



# SMOKE RINGS

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

*Veteran Meets Veteran in the Flaming Skies Above Shell-Torn France as Orth Zooms for Vengeance!*

**A**S THE 7th PURSUIT SQUADRON swung into action against the German armada, Silent Orth stared at the Germans in utter amazement. He had never seen anything like it. The Germans, he knew from long experience, were methodical, savage, deadly. No lost motion, no sky acrobatics. Just straight out-and-out flying. Not a maneuver that didn't bring a German closer to his prey, or take himself out of danger.

And yet—

The Germans seemed to have gone crazy. There

were more of them this morning than formerly. Twelve German crates—Fokkers—against six American planes. Six of the German crates were doing their stuff in mad maneuver. How they escaped collision Silent Orth couldn't guess. They brushed wing-tips in as mad an exhibition of stunting as Orth had ever seen.

A striped-tailed Fokker dived on one of the 7th's fledglings. It dived with its Spandaus raging. The American started to sideslip out of range, but before it could even make a move to do so, the German had performed a swift double-thrust, had jumped that crate, and was smashing bullets into the belly of a Spad

directly above. In doing so he laid himself open to attack from both sides, but so swift was his maneuver the two Spads didn't have time to attack.

Silent Orth whistled.

"That stuff looks swell," he muttered. "But what does it get them? They rely on speed to escape disaster. Stunting has no place in sky-fighting. In a few minutes our men will know what to expect of the Heinies, and then there'll be something!"

A GERMAN dived on Silent Orth. Orth, his mouth puckered in a soundless whistle, sideslipped enough to keep from being hit. He leveled off instantly, when the spray of lead had gone past his ears with a sound like that of a swarm of angry hornets, and swung into line behind the German who was zooming to get a second crack at the Spad through which his comrade had just sent a burst of lead—that had failed to kill, or even to hit, the American pilot.

Orth's eyes narrowed as he brought the German into his ring-sight. His eyes were still narrowed as his Vickers began their song of death.

Silent Orth, with a score and more of German planes to his credit, never missed when he had an enemy in line. He didn't miss now. The German jumped in his pit, turned and looked back down at Orth, who could see the crimson tide spurt from the German's mouth. Orth slipped away as the German's nose came around, his Fokker starting its long fall to the ground.

"What can Baron Holzmann be thinking of?" Orth asked himself. "Those stunting flyers haven't a chance, unless they happen to crash the Americans in their stunting, which doesn't seem to be especially good for the Germans themselves. What the devil is coming off, anyhow?"

The mad swirl of German crates continued. Half of the Germans were flying the usual sane, sure manner they had always used. They dropped methodically onto the tails of their enemies, fired their bursts of lead, slipped away, or followed their falling enemies down to guard against tricks. But the other, the stunting six, now reduced to five by the sure marksmanship of Silent Orth, continued their mad flying.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that those stunting five are scared to death—afraid to fly a sane flight, for fear they'll get smashed. They're trying to flop all over the sky to keep from getting hit—as a man runs zigzag for the same reason, with someone firing on him. Well, I'll break this up!"

Orth flew directly into the midst of the whirling crates. His eyes missed no single move. Beside him two Fokkers were zooming for the skies. He disregarded them. They couldn't turn and fire in time to do him any harm. A Fokker slanted, bullet-swift, across his nose, and he didn't even try to hit it, knowing such an attempt a waste of time; nor did he give the German a second thought. That fellow couldn't possibly get into line to blast Orth from the sky.

Orth's brows were narrowed in thought. It might have been noted, had anyone looked closely, that the hand on the stick was white-knuckled, that Orth's face was getting white—especially around the lips. "I wonder if—" he began. He cut the thought short off, refusing to put it into words, even to himself. "But they're soldiers, and have to take soldiers' chances."

That settled it. The eyes of Silent Orth took on a steely glint as he looked around him. The Americans, as usual, were taking care of themselves. One Spad was wobbling badly as its pilot fought to free a jam of his Vickers. Orth noted this, and that two Germans were moving to the attack.

Almost lazily Orth spun to his left, spiraling down to take the Germans off the tail of Lieutenant Bladen. The first German came into line—not entirely, for Orth couldn't see the pilot. But for a split second his motor section was in line, and Orth cut loose with a blistering hail of lead. His tracers ended at the Fokker's motor, and he knew that his lead was smashing into the Fokker's mechanism at a terrific rate. But his frown merely deepened when orange flames and black smoke burst from under the Fokker's motor housing, and the German crate started down. It was then that the German pilot did a strange thing. He stood up, his gauntleted hands held out before his face in a forbidding gesture, as though he bade the smoke and the flames to stay away from him. The German's mouth was open. He swayed in his pit, half standing as he was, and Orth apostrophized him across the abyss between.

