

"WRECKS"

by A. KINNEY GRIFFITH

It was when Lieutenant Rex Norcross, wounded and flying a bullet-riddled plane, crashed in landing that the C.O. called him "Wrecks." The name stuck, but as time went on it meant more and more. Then came the big bombing mission—and Wrecks was there!

A NIEUPORT SCOUT PLANE landed at a small flying field just inside the French line of reserve. Its wings were bullet-riddled, its fuselage shattered with anti-aircraft and machine-gun fire. As it taxied up close to the hangars, the left wheel struck a discarded chock and the plane ground looped, and the propeller was dashed to splinters. A slender, black-haired youth in the uniform of a French flying lieutenant crawled out of the pilot pit, and lurching a few steps away, gave one sorrowful look around at the Nieuport reclining on its nose.

It was Rex Norcross, returned from a reconnaissance over the German lines. Blood dripped from his tunic as he staggered across the tarmac. Every step he took brought agonizing pain, each movement necessitated greater effort on his part. His handsome face was pale and distorted with pain. A solicitous and awe-inspired greasehall helped him across to the commanding officer's quarters, front-line headquarters of the famous Lafayette Escadrille, a squadron composed of Americans attached to the French service.

Rex Norcross saluted and made his report in short, terse phrases. "Sir, it was that same vari-colored jagdstaffel again. They got both our observation planes, but I got two of them, so we're even, except I'm wrecked again!"

The major was glaring, radiating a cold fury, but still speechless. The lieutenant continued passionately. "If I could only have a Spad—with a big Hisso motor—I'd rid the sky of that bloody circus—I'm sick and tired of these little one-and-a-half coffins!"

"Hisso, hell!" the major finally exploded. "You'd wreck it the same as you did all the rest. You have more wrecks than—Say, your name is Rex,, do you spell it W-r-e-c-k-s?"

At this point the adjutant got up and quietly left

the office, and ran for the small group of pilots and mechanics that were silently inspecting the crashed and bullet-punctured Nieuport. He spread the alarm that the C.O. was again on the rampage and was right then bawling out young Norcross—calling him "Wrecks."

The adjutant's gossip and the major's fiery explosion started something—the name "Wrecks" stuck to Lieutenant Norcross. However, had the adjutant remained in the office one minute longer, he would have seen Norcross faint and wilt to the floor—and then the major stoop over and lift him up and tenderly carry him to a hunk and call a surgeon, while he mumbled: "Wrecks? Yeah, *wrecks!* That kid has wrecked more damn Heinies than any other man in the outfit!"

Recovering from his wounds, Norcross was assigned to the 505th squadron, patrolling the Marne salient. Days went by, all of them crammed with action. There was fighting, bombing, observing and some more fighting. He was constantly scrapping with the Maltese cross planes of the enemy. He sent many down in wreckage; flaming wrecks, until the nickname Wrecks became a byword with the Allied war birds. It became a salutation to his ability to wreck his opponent in any fight, whether it was a lone-handed duel high above the clouds, or in a massed dog-fight. Often he would return to the airdrome, or home base, with his speedy Spad limping and battle-scarred, but always his report requested confirmation of at least one more enemy plane that was completely wrecked, blotto!

Medals and citations came, lots of them. There was the D.S.C., and the French, Belgian and Italian *Croix de Guerre*—with palms. Then came promotion, a captaincy and command of a flight.

He was Captain Wrecks Norcross, the flying and fighting automaton. Pfaltzs, Albatrosses, Fokkers and

Halberstaders, including one huge six-motored Gotha R. bomber, all fell wrecked, down in flames before his death-spitting Spad.

A MONTH went by. One evening at mess the squadron commander read on order from the chief of air service.

"Squadron of twenty-four Capronis to bomb enemy supply depot at Fere-en-Tardenois. Order two flights Spads and Nieuports—ten each—as escort. Rendezvous at 10,000 feet over Dormans, quarter-hour before dawn. Highest results expected.

*Signed: Woodside,
Commander-in-chief."*

When the major finished reading, the room was in silence for a moment. Then bedlam reigned. Four flight commanders demanded the honor of going on the escort, all at once, the pilots all boosting for their respective commands. The issue was finally settled by cutting the cards. Captain Rex Norcross drew flight number one, Captain James Bell, flight number two. The less fortunate members of the squadron got drunk and cursed the army, the general, the war, and everything pertaining to it.

