



THE CLOUD CRACKER

by FREDERICK G. DAVIS

A phantom flew with the Fourteenth's patrols. Norton laughed when Fokkers lashed with fangs of steel at another Yank—for he played a double game to win doom wings.

S EVEN PATCHED SPADS of the Fourteenth Provisional Pursuit Squadron, A.E.F., droned high through the dawn mist which covered the shell-pitted mud of No Man's Land and shrouded the rising sun.

Seven dog-tired Yanks clamped clammy hands to their sticks and peered right and left with red-shot eyes. Somewhere behind the murk was the drone of other motors. Enemy ships. Drawing closer—closer Jerry crates looking for a scrap—and about to find it!

The Yank formation rushed on through the fog like phantoms.

Captain James Kinney, C.O. of the Fourteenth, was flying Point. He was peering steadily into the

higher mist. Up there he sensed a furtive, menacing movement. As he continued to fly he gently waggled his wings—the signal that enemy aircraft were sighted.

They came. Waspish shapes winging through the fog. Red planes blending through the grayness. Black crosses gleaming on their fuselages. Fokkers! Four—five—six—seven!

The six Yank pilots flying behind Kinney had seen the death-bringing Fokkers appear even as he signaled. The Spad formation did not waver. The echelons kept steady.

The fog was closing in. Nothing was visible but the fighting ships of the enemy. No heaven. No earth. Only the red-winged bringers of doom.

Seven Fokkers. Seven Spads.

Orders were to fly formation until signaled to break. The six Yank pilots waited tautly for their leader's signal. It was coming at any instant now. At any instant it was coming.

The Fokker formation was roaring straight ahead. Ships red, as though wet with the blood of fallen Allied flyers. Swinging through the murk in a grim dance of death. Waiting—waiting to strike.

And six weary Yanks still waited for the signal—waited for Death to lift his fleshless finger.

Suddenly the leader of the Fokkers spun around. The red ship, seemed to hang in the air. Spots of flickering red appeared behind its prop. The sound of the Spandau chattered through the murk. Slugs screamed past the American seven. Instantly the six other red planes whirled and came plunging in to the ruthless attack.

Captain James Kinney raised his hand. In it was a Very pistol. He jerked the trigger and a red ball of light cut through the fog. The signal!

Fight 'em!

FLYING just off Captain Kinney's right wing-tips was Lieutenant Tim Norton. Twenty-four, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, young and sensitive, but old in the ways of war, and toughened by the fires of conflict. A "mere kid," but a seasoned soldier of the sky. One month "up" and a veteran.

Tim Norton looked quickly around him. The other Spads suddenly fluttered out of formation, scattering like leaves before a terrific blast of wind. One and all they, whirled to meet the Fokker attack. Norton's long, slender fingers gripped the stick harder. His lips tightened back against his teeth.

"Come on, you Heinies! Come on, you Heinies! Come on!"

Raggedly the two flocks of planes roared at each other. The sky was full of their thunder, confused by a swirl of planes. Spads were beginning to single out Fokkers. The ships drew apart as they flung around into a crazy, wide circle. Machine-guns rattled, spurted, were silent and rattled again.

One of those snarling guns was pelting bullets straight at Tim Norton.

"Come on, you Heinie!"

Norton felt a sharp quiver pass through the fuselage of his plane as a swarm of bullets snapped over his head and tore into the tail of his Spad. He howled, slammed the Hisso full on, drove straight at the Fokker. He crouched low in the pit, eyes lined up

behind the sight-ring of his Vickers, and his thumb on the trips.

A spatter of slugs went out of his Vickers. A tracer stretched its breathy thread through the fog. It marked its path below the flashing body of the Fokker as the Jerry crate rolled away. Norton kicked around after him, plunging madly through the mist.

Almost instantly he was on the Fokker's tail. It swung through the sky beyond his prop, trying to escape. Norton peered at it intently, strainedly. He had executed no brilliant maneuver, but there was the Fokker in front of him, riding in front of his guns. Norton realized then that the Jerry in that crate must be new to the skies—a replacement—a young *leutnant* perhaps who had desperately attacked in his first sky fight and who now was fleeing in terror.

Norton ripped after the red crate madly. His thumbs were on his trips, but he did not fire. Long seconds passed before he could bring himself to open the machine-guns at the youngster in the enemy crate.

He had to do it. He had to do it. No Jerry would ever spare him if he had been tailed. It was a game of kill or be killed. He had to do it. And he did.

A short burst spurted from his guns. The tracers speared cleanly into the pit of the Fokker. Almost instantly it nosed down, and began to spin toward destruction in No Man's Land . . .

Norton circled swiftly above it, peering down, his face very solemn.

"Sorry, Heinie," he said softly into the thunder of his Hisso. "Sorry I had to do that."

THE sky was shaking with the thunder of the fighting planes. As Norton circled he caught a glimpse again of the plane—a red Fokker, burning—going down a flamer! Almost above it, now, a Spad was fluttering, dropping like a wounded, dying bird. The other combat planes had scattered away, though through the mist came the flicker of their guns, the drowning roar of their engines.

Two planes whipped through the sky close to Norton—a Fokker and a Spad, and the red ship was screaming crazily in an attack. The Fokker had a white silk streamer tied to its tail assembly—it was the ship of the enemy squadron leader.

The Yank it was chasing was trying desperately to escape it. The Spad flopped over recklessly, and whirled, striving for altitude. Swift and desperate as that move had been, the Fokker had been as fast. It came plunging at the Spad with Spandaus spitting, a deadly fiend mad for a kill.

Tim Norton knew that that Yank was outmatched. The Jerry pilot was an older hand at the game of sky-fighting. He was a past master of all tactics, and utterly merciless. The blood-red Fokker snarled with added savagery, for the Jerry pilot had quickly realized his advantage. As the Fokker snarled down, the Yank kicked rudder to escape.

The Yank flung his Spad around in a tight, hard bank. Desperately he tried to swing on the Fokker, but already it was above him again, already it was roaring full at the Yank with Spandaus spitting. Suddenly the Yank lurched backward in the pit. The German bullets had slapped past his head, raked across his instruments, missed him by a fraction of an inch.

Tim Norton was yelling, yelling unheard encouragement to the Yank. Suddenly he snapped around and went plunging through the sky with Hisso blasting at its limit. The Fokker was behind the Yank now, riding his tail!

Desperately the Yank was rocking his plane, swinging from left to right rudder recklessly, to escape the hurricane of bullets that tore at him. Norton saw the tracers strike past the Yank, and came roaring down out of the fog.

His Vickers spat. The slugs sang above the head of the Jerry pilot. The Jerry jerked around desperately, saw Norton howling down at him. Swift as light, the Fokker banked to meet him. Norton's Vickers opened up again, and the Spandaus answered at the same instant. Slugs screamed across the sky, tearing into the wings of both planes.

Norton plunged at the Fokker madly. The red ship again seemed to hang on its prop, and sprayed the air above with slugs.

Whipping past, Norton rolled over and, with wings vertical, poured lead into the wasp body. The Fokker lurched aside, jerked around, and plunged in again. The Vickers kept rattling, and the enemy pilot flew wildly to escape—but he could not.

A flash of flame streamed back from the punctured tank of the red plane. The pilot flung himself up in the pit, hands outstretched. The Fokker lurched over on its side, and fell swiftly into a spin. It went twisting downward like a falling torch. Its outlines disappeared into the thick mist below. Norton stared down at the crimson flickering until it grew faint, and disappeared.

The Yank in the other Spad was signaling to him. He waved back weakly. He looked around. The sputtering of machine-guns had stopped. Several Spads were circling above, and no Fokkers were in

sight. Norton slowly swung his Spad around and went to join them. The other Spad went ahead. From the mist beyond a fifth appeared.

Captain Kinney's ship leveled off, and signaled the others to follow. They fell into rough formation. Five Spads. Seven had flown off on dawn patrol, and five were returning. Two were lost—resting down in the mud of No Man's Land. Two flying Yanks had died in the pit.

The five peppered Spads followed Kinney back toward the base of the Fourteenth. The sun was scattering the fog, and a dim earth was visible. Zigzagging trenches, glistening barbed wire newly laid. Somewhere back there was the base of the Fourteenth.

Kinney found his bearings through the thinning fog, and skirted above the edge of a wood. The flat field lay beyond, misted over. Kinney stepped down to it gently, and his Spad rolled to a gummy stop at the far edge.

The C.O. stood beside his crate, watching his Yanks come downstairs. Wearily, lighting fags, they trundled in, crawled out of their pits, and moved toward the barracks like rheumatic old men. Five, and there had been seven.

Haggard-eyed, the C.O. strode to his tent, ducked inside, and made marks on the roster board. He had his bookkeeping to do, the C.O. had. He had his accounts to keep—accounts of life and death. And the balance was always written in red.

LIEUTENANT KIRBY ROSS stood on the field, staring at the scarred Spad near him. His eyes were blue and soft; his features were as finely turned as if a genius had chiseled the lines. Like the others, he was young; like the others, the fires of war had hardened him.

The Spad he stared at was his own. It was riddled with fresh bullet-holes. One wing was so perforated that its having stayed together was a miracle. Ross had almost met death up there in the fog. Another moment of fighting would have seen him flashing in flames into the oblivion of the mud below—if it had not been for the Yank who had jumped into his fight, and stayed the hand of Death.

Ross drew deeply on his tasteless cigarette, and ducked inside the tent. One of the five who had returned was stretched out on a cot, already deep in a stunned sleep. Two others were gulping down hot black coffee. The fourth was sitting, with eyes half closed, not even smoking. Toward that man Kirby Ross went.

He sat down opposite that pilot, smiling slightly, yet very serious.

"I want to say—much obliged, Norton. I guess you—you pulled me out of a tough spot."

Lieutenant Timothy Norton's eyes opened and fixed with a twinkle on Ross. He was young, even younger than Ross. Square, clean-cut face, black eyes of unfathomable depth. A grim, yet kindly expression about his mouth. And a manner which offered friendship to no man.

"Why, that's all right, Ross," Norton answered. "I don't suppose I should have butted in at all—but something made me do it."

"I don't know who the Jerry was that hopped me," Ross went on awkwardly, "but he certainly knew how. He would have got me sure, if you hadn't—helped me out."

"Have another cigarette," Norton offered casually.

As Ross lighted the smoke, he studied the man opposite him. Norton was strange. He'd been "up" longer than Ross, yet Ross scarcely knew him. Norton had kept to himself. None of the Yanks of the Fourteenth had succeeded in becoming friendly with him. Not that Norton was a snob; far from it. He had shown himself to be one of the finest of the squadron, as cordial as any; but he simply could not be penetrated. And the others, respecting him as a flyer and a gentleman, had not tried to poke into his affairs.

Norton was always there when a binge was thrown; he sang the songs, drank his share, did his part in the ground flying; but when the party was over, no man knew him better than before. He seemed to feel that he was his own affair. And there was about him a fineness, a warmth which attracted Kirby Ross. There was no other man in the squadron whom Ross would rather have made his friend; and no man less inclined to enter such a friendship.

ROSS drew deeply on his fag. "Funny, how the big scrap is changing things," he said, "and yet—I don't feel much different here than I did back in New York. It's all—all a big play. 'All the world's a stage, the men and women players'—and this proves it. The biggest dramatic production ever put on."

Norton's gaze stayed on Ross's face. "You interested in the theater?" he asked simply.

"Why, yes." Ross answered the question readily, hoping to draw Norton out, and glad of the chance to talk with him. "I played juveniles, in New York. I probably would never have been starred, but—I liked

it. It's funny. Have you ever had stage-fright? That awful, hot, choked-up feeling that comes just before you step out, just before your cue comes. I still get that feeling—every time I go up on patrol—every time I see a Jerry crate hitting it up in my direction."

Norton said, "You can't be blamed for that. I've never been on the stage, but I get it, too."

"Sure. We all do. It's just like that, this cockeyed war—just like a play. The curtain's up. The show's on. We get our cues, we play our parts. Only, not even the actors know how we're going to come out of it."

Norton dropped his smoke to the boards and crushed it out.

"Perhaps," he said.

On the field a motor was purring. Far away the big guns grumbled. Closer was the spiteful snapping of Chaucats. Norton listened.

Then he spoke quietly, impulsively.

"You're a good guy, Ross. I like you."

It was dank inside the tent; and the darkness seemed to Ross to bring him closer to Norton than ever before.

"It's funny—funny as hell—about dying," Norton said slowly. "I guess we're all afraid of it. Even the bravest man is afraid of death—if he weren't, the things he did wouldn't be brave. Thousands of men in this scrap, and every one of them wants to come through alive. And yet—dying—it probably won't be so bad."

The end of Norton's cigarette glowed slowly, and became dull again.

"Married, Ross?"

"No."

"I am. It'll be three years Christmas. There isn't any baby—I guess there won't be. That's just as well. Joan's a dear kid, Ross. Pretty as a dream. Talented—plays the violin marvelously. Intelligent. The best sport I ever knew. I guess you understand I'm crazy about her. Absolutely insane about her. And I guess—well—

"Her family and mine've known each other since before we were both born. They sort of had an idea from the start that Joanny and I would sometime get married. You've heard about such things arranged by families before Well, this time the parties concerned didn't kick. I loved Joan—and she said she loved me—and as soon as I got out of Dartmouth and got started in the plant, we were married. It's been two years of heaven for me.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this, Ross. I've kept quiet about it so far. I guess—I guess it really doesn't matter."

NORTON'S cigarette glowed and grew dull again. Kirby Ross sat quietly in the darkness, watching Norton's eyes when the glow grew bright again.

"I don't hold anything against Joan for what happened—about a year ago. She couldn't help it. She hasn't been different to me since then. I've told you she's the best sport I ever knew. She wouldn't kick. She's played the game—absolutely straight. And—damned if I don't love her all the more for it.

"About—about a year ago Joan met the foreman of the plant. Art Mason—fine, clean chap. Started with nothing, got himself an education, and worked himself up to the job just below mine. Personally, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for Art. He's like Joan, too—a square dealer, and a damn' good sport.

"You see, dad put me into the plant after I graduated. I didn't work for what I got. I was just put there, over the heads of half a dozen men who'd worked for their advancements. I didn't want to do it, but dad insisted—said he had great plans for me, and I mustn't upset 'em.

"There was Art Mason, just below me, you see. He'd been dreaming of holding my job some day, of being promoted to it. He's perfectly able to handle it, even better than I am. In fact he's at my desk now—supposedly until I come back. He—he couldn't get into the service—and his left hand is crippled. Hurt it in the plant.

"When I was put into my job, Art's dreams went glimmering; but he didn't kick. Every day and night for years he'd been slaving to get what I had handed to me—but he didn't kick. He went right on, giving his damndest to the job and playing the game. But if I wasn't there—if I didn't come back from this crazy war—he'd have what he deserves. You see?"

Norton was speaking very quietly. His voice was not bitter; it was tender. He had thought all this out—thought it out long ago. It was as though he were thinking to himself, thinking it all over again.

