



JORGENSEN

# CLOUD TRAP

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*A Sinister Pall of Smoke Hangs Over the Heavens — and It's Up to Orth to Dispel Its Fiendish Effect on His Wing-Mates!*

**C**OLD FURY possessed the heart and soul of Silent Orth when he realized that the squadron had flown into a trap. The Germans had baited it with consummate skill. Orth wondered why neither side apparently had ever thought of doing it like this before.

Late at night or in the early dawn, planes from

other sectors had been massed beyond Masmunster, until Orth's squadron was outnumbered five to one. The strategy was obvious.

When flyers in other sectors went out for the morning patrols they would find the skies empty of German crates, because those same crates were now facing the squadron to which Orth belonged.

Puzzled and mystified, the other flyers would return

home, perhaps to come back to bomb unguarded railheads and ammunition dumps—by which time the survivors of this scrap would be back to hold them off. It was the old strategy of the ancient Roman soldier who defeated his enemies one at a time by outrunning them, then turning and taking them in turn as they outran one another.

Orth's squadron, commanded by Captain Davidson, held ten planes, all fast fighters flown by comparative veterans. Their first contact with the Germans had come three minutes before. Ten planes against twelve, but odds not too great.

But then, when the battle had been joined, the ground below had literally spewed forth planes which had swung aloft to take part in the fight. The number of the Germans had jumped from ten to twenty, from twenty to thirty, in the batting of an eye. No such force of planes had ever been concentrated against Orth's wingmates. It was so obviously a trap which the Americans should have foreseen, that it was little wonder Orth was angry at himself and his wing-mates.

The chance that he would ever live to vent that anger in words seemed remote, for now there were three planes actively engaged against each of the American's ships.

ALL fast Fokkers, against grey Spads. All fighters. With the odds even the fight would have been brutal, terrific. With the odds so great in favor of the Germans it might become a massacre.

"I'll be double-damned if it will!" Orth exploded. "We're a match for 'em no matter what!"

For himself he had never flown with such reckless savagery. He got his first Fokker in the first minute of fighting. He watched it go spinning down in flames.

His eyes were everywhere. His nerves were keyed to fever pitch. He seemed to sense exactly when an enemy sat on his tail, to know exactly when to roll out of line of sights.

Orth looked about him. Three Germans, with mechanical surety of purpose, were hammering at Lieutenant Rosecrans from three angles at once.

He was obviously doomed unless something were done instantly.

ORTH hurled the thunderbolts of his wrath, in the shape of Vickers lead, into the cockpit and through the pilot of the nearest Fokker. He leap-frogged the dead man—he knew he was dead by the blood which spilled forth to crimson on the outside of the man's cockpit.

The Fokker hesitated, then flopped down the sky as Orth fastened his fangs in the side of the next crate.

He got that one, too, but not before the third Fokker's pilot had smashed Rosecrans' back to a froth with a hail of Spandau bullets. Orth could see the man's laughter, a broad grin on a broad face. The German lifted his hand derisively, as though he said: "I got him in spite of you, you Yankee swine."

But if that was the man's idea, he never had a chance to speak it to anyone, for Orth smashed a burst into his chest before he could lower his hands to his trips after the derisive gesture.

Orth's grin was like the snarl of a wolf.

He laughed to himself, and vowed that three Germans were not enough to pay up for the death of Rosecrans. Even as Orth thought this another Spad went down, the crate flown by Lieutenant Johnstone. Johnstone, trapped in triple-angle fire, hadn't had a chance even to use his guns. He had never been able to maneuver out of the box which the wings of his enemies had nailed around him. It had symbolized the coffin which would shortly hold his charred remains.

"Rats in a trap!" thought Orth. "But as long as I live I'll keep hammering and driving."

Captain Davidson, commanding the flight, was the next to go. He had managed to force one enemy out of the fight with a broken propeller before they got him. The German with the broken prop had an excellent chance of landing his crate and coming back to fight tomorrow. Rather, he would have had that chance but for the cold fury of Silent Orth, who dived on the German and fired a burst into his motor.