Norcross and Bell with their pilots went out to the hangars and supervised the overhauling and refueling of each fighting craft. The birds of war were restless that night. A big kill was in the atmosphere for the morrow. It would be no ordinary dawn patrol.

The two captains reported to the major for final orders when their planes were ready.

"Boys," said the major, handing each a large glass of cognac, "Fere-en-Tardenois is the main supply center for the German army in this sector. Orders from G.H.Q. are to wreck it, wipe it out. You know as well as I do, how it can be done. Protect those bombers at all cost, and you will have fulfilled your mission. It will be the most decisive aerial victory of the war, if you are successful!"

"And if we are not successful, major?"

"In that event, don't come back—go over the hill!"

Long before daylight the grumbling mechanics had the twenty planes out on the line. The huge Hispano Suiza gear motors of flight one burst into life with a throaty roar for the warm-up. Then came the sharp staccato exhaust of the Le Rhone rotary motored Nicuports of flight two. Their pilots began to make final inspections, and plenty of drums of good ammunition were stowed away in handy places in the fuselages. The Vickers and Lewis machine guns were

gone over and the synchronizing gears were given a final scrutiny.

A Very pistol flashed, the signal. Captain Wrecks Norcross settled his goggles and gripped the throttle with a nerve tingling hand; another minute, and he would be winging his way aloft, leading his flight, on to more glory—or death.

Wrecks eyed the illuminated dial of his wrist watch a moment, then jizzed his motor twice. The mechanics removed the chocks, again Wrecks poured the juice to his motor, and the lighting Spad leaped forward like a thing with life on into the darkness, he was followed at regular intervals by each member of his flight. Then came Captain Bell, also followed by his entire command.

Captain Norcross lead his flight straight, cast for two kilometers, then turned north. Captain Bell circled the airdrome once and headed straight north. Both commands flew a formation, with the flight commander at the point.

The score of trim lighting craft swept on, steadily gaining altitude. Higher and higher they soared, far above the swishing, crashing, bursting shrapnel fired into the enemy trenches by the Allied artillery.

Approaching Dormans with the first gray streaks of dawn, Wrecks Norcross, at the point of the leading formation, got his first glimpse of the huge gray ghostlike twin-motored Caproni bombers. The big lank wings bad preceded their escorts to the rendezvous.

Flight number one overhauled them and zoomed up, above and over, then throttled down to conform with the speed of the lumbering bombers.

Flight number two drew up in wide formation below the Capronis. The flock had assembled for the kill, and now they swooped on into the dawn and Fere-en-Tardenois, their prey.

The forty four fighting planes approached their objective at 20,000 feet, high above the range of archie guns. The sun had not yet topped the horizon. The enemy supply base below was shrouded in a dark mist. Captain Norcross dipped his wings in signal. The bomber squadron commander caught the signal and passed it on to Captain Bell. The three fighting units swung around over Fere-en-Tardenois in a wide sweeping circle. Bell and his Nieuports spread out farther away from beneath the big Capronis. Norcross and his Spads drew into a still more compact formation, every pilot tense, wary and alert.

The wide circle was nearly complete, objects below

were becoming more discernible, the scintillating rays of the sun were flashing over the skyline when suddenly two swift-flying Albatross triplanes shot up from the mist below. They were climbing at right angles with tremendous speed. Wrecks figured them to be an advance reconnoitering party up to report on the approaching enemy birdmen. Wrecks waved an arm in signal again, then shoved forward, on the throttle and slick, and kicked on right rudder. The Spad responded like a shooting meteor, straight toward the first of the approaching triplanes.

LIEUTENANT BARD, flying position number two of the Spad flight, dashed down after his commander. It would be a duel, two against two, no quarter asked or given. The droning roar of the Hiss motors mingled with the peculiar, weird, roar of the Mercedes, but only for a moment, for it was all over in less time than it takes to tell of it.

Wrecks Norcross dived from his position above, down on the nearest of the approaching triplanes. A steady hand flashed to the gun handles, a firm pressure on the trips. While the broadside of the Albatross was within the circle of the gun sights, a red stream of hot lead flowed from the muzzle of the twin machine gun through the propeller arc, the green tongue of the tracer bullets spit forth testifying direct hits. The Albatross burst into sudden flame, went into a tail-spin and flashed earthward utterly out of control. It was first blood for Wrecks. Bard was unable to catch up with his quarry, as the second Jerry had turned tail and fled. The two Americans banked sharply around and returned to their comrades.

