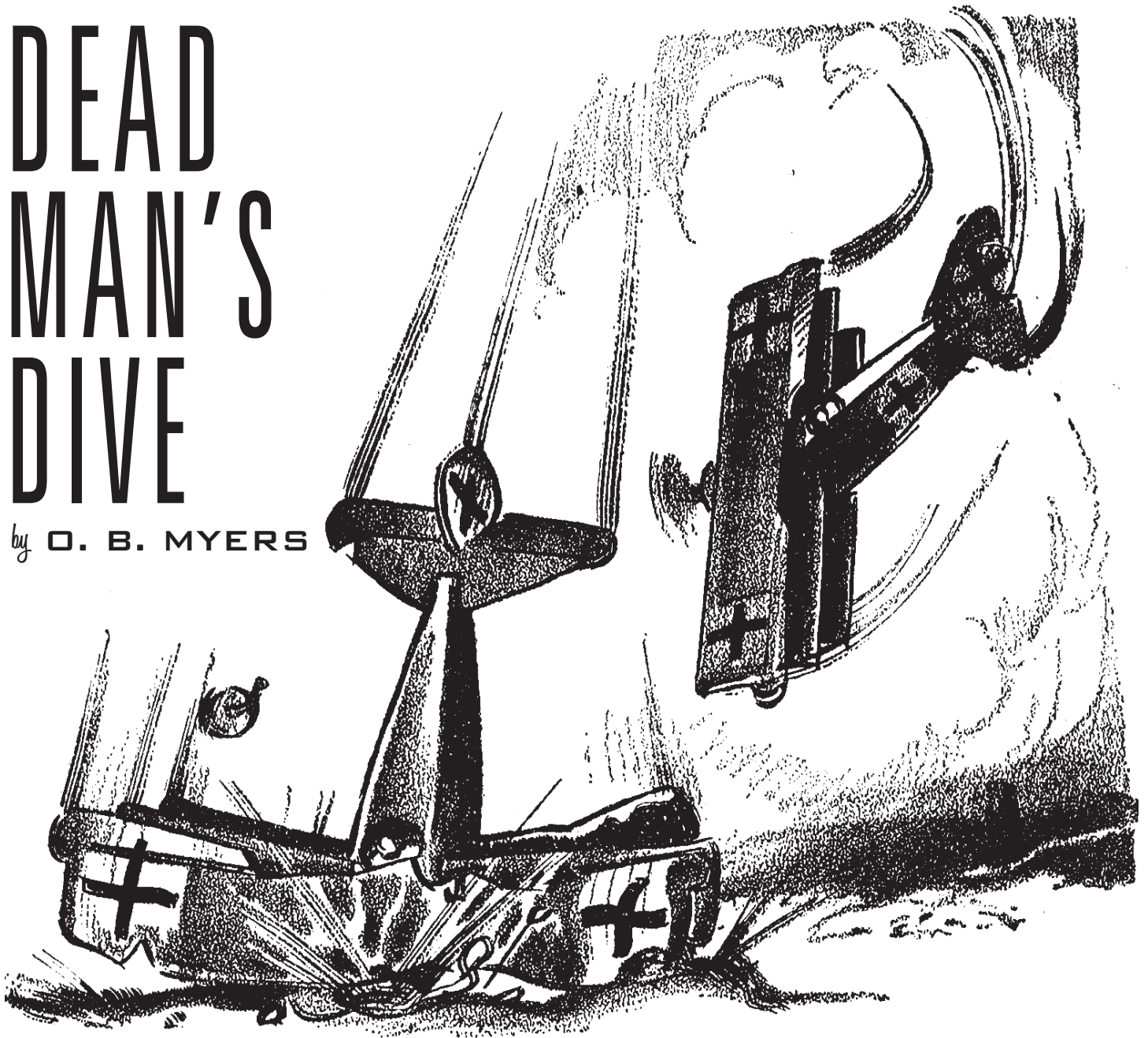


DEAD MAN'S DIVE

by O. B. MYERS



That wind-torn streamer marked safety for two Yanks, until that trick maneuver taught Barry to distrust even the message of the white signal—when black crosses cast their sinister shadow on it.

THAT balloon at Sargelles must come down before dark!" Major Crane leaned forward in his chair, and emphasized each word by pounding an angry fist on the table top. His brows were drawn together in a worried frown, his tone was harsh and uncompromising, his eye flashed fire. Plainly the commanding officer of the 19th Spads meant what he said, and not maybe.

The three flight leaders who stood facing him shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, and looked

alternately at each other with sidelong glances, and at the floor. For the third time that day they were hearing this order, which, in itself, was unusual. The crack squadron of the Yank pursuit was not accustomed to having an order repeated, even once. Their reputation had not been built on failure. Even to admit its possibility came hard.

