



# GOLDEN WINGS

by JACKSON SCHOLZ

*A high-speed story of naval aviation by a pilot-writer who won his wings at Pensacola.*

**C**LIMBING TO THE EDGE of the cockpit, Ensign "Jiggs" Neely slipped his fingers through the ring of the rip cord. He poised for a moment, made a hasty computation of his air speed and the velocity of the wind, then, with a wave to his pilot, dived head long into space.

Downward he shot with terrific momentum. The air screeched by, tearing at his clothes. Land and water were blended together, a hodgepodge of green and blue.

His lungs seemed deflated, as though by some huge pump. His stomach was shriveled by the dizzy drop, but his nerves, tense and vibrant, thrilled to the savage pleasure of that dive through space.

It was almost with reluctance that Jiggs finally

yanked the cord, yet he always enjoyed that moment, too, the instant it took the 'chute to open—the instant that meant the difference between life and death. There was always the chance that something would go wrong.

The pilot 'chute popped out, and dragged the silken canopy from its case. Another instant, while it caught the air, then Jiggs was jerked upward, it seemed, with a force that made him grunt. In another moment, he was swaying helpless like some grotesque pendulum.

He looked up and grinned at the frail mushroom of silk above.

"Ain't science grand?" he observed, then turned his attention to the ground below, concentrating upon the objective which he had selected, a spot upon the blimp landing field.

There had been no particular reason Jiggs' parachute jump that morning, except that he had learned from experience that it was more effective than a bromo seltzer.

"Clears my head," he insisted, "puts a man in shape for the day."

His flying mates, naval ensigns working for their wings and a J.G. rating, were inclined to accept this a bit dubiously. Most of those who had experimented with this aerial life-saver had been willing to accept it as the hazardous bit of insurance for which it was intended, and not as a plaything designed for recreation. Jiggs' devotion to the sport frankly puzzled them.

It puzzled Jiggs, too, at times. "But what's a man going to do?" he demanded. "When you once start taking-dope you've got to keep it up."

He noted now that the wind was slightly stronger than he had supposed. His landing would require a bit of jockeying, so he set about to gather in the shrouds, and spill the air from the 'chute above. Those watching from the ground saw him descend in spasmodic jerks, but they saw, too, that he would strike the spot for which he generally aimed. It was a masterful piece of jumping, and Jiggs was frankly elated himself, as he expertly spilled the remainder of the air in order to keep himself from being dragged along the ground.

While he relieved himself of his harness, however, his infectious grin became a little less assured as he watched the approach of an orderly. It was the skipper's orderly, and there was something more or less sinister in the gob's stride. There was something suggestive, too, in the orderly's attempt to hide a smile, as he came to attention and saluted.

"Skipper wants to see you at once, sir," he announced, about-faced and strode away.

Jiggs didn't like the sound of that, and his steps dragged reluctantly, as he made his way toward the executive building. He paused at the captain's door and took a longer breath than he ever took before trusting his life to a parachute. He set his lean jaw, till the muscles bunched below his ears, then stepped into the outer office. He made known his wants, and after a brief wait was ushered into the captain's office.

HE CAME to attention before the skipper's desk, but the latter ignored him completely, apparently absorbed in a letter before him. It gave Jiggs the opportunity to study the square, rugged features of the older man, but the results of his studies were hardly reassuring. It was like staring at a grizzly bear without

the protection of intervening bars. The captain looked up so suddenly that Jiggs felt a quiver run down his spine, and then he braced himself for the ordeal of being studied in turn by his superior officer.

Jiggs Neely was in no frame of mind to realize that he had little to fear from such an inspection. His flying suit failed to conceal the liteness of his figure, and the clear tan of his regular features radiated a youth and health that the older man must have envied. Jiggs' eyes were blue, dark-blue, wide set and fearless. Tiny wrinkles in the corners suggested a devil-may-care, quizzical quality in Jiggs' make-up. If the captain appreciated the straight directness of the ensign's gaze, he concealed the emotion by glowering all the harder.

"Ensign Neely," he rumbled, "do you know why you're here?"

"No, sir."

"*Har-r-rump*," growled the skipper, "Well, you ought to know. At any rate you would have known sooner, if I had had the time to get you up here before. Briefly, Ensign Neely, you're a bad influence at this station." The captain stopped as though expecting a reply, but Jiggs wisely kept silent.