"Joan—Joan's loved Art ever since she first saw him," Tim Norton went on. "I know it. I've known it from the start. It's—just something that happened. Joan couldn't help it—Art couldn't help it—and I couldn't. It's been hell to think that Joan—Joan hasn't been mine since that day. And she hasn't been the mail's she loves. And that—that's wrong."

Kirby Ross stared through the flickering darkness into Norton's face.

"I'm not kicking. At least, I can be as decent about it as they've been. It's funny—damn' funny," Norton said.

He crushed his fag. His eyes half closed. His lips formed whispered words, as though in a gentle, sweet song.

*I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes 'round again next year,
And all the world is on parade—
I have a rendezvous with Death. . . .*

He shrugged, and rose, and went toward the flaps of the tent. He ducked out. Kirby Ross rose and followed, and slipped out onto the field. He felt strangely alone. . . .

The fog was drifting across the field, and in it Tim Norton was trudging away.

CHAPTER II DETAIL

IN THE TENT beside the C.O.'s, the Telephone Sergeant perched in front of his switchboard. His eyes were red and stinging with want of sleep. Through the phones clasped to his aching ears the voice of an adjutant at Divisional Headquarters was rasping. As he listened, the phone sarge scribbled wearily on a pad of green flimsy.

He tore off the sheet, slipped the phones off, and ducked inside operations tent.

"Ah-h-h!" he yawned. "Message just in from D.H.Q., sir."

Captain Kinney raised his haggard eyes. "Good Judas! Can't they let a man rest?"

"No, sir," said the phone sarge, and ducked out. Kinney blinked at the scrawled message.

Observation balloon reported directing artillery fire at troops moving up. Position about FSD4, R.A.3P. Strafe and report results.

Kinney delivered himself of a mighty sigh, and went outside. He barked a command at the hangar crew, and strode across the field toward the barracks tent. Tim Norton was striding toward it.

"Feel okay, Norton? Take a detail?"

"Sure," Norton said.

Kinney nodded, and strode inside the tent. The one flying shavetail was still immersed in deep slumber on the cot. One of the others, who had just soaked up two

cups of black coffee to keep awake, was snoring lustily. Kirby Ross and the other were rolling two cubic things on the floor.

“Put the bones up,” Kinney said. “You boys’ve got a sausage to stick.”

As they came toward him, he put the flimsy in Ross’s hand. Kinney had no need to refer to the code map to tell them where to go to look for the obs. He knew them all by heart.

“Little north of Bardelle, just in back of that deserted village. Look out for the damned thing; it may be a decoy. If it starts to go down when you get close to it, it’s probably okay. If it stays up, let it alone, or it’ll explode when you hit it, and you’ll never come back. Clever chaps, these Heinies.”

When Ross and the other pilot, Marson, went out onto the field, three Spads were already lined up, and Tim Norton was climbing into one of them. The crates had been hastily patched and reinforced, refueled and ready for another waltz with Jerry.

ROSS and Marson climbed into the pits of the other two Spads. They made contact, the props were pumped over. The motors blasted and warmed, then idled. Ross was leading this detail: he signaled the chocks to be dragged. As the wheels rolled free, he opened the gun.

The hissos smoothly lifted the three planes over the woods, into the clearing air. With the others winging close to him, Ross swung toward Bardelle. They climbed steadily, looking around. The visibility was decent now, and no other crates were in sight. The mounting sun glared behind them, and below lay the checkerboard of the earth, on which the Fates were moving the destinies of men and nations.

Ross swung closer to the enemy lines. Below lay the ruin of what had once been a peaceful French village. Its walls were crumbled, its fields upturned; it was deserted. To the southward now lay Bardelle; the enemy line stretched across the ragged hills below, and against the hazy blue of the sky beyond was a glistening black ball—the observation balloon.

As the three planes swung over the German lines, Archies began to crack. Their black smoke rolled out, their thunder rocked the air. The trio of Yanks began to zigzag to escape the flying shrapnel. Machine-guns began to rattle below, but they were out of range. Straight before Ross’s prop hung the observation balloon. It was being drawn down by its cable; in its basket, two observers were getting busy with Maxims.

The three fighting Yanks whirled in to attack. Ross put the balloon in his sight ring, and pushed back the trips of his Vickers. Norton and Marson followed instantly. The slugs screeched across the sky. The incendiary bullets mixed with the regular load tore their way through the filmy fabric of the bag. With a flash and a rumble, the big bubble broke.

The three Spads whirled around, motors roaring. The Archies barked furiously, the shrapnel rained. The bullets of the enemy machine-guns still reached for the Yanks.

The balloon went twisting down to destruction, flaming, smoking. In the swinging, dangling wicker basket one of the observers was crouching behind the machine-gun, spraying lead at the three Yanks even as Death reached for him. The other tumbled out of the basket as it swung, and went sprawling through the air with uniform aflame.

Kirby Ross kicked his Spad around swiftly. As the three planes of the Fourteenth roared away, the clapping of the Archies followed them. The shrapnel hissed close—but not close enough to do damage. Ross thundered on across the enemy line again, out into the sky above No Man’s Land, and looked back once.

The flaming balloon struck the ground, a writhing mass of flame. It lay a flaccid, smoldering heap.

Suddenly the Archies stopped their barking—very suddenly. Kirby Ross jerked around, suspecting that abrupt silence. Immediately he saw the cause for the sudden ceasing of the antiaircraft fire.

Three Fokkers had whirled into the sky from an airdrome farther behind the lines, and were roaring after them.

SWIFTLY Ross flung his Spad around in a vertical bank. Norton and Marson, seeing the red scavengers of the sky thundering in their direction, slapped around behind. At once the three Fokkers began to circle; and the three Yanks swung around opposite them.

The three Spads danced toward the sun, hoping to find some little protection in the glare. The Fokkers followed, relentlessly. Red-winged, green-lined on their tails, like poisonous, sting-carrying insects. Their red wings flashing, they roared after the three Yanks.

Suddenly the leading Fokker whirled, opened its Spandaus, and sprayed the sky with slugs. Ross ducked deeper into the pit instinctively as the bullets screeched past him. He flung his Spad up into a terrific zoom and then, with motor blasting, bore in to answer the burst.

Beside him in the sky the spattering of Vickers broke out. Ross did not glance aside. Through his sight-ring he peered at the leading Fokker. He kicked around in a steep bank and, with the world spinning crazily below his right wing, thrust back the trips to throw a flock of slugs at the red plane.

When the tracers left their foggy trail through the air, the Fokker was beyond. The sudden burst of fire was a signal for the six ships to open the battle in full fury. The Fokker came roaring around savagely, Spandaus spitting fire and steel. Ross rolled away, and felt the tremor of the Jerry's bullets go through the body of his plane.

The guns spattered through the frantic roaring of the motors. Ross crouched behind his crash-pad, jerking his head right and left as he rocked through the sky with the Fokker trying for his tail. Grimly he set to the controls, and kicked into a terrific zoom. Once today a Jerry had ridden his tail—and once was enough! This time he was going to keep it off!

He Immelmanned sharply, and saw the Fokker thundering up at him, sticking close. Ross' teeth bared in a tight, grim grin. The curtain was up! The play was on! He must play his part! And his part was to fight—to fight and live! To fight and live! And a good actor never fails!

One fleeting glimpse Ross caught of a Spad rolling wing over wing, toward the morass of No-Man's-Land—out of control. Marson! Marson had been hit! Smoke was already pouring back from the nacelle—in another instant the Spad would burst into flame! Marson has acted his last bit of business—said his last line—and exit!

A red-winged ship was frantically whipping around and striking back toward the German line. Its motor was choking, its wings were shaking. Marson had put in a good burst before his hand had dropped limp from the trips. The Jerry crate was straining every effort to get back of the lines with a conking motor and a cracked prop.

IN THAT fleeting instant, Ross also saw Norton's Spad whirling through the sky with the third Fokker, Vickers spitting and exhausts splashing fire.

Ross kicked the rudders right and spun in a vertical bank as the Fokker snapped around at him. A parade of slugs slashed through the air, and the smoke of a tracer stitched through Ross's wings. Ross rolled again, banked again, and sighted the blood-red ship through the ring of his Vickers!

As he whirled, the Fokker tore away, but Ross had him. Ross shouted—shouted himself on. With a deadly certainty he followed that red crate, and eased the trips of the Vickers forward. Flame sputtered behind his prop. A deadly hail rattled across the sky. A tracer streaked through the pit of that fleeing Fokker.

The Fokker lurched, the Jerry pilot threw himself back from the stick. A flash of flame swept backward, covering him. Ross suddenly stopped his wild laughter as he stared at that ship. The flame-enveloped Fokker began to twist down toward the pitted earth below. It plunged down, down, and struck. A fountain of sparks sprang up, and Death took another brave.

Kirby Ross swung around. Archie was beginning to bark again. The machine-guns were reaching for him, and he needed more altitude. As he went spiraling up, plunging through the black smoke of the anti-aircraft shells, he saw Norton's Spad whirling through the air out Over disputed territory. The third Fokker was whipping down at him, but Norton had it on his gunsights.

Ross waited for the burst, the clatter of bullets which would send the Fokker down with a dead man in the pit. But the Vickers did not open. In the pit, Tim Norton seemed to be fumbling with the trips and the pan. Ross realized instantly what had happened. Norton's gun had jammed!

And the Fokker swung down furiously, whirling to put Norton on the sights and throw the Yank into a flaming hell.

Kirby Ross saw that, and a savage snarl broke through his lips. It was a thing he never could have done—kill a man whose guns had jammed. A surge of hate broke through him, hatred for the enemy pilot who was bearing down on Norton for the final burst. On the instant Ross swung his Spad around and, though he was almost out of range, opened his Vickers and flung a burst of slugs madly at the Jerry.

The red plane swerved aside. The pilot peered around at Ross. He kicked into a bank and leveled, as though debating whether or not to attack Ross. Kirby Ross settled that question for him. With Hisso blasting full on, and crouched behind his sight-ring, he went plunging at the red ship.

The Fokker threw itself into a terrific zoom, flopped over into an Immelmann. Ross chose to disregard the advantage of altitude which that move gave the enemy pilot. He turned the nose of his Spad straight at the red belly of the Fokker, and went roaring up at it. He jammed the trips of his guns hard forward, and a rattle

of fire answered. He saw a tracer pierce the body of the Fokker—and still he kept the trips down.

“You dirty coward!”

Then he flung himself back in the pit, tearing away from the trips. The Fokker lurched into a dive, and came plunging down.

Ross kicked aside. The Fokker slashed through the air within a hundred feet of him, Spandaus clattering out slugs into the mud of No-Man’s-Land. In the agony of death the enemy pilot’s hand had cramped to his trips. Still firing his guns, the Fokker pilot went plunging down to doom.

ROSS saw the plane strike; saw it crumple into a shapeless heap; and drew back, covered with a cold sweat, numbed by exhaustion.

Again Archie began to bark furiously. The black clouds appeared in the trail of Ross’s ship, the shrapnel hissed dangerously close. Warily gunning his Hisso, Ross pushed his Spad toward the Allied line, signaling to Norton. Norton had banked around, and was drawing close.

Together they began driving for the home field. In a few moments the Archies abandoned the fight. Below now lay the torn land which belonged to no nation. They skimmed over the lines, glided low over the woods which flanked the base of the Fourteenth.

Ross’s peppered Spad wavered down to a landing first. Ross dragged himself out of the pit, and reached in his pocket for a cigarette. Tim Norton came driving in behind him, and crawled out of the pit with face blanched, lips tight. He stood staring at Ross, and he did not move.

Kirby Ross sighed. He turned and walked toward operations tent. Just outside Captain Kinney was standing.

“Balloon down,” Ross said.

“Good.”

“Three Fokkers came up after us. They got Marson, poor guy.”

“Damn this war to hell!” said the C.O.

Kirby Ross looked around again. Shoulders hunched, moving slowly, Tim Norton was going toward the billet tent.

KIRBY ROSS followed Norton after a moment. Just inside the flaps, he looked around. On a cot in the corner, Norton was squatting, drawing slowly on a cigarette. Norton slowly rose, and stood beside Ross.

“Thanks, Ross—thanks for getting that Jerry off my tail when you did.”

“That’s all right,” Ross answered. “The coward needed killing, and I gave it to him, that’s all.”

Norton smiled faintly.

“I can’t forget what you told me this morning, Norton,” Ross went on. “You’re the first man I ever knew who wanted to die. It kind of gets me, Norton. I guess a man’s living is his own business, but why, when I saw that dirty Jerry coming down on you like that, I couldn’t let him get you.”

“You’re a good guy, Ross,” Norton said quietly. “I like you. Have a cigarette?”

Ross slowly pulled a smoke out of Norton’s packet. As he lighted it, Norton turned, and strode out of the tent. Ross stood still. His mind was full of queer thoughts.

All up and down the Front were thousands of men praying God for another day of life, fearful every moment that the hand of Death would reach out unseen and touch them. Thousands of men, hoping plaintively to live it through. And there went Tim Norton, hoping that the end would come quickly. There went a man who had come to war seeking death.

Ross took his cigarette out of his mouth and threw! it away. It had gone out . . .

CHAPTER III SPECIAL ORDERS

THE SLANTING RAYS of the sun were shafting through the dawn mist when a motorcycle came popping down the road which led to the base of the Fourteenth Provisional Pursuit Squadron. The mud-caked messenger wrenched the machine onto the soggy field, let it kick itself into the slush, and wearily ducked through the flaps of operations tent.

Captain Kinney jerked up from a doze. The messenger thrust a crumpled paper at him. Kinney took it, stamped the messenger’s book. As he unfolded the despatch, the motorcycle barked into action again and went put-putting away down the road.

Kinney read the message wearily, and stared out through the flaps of the tent. It was another day. A few hours previous the dawn patrol had come back. Jerry had been aloft as usual, hunting for trouble. The fight this morning had been hard and swift; but only one of the new men, a replacement, was hurt, with a shattered shoulder. Another day—and there would be another and another.

Kinney barked at the orderly who passed outside, and the orderly stuck his head into the tent.

"Get Ross and Norton and Cummins in here right away," Kinney said.

"Aye, sir," said the orderly.

Kinney scowled at the message as he waited, and stared through the tent flaps again. Over everything hung a suggestion of the wet grayness of the dawn not yet gone. Behind the thin curtain of mist spread the panorama of war. The big guns were still booming out there; tanks were crawling, machine guns were spattering out death. Everywhere was death—everywhere.

THE flaps of the tent jerked aside. Ross came in first, followed by Norton and Cummins. Their eyes were red-rimmed and aching for need of sleep. Yet there was a bright expectancy in those eyes, and a kind of grim humor that kept the youth in their faces.

"Want us, Cap?" Ross asked.

"Read that," Kinney said, thrusting the despatch into Ross's hands.

The three read the typewritten words together.

From: The General Commanding, Divisional Headquarters, A.E.F.

To: Commanding Officer, Fourteenth Pursuit Squadron, Bardelle.

Subject: Information and orders.

