



# THE AVALANCHE

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

*Herman Manke, German Flyer, Was Hell on Wheels—and It Was Up to Orth to Knock the Wheels Out from Under Him!*

**S**OMETHING NEW has come up to give us something to do, Orth,” said Major Messersmith grimly. “And as usual you get the bid.”

“What’s that, sir?” asked Silent Orth quietly.

“Herman Manke.”

“Who’s he?”

“Nobody much. Just the German newcomer across the lines who got four Britishers out of the squadron

five kilometers north of here. He got all four of them the same day—during one flight.”

Orth grinned slightly. He waited for the major to continue.

“They’ve moved him to the outfit directly across from us, Orth,” said Messersmith. “He’s got tactics of his own which are unusually good.”

“Yes? What are they?”

“He’s rigged his Fokker so that it will dive twice

as far as a Fokker is calculated to dive, getting up terrific speed. He doesn't try to avoid anyone under him. That's up to them. He's as deadly with his Spandaus as a spitting cobra. He never seems to miss and we haven't got a crate that can handle him for speed."

"I'll give it a try, sir," said Orth. "I think a lot of talk like this is exaggerated by the chaps who see the fights. So, if you don't mind, I won't be doing a lot of planning until I've seen Manke in action."

Orth's eyes were bleak, his jaw muscles a tight ridge against his cheeks. Messersmith grinned inwardly. In starting Silent Orth he had set machinery in motion which, at the very least, would cause plenty of trouble to Herman Manke.

Orth flew solo whenever he liked. The usual rules did not bind him, except that he was required to make out combat reports on his return from across the lines. He decided, leaving the major, to have a look at Manke's drome.

HE ORDERED out his Spad, plentifully covered with small black patches to show where Germans had tried to take the life of the famous American ace, and checked his guns and instruments.

Then he climbed in, signaled for the chocks to be yanked free. He blasted the Spad's tail off for a brief run to the take-off, lifted the crate off the field with a magnificent rush. A whizzing of air and Orth was gone, heading for the lines.

Over them he looked down, enjoying the usual excitement of the Archies. There wasn't a gunner on the ground down there who didn't know Orth's crate. His fame was secure on both sides of the lines. When Germans saw him crossing, telephones jangled the warning back of the lines, tautening the nerves of all German flyers who received the warning.

The old-timers usually shrugged. They wouldn't avoid fighting Orth, but as long as he didn't bother them they let well enough alone. If ordered to fight him, they were all coldness and efficiency, and much of the coldness was about their hearts. He'd sent too many of their comrades down the sky-stairs in flames for them to take him lightly.

AMONG their number was Herman Manke. Manke had already heard all there was to know about Orth, whose deeds alone spoke for him.

Orth's Spad roared on, the Hisso blaring full out, heading straight for the drome to which Herman

Manke, *Hauptmann*, was attached. His eyes searched the skies on all sides.

But there was nothing in sight as the kilometers reeled out behind him. If Manke had been warned, he had already had time to reach the ceiling of his Fokker before Orth came in sight of his drome.

Then, within five kilometers of the German field, flying in a sky apparently empty of German crates, Orth's eye picked up the flashing wings of the enemy. The German was almost directly overhead, so far up that it was almost impossible to make out his plane.

But there was nothing remarkable about that, when you stopped to consider that from directly below all that could be seen of him were the entering edges of his wings and the snout of his fuselage.

Orth watched him come, His eyes lighted with admiration. The plane was dropping like a bullet. Orth could almost hear the roaring of wind through the German's superstructure. He cut his motor to listen.

Wind whispered through his struts and brace. From aloft came a shriek as of many banshees wailing.

Orth had never seen a crate dive like that. It dived faster than a stone could fall. It was terrific.

Orth cut in his motor again, beginning to circle. Then his face lighted with amazement. Manke was still too far above to be within effective range, yet a row of holes suddenly appeared in Orth's wings! They were neatly etched, surely stitched, as carefully spaced as though dug by knives in the hands of riggers.