"You might have a chance if you sideslipped her, you fool! Didn't anybody ever tell you that?"

Then Orth gasped as the German making no effort to fight his crate down the skies, simply jumped over the side to escape roasting, and started the long somersaulting plunge down the invisible ramps of the sky. Orth's hand now trembled on the stick. His thumbs on the trips seemed to be burning, as though he had a fever.

A dreadful suspicion began to grow in him. These Germans were not what they appeared to be. There

was something strange here, something awe-inspiring, something crazily heroic. But what?

Orth himself with almost no effort, had knocked down two of the stunting flyers. The one who had jumped might have tried for the ground, sideslipping to keep the fire away from his body. Of course, then, Orth would have followed him, blasting away to make sure that the pilot would not live to fly again tomorrow. That was war, in which no quarter was asked or given.

Orth's hands were trembling a little, and he cursed himself because this was so. A Fokker flashed over him, blasting away at his camel-back. The bullets ripped great tears in the fabric. Orth felt his Spad shudder with the leaden impact. But he scarcely looked around. His crate still responded, and that was enough. Orth glanced at the flashing Fokker which had just swung over his head.

ORTH watched the German circle wide—then go into a series of barrel-rolls, though no one was anywhere near him.

“He was expecting me to retaliate, and was zigzagging to throw me off,” thought Orth. “The crazy fool!”

He waited for the German to right himself. He studied the fellow. The German looked back at his own tail, then searched the sky above him, seeming surprised that nothing had happened to him.

It was then that a stunting crate brought blood. It dived on an American with its Spandaus blazing. This time, more by good luck than planning, the lead did not miss. It got Lieutenant Bladen, and got him through the chest. Orth saw the blood spurt, saw the Spad go into a series of wild spirals down the sky, as the German went over.

Even so, as Orth swept in to even the score, his hands were trembling so that he almost missed his burst. As it was, he ripped the German's shoulders to bloody shreds before the heart of the burst centered on the German's back. Then the German disappeared into his pit.

Orth checked them off on his fingers. He had downed three Germans. In less than five minutes he had “shot a tripe,” something that rarely occurred in any sky battle, something that usually was considered as almost beyond the bounds of possibility.

“And I could go right after the stunters,” Orth told himself, “this very minute, and get the rest of them before a minute was up.”

ORTH was getting the jitters. His victories had

been too easy. He'd been hit once, a blast through the camelback, more by luck than anything else.

The six staid and dignified flyers—the Germans who didn't stunt—were doing the usual. They were trying their best to get on the tails of their enemies. They did it under cover of the flashy attacks of the other six—now reduced to three by the sure, certain marksmanship of Silent Orth, whose eyes were cloudy as with pain.

A moment later he said: “Why should I let it get my goat? If the Germans are desperate enough to resort to such tactics, to allow their flyers to commit suicide, why should I squawk? It's no skin off my nose!”

Now two of the Fokkers converged on the nose of a Spad. The American pilot started in between them, his Vickers flaming. And then one of the staid-flying Heinies dropped on the Spad's tail, and the American never knew what had hit him. A single burst, perhaps no more than a score of bullets, and the American was finished.

A cry of fury burst from the lips of Silent Orth. He zoomed like a bullet, turned over, dived—dived straight at the nearer of the two crates. Orth saw the fellow in his ring-sight. At the same moment he let his Vickers yammer. There was no escape for anything on which Silent Orth had a bead.

The German went down like a shot bird.

And Orth's face was a white mask. He licked dry lips. He swore savagely to himself.

Then, to forget the suspicion which was gradually, surely, growing on him, he swung into the German who had just slain one of Orth's wingmates. Here was something he understood. Here was a veteran who knew how to fly—a cool, relentless fighter who neither gave nor asked quarter, whose Spandaus were deadly as death itself. Orth and the German swept into the circle whence the only escape was death.

This battle lasted for two minutes, eons of time in a battle in the skies. Orth kept grimly at his task. Once the German got so close to Orth that his bullets ripped and tore at the tail-surfaces of Orth's Spad. But Orth, looking back, holding his crate in its tight circle, merely estimated speed, time, and distance, and made sure that the German couldn't get close enough to send bullets into the Spad's pilot.

