



A FIGHTING MAN

by WILLIAM E.
POINDEXTER

Little Ossie Timpkins, K.P., asked for nothing more—to die in a blaze of glory—to ride flaming wings down the steep skies to a fiery grave! But they wouldn't let him into the air—wouldn't let him prove that he was even as every last one of them—a fighting man!

IN THOSE LAST DAYS there was no rest for the pilots of the 212th. With Germany putting flight after flight of D7 Fokkers into the air in a valiant attempt to stave off the inevitable, there could be no rest. They came to earth only long enough to refuel, and in savage silence, to gulp food which they did not taste. They grew grim and gaunt and old, but they had a job to perform, and they performed it.

And in the cook shack, Ossie Timpkins peeled spuds.

"Yes, sir, when all's said an' done, it's the cooks that'll win this here war." Little Ossie paused with a knife in one hand and a half-peeled potato in the other. "Of course, the fightin' men helps a lot," he added generously, "but it's the cooks that deserves the credit—even if they never git it."

"Haw, haw, haw," observed Sergeant-Pilot Vic Guthrie, without the slightest trace of humor in his voice. He was not even listening. He was busily engaged in wiping out his plate with pieces of bread and eating the bread hungrily.

"Well, it's the truth," argued little Ossie valiantly, although ordinarily he didn't argue with anybody, but he winced at the implied contempt in the other's tone. Guthrie happened to be Ossie's own particular hero, a two-fisted, hard-fighting he-man who had never learned what fear was, and who had a Medal of Honor tucked carefully away in the bottom of his war-bag, Ossie had caught a glimpse of it once, and while he didn't envy Guthrie, he would cheerfully have given his own soul to have earned one.

"It's the truth," Ossie reiterated. "They ain't a war won, no, nor a girl neither, but what a cook made it possible. Now you take this guy Romeo, that I seen in a play once. D'yuh think he could git off all them love words to Juliet without some cook had filled his stummick with beans an' sow-belly first? No, sir! An' d'yuh think you fellers coulda mopped up that Jerry circus yesterday over Lisonville if us cooks hadn't been right on the job with—"

"All right, all right!" snapped the sergeant exasperatedly. "I'm willing to admit you cooks won the war twice over, so shut up and finish peeling those spuds. We're getting hell in great gobs out yonder, and we're due for more. Gripes, you guys that sit around on your tails all day make me sick. You're not a cook, anyway. Just a lousy K.P. because you haven't got guts enough to be anything else."

Little Ossie sighed and bent again over his eternal spuds. But every now and then his faded

blue eyes turned wistfully towards the landing field where warming motors shattered the air with their thundering challenge. He talked bravely about cooks winning the war, but he knew in his secret heart that he was just trying to hide the fact that he wanted, with all his soul and body, to be known as a fighting pilot.

He got up to tug awkwardly at another sack of potatoes, a pathetic little figure in a grease-smeared uniform that was built for a man twice his size. Well, he'd tried to be a fightin' man, Gawd knowed he had! What did' it matter if he couldn't remember which was his left foot when the drill sergeant bellered at him and burned him with withering sarcasm? What did it matter if he never could roll his puttees exactly right, or a button was always missing from his blouse?

KID stuff, that's what it was, and didn't have a thing in the world to do with fightin', as far as he could see. But then, he guessed he ought to be used to such things by now. As far back as he could remember he'd never had anything—never had anything he wanted. Always been kicked around like he wasn't even human. Never even had no mother or father, he hadn't. There'd been the orphanage first. After that there'd been the workhouse every now and then. He wasn't no criminal, so he guessed they jailed him just for bein' alive. Or he'd knocked about the streets with nobody to care whether he starved to death or not. There had been a home for stray cats in his town, he remembered, but there was no place for stray humans, it seemed.

A furtive tear plowed a furrow through the dirt on his unshaven cheek as he turned wistful eyes towards the landing field again, listening to the stirring music of the motors.