Impossible, yet there it was. At that vast distance, diving with such terrific speed, Manke had sent a hail of lead through Orth's wings.

Orth's lips closed on his snarling smile. Here was an opponent with whom to reckon. Orth did not fly into a swift series of acrobatics, but he did hold to his particular spot in the sky. He flew in a circle to the left, leveled, flew to the right, cutting a mild figure eight, apparently, but a dazzling speed.

Down and down flashed the brilliant Manke. Even as feet and hands kept the Spad flying, making it as difficult as possible as a target, Orth studied the falling German. The terrific speed at which he fell snapped the smoke back in the propwash, banishing it forever, ripping it into wisps and shreds.

NOW the shriek of Manke's wings could be heard above the roaring of Orth's own motor. Again and again, scarcely seeming to yaw—though Orth knew he must have done something to keep him approximately in line—the German let loose with his Spandaus. Orth

always escaped, though several times it was by the skin of his teeth. One burst had gone through the bottom of his pit, between his feet.

Now the German was right above him.

Orth suddenly straightened, banked away, wing turned to face the German when he flashed past. As he came back, facing the cone of air through which Manke was diving, he let loose with his Vickers, aiming at a place in the sky through which Manke must inevitably dive. But even as his Vickers chattered Manke was past him like a streak flattening out far below him.

"I'D give anything," Orth thought, "to know what holds his wings together."

Automatically Orth had gone into a dive himself, his Vickers aflame. If Manke could shoot at that distance, so could Orth. His own wings were bowing back with the pressure of the wind by the time that Manke had leveled off, heading back for home. Orth leveled with him, keeping his guns trained. But he knew that his chance of hitting the German was almost nil.

He gritted his teeth. A low laugh burbled from his lips, to be snatched into silence by the slipstream.

Leveled off, Orth followed as swiftly on the tail of the German as he could, and was almost over the field when Manke went down for a landing. There were a score of men on the field in line with Manke's landing, and Orth's eyes narrowed as he watched what they did. Manke flashed toward them, almost the full length of the field, at ghastly speed.

Two men were knocked down, one of them to lie still, as the others swung onto his wings.

"He's got so much power he can't stay in an ordinary field," thought Orth. "And his men have to catch him when he comes in. What kind of a motor has he, I wonder?"

Manke had scarcely touched the field and started rolling than three Fokkers flashed along, rising into the sky. Orth watched them come with a little grin on his lips.

He circled the field. His altimeter said five hundred feet. He waited until the first crate had actually started to lift into the sky. Then he tilted his nose and dived like a thunderbolt. His guns were coming into line as he dived.

His Vickers flared.

The first Fokker, at whose motor housing he had deliberately aimed, suddenly burst into flames. It

nosed down even as the pilot, fooled perhaps by his nearness to the ground, rose from his seat and jumped to escape the flames. Orth watched the man's body somersault into the trees at the edge of the field.

The other two were close on the heels of the first, but so quickly had things happened it was almost impossible to believe that already one crate had gone down.

Orth's Vickers flamed across the second cockpit. His bullets struck a German's white face in the middle, and the white face became red. The Fokker, already off, kept on going, slanting up the sky under full power.

Orth swung back to the third Fokker, hammered at it with deadly efficiency. His first burst probed for the motor housing, which now was directly opposite him. The German's mouth fell open. Orth's burst had cut the man in two. The German slipped to invisibility in his pit.

AS THE third Fokker started down into the woods, Orth turned his eyes toward the second Fokker. It was vanishing, with a strange cargo of red death, into the west. Orth swept back, dived low over Manke, waved his hand in mock salute. But Manke did not wave back. Orth grinned.

And then remembered something: he, Orth, could have shot Manke to death as he stood in his pit to watch the fall of his three comrades. Manke must have realized that, yet he had made no move to jump, or even to slide aside.

He whirled away. Near the lines he overtook the second Fokker with its dead pilot still in the pit. There was no telling what damage the pilotless crate, whose controls must have locked somehow to keep the craft steady, might do if it swept across the lines.