"A bad influence," repeated the other, "I suppose you want to know why?"

"Yes, sir," replied Jiggs.

"Well, then, I'll tell you. In the first place it is our aim to turn out aviators here at Pensacola, and not circus performers. I am told by your instructors that you are a flyer above the average, but from the reports which I receive, I deduce that you are below the average in common sense.

"I heard how you flew a plane under the telephone wires on the gunnery island, and actually left the mark of your pontoons in the sand below. I've heard other things equally as brainless, and if you have no concern for your own life, it's time that you considered the planes and the property of this station. Other young fools will be trying that stuff next, and they probably won't be as lucky as you have been."

"But, that's not all. Your worst offense, it seems, is annoying our blimps while in the air. Other idiots have taken up the pastime and I have issued a general order forbidding it. Those orders are definite. Another offense of that nature and the man will never pilot another navy plane.

"Your parachute jumping has got to stop also. You've had enough of that to last you the rest of your life. The government has spent too much money on you already to take any further chances.

"You will receive your wings in another week, if you behave yourself. One slip and you don't get 'em. Is that clear?"

Jiggs swallowed with difficulty. "Yes, sir."

"Then, get out, and remember what I've told you."

Jiggs saluted, and executed a shaky about-face on legs which were none too steady. He left the executive building in a daze which he seemed unable to shake off until he had covered almost half the distance to his quarters.

Not to get his wings! It was a horrible possibility which had never entered his mind. It seemed so inevitable, somehow or other, the golden wings above his heart. He had always pictured himself like that. He had been obsessed with the thought before entering the Naval Academy. His four years at Annapolis had been made less arduous by the vision of the golden wings ahead.

And now, with but a week to go, he was faced with the incredible possibility of not obtaining them. The mere thought acted with the paralyzing effect of a blow at the base of the skull. He would rather die, he decided fiercely. Better that than never again to feel the joy stick in his fingers, the tug of the wind against his helmet, and to hear the thunder of a motor.

He shook his head, and pulled himself together. No use getting panicky like a schoolgirl. After all, there was only a week left, and all he had to do was to watch his step during that time. That, certainly, should be easy enough.

AS HE approached his quarters, he saw "Whitey" Pool enter the building, and Jiggs slowed his pace to avoid a meeting with the big, blond ensign. He was in no mood to renew the ancient feud, which had existed between the two since Jiggs' arrival at Pensacola.

In the first place, Whitey was a blimpier, and Jiggs shared the feeling of pity and superiority which all heavier-than-air men feel toward their poor, misguided lighter-than-air brothers. It was conceded, of course, that there were some pretty good guys among the blimpies, but Jiggs could never, by any stretch of imagination, extend such a compliment to Whitey Pool.

The enmity had started, quite naturally, over a girl, a Pensacola girl, with provoking eyes and an equally provoking Southern accent. The fact that Jiggs' charms had proved paramount over those of Whitey had done little to cement the friendship of the two flyers. One thing had led to another, until now, whenever the two

men approached the same vicinity, the atmosphere became decidedly charged with suspense.

Jiggs Neely, in his present frame of mind, felt no desire to meet Whitey. He lingered, therefore, giving the other plenty of time to go to his room. But, when Jiggs finally entered, he found Whitey Pool loafing around with several of the other fellows, awaiting the mess call to lunch.

Jiggs grunted a reply to the greetings of his friends, and was about to pass on when he was stopped by Whitey's voice.

"The Skipper had 'the Lady Killer' on the carpet this morning."

Jiggs turned slowly, "Well?" he demanded.

Whitey elaborately flicked the ashes from his cigarette.

"I suppose he gave you the Military Cross?"

"Quite the contrary," said Jiggs maliciously, "he threatened to kick me out if I didn't stop frightening you poor blimpies to death. It seems that your nerves are becoming shattered. You take so many of your pay hops in the hangar it gives you the willies to get out in the open air.

"Smelling salts should be a part of your equipment. You should have a smelling-salts drill, so you could get them out in time whenever you see a real flying machine within a couple of miles of you. You probably squawked louder than anybody else."

Whitey hurled his cigarette to the floor.

"That's a lie!" he shouted.

