



TEST FLIGHT

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

They clipped his wings and sent him to the rear. When the black menace of the enemy reached out to spread its venom over London he knew that only the magic of his guns could prove his valor.

WITH TWO ALBATROSS flammers to his credit, Captain Ted Strang, Yankee flight commander with squadron 27 R.A.F., zoomed from a third red devil and set his nose at a German Tripe. In the cockpit of this circling Fokker, the hand of a *Rittmeister* tensed at the throttle. He had watched his brood give fight to this Yankee vulture—had watched from above, hoping that sooner or later, the pilot in the Camel would make a slip and become cold meat.

But the Yank was going up for fight—streaking east, his ship straining for altitude. At the proper psychological moment Strang tipped his nose, then

back-sticked into an Immelmann turn, which set his nose dead on the screaming Fokker. His guns ripped a terrible burst of fire that the *Rittmeister* couldn't avoid.

A pair of German arms flung outward, overside, and the German ace's heavy-set body slumped forward over the stick. His Fokker set her nose to earth in a tight spin. But—in spite of the thrill of conquest, Ted Strang gasped. His guns had jammed.

Out on a solo, he had run into a heavy jagdstaffel formation and had fought them for upward of twenty-five minutes—an age it seemed.

With three planes to his credit, including the famous *Rittmeister*, who might have been second in greatness to the Red Baron, Strang suddenly realized

that he was cold meat. Two screaming Albatrosses were on his tail. His guns were useless, and he was well over Bocheland.

Canuck gunners and infantrymen stood speechless, expressing their admiration with an odd nudge or two. Three ships washed out and the lone Camel pilot still in the mill! But then a murmur broke out along the lines. Ted Strang was streaking earthward like a plummet.

The Camel seemed out of control, coming down in a full-on dive, on the enemy's terrain. But, suddenly, the limp frame in the cockpit jerked erect. Strang had been revived by the slap of the slip-stream. A bullet in the thigh and another in his right shoulder had passed him out. Now, stick in his left hand, he was the same cool, daring sky devil. He must streak past the enemy lines—back, even though he crashed in No-Man's-Land. The infantry would save him.

The earth seemed to erupt, in a mad effort to blot him out, so swiftly did it seem to fly to meet him. Then, suddenly, he kicked rudder and sideslipped, socking hard into the clay almost at the Allied front line. An utter void swallowed him. He was not conscious of the bombing detail, which leaped out through the wire to his rescue. Nor did he recover until an infantry surgeon had his wounds almost dressed.

"Well, how's that feel, cap?" jerked the surgeon, as Strang stared about him. "Can't kill some of you birds, can they?"

"Feels okay, doc," Strang replied, with an attempt to smile. "Gee, but I never expected to clear those damned Jerry trenches. I could have sworn that I'd come alive in Boche hands. Pretty tough, damn it."

"It surely was damned hard lines gettin' socked, cap," grunted the surgeon, completing the strapping of Strang's broken arm. "But you went out so damned gloriously that I'd say it was mighty fine. There were enough ground observers to recommend you a thousand times. Pretty tough, you say! I've been in this cockeyed war since October '14 and can't even post a miserable wound stripe."

"It isn't that, doc. You're damned good, and I'm obliged. But, don't you see that this puts me out of the game, with the Red Baron still at large. Out of the game I like. Hell! I came over from the U.S. in fifteen and was just getting my stride, when those lousy guns jammed. My whole heart and soul were in this sky-war game, an' now, the best I can ever hope for is some cockeyed job instructin' at some blasted school in England. It's action that'll win this war. Think you could do something when you, mark my ticket, doc?"

"H'mm, you blitherin' young fool. Do something? Sure. I'll mark you clean through to Connecticut if you say another damned word. Don't you know when you've had enough? Here, drink this rum. I've got to do a little more to that leg. It'll hurt, but—"

"Aw, go to it, doc. Cut the damn thing off. I won't need it any more. Hell! I know I could be back as sound as a dollar in a month. I'm coming back to France if it's—if—ugh!" Strang broke off short as the doctor pulled on the damaged leg. As careful as he was with his skillful fingers, the surgeon could not help hurting the Yank.