ORTH edged over the top of the Fokker, his wheels almost touching it. He felt strange, watching the whirring prop of the enemy, which the pilot would never hear again; listening to the beating of the motor, like the bodiless heart of some dead thing. Orth swung into position above the Fokker.

Then, with his motor suddenly full out, he yanked his stick back into his stomach. His nose came up, and the mighty force of his slipstream played back over the Fokker.

Its nose ducked down, starting its swift fall under full power for the earth below. Orth circled the spot until the Fokker crashed to earth.

Then, sighing, knowing that he had given even

Manke something to think about, Orth went home again. Archies hammered spitefully at him as he flashed over the lines, but he paid them no heed. His mind was busy with plans by which to bring Herman Manke down from the sky.

Orth landed.

He spoke to his master technical sergeant.

"Listen, can you think of any way to make this Spad dive twice as fast and far as it's supposed to? To travel faster, at least twice as fast, as it was ever intended?"

"If I did, sir," said the sergeant, "I'd be a war profiteer."

"Well, listen. That guy Manke has a crate that does just that. I don't think any German ack emma has anything on you. Put your head to work on it. It would be worth dying afterward, I think, just to go through a fight at an average speed of somewhere around two hundred and fifty miles an hour."

"Two hundred and fifty!" gasped the sergeant.

"Why, no such speed—"

"Or maybe three hundred," said Orth. "I'll make you famous if you can work it out," Orth said.

"And you'll make yourself deader than a mackerel, sir," said the sergeant.

"Which," retorted Orth, "is no skin off your nose. Hop to it, old son!"

ORTH'S eyes narrowed as, next day, he saw what had been done to his Spad. It was almost an arrow. The wings were almost non-existent. Something had been done to the motor, too, which the sergeant didn't attempt to explain, but which promised terrific speed.

"If you dive into the ground with this crate, sir," he told Orth, "you'll go halfway through to China. One thing, though, your wings won't fold back because there aren't enough wings to fold."

Orth clambered into the crate. Men held the wings while he stepped the motor up to its full speed.

Orth gave the signal. The Spad—or what had once been a Spad—was away with a terrific rush of air.

"Wheel"

In spite of himself the old boyish expression burst from Orth's lips as the crate smashed down the field, lifting into the air just before the trees were reached. The wind was a wall against his face. He was plowing the air with the speed of a bullet.

He grinned his appreciation, ducking his head into the pit to listen to the motor drone.

The crate wasn't shaking itself to pieces. The master technical sergeant, who had been an inventor before

entering the service, had thought of everything a man could think of in the space of thirty-six hours.

He had performed a miracle.

At five thousand feet he streaked for the lines.

Archies flowered far behind him. He headed straight for Manke's drome. Across the lines he gave his crate a real test. He nosed her up at a forty-five degree angle and gave her full gun. The earth slanted away behind him as though it were falling into space. The ground became a blur. Even going up the stairways of the sky the Spad seemed to gain speed.

Up—up to fifteen thousand feet. Now, down below him, he could make out the German drone, more by guess than by actual sight. Things did not stand out plainly at fifteen thousand feet.

Orth closed his eyes for a moment when he leveled off, looking down the vast abysses of the blue skies.

"Now to give Manke a treat. I wonder what he'll do about it!"

He studied his wings a moment. If Manke's wings would stand it the Spad's ought to.

He gulped a little, let his breath out.

"Well, here we go!"

HE NOSED down. He aimed his nose for what he took to be the tarmac of Manke's squadron. He eased his throttle open. His crate started down with a terrific rush that hinted of vast reserves of power. It was a power dive greater in its force than any he had ever tried in his life.

In a matter of seconds the wind roared past his ears. He knew he dared not stick a hand out, or lift his head. The earth was a blur which he could scarcely see. His altimeter danced crazily and he knew he would have to pull out by guess.

Once, years before, he had heard a blizzard whistle in a mighty, rocky canyon. Then he had thought of the power of the infinite, the tumbling and crashing of the elements which made a man feel so small. But that sound was nothing to this.

As he listened, and the earth rushed up to meet him, he managed to watch his wings to see how they stood it. The wires which the sergeant had put in place were almost straight, hadn't yet felt the terrific force of the dive.