Confidential—Destroy When Read

1. The Commanding Officer, Fourteenth Pursuit Squadron, is informed that immediate steps will be taken to prevent further enemy attacks of artillery along this sector, which have had an almost disastrous effect.

2. An attempt will be made to shell the important enemy concentrations responsible for these attacks.

3. Movements of infantry, now tinder way, of the highest importance, in which the air forces will assist, demand the utmost protection from further attacks of the enemy. Should these attacks continue, the new Allied movements will be prevented and the campaign will almost certainly meet with defeat.

4. The Commanding Officer, Fourteenth Pursuit Squadron, will chose from among his men one who can be relied upon to carry out instructions of the utmost importance, involving the gravest danger.

5. The man chosen will be sent to the Officer of the Wing at once for detailed instructions.

By Order: Major General Burton,
Commanding Xth Division.

H. J. Adams, Adjutant.

"You three," Kinney said wearily, "are the only men I have left who've had more than a few weeks flying at the front. One of you is going to handle this detail."

"I'll take it," Ross said.

"That's for me," said Cummins.

"Wait a minute, Cap," Norton said quietly. "I'll do the job myself."

"Headquarters mentions incidentally that the detail is dangerous," Kinney said slowly. "You know how H.Q. rates danger. It means that the man who takes the orders is almost certain not to come back. Cummins, that splinter in your arm is still bothering you, isn't it?"

"Not any more," Cummins lied.

"I've never asked a favor of you before, Cap," Tim Norton said quietly. "Cummins is a little shaky in that arm, and you need Ross here. Let me handle it."

Kinney sighed deeply. "All right, Norton. You're the man. Report to Wing right away—any way you can get there."

The three men turned away. Cummins went ambling across the field back toward barracks tent to snatch some greatly needed sleep. Norton paused outside to light a smoke, and Kirby Ross stopped beside him.

"Hope you come through all right, Norton. I haven't had a chance to say anything to you since—last night. I just want you to know that I appreciate it a hell of a lot—your telling me what you did. And I'll never breathe a word of it to anybody else—you understand that."

"Thanks, Ross," Norton said slowly, drawing on the fag. "Thanks a lot."

DOWN the mud trough which served as a road an ambulance came slipping and sloshing. The gears ground shrilly on second speed as it splashed through the puddles and climbed the ruts. It rolled onto the field of the Fourteenth, swerved around, jerked to a stop, and stood panting.

The rear doors swung open, and two shutter-bearers climbed out. Their uniforms were covered with ugly spots. They dragged the stretcher toward the barracks tent, and a moment later came out lugging it between them. On it lay a flyer, face pale as the mist, making a pretense at smoking a cigarette. This was the replacement whose shoulder had stopped a Jerry machine gun bullet during dawn patrol that morning; he was going back.

The two men slid the stretcher into the ambulance. Two others, inside, blue-tagged, did not look up. The weary bearers climbed in, yelled "Okay!" to the driver, and eased the doors shut.

The ambulance did not move.

Tim Norton strode around to the driver's seat. "Hey! Going back to Bardelle?"

The driver was slumped forward on the seat, fast asleep.

"Hey!"

The driver jerked up as if stung. It was a girl. Her face was flecked with mud, and her red-shot eyes were dull with fatigue. Her small and very dirty hands gripped the wheel tightly as she stared at Norton.

"If you're going back to Bardelle, I'm going with you. Okay?"

"Sure, Mr. Norton—sure! Climb right in!"

Norton pulled himself to the seat beside the little puddle-jumper. She was smiling now. Putting the car in low, she sent it crawling back toward the road. As it jounced she clamped her tiny hands to the wheel, and said things after every bump.

"Gosh, I can't help it!" she blurted. "It hurts me as much as it does them fellas back there whenever this damn thing jumps!"

Norton was looking at her strangely.

"I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I?"

"Sure, but I guess you don't remember me," she answered. "My name's Mid Riley. I used to work in the plant. Stitchin' department."

"Oh, sure," Norton said. "I remember."

"Gosh, I thought I was seein' things when you stepped up and hollered at me that way!" Mid Riley said with a laugh. All the while she plied her teeth at that overworked wad of gum.

HERE the rutted road led past the woods. The wheels churned, the muddy water splattered wide. Riley groaned and grunted with each jerk. Farther on, the road was open, and the sun had dried it a little; the going was smoother there.

"Gosh, yes, I thought I was seein' things, Mr. Norton. Remember the time when I ran the stitcher through my finger, back at the plant? You was right there, and you doctored it for me. It got well quick, too. Remember that?"

"You almost fainted, but you didn't, did you?"

"Gosh, no! Gosh, I was a shero for a week after that, on account of you takin' care of me like that. All the girls was jealous!"

Tim Norton suppressed a smile.

"Gosh, I read all about it, when you got married," Mid Riley went on, chewing more rapidly. "It sure was swell—such a big wedding. Just like in books. Gosh, it was fun, readin' about it. . . . Gee, nothin' like that

could ever happen to me—marrin' a man like you, I mean. You know what I mean, Mr. Norton?"

"You're a game little kid—coming over here like this," Norton answered.

"Oh, I got fellas—lots of 'em," Riley chewed on blithely. "Lee Joseph, he rushed me somethin' awful. He used to drive the truck. Gosh—truck-drivin'! I couldn't see that. Me—I guess I got big ideas."

Norton's grin grew a little uncontrollable.

"I like to dream about it—some nice-lookin' fella, with a lot of money, so I wouldn't have to go on stitchin' the rest of my life, like I would if I married Lee. Gosh, ain't it funny! Findin' you over here—and I never would 've talked to you like this, back home. Gosh, it's sure diff'rent—all this fightin', and dyin'. It—gosh!"

"I understand," said Norton.

He did understand.

The truck lurched on. Norton eased back, trying to snatch a moment of rest. Mid Riley kept her dirty little hands tight on the wheel, and fought the ambulance over the ruts and puddles. Her eyelids drooped, and she chewed that ever-lasting lump of gum more slowly now. . . .

Tim Norton suddenly jerked up. The truck was veering toward the edge of the road, into the gully which ran alongside. He saw Mid Riley slumping forward over the wheel, her hands loose and slipping. . . . The ambulance jounced, began to nose into the softer mud and grass. Tim Norton grabbed the wheel.

With a twist, he sent the ambulance crawling back into the road. The wheels churned, and the engine raced as he jammed on the gas and thrust it ahead. . . . At the same moment Mid Riley pulled up again, opened wide, horrified eyes, and gripped the wheel. . . .

"Gosh—it almost went off!"

"You need some sleep, young woman!" Tim Norton said.

"Gosh, I shouldn't 've let it do that. Mr. Norton, it would 've hurt them fellas awful if it'd gone into the gully there."

"Ease over," Norton said. "I'll take it in the rest of the way."

Mid Riley needed no second invitation. She slipped away from the wheel, and Norton took it. She sat staring at him as he drove the ambulance through another swampy section of road.

"I'm awful glad you was along," she said. "You saved me from a lot of trouble that time."

She sank back exhaustedly. Her eyes closed again. Her head lowered, touched Norton's shoulder, and

stayed there. In a moment she was sound asleep. Norton drove on, wearily; and her small head was on his shoulder.

WHEN the ambulance glided to a stop in front of the Cafe Noir, Puddlejumper Mid Riley was again at the wheel. Tim Norton climbed down.

"I'm sure much obliged to you, Mr. Norton."

"Glad to do it, Riley."

The ambulance ground on, toward the ramshackle structure on the other side of town above which a Red Cross flag was fluttering. Tim Norton looked around at the streets of the town. The walls were cracked, the roofs pierced, as a result of past shelling. Uniformed men were everywhere. Most of them clustered around the Cafe Noir.

Norton went in. It was no longer the gay center of town where couples paused to sip wine and nibble cakes. The round tables were pushed back, and in their stead were larger ones, littered with maps and communications. On the walls were many maps, covered with bright-headed pins, denoting troop positions and movements. The large sidewalk windows were plastered over with paper, and added to the feeble light which filtered through was the flickering glimmer of candles.

"Lieutenant Norton reporting to Colonel Davidson," Norton said to the orderly at the door.

The orderly pointed, and Norton went toward the rear of the cafe. At a desk in a secluded corner a white-haired man was sitting, frowning at a batch of despatches. He looked up with a scowl as Norton saluted.

"Lieutenant Norton, sir. Captain Kinney sent me to see you about the special orders received this morning."

"Sit down, Norton." Colonel Davidson leaned far back in his chair and regarded Norton keenly. "I've heard of you. You'll fill the bill, all right."

Davidson took a map from a rack, and unrolled it, and pointed a stubby forefinger at an area outlined in red.

"Listen carefully, Norton. Troops are moving up here. They are reinforcements sent into this salient. This black line is the enemy's front. Notice that the salient has grown deeper and deeper. The enemy's strength has been pressing here, trying to force through. At the same time, they have been working on information sent over by spies, and they are making desperate efforts to prevent our troops going into the

salient to repulse their attacks. That is the situation—a damned serious situation, Norton.

"If the enemy succeeds in advancing any further," Colonel Davidson went on, "they may close in around that salient. If they manage to do that, two things may happen. First, the troops already there will be cut off from communication and supplies—they will be entirely surrounded. Either they will all be destroyed, or they will be held prisoners there by enemy lines. Secondly, the cutting off of that salient will bring the enemy line closer into French territory than ever before. They may press on and seize Paris. If that happens—the war is over, Norton. And that must not happen!"

COLONEL DAVIDSON glowered viciously.

"We have met the greatest difficulty advancing troops to reinforce our line inside that salient. It is absolutely imperative that we strengthen that line. Naturally, we have been making every possible effort to do so. But because of the information supplied to the enemy by various spies who have eluded us, we are unable to do so. To send men up now would mean to butcher them wholesale. Any advance of reinforcements brings on artillery fire of the most devastating kind. Look here.

"We have brought up behind Bardelle a concentration of long range naval guns of heavy caliber. The purpose of those guns is to destroy the artillery concentrations of the enemy which are preventing the advance of our troops. We dare not bring up our artillery any closer, until it is assured that it will not be destroyed by the enemy. And it is absolutely necessary that those guns get down on the objective and destroy it.

"Your part, Norton, is to see that the advance of our artillery is covered from the air. You are going to cover it alone. We dare not send up more than one man, for to do so would be tantamount to informing the enemy of our operations. We already have information on the general location of the enemy guns, and we know that once we get ours forward, we can destroy the enemy concentration.

"Therefore, this afternoon, at ten minutes past three, you will take to the air. You will fly to a position north of Bardelle here, and prepare to remain there. Once you are up, the artillery carriages will be brought forward over these tracks. Your plane will be a two-seater, outfitted with wireless apparatus, so that your observer will be able to keep in touch with us. You will remain in the air, informing us as to the hits

our artillery make, until the enemy concentration is destroyed.

"After the concentration has been destroyed, this headquarters will order you to return—but not before then. If no orders are received to that effect, you are simply not to return.

"The two-seater and the wireless operator will be sent to your field at once. Ten minutes past three is the time set. Your watch agrees with mine?"

Norton set his wrist-watch so that it registered exactly with the Colonel's, and said, "Okay, sir."

Colonel Davidson spread his big hands flat on the map. "You realize how important this is, Norton. You also realize what this means to you. A few minutes after the first of our shells falls, the air is going to be full of Jerry crates. You'll be the eyes of our battery, and they'll all drive straight for you. The chances are a thousand to one that you'll never come back."

"I understand that," Norton said.

"You're prepared to take that chance?"

"Certainly," Norton said.

IN THE chill air above the base of the Fourteenth Pursuit Squadron a plane hummed. It was a two-seater Salmson, and it began to spiral down for a landing. It came roaring to the field, touched trucks to the gummy ground, and jerked to a stop beside the demountable hangars.

Out of the pit climbed a lean pilot with a tiny mustache under his nose. He stroked the few hairs caressingly as Captain Kinney ducked out of his tent and strode wearily toward him.

"Lieutenant Marshall, Captain Kinney. I've brought this ship here for Lieutenant Norton. Confidential orders from D.H.Q."

"Norton's not back yet," Kinney answered.

"From what I've heard of him," Marshall answered, smoothing his mustache, "he'll be here in time."

Down the road, even then, a staff car was churning its way. Its khaki color was buried deep between caked and dripping mud. The orderly at the wheel slammed the Cadillac over the ruts and holes, and twisted it to a stop at the corner of the field. Out of the front seat climbed Tim Norton.

He glanced at his watch. It was two forty-five. The take-off was due in twenty-five minutes.

A cold, slapping wind was whining down out of the scudded sky. The horizon was blurred. The flashes of big guns in the distance glowed through the mist as though it were night. The Salmson on the field was

dripping with dew. It was going to be an ugly flight in more ways than one.

Norton strode to the two-seater. Lieutenant Marshall introduced himself, and Norton gripped his hand.

"Wireless apparatus all okay?"

"Perfect."

"Motor checked?"

"Likewise perfect."

Norton pulled out a fag and lighted it. "This detail might turn out to be damn' tough on you, Marshall. I wish I were going alone."

"Don't worry about me, Norton," Marshall said, and petted his tiny mustache.

Twenty-five minutes. Norton and Marshall spent the first few of them drinking hot cups of strong black coffee. They came back to the ship together, not talking, and checked over their instruments. They looked up into the gray sky and tried to fathom its depths.

Twenty minutes.

Fifteen.

Ten.

LIEUTENANT Kirby Ross stood beside barracks tent, watching the two men standing beside the ship. He came forward, and placed a hand on Norton's shoulder.

"I wish the hell I was going with you, Norton. . . . I—I've kind of got that sort of a feeling."

"Thanks, Ross," said Norton slowly—and a tight little smile grew on his face.

He looked up in the sky again, and turned back to Ross.

"Just in case I don't come back, Ross, and you happen to see that little puddle-jumper called Riley—why, just tell her for me that some day I hope she gets what she wants. I guess she'll understand."

Five minutes.

LIEUTENANT Marshall climbed into the rear pit, tightened a gunner's belt around his waist, and swung the Lewises on their ring. Then he ducked down, clamped a pair of phones on his ears, threw a switch, and tapped at a key set on a little table before him.

Norton climbed into the fore pit. "Okay."

A mechanic had come forward. "Suck in!"

"Suck in!"

"Contact!"

"Contact!"

The prop whirled, the motor rushed into action. Norton read his instrument slowly. He looked back, received a signal from Marshall. His watch told him that he had just enough time to reach his position in the sky. He signaled again—the chocks to be pulled.

The Salmson's motor thundered; the wheels wiggled free. The heavy ship waddled down the field. Norton put an easy pressure on the stick, the big ship lifted. It sailed upward over the trees. Norton kept it climbing—turned its nose northward of Bardelle, and kept it climbing.

"A chance in a thousand, kept running through his head. "A chance in a thousand!"

He thought of many things. He thought of Joan, back home. Of Art Mason, in the factory. Of Mid Riley and her dreams. Of the belching fire below, and the rolling of thunder, and the rushing of smoke.