But he'd thought it would be different when he got into the army. He'd go marching gaily away in a fine new uniform, with the bands playin' and the crowd cheerin' and the girls runnin' out and wavin' goodbye. And then there'd be battles where he could fight the Jerries and—and really amount to something at last.

Yeah—and here he was on permanent K.P. with a flyin' outfit, peelin' spuds! If he could have stayed with the infantry, he might accidentally have got into the scrap, but what chance would he ever have to fly? None, that's what. Death? Shucks, he wouldn't mind a little thing like that. Life hadn't been so pleasant that he was afraid to die. If he could show the boys, and especially Guthrie, that he was a man even as they were, why, hell, he'd be glad to die! To die in a blaze of glory—what more could a man ask?

Ossie Timpkins was aroused from his reverie by a heavy hand on his shoulder. "C'mon, Ossie," growled the cook, "go open me a case of them prunes. Git a move on now." With customary roughness he jerked the little man to his feet, pushed him violently, and Ossie staggered against Vic Guthrie. Guthrie batted him away, much as if he had been a pestiferous fly, and with as little attention. Guthrie was not intentionally cruel, but he had a strong man's contempt for weakness, and besides, his nerves were strained to the breaking point.

Blinking tears of rage from his eyes, Ossie staggered across the room and jerked out the box of prunes. That's the way it always was, he thought bitterly. Always kicked and knocked about, and nobody cared whether he lived or died. But if he could just do something once, something big like other men, why, it wouldn't matter. Gawd, couldn't you see your way clear to do something about it? Just give him a chance, that's all he asked.

He turned about with the box of prunes in his arms just as the pilot strode out through the door. Ossie stared after him with that wistful, lost-dog look in his eyes that might have moved men to pity if they had ever paid enough attention to him to notice it. Guthrie was going to battle, going up there among the clouds where every man was a hero, where he would do things that would justify his existence, while he, Ossie, would stay behind where it was safe and—and peel spuds!

YEAH, and when the war was over, Guthrie would have medals to give to his girl. All the rest of his days he could tell tales of heroism and mighty deeds of valor while his children listened in wide-eyed worship. He could tell of how many Fokkers had fallen to his racketing Lewis guns. And all that Ossie could tell would be of how many spuds he had peeled! He choked suddenly and rubbed at his eyes with a grimy hand, but was brought back to the present by the roaring voice of Guthrie speaking to the gunnery sergeant just outside the window.

"Where in thunder did Halliday go?" he was shouting above the drone of the motors.

"Brancheau came in with his observer dead in the cockpit, and he took Halliday with him," the other yelled back.

"Hell! Where does Brancheau get off, taking my observer? I've got to down a sausage in twenty minutes and not another man on the field. All right, get my bus on the line—I can handle the job by myself."

Ossie staggered at the words as if he had been hit between the eyes. It seemed to him that here was a direct answer to his prayers if he could only pull it off. It might mean a court martial for him, but it was worth the chance. And no matter what happened, at least he would never peel another spud.

Glancing cautiously about, he saw that the cook was engaged at the stove, and he set the box of prunes carefully down on the floor and dived into the next room.

He plunged beneath his bunk and dragged out his most cherished possessions. An old automatic that would not shoot, a hand grenade that he had picked up, Lord knew where, goggles and a bullet-torn helmet that some pilot had tossed away as useless. Ossie had stored them carefully away as something symbolic of the glory that could never be his, but now, with a little luck, he might use them, after all.

Downing a sausage these days was a two-man job, he knew, yet the great Guthrie was going out after it alone as casually as if he were strolling to pick daisies in a meadow back home. Well, Guthrie wasn't going alone if Ossie could help it. It was his one chance and he meant to make the most of it. At any rate, he knew enough to pull the trigger of a machine gun.