"They'll hold; but how much and for how long?" Orth wondered.

He fed his Hisso more juice. The crate almost went out from under him, leaving him sitting in space, there to fall far slower than his crate was diving. He

almost clutched for support, but caught himself in time. "If something happens," he was thinking, "I'll probably dive for a hundred feet or so even after I hit the ground."

He tried to find comparisons for his mounting speed as his invisible prop bit into the air and hammered the Spad into speed and more speed. The power of the Hiss was greater by far than gravity's pull.

Faster—faster—

THE crack of doom could not have been heard through the smashing roar of the wind. An ocean of it seemed banked ahead of the Spad's nose, to break apart with thunderclaps before the cutting pull of the propeller. The blurred earth could be seen only through tears. The world was merely a target, the Spad a bullet sped from a gun.

Orth laughed. But he remembered that he still had Manke to reckon with. He held his nose down. The figures on the ground down there were seen as figures in a dream, blurred and unreal, dimmed by his speed. But, knowing fields, he knew what was happening: the Germans were preparing crates to send up for him.

He didn't care. There was only one that had a chance with him: that of Herman Manke. And what a fight, he told himself, that would be!

It was one thing to ride a comet against a slow-moving crate, quite another to fly comet against comet, traveling faster than man was ever intended to travel. Would Manke be up to it? Would Orth himself be able to stand it?

HIS ears were clogged with the sound. Let this terrific dive continue much longer and he would be bleeding at the nose and ears.

Down and down.

He guessed that he must be four thousand feet from the earth. It would take almost that much space for him to pull out, he figured, and was almost afraid to try. Back he came on the stick.

It was the cataclysm. No words could describe the sensation. His downward speed was checked. The bottom of his seat became a hard concrete pavement against which he was pinned as a high wind might pin a fly against a windowpane. He tried to look down, seeking the earth; but there was no earth—only the sky. It was all around him in its blue immensity.

Then he saw the earth, in the other direction, and knew that he had performed half of a mighty loop.

And suddenly there was Herman Manke, like a projectile shot from a gun, rising to the attack.

Manke leveled off, far above Orth, and headed straight for the lines.

It was Manke who set the pace, led the way. Orth followed, conscious that his crate was as fast as that of Manke.

"There's no difference then, really," thought Orth. "We both just travel faster, that's all. Manke has already adjusted himself to it through experience, which probably gives him something of an edge. But he'll need it, and more!"

The lines were close when Manke made his first bid. He merely nosed up, shooting toward the sky like a sky-rocket. Orth watched him go up, spread his wings against the sky as he winged over. Then Manke was coming down.

Orth could picture the German crouched over his guns, ready to blast away.

Orth grinned.

Loops would be bigger, dives faster, zooms more breath-taking—that was all. Aside from that it was a fight between two men, both of whom had spread terror and death and destruction in their wakes ever since they had come to the Front.

Orth sideslipped, and even that was breath-taking. He gasped with the speed of it. He flung his crate around the sky. The earth was a mad spinning wheel as, testing out the maneuverability of his crate for the first time, he realized in truth the tremendous power of his Spad.

Coolness came to him. With this thing he could fight and whip anything that flew—with the possible exception of Herman Manke, the man he now faced.

MANKE slipped past him. Tracer smoke missed Orth's wings by inches. Manke zoomed under his belly, trying to get him from below. Orth zoomed, looking back down. Manke was on his tail, and both planes were pointing almost at the sky. Orth's joy in the conflict burred in his throat, a sound of utter enjoyment, like that of a small boy.

Deliberately he came back further on his stick. It was as though there were no force of gravity at all, for even in this impossible position the crate responded, started its loop, sliding backward out of Manke's line of sights.

"It's like trying to hit a dragonfly on the wing," thought Orth.

Manke had vanished, shooting up into the

space which Orth had just occupied. Orth tried the impossible again. On his back, traveling like a bat out of hell, he rolled to an upright position and then, without pausing, Immelmanned, to face the direction of Manke's flight. In so doing he utilized all his speed throughout.