"I didn't tell you before," resumed the major, in edged accents, "but I may as well now. To-morrow morning at dawn an important push is starting, up that valley. An enemy balloon in the region of

Sargelles would raise merry hell with our infantry, and probably be enough to cause the collapse of the drive. That's why it must come down. "He leaned back, and the sting of sarcasm entered his tone. "At nine this morning Wing gave us the job. It's now after five, and as near as I can tell from your reports, not a bullet has scraped fabric yet. Every hour they call me up; what am I to tell them? That the 19th is not equal to the task? Of shooting down a single balloon? *Bah!* The 29th, at the other end of the field, will be laughing their heads off at us—to say nothing of the gravity of the results."

At mention of the 29th, their deadly rivals, one of the uneasy pilots flushed beet-red, and another muttered a curse of vexation. But Jim Frost, C Flight leader, tallest, broadest, and oldest of the three, straightened his shoulders, looked the C.O. in the eye, and spoke apologetically.

"We've been trying all day, sir. But that Drachen is being covered continually by a full squadron of Fokkers, about twenty-five. C Flight attacked at noon, but they drove us off. We lost two men, and couldn't get near the balloon. A Flight lost another at two o'clock, with no better luck. Then B Flight tried to lure the Fokkers out of the way with a single decoy, while the rest waited in the sun. But the Boche wouldn't fall for it. They're all from Kranich's circus; we could see the green crows plainly."

"Kranich!" muttered the major thoughtfully. "The best flyer the devils have got—damn them! I saw him give a stunting exhibition at Mineola once, before the war. If he was good then, what must he be like now? But Kranich or no Kranich, that balloon must be destroyed! Now, how are we going to do it?"

Neither of the others making a move to open their mouths, Jim Frost spoke again.

"Direct attack will never do it, sir. A Flight is out on the five o'clock, at the other end of the sector; we'd have only about twelve to their twenty-five. We'd only lose half our men, and never get near the balloon. Our only chance is to lure those Fokkers away by some trick, and then strike before they get wise."

"But I thought you said B Flight tried that?"

Jim Frost nodded hopelessly, and frowned, deep in thought. He was about to speak again, when suddenly the words seemed to freeze on his lips, and his eyes opened wide in astonishment. The major, too, leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table, and fastened a horrified gaze on Jim's face. One of the other pilots emitted a sharp gasp of alarm.

"My God, what's that!" cried the major.

For the past several minutes there had been audible from overhead the rising and falling drone of a couple of motors, to which familiar sound the four men in the room had paid scant attention. Now, however, the drone had risen abruptly to a roar, increased immeasurably in volume; had in an instant become an ear-shattering thunder, so close above the roof that it seemed literally to be in the room with them, pounding upon their eardrums, and actually shaking the papers upon the table. The plane from which it came, it was obvious, must be perilously low; must, it seemed at any moment, burst through upon them.

AS ONE man they sprang for the door. Jim, first to emerge, looked up, to see a Spad graze its wheels on the ridge-pole of the first hangar. Behind it, hard upon its heels, came another; both were so dangerously low that he had no difficulty in catching their numbers. The major, at his elbow, was swearing profusely.

"Who in hell—crazy fools, stunting right over—"

The C.O.'s words stopped as it cut off with a knife. For the first Spad suddenly seemed to go mad. Its headlong rush was interrupted by the most grotesque maneuver the major had ever seen. Its tail came up, over, and up some more, until, without apparently changing position, the ship hung nose down, but motionless. It was in the attitude of a vertical dive, not fifty feet above the hangar roof, yet it was not diving. The second Spad passed beneath it; an exclamation of horror burst from the major's lips. But instead of plunging headfirst into the hangar, as he fully expected, the Spad above dipped briefly into level flight, and was in the next moment curving off beyond the road, with motor cut to land. It took several moments for the C.O. to get his breath.

"Well, I'll be fried! That's the first time I ever saw—say, Frost, who is in that ship?"

Jim, to whose face some of the color had returned, smiled faintly as he replied.

"It's Ed Starke, major. And the other one is Barry McCue. They're at it again, trying to prove who is the crack stunt artist of the outfit. That argument between them will never be settled, I guess, till one of them is dead."

"Well, damn their hides. I'll give them both tickets to Blois, if they pull their exhibitions right over my headquarters roof! Scared me out of five years' growth, they did."

Since the major already stood six feet three in his

stocking feet, reflected Jim, the loss would probably not be serious. He watched the first Spad land, and taxi toward the hangars; Barry McCue was rolling his wheels in the middle of the field. Without waiting to come to a stop, he blurped his gun, and shot at headlong speed across the tarmac. His ship slewed recklessly to a stop alongside that of Ed Starke, and Jim could see that the argument in the air was being followed by an argument on the ground.