Black smoke erupted from under the motor housing. The German himself had not been touched. But Orth, as Davidson's crate went spinning past him, was not satisfied with that. He dived into the black smoke which came back from the stricken Fokker, his eyes glued to his ring-sight, his knees gripping the stick, his hand on the trips of his Vickers.

ORTH'S Vickers spat and flamed. The German writhed in his cockpit. The odor of the black smoke was in Orth's nostrils, the murky smother of it, hot as Hades, was on his face, blinding his eyes. But he strained to see his victim, and when he saw the gross body ahead of him, let drive with his Vickers.

Then, sure that his enemy was dead, Orth swerved out into the bright sunlight again. He knew that the black smoke had smudged his face, or it had almost blackened his goggles.

For all of thirty seconds, in the midst of the smoke through which he had probed for the enemy, he wasn't able to see a thing. The smoke had been an effective screen behind which, but for the grim intentness of Orth, the German might have escaped. Orth wiped the sweat from his face. He smeared his goggles with a gauntleted hand, trying to rub off the soot.

Then he started climbing again, just as two more Spads flashed past him, in flames. Orth's lips locked. His teeth ground together in fury.

"There must be a way to pay them up," he thought, "and by the Lord Harry I'll find it if I live—and I refuse to die until I have!"

ORTH slammed into the thick of the fight. With Davidson gone he was in command of the remnants of the flight. Wildly, frantically, he waved his cohorts home. There were so few of them to witness the signal, and these were so closely hemmed in by the ruthless Germans that they couldn't get away.

So Orth set grimly to work.

Let everybody make way for Silent Orth! He became a demon, striving to win a way to freedom for his trapped men. He hurled his crate through the thick of the fight with reckless disregard for the wings and fuselages of friend and enemy alike.

The Germans, in several places, were thrown into confusion by the tactics of this mad Yankee who seemed to be everywhere. His wings were in shreds, until it seemed that nothing held the Spad up save the laboring, thundering Hisso motor which drove it through the air like a bullet.

Another Spad went down. Despair grew in the heart of Silent Orth. There were too blasted many of the Germans. By sheer force of numbers they would destroy the entire flight before he could cause enough diversion for them to escape.

Orth would gladly have collided with any German who did not get out of his way. He knew it and held to his course whenever he set one.

The Germans, outnumbering the Americans as they did, did not need to risk their lives as recklessly as did Silent Orth. Therefore they did not. They fought to keep their formations.

Flyers who held Americans boxed in, tried to keep them trapped, but Orth would have none of it. In every instance where it was possible, and even when it did not seem possible at all, Orth plunged straight into the box and broke it up.

SEVERAL crates staggered out with broken wings, blazing motors, smashed struts and longerons, which forced the Germans down to crash landings. Orth had long since lost track of the number of his *descendus*.

He did not care, as long as it was plenty.

"I'll figure it out by counting the ones that are left!" he told himself savagely.

Back and forth, a flying figure of vengeance, Silent Orth sped on desperate wings to try and get his flyers home. And whenever he saw and recognized the face of this one or that one, he beckoned him imperiously home. But so far none had been able to break free.

One had almost managed it, but four Germans had gleefully followed, hammering Lieutenant Smitts into the ground with a hail of lead in which nothing could have lived. Orth's grin became more savage, his teeth more tightly locked.

Vickers flaming.

Spandaus making murderous answer.

Three Fokkers going down, to the discomfiture of the Germans who hadn't intended the Americans to have a chance. The Americans were fighting as desperately as Americans always did fight. They were going to die, but they were going to take as many Germans with them as they could.

Lieutenant Jorgensen, knowing himself doomed in a burning crate, had deliberately turned his flaming torch of a crate into the three Fokkers which had set him afire.