There was a moment of tense silence, broken only by the heavy, outraged breathing of Whitey Pool. Jiggs felt his muscles contract. He seemed to see the other man through a red haze that had formed before his eyes. He felt himself move slowly forward, then suddenly into that crimson haze came the clear vision of a pair of golden wings.

Jiggs' senses cleared as though by magic. He went slightly pale at the effort required to control his fury, and his eyes still smoldered dangerously, as they met the equally angry eyes of the other man.

"Whitey," Jiggs said softly, "I'm going to let you get away with that crack for just one week. After I get my wings I'm going to lick you for it. They mean more to me than you do just at present. But remember—I'm going to lick you."

Whitey laughed nastily.

"Oh, well," he said, "I guess that's as good an excuse as any. Come around some time when your nerves are in better shape."

“Don’t worry, I will,” Jiggs promised. He wheeled and left the room, while the vision of the golden wings still had the power to keep him out of trouble.

After lunch, Jiggs was still in an irritable frame of mind, and, under such conditions, he knew that there was only one sure remedy. He climbed into his flying suit, and with his helmet and goggles slung over his arm, made his way to the beach.

There were no planes available at the time, so he dangled his legs from the concrete sea wall, and listened to the lazy drone of motors overhead. A training plane landed shortly, and taxied up to the beach. The beach officer nodded to Jiggs to signify that he might take it out. He had to wait, however, until it was refueled by the ground crew.

He then climbed to the lower wing and along the leading edge to the fuselage. He climbed into the rear cockpit, tested the controls and fastened his safety belt. Then he settled himself comfortably on the parachute which served as his cushion, waved his hand to the mechanic on the beach. The mech swung the wing about till the nose of the plane was facing the water.

JIGGS NEELY pushed the throttle slightly forward and taxied the plane out into the bay. A glance at the tower showed him the direction of the wind, and when he was well off shore he cut his gun once more and waited till the plane, acting as a weather vane, nosed into the wind of its own accord.

This time the throttle went all the way forward, and for a moment the ship wallowed clumsily, as it gained headway through the water. A gentle backhand-forward motion of the stick rocked the plane and brought the air under the step of the center pontoon. In another moment the ship was up on the step, scudding over the surface of the water, and rapidly gaining flying speed.

Jiggs held the nose down for several seconds more, then the plane leaped from the water in a swift, high zoom. Just at the stalling point, he shoved the stick ahead, and with a slight shudder of protest, the wings gripped the air. The training ship started to climb more gently. The pilot wiped the spray from his goggles with the sleeve of his flying suit, and then settled back to enjoy himself.

Jiggs felt better already. The pounding of the air and the thunder of the motor always served to reduce to pettiness those troubles he had experienced on the ground. He seemed to have severed all connection with earthly things. It was almost with a feeling of

resentment that he regarded the particles of moist sand which still clung to the leading edge of the lower wing. A couple of thousand feet below a flying boat was bombing a tow target, a pontoon dragged several hundred feet behind a motor boat. He could see the white puffs as the practice bombs struck the water, wide of their target.

Around and around the course he flew. Jiggs lost all track of time till a startled glance at his fuel gauge, informed him that it was time to turn back. He cut the gun and nosed over into a lazy spiral. Leveling off again at fifteen hundred feet, the young pilot noted with a slight feeling of irritation that one of the blimps was flying at the same height and was heading in the same direction.

Jiggs fought down an almost overpowering desire to dive on its tail, but the words of the captain were still too fresh in his mind. Instead, he swung aside to pass it with a liberal margin, but as he rapidly drew abreast, Jiggs was attracted by the excited motions of a figure in the stern of the gondola.

The figure seemed to be trying to attract his attention, and when Jiggs edged in cautiously, he caught his breath sharply, as he read the unmistakable signals of the man’s arms. He was signaling in semaphore, and rapidly repeating the letters—S O S !

Without an instant’s hesitation, Jiggs jerked his ship around and headed toward the blimp. He realized that there was probably nothing he could do, but he might at least learn the cause of the trouble and dive back to the station and report it. At any rate, an S O S—the three most stirring letters in the code—was not to be ignored.

Jiggs strained his eyes as he came closer, but could see nothing amiss. The figure in the stern was still making frantic gestures, but the other two figures seemed to be quite composed, and were looking ahead, intent upon their flying.