Ted passed out cold, still grumbling and cursing in an unintelligible jargon.

An hour later, an appeal to his own squadron surgeon to be left in France, was fruitless, and to the cheers and congratulations of his many pals at 27, Strang was rushed to the rear in a roaring ambulance.

Hospital! An age-long period of stiff white sheets, the soft patter of nurses' feet. Routine inspections. Ether and carbolic. It was all nauseous to Ted Strang, though he appreciated all that was done for him.

He experienced fights with surgeons who seemed determined to amputate his arm.

"No change, this morning, Strang. Better let us nip her off. She refuses to drain, old man. You'll suffer less with the blighted thing gone." He had listened to this sort of thing, but had stolidly held out against amputation; and then—the tubes began to work. His wound was draining. Swelling commenced to subside and the frightful pain abated in some degree. For the first time in two months Ted Strang was sitting up when, one morning, the surgeons stopped at his cot, on their regular rounds.

TED laughed as he saw the surgeons—laughed at them. "It's all over, chaps," he chuckled. "I'm on the mend. Trot in a beefsteak and get me onto my feet. I've cheated that ol' saw, and in another month I'll be ready for the sky. What's the latest news?"

"Ramsgate strafed by Boche cruisers at dawn this morning," snapped a young surgeon, taking a seat on the bed. "Some casualties. Folkstone was badly bombed yesterday—a deuce of a mess."

"H'mm—and what was done about it?" asked Strang, through set lips. "You say Ramsgate was bombarded again by cruisers. That means the enemy ships streaked out of Zeebrugge and back in again before we came alive. By God, why don't they fly over and strafe that damned Mole? It should be pie, doc."

“Yes, pie is right, Strang, so long as Jerry’s defences were asleep. But, the way it is, you just can’t get through that belt of archie fire—at least so the R.N.A.S. chaps tell me.”

“Have they ever tried, seriously? Say some solo bomber, who could skip, in there unawares?”

“Couldn’t say, old man,” returned the doctor. “A little out of my line. But don’t get so worked up over it. No matter what happens, Strang, you’ll never be allowed to return to France, I’ve seen your papers. It’s—*verboten*.”

“The devil! They’ve made it definite, then,” jerked the Yank.

“Quite, yes. There’s a staff captaincy awaiting you, if you choose to remain this side of the Atlantic—either on the R.A.F. or with the R.N.A.S. My, Strang, this arm has surely quieted down. Don’t get upset over anything and we’ll have you out in a short time. The leg will come out of the strappings to-day. If it doesn’t speak like it was a permanent stiff, we’ll let you up for a while. Now, cheerio, ol’ thing.” He walked off with a pleasant nod.

Soon the sound of feet warned of the approach of a nurse, who tripped in carrying a tray. Ted Strang had had very little to do with women. Never seemed to have the time. He was a mining engineer in the West, and was out for the greatest part of each year. He had never been thrown so close to women as he had since this term in the hospital.

“Good morning, Captain Strang.” He thrilled at the voice, though he couldn’t have told why.

“Good morning, nurse,” he gulped. “More eats? I wonder if by any chance you’ve got a half-dozen eggs under that cover. I’m famished.”

“One egg and a cupful of gruel, captain. Two pieces of toast and a little marmalade.” She concluded her speech with a musical little chuckle, as she lifted off the cover. “But don’t look so sad. Heavens! You came to life go suddenly that we couldn’t keep pace with you. What did the surgeons have to say? Much improvement?”

“H’m, I suppose you’re hankerin’ to be rid of me, eh?” he grunted, breaking the shell of the lone egg.

“I think that’s a little unkind, Captain Strang,” she answered, as her-face reddened. “I was only anxious for your welfare. I know how terribly anxious you are to get back in the sky. I want you to—to—” She broke off short and got to her feet.