A chance in a thousand . . .

Tim Norton's lips were set tightly in a strained smile.

CHAPTER IV DEATH'S RENDEZVOUS

ROARING EIGHT THOUSAND FEET above No-Man's-Land, Tim Norton peered down at the chaos of the earth. Zigzag black lines—trenches. Marks like scratchings on dirty paper—barbed wire entanglements. Little spots of trash in the mud-crashed airplanes. The belching rumble of big guns, the screeching whine of unseen shells, the splashing of fire as the big slugs ripped open the earth.

War!

Gleaming streaks reaching far through the haze to the ragged horizon—railroad tracks. Black smoke pouring up as toy-like locomotives puffed northward. Behind them, queer-looking cars, the glistening black barrels of big artillery. The naval guns were moving, creeping forward to smash down the enemy's offensive. Those mammoth rifles Norton, in the Salmson, was going to direct.

Fifteen-inch guns, carrying their own crews, able to drop a shell twenty-odd miles, ready to tear the earth asunder with their mighty shells. Creeping up. Moving into position. Eyeless monsters, depending for sight on the eyes of the two lone men in the skies. Guns upon

which the lives of thousands of men, the very destiny of nations, were depending. Crawling closer to the front—closer.

Norton peered forward, through the whirl of his prop. Ahead lay enemy territory. Beyond were hidden terrible engines of destruction. More zig-zag trenches, other criss-crossings of barbed wire. Craters everywhere, filled with stinking water, reflecting the sun, glaring up like the dead eyes of a slaughtered world.

Somewhere ahead lay the concentration of enemy artillery which the big American naval guns were going to try to find. Norton was circling slowly, dropping lower—lower above German territory. Anti-aircraft guns began to crack open the air. The blobs of black smoke appeared suddenly, the rocking explosions burst out, the shrapnel hissed wide. Norton ignored the Archies, and turned back to Marshall.

Marshall was yelling at him. "Got a report! Guns in position! Take your position, and I'll signal for the first shot! Make it snappy!"

Norton leveled off, and began to push the Salmson closer to its objective. The Archies, grew more furious. The terrific handclaps of their explosions broke through even the roar of the motor. Here, behind the lines, was a tangle of railroad tracks, several glistening spurs leading off into nowhere. Something was camouflaged down there—something which the Jerries intended that no Yank eyes in the sky should see.

NORTON cut the gun a little and twisted back. "Tell 'em to begin firing!"

Marshall ducked down, pounded his key, clamped his phones tighter; then straightened again.

"First shell coming over in sixty seconds. One due every minute until direct hits made! For God's sake, look out for those crazy Archies!"

Norton nodded, turned back to the controls. He peered down at the enemy territory. He waited. Every second was an eternity. Norton's whole body was clammy, cramped. The cracking Archie shells seemed to split his brain open. The air was full of the stench of burned explosive. He waited, waited . . .

Then, far behind the Allied lines, a dull boom, louder than the others, sounded.

Wheeee! Eeeee!

The shell screamed high through the air, invisible to Norton and Marshall, but bringing with it a fresh, stark chill. Suddenly, several miles behind the German

lines, the shell struck. A red flower of flame burst instantaneously from that seed of destruction. A geyser of earth and smoke poured into the air. For a moment the shock of the explosion stunned the very air. Then the smoke began to flow away, disclosing a great crater in the ground, with twisted, snarled railroad tracks sticking out of it. In the rear pit of the Salmson, Marshall was frantically busy with his key. Norton gave him a glance, then peered back at the wounded earth below. The Archies began to clop all around, more furiously than before. Norton wiggled his rudders, weaving back and forth. He sat easily in the pit, waiting—still waiting.

Sixty long seconds passed. The air boiled with the concussions of the anti-aircraft shells, hissed with spraying schrapnel. Sixty long seconds.

Suddenly another eruption came up out of the ground. Another tower of flame flashed up, another bubble of smoke burst, another shock rocked the heavens. This second shell had fallen farther toward the East—closer to that spot where the camouflaged something lay. This second shell was still more than a mile short.

Marshall kept ducked down in his pit, pounding at his key. The seconds began to tick away again. The Archies kept up their terrific clatter. The smoke of the fifteen-inch shells hung to the ripped ground like a shroud.

Norton jerked up, peered over the side of the Salmson. His lips pressed hard together, his eyes narrowed. He swung slowly around, then turned, touched Marshall's shoulder, and pointed downward. Still tapping his key, Marshall jerked up and stared.

Two thousand feet above the ground the fog was still sticking. Up through the haze came a flashing body, red as blood. A Fokker! A Fokker, coming up to knock one Salmson out of the sky!

NORTON watched it keenly. The red plane of the enemy did not fly up at once to attack. It went spiraling into the air perhaps a mile distant, until it reached Norton's altitude; then it went climbing higher. It leveled off up there, whirled into a cloud-bank, and disappeared.

The Fokker was rushing closer behind the curtain of clouds, roaring in to an attack—Norton knew that. He knew, too, that the Salmson was no match for it in battle. The Salmson was heavier, less able to maneuver. Its only chance with the faster Fokker lay in the guns in the rear pit. Marshall, back there, was staring up at the hovering mass of white, and still pounding his key.

"Keep circling!" he yelled at Norton. "I'll take care of that baby!"

Poom! Wheeee-eeee!

Another shell screamed up into the air from the big guns behind the Allied line, and went tearing over into enemy territory. An instant later it slapped into the earth.

A ball of fire rolled up from there, smoke spewed, and the sky shook again. Through the haze, Norton saw something he had not seen before—the flashing of light on the barrels of big guns, and one of them lurched over into the mud, wrecked.

The third shell had hit the edge of the bull's-eye!

The cloud above split open, and the red wasp of the enemy came whirling down. It was less than a thousand feet higher, and it was roaring down on a steep power glide. The pilot's head was silhouetted against the white behind as he glared through the gun-sight.

Norton touched his gun-trips. The Vickers spattered, warmed. In the rear pit Marshall was tapping the key with one hand and reaching for the butts of his Lewises with the other. He turned suddenly, and thrust his shoulder against the butts. He swung the twin guns around, squinted up at the flashing Fokker.

The Lewises burst out in their sudden staccato voice. The whole Salmson trembled during the burst. The Fokker above suddenly rolled to the left, its Mercedes howling with rage. As it moved, the Lewises in the rear pit of the Salmson kept looking at it. Marshall flung another handful of hot slugs at it; but this time the tracers passed through empty air.

The Fokker plunged downward almost vertically, then pulled out with breath-taking suddenness, and whirled around. The maneuver had almost cost a Jerry pilot his life by reason of the loss of two wings; but it had put him forward of the Salmson, and below, out of range of Marshall Lewises. It wheeled, and came boring up viciously.

Instantly Norton kicked right rudder hard, and turned the Salmson on its side. Hanging in the rear pit like a monkey, Marshall swung the Lewises around on the scarf-ring. Once more there was a flicker of red on his gun-sights. Once more crimson fire flashed out of the barrel, and slugs screamed across the sky.

A great hole tore through one red wing of the Fokker. The impact of the bullet seemed to whirl the plane around. It writhed over on its side, and twisted around, with its nose pointing straight at the mud below. The rest of the ruptured wing thrashed loose as the Fokker whipped over and over.

Its spin became wilder. It lashed faster and faster downward through the air.

NORTON jerked the Salmson level again, peering down as the Fokker slapped into the mud of disputed territory below. He whirled around quickly.

The Archies had let up during the scrap, but now they were barking even more furiously than before. Everywhere in the sky black blots of smoke were appearing, and the cracking reports seemed constant. Norton clamped to his controls, and Marshall ducked again into the pit.

"Keep an eye out!" he yelled. "There'll be more of 'em up in a minute!"

Poo-oom! Wheee-eeee! Another dull report, another screech as a big slug arced over into enemy territory. Marshall jerked up out of the pit, peering. Norton spun around, staring down at the region of the concealed enemy artillery. Another flower of flame blossomed, another reverberation shook the earth and the heavens.

This shell had fallen farther away from the gun base than any of the others. "Hell!" Marshall screeched. "They've lost it!"

He ducked back into the pit and pounded the key furiously. Norton swiveled his head around like an owl's, searching.

Norton's orders were to keep that plane in the sky until the naval guns found their target. Something had gone wrong; they'd lost their elevation; finding it again would take precious minutes. The Archie shells were getting even thicker than before. Hell was pouring out of the sky. And Norton's orders were to stay up there until the target was hit and orders came to go back.

A chance in a thousand!

And far into the West Norton saw three red dots hovering—three more Fokkers rushing in to the kill!

The trio of red planes spread their wings straight toward the Salmson. Marshall, hearing the dull drone of their exhausts, jerked up again. Something invective passed his lips. Again, while rattling his key with one hand, he reached for the butts of the Lewises with the other.

This time Norton could not ignore the attack. It was far more than Marshall could handle alone—far more than both of them might be able to handle. Norton's thumbs once more touched the trips of his Vickers, once more warmed his guns. And he swung around to meet the attacking red three full on.

The Archies kept clapping their black blots into the sky, regardless now even of the German ships in

the air. The gunners below were working frantically. The Fokkers rushed closer, their Spandaus rattling, getting hot for the fight. Marshall left his key, clamped the butts of his Lewis tight against his shoulder, and squinted through the sight.

Brrrrt!

The three Fokkers opened their Spandaus at almost the same instant, and the slugs splattered through the sky all around the Salmson. Marshall's triggers went back, and the Lewises answered. Norton heard the beat of the guns in the rear pit, and held his plane steady; then, when the rattling ceased, he flung around in a vertical bank, and began to drive head on into the midst of the murderous three.

ONE of the Fokkers rolled slowly over on its side. A gush of flame broke out of its motor housing and swept back in the terrific wind, covering the pilot. Through the flashing sheet the upthrown arms of the Jerry pilot were flung toward the merciless sky. The Fokker went spinning down, flaming from boss to tail, as Norton slapped the Salmson closer.

Only two Fokkers now! Four guns against four! That was some better!

Steel snapped past Norton's head. He opened his Vickers, and rattled lead out at the red twins of death—a long burst. One of the Fokkers flung itself into a terrific zoom, and went bolting overhead. In the rear pit of the Salmson, Marshall crouched, keeping the sight on it. His Lewis guns sprayed out flame and slugs again, and he saw a hole rip through that Fokker's right wing.

The other Fokker dropped suddenly. Below, it whirled, and came boring straight up. The Spandaus rattled savagely, and Norton felt the shaking of his Salmson as the slugs hit. Abruptly the Lewis behind him went quiet. Its short burst ended sharply. Norton swung around, staring. Marshall was slumped back in the pit, pale as the cloud above, smiling faintly.

"You hit?" Norton screeched. "You hit?"

"I'm—okay!"

The Fokker above was sliding down on one wing. One arm of the pilot was dangling loosely overside. It twisted over, and its motor howled like a soul in mortal agony. It spun, and as the Salmson banked around, slashed past not fifty feet distant. The face of the Jerry pilot was turned upward to the sky, eyes staring, one arm still up-thrown as though supplicating mercy. Mercy! There was no mercy in these death-ridden skies!

Norton jerked back again. Marshall was making a feeble motion toward his Lewis. An ugly smear of red was discoloring his tunic over his left breast.

The effort was too much.

His arm dropped back weakly. He smiled again, feebly, and made a little gesture. A gesture that said: "So-long, buddy."

Poom! *Wheeeee!* Again the big guns behind the Bardelle section smashed out a shell. Again it screamed through the sky. Again it dropped into enemy territory, spewing up earth and flame and deafening noise. Norton stared at the tremendous, smoking crater in the ground. He saw again the glint of sunlight on the black barrels of the artillery below—saw men running wildly, and knew that the first direct hit had been scored!

Direct hit! At last—and too late!

NORTON jerked his eyes around at the Fokker which was whirling up from below. One was already in the sticky mud below; the other was tumbling down to destruction; the third was still roaring in the fight. It whipped around like mad, flanking Norton. Between the two planes gusted the black smoke of the Archies. And again the Fokker's Spandaus rattled.

Norton's thumbs were trembling on the trips of his Vickers. He felt the slashing of the German's slugs through the air around him. The red-winged bird of death whipped around again, closer. For a fleeting instant Norton had it on its sight, and jammed the trips back. His tracers stretched out, peppered through the red body just back of the pit. Almost a hit—almost!

Deliberately Norton whirled around at the Fokker, began to plunge toward it as it plunged toward him. Head on the two sped across the sky. Norton cut in his guns. The Fokker rocked aside swiftly, its Spandaus spitting. The cowling in front of Norton splintered. He held his trips down, chilled to the very center of his heart. The Fokker whipped back again—and then Tim Norton felt the sting of bullets biting into his body.

Norton sank back in the pit slowly.

He looked down at himself, at the bubbling red on his tunic. He brushed a hand weakly across his forehead.

"Ah-h-h!"

Norton was going down. He was going to crash. He saw the earth rise up before him, twist and spin. He reached for the controls, and with his last strength fought to right the Salmson. The big ship responded

to his tugs, but Norton did not know now that it responded. Sky, earth, everything, was filmed over with a deepening red. Deepening.

Norton knew he was crashing. He knew that this was the end. The thousandth chance had lost. The earth was rocking up at him.

Red over everything—deep, blood red. Through that scarlet haze, Norton saw things. Joan. Art Mason. Joan. Forever Joan. Then a red so deep that even her vision was blotted out.

A splitting crash sounded. A merciless wrench passed through Norton's body. Then silence—and ease—and blackness

The twisted wreck of the Salmson lay at the edge of a shallow stream. Toward it black-helmeted and gray-uniformed men came running. They waded into the water, dragged at the motionless forms in the pits of the ships. First they pulled out all that was left of Lieutenant Marshall, his tiny mustache roughened as it never had been in life. Next Tim Norton, his tunic torn and sticky.

Behind the gray-uniformed men came an officer. He stood, adjusting a monocle in his eye, staring down at the two figures. He spoke curtly in a guttural voice, and the soldiers brought out the identification tags of the two who had fallen from the sky. The officer leaned forward, peered at Marshall, and spread his hands. He gazed long at Tim Norton, and shrugged.

NOT much later a red Fokker whirled off an airdrome far behind the German lines. The ship circled swiftly, then leveled, and nosed out over the morass of No-Man's-Land.

As it reached the Allied lines, machine-guns began to pelt the sky. The Fokker sped on. The roar of its Mercedes reached the ears of men on the field of the Fourteenth Provisional Pursuit Squadron. The Jerry plane came howling straight toward it. And suddenly the furious spattering of the machine-guns stopped.

A flutter of white showed over the cowling of the German plane. It banked, and swept around several thousand feet above the base of the Fourteenth. As it did so the flash of white dashed out into the wind. The hand of the Jerry pilot had dropped a handkerchief. It bulged out into a tiny parachute as it floated down.

The black-crossed plane dashed back toward its own lines. This time no bullets followed it. And the little chute it had dropped came settling toward the field.