Then all hell broke loose. The huge Caproni tank-wings had each released their first bombs. Several of the TNT-loaded projectiles struck one of the large ammunition sheds and exploded, igniting tons and tons of artillery shells. It seemed like the earth and heavens were rent asunder from the terrific concussion. The whole world shook and screamed, and a seething inferno opened up a yawning pit.

Like all good pilots should—if able to do so in time—Wrecks Norcross had closed one eye tightly, consequently his sight was undazzled by the fearful glow of the explosion, when an instant later a veritable shower of fighting Maltese cross planes descended and closed in from all directions. It was the original varicolored jagdstaffel. Wrecks saw that instantly, and led his squadron into the fray.

From that moment on it was bank, zoom and dive.

Teeth clenched, lips snarling, hands clawing at sticks and gun grips, with motors roaring wide open and bullets flashing and ripping. The men of the 505th squadron fought desperately. The whole welkin rang with the screech of the eagles fighting off the attacking swarm of hornets trying to protect their nest from being destroyed. The eagles valiantly guarded their slow-flying mother birds—who had eggs to lay into that hornet nest below.

It seemed like the air was clogged with the whirling, shooting, flaming, fighting planes, but actually there were only twenty-four of the Boche and forty-four of the bombing patrol.

The crews of the Capronis bravely stayed at their duties—the pilots at their controls, the bombers at their bomb releases, the gunners at their turret-mounted machine guns. All around them was a whirling, slithering hell. Their mission was nearly over, the bombs nearly all dropped earthward, down to increase the death and destruction they had stirred up below.

The escorting eagles, however, had not fared so well. They were evenly matched, if not outnumbered, by the fierce and swift flying and shooting Albatrosses, Hannoveraners and Fokkers. The fight was beginning to spread out over a wide radius up and down and out, many kilos around. For every plane flying the black cross shot down, a plane wearing the red-white-and-blue circle plunged earthward a flaming funeral pyre. The fight was still even.

Wrecks Norcross and James Bell, wise old heads at this war game, stayed in close to their charges in the center, inside the general melee, their squadrons outside the circle were at death grips with the enemy, fighting it out to the bitter end, an eye for an eye, a bullet for a bullet, death for death.

Frequently a swift-darting Fokker or Albatross would break away from the roaring mass of destruction—or having disposed of an opponent—and dart in with twin Spandaus vomiting red flame towards the bombers. Then Norcross and Bell inside and alert for just such maneuvers, would swoop, their Vickers belching, snarling defiance at the daring German.

Sometimes it would be over in a few moments, sometimes their metal would be tested to the limit, but in the end always the same result, the Capronis would remain unscathed and the attacker would go crashing down, and either Wrecks or Jimmie would hastily scratch a mark on the instrument panel before them

with an empty cartridge, tallying off another victim for the day. These two birdmen were invincible this day, it would seem.

THE big tank-wings had laid their last eggs, and now light and buoyant began sweeping up and around in a circle toward the home base. Wrecks waved his arm in signal to Jimmie, then zoomed his Spad up above the Capronis. His head was drumming and throbbing, his heart laden with dread. He had noticed something that the other pilot was evidently unaware of as yet—the fact, the searing heart-rending fact, that after all this terrific, but gloriously fought battle, the tide of fate had turned against them—not one of their flying, fighting companions remained alive in the air.

All were down, down behind the lines dead, or worse than dead, prisoners. Wrecks and Jimmie were the only two of the original escort of twenty-four brave fighting men aloft. The rest had been hurled to destruction in less than half an hour of fighting.

Wrecks signaled to the Caproni commander and the big "wops" roared homeward under full throttle. Then he and Bell turned to fight off the approaching five planes, the remainder of the jagdstaffel, victors of the big dogfight. One Albatross, two Fokkers and two Hannoveraners, coming abreast—they must not pass!

Norcross took stock of his fuel and ammunition, and saw that one full drum of ammo remained besides what was in his guns, fuel enough for about twenty minutes more, then—probably oblivion.

The Spad and the Nieuport climbed for the ceiling, hoping for an even break, as the on-coming planes had the sun at their tails.

"Damn their obstinacy! Don't they ever have enough?" Wreck snarled aloud.