By striking first one and then the other, at bewildering speed, he had crashed and set fire to all three. An impossible feat, save for a man already on the brink of the grave.

Orth lifted his hand in respectful salute as Jorgensen went down. He spoke into the slipstream:

"Okay, partner, we'll be paying up for you, if there are any of us left when the shindig is over!"

Finally he managed to maneuver his survivors into a compact group. Four of them remained, counting himself. Wing and wing, flying like men possessed, for their very lives, the four flashed toward home.

The Archies blazed at them, firing even into their own planes in the hope of downing the rest of the enemy.

Orth had a scheme. He had guessed what the Germans had done. They had expected to wipe out the entire squadron. They had failed, which might keep the whole German force here for one more dog-fight.

"If it doesn't," thought Orth, "I'll follow them—wherever they try to go."

RELUCTANTLY the Germans drew off, Orth led his wing-mates to a landing on the home field. He knew what terror must be gripping the hearts of those on the ground when they counted those who had come back, knowing that ten had crossed the lines.

The survivors climbed stiffly from their pits. Their faces were black. Their eyes were numb with the experience through which they had passed. They looked like men just waking from a ghastly nightmare. Orth studied them.

Most of them should go right back into the air again to counteract the awful experience, for it might wreck their nerves. Orth studied his men. They seemed to wince as they looked back at him.

“Well,” said Orth, “let’s get it over with. We’ve got to report to the Old Man.”

Major Messersmith, his face very white, said nothing to them as they trooped in to sign their combat reports.

But they well knew what was in his heart. He had probably been told by telephone, after the flight had left, of what they were running into—too late to do anything about it.

The four made out their reports. Orth waved them out.

“Meet in my hutment in fifteen minutes,” he said. Messersmith looked up at Orth.

“HAVE we replacements for the six we lost this morning, sir?” snapped Orth.

“Yes. All youngsters.”

“Good! They can do what we want, and do it to the queen’s taste. They’re just what I want, and it will be the sort of experience they ought to have before actually engaging in individual combat. Have them on the apron in twenty minutes, sir, if I have your permission to do what I’m going to tell you. I’ll see that most of them come back. I want to take a crack at those Heinies before they have a chance to disperse to their various *Staffels*. I intend to give them a lesson they’ll never forget. I’ll bet they won’t be setting any more traps for a little while!”

“That is the most I’ve heard you say in two months, Orth,” said Messersmith irrelevantly.

“From now on I’ll say it with bullets,” said Silent Orth, and his voice was so grimly savage that Messersmith’s eyes widened.

“I would hate to face you when you feel like that, Orth,” he said.

“Good!” replied Orth. “I intend to hold it, sir. Now, listen—”

EARNESTLY Orth leaned forward and told of the plunge into the black smoke which had trailed behind one of his victims of whose death he had wanted to be sure. When he had finished he asked a question.

“Would our master technical sergeant know?”

“He’s a smart engineer,” said Messersmith. “Let’s go see.”

Five minutes later and the eyes of the master technical sergeant were glowing with excitement as Orth outlined his plan. He kept nodding vigorously as Orth talked.

“I can do anything with crates, sir,” he said.

“Then work me a miracle, with all of the ten crates I’m going to take off this field in something like ten minutes from now,” snapped Orth. “If you make good, it’s gold bars and the stick of a crate for yours, if the major and myself can wrangle it.”

“If the trick works, sir,” replied the master technical sergeant, “Headquarters will let you do anything, even recommend a master technical sergeant to be a shavetail.”

Orth stalked across the tarmac, leading Messersmith as though he were in command instead of the major.

But Messersmith was as excited and just as eager to try it out as Orth was.

“I wish I dared go, Orth,” he said wistfully. “But regulations—”

“I know, sir,” replied Orth. “We all know. You did you share as a captain, before gold leaves chained you to a desk to send other men out to die.”

The major winced.

“It’s no fun to send them out, Orth,” he said.