Then he looked to the front again, tightened his circle, and sought to overtake the German—who was both ahead of him and behind him.

He cut the circle until he was almost standing on his left wing.

Then, finally, he saw the German's tail-surfaces coming into his ring-sight. His thumbs went to his trips. His Vickers began to chatter. The tail-surfaces of the German began to moult bits of fabric. Inexorably, savagely, Orth kept at his task of destruction. His stream of bullets, like water from a hose, began to reach along the Fokker's camelback, toward the pilot.

"If he knows his stuff he'll make a break of some kind," thought Orth, "and I may get him or not, depending on the luck of the sky."

Closer, closer. Orth came toward his enemy. Now the Vickers lead which was passing through the Fokker's fuselage—and slanting out past the right side of the German—was almost close enough to bite into the flesh of the enemy.

It was then that the German took a desperate chance. He dropped his nose, dropped out of the circle, and Orth passed over the spot where he had been, missing the falling German with his lower wing-tips only by the grace of the high gods of war.

Orth grinned. There was fighting. There was airmanship!

And there had been no stunting in it—just orthodox fighting to the end. No need to look around for the German he had been fighting; he had that one's crate practically *hors de combat*. But he did look around, after a bit—and saw the German skilfully shaking two Spads off his tail, slanting down for some sort of landing.

Orth grinned.

"He was just too good for me. But these others—"

He looked around for them. Desperately, as before, the stunting crates were maneuvering, and Orth could sense a kind of terror in their pilots which he was beginning to understand.

"It has to end somehow," thought Orth, "but whoever heard of one flyer getting six of the enemy in one fight?"

His hands shook again. His lips worked convulsively, as he set himself to do the job he knew he had to do. There were four Spads left, proof that whatever the German trick was, it had a chance for success if something were not done—and now Orth must do that something. He set about it with that deadly efficiency which characterized him.

He lunged at one of the maneuvering crates. It was simple, easy. The German was diving on a Spad. Another German—the sure, plodding kind—was dropping onto the tail of that same Spad. The acrobatic German would shoot, then zoom. Orth,

with one eye on the Spad, planning to do his job, then get the second Fokker off that Spad's tail, lined up his crate, his thumbs on the trips, in order to catch the German as he zoomed—straight into Orth's line of fire.

AND the German did exactly that. Orth's Vickers were flaming, spearing lead out into space in a steady stream. The German flew directly into that stream—

Orth didn't look again to see what had happened. He knew what had happened the second the German's arms, both of them, shot skyward as though he had been struck over the heart by a sledgehammer.

Orth winged over, dived straight down between the Spad and the Fokker. His bullets ranged through the wings of the Fokker, as he set his nose to dive between friend and enemy.

The Fokker pilot looked up. His right hand lifted. Orth could see the man shrug his shoulders.

"I'm right," thought Orth, "and his trick failed. But such a monstrous thing to do, for the sake of getting enemy flyers!"

Orth's thought was influenced, next moment, by the flashing roar of that Fokker whose pilot had flung up his arms, by that Fokker itself, going past him in flames—with the arms of the pilot dangling over the side of the fuselage, the pilot's head lolling on the cockpit coaming, plaything of the slipstream and the backward pluming smoke and flames.

That sickness of Orth's became a leaden weight in the pit of his stomach.

And there still were two of the stunting crates, and their antics were madder than ever.

"They're scared out of their wits," thought Orth.

The quicker he did his job, the better, Orth decided.

He himself swung into a series of wild acrobatics—which, however, were performed with a purpose in mind, which were aiming at just one result.

HE LEVELED off, held steady for a moment. His ring-sight covered the whirling propeller of one of the Fokkers. His Vickers began spouting.

The jagged pieces of the German's prop became visible. The German was madly trying to cut his switch to keep his motor from vibrating out of its bed. The Fokker started down. The pilot looked back at Orth, terror on his face, and Orth waved negligently.

"Get away, dunce," that wave seemed to say. "You don't belong up here anyhow."

And then Orth, with calm precision, never wasting

a maneuver or a bullet, was sitting down on the tail of the last of the stunters. Again his target was the propeller, again a German fought to cut his switch as he started down.

And now the eyes of Silent Orth were bleak, savage.