The men on the field watched solemnly. This grim

courtesy surely meant that one of the squadron had fallen behind the enemy's lines.

The tiny parachute dropped close to operations tent. Captain Kinney picked it up, eyes narrowed, lips compressed, face haggard. As he unfolded it, Kirby Ross came slowly toward him.

The short message on the paper was penned in English, stiffly, bluntly:

Shot down behind the German lines this afternoon, Lieutenants Alfred Marshall and Timothy Norton. With the sympathy of Baron Bergman.

Kirby Ross stood staring. Captain Kinney crushed the paper between his two fists. He strode back into his tent, took up his pen. Slowly, wearily, he wrote.

The bookkeeping of war must be done. The accounts of the living and the dead must be kept. The balance must always be written in red.

So it was that, soon after, General Headquarters declared :

Killed in Action—First Lieut. Timothy Norton, cited.

CHAPTER V SECRET MISSION

DAYS OF LIVING HELL, nights black as oblivion. The big guns growling eternally. The acrid stench of burned high explosive. Clammy, drifting fogs. Crawling forms in No-Man's-Land. Shapeless things dangling on the wire. Stagnant water in the craters, colored with men's blood. Floating moonshells, making ghosts of the living. Men sobbing and laughing—laughing in the face of the god of war.

Days and nights of it—endless days and nights. Then another dawn came.

The everlasting fog was drifting across the flying field. Five Spads were lined up, with dew running across their wings and shaking off their tails as their prop idled. Their noses were turned into the scudded sky. In a few moments another patrol would take off.

In the distance, on the rutted road, two spots of glaring light appeared. They came closer, moving with frantic rapidity. Like a big bug, with shining eyes, the staff car sloshed to the corner of the field.

Colonel Davidson, Officer of the Wing, slammed out of the slimy vehicle, and came striding through

the mist toward operations tent. He peered around the field, looking for the C.O. of the Fourteenth, but no C.O. was in evidence. He pushed his head inside the tent, and found it dark.

The Colonel scratched a match on the seat of his high-ranking pants and touched it to the wet wick of the candle on the table. The flickering light showed him the form of a man slumped across the cot opposite him. Colonel Davidson gripped Captain Kinney's shoulder and shook him.

"Get the hell away from here!" Kinney blurted, eyes still closed.

"This is Davidson, Kinney! Wake up! I'm here on damned important business. Wake up!"

Kinney dragged himself to a sitting position and blinked at his superior officer.

"Listen, Kinney. We've got a mighty important job to do. Call in the best man you've got. I want to talk to him."

"Another one!" Kinney snapped. "Good God, Davidson, is this squadron fighting this war single-handed?"

"Kinney, it's your own damn' fault. You've got the fightin'est flock of fighters along this Front. You've got the kind of men I need. Get one of 'em in here right now for important special detail. There's not a minute to waste."

Kinney's jaws stretched in an elaborate yawn. Jerking aside the tent flaps, he glared across the fog-drenched field. He yelled out a name, and a flyer approaching his Spad in the line-up stopped short. The pilot turned and came into the tent.

"Here's Kirby Ross," Kinney said. "He's the best man I've got. How do you want him murdered?"

"Cut that out, Kinney!" Davidson barked. "Listen to me, both of you!"

LIEUTENANT KIRBY ROSS, blinking sleepily, stifled a yawn and obeyed orders. He listened.

"For several days," Colonel Davidson said with a click, "the enemy has been massing for a terrific attack. Our observers have learned that much from this side. We know that preparations are under way for the strongest drive of the war—but that's all we know. Just where the massing is taking place, just where the enemy's blow will strike, we don't know definitely. We're sure of just one thing—that drive has got to be prevented. If it isn't—we'll be smashed.

"Until the past week I've been receiving important information from an agent of the American

Intelligence on the other side of the German lines. His last communication said that he was suspected, and he's been forced to lie quiet. No doubt he has the information we need, but he dare not pass it out. I've got to get that information regardless. We need it desperately. Ross, I'm giving you the job of getting it for us."

"Look here, Davidson," Kinney said bluntly, "my men are flyers, not spies."

"No ordinary Intelligence man could handle this," Davidson snapped back. "It calls for a flyer—a man willing to run the gravest risk. Listen to me, Ross, I want you to go up with the patrol this morning. You are to fake a crash—to deliberately fall behind the enemy's lines. You are to permit yourself to be taken prisoner and thrown into a prison camp—"

"Colonel, you're crazy!" Kinney blurted. "Of all the dirty work of the Intelligence to push off onto us! Asking Ross to rot in a filthy prison camp—!"

"Understand, Ross," Davidson said smartly, "these are not outright orders. It's a volunteer detail. You can refuse it if you wish. How about it?"

Kirby Ross shrugged. "Why not?"

"Hell!" snarled Kinney.

"Very good," Davidson purred. "You understand me so far, Ross. You are to fake a crash, and be taken prisoner. If you fall anywhere near Leboeuf you will be taken to the camp located back of the town.

"The Intelligence Agent I have spoken of, Number Thirty-three, frequently visits that camp. He is disguised as a chaplain and has been given special privileges—moved from camp to camp. If any man has the information we want, he has it. You've to get the dope from him and hold it.

"Tomorrow night, at precisely midnight, keep a sharp watch. I'll try to send a man across the lines. Working alone, on the ground, he'll make an attempt to reach the prison camp. If he's lucky, and gets to you, you'll be able to pass the information to him. He'll bring it back to me under cover of darkness. It's a long chance, but the only one—we've got to take it. Understand?"

Ross nodded.

"That's all!"

Kirby Ross turned and ducked out of the tent. The five Spads were still panting at the line. Three pilots were in the pits, waiting.

COLONEL DAVIDSON strode out of the tent, went slipping through the mud toward his staff car.

It churned and jounced, back toward the road. As it swayed through the ruts, another pair of gleaming headlamps flashed on its wet body. An ambulance was crawling closer to the field. It stopped behind the hangars, and the driver jumped down.

Mid Riley, formerly of the stitching department of a New England factory, now puddle-jumper extraordinary, came half-running across the field. She saw Kirby Ross standing by operations tent, and went toward him. Her face was muddier than before; her hands were black. She was still industriously chewing on her wad of gum.

"Say, Mister," she thrust at Ross, "did you—did you know a gentleman here by the name of Mr. Norton?"

Ross's eyebrows knitted together. "I did, sister."

"Is—is it true, what I heard?"

Ross nodded slowly.

"Gosh—gosh, that ain't right. A swell guy like Mr. Norton. It wasn't right he should get killed like that."

"Well, I guess—I guess he's satisfied," said Kirby Ross slowly. "Your name Riley? He told me something to tell you, just before he went up, that last time. He said he hoped that some day you'd get what you want—and he said you'd understand."

Mid Riley's big eyes were glistening. "Yeah—yeah, gosh, I sure do. Gee, he was a swell guy. Everybody was crazy about him. I was nuts about him, too. He didn't know it, but—gosh, he was kind of like a god to me. Oh—oh, hell!"

"It's a tough war, Riley," Ross said.

Captain Kinney shouldered out of the operations tent behind him.

"Come on, Ross."

They went together toward the line of planes, and Mid Riley turned. She went slowly back toward her ambulance, rubbing her hands roughly across her eyes, leaving a smudge across her cheek . . .

"Dirty work, Ross—damn' dirty," Captain Kinney said.

"Let's go," said Ross.

Kinney climbed into the center plane. Ross's was placed to fly tail to the left echelon. He legged in, peered over his dials. Every pilot turned to peer at Kinney. He raised a Very pistol from the pit, and a green ball of light pierced the hazy gloom.

Take-off!

The engines howled. Kinney's plane struggled across the sticky earth, and the four others began to quiver against their chocks. The props slapped a wet gale across the field. As soon as Kinney's plane tore

loose from the gummy earth, the inner pair of planes rushed forward, and swung up.

Kirby Ross was chilled to the marrow; his lungs were choked up, cramped. It was the same dread feeling that had filled him many times while waiting in the wings of a stage, waiting for the moment when he would step into the glare of the footlights. The curtain was up! His cue was given! He had his part to play.

Ross's hand clamped to the stick, gripped the throttle lever. His Spad dragged forward, roared, pulled loose. Then it smoothed, and he was soaring with the others, plunging through the clammy fog, driving out across the reeking swamp of No-Man's-Land.

A FLOCK of red planes came roaring out of the high mist from the direction of enemy territory. They came in formation, but as they approached the patrol of the Fourteenth they spread apart, preparing to attack. On their fuselages gleamed the deadly Black Cross. Fokkers. Seven of them. Seven Fokkers!

The quintet of tri-circled planes flew steadily on their patrol. Captain Kinney, at point, stared across the gray void at the threatening red crates. Kirby Ross stared all around, tried to penetrate the haze below. He did not know, but he felt that they were above enemy territory. If so, he was perfectly placed to begin his fake fall.

The Fokker squadron began to dance around in a wide circle. As that move began, Kinney gently waggled his wings, and at the same time began to bring his ships into the same loose maneuver. For a few moments the twelve planes roared on, the motors discording, throbbing.

Suddenly the first machine-gun rattled, and the gray Spads danced away to meet the attack.

A Fokker had flung the bullets at the tri-circled Spads. It came now, roaring across the sky, leading the other blood-red wasps. The spattering of Vickers began to mix with the snarl of the Spandaus.

Kinney pulled his Spads into a terrific zoom, and rolled around. He spun to find a Fokker whirling to meet him. An instant passed when the red sides of the Fokker flashed across his Vickers sights. Kinney's guns snarled out their wrath. The cry of destruction was short, merciless. Kinney's tracers stitched through the red-winged vulture, through the man in the pit.

The Fokker began to tumble—to drive down, with motor blasting full on, to destruction in the mud that waited for it below the fog.

Ross whirled around desperately. A Fokker was swinging toward him. It was driving in toward his tail. Ross rocked his plane desperately as he heard the Spandaus behind him spatter out slugs. He felt something slap against the crash-pad behind his head. He zoomed desperately, swiveling his head around, watching the Fokker follow him.

The sky was roaring with the voices of the motors and echoing the smashing rattle of the machine-guns.

Ross pushed out of his zoom, and flung his Spad around in a reckless dive. The move was too sudden and too swift for the Fokker to follow as closely as it had before. He whirled, and jammed the trips of his Vickers forward. His bullets spattered through the tail of the Fokker. They whirled around together madly.

Again Ross flung his Spad into a crazy zoom. This time the Fokker stuck closer. When Ross rocked around at the top of the zoom, and came slapping downward, the Fokker followed like a red shadow. Its Spandaus opened again; the slugs spattered into his crash-pad, poomed through his wings, rattled past his nacelle. Ross rolled over, and thrust the Spad into a swift dive.

Now was his chance!

Ross's mind worked like lightning. Deliberately he let the Spad whirl into a spin. He let himself sway loosely in the pit, one arm dangling over the cowling. The Fokker roared after him. Another burst from the Spandaus crashed through the fuselage of his plane, just behind the pit. Ross did not move—and the Spandaus went silent.

The Spad went howling downward. The Jerry pilot, peering over his cowling, watched it plunge, then banked around, and turned to find other prey for his guns. Kirby Ross knew that the Fokker was spinning away, even though he did not peer up.

Downward the Spad kept plunging, until, sure that he was safely covered by the fog, Ross reached for the stick again.

THE haze-covered chaos of the shell-pitted land below was whirling up at him. The ship's terrific speed was almost destruction in itself. Ross began to fight with the stick, to pull the Spad out of the spin. He thrust it forward, kicked the rudders hard in the opposite direction, and waited. The world kept spinning, whirling, twisting.

The writhing of the Spad grew less violent. The nose of the plane began to lift. The ship was coming out! Slowly it was swinging level again. The ground was still

streaking up, the earth was still rocking crazily. Ross saw the shell-pits more clearly, the confusion of a shell-torn wood. Beyond were gray, unpainted buildings.

Ross was dropping behind the German lines. He let the Spad go down. Swiftly the earth rose to meet him. A grassy field loomed in front of the prop. Ross pulled the ship a little out of its steep dive, but still let it smash downward.

The trucks slashed down to the soft earth, and struck. The prop bit into the ground, splintered. The motor screamed like a woman, in terror and pain. Almost at once that horrible screech began to die away, and the Spad slithered to a stop.

Ross stayed in the pit, stunned, weak. He stayed there and waited.

From somewhere beyond came confused sounds. Ross peered around, and through a blur saw a group of gray-coated figures running toward his cracked-up plane. Instinctively he dragged himself up, began to pull himself over the cowling. He tumbled out, came dizzily to his feet, and tried to begin to run.

“Halt!”

The command was in a thick, throaty voice. Ross jerked around. He saw rifles leveled at him, helmeted heads pressed low behind the sights. The other Jerries were still running toward him. Ross gave up the idea of running. His orders were to allow himself to be captured—and here was capture! Slowly he thrust his hands above his head.

Another man came running from behind the German soldiers—a man wearing the uniform of a German officer.

In his hand he held a gigantic automatic.

Ross was not faking the confusion—the shock which held him swaying to the spot. The impact of the crash had dazed him. He knew only vaguely what had happened, but he knew that it was right. At the same time, he was full of that choking, cramped sensation in his lungs. He had never before been so close to the foe.

The German lieutenant came to a stop, peering at him with a tight smirk on his lips.

“Ah, my friend! We were scarcely expecting a visitor, but we are very pleased to greet you!”

“The hell with you,” said Ross gaspingly.

“You have no weapon on you, Lieutenant?”

“Go to hell, I told you!”

The officer stepped closer, and patted Ross’s uniform. He found no gun concealed on Ross. Ross watched him, and began to smile wryly. The mist was clearing out of his brain now.

The German officer stepped back. He spoke swiftly, gutturally, and three of the gray-uniformed soldiers advanced toward Ross. Their guns looked unwaveringly at him.

“Be so good as to march ahead of my men,” the lieutenant said in stilted English. “Quickly, now—march!”

Ross began to trudge away. The three soldiers followed, close behind him. As he moved, Ross peered around him. Ahead lay a cluster of weather-grayed buildings. Beyond that there was nothing but fog. A muddy road, a short distance away, stretched off into the wet grayness.

ROSS went down the road swayingly. It was cut and rutted by the tires of heavy trucks. The gray buildings, as he passed them, looked gaunt and forbidding. Other Jerries were stationed around them, guarding their doors. As he passed, they eyed him leeringly, and made guttural remarks to each other. Ross’s hand clenched. He ached to fasten those hands around the thick necks of those men and choke those unknown insults down their throats . . .

“Halt!”

In front of a square, bleak building, Ross halted. The Jerries behind him gestured him toward the door of it. The officer reached out a hand and shoved him through. Ross passed through another doorway, into an inner room.

There, at a big desk littered with maps and documents, sat a brush-headed *ober-leutnant*. He stared up at Ross with washy blue eyes. The officer who had followed Ross spoke swiftly to him in thick, blurring syllables.

“Your name?” asked the *ober-leutnant*.

“Lieutenant Kirby Ross.”

“Your squadron?”