“Nor to lead them out, sir,” replied Silent Orth, “unless something can be done about it. Please check my remarks while I talk with these men who came back with me.”

THE three veterans stood up as Orth entered with the major. Messersmith bade them sit down. Orth took the floor. He explained his idea.

“Almost every flyer can stunt—even the kiwis,” he said. “It will be a lark for the replacements. But as for us, we’re going out to kill and keep on killing, and we’re staying in the fight until the last German is knocked out of the sky, and knocked out so he won’t come back tomorrow. Understood?”

They nodded.

They did not smile. They had been through too great an ordeal to smile. Orth knew that if they were allowed to think of their crushing defeat, and their

flight home which had been in the nature of a rout, they would begin to scream with frazzled nerves. He wasn't going to give them time.

"Out to the deadline now," he snapped, "and help the master technical sergeant tickle up the crates of the kiwis. And gather the replacements in groups to explain to them exactly what we are going to do. There may be danger of collision when we contact the Germans, but surely no more than that."

Still they didn't grin, but they looked liked gods of vengeance as they stepped out of the hutment onto the tarmac and strode across to the deadline.

The greaseballs labored until sweat streamed from their faces. Their faces were very eager as they obeyed the snapped commands of the master technical sergeant.

Ten crates—Spads—equipped with strange devices invented on the spur of the moment, were ready for a murderous test when Orth gave word to clamber into cockpits, and assured himself that the replacements, whose names he hadn't even had time to get, knew exactly what was expected of them.

The whole thing was a desperate expedient. If it succeeded the Germans would receive a lesson they would not soon forget. If it failed, seven kiwis would probably die with the four veterans who remained of the morning battle.

But Orth had never been surer of himself. He had just one desire; to test out the stunt he felt he had perfected.

The ten crates rolled down the field, gathering speed. Their tails came off the field together. They leaped into the sky. Orth had arranged for rendezvous at seven thousand feet, where the ten planes fell into formation as easily as though their pilots had been flying together for weeks.

So far, so good; the flyers could be depended on to the limit of their personal possibilities. That's all that could be asked of anyone.

NOW Orth headed for the lines, with the ten motors full out.

The Germans were ready. A hail of Archie projectiles strove to down the American crates as they streaked across the lines. Orth studied the faces of the newer seven. They were looking straight ahead. As nearly as Orth could tell, not a man so much as gave the Archies a thought. Strange, how quickly Death, as a passenger, became a commonplace in this war.

The fighters were all of them fatalists. Either of two

things happened to you. You died or you lived. If you died you didn't worry. If you lived there was nothing to worry about, either.

It was a handy, comfortable philosophy if you could stick to it. But you couldn't, not always, for nerves had a way of breaking.

Orth studied his men. He was sure everything was all right. Sure, too, that the Germans hadn't yet had time to scatter to their various *Staffels*. If they had — well, the squadron would follow them. Shame would dog Orth's life forever after if he allowed the Germans to get away without avenging the Americans who had fallen.

His hands were white-knuckled inside the gauntlets. His goggles were clean, but would soon be dirty again. Now Orth stiffened in his pit, for the Germans were quick to answer the challenge, now that he had crossed their lines into German-held skies.

Twenty crates were off. No use, now, the Germans must have thought, to try to hide. They found out about us this morning, so we'll mass against them again, and smash them as we smashed them before.

Orth could almost feel the wave of German thought. He counted on exactly that. He looked at his men again.

There were grins on their faces as they looked back. They were eager to spring their surprise, though he hoped they were not too eager. A premature move might jeopardize everything. He signaled for care, and his pilots grinned again, grinned as their Spads rode the rising and falling wind currents into German skies.

ON THE Germans came, flashing at full speed to meet the Americans whom, for honor's sake, they must wipe out of the skies as a brush wipes the marks off a slate.

Orth's veterans were to his right and left. They were grimly intent on their business, as they had need to be, for theirs was to be the major task of the day. They were Orth's projectiles. Only Orth himself would be a more dangerous one than any of his men.