Hearing the cook's querulous voice calling him, Ossie slipped quietly through the window, and raced around to the landing field. With the overworked ground crews milling about, he was unnoticed as he slipped up and popped into the rear cockpit of Guthrie's two-seater like a frightened rabbit into a hole. He crouched down beneath the gun, adjusting his goggles and helmet, and praying that no one would think to glance into that cockpit.

Ossie's heart was thundering almost as loud as the ship's motor at the thought of riding to battle behind the great Guthrie. Afterwards, if he lived, there would be trouble, but this was his moment of glory and he didn't care what happened when it was finished.

An instant later Guthrie straddled in behind the stick, and Ossie breathed a sigh of relief as the motor roared stridently and the plane began to lurch down the field. They took off in a clean zoom and Ossie felt his heart rattling around somewhere in his boots. It was the first time he had ever been off the ground, and there was a hollow feeling where his stomach should have been.

But hell! what did it matter if his teeth were clicking together and his body was shivering as if he had a chill? Whether he lived or died, he was a fighting man

for once in his life, riding to glory behind his hero, Vic Guthrie.

He didn't dare show his head above the cockpit coaming yet, because if Guthrie saw him, he would return to the field and kick Ossie's oversized breeches up above his ears. But the little man could tell that they were climbing steadily. Time enough to show himself when they sighted the balloon.

A FEW minutes later the ship zoomed and flung over sidewise, so that Ossie was obliged to grasp the bucket-seat to keep from being tossed out into very vacant space. What was the matter with Guthrie, he wondered, capering around through the sky like that?

A swarm of angry hornets buzzed past just above Ossie's head. He couldn't see them, but he could hear them. Now what in thunder were hornets doing up there a mile above the earth? And those holes in the side of the cockpit—he would have sworn that they hadn't been there a moment before.

Gosh, he bet that Guthrie was drunk, the way he was throwing the old bus about the sky. And those blamed hornets—wow! Ouch! One of them had stung him on the chest. Ossie tilted his head just as a great black and white Fokker thundered over so close that he could see the sun glinting on the pilot's goggles as he stared down upon them.

Why, those hornets were Spandau bullets, and one of them had stung him, got him plumb center, too! He coughed, and felt the hot blood well up to his lips. Right through the gizzard! Oh Gawd! why did this have to happen to him before he'd even had the chance to pull a trigger? He wouldn't have cared if it had happened after they got the balloon, because then they might have pinned a medal on his dead chest before they buried him. Well, it was just his luck, the bad luck that had dogged him ever since he could remember.

He couldn't stand up, couldn't draw himself up to the gun because the plane was rocketing about in the air so furiously that it was all he could do to keep from being flung out. And all the time the life blood was trickling out of his mouth from the punctured lung and running down his chin. He had to do something, and do it quick.

For a moment the bus was on an even keel, and by a desperate effort Ossie dragged himself up into the seat and clamped his hands on the Vickers. He had never actually fired a machine gun, but he had hung around the planes so much that, theoretically, he knew how it was done.

Ossie had drawn himself up just in time to see a Fokker come streaking down from the sky, the tail whipping about in a wild death spin, while black smoke trailed out above her. The pilot sat erect in the cockpit, and as the doomed plane swept past, he raised his hand in the last salute.

Gawd! Ossie thought, that was the way real men died! It was worthwhile to die like that, and Ossie wanted nothing better. That German could die gallantly because he knew that he had fought a good fight, even though he had lost.

But there was another Fokker slanting in from the side, and bullets were eating hungrily at a wing strut. Ossie swung the Vickers, pressing the trigger at the same time, and nearly blew the top of Vic Guthrie's head off. At the sound of the racketing gun, Guthrie started convulsively, and stared back over his shoulder with his eyes almost popping through his goggles. But Ossie didn't have time to pay any attention to him.

He was spraying the atmosphere in every direction—every direction, that is, but the one in which the Fokker was boring in at them. Shooting at a moving target from a whirling, devil-dancing plane wasn't as easy as it looked, but at that, those wild-flying tracers were bothering the German. He sheered off, but at that moment Guthrie put the nose of his bus down in a screaming dive, for the motor had conked.