“Don’t go, Miss Falhar,” he called. “Sorry I was so damn grumpy. Didn’t mean to be, particularly with you. Lord! You’ve been the one bright spot in this cripple garage. Tell me what you want me to—to—”

“Oh, perhaps it doesn’t matter,” she said, jerkily. “I was only hoping that you’d get better—get well enough to go up again, for you’ll never be happy again till you do.”

“And, does it make any difference to you whether or not I’m happy?” he urged. For a moment she was silent, speechless. Then her lips parted in a smile which made Strang forget his half-eaten, solitary egg.

“Yes,” she murmured. “I want to see you happy. I’d give anything to see you able to fly again. Now carry on, and don’t spill that yolk on the sheets. Toodle-oo. I’ve got to trot along.”

“Well, I’ll be a cockeyed son of a gun,” he ruminated. “Imagine that! The only human who shows any signs of savvy, is a woman. Makes a guy feel good to have some one like her talk to him. By God! I am going to hit the ceiling again. Those cruisers out of Zeebrugge! Those bombs on Folkstone! Why the hell don’t some vulture get out and throw a crimp in this sort of thing.”

And Strang was still thinking, visualizing Zeebrugge, as he slipped back into one of the few sound sleeps he’d enjoyed since leaving France.

In less than two months following the announcement of his passing the danger point, Ted Strang was walking with a cane. He had chucked the crutch early in the game. His arm was stiff and sore, and his leg pained at times, but he was down by the sea, convalescing, and hoping.

Then came the day of his discharge from convalescence. He chose the headquarters of the R.N.A.S.—a staff position at their schools of instruction. First he moved to Croydon—up to Scotland, then settled on the south coast.

He assisted with instructional work. Each day his heart leaped with a stronger urge to take those rooks aloft. But, War Office had ruled against it. He had met the King and received his Distinguished Service Order, the ribbon of which now nestled alongside that of the M.C. and bar, but, save for its presence there, Strang wasn’t interested.

To-night, as he strolled along the sea front, the distant sky seemed to ripple with chains of lurid flame. The phantasmagoria of battle lights in the distant sky seemed to flash for his special benefit. They called, taunted, urged, and Strang cursed beneath his breath.

“The lights of Flanders,” he breathed. “God! What a lot I’d give to be there with old 27 squad. Another raid this mornin’, an’ me just strollin’ around like an out-of-work!”

He broke off and his teeth suddenly snapped

shut with a determined click. He wheeled and strode smartly back to his side car. His driver was ready on the cycle and Strang barked an order: "London, Perks. Hustle, and drop me off at War Office."

"Yes, sir, but ain't it a grand night for a raid? Strike me, I think we'll 'ave a dose o' Zeps afore mornin'." The engine snorted and Strang felt the slap of wind in his face. As he settled back in the gondola, he wondered just how Brigadier General Malcolmson would receive his proposition.

"BUT all I'm asking, sir, is that I be given a flight—a test flight. If I can't go it, I'll give in." With outspread hands, Ted Strang appealed to his chief for a chance.

"And, if you lose your blasted nerve three thousand feet above the Channel, what then?"

"The inevitable, general. A hell of a big splash, sir, and—you won't be bothered with Captain Edward Strang any more. Why, dash it, sir, there's a chap commanding a flight in France, with a wooden leg. Do you mean to tell me that he's any better than I?" Strang's voice had risen to its highest baritone notes, and there was a gleam in his eyes that the general took particular note of.

"Humph! You take the wrong attitude, Strang. We have taken into consideration your long and valuable service in France, together with your wounds. By the way—how's the leg, and arm? Any trouble?"

"Nothing to speak of, sir," snapped the skipper, eagerly. "Played a game of tennis to-day—"

But, Strang never told the brigadier that he had held his racket in his left hand.

"Well, let me see, Strang. I can't do much without the sanction of War Office. But I'll see if they will let you take a single-seater out over the Channel tomorrow; and if you break your bloody neck, I suppose you'll come and haunt me for the rest of my life. By the way, are you doing anything special tonight?"