"I'll get at least one of them if I have to crash him head on!" thought the desperate Bell, realizing that his motor had "bugs" and was beginning to overheat.

They came together, guns spitting defiance, motors roaring a death tune. Wrecks engaged the Albatross by diving at it from his superior height, strafing it from prop to fin with a hail of lead. He dived down past behind it and looped back and over into a perfect Immelmann, which put him back up almost to his former altitude. Then he was on the tail of the Jerry again, motor roaring wide open.

Round and round in a circle they swooped, each fighter trying to crosscut on the other and get in a quick burst of shots. But each pilot was a veteran at that game and left nothing to chance.

Bell was engaged with a Fokker, swerving and diving and shooting, trying to get in that one fatal shot first. His head was swimming, his mental faculties were becoming mechanical and less subtle. His eyesight blurred for an instant, then it happened—a diving Hannoveraner slightly misjudged distances, Jimmie was unseeing, and they crashed. The Mercedes motor imbedded itself in the Nieuport fuselage, left wings locked with left wings, and foe with foe. There was an explosion, and a double mass of flame plummeted earthward.

Wrecks saw his comrade go and steeled himself for the fight of his life. It was four against one, and the odds were too great. Wrecks went berserker. A tremendous thrust at the stick and rudder bar brought him the desired moment directly behind the Albatross. He saw its pilot through the gun-sight circle, and his hand flashed to the gun trip. There was a flash of green and red, and the German went down out of control. Three were left. A crash dive fooled the remaining Hannoveraner pilot, who foolishly started to follow the Spad.

The ruse brought Wrecks a good distance away and time to execute a close Immelmann with only one plane to combat. He met the German head on, guns spitting death. Now there were two more left! But they were Fokkers, fighters of the best! Wrecks' oil-smearred face was split by a ruthless smile. The major wanted wrecks? The general wanted results? Well, they'll get 'em!

THE Spad, belching flame, zoomed into a power dive directly behind one of the remaining Fokkers, and some of the shots were effectively lashing the plane. Wrecks, grinning even more ruthlessly, relentlessly followed it as it quivered and dropped at a steep angle, then he jerked into another Immelmann, barely in time, as the other Fokker had gotten on to his tail, firing a steady stream of lead. Again the sweeping and circling, trying to out-maneuver the other fellow. There were a few more short bursts of hot lead without apparent results. Then *rip, crash!* Wrecks looked around with bloodshot eyes. That other Fokker was back in the game! Wrecks did a vertical bank, hoping to pull out ahead and do his favorite Immelmann, but his controls did not respond so quickly this time, the rudder and ailerons seemed gone, shot away. Then he got it from both sides simultaneously. His instrument panel was smashed before his eyes, his goggles were torn off, blinding him, his shoulder seemed to be

seared with hot iron. For a moment he became a raging demon. Back he jerked the stick, up came the nose, down went right wings then up again to an even keel—he did it again, an Immelmann.

"Could do it often. God, my mouth tastes salty. My chance! They're there! Shoot!" He screamed aloud to himself.

Clammy hand again pressed the gun trip, and the red-hot Vickers belched forth their last shots at the other two planes that for one fleeting moment were on a direct line of fire, dead ahead. Then the twin guns of the Spad were stilled suddenly, empty!

The Fokkers fell apart, one down out of control, a flaming wreck, the other went up and around after the now unresisting Spad. A long burst from the spiteful Spandaus and it was all over with the Hisso-motored Spad, some of these last bullets had struck the propeller, splintering it. The motor began to vibrate, more and more, until suddenly with a twisting wrench

it vibrated itself entirely free from its installation and dropped, like a scorching hot plummet, down, striking the last Fokker—its destroyer that had dived below the Spad out of sheer excess speed!

The Fokker followed its last fighting comrade to destruction behind its enemy lines.

Some subconscious inner self told Captain Rex Norcross that he could land his motorless ship. It was gliding-down, down in the direction of home. And that subconscious inner self was guiding the hand that steadied the falling plane. Down it fluttered, on its last flight. *Crash*, bounce, *crash*, then it stopped rolling, brought up sharp and completely wrecked by a trench occupied by olive-drab-clad doughboys.

Captain Norcross banged his head against the crash pad, which cleared his senses for a moment, and the approaching infantrymen heard him mutter: "The C.O. wanted 'em wrecked, eh? Well, they are!"