He dived down into the midst of the fight, where four Americans fought against five veteran Germans. His Vickers were never still. His presence steadied his wingmates. In two minutes, the Germans were wildly cutting out of the fight, heading home—with exactly four crates, as had their enemies.

Orth and his wingmates, without looking at one another, started for home. The Germans were already slanting toward their own Staffel.

The four Spads, which had originally been six, dropped down to their own tarmac like tired birds.

They rolled to a stop. Four pilots crawled out. Three pilots gathered around Silent Orth. Their faces, too, were dead white. Orth leaned against his own fuselage.

“Well, Silent,” said Lieutenant Mickey Lane, “what’s the answer? That stunting stuff, for instance. And why did you shoot two of ’em down without killing them?”

“I got four of ’em,” said Orth dully, his voice shaking. “I simply couldn’t smash the others. Say what you like, maybe they had it coming. But never as much as Baron Holzmann, who must have been back of the stunt. I couldn’t do it, that’s all!”

Orth took a cigarette from his pocket. It was flattened out, and he rolled it between his palms to make it round again. Instead, he broke the cube, and tobacco spilled into the dust. Lane gave him a lighted cigarette. Orth, from force of habit, sucked a lungful of smoke, blew it forth. Smoke-rings were one of his accomplishments. He blew them without thinking. And even his wingmates noticed now that the smoke which speared from his mouth and nostrils was a blue blur. No smoke-rings—and then they knew he was deeply stirred about something: the spilled tobacco, the inability to blow smoke-rings, everything.

Major Dean, the new squadron commander, came striding across the tarmac. His brow was a frown of authority. His black eyes were flashing.

“Why the delay in making out combat reports, Orth?” he demanded.

Orth and his men shifted, assumed something that might have been called the attitude of attention.

“Because we couldn’t make out exactly what had happened this morning, sir. There were twelve German crates, and six went crazy.”

“If you’d done your duty and come to headquarters to make your reports the second you landed,” said Dean severely, “you’d know by this time. I’ve got the report from Wing. Baron Holzmann has tried a desperate trick to try and rub out this outfit. It consists of sending six young—”

Orth lifted his right hand. His face was a mask of bitterness.

“Let me finish it, sir,” he said. “Holzmann has picked out half a dozen fledgling volunteers, from some training school—kids who can stunt their heads off, but don’t yet know which end of a Spandau spouts the lead—and given them a chance to die for the Fatherland! They came into battle this morning, knowing they didn’t have a chance. Or maybe he told them they would have a chance—that he and his men would protect them. And what is the real plan?”

“The war may soon be over. These youngsters haven’t a chance of getting to the front if they follow routine, and wait until they are ready. So Holzmann deliberately sacrifices them, with the idea that while we’re puzzled by the stunt, his veterans will blast us down. It didn’t work because—”

And there Orth bowed his head. His whole body was shaking. He couldn’t seem to finish.

“Well, Orth,” snapped Dean. “I’m waiting! What is this, a dramatic class or something?”

Orth straightened as though he had been slugged under the chin. When he met the eyes of Major Dean, his own were so cold that Dean, involuntarily, took a backward step.

“No, sir,” said Orth quietly, “it isn’t a dramatic class. It’s a training school for martinets who ought to be in Blois. Yes, I said Blois—where they send the incompetents. Ground me if you like, court-martial me if you dare, but you’ll listen!”

“Holzmann sent half a dozen kids—I know they were kids by the way they behaved—into battle against us this morning. And I—I, damn it, whom everybody knows—and it isn’t boasting, either—can hold my own against Germany’s best, killed four of them! I murdered four youngsters who, but for me—and for Holzmann—had every right to survive the war! But I’m going to get Holzmann!”

DEAN licked his lips. In the tense words of Silent Orth he read something that stilled him, something beyond the understanding of a desk soldier who had been at the Front less than a week.

“Maybe you’re right, Orth,” he said softly, at

last. "Wing says those six young flyers were around eighteen years of age."

A thin cry burst from the lips of Silent Orth. His eyes seemed to recede into his head. Lines seemed to grow in his cheeks, as though he were visibly becoming an old man.

"And yet," he said to himself, deep down in his heart, "what else could I have done?"

He straightened, stared at Major Dean. "There's just one thing, sir," he said, "I wish to do before I make out my combat report. I want to take a crack at Baron Holzmann. He should be included in the report—or I shouldn't be in position to make out one."

"You mean a challenge? To personal combat?"