"Not a thing, sir. Why?"

"I wish to God you'd stay and work over this rotten Zeebrugge situation with me. I—"

"Zeebrugge!"

"Yes, Strang, I've been asked to get out something on the feasibility of a sky strafe there. You could help me no end. Have a Scotch before we begin?"

Strang's hand trembled on the glass. Zeebrugge! They were actually coming alive on this question. He downed his Scotch and soda at a gulp. Then, for two whole hours, he and Malcolmson worked on

the plans of the enemy naval base—the Mole, and surrounding waters and inland defences.

They started at the shriek of a siren. The growl of an anti-aircraft gun signaled and then all London seemed to leap into a state of chaotic tumult. The Zeppelins were over again.

Ted Strang jumped to his feet and, bidding his chief a hasty good night he dashed from the office.

Outside he paused a moment to watch the phantasmagoria in the sky above him, where a hundred beams of light swept the sky. Machine guns clattered, and nose caps and strips of shell casing screamed earthward in tune with the whole shells, which streaked skyward.

He started. There was every chance of a test flight! Malcolmson would back him to the limit. Then—why not tonight! There was a flotilla of single-seater sea bombers warped in at his headquarters. Light, fast ships, that he knew he'd be perfectly at home with.

"It's getting late," he jerked. "Soon those lousy Zeps will be returning over the Channel, or North Sea. Malcolmson'll back me. It'll be almost dawn, before I'm up—we'll consider that my test flight. Some test flight!"

"Ave you the customary permit, sir?" asked a ground non-com when Strang asked for a plane to be revved up. And, for a moment the Yank was checked. Of course, any pilot outside the regular patrol had to furnish a permit.

"Wire through to General Malcolmson, if you have any doubt, sergeant major," he snapped.

"Course, there's no doubt at all, sir. Wisht I had a chance o' climbin' up an' takin' a poke at them blasted sausages. Was there much damage done up at the city, sir?"

"Didn't wait to see, sergeant major. Just got my orders for a flight from the general, and when the archies opened I came back hell for leather. I'm going up this time, S.M., after all. Can you feature that?"

"Must feel good, sir, after your sky record. Now yer won't be needin' bombs, eh?"

"Sure thing, S.M. Leave them aboard. No tellin' where I'll wind up. They've kept me down so cockeyed long I'm gonna make this flight a real one."

"Right you are, captain. I'll have her ready for you in fifteen minutes. All ready for any perishin' thing yer bumps into."

Strang was whistling as he stole back to his digs and fished out his flying suit. His hands trembled as he fumbled with goggles and straps. But they weren't

shaking with fear. He knew no fear, save that his plans might yet be frustrated by some sub-chief.

His chance had come. He knew that the signature of the War Office heads was only a matter of form.

"Blimey, the strafe's gettin' 'otter an' 'otter," commented the non-com.

"Seems to me like they's only one Zep up after all, the way the lights is concentratin'. Good luck, captain. My oath!"

Strang settled in the cockpit. The cramped state hurt his leg for the moment, but the pain seemed to disappear as he fondled the stick and throttle. Hand firm on the stick, he felt her take the water like a fish. He had a load of light bombs aboard and realized that he must be careful how he brought up her nose.

The stick eased toward his stomach. As he floated up through space, his hand played with the throttle and the trim seaplane responded sweetly, her engine hitting smoothly on all cylinders, her body scarcely rocking. At a thousand feet, he pulled her nose around in a climbing turn.

Strang made his altitude well out to sea. The first finger of light had commenced to pencil the eastern sky as he banked his ship around toward the English coast. Suddenly a puff of smoke almost immediately ahead caused him to tense at the controls.

"Hell's whistles!" he jerked. "What a situation! I'm shut out by our own ack-acks."

Not knowing of his existence, the anti-aircraft gunners had opened up at the first sight of a plane heading north. No one had reported a patrol out, and the light was too bad to determine the coloring of the British seaplane.