“The Fourteenth.”

“Lieutenant Ross, of the Fourteenth Squadron, you will be kept our prisoner.”

Ross shrugged.

The *ober-leutnant* growled a command to his *unter-offizier*. Ross was turned around, pushed out of the door again. Again, once he was outside the shack, he was covered by the guns of the Jerries. Again they began to move down the road. Mud. The sloshing of boots. Chill fog. The guns peering at Ross’s back chillingly.

Beside the road a queer structure came into view. Poles had been fixed in the ground and strung high with meshing and barbed wire. Inside the enclosure were men in American, British, French uniforms. They

peered out through the wire like trapped animals. In the center of the enclosure was a small hut, around which others were sauntering. Prisoners. All of them prisoners of war.

The *unter-offizier* barked a command. A guard at the gate of the enclosure turned, drew out a key. The big lock snapped open, and the door was flung back. Ross was prodded with the guns.

He stepped forward, went through that doorway. Instantly the lock clicked again behind him.

Ross looked around at the walls of barbed wire. Walls of it. The horrible barbs covered the whole horizon, streaked across the grayness of the sky. Barbed wire, and fog beyond.

There, on one barb, hung a red-crueted tatter of cloth. Perhaps a prisoner had flung himself against the wire there, insane, striving to escape. That was not hard to picture. Higher, at the upper edge of the wire, a greenish tarnish glistened. Poison! Everywhere the barbed wire blotted out the world.

None of the men came close to Ross. They stared at him vacantly. They moved around listlessly. Men, haggard-faced, weakened. Men living, yet dead. Prisoners of war.

And Ross was a prisoner with them. Locked in among living corpses. Breathing unendurable stench. Looking out at an unreachable world. Barbed wire on every side. Prisoners of war!

CHAPTER VI BEHIND THE LINES

NIGHT. BLACKNESS PRESSING close to the pulsing earth. The everlasting grumble of the big guns, far and hushed. Star-shells floating high, shedding ghostly radiance over shell-pits and drenched trenches, making those horrible things on the wire seem alive. The drone of planes, the stutter of machine-guns. Brief silences. Menacing darkness prayed for by men who prayed again for light.

Behind Leboeuf, back of the German lines, one rambling structure lay apart. Its windows were closely covered so that the lights inside would not betray its position to Allied aircraft. Above it, a flag of mercy floating unseen. Silence, shaking slightly with the far-off tremors of war.

Rows of cots. Men lying under the rumbled sheets, some still, some writhing in pain. Nurses moving quietly from one to another, consulting charts, feeling pulses, taking temperatures. Doctors peering at the wounded, passing on to others, too busy, too pressed to give any the attention needed. In here, the human debris of the conflict. In one corner was a cot curtained off from the others. On the cot in there, a man whose face had none of the characteristics' of the German. A young, black-eyed Yank, his chest bound tightly by many bandages. He lay listening, listening to the footfalls, the groans which sounded beyond the curtain. He had lain there for many days, mending.

The sheet curtain rustled aside, and a nurse looked in. She studied the pale face, the lax expression of this Yank.

"How are you feeling this evening, *Herr Norton*?"

The Yank opened his eyes slowly. His eyes shifted painfully toward the nurse. "Better, thanks."

The curtain rustled down again. The footfalls of the nurse went away. The Yank's weak manner seemed to pass. His eyes grew bright, his expression tense. He peered around hint, gazed at the covered window beside his cot. Again he lay listening, listening. The night crept on. Tim Norton slept. He slept restlessly, awakening often to listen. Always the careful footfalls beyond, always the rumble of the big guns in the distance. The night wore away. Norton slept again, and when he awakened, the increased bustle beyond the curtain told him that another dawn had come.

The nurse looked in again, smiling. "How do you feel today, *Herr Norton*?"

"A little better, thanks." To Norton it seemed that he had been stretched out here, in the enemy's hospital, for centuries. The day when he had crashed behind these lines seemed ages old. He remembered it dimly, the moment when he had opened his eyes to stare at the bare walls, the other cots, the bandages which bound him.

They told him that he had been thought dead after the crash; that he might have been buried alive if an alert young doctor, fresh from the university, had not seen him and ordered him into the hospital. Tim Norton had smiled grimly, and extended his thanks to that over-enthusiastic young medic who knew no difference between a dying countryman and a dying foe.

During the day Norton lay listening, as he had listened for many days. When they brought him gruel, he sipped it slowly, peering all around. The day passed

slowly, even more slowly than the previous endless ones. The evening came reluctantly. The darkness at last, and again that hush, that tension. . . .

The curtains pulled aside.

“You are feeling well tonight, *Herr* Norton?”

“A little better, thanks.”

The sheet dropped again, and the footfalls went away. Norton knew that the nurse would not look at him again until morning. He lay listening. The silence throbbed. Inside the hospital it was very quiet.

SLOWLY Norton pulled the thin blanket off his stiff body. He swung his feet down. A dizziness swept over him, but he shook it out of his head. He braced himself, and stood upright. He was weak; it was an effort. Norton kept listening, listening.

Over the window a ragged piece of canvas was hanging. He thrust his fingers below the frayed edge of it, ran them over the cool panes of the window. Upward he reached until he felt the catch. Slowly he loosened it, and let it hang. He crouched, peering through the narrow crack, out into the darkness.

Every movement he made was an effort. His whole body throbbed. The wounds in his side itched torturously. He waited, gathering strength, peering out through the crack. Outside sounded the creak of leather boots. A black form patrolcd past. The guard.

A moment later the guard was gone. Norton pushed gently at the frame of the window. It swung out. Quickly he leaned forward, peering into the night. Pulsing silence. Furtive movements, but none of them close. Making a desperate effort, Norton swung over the window-sill, and dropped to the ground outside.

The damp chill struck through the light cotton pajamas he was wearing. Quickly he turned, pushed the window back into place. Quivering with the sudden cold, he began to move swiftly along the wall of the hospital, ducking low to avoid the chinks of light from the windows. At the corner he paused, then rushed on through the darkness like a ghost.

He crept past the rear of the gray buildings which loomed through the darkness. Suddenly he paused, stock-still, listening. He heard voices speaking in German. Footfalls were coming toward him. Norton whirled, dashed aside.

The men passed on. Norton watched their black shapes disappear into the darkness. He turned, crept on. The next shack loomed out of the gloom. As Norton passed behind it, his foot struck a heap of something on the ground.

He stooped, groping, feeling of it. A small pile of wood, presumably for a stove inside one of the shacks. Norton seized a piece thick as his wrist, gripped it, and pressed on.

Again voices. Again movements in the blackness. Norton once more pressed against the wall of the building. Two Jerries passed close, going in the same direction the other had taken. They paused, and one of them turned back. The other started on again.

Norton’s lips formed into a hard grin. Gripping the stick of wood harder, he began to creep after that man.

In a moment he was only a few feet away.

“Sorry, Heinie, but I don’t want to hit you from the back. Turn around!”

The German soldier jerked out an exclamation, whirled. Instantly Norton’s stick hissed through the air and cracked sharply against the side of the German’s head. With a grunt, the man went down, and lay loosely at Norton’s feet.

Norton’s fingers fastened in the baggy uniform, and he backed away, dragging the Jerry after him. The effort drained the strength from him amazingly. His days on the hospital cot had made him as weak as a child. Still he worked desperately, and dragged the man into the deeper shadow behind the nearest shack.

He worked quickly. In a few moments the German’s uniform was off, and Norton was getting into it. He was dizzy from the effort he had made, but he did not stop. Completely in the uniform, he stood listening again.

“Sorry, Heinie,” he said to the unconscious man on the ground, “but I’ve got to get back!”

He crept forward through the darkness again. At the spot where he had met the Jerry he stooped and searched the ground with his fingers. His hands struck the German’s dropped rifle; he snatched it up. Then, hurrying, through the night more swiftly than before, he moved along behind the line of black buildings.

A guard passed close. Norton jerked to a stop, pressing deep into a shadow. As he peered, the guard passed on, slowly.

Somewhere, across the road, was the Front. Norton was going to make a try for it—going to try to get back across.

INSIDE the prison camp was not a ray of light. The darkness seemed to make the barbed-wire walls press in even closer. Over everything lay that pulsing silence of the war-ridden night. Kirby Ross of the Fourteenth Provisional Pursuit Squadron, A.E.F., paced slowly

back and forth across the muddy yard. Inside the black hut men lay sprawled on the floor, asleep; but in Ross's mind was no thought of rest. He kept pacing, pacing.

Footfalls sounded through the darkness, the sucking of men's boots through the ooze. A flashing of light came down the road. Four gray-uniformed soldiers moved in the light, and between them a man in American uniform. They stopped outside the gate of the prison camp.

The lock clicked, the gate opened. The American came inside. The gate closed, the lock clicked again. The flashing light went on as the guards marched back from the direction they had come.

Ross stood staring. For a brief instant he had glimpsed the American, the rank markings on the uniform. At last! At last his man had come!

The newcomer went to the doorway of the hut, lowered himself to the ground, and sat there. For a long time Ross did not move. Around the walls of the enclosure the tramp of a guard's boots sounded continually. Now and then a light flashed into the yard from the hand of the guard. Ross waited.

Finally he moved through the darkness. He lowered himself beside the Chaplain, and for another moment did not speak. Then he said in a whisper barely audible:

"Thirty-three?"

For a long minute no answer came. Then: "Who are you?"

"Ross, Fourteenth Pursuit Squadron. Secret detail ordered by Colonel Davidson. I'm after information about—"

"Wait!"

The guard marched past again. This time he did not flash his light. Slowly he passed around behind the hut.

"—About a massing of German troops. Man coming across at midnight to try to get the dope from me. Davidson says—utmost importance."

Thirty-three bared the luminous dial of his wrist watch. "Eleven-thirty now."

Silence again. The footfalls of the guard. Vague movement in the blackness.

"Eve got what you want," Thirty-three whispered slowly. "Drive will be made direct on Bardelle—tomorrow. Troops massing now, behind Leboeuf. Time about ten o'clock in the morning. For God's sake get that information back if it's humanly possible!"

Kirby Ross slowly rose. A flashing light was coming around from behind the camp, probing through the wire walls. Quickly he stepped inside the hut to escape

the beam. It passed on. Then again blackness, and that beating silence.

ROSS waited tautly. He realized fully the import of the information he had received from the Intelligence man. At Bardelle the American Divisional Headquarters were located. Behind the town were ammunition dumps and supply bases of the highest importance to the troops along the Allied Front.

If Bardelle were crushed and seized by the enemy, it would be a calamitous defeat. The supplies would be seized, the morale of the Wing would be broken, the cutting off of the railroad would paralyze operations within that dangerous salient which the Allied armies were even then trying to close up. "Highest importance," Colonel Davidson had said—rightly!

The minutes ticked away with torturous slowness. Ross came out of the hut, and began to drift around the yard. He peered through into the impenetrable darkness, and saw nothing. Silence and emptiness. He waited with nerves aching.

He jerked to a stop when he thought he sensed a faint rustle beyond the wall of barbed wire. The footfalls of the guard were squashing closer. The black shape of the man passed, went around the corner of the yard and on. Ross did not move. Like a statue he stood, listening.

Another faint rustle. An almost inaudible gritting of pebbles together. An almost invisible flutter in the darkness. Then a whisper, faint as the stirring of the wind:

"Ross!"

Ross jerked toward the barbed wall. In a moment he found the black shape of a man crouched against the wire, saw the gaunt outline of a face pressed close, Ross dropped to his haunches.

"Sent by Colonel Davidson!" the voice came in a strained whisper. "For the love of Heaven, make it snappy!"

"Listen! Concentration behind Leboeuf! Mass attack on Bardelle ten tomorrow morning. Don't let anything stop you from getting that word to D.H.Q.!"

"Okay!"

Crack!

The spat of a rifle shattered the stillness! The shape at the wall of wire suddenly disappeared as the man leaped away. Ross jerked up, snarling. At the same instant a beam of light probed through the darkness, and its rays struck the form of a man running wildly away. It was the messenger who had crawled across the lines, striving now to get back.

Spat! Three rifles spoke as one. The messenger suddenly threw himself down on the grass. Almost instantly he leaped up again, with one leg dragging. As he moved, the rifles cracked again. This time he fell—to stay. Dropped into the grass, a limp bundle, and lay!

“They got him!” Kirby Ross gasped.

Men came running through the night. Lights flashed through the darkness. Hubbub broke out all around. Gruff voices snarled commands. Men ran forward to the dead messenger, jerked him over. Others began to hurry toward the gate of the prison-camp. A sharp voice kept on rattling out commands.

LIGHTS pierced through the walls of the camp, striking Ross blindingly. Rifles pushed through the meshes, leveled at him. The gate clicked open, and an officer stomped in, followed by a squad of gray soldiers. It was the *unter-offisier* who had thrown Ross into this camp. Now he glared like an enraged beast.

“Swine! Dog! Fool! This time we will put you where you won’t play tricks!”

The *unter-offisier* barked out a command. The gray soldiers marched forward, surrounded Ross. They gripped his arms, thrust him forward. He was pushed through the gate, out onto the road. The big lock clicked behind him, and rifle-barrels prodded his back.

“March, fool!”

Ross was not, at that moment, thinking of himself. He was not thinking of the messenger who had been killed within a few yards of the prison camp after daring the danger of miles. He was thinking of the information which must get back to the Headquarters at Bardelle—the information which had been dropped by a bullet in the messenger’s heart.

He marched, blinded by the glare of the lights, prodded by the rifle barrels. At the weather-blackened shack which he had once before entered, he was stopped, and thrust through the door. Once more he was pushed into the inner room. And there, as before, a bristle-headed *ober-leutnant* peered at him with cold, washy blue eyes.

“This man is a spy!” the *unter-offisier* rattled out. “He tried to pass information to the enemy. The man who sneaked up to the prison camp to get the information is now dead. Quick work on the part of the guards prevented the information getting over to the enemy, *Herr Ober-Leutnant!*”

“A spy, Lieutenant Ross! A spy!”

The heavy-jowled German officer drawled the words menacingly.

“You realize, of course, Lieutenant Ross, what is done with a spy who is discovered, *hein?*”

“Go to hell!” Ross blazed.

“A firing-squad. That is medicine for a spy. You understand that, Lieutenant Ross. You will be executed in the morning, my good friend—unless—unless you have some information which we would like to have concerning the American flying squadrons.”

“Get your damn’ firing squad ready!” Ross snapped. “You’ll get no information out of me!”

“That is final, Lieutenant?”

“Damn’ right it’s final—and if you ask me again I’ll pound you on the nose.”

The ober-leutnant puffed up with great dignity. “Very well, then—it is final. At dawn, Lieutenant Ross, you will be executed. *Leutnant*, take him away.

Heavy hands fell on Ross’s shoulders. He was jerked around, pushed through the doorway, out of the building, into the beating night.