Ahead of him, traveling fast up the sky, Orth spotted the blurred shape of Manke's wings.

HE LEANED forward, gripping the stick with his knees. Bullets sped through his propeller arc as his guns let go. For a moment he wondered if the ack emmas, in stepping up the motor's speed, might have forgotten to check the timing of the firing mechanism, so that he would shoot away his own propeller. If he had done so, at this terrific speed, his motor would have shaken from its bed before he could have pronounced his name.

But nothing had been forgotten. Tracers streaked across the void.

They missed.

Manke was coming back down. Now his nose aimed straight at that of Orth. Orth grinned. It wasn't the first time by far that a German had thus challenged him. He never gave way when a man raced to meet him head-on.

He gritted his teeth and watched Manke.

"If we collide at this speed," thought Orth, "we'll both be halfway through hell before we come out of our daze."

The Manke ship flashed on. Orth held his stick steady. He wouldn't budge to right or left, dive or zoom. Manke had challenged. Orth was calling. Terrific, ghastly speed—

Then Manke was under Orth's crate. At the last moment he had shoved his stick slightly forward. Orth performed a breath-taking stunt, then. He brought his stick back into his stomach. Even as his nose came up with a mighty rush of speed, he was already half-rolling out, so that he should be on Manke's tail.

But Manke himself was a fast thinker. He, too, was performing an Immelmann. Orth, however, had completed his maneuver first. He had thought of it first, as a checker player thinks of moves in advance, and so had that much on the German.

Manke was just coming to the top of his loop, where he would half-roll out, so that the two would be head-on again, when Orth, with a cowboy yell which nobody, even himself, could possibly hear, let go with his Vickers.

The tracers vanished into the fuselage of the German.

Even so, the Fokker half-rolled out. Orth was closing on the enemy. His Vickers never ceased their chattering. The Fokker seemed to be hesitating. Orth's guns kept hammering, hammering.

He dived with the speed of light.

HE NOSED up, smashing away at Manke's belly as the Fokker seemed to hover in the still air for an infinitesimal instant. His bullets, he knew, were going straight and true into the Fokker's belly. He shouted again, wishing he had more bullets to speed on their way.

Then—Smoke burst from the motor of the Fokker!

Orth dived out of danger as the Fokker went over him, still like a comet, this time trailing a pennant of black smoke in the midst of which blossomed flowers of sullen red death.

Manke was invisible. Probably, Orth thought, he'd ducked into his pit. Then the Fokker's nose dropped, as Orth Immelmanned again to get on the German's tail. The Fokker was smashing directly for the ground. It had all the speed it had ever had when Orth had first seen it, dropping down the sky to destroy him.

Speed—speed—and the ground but a few hundred feet down. And still more speed.

With the motor going full speed, the Fokker crashed in.

ORTH thought, and rubbed his eyes in disbelief, that he could see the motor of the Fokker go into the earth, penetrating it as a bullet might penetrate the crust of a pie.

Of pilot there was no sight whatever.

Orth was acutely conscious of one grim fact: But for his faster thinking, it might have been himself, Silent Orth, down there, being driven deeper and deeper into the earth by the crate's dive. Instead, it was the ill-fated Herman Manke, who had sped across the German heavens like a comet from some outside world.

Orth slowed down to salute his dead enemy as he sped over the place.

He looked down.

Allied soldiers in the trenches were waving their hats.

German soldiers in the trenches were standing in stunned silence. Probably, he thought, nobody who had seen the lightning-swift battle had yet caught his breath.

He flew home. He landed. His wings were caught by his ack emmas. He wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Whew!” he said. “With that dragonfly I could go through the German squadrons like a bullet through tissue paper!”

“We’ll leave her rigged as she is, then, sir?” asked the sergeant.

Orth hesitated for a moment, then straightened.

“No. I like the same sort of crate as my wingmates use. I’m too young and full of life to play Angel of Destruction—yet. The nightmare’s over but while it lasted, Sarge, I lived with the high gods of the air!”