"No. Punishment. Justice. I don't intend he shall do that again. I don't mind how many babes in arms he sacrifices, as long as I don't have to act as his instrument of destruction in order to save my own men—"

Dean didn't answer. He merely shrugged, turned on his heel and moved across the tarmac to headquarters building. But his shrug and his going were answer enough.

Orth glanced at his men. "Beat it," he said. "I won't need you in this."

And there was something so inexorably final in his words that they didn't even ask him a question. On the way to their hutments, Lane said to the others:

"I'd hate to be in Holzmann's place."

ORTH supervised, personally, the servicing of his Spad. In his mind was no thought of note dropping, no thought of anything spectacular. He'd get to Holzmann, handle him, even if he had to drop on Holzmann's field and go after him with his automatic. It didn't occur to Orth that this might be spectacular.

He had just one idea in mind: Holzmann—standing on a field of battle, with unknowing young German pilots crashing to death against him, while Holzmann laughed. Unreal, fantastic, that picture, but it stuck in Orth's craw and would not be erased from memory.

An hour passed. The bullet holes in Orth's camelback hadn't been entirely pasted over, but he didn't wait. He crawled into his pit. His face now was calm, and he was more sure of himself—as any flyer living had to be if he were to have the slightest chance with a flyer like Holzmann.

Orth took off. He rose to seven thousand feet and dashed through the Archies at the front. He flew

through the area where, a short time before, he had sent the young Germans down to death. He looked down, and his heart turned over. Down there, dotting German soil, a number of German crates were still burning.

Then, the German drome. As he raced for his objective an Albatross smashed down on him. Orth stared at the German as the crate, missing with its first burst, flew past him, almost close enough to touch. Orth waved the German savagely away. The German's mouth hung open—but, strangely, he did not attack again, but flew on toward the Front, looking back now and again as though deeply puzzled.

Orth reached the German field without further encounters.

He circled it, looking down. German machine-guns on the ground, among the hangars, were blazing away at him, but he paid them no heed. The chance that he would be hit, circling and diving, zooming and slipping as he was, were one in a thousand. He gave the guns down there no thought. He studied the field instead, watching for German pilots to come off. None came.

Orth's lips tightened. He picked out the German headquarters office, dived on it with his flying wires shrilling his speed. His knees held his stick, his thumbs were on the trips—as he sped a burst of bullets into the roof of the building. He didn't wish to kill Holzmann inside, and had little fear that he would do so. He wanted the German outside, aloft, in the high places, where it would be man to man and he could give the German some of the hell into which Holzmann had sent the fledglings.

"Funny," thought Orth, "me fighting to avenge a half dozen German kids who were probably proud to die for the Fatherland!"

But Orth was fighting for himself, and his own peace of mind, rather than for the fallen German youngsters. If he didn't somehow balance the account, those half dozen young Germans would haunt him forever.

Again he circled over the building, spraying the roof with lead.

A big man appeared from the door, looking up. He was pulling on his gauntlets, adjusting his flying helmet. Orth circled low. The German disdained running for cover.

"Holzmann!" thought Orth. "He'd have to make a grandstand play like that, for the benefit of watching Germans!"

Holzmann waved negligently to Orth as he strode across the field, with Orth flashing past his head. His wave said: "Wait for me, American. I'm coming right up."

Orth kept on circling. He watched Holzmann climb into a Fokker. He dropped over the Fokker, studying its markings as best he could—and made out the insignia of Hugo Holzmann: an hourglass in black, with the tides of life running out. Orth gritted his teeth.

"The buzzard probably wouldn't understand, if he were told, what a man really feels about killing youngsters—though he was as responsible for it as I; more so!"

Holzmann scudded across the field, into the wind. His movements were sure, deliberate. There was the veteran, savage fighter, coming up to give battle, merely as part of the day's work.

The Fokker got off, stood on its tail to climb.

Orth shot up five thousand. Germans of all ranks were now massing on the field below, in front of the hangars, to watch this American get his just desserts.

"Holzmann," thought Orth, "has probably named the round I'll fall in. I wonder how many minutes, or seconds, he told them, it would take him to knock me down when we finally lock horns?"

Well, he would soon know!

Holzmann was now at five thousand, edging in toward Orth. Orth was set for battle—knew that Holzmann was. Then, in a sudden, wing-buckling turn, as though he planned to end it all at once, Holzmann dropped on Orth's tail, his guns blazing. Instantly fresh bits of fabric fluttered from the tail of Orth's Spad.