"Look here, Frost, what kind of a contortion was that that Starke pulled? I swear I never saw anything like it; I thought he was coming down right on top of my head!"

"That's a trick stunt of his own, major. The 'Dead Man's Dive,' he calls it. Although the ship is in a diving position, it isn't moving downward."

"How does he do it—magic?"

"No; in fact, he's quite willing to tell you, any time. He's explained it to everybody in the squadron, but no one else seems to be able to master it. When worked right, it gives you a free shot at anybody on your tail. But every time I try it, I fall into a spin. I'd never dare start it as low as he did."

"It looks like a good stunt," admitted the C.O., "but you can tell Starke for me to practice it elsewhere than over my head. If he and McCue would give the Boche the benefit of their maneuvers, instead of this field, they'd be a damned sight more good to us. Come along now; we're losing time. We've got to figure out some way of getting at that blasted balloon."

The major turned away toward the door, but Jim did not follow immediately. The other two flight leaders entered; the major turned.

"Frost!" he called. "I said come on!"

But Jim still stood like a statue, his eyes riveted on an empty spot in the sky, his brow creased in thought. The major was just about to shout again, angrily, when Jim spun on his heel, took a few steps, and seized him by the arm.

"Major!" he blurted excitedly. "Your words gave me an idea! We were just trying to think of some way to decoy Kranich's Fokkers out of position, weren't we?"

The C.O. nodded, puzzled, but did not interrupt.

"Well, how does this sound?" And for perhaps half a minute Jim spoke eagerly, in a low tone, into the major's ear.

"By God!" exclaimed the C.O., when Jim paused. "That might work. Get them in here right away, and we'll talk about it."

THREE minutes later the same group of flight leaders was clustered around the major's table, with the addition of two new figures. Ed Starke, short, chunky, and grim-featured, lolled at ease without removing either helmet or goggles; his hard-bitten jaw was that of a man who would rather fight than eat, which index to his character was not denied by his fearless gray eyes. Barry McCue was plainly much younger; after a nervous glance about him, he stood stiffly erect, helmet in hand, his boyish face betraying a slight uneasiness. The C.O., he guessed, was about to bawl them out for stunting over the drome, and the first words he heard sustained this expectation.

"You buzzards," began the C.O., "seem to be fond of staging mimic battles between yourselves, to see who is the better man. What I want to ask you is: how would you like to have it out once and for all, where the whole squadron could be watching?"

Barry, surprised, could not speak for a moment.

"I'll fly him ragged any time, major," drawled Ed Starke.

"You mean you'll try!" retorted Barry. "Why, I was almost on your tail there, to-day, when—"

"But you didn't stay," murmured Ed, with a maddening smile.

"Hold your tongues," interrupted the major, "until you hear what I'm saying. You both know about the balloon at Sargelles. We've been trying to dope out some way of tricking those Jerries into leaving it unguarded. Jim Frost has suggested that if they were to see a Fokker and a Spad in close combat, with the Spad apparently getting the upper hand, they might be lured into coming to the rescue of a comrade in distress. But the scrap must not look like a fake, or it will never fool them; Kranich's men are wise devils. The 29th has one of those green-cowled Fokkers on the other end of the field, that they brought down intact three days ago. Get the idea?"

The two rivals not only grasped the idea; simultaneously they stepped forward, and spoke in the same breath, eagerly.

"I'll do it, major!"

"I didn't ask you yet," growled the C.O. "Maybe you haven't considered the risks. If the thing works, you'll find yourselves in the middle of about two dozen Fokkers, and the man in the Spad will be in for a hot time. And if those Boche guess the trick, the one in the Fokker will be in for a hotter time still; Kranich's crowd won't take kindly to being fooled."

"In that case," said Ed Starke calmly, "I'll fly the Fokker."

"The Spad," retorted Barry instantly, "is supposed to be getting the upper hand, you said. So I'd better take the Spad."

Ed snorted in disgust, but the major was speaking again.

"Make your combat just as real as you want; the harder you fight, the better. Do a lot of shooting, but be damned sure you miss. The rest of us will be up in the sun, watching; we'll tell you afterwards who is the better flyer. The minute the Boche leave the balloon and come for you, we'll come down. There will be enough of us to make a scrap out of it until somebody gets a crack at the bag; then it will be every man for himself. As soon as the balloon goes down, beat it for home—under stand?"

Every one in the room nodded his agreement.

"Now Starke, you're willing to fly the Fokker?"

"Any time," answered Ed evenly.