Suddenly, something clicked in Jiggs’ mind. It was as though some subconscious instinct had flashed a warning, but the warning came a second too late.

He was so close now that there was no possibility of missing the blimp without a steep zoom. This, of course, was simple enough, and Jiggs performed the maneuver with no threat of danger to any one concerned. It was the last impressions, received from the occupants of the blimp, that swept Jiggs with a dizziness almost akin to nausea.

In a brief fraction of a second he had recognized the figure who had semaphored the S O S—Whitey

Pool, of course—and as a parting gesture Whitey had applied his thumb to his nose, with fingers spread, in order to dispel any doubt which might linger in Jiggs' mind.

Jiggs saw, too, the furious faces of the others. He saw the officer in charge shake his fist, and Jiggs experienced a surge of hopeless rage he had never known before. No one but himself had seen Whitey's signals!

JIGGS made a step landing, which was quite in keeping with his mood. He allowed the ship no chance to settle, but opened his throttle again and raced toward the beach, his pontoons leaving thin ribbons of white foam.

As he roared toward the beach there was every prospect that he would crash upon the concrete, but at the exact instant, Jiggs cut the gun, jerked back on the stick, and jammed over his right rudder. The nose went up and the tail whipped around. The pontoon presented its underside to the water, and the forward rush was checked as though by magic. So nicely had Jiggs timed it that his left wing swung up on land into the waiting hands of a mechanic.

Jiggs shoved up his goggles, and, climbing along the wing once more, dropped to the ground.

"That was close, sir," the gob volunteered. "Lucky the beach officer didn't see you."

Jiggs laughed harshly.

"It wouldn't have changed matters in the least," he said. "Maybe you can tell me whether or not any of those blimpers were around here to-day."

"Why, yes, sir, Mr. Pool came down shortly after you left."

"What did he want?" "He asked the number of the ship you were flying."

Jiggs' lips compressed to an even tighter line.

"Thanks," he said, and made his way swiftly toward the blimp hangars.

The blimp was still up, and the ground men, awaiting its arrival, gazed with curiosity upon this heavier-than-air pilot who strode up and down like a lion in a cage. Their attention, however, was diverted by the arrival of the cumberson craft, and their energies were soon enlisted, as they tugged on the ropes to bring it to earth.

The flyers alighted and made their way toward the hangar. Jiggs confronted them en route, but was conscious only of the presence of Whitey Pool, who was wearing a sardonic, triumphant grin. Jiggs wasted

no words, but walked up and cuffed the blimper heavily across the face with the back of his hand.

Pool staggered back from the force of the blow, but recovered himself quickly, and came at Jiggs with a rush. Pool was the bigger man of the two, and the blow he aimed at Jiggs would probably have been the last one struck if it had ever landed, but fortunately for Jiggs, it did not.

Jiggs Neely side-stepped, neatly, but not enough to throw himself off balance. He was firmly set, therefore, as he let fly with a short left hook which caught Pool in his unprotected midsection.

It stopped his rush and brought him upright with a grunt of pain. While Whitey Pool's mouth was still open in a frantic gasp for breath, Jiggs caught him flush on the angle of the jaw with a straight right which had every ounce of his weight behind it.

Pool lurched forward and dropped like a sack of grain. Jiggs wasted one contemptuous glance on him, ignored the others, and strode away.

Nor, did Jiggs attempt to fool himself as to what he was up against. He knew only too well the relentlessness with which the wheels of discipline would begin to grind. The knowledge of this oppressed him with a feeling of hopelessness which left his mind and body numb.

He slipped his helmet from his head and gazed at it curiously. It appeared somehow in the guise of an old friend with whom he had spent most of the happiest hours of his life. He felt a peculiar smarting in his eyes—tears, which he savagely dispelled by drawing his rough, grimy sleeve across his face.

He was expecting a summons from the Skipper, but he was even denied that much satisfaction. He received a terse note instead:

To—Ensign J. Neely

From—Commandant of Station.

Subject—Disobedience of orders, and conduct unbecoming an officer.

Ensign Neely, pending investigation by court martial, will be prohibited from further use of heavier-than-air craft.

It was signed by the Skipper, and Jiggs held it for some moments in lifeless fingers before finally folding it, and placing it in his pocket.

