this had occurred with the speed of light; for the two black crates which Orth had just finished off, went into the ground almost together.

Orth had "shot a tripe." Could he stretch it to five? He had to, if he were to live. His eyes were still glued to his ring-sight. He was trying to get the other two. But now they were wise. They went in opposite directions, flying with motors full out.

AND by the time Orth had leveled off to meet them on their own terms, they were above his level in the sky, banking around to come at him from the north and from the south. Orth's jaw muscles stood out, ridges of determination, as he realized that the Germans' strategy might succeed.

But one black Fokker was closer than the other. Orth concentrated on this one. Again, no maneuvering. Nothing but a straight, savage, determined thrust, everything—his life and his future—banked on the result. His knees gripped the stick. His eyes were glued to the ring-sight. His heart was calm, his fingers and feet on trips and controls.

The German barrel-rolled to throw him off, but he lunged straight in, Vickers flaming. Even as he came in he saw a half a dozen Boche crates rolling along the field.

Silent Orth counted coup again.

His first bullets struck the third German full in the face as the man stopped his frantic barrel-roll. Orth, seeing the blood come forth in a crimson stream, instantly banked away toward the last Fokker, determined to get him before reinforcements could arrive—to get him, as it were, on Orth's own flight for home.

But the last German was obdurate, hated to require

the help of the six coming up, and Orth fought him for the full ten minutes, while the other six crates circled the mêlée. Bullets riddled Orth's wings, battered his crate, while he waited calmly for his chance.

When it came his guns spoke, one long burst—and then, without waiting to see what the results would be, he suddenly dived for the tree-tops to hedgehop home ahead of his enemies.

He looked back as bullets snapped past his ears, to see the last black Fokker go roaring in. He had done the impossible.

He must still do the impossible to get home.

He did it. He rolled home, but at the very last his own wingmates helped by diving into the thick of the Germans, to win a major victory against them, while Orth slid under the fight and shot a landing on his own tarmac. He was weak and trembling as he waited beside his stricken Spad for his wingmates to come in and shoot their own landings. He straightened, though, when they gathered about him.

THEY touched him as though unable to believe that he had come through even this unscathed.

Someone spoke with awe:

“The man's bullet proof,” and Silent was afraid it would give him another nickname which would be a challenge to his enemies.

His own flight commander said:

“How in God's name did you do it? It's impossible! A hundred bullets, at the very least, should have hit you!”

And Orth allowed himself the touch of immodesty he felt he was entitled to:

“Oh, I used to be an African dodger at a country fair! I saw all the bullets coming—and dodged!”