"All right. But before you start, tie a white rag on your tailskid. That will identify you, so that we can tell you from the other Fokkers once the mix-up begins."

"No need for that, major," objected Ed immediately. "It might identify me to the Boche, too. And I'll take my chances of attack by the Spads any day."

"Don't be so sure, Starke; there's such a thing as over-confidence, you know. There's enough danger in this thing, without risking being shot down by your own friends. Do as I say."

Ed Starke opened his mouth to remonstrate further, but then closed it again. A direct order was not to be disputed, though from his sullen expression it was evident that he considered it unnecessary. It was, perhaps, the color of the marking which displeased him.

"THERE'S no time to lose," the major was saying rapidly. "Frost, you see that B and C Flights are notified and ready. McCue, make sure your ship is gassed, and your belts full. Starke, you start across the field; I'll call Bardwell at the 29th right away, and tell him we want to borrow that Fokker. Fly it over here, and we'll get it fixed up as quickly as possible. We ought to leave the ground in"—he glanced at his watch—"not less than twenty minutes."

A chorus of shouted and eager assent went up, and the hurrying pilots trod on each others' heels as they went through the door. Outside they separated, one trotting toward the barracks, two toward the hangars; Ed Starke, alone, set off at a run in the direction of the hangars and quarters of the 29th, on

the opposite side of the field. Inside, Major Crane sat still and thoughtful at his table, after making one brief telephone call. His brow was deeply furrowed, and his head shook sadly from side to side.

"By God!" he muttered to himself. "I ought not to let them do it. But that balloon—"

It was several minutes before he rose, reached for his own helmet and goggles, and himself emerged onto the busy tarmac.

A quarter of an hour later a dozen Spads were drawn up on the deadline, and the air quivered with the throttled thunder of many exhausts. Barry McCue, standing beside his cockpit, felt the quiver travel up and down his spine, and tensed his muscles to resist. The suspense of waiting oppressed him; why couldn't they get started? Ed certainly took long enough to fasten a bit of rag to a tailskid. He looked down at the end of the line, where idled a ship different from all the others. After five minutes of fussing around the tail, Ed was now fussing some more inside the cockpit.

He saw the major stride over impatiently and ask a question, though he could not hear the words. He saw Ed nod, almost leisurely, and without waiting to see more, Barry threw his leg over the fairing and let himself slide down into the cockpit. By the time he had his belt fastened the major was shouting into his ear.

"He'll be over Gorette, at three thousand! Come in from the west, and dive on him. Let the wind carry you toward Sargelles. We'll be there, but you won't see us. Watch yourself, now, good luck!"

Barry grinned tensely, and saw a cloud of dust arise behind the major's head. Ed, in the Fokker, was taking off. The square-nosed, alien ship rolled swiftly across the turf, and rose smoothly before passing the middle of the field. It curved smoothly upward in a graceful chandelle, and droned into a steep climb. Ed certainly knew how to handle a plane, even one whose cockpit was strange to him, thought Barry. But his lips tightened; he'd show Ed to-day who was the better flyer. The whole squadron would be watching; it was his chance to prove that he, Barry McCue, was the crack pilot of the premier outfit in the sector. Had he taken more than a casual glance at the major's face, he could have guessed that his commanding officer was worried less about the outcome of the rivalry between himself and Ed, than about what was going to happen when twenty-five angry Boche awoke to the fact that they had been tricked.

Barry's fingers crooked around the throttle, and

pulled it quickly open. The Spad, trembling like an eager steed, moved forward, gaining speed. Barry ruddered toward the center of the field, and waited until the stick no longer felt limp in his hand. Then he tugged sharply. With roaring exhausts the Spad soared into the air, in a wheeling climb which was the exact duplicate of Ed's chandelle. Back across the hangar roofs he shot, in a stiff zoom. His eyes were to the front, and hence did not see the major, below, shaking a fist angrily at the hair-raising folly of his take-off.

Ed's Fokker was already a speck in the distance; Barry sheered off toward the western end of the sector, and watched his altimeter needle. Two thousand, three thousand, thirty-five hundred. Here he leveled off and checked his position. When he reached the lines he banked widely left, and swung in a wide circle until he was pointed across the ridges, toward Sargelles. The sun was over his left shoulder; his test against Ed, he reflected, would begin with the advantage of position on his side. And would end, he resolved, the same way.

FAR ahead, but drawing rapidly closer, Barry picked out the wooded ridge on the other side of which lay the valley of Sargelles. Against the near slope he could make out a whitish blur which was the village of Gorette; in direct line beyond it the balloon was a grayish blot against the sky. His eyes lifted slowly—yes, there they were. Straight above the balloon the sky was speckled with pinpricks, in two large groups, which looked like two swarms of bees. Those were the Fokkers. For the moment he saw nothing of Ed's lone ship, and as he drew nearer he studied the formation of the enemy.