The Germans were spreading out fanwise now, and Orth knew that each three of them, by signals, had already decided which of the Americans to box in, in the old game of blasting away at a prospective victim from every possible angle.

"No backing out now," thought Orth. "But who would want to? Not one of these buzzards of mine, that's certain!"

HIS confidence had never been any higher, even when he had flown alone, when it was usually sublime because he didn't have to worry about the safety of anyone else.

Now the Germans were very close.

Orth gave the signal to his veterans.

In a moment the guns would open. They were to wait for the Spandau lead of the Germans to begin blasting away at them. Orth studied the leading German crate, watching for the flowering of smoke at the spinner cap to indicate Spandaus a-chatter.

There it was!

Orth gave the signal. A strange, crazy thing, calculated to befuddle any airman accustomed to orthodox methods of fighting, happened to the American formation. Four flyers, led by Orth, hurled themselves straight into the thick of the Germans. They went in with wings rocking, blasting away with everything their guns would hurl.

Orth led. His guns grew hot as they bounced and jerked under the pressure of his finger on the Bowden stick triggers.

The Germans fired madly. Orth could picture their surprise when the other seven American planes, wildly gyrating, doing all the loops and spins of a country circus, avoided rather than advanced to the attack. Their speed was as great, perhaps greater, than that of the veteran four. But they were clinging to the outskirts of the theater of operations, as though they were afraid. The seven were scattered all over the sky. To attack any of them, the German crates must separate from their fellows. But they didn't do this at once. They were trying to spot the trick.

SOON the seven were everywhere about the German formation.

Orth and his three veterans were in the midst of the Germans, trying to keep alive, and blasting away, until the seven should begin to do their stuff.

Orth got the first German with a burst through the head. He saw the crate start down but dared not follow it, even with his eyes. He was in the midst of hostile planes. Bullets were hammering at him and his men from all angles, and for a moment he was in doubt as to whether his seven fledglings would get to work in time to keep the four from being done to death in the sky.

Another Fokker went down. Marcossou had got him, with a burst through the cockpit that must almost have cut the German in two across the middle.

But by now the Germans were massing to get Orth and his wing-mates in their own midst, after which

it would be easier and simpler for them to get the scattered seven.

But the scattered seven obviously had other ideas, which were put into execution in exactly the nick of time, as Orth had planned. Neither he nor his men had been touched when the seven started their surprise.

Simultaneously, from all seven of the crates poured black streamers of heavy smoke.

Each of the seven crates was hidden in it. The whole sky was black in a matter of seconds.

But this wasn't all. The seven went into the wildest exhibition of flying that any of them, assuredly, had ever taken part in. They began to circle the German formation from top to bottom, from end to rear.

And as their seven crates flashed through a series of concentric circles, the Germans were encompassed in a vast cocoon of the black fog.

In a matter of seconds the blackness almost shut out the light of the sun as the seven flashed through their evolutions at the top performance of their Hissos.

Orth and his three, while the Germans stared in bewildered consternation, crashed out of the fight, out beyond the circle of smoke. Then, circling outside the black cloud, they waited for Germans to come out. From their own experience they knew that the Germans would be blinded when they emerged.

THERE came one, clawing at his eyes.

Marcossou was on top of him with blistering guns before he could even guess what was going to happen to him. As the German started falling down the wall of black smoke, Marcossou darted back up.

No other Germans stuck their noses out, for at this sort of game even the kiwis had a chance. They could down their enemies before those enemies could know what they were up to. They had the advantage of sunlight.

Now Orth was alone, for the other three had circled the cloud, each to penetrate it when and where he wished. Orth climbed over it.

Then, shutting his eyes, hoping to escape collision, which he had scarcely considered at all, Orth tilted his nose down and dived. He dived with his motor full out, his knees gripping his stick, his eyes glued to his ring-sight, his hands on his trips.