ENSIGN JIGGS NEELY had built his whole world about airplanes and the mysterious vastness of the sky. Every ambition, every energy had been bent toward that pair of golden wings which were now as

unobtainable as the stars. It took him several days to actually realize this, several days of brooding, silent suffering.

He would wander about the limits of the station, with a puzzled frown between his eyes. He spent hours dangling his feet from the concrete retaining wall on the beach, watching lucky pilots take planes out and bring them in. Strangely, he experienced no feeling of resentment. The hurt went too deep for that. His life, it seemed, had ended at the time he had received the letter from the Skipper.

The blimpers were experimenting with an observation balloon. That amused him some, as he watched them reel it in and out. He was vaguely annoyed too, to find himself actually envying them. He laughed harshly. This, he felt, must be the end—to envy a blimper.

Jiggs was sitting one day in his accustomed place on the wall, when he was approached by the beach officer.

“Listen, Jiggs,” said the lieutenant, “why don’t you bum a ride with some of the fellows? It would make you feel better.”

“Hell, you know I’m beached.”

“Sure, but as I interpret the meaning, you are merely prohibited from piloting a plane. If I’m wrong I won’t bother to look the matter up; so as far as I am concerned, you can go up as a passenger—only pick a discreet pilot.”

It did not take Jiggs long to take advantage of the suggestion. He repeated the beach officer’s suggestion to one of his friends, “Bud” Landon, who considered the idea a good one. Jiggs borrowed a flying outfit, and wiggled into his parachute straps. In another minute, he was settled in the front cockpit, the pontoons, shortly, kissed the waves farewell. Jiggs once more found life worth living.

As they circled about the course, Jiggs felt his fingers itching to grab the rubber handle of the stick. Bud was a good pilot, but he, Jiggs, was a better one. As a compromise, Jiggs allowed his fingers to rest gently on the stick, and his feet lightly on the rudder. He could at least get the feel of it without interfering with the pilot.

As a passenger, Jiggs had more time than Bud to look around. With his head, over the edge of the cockpit, he was studying the land and water below when, suddenly, he stiffened in his seat. He had been watching the blimp landing field, where a group of tiny dots surrounded a larger object—the observation balloon.

Even as he watched he seemed to see the great bag lurch in a peculiar way. The tiny dots scattered like panicky ants, and Jiggs felt his heart leap in sudden-premonition that tragedy was in the air.

He shook the stick to attract Bud’s attention, and pointed toward the balloon, which was rapidly rising. Bud banked around sharply, and dove a couple of hundred feet to get a better view.

Jiggs felt the ship tremble slightly as though in response to a shudder from its pilot. Jiggs saw the same thing at the same time, as did Bud Landon. A rope was trailing from the balloon, and a man hung suspended from the rope—head down!

JIGGS NEELY took in the situation at a glance. He wasted no time in speculation as to the manner in which the horrible accident had occurred. He accepted facts as they were, and his excitement gave way to a steady coolness which was apparently not shared by Bud,

This was evident by the erratic action of the ship, and Jiggs, without an instant’s hesitation, shook the stick imperatively and pointed to himself. Bud was only too glad to relinquish the responsibility, and Jiggs experienced a thrill of confidence, as he felt the ship respond to his own guidance.

He first studied the streaks upon the water which indicate the direction of the wind. In this way he was able to determine the course the balloon would take. His jaw set a little firmer as he noted that, in time, the balloon would cross the bay in the direction of the gunnery island, and would sail from there into the open Gulf of Mexico. His knowledge of balloons was limited. He had no idea how high it was liable to go, for which reason he planned to have plenty of altitude to his own credit.

He spiraled upward, staying above the bag, which finally seemed contented to sail along at three thousand feet. Jiggs held his ship at forty-five hundred, maneuvered to a point behind the balloon, and set his course by the streaks on the water. Out of the corner of his eye he saw two sea sleds below, throwing spray high in the air, waiting helplessly below, powerless to do anything but watch. They would only be able to go as far as the island, and as Jiggs’ plan required the sleds, he realized he must act quickly.

He motioned to Bud to take the stick and hold the course, and the latter, who had had lime to compose himself, nodded grimly. Jiggs then unstrapped his safety belt, looked to the fastenings of his ‘chute, and

climbed out of the cockpit onto the wing. A glance at Bud's set face told him that his pilot could be depended upon, and that he had guessed Jiggs' plan.