Circling at about five thousand, he estimated, and there were at least twenty-five of them. He had counted fourteen in one group, and his eyes were traveling over the other, when suddenly a faint shadow flitted across his cowl, and a distant crackling penetrated the ear-filling roar of his motor.

His head twisted sharply, and in an instant of shock he saw, coming from behind and above, a leering, black nose from which spat long, stabbing threads of gray. His heart jerked painfully; but then in the next instant he realized that the hissing tracers were passing well above his head, and at the same time caught a momentary flash of white from the tailskid of the onrushing foe. It was Ed, who, instead of waiting to be attacked, had crossed him by seizing the offensive in the beginning.

Damn it, why hadn't he watched for this, instead of wasting his vigilance on the distant Boche? Now

the first advantage of position was Ed's; he might have known that devil would overlook no bets. Barry's hand brought the stick over against his right knee, and his foot drove viciously against the rudder. Without an instant's pause his Spad rotated upon its own fuselage as an axis, like a boomerang in full flight, until it completed a full roll. He shot a glance over his shoulder, and gasped in surprise. Instead of following up, Ed had curved away in a gentle glide, as if disdainful to retain the advantage he had procured at the start. This evidence of supreme confidence was all that was needed to touch off Barry's wrath.

"Damn you, play with me, will you!" His wing-tip went down, and he curved into a plunge. But before he could straighten out, Ed was gone. A terrific zoom carried the Fokker up and up, into the blind spot covered by Barry's upper wing. Barry followed hotly, coaxing the last inch of lift out of his laboring motor. But still that black-crossed tail, with its fluttering marker, kept tantalizingly out of reach. Remembering the major's instructions, Barry loosed a sizzling burst, which raked the sky behind Ed's rudder. Then, on the verge of a stall, he saw the Fokker's wing-tip drop, and just in time thrust his own stick forward. He dodged Ed's whirling lunge by a matter of feet, and both went into a tight and endless spiral.

In furious and unrelenting struggle the two fought on, while the minutes passed. The breeze from the west was drifting them slowly but surely nearer and nearer to the Sargelles ridge, but for this Barry had no thought. He was thinking only of the major and his comrades watching from a distance, to see which should gain the upper hand in this mock battle, and that result was, to Barry, more important than anything else. Twice Ed almost got on his tail, and only by superhuman efforts did Barry get free. Once he whirled into position behind Ed's rudder, but Ed crossed him by zooming instead of diving, and the fraction of a second lost in correcting his first move, coupled with the superior lifting power of the Fokker's thick wings, cost him the momentary advantage.

But Ed's dive, to regain speed, again left Barry on top. They were circling warily now, fencing for a thrust. Barry, looking down, calculated his position and speed to a nicety. A half-*vrille*, and a sharp pull-up; if done swiftly enough, it would place him on the other's tail, and there he would stay. He gripped the stick, lightly, but firmly, and the muscles along the back of his legs tensed in readiness. Ed was still in a vertical bank. *Now!*

BARRY'S kick sent the horizon spinning like a top; it halted abruptly as his other foot corrected. Back came the stick, and he could see the broad side of a green-cowled Fokker sliding into his sights. He pressed a short burst out of his triggers, stopped it as his target slid too close. It was, after all, Ed Starke in that cockpit, and not a German, he reminded himself with a jerk. But what was Ed doing?

For a brief instant Ed, instead of wheeling to avoid his attack, held the bank, and Barry saw that he was twisted about in his seat to stare upward. Ed's left arm was over the rim of his cowl, gesticulating furiously. Then in the twinkling of an eye Ed was gone, as he threw his plane into a slip. Like a flash Barry remembered, and on the instant the sky seemed to tremble with the rush of many wings and the roar of many motors. The Boche had come! Fooled by the fake combat, they had plunged to the rescue; the ruse had worked.

Barry's momentary knowledge of the success of the trick was drowned in the realization of his own peril. One swift look showed him a sky black with oncoming planes. From before, from behind, from all sides they converged upon him. And from every whirling propeller spat twin threads of tracer gray, to lace the air about his cockpit with hissing death. Those tracers, he knew, were aimed to kill. No longer was he playing a game of maneuvers with a comrade. Now he was pitting his skill against two dozen of the Boche's best, his only hope being to defend himself from annihilation until the other Spads should come to his assistance.