Now a light cruiser took up the signal and her anti-aircraft gun commenced to plaster the sky about the Yank. He side-slipped, dived, zoomed, and went through all the tricks in the box.

"Damn fools," he snarled. "Rotten cuckoo eggs, the whole damn bunch. If they'd only use their eyes—"

But the gunners were not to blame. They rightly thought that Strang's plane was the forerunner of an escort, which was winging across to assist the Zep on her return flight.

Then suddenly, like an ebbing tide, the gunners switched their direction. Strang jockeyed the goggles on his brow and wiped the stinging sweat from his eyes. He shot a glance inland. Then he gasped as he glimpsed the flash of the Zep's exhausts.

Cruisers and destroyers opened up from all points of the Channel now and Strang was forced to stunt

threateningly, dangerously, as he found himself again in the very pit of hell.

But his mind was working with that same coolness he had known in the Flanders sky trails. This was the flight of his life—his test flight. To fail now, would mean immediate transfer back to the U.S. He exhaled a deep breath that carried half-sob, half-sigh, the mingled expression of despair and desire.

Then he shook his head and pushed the ship's nose down. At five hundred feet above the nearest cruiser he flattened out and commenced to wireless. This was the first opportunity he had found to get a message through. Instantly the guns switched off his ship and he breathed with a wheezed sigh of relief. He headed south, toward the French coast. Then, gradually, a bit at a time, he commenced to head her into the sky. He had formed a definite plan of action. There was a patch of floating drift cloud above him. If he could make that in time, the Zep would be cold meat.

Up he soared, with throttle wide open. From time to time he cast eager glances over his left shoulder, watching for the shadow streaks which he knew would be the sky flotilla of Fokkers, which accompanied the Zep.

He had barely made the cloud bank, before a plane roared southwest beneath him. Zooming out at the far end of the cloud, he banked left and dove down into the billows again. At the most northerly point of his cover-strata he got his first glimpse of the Zep. She was making for the cloud patch, her engines roaring wide open.

He licked his parched lips and came around, heart plunging madly. "Test flight!" he jerked. "By God, I think I can make it. That damn grub is comin' hell-bent for these cloud banks. If I can hold the ol' nerve. I'll get him." As he banked again he shuddered with excitement, knowing that when he came around again, he would be head on to the charging Zep.

STRANG was fortunate that the Zep had been forced down to the altitude of the cloud strata. He realized the chance he was taking with the heavy weight of sky eggs aboard.

"I'm as crazy as a coot," he jerked as he brought the ship around. "Mebbe get hell for this. But we'll show some of these wisecres somethin' new in sky work. Grounded me, did they?" His fingers squeezed the Vickers trips. Taken almost unawares, the nose of the Zep was entering the cloud formation, slightly below the Yank.

Two Fokkers were at her stern, fighting off a couple of venturesome Bristols. Then, the Zep's crew spotted the menace from the flaming Vickers dead ahead. A gondola's Maxim spurted flame. Ted banked hard over left, cutting in ahead of the Zep, to make one of the swift, mad dashes that were his only means of gaining advantage.

As he came round he set the seaplane's nose up, to gain some altitude. A burst of Maxim fire took him just astern, bullets ripping through his tail float. He shuddered as he thought of the consequences, should a bullet strike the sensitive percussion nose cap of one of his bombs.

The sleek shape of the sky monster glided to view through a port. Then he went down in a mad dive, Vickers chattering fiercely in long bursts.

Still he went down, until it seemed as though his prop was destined to plow through the dirigible. He cut a feed pipe on the Zep's port engine and a coil of smoke spiraled skyward—a sickly, ominous coil which sent a shiver through the crew in the gondolas. He raked a belt clean through, before his brows went up with that odd flick of elation which comes with conquest.