OSSIE strained his watering eyes downward, saw that they were heading for an open field and wondered vaguely if they were going to crash. Well, it didn't matter now. He hadn't got the Fokker, but for once in his life he had been a real fighting man. He shivered a little at the moaning of the wind through the rigging. He could hear it clearly now that the motor didn't deafen him, and it sounded like the moaning of ghosts. Dead men were riding the wings of the plane, he thought. And he wondered whether, after he was dead, his ghost would ride the skies, or whether it would be back in the mess shack—peeling spuds!

But they were not due for a crash. Guthrie glided in for a nice landing with the stick dead, the plane rolling and bumping over the rough ground until it stopped near the woods. Instantly the pilot was out and climbing up to the engine, swearing in a way that aroused Ossie's admiration. Guthrie, he thought proudly, could even cuss better than anyone else.

"Ossie, you damned little gold-brick," Guthrie thundered as he worked frantically over his power-

plant, "what in Hades are you doing in that bus?"

Ossie coughed and hid the blood that trickled from his mouth with his hand. "Well, I heard you say you didn't have no observer, so I thought I'd come along an' help—" he began mildly, but Guthrie interrupted him with a snort.

"Yeah, I know why you came along," he rasped. "You got tired peeling spuds and thought you'd take a joy-ride. Didn't know I was coming across the lines, did you? Well, before we get back, you'll think peeling spuds is a pleasure!"

Ossie doubted that, but he couldn't answer because blood kept getting in his throat and choking him. And in his chest where the hornet—that is, where the bullet had stung him, there was a raging hell. He was being burned alive, and he expected any moment that the flames would burst out through his mouth.

No, he'd never peel spuds again, and he was thankful for that, but he did wish that Guthrie knew why he had sneaked into the plane and come on this trip. But he couldn't say anything. That was the trouble with Ossie, he could think, but he never could put his thoughts into words.

Guthrie raised his head and looked at him suddenly. "Ossie," he demanded, struck by the livid face of the little man, "you're not hurt, are you?" Guthrie promised himself that he would kick Ossie's pants when they got back, but he didn't want the little man injured.

"N-no," Ossie chattered through clicking teeth. "J-just scared, I guess." He mustn't let Guthrie know that his life was dribbling away in that thin red stream from his mouth.

The pilot grunted. "Well, you're going to be more scared than that before I get through with you," he promised grimly. "I've got this feed-line unchoked, so we'll get started after that balloon again, and—"

He jumped down without finishing the sentence, and grasped the prop. Ossie was sinking back into his seat, and there was a strange blur gathering before his eyes. His goggles were steaming, he thought, and he pushed them up on his forehead. Funny, that didn't help any. But through the blur he could see several figures in field gray rushing from the woods, and Guthrie's yell of rage and despair rang in his ears.

For an instant he did not understand; then he realized that a squad of German infantrymen were rushing upon them, and that rifle bullets were whining past his head. Ossie struck himself savagely on the temple with the heel of his hand, and his vision cleared

momentarily. He whirled the Vickers about and pressed the trigger, just as Guthrie swung the prop and the motor broke into a stuttering roar.

Ossie's first burst of bullets punctured holes in the blue sky. The second burst stripped leaves from the trees a hundred yards beyond, and as Guthrie made a wild, spring and straddled into the front cockpit, the Germans were upon them.

THE plane was shuddering forward as the pilot jazzed the throttle, but the Germans were hanging on to the wings, dragging the bus around, and they were below the depression angle of Ossie's gun. Capture seemed certain, but Ossie happened to think of his grenade for the first time. He yanked it from his pocket, and after some difficulty bit out the pin. He had a vague idea that you were supposed to hold the thing for thirty seconds before throwing it, but fortunately for Ossie, there was no time, to test this interesting theory. The ship had been dragged around in a circle, and the Germans were already reaching up to drag them from the cockpits.