Entering the black pall, he closed his eyes, covered his goggles with one of his gauntleted hands. He took the hand away when he estimated he was through; and dead ahead of him, milling like frightened cattle, were the remnants of the German fighters. Orth's Vickers shrieked and chattered.

His target was very clear.

His lead smashed slantingly into the back of a German pilot who never knew what struck him. Nor did the others have a chance to see, for as Orth struck, he saw his three wing-mates coming in from other angles, so he continued his dive, with a shrieking of flying wires and a roar of Hisso power.

On through the formation, his guns stilled. Orth dropped his crate.

He would have sworn, when the smoke pall under the milling German formation was around him again, that not one bullet had come within many yards of any part of his crate.

The speed of Orth's dive was terrific. Well, now his three wing-mates would have to watch out for themselves. He came back on his stick. The nose of his crate lifted with a tremendous surge of power and speed. In a split second he was back into the smoke through which he had dove.

Once again he was among the Germans. He came from below, with his guns flaming. He saw the broad bellies of many of the German crates. He had but to select the one he wished to down. Two Fokkers passed him, shot down by the veterans, as he went up.

ONE Fokker darted through the smoke to escape. Orth got his man through the belly, dropped his left wing, leveled off, and flashed through the smoke on the trail of the German who had tried to escape. He caught him just outside, just as the German was turning to look back at what manner of trap he was escaping, and Orth spat death at him from his blistering guns.

Back came Orth on his stick.

Over on his back in a tight loop. A half-roll out, and Orth was flashing back into the battle, right through the cocoon of smoke his men had spun, like spiders of death, all around the German formation.

Inside the black circle again Orth gasped in surprise, staring.

"So," he thought, "the bloody beggars didn't want us to have all the fun, eh?"

For the kiwis, who had made retribution possible for the Americans, were taking part in the fight. Like dragonflies they had dropped through the smoke themselves, and already two of their number had chalked up victories.

Now——

IT WAS a Roman holiday for the kiwis, thanks to the fact that Orth, following a dead German in a burning

crate, had had a brainstorm. Orth laughed aloud in high glee, even as he signaled for the kiwis to get back out of the smoke before the Germans could rally.

They obeyed Orth's signal. Outside, they rallied at his signal, in a rendezvous two hundred feet or so above the drifting black cocoon. There they waited, staring down, waiting for the Germans to come out, as eventually they must.

Orth singled out those whom he thought to be the best of the kiwis. He signaled his three veterans to stay out of the next phase of the engagement.

The formation circled, and then watched.

The Germans broke through. With a roaring of suddenly speeding motors, the kiwis tilted their noses down, diving, with Vickers chattering their hail of death.

Two Fokkers down.

Three— Four—

Then, after the kiwis followed the veterans, to mop up for the fledglings who had done so well for themselves, thanks to Silent Orth. The veterans counted coup again and again.

FREED of the black cocoon, the Germans seemed to have one idea: to get home before all of them were killed. And the Americans had just one idea in their turn: to see that not a single German got home.

The last of them, under the venge-fully chattering guns of Silent Orth, fell in flames on his own tarmac, where no more than half a dozen Fokkers idled at the deadline. Orth swept low over the field, cut his motor and yelled to the Germans:

"You needn't wait for your friends. They're not coming back today!"

On the way back to his own field he wondered why he should have been so sarcastic in his crowing over victory that had gone beyond his wildest hopes.

"I guess," he decided, "that if I don't look out I'm likely to begin talking too much again."

But when Messersmith heard Silent Orth's report, he wanted more details by word of mouth. He set no damper on the tongue of Silent Orth, and while out in the hutments the kiwis told one another what great guys they were, Orth became almost poetic as he referred to those same kiwis as:

"A bunch, Major, of blasted dark angels, with soot on their faces until Satan wouldn't have it, and courage enough to dive into hell if we told 'em to!"

At that, Orth thought, the analogy was exceedingly apt.