A tongue of flame leaped skyward, a sinister lapping thing which spelled doom. To the last, the Zep's guns kept up a fierce fire, which threatened, every second, to crash the Yank. His seaplane's fabric was riddled, and he was far from certain about the condition of a strut, but, with the same fearless spirit which had brought him out if those Flanders skies alive, he swooped down on the now flaming bag.

Like a wasted comet, the big bomber heeled seaward in an avalanche of hell.

Crews of the British navy, merchantmen scudding along the free ways of the Channel cast awe-struck glances skywards and then broke into loud cheers as the mighty bomber dived, hissing, into the claiming dark Channel waters. But, they looked in vain for the conquerors. Ted Strang was operating without permit, without War-Office license. He was, in spite of the glory and meaning of his conquest, liable to court-martial.

But now—he could continue on his test flight. Day was breaking. Ted dropped low enough in the strata to use his wireless, but when asked for his name, he merely buzzed out an all's well.

"I can do without recognition," he muttered. "I've had the thrill. Reckon I'll take a cruise around and try an' catch a Boche cruiser asleep, or mebbe a little

U-boat." And then Strang thought of Zeebrugge. That fortress which had haunted him so long. Zeebrugge, the impregnable! Was it possible for a lone ship to cut in through those hellish defences? He had listened to the stories from pilots who had flown in formation. Had heard the tales of the archies, which fired from guns that were truck to truck, wheel to wheel. And the flaming onions, those tentacled devils whose phosphorus fingers clutched like armies of incendiary fiends.

"Hell! I'd need a special permit to bomb Zeebrugge, even though I did get a break through. Too blasted much red tape."

His feet fidgeted at the rudder bar, and he jockeyed his stick impatiently, causing her to yaw, as if she'd struck a heavy cross-wind. But, all the time, he was making up his steel mind. Should he attempt Zeebrugge?

"By God, I'll strike through an' if I can see an opening at all, I'll wireless for permission."

Back at headquarters, General Malcolmson burned wires searching for Captain Strang. After much fussing, the general had got the sanction of War Office to his request for a test flight for the Yank.

"And now, by gad, I can't find him," he blurted to his G.S.O.I. "If I don't land him by breakfast time I'll discipline him by canceling the order."

"You don't suppose he took you at your word and went up, sir," offered the staff.

"Can't say, Hargraves. Pon my soul, he had so dashed much spirit, I shouldn't be surprised to learn that he'd stolen a ship and went up Zep hunting. A likeable chap; a damn fine scout, but—hell! There's such a thing as military etiquette, discipline, and—take that message, Hargraves." The general grunted to his staff to receive a message sheet brought in by the excited signaler.

There was a second's silence as the staff colonel tore open the thin envelope. His eyes started, and he wheeled to face his chief.

"Listen, sir. By thunder! 'Zep down in flames. Result of attack by plane from above. Pilot not identified. Latitude—'"

"Let me see, Hargraves," jerked the general, snatching at the sheet. "'Pilot not identified.' Not iden—Hargraves, I'll bet you a half dozen shirts that the pilot who crashed that Zep was—"

"Strang!"

"Right! Damnation! Can you beat it? Not identified. The young devil daren't identify himself for fear of crashing into me. Pon my soul! I—"

The general was speechless, torn between a sense of pride, and a stronger sense of admiration for the intrepid Yank.

Meanwhile, Ted Strang was nearing the Mole. He had an advantage on the ground gunners, who were expecting the return of Fokker escorts. Now he glimpsed the stronghold—the gleaming cement, and the black hull of a cruiser warped in.

“God! What an opportunity,” he jerked. “I could cut in and paralyze that ship an’ smash up the dock. I wonder if those cockeyed fish back at London will let me—”

He commenced to buzz on his set. “May I bomb Zeebrugge May I bomb Zeebrugge”

He repeated the message, time and again, until at last, weary of waiting for a reply he kicked his plane around savagely and growled out an oath—a string of them.

“Cold meat,” he jerked. “A whole packing house full of it, right in my bomb sights an’ those damn brass hats wouldn’t flash me the yes.”