He hurled his plane into a twisting half-loop, but was careful not to let it stall at the top. He slid into the beginning of a spiral, to find himself flying through what seemed like a solid screen of tracer streaks. He hastily reversed his bank, but the fire was just as thick on his right hand as on his left. He plunged, and pulled up in a tremendous zoom, but still there were more above him, who dipped to rain steel across his path. To attempt to dodge the fire of any one was futile, since there were still a score to head him off. To run or dive was suicide, since it only uncovered his tail to direct attack. His only chance lay in perpetual and ceaseless maneuver, making of himself a constantly shifting target—and trusting to the blind gods of luck.

His contortions became grotesque, yet flowed one into another with the smoothness of perfect instinct. He emerged from a reversement to feel the bite of bullets passing through his tail surfaces. Yet he made

not the natural error of diving, but pulled sharply up instead, and the fearful twitching of the rudder bar under his feet stopped. He swept around in a vertical spiral; when he felt the pound and smash of steel against his undercarriage, stick and rudder crossed together, and he was dropping in a sideslip. The stream of tracers slipped along his top wing, and off into space.

He came out of the slip to yank into a desperate chandelle, and when no guns belched in his very ear was surprised to find himself for the moment free of attackers. He threw a look above his head, and realized the reason. The Spads had come. There were more planes than ever now, and the air about him was a mad whirl of confusion. Friend and foe were inextricably mingled in one insane struggle. The roar of exhausts was deafening, yet was rent by the shrill shriek of wires and the staccato hammer of a multitude of guns. The sky was a network of flying, hissing steel, through which darted in all directions the half-seen forms of plunging Spads and wheeling Fokkers. A battle royal, in which there could be thought of neither attack nor defense. Only lunge, and wheel, and lunge again, fire when the opportunity offered, and pray that the enemy missed you just once oftener than you missed him.

Barry gulped a deep breath of awe, and saw three Fokkers hurtling down toward him, closely pursued by a single Spad. He whipped his stick over, and came around on a wing-tip; the three were passing directly before his sights. He peered closely; no, none of the three carried a white streamer on its tailskid. His fingers jammed the triggers down. The first burst was wide, but Barry's stick slammed into the corner of his cockpit, and as the bottom of everything seemed to drop out from under him he saw his tracer blast creeping closer and closer to a black-crossed tail. He fastened his gaze there, aware that the other two were pulling up. His guns chattered and shook, venomously, savagely. His tracers tasted fabric now, bit their way hungrily up the length of dark-hued fuselage. Nearer and nearer to the cockpit, and to the gas tank, they clawed their way. His hand pressed his stick, coolly, carefully.

He jerked aside in time to keep from flying into a cloud of smoke and fragments, and felt his wings sag and groan with the abruptness of his tug on the stick. He eased off, allowing his terrific speed to carry him into a zoom, and swept a hasty glance about him. The monstrous melee had been going on for several

minutes now, and was beginning to spread out. Here and there Spad and Fokker were engaged in single duels, wheeling tightly about one another, sparring for the fatal opening. Here were two Spads, spiralling back to back, while about them darted five or six foes, firing, zooming away, and returning to fire again. Above and to his right Barry saw one Spad keeping three foes busy, by virtue of lightning attacks, one after the other, and his admiration increased when he caught the number on the Spad's fuselage. That was the major himself, and even as Barry looked one of the Fokkers turned over, and began with slow but unmistakable finality to spin, belly up, toward the earth.

SUDDENLY Barry thought of Ed. Where, in all this mess, was Ed? Quickly Barry's eyes leaped from one Fokker to another, escaping none, but nowhere could he find the telltale white rag. What had happened? Had Ed's marking betrayed him to the Boche, and brought him only the reward of death for his intrepid adventure? Or had some comrade, in the hectic fury of battle, failed to recognize the clue to his identity, and shot him down, unwarned, as an enemy? Barry's heart jerked in dismay at the thought, and he peered frantically in all directions.

He did not see a sign of Ed, but he saw something else. Just beyond the ridge, beneath his lower wing, he saw a tremendous burst of flame and smoke which seemed to swell and hang in one spot, and the meaning hit him instantly. Some one had found and seized the opportunity to dive on the balloon, which now was naught but a fiery mass of burning fabric. That blazing holocaust was the signal for the end; the mission, then, had succeeded, and nothing remained but to break off the unequal conflict and streak for home. He himself was in the clear; yet something made him hesitate. Was Ed all right? And if so, where the devil was he?

From a mix-up overhead two Spads dove suddenly, obeying the major's orders at sight of the blazing balloon. A cluster of Fokkers plunged in pursuit, but not quite quickly enough; already they were being out-distanced. Barry, watching, saw one of the Fokkers pull abruptly aside, and come rushing toward him. Instinctively he turned to meet the attack head-on; his own tracers crossed those of the foe. The Fokker zoomed sharply, to keep its altitude, and passed directly above Barry's head. He looked up, to find himself gazing full at the dark-hued belly, and his eyes fastened themselves on the tailskid. There fluttered the merest wisp of white!