Ossie tossed the grenade and it exploded before it hit the ground. That bomb should have blown a wing off the plane, but the little gods of luck were riding with Ossie that day. The explosion hurled the Germans aside as if they had been struck with a giant club. The ship heeled over, a wing tip dragging the ground, and the next instant they were trundling down the field, gathering speed, and took off in a lurching zoom over the tree tops.

Once Vic Guthrie turned his head to stare wonderingly at the pallid little man crouched in the rear office, and shook his head in amazement. Ossie was nearly through, and he knew it, but there was a blazing light in his faded blue eyes. His numbed hands automatically fastened the safety-belt about him, but he did not realize what he was doing.

But he did know that if he had not been along to toss that grenade, Guthrie would now either be dead or a prisoner. Yes, and Guthrie knew it, too. That was all that mattered. Ossie had shown that he was a fighting man, so he could die in peace. His life had been hard, but this one moment of glory had made it all worth while.

For the next few minutes Ossie was conscious of little except the fire within his breast, but it didn't matter so much. He wasn't going to cry about it. The image of that German pilot saluting as he rode to his death was still before Ossie's eyes. That was the way he

wanted to die—gallantly. No, sir, if he had to wash out, it would be in a blaze of glory.

He was aware, presently, of black puffs of smoke all around the plane, and he wondered dimly what they could be. They didn't look dangerous; that is, they didn't look dangerous until one of the puffs of smoke mushroomed just off the left wing, and hot, sizzling shards whistled past his ears and ripped through the wing surfaces. The plane tilted suddenly and flipped over on her back, and Ossie's eyes cleared so that he had a swift glimpse of the earth spread out far below him like some great painting.

Another instant and the sky was in its proper place above him, as Guthrie regained control and righted the plane. They were diving now, diving straight into the midst of that inferno of bursting anti-aircraft shells. Ossie was deafened by the thunderous concussions. Then he saw the German balloon just in front of them. As he watched, two tiny figures popped up out of the basket and flung themselves over the side, their parachutes blossoming out above them.

OSSIE laughed aloud at the spectacle, or rather he thought that he laughed, but his blue, stiffened lips had not moved. They were thundering down upon the balloon, while Guthrie's guns chattered and racketed in a maniacal chuckle. When the pilot sheered off, they were so close to the swaying bag that the wheels of the undercarriage almost raked along the top, but nothing happened.

They were going down, down, in a vertical, howling dive, then the nose came up, straining, shuddering, and they lofted dizzily. There were several black specks in the sky, and Ossie didn't know whether they were enemy planes, or whether they were imaginary black spots before his dimmed eyes. They seemed to be converging, however, drawing in upon the battling American plane.

There was a moment or two of blankness then, while Ossie's head drooped forward on his chest. His head was rolling lifelessly on his shoulders, as Guthrie sent his bus slanting between two Fokkers that were raking him with a vicious crossfire. He escaped death by a miracle, but he was making—no attempt to fight back. That balloon had to come down, no matter what happened, and he intended to get it before he died.

As Guthrie again escaped a Fokker that slashed in upon him, he knew that he would have but one more chance to get the sausage. It was coming down fast, and the German planes were set to get him. He

jockeyed into position, slammed the stick far forward and opened the throttle in a hammering power dive.

In a desperate effort to head him off, a Fokker cut in between him and the balloon, striving to make him veer aside, but he locked his teeth and held steadily on. The Fokker was forced to pull up into a stall to prevent a collision with this madman, Guthrie was in perfect position now. He could not miss. He pressed the trips of his Lewis guns for the long burst that would sweep the gas bag from end to end. The guns spat once and jammed with a finality that caused the pilot to swear in hysterical rage.