With a disgruntled snarl he kicked his rudder over and headed nor’-nor’-east, in search of some enemy seacraft on which to unload his bombs.

FOR upward of fifteen minutes Ted scoured the black, rolling waters, but it seemed that the wastes were totally deserted. He struck a point to the north, heading for the banks, when his keen eyes discerned a U-boat, emerging. Near by a couple of British trawlers cruised aimlessly about.

Ted opened his throttle and tore across the mountainous seas, his fingers ready for action on the bomb release.

Suddenly he glimpsed the eruption of a torpedo, which struck a trawler amidships. His teeth gritted hard and he pushed forward on his stick. Like a hawk plummeting from the sky, his seaplane dived, screaming her death song, and then—Strang jerked his lever.

“Blast!” His first bomb was wide. He had overshot, with too much stick on. He zoomed, and pulled her around, streaking, in past the bows of the sound trawler, whose guns had commenced firing. Shells screamed past his wing spread, alarmingly close. He was almost in direct line of fire.

His hand slipped to the bomb release again. He was ready, when the sub commenced to dive. She was almost down, when he let go his number—two bombs. A fearful gout of spume shot skyward—spume and

flying metal. His missile had detonated right on the disappearing conning tower.

The U-23 rolled. Her stern heaved skyward, and she went down by the head, with all hands. Strange’s nose was set eastward, when a black mushroom shape unfurled in the clearway directly ahead. A German destroyer was coming up at full power, her archie registering with alarming accuracy.

The Yank signaled to the trawler, whose crew were engaged in transferring their unfortunate mates from the wreck. He ordered them in coastward, while he commenced to climb.

“God! There’s no end to this day’s work,” he grunted, as he played with the throttle. “Wonder how this sky fish’ll function when I start to play with that archie!”

He had to commence his play with a suddenness that threatened to crack the ship up. He threw her into a stiff sideslip, then out again, into a climbing turn. All the time edging closer and closer to the on-coming destroyer. He had two bombs left, and sufficient fuel for another half hour in the sky.

He flattened out and zigzagged at full gun, seeking to get above the sleek shape of the German water rat. But the archie followed him persistently, her gunners deadly accurate.

When he banked, Ted Strang tripped his number-three bomb. It struck the destroyer astern. He saw her shudder and hang motionless for a brief moment, but the damage was slight, and she commenced to streak eastward in a zigzag course, the sky devil roaring at her stern. He was hugging her closely, heedless of the fire from a couple of Maxims astern. Now he was out of archie range, much too close for point-blank operation.

The destroyer came over hard-a-starboard, and Ted overshot. It was then that the fire of the German machine guns took effect. He saw his starboard pontoon crack open, a long section hang loose like a piece of stripped fabric.

“Cooked now,” he jerked. “I’ll have a sweet landing, and an acquaintance with Davy Jones. So long, little nurse.

I’ve been thinkin’ of you a lot. Quite a blasted fool, I reckon. Never thought of women before I met you.” Then, with a snarl of rage, he brought the crippled ship around and charged nose on to the streaking destroyer’s stern.

His last bomb shot through space, Strang streaking on ahead. As he banked her clumsily around he saw the effect of his burst. Dead amidships! A perfect burst.

He tipped his nose and raked the deck with bursts from his Vickers. But, in spite of the damage done to the destroyer, her machine-gun crews were active, and Strang's plane took a fearful hammering. He felt her yaw and stagger and realized that he had but one bet—to glide away and attempt a landing.

He pulled out of range of the Maxim, banked around and waved to the crippled ship, which was slugging back to port like a whipped cur.

It seemed to Strang that he was miles from anywhere. Not a ship in sight.

His starboard spread commenced to buckle and Strang threw her into a sideslip. Down . . . down. . . This was a new experience—a forced landing at sea! He shot a glance to the life belt hanging close at hand, and grinned. Then, like a huge, wounded bird hitting the water, his D.H. slammed in and ricocheted along like a stone skimming a lake's surface. Her starboard float suddenly gave and she heeled over.