Not a yard of waving streamer, but a tiny fragment of fabric, half the size of a handkerchief. Yet Barry let out a yell of joy as he guessed the explanation. That was Ed, there was no doubt about that. The howling gale of the slipstream must have torn his frail banner to bits, leaving naught but the shred which now remained. That was why he had been unable to locate Ed before; what was left was too small to be seen, except from very close. But Ed, at least, was safe; that he was not even scratched was evident from the way he was handling that Fokker.

Round above Barry's head he whirled on a wing-tip, and with a quick flirt pointed his square nose down, straight for the flat side of Barry's cockpit. Barry, knowing it to be Ed, did not bother to start a turn, but raised a hand to wave it across his cowl in greeting. One swing his arm made, and then stopped in mid-air. What the hell! Ed was shooting at him—and those tracers were coming uncomfortably close. What was the idea?

Instinctively Barry threw his Spad into a bank. The fire from the Fokker ceased, but its blunt nose swung to follow his turn. Barry, looking back, saw the round top of a helmeted head between the twin guns on the cowl, and again he saw those guns spit out a short burst. The hissing tracers sliced the air above his head.

"What the hell, Ed," he muttered, as if the other could hear his words, "the show's over. Cut it out, and let's go home. We've done our stuff for today. How do you know one of us hasn't got a bullet through a spar, that will let go in the middle of a maneuver? Haven't you had enough, that you—*hey!*"

A sharp cry tore through Barry's teeth. Far from sensing Barry's wish, Ed was apparently eager for more fight. The test of their skill, to him, was not yet finished. Now that the larger mission was successfully concluded, he evidently wanted to take up their personal rivalry where it had been dropped with the arrival of the Boche. For Ed's Fokker was tearing in upon Barry's flank, and had just loosed a stream of bullets which ripped a swathe of fabric from the center section of the Spad, and caromed wickedly off the cowl.

BARRY suddenly became angry. He had emerged alive from one of the fiercest battles of his career, and had no desire to play at mock warfare for some time to come. All he wanted was to get down, where he could feel the good ground beneath his feet, and thank his lucky stars that he was not a corpse. But Ed, his appetite for battle still strong, would not let him.

"You crazy fool!" yelled Barry, into the wind. "Don't you know when you've had enough? If you don't, by God, I'll show you!"

He whipped his Spad into a wing-over, and charged back at the Fokker which persecuted him. The blunt nose swerved aside, but Barry curved in, as if his intent was to ram. Hastily the Fokker veered away, and down; Barry's stick slammed against the side of his cockpit as he lunged in pursuit. The other went into a dive, and Barry dove after. Habit made his fingers curl about the triggers; just in time he reminded himself that that was Ed in that ship, and not a Boche, as he caught a tiny flutter of white from the tailskid. But even had he fired, his bullets would have found thin air. For the Fokker rose into a zoom, and immediately went into a half-roll which momentarily threw Barry off the trail. He wheeled on a wing tip, and rushed to regain his position.

"I'll give you all the combat you want!" he grated through clenched teeth. "I'll show you once and for all time, who is the better man, and then maybe you'll lay off me!"

But try as he would, he could not again bring that black-crossed tail within reach of his sights. Like a dragonfly with a human brain that Fokker darted and wheeled and lunged across the sky, eluding Barry's every effort to catch it unaware. It spiraled, fell into a vertical slip, and jerked out so abruptly that Barry, following close, felt his wings wrench under the strain. He eased on the stick the barest trifle, but the movement cost him the slight advantage which had been his. Now they were on even terms, whirling round about each other as if both tied to an invisible pivot in the sky, and losing altitude with every turn.

"The hell with you, Ed Starke!" gasped Barry, as the sweat poured down his cheeks. "You won't out of this without admitting that you're beaten—take that!"

He kicked right rudder hard, and caught the spin with a lightning movement of his stick. But, peering through his sights, his eyes met empty air. The Fokker which should have been there was not; for a moment, in truth, he could not even find it. What Ed had done in that instant while the Spad spun, or how he did it, Barry could not guess. But he became suddenly aware that the Fokker was behind him, and his awareness was startled into angry dismay when a shower of tracers slashed the fabric of his lower wing.

Now, instead of attacking, he was on the defensive; Ed's Fokker was on his tail. Cursing anew, he bent every effort to reverse their positions, putting his Spad

through every maneuver he had ever been taught, and some that he had invented himself, in swift succession. But in vain; twist and wheel and spin as he would, the leering blunt nose was always on his tail when he snatched a look to the rear. And the guns behind that nose vomited savagely, not once but often. The searing tracers hummed angrily past Barry's very ears, and flicked shining dents in his motor cowling; he ground his teeth in helpless rage. If Ed was shooting to miss, he was certainly shaving his margin mighty fine.