Jiggs' motions were steady and accurate, as he worked himself out on the wing against the force of the wind. He felt no sense of fear, only that he might fail in the hundred-to-one chance that he had set for himself.

The balloon, now, was almost directly below. Fifteen seconds more should do it! Slowly Jiggs counted. How long it seemed. At fourteen he took a long breath, and his fingers were steady, as he slipped them through the ring of the rip cord.

Fifteen!

He dived headlong into space, waited three more seconds and pulled the ring. He hardly noticed the jerk which checked his plunge, he was too intent upon the balloon below.

Closely he studied it. He had never dreamed a balloon could actually be so small. It looked like a toy balloon that children buy at fairs and circuses. It was coming faster, too, than he had calculated. The wind, it is true, was holding him directly in its path, but the bag would pass beneath him at his present rate.

His thoughts turned swiftly to the poor fellow dangling below. Jiggs wondered if he was still alive, and offered a brief prayer to that effect, as he gathered in the shrouds, and spilled the wind from his 'chute.

It was hazardous work, because Jiggs was forced to drop more rapidly than he had ever dropped before. At times he feared that the 'chute would not reopen, and at these times Jiggs experienced the first genuine, horrible fear he had ever known.

Closer and closer he came to the bag, which now appeared really huge. It seemed impossible, incredible that he could come in contact with it, but sobbing and cursing, Jiggs worked at his shrouds with a desperation which was madness.

Those last few seconds were a blank. Whether by instinct, genius, or just blind luck, Jiggs reached his objective, he never knew. Watchers below told him that, at the end, he was swinging in his harness like a pendulum, and that at the farthest point of one of these swings, his fingers gripped the mesh about the bag of the balloon. In another instant he would have been swept past.

The moment that his fingers touched the mesh, Jiggs' mind regained its clearness. He freed himself from the harness of the 'chute, and saw it flutter toward the water. Then swiftly, he worked his way

down the side of the balloon, taking desperate chances in his fight against time. He gained the shrouds, and dropped into the basket. It took him but a moment to locate the release valve, and shortly after he had jerked it, he felt the big bag begin to settle.

THE gleaming stretch of the gunnery island loomed dangerously close. He released more gas till the balloon was dropping with alarming speed. His brief glance at the man below had convinced him that the figure was unconscious. It was dangling below with lifeless contortions.

The water seemed rushing up to meet him. He had barely time to strip off his flying clothes and shoes, before he saw the figure at the end of the rope, strike the water and go under. The next moment the basket struck with a vicious slap, which almost jarred Jiggs' breath away. He almost strangled when he came to the surface from the dive he had taken from the basket to prevent being trapped by the almost-deflated bag above.

Brilliant lights seemed to dance before his eyes. Air rushed into his lungs as though to burst them. Jiggs fought down a dizziness and a strange desire to relax and rest. Another short period of unconsciousness and he awoke to find himself swimming desperately toward a figure which had just appeared on the surface a few yards away.

He reached it just as it was sinking. Jiggs remembered jerking the man's head to the surface; the shouts of men and the roaring of the sea sleds, then—blackness.

He awoke in sick bay, and looked up into the eyes of a grinning orderly. Slowly, Jiggs' senses returned, and with them the memory of what had gone before. Then came the bleak thought of what the future held for him. He groaned and turned his face to the wall, but the orderly shook him gently by the shoulder.

"How do you feel, sir?"

"Oh, I'm all right."

"Could—could you read a letter?"

Jiggs turned weakly. Wouldn't they ever let him alone?"

"Give it here," he said, crossly.

It was another official document, which he opened with an angry jerk, almost tearing part of the letter. He removed it, pieced it together and saw it to be another terse note—to so-and-so, from so-and-so, and all that sort of thing.

The message read:

Ensign Neely will report at his earliest convenience to the office of the commandant to receive his naval aviator's commission.

It was signed by the Skipper. The words blurred before his eyes. He read the message again before his gaze dropped to a note below, which was written in long hand, and decidedly unofficial. It said:

The man you rescued was Ensign Pool. His nerve is gone and he has quit the service, but not before he confessed to the SOS incident. Please accept my apologies. I wish we had more like you.

This too, was signed by the Skipper. "Hey, orderly!" roared Jiggs. "Orderly!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get my clothes!"