CHAPTER VII THE FIRING SQUAD

TIM NORTON cramped closer into the black shadow of the box-like shack. He sensed a sudden tension in the air. A hundred yards away a light was flashing, disappearing, flashing again. From inside the shack against which he pressed he heard a rustling of papers, an exchange of guttural syllables. Then, abruptly, the black silence cracked open.

A rifle spat. The report echoed from the distance, where the light had been flashing. The beam sliced through the blackness again. A second time rifle-fire clattered out. Jerking around, peering, Norton saw the clean-cut outline of a man running through the darkness—saw him drop and lay still.

Other lights began to flash, voices began to call. Commands rang. Norton clamped himself still deeper into the black shadow. He did not know what was happening; he only knew that he must stay out of sight. He kept peering in the direction of the commotion.

A moment later a squad of gray soldiers came marching up the muddy road toward the shack behind which Norton was crouching. The flashing lights showed Norton a man among them wearing the

uniform of a Yank flyer. They came closer, and Norton stared with startled eyes. That man being marched forward at the point of German rifles—that man Tim Norton knew. It was Kirby Ross!

Norton could only stare. He heard other commands snapped out in thick German, a door creak on its hinges, and footfalls thump on the board floor inside the shack. He waited tensely, and the snapping of a voice reached his ears through the wall.

“This man is a spy! He tried to pass information to the enemy!”

“A spy, Lieutenant Ross! A spy!” This voice was heavier, threatening. “You realize, of course, Lieutenant Ross, what is done with a spy who is discovered, *hein?*”

“Go to hell!” came Ross’s voice.

“A firing squad—that is medicine for a spy. You will be executed in the morning, my good friend, unless—unless you have some information which we would like to have concerning the American flying squadrons.”

“Get your damn’ firing squad ready!” Ross’s voice snapped. “You’ll get no information out of me!”

“That is final, Lieutenant?”

“Damn’ right it’s final—!”

Again footfalls thumped over the floor inside the shack. Again a door creaked. Again the squad of gray-uniformed Jerries came into view, prodding Ross before them.

Tim Norton pulled himself upright. His lips were grimly compressed. He gripped the rifle he had tightly in his hands.

“At dawn, Lieutenant Ross,” the *ober-leutnant* had said, “you will be executed!”

“By the Lord!” rushed through Tim Norton’s mind. “We’ll see about that!”

The guards were marching Ross to some vile cell, to keep him in solitary confinement—until dawn. And dawn was only a few hours away. Only a few hours, and Ross would face a deadly line of rifles. The rising sun would shine on Ross’s riddled body—unless—

TIM NORTON gripped the rifle desperately, moved out of the shadow. An instant later he stood there staring through the gloom. Then, suddenly, crazily, he yelled:

“Ross! Ross!”

Ross jerked around. The German soldiers whirled. At the same instant Norton snapped his rifle-butt to his shoulder and snapped back the trigger. Flame

spattered out of the barrel twice in quick succession. Two of the gray-coated soldiers swung around, dropped to their knees!

“Ross! This way!”

Kirby Ross acted swiftly. He jerked around again, his fists clubbed. In that instant he went a bit mad. He struck out blindly at the nearest German. His knuckles cracked sharply against the man’s chin. The Jerry staggered backward, toppled over another crumpled on the ground.

Ross leaped after him recklessly, snatched at the rifle which loosened from the stunned soldier’s hand. He gripped it, whirled. A bullet smashed out of the barrel, and the flare of fire lighted the astonished face of a German.

As that man went down, Ross leaped again. From the darkness beyond the other rifle spat again. The squad of German soldiers was already reduced to four. The others scattered in terror, firing their rifles crazily as they stumbled away. In an instant Ross was dashing into the blackness like mad.

A spear of light shafted through the night. It glanced across Ross as he ran. Almost instantly the rifle farther away in the darkness spoke again, and the light dropped with the man behind it. It flickered and went out. All around there was shouting, running, confusion.

“Ross!”

“Come on!” Ross gasped.

Someone sped through the blackness toward him. Ross did not know who it was. He had not a fraction of an instant to give to finding out. He went running through the darkness wildly, knowing only that the other man was close behind him. And behind there was wild shouting, and another flashing of lights.

Far away in the sky a star-shell burst into brilliance, and hung. Its bleak radiance sprayed down on Ross and Norton as they ran. They whirled around together, and saw behind them the silhouettes of Jerry soldiers scattering. Off at one side was a looming blackness—trees. Madly Ross raced for them.

Rifles rattled again. The slugs slapped into the damp earth, flattered among the tree-trunks beyond. Ross and Norton flung themselves into the deep shadow, plunged further into the darkness. Peering back they saw the Jerries spreading out toward them, rifle-barrels flashing in the stark glow.

AS ROSS and Norton pressed on, feeling their way through the trees, a crashing sounded in the bushes

behind them. Men were rushing through the bushes in pursuit. Another flashlight began to probe with its dazzling beam. Then, shrilly clear, came the rattle of a Maxim.

Brrrrt!

The bullets crashed into the tree-trunks around Ross and Norton. The stream of pelting death was moving their way! From somewhere to the right hidden among the trees, was a dancing spot of fire.

Prrrrrt!

Ross and Norton fell headlong against the wet ground, and pressed close. The bullets spattered on above them. Suddenly the fusillade stopped. Behind them the crashing of men through the bushes continued; but the two men on the ground did not move.

"Say! Ross gasped. "Say—who the devil are you, anyhow?"

"It's Norton, Ross," came the panting answer.

"Who?"

Prrr-prrrrt!

Again the machine-gun spattered lead among the trees. The slugs buzzed through the air like bees. From behind, the Jerries were pressing closer. More lights were flashing, shifting everywhere.

"Come on—we've got to get out of here!" Ross whispered sharply.

Together they lurched up. The shafts of the lights behind swung through the foliage. Rifles cracked, men shouted hoarsely. A bullet bit through the flesh of Ross's upper left arm. . . . They came to a crouching stop behind a clump of trees, staring around. The floating star-shell, shining through the leaves, sprinkled the ground with glowing diamonds. . . .

"Did you say—did you say Norton?" Kirby Ross gasped, glaring at the man beside him.

"For God's sake come on!"

The crashing was coming closer. The lights flashed through the branches above. Staring in the direction they were working, Norton saw a glimmer which told him of a clearing ahead. He broke away suddenly, and Ross went legging after him. An instant later they plunged through a flood of light.

"Duck!" Norton gasped.

Ahead of them lay open ground. They sprinted across it desperately. The star-shell gleamed down on them mercilessly. Behind them they heard the soldiers rushing on through the trees. Then,, suddenly, the light-bomb flickered out, and again blackness closed over the world. "Get in that hole!"

They dropped flat, and scrambled together into a crater which a shell had dug. Breathlessly, they pressed themselves into the ooze, and peered over the ragged edge of it. Among the trees the lights were flashing and the men were running.

They peered across the ravaged earth on the other side. It was heaped and pitted by past shelling. Farther on stretched a barbed wire entanglement. Beyond that was the mud of No-Man's-Land and, still farther beyond, the Allied line.

"Come on!" Norton gasped again. "We've got to get past that wire!"

He scampered over the edge of the crater and, crouching, ran on. Ross clambered up after him.

They went through the darkness like ghosts. They slowed, peering all around. The men behind were in the open, now. The lights were flashing in front of the trees.

DIRECTLY ahead of Norton and Ross was the criss-crossing of the barbed wire. Crawling on hands and knees, they began to skirt along beside it. Norton stopped, went flat. Wriggling like a lizard in the mud, he began to push himself under the strands where the rain had washed away the soft earth and made a passage possible.

Inch by inch he went forward, breathing in gulps. He pulled out on the other side, and rolled over, and lay in throbbing exhaustion. Kirby Ross came crawling through beside him. A moment later they were on their feet away, scurrying forward.

The blackness of a shell-pit opened in front of them. They slid over the edge, and lay against the slanting wall of it, panting. The stench of stagnant water swept over them, but they did not mind that. Norton lay back in utter fatigue; Ross crouched, staring at him.

Another star-shell blinked out of the void of the sky, and the light fell on the two slumped there alone in the midst of the battled desert.

"Norton—Norton! For the love of heaven, it is you!"

Norton raised up slowly. "H'lo, Ross, old man. Say—we've slipped 'em, hey? We've slipped 'em!"

"Great S'cott, Norton—you were reported killed! The Jerries sent over a note that you'd—crashed!"

Norton peered at Ross fixedly in the ghostly glow. "Yeah—I thought I'd got it, too, but—I didn't, quite. Been in a hospital, back there. I was reported—you say they've got me listed as—dead?"

“Lord, Norton—I’m glad to see you again

Norton was smiling—smiling bitterly.

“You—you pulled me out of a tight fix, Norton. I thought I was a goner sure. Two days ago Davidson sent me over. Idea was to get information from an Intelligence man. I was to pass it on to somebody else who came across the lines at midnight. Poor guy—he got it before he could get away. Guard spotted him, I guess.”

Still Norton was silent.

“They caught me at it, too—and it was going to be the firing squad for mine, until you mixed in. You took ’em by surprise, all right—me, too. I’ve got the dope Davidson wants. Attack planned on Bardelle tomorrow morning ten o’clock—and Davidson’s got to get that dope, or we’ll be smashed. I’m glad I’m getting through!”

The star-shell was dropping slowly lower. Norton was staring fixedly at Ross.

“There’s no mistake about that, Ross? They’ve got me listed—as dead?”

“We’ll be able to get back okay now,” Ross went on rapidly. “Our base must be right across there. They’ll be waiting for that messenger to get back; they’ll be on the lookout for somebody to come through. There’ll be a hell of a lot of guys glad to see you, Norton.”

Norton said nothing.

“And that puddle-jumper named Riley. I guess she’ll be pretty damn’ glad, too.”

NORTON spoke slowly. “You’re a good guy, Ross. I’m glad this cockeyed war sort of—brought us together. I guess you’re the only close friend I’ve got over here. I—I’m depending on you, Ross.”

“Depending on me?” Ross echoed. “What for, Norton? What do you mean?”

The flicker of the falling star-shell was reflected in Norton’s shining eyes.

“It’ll be better—far better,” Norton went on slowly. “You remember what I told you, back there, that night on the field. I told you things I’ve never told any other man—things I never intended to tell anyone. That’s why I’m depending on you, Ross, to—to say nothing to anybody about me.”

“Say—? What the devil are you driving at, Norton?”

“Yeah—it’ll be better,” Norton repeated slowly. “It will be a shock to Joan at first—but she’ll get over it. That—that will come in time. After that she’ll be free. She’ll be free to have—the man she really loves.”

Ross blinked.

“And Art Mason—why, if I came back, he’d have to give up that job, you see. He’d have to go back down into the factory. He wouldn’t kick—not Art—but it’s not going to be like that. He’s going to stick where he is, Ross—because he deserves to. Anything else—why, anything else wouldn’t be square.”

Norton’s voice was quiet and firm. “You understand that, Ross? You’re going back over the line alone. And you’re not going to say anything about me. Understand?”

“Good Lord, Norton—”

“I’m going to stay listed as killed in action, that’s all.”

“Like hell!”

“Wait a minute, Ross,” Norton broke in coolly. “It’s the only decent thing I can do. This is the only chance I’ll ever have to do it. It’s got to be as I say, Ross—understand?”

“You’re asking Norton—damn’ thing,

Ross blinked rapidly. a damn’ hard hard.”

“I want your word, Ross. Never a word about me. Never a word to change the records. As long as you live, you’ll say—nothing.”

“What can you do?” Ross protested. “Where can you go?”

“I don’t know now—but that doesn’t matter. Leave it to me, buddy. All that matters is—what I’ve asked you. I want your word.”

Kirby Ross was silent a long time. He lay against the muddy wall of the crater, peering at Norton’s pale face. After the star-shell blinked out, he kept staring. Then, slowly, his hand reached out and sought Norton’s. For a long moment their hands clasped.

“You’ve got my word,” Ross said.

“Thanks, buddy. Thanks. You’d better be getting in. We’d better split right now. Don’t worry about me—I’ll get through somewhere, all right.”

Kirby Ross slowly looked around. He crawled to the edge of the crater. Far away over the pitted earth lay the Allied line, the base of the Fourteenth. He looked back, at the shadowy figure of Norton. “You’re a real guy, Norton. I’ll never forget you. So long.”

“So long, buddy.”

Ross crawled out through the blackness. A chill wind swept over him, and utter fatigue deadened his limbs; but he went on. And, dimly, in the East, the first gray light of dawn began to break.

CHAPTER VIII
EAGLE WINGS

GRAY-ROSE LIGHT SPREAD over the field of the Fourteenth. Men moved like phantoms among the tents. Mechanics rolled patched Spads out of the hangars, lined them up, wrestled with the props. Motors barked, churned into action. Another dawn patrol was in preparation.

Captain Kinney sat inside his tent, peering at recent communications. The candle stuck in the bottle on his table was guttering out. As it flickered down, Kinney stared out across the sodden field. His eyes sharpened, he half rose, spitting out expletives.

Onto the edge of the field a man came tottering. He came from the direction of the Front. His uniform was greasy and caked with mud. His face was haggard, his eyes reel-shot. Behind him came a private, a sentry with ready rifle, suspiciously following him in. He stalked straight toward the row of tents—Kirby Ross, returning from special secret detail!

Ross strode straight past Kinney as Kinney ducked out of the flaps of operations tent. He reached inside the next, and gripped the shoulder of the dozing telephone sergeant. The phone sarge started back, blinking as if at a ghost.

“Get me Davidson at D.H.Q.!”

Ross stood swaying unsteadily as the sarge plugged in and clicked the cams. A moment later, when a voice rasped in the phones, Ross snatched them away. He bent close to the transmitter and barked out his words.

“Colonel Davidson! Lieutenant Ross reporting! An attack by the enemy, centered on Bardelle, will begin at ten o’clock this morning!”

Colonel Davidson’s voice whanged deafeningly in the phones.

“*What!* Great Lord! Tell Kinney to stand by for immediate orders!”

Ross dropped the phones. He looked around at Kinney, very tired, feeling very old.

“Davidson says to stand by for immediate orders. Attack . . . coming . . . ten o’clock.”

He strode across the field. The slapping of the backblasts of the Spads seemed almost to knock

him off his feet. He shouldered inside the tent and dropped onto the nearest cot. Almost instantly he was asleep.

SEVEN bullet-marked Spads were lined up on the field, props whirling, engines throbbing, their noses pointing into enemy skies. Grease monkeys were fussing around them, making final inspections. Pilots were feeling over their Vickers.

A moment ago a motorcycle had popped onto the field. The messenger had run to operations tent and put a despatch into Captain Kinney’s hands, Just outside the tent, as the motorcycle began to putter away again, he peen Wearily at typewritten words.

From: The General Commanding, Divisional Headquarters.

To: Commanding Officers, all squadrons, Xth Division, A.E.F.

Subject: Information and orders.