LOWER and lower dropped the fighters, until Barry, looking overside, saw that a scant fifty feet separated him from the ground. No longer was there room for a complex maneuver; he was reduced to essing frantically from side to side as he raced toward the south. And still the Fokker clung doggedly to his tail, unsatisfied, and still the bullets slashed the air about his head. The end was in sight; it was impossible to continue longer. He was going to be forced to admit defeat, or be driven headlong into the earth. Yet his fighting nature revolted at the very thought of defeat, even by a comrade, and he resolved upon one last trick.

The Dead Man's Dive, Ed's own stunt! Unknown to Ed, Barry had practiced it, until he had it perfect. From some one else, it might come as a complete surprise to Ed; or enough of a surprise to give Barry the few seconds he needed to escape. He took one look behind, and his fingers tensed on the stick. *Kick!* The horizon went crazy, and then disappeared completely. Barry was hanging in his strap, looking down a flat field. He saw the Fokker shoot past, beneath him, and then he started to drop. But his stick came instantly into his belly, and he curved out to graze the bushes with his wheels.

He twisted his head over his shoulder. Ed's Fokker had begun the same maneuver, Ed's own pet stunt. Up and over went the tail. But what was wrong? The Fokker was not hanging there, as it should if the thing were done properly. It was moving too fast, much too fast and moving downward. It was diving, diving toward the ground. Barry's mouth flew open, but before the cry could pass his lips it was all over. Head first, with motor roaring wide, the Fokker plunged into the ground, and disintegrated in a cloud of dirt and flying splinters.

Barry's blood froze with horror. What had he done? Ed was dead; Ed had killed himself, doing his own stunt. No, he himself had killed Ed. It was his fault; he

should never have permitted this last wasted combat to start. Ed should have known better, but so should he. Ed, perhaps, had been wounded. Or maybe a Fokker was unable to execute the maneuver which a Spad did with difficulty. Whatever the reason, there lay Ed's ship, a hopeless, shattered wreck.

He jammed his throttle shut, and swooped in a swift glide. The field was large enough, and fairly smooth; in a matter of seconds his wheels were rolling. He leaped to the ground and broke into a run toward the mangled heap of struts and canvas.

"Ed!" he cried, without knowing that he spoke. "Ed! Ed!"

His trembling fingers tore aside the crumpled fabric over what had been the cockpit, and seized the collar of a leather coat. Hastily, and yet gently, he dragged a limp form out into the open, rolled it onto its back, and lifted the splintered goggles from the half-open eyes. He started back in amazement.

The face was that of a complete stranger, and the collar of the tunic, showing under the jacket, was slate-gray in color!

So intent had he been on what he was doing that he had never heard the sound of another motor, throttled to land. But now, as he turned, he saw a Fokker roll to a stop in the center of the field, and a figure leap out and run toward him. Even before the other lifted his goggles, he knew from the gait that it was Ed Starke, but his incredulous relief did not lessen his astonishment.

"Ed!" he cried, seizing the other by the arm to see if he was real. "Where were you—I thought—what—"

Ed laughed aloud at his stammering confusion, and calmly lighted two cigarettes before explaining.

"The first thing I saw when those Boche arrived was that their leader was marked by a white pennon on his tail-skid. I had half expected something like that, and had fixed my own rag so that one pull at the end of the string, in my cockpit, would untie the knot and let it loose. I could see that there was sure to be trouble with a real Boche marked that way in the middle of the scrap, so I pulled the string, let my own marker go, and then jumped on the Jerry. I didn't get him, but my second burst shot away the pennon on his tail, and that was good enough."

"But then—" stuttered Barry. "Then," proceeded Ed, "all the Spads seemed to be damned busy, so I sneaked over and knocked off the balloon. By the time I got back in the neighborhood, the battle was over; you seemed to be the only one still scrapping. I hustled over, just in time to see you crash him."

With a nod of his head he indicated the washed-out Fokker. Briefly Barry detailed his account of the last combat.

"But Ed," he finished, "you take the palm for flying. Never again will I give you any arguments on that score. Any man who can shoot a rag off a tailskid wins the prize, and that's that."

"Horse-whiskers," retorted Ed. "I'll hand that pal, right back to a bird who can out-maneuver the Boche's best, and crash him to the ground without firing a shot. That's real flying! You know who that is, don't you?"

Barry looked down at the still figure, and shook his head.

"Well, who would be leading Kranich's outfit of Fokkers? It's Kranich himself, of course!"