But Ossie took that moment to open his eyes. He stared about him in bewilderment just as the plane slashed past within yards of the gas bag. For an instant it was bulking before Ossie's eyes, seeming to fill the whole world. He became conscious that his hands were locked about the Vickers in a death grip, and the gun was pointing straight at the balloon. He squeezed down on the trigger, and he couldn't have missed if he had wanted to. There was a long burst, and hissing tracers plunged straight into the bag.

It exploded just as the plane was veering away, and she was lifted on the wind from the concussion and tossed wing over wing through the air. Ossie saw the roaring flames leap out, and he thought that they were the flames of hell reaching for him. But he didn't care.

"Blaze of glory, blaze of glory!" his stiffened lips were whispering over and over again. His head began to roll on his shoulders, and he did not know that Guthrie was fighting grimly for his life. The flames from the burning balloon had missed the plane, but they had seared Guthrie's face to a crisp, and the ship had gone down in a wild spin almost to the tree tops before the pilot pulled out of it.

The Fokkers had come down with him, intent on finishing him, but he did not stay to fight. He had cast a glance over his shoulder to see Ossie's head snapping back and forth, and his one thought was to win his way across the lines. With the motor gunned to the limit, he sent the ship hedge-hopping towards the lines, sometimes only scant yards from the ground. The Fokkers dived upon him, but with each dive they lost ground, and they gave up the chase as he flashed across so low that the men in the trenches ducked involuntarily, thinking he was crashing.

He cut the ignition and hit the field in a rough landing that caused Ossie to open blind eyes and draw himself up. And when the plane rolled to a stop, Ossie was sitting erect, hand to forehead in the last salute.

IT WAS hours later that Guthrie stood by the bedside and listened to the babbling delirium that issued from Ossie's blue lips. In that moment Ossie unknowingly revealed the tragedy of his life, how he had longed to be a fighting man as the others were, and do something worthwhile. And Guthrie, hearing his own name mentioned continuously, learned, to his ashamed astonishment, that Ossie had worshipped him as a hero.

Guthrie turned away sharply and drew the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Doc, is there a chance for him?" he asked sharply.

The doctor nodded. "A very good chance," he answered, "but it's the end of the war for him. The bullet touched his lung and he's messed up pretty bad. He would have bled to death in another ten minutes, but he'll be all right now. By the way, how did he happen to get a wound like that? He doesn't look like a fighting man to me."

"No? Well, you never can tell by the looks. I thought the same thing until—" He broke off and turned back to Ossie again, listening closely to the words that poured from the little man's mouth. He was mumbling about a medal now, one like Guthrie's, just to prove that he had been a real fighting man like his hero.

"Will he rate a decoration?" asked the M.O.

Guthrie shook his head grimly. "I'm have to lie fast if I save him from a court martial."

In sudden resolve he turned away and strode

hurriedly to the bunk house, where he dragged his bag out from under the bed. He took something out which, although he would not have admitted it, was his most precious earthly possession, and without looking at it, hurried back to where Ossie lay.

The delirious babbling had ceased, and there was a sane look in the little man's faded blue eyes. Guthrie shouldered his way through the group of men who stood about the bed, and fell to his knees.

"I want to shake hands with a man, by cripes!" he thundered, thrusting out a horny hand. "Partner, I want to shake hands with a regular he-man who knows what to do at the right time, and has guts enough to do it. Ossie, you did something that I'll never forget, and I'm proud to say that you're the damndest, fightingest buddy I've got in this outfit!"

"Buddy? You mean that—that I—" There was a sudden, joyous blaze in the little man's eyes.

"Sure I mean it. And listen to this, Ossie. It's a little irregular, maybe, but when the big boys at H.Q. heard what you'd done, they rushed things through, decided you rated the Medal of Honor—and here it is, by gosh!"

With an ineffable sigh of content, as one whose mission in life has been fulfilled, Ossie Timpkins' hand closed on the bit of metal and ribbon. And Vic Guthrie thought that his cherished medal was a small price to pay, after all, for the look that came into Ossie's eyes.