1. All available lighting planes will be put into the air north of Bardelle this morning at 9:50 o’clock.
2. Our objective is to repulse an attack by the enemy from behind Leboeuf, to scatter the enemy infantry and prevent the bringing up of reinforcements.
3. Enemy aircraft must be held off to prevent frustration of this move.
4. Squadron Commanders are ordered to use every available resource at their disposals to render the enemy’s planned attack ineffective.
5. All planes are to remain in the air until it is clearly evident that the enemy’s ground and air forces have been scattered.

By order: Major General Burton,
Commanding Xth Division.

H. J. Adams, Adjutant.

Kinney strode away from the tent, through the slapping slip-streams of the line of Spads. The motors had smoothed off. They were ready for the patrol. In the pits the pilots were already settling to the controls in anticipation of the order just received.

Lieutenant Kirby Ross dragged aside the flaps of the billet tent and peered out. He trudged toward Kinney. The C.O. eyed him scowlingly.

“What’s on your mind, Ross?”

“Why, I’m flying on this patrol.” Kinney’s scowl deepened. “Man, you’re all done in. Can you make it?”

“Hell, yes! I’m going to see this thing through to the end.”

KINNEY shrugged, and turned toward his Spad. Grimly he climbed into his cockpit. His fingers played

over the controls and the gun-trips as he stared up and down the line. At the end of the right echelon, Ross was wearily climbing into his Spad. Kinney waited a moment.

The eyes of every man of the patrol were on him, looking for the signal. Kinney quickly gave it. The Hissos blasted up in a furious chorus Kinney's Spad crept forward. It rushed, lifted.

Behind him, two more soared up. Again, two more, howling their way into the sky. Two more, raising their voices in the song of wrath. The seven planes lifted and drove high, filling the heavens with their thunder.

As the formation of Spads sang out over the mud of disputed territory, other planes came roaring through the sky. Nieuports, Camels. More Spads. A mighty chorus of motors. A howling song of death reaching to the very zenith. Planes in tens and twenties, all screaming out over the battlefield.

Kirby Ross peered around. Back of his right wing lay Bardelle. Forward lay enemy territory. Farther, back was the town of Leboeuf, held by the enemy, center of their newest concentrations. The town lay in the center of a spider-web of roads and railroad tracks, its tile roofs glistening in the morning sunlight. Down there was movement, quick, busy, covering every road.

Motor lorries were creeping along the lanes of mud. Squads of men were advancing. Troops were moving up. All along the line down there, troops were moving up. Thousands of others were massed in the trenches, in the woods, behind the wire. It lacked a few minutes of ten. Shortly the earth would begin to run with men's blood.

Down there was the wedge which had bitten into the territory held by the Allied armies, the sharp point which threatened to drive ever deeper. The booming of artillery began to fill the air, echoed by the spiteful clatter of smaller ordinance. Down there man-power was piling up.

Farther back of the line, red-winged shapes rushed off the ground, came howling up. Five—ten—more. Out of the high clouds others came howling—Fokkers and Pfalzes, Albatrosses and Halberstadts. Furious fighting ships all! Demons of the sky! Then another, greater than any of the rest, came howling off the ground like a snarling, winged monster. A dreadnought of the air—a *Gotha*!

The mammoth plane circled high far behind the lines, black wings outlined against the blue of the sky. It began to head straight for Bardelle. The *Gotha* was coming over on a bombing mission—sent to wipe all humanity out of the town held by the Allies.

It was a howling juggernaut of the sky. In its pits its crew were getting busy behind its machine-guns. Two in the fore pit were synchronized with the prop; in the second pit was another, scarf-winged, able to sweep the heavens with devastating fire; another was able to pour hot lead through the floor at any enemy aircraft below. Beside it, as escorts, hummed two Pfalzes.

SOME of the Yank Spads began to dive low, powering close to the ground in crazy risk of the machine-guns on the ground. Their aim was to sweep the ground with fire, scatter the troops. The rattle of Vickers began to sound a constant tattoo against the sky.

From below the fighting pursuits of the enemy were howling up. The Allied squadron spread out, roaring to meet them. Red-circled planes began to single out the red-winged ones of the Germans. Spandaus mixed fire with Vickers. On and on, seeming never to stop, the bullets rattled out.

On the earth below artillery opened fire. The heavy shocks percussed through the air; the screams of the shells shrilled through the low thunder of the motors, the sharp staccato of the Vickers and Spandaus. From behind Bardelle, the big naval guns began to go into action again. Observation Salmsons, hovering higher than all the rest, looked down on the belching craters which the shells made, and signaled corrections by wireless to the gun crews below.

The air boiled with the clapping of Archies. Black and white smoke mixed on the chill wind. The sky became a merry-go-round of death, with planes whipping madly, guns rattling all the while.

A Fokker flashed into flame and began streaking down to earth. A Spad followed, with the man in the pit still pouring lead into it. The unearthly scream of a motor freed of a shattered propeller chilled above all the other clattering bedlam.

Kinney of the Fourteenth drove in swiftly toward the black monster of the sky which was growling on toward Bardelle. The *Gotha* plowed ahead steadily. In the pits the Jerry gunners were getting active with their Spandaus and Maxims. Kinney blasted on toward it.

The Pfalzes skirted away from the sides of the *Gotha*, dashed toward the Spads. They began circling in an attempt to ride the tails of the Yanks, but the starred ships circled with them, gave them olllllllnot an inch. Two of the freshest Spads, in the hands of replacements, singled off the Pfalzes, and went whipping downward again with them.

Kinney bored in toward the *Gotha*. Winging beside

him was another Spad of the Fourteenth—Ross. The machine-guns of the Gotha were rattling out slugs toward them. The bullets screamed over the wings of the two Yank crates. Kinney kicked his ship around, zoomed wildly, and left Ross. Ross flung himself over in a desperate half-roll, and came back yelling, his thumbs on the trips.

The Gotha's rear-pit gun dusted Kinney's tail with spattering lead. Kinney rolled over and, with wings almost vertical, came slashing downward. A swarm of slugs from his Vickers clacked into the rear pit. The Jerry gunner threw up his hands, slumped away. . . .

Ross drove in closer to the Gotha, rushing diagonally at it, toward its right motor-housing. A furious fusillade snapped out of his guns. The right engine of the Gotha screamed, the prop vanished in invisible fragments. The great black vulture lurched on its side.

Ross whipped aside, spun around in a vertical bank, and zoomed directly up into the breast of the great bird. The under-pit gun was reaching for him, pelting holes through his wings. Through that hole in the belly of the Gotha Ross sank round after round of hard-hitting Yank ammo. The under-gun went silent.

As Ross flung himself around madly again, he glimpsed a Pfalz spinning toward the earth, one of the fresh Spads of the Fourteenth whirling above it—a replacement baptized with blood! The other Spad was not in sight. It had evidently already fallen. The other Pfalz had danced off with another Spad of the Fourteenth.

THE guns of the Gotha were snarling viciously. It was trying to break through the swarm of Yank planes and reach Bardelle. With one motor already disabled, it was fighting desperately. Ross frenziedly slapped around again, driving straight on a level with the fore pit. He pushed the trips of his Vickers, and poured blazing slugs across the wings.

The Gotha lurched, wrenched, began to lie over on one wing. One of the machine-guns still spattered out lead, but the pilot of the great black bird was lying dead across the wheel. It went streaking downward, faster, faster. Into the mud of No-Man's-Land it went, and lay, a crushed thing, a monster defeated.

Ross peered around through confused, bleary eyes. On the ground, confusion had broken. Troops were scattering back from the Line. The artillery below was firing spasmodically. The swarm of Allied planes were outnumbering the Jerry crates enormously.

The flock of Fokkers which had swarmed up to attack were scattered. Two of them were at that instant plunging down to destruction, one of them a flamer. Others were limping back to their drome with wounded pilots or jammed Spandaus. The air was boiling with anti-aircraft fire, but the shrapnel was finding no mark in any of the Yank crates.

A Bristol of the R.A.F. was howling high above, dropping its eggs swiftly into enemy territory. Flame splashed up around the artillery of the enemy. The big guns were being abandoned by their crews, toppled into the mud by the terrific force of the G.I. cans. Down there half a dozen Spads were howling low over the ground, pelting the earth with a rain of death.

On the ground farther back an observation balloon lay burning. Gray figures were running madly in all directions like frenzied ants whose hill had been destroyed. Still in the sky the Yank planes howled their taunts—and now the sky was theirs.

Captain Kinney peered around wearily. He saw Ross's plane, and two others of the Fourteenth. He waggled his wings slowly, signaling them to return. Other Allied fighting ships were already tailing away from that section of sky. The Spads of the squadron fell in behind Kinney, and went limping back toward their base. Four of them. Seven had gone out, and four were coming back.

KINNEY'S plane sailed low over the trees which fringed the field. His trucks touched the muddy ground first. He crawled out of the pit, and behind him came the others, like weary birds grateful for the coming rest. The pilots legged out of the pits, numbed and fogged by the strain of the fight. They looked around dizzily.

Kirby Ross came slowly toward Kinney. Kinney was smiling grimly and reaching for a cigarette from a pocket of his tunic.

"I saw you get that Gotha, Ross," he said shortly. "Damn' good work."

The phone sarge ducked out of his tent. Kinney jumped as if stung, and snatched away angrily the green flimsy which the sarge pushed at him. He read it swiftly, and handed it over to Ross.

Attack broken My heart-felt congratulations to Captain Kinney and Lieutenant Ross.

Kirby Ross's lips tightened. . . . "I don't deserve the credit. There's another guy who should have that."

"Who?" Kinney barked.

Ross shrugged. Kinney was too tired to question him further. The C.O. stared again at the Colonel's felicitations.

"Hell!" he said.

CHAPTER IX AFTERMATH

THE DAY CAME when the big guns along both fronts were hushed. Men moved about wonderingly. Officers clustered together, talked quietly among themselves. There was strange talk going about—very strange talk about something called peace.

Word came. In a wood just back of the Allied line German emissaries had stepped into a certain railway car in which meals had once been served to pleasure-seeking travelers. There they had met the plenipotentiaries of the Allied forces, and there they had signed papers. There would be no more fighting. The armistice had been signed.

Peace!

Then it was that the world went mad with joy. Paris no longer heard the booming of artillery thirty short miles away, and broke forth in delirious ecstasy. Men, women and children poured into the streets. Whistles screeched, bells clanged, everyone shouted. Like loosed rivers, the streets flowed with frenziedly happy people. The strain of long months of war had broken.

Peace!

Bedlam. Boulevards thronged. Wines spilled. Reckless abandonment. Smiles on faces which had long ago stopped smiling.

Peace!

Mid Riley, expert puddle jumper, danced her way down the milling streets of the Boulevard des Italiens that day.

She chewed her clump of gum more rapturously than ever before. She sang with those who sang, shouted with the others, laughed at everything. Until—

She saw a man with hunched shoulders, garbed in loose, nondescript clothes, pushing his way slowly through the milling throng. Mid Riley grew very serious when she saw that man. She started shouldering her way through the shouting crowd toward him. He walked, silent, glancing right and

left, and at times was rushed with the press of people unresistingly.

He detached himself from the flow, and turned into the cafe nearest.

He sought his way over the upturned tables, and stood a moment. His face was covered with a black bristle of whiskers, and his black eyes were shining with a peculiar light.

Mid Riley peered at him with hand caught at her throat.

"It's you!"

THE man turned quickly. He dropped the glass of wine he had taken up from the bar, and quickly began to shoulder away. Mid Riley followed him desperately. At the door she caught his arm, dragged him back.

"Oh, Tim—Mr. Norton! Don't you remember me?"

"Hello, Riley," said Norton slowly.

"Gosh—I thought—!"

Tears were welling up in Mid Riley's eyes, but even then she did not stop chewing her wad of gum. "I knew it couldn't be true."

Norton's hand closed tightly over her arm. "It is true, you understand? It's true. You've got to believe that it's true."

"But—it's you! I mean—oh, I don't know what I mean! I'm so happy! I never was so hap—"

"Listen, Riley. Listen hard. I want you to understand something. I'm not going back."

"You're not—going back!"

"No, Riley. Not back there. That's something you must tell no one. Understand? Back home, they've got to go on believing—what they believe. Promise me, Riley—you'll let them go on believing it."

"Gosh—I'll do anything you say, Tim—anything—but—where are you going? Where are you going now?"

Norton's hands closed tightly around one of Mid Riley's dirty little hands. "Tomorrow morning I'm going by train to Marseilles. I've enlisted in the Foreign Legion—understand? You've got to go back, Riley. God bless you, you've got to go back."

He turned quickly, and pressed deep into the crowd. For a moment Mid Riley stood staring; then she began to push after him recklessly. She tore men aside, pushed on. The sweep of the crowd rushed her off her feet and carried her back. She fought loose, and went groping her way madly against the milling crowds.

The crowd was shouting, singing loudly. Mid Riley's voice was faint in the uproar. She went tearing her way madly through it. She caught a glimpse of

Tim Norton's head and shoulders, and went on more desperately than before.

"Mr. Norton—*Mr. Norton!*"

HE HAD heard her. She knew he had heard her. He was still going on, not looking back. Tears were streaming down Mid Riley's face. The laughter and singing of the crowd, ringing in her ears, were a mockery she did not hear. With every ounce of strength she possessed, she fought her way along toward Tim Norton.

She groped for his arm; her dirty little hands gripped him with fervent tightness. Still the crowd tore at her, but she clung to Norton's arm in spite of the pushing and jostling.

Tim Norton looked down at her. The press of people was pushing at them both, but he did not notice that now. In his eyes as he gazed down at Mid Riley, was a soft, new light, like a new hope. Mid Riley, her cheeks wet with tears, still chewing on her wad of gun.

"You didn't mean it when you said you was goin' with the Foreign Legion?"

A smile grew on Tim Norton's face—he began to smile for the first time in weeks.

"How could you tell that, Mid?"

"I knew it!" Mid Riley burst out. "I knew you wouldn't go away like that! I wouldn't let you, Tim—I wouldn't!"

Norton's eyes were shining. "You're right, Mid. I lied to you. I haven't enlisted in the Legion. I said that because I had to get away from you."

"But you don't have to!" Mid Riley cried. She clung still more tightly to Norton's arm. "You don't have to get away from me. I'll go wherever you go, Tim Norton!"

Norton's hands went out and clasped Riley's shoulders. He peered into her eyes. Neither of them saw or felt the crowd rushing against them; neither of them heard the shouting and the singing. Mid Riley was gazing up at him with brimming eyes, and her lips were wet with tears.

"God bless you, Mid," Norton said slowly. "You're a good guy. Listen, then. Tim Norton's dead. I—well, I'm nobody—just now. But I'm going to Switzerland. Up there I'll think things out, so that everything will be all right—back there. And I'll be—somebody—again. If you want to follow that somebody—"

"Do I?" Mid Riley choked out. "Will I?"

Her eyes were streaming with tears—eyes shining with joy. Tim Norton's hand clasped over hers.

The crowd was sweeping at them, and they no longer resisted it. Loud songs rang through the air, and shouting, and bells pealed, and whistles screeched. They went with the crowd along the boulevard, their hands clinging together, and soon, like all the others, they were singing. . . .

THE END