Orth's face was no longer white. There was a quiet smile on it. His heart sang. Here was a proper adversary, a man who could fight like a fiend. Again Holzmann fired, a stuttering burst. His lead went through Orth's camelback, close behind the pilot.

Orth settled more comfortably into his pit. Here was the sort of thing Orth loved: jousting with death when death had a chance to claim either man. Here was a man's way of fighting.

Again Holzmann fired. This time his bullets stitched bullet holes in Orth's right wing, those bullets going uncomfortably close to Orth's face.

Then, with a gurgling laugh in his throat—that laugh of the fighter who loves the give and take of blows, whether of lead or of fists—Orth went into action. The two flyers, evenly matched as two veterans could be, were a pinwheel of action in the sky.

Orth smashed a burst of lead through Holzmann's camelback, just a little too far back to get the pilot. Then Orth settled down. If he could come this close, he decided, he could make the kill, or at least had an even chance to make it. Holzmann was at his throat again, with a savage burst. Orth's shoulder went numb. His left leg went numb. Dazedly Orth looked down into the cockpit, to see streaks of blood on the floor of the pit.

With a savage series of acrobatics, not one that was not needed to gain his ends, Orth managed to sit on Holzmann's tail for the fraction of a second. His Vickers flamed. He scarcely knew how he forced his numbed hands and arms to obey him. But—they did, and—

Holzmann stiffened in his pit. Orth was very close. He saw crimson splotch the left shoulder of his enemy, where blood had jumped forth with the impact of Orth's bullets. Holzmann's face was grim, savage.

Again, for all of a minute, the two fought, maneuvered, for position—and Holzmann drew blood again, with a bullet in Orth's foot. Orth was beginning to grow weak from loss of blood, but never once did he forget what the outcome must be. If he lost there would be more German youngsters, as foils for the guns of the Germans.

A SAVAGE maelstrom of action, as veteran met veteran, guns against guns, Vickers against Spandaus. Pencils of tracer smoke across the sky. The humming of taut wires. The blistering hot lead. The reek of raw gasoline, of burning oil.

And then, at the last, the circle of death, with each riding the tail of the other, each trying to crawl up on the other for the *coup de grace*.

"When the circle breaks," thought Orth, "one of us must die!"

He set himself a grim task, to make his circle tighter than Holzmann's. He held his Spad with his left wing down, straight. There were times when the two flyers could look straight across at each other—over their heads! They did it, their faces grim, lacking in all expression, save the tense desire to slay. Orth cut his circle a little.

If he could cut across it—but the crate had not been built that could perform such a maneuver.

Just the same, if he did it, what could happen? The wings could drop off, leaving him aloft with nothing but a motor and a fuselage.

"The hell with it!" said Orth to himself, and cut

across the circle. He didn't hear the protesting of wires, the cracking of braces taking more strain than ever they were intended to. He didn't hear anything, save the crashing of his own Vickers. He didn't see anything except the wings of the Fokker, directly in his path, where he would cut it in two—with death for both pilots a certainty, if Holzmann couldn't somehow fly out of the trap.

Momentum had to do it. Orth saw the face of Holzmann turn red with blood. Then, when Orth expected the crash, and kept his eyes open, unafraid, to experience it all, the Fokker was gone.

He watched it go, left wing down, until that wing crashed into the German field, thousands of feet below. Germans went racing across the field to the wreckage. But Holzmann, Orth knew, would never emerge, for the Fokker had gone in under full power.

Orth, feeling somewhat better, headed for home.

HE LANDED. He managed to crawl from his pit. He leaned against his fuselage as his wingmates,

headed by Major Dean, came running. They saw that his clothing was streaked with blood, that he was, really, standing on one leg, that his left arm hung useless at his side. His cheeks were covered with sweat, but his eyes were clear.

Orth held up his good hand.

"I need a cigarette, first thing," he said.

Someone gave him one. It was noted that his hand did not tremble as he put the cigarette to his lips. Someone lighted it for him. And then he tilted back his head a little, after sucking a vast draught of smoke into his lungs, and expelled the smoke gratefully.

His wingmates noted that he blew three perfect smoke-rings—and they didn't need to ask if he had got Holzmann.

Dean put it this way: "Can you make out your combat report, now, Orth?"

Orth nodded, half grinned. Even a desk soldier like Major Dean learned things, if you gave him time enough!