Desperately, the yank slipped out and grasped at the port struts. He clawed his way topside from the heeled cockpit, hurting his leg badly as he swung it around a strut.

Now high and dry he glanced down, and gasped. His life belt had been tossed clear and, caught in a strong current, was drifting seaward.

"That's the end of things," he hissed. "Gee! I wonder if I dare take a chance and swim after her!" But his better judgment prevailed. He might not get back to the plane, which bobbed free on the waves. A straw in the hand is worth two life belts out to sea, so he thought.

Cold, shivering, his weak leg throbbing with a violent ache, he clung tightly as the hours slipped by.

"Used to hear all sorts of yarns about the traffic on this damn Channel," he muttered. "Trawlers, destroyers, subs, an' God knows what, but I can't see a thing. Reckon it'll be my luck to get picked by a lousy *Unterseeboote*. Wish to gosh I had a smoke. H-mmm—"

Strang closed his eyes. He was thinking—visualizing the little nurse, whose smile and soft voice had helped him weather the storm while in the hospital.

"Seems a damn sight harder to go out, when a guy thinks there's possibly some woman pinin' for him," he mused. Then — "*Tcha!*" he spat testily through his thin, compressed lips. "This is what I get for defyin' all orders. Test flight! A bright mess I made of things. I wish I'd have done the 'impossible' now—solo bombed

Zeebrugge. It wouldn't have been so hard to pass along to Davy Jones, thinkin' that I'd done something that would have shown how feasible the bombing of Zeebrugge is, if you only go about it right. Gee! I'm going down faster now. The cockpit's almost closed." He commenced to hum, chuckled, then broke out into a harsh laugh, which carried a note of hysteria. The hours had drawn along past noon, and now the wreck of the seaplane barely held his legs out of the water.

There was a stir aboard the destroyer H-14, when a lookout spotted a floating object astern. The British war vessel was sub hunting. There was a greater stir when a floating life belt was hauled aboard and the number of Strang's squadron and an officer's name were read from the limp shape.

"Wireless all craft to commence a search," thundered a lieutenant commander, who then ordered the destroyer about. Her engines roared wide open, as she set her nose in the direction from which the belt had drifted.

"That's the chap who bombed Zeebrugge this morning," the commander advised a fellow officer as they clung to the forward rail. "I hope we can rescue the poor blighter." Drenched, as the thin bow of the destroyer cleaved a way through the heavy swell, the officers clung fast, refusing to budge from their position.

"There she is—by gad, Evans. A point to starboard. Hardly anything left." The commander clutched at his subordinate's sleeve. "Lend me your glasses."

"Right as rain. Almost submerged. Don't see the pilot. By God! The poor devil's—No, there he is, swimming around, clutching at a bobbing strut. Thank heaven!"

Ten minutes later Ted Strang sat wrapped in warm blankets drinking hot rum toddy and smiling at a beaming lieutenant commander.

"Teeth have stopped chattering, ol' bean," grinned the navy man. "Feeling more chipper?"

"Fine, sir. Little pain in my leg, but—God! What a lucky cuss I am. I—"

"You won't know how bally lucky you are until I get you ashore," interrupted the commander. "I've wirelessly through advising them ashore that I've picked up the big hero of the hour—the man who solo bombed Zeebrugge."

"What!" Strang started and almost spilled the last of his rum.

"Congrats, ol' thing. The whole of the south country's in quite a stir. Shouldn't be surprised if they had a cockeyed band down to meet you. Wonderful bit

of work that. Right through those Zeebrugge defences and—here you are, alive to tell the tale. Try and get a sleep now, Strang. I'll slip topside for a moment. You won't be disturbed." And as he got up to go the officer smiled down at Strang, whose face was drawn, eyes staring vacantly into space.

His head came up with a start, and his dreaming eyes flashed fire. "God, what a mess!" he groaned. "They must have bungled my wireless message asking for permission to bomb—must have got it reading that I was actually in operation over the Mole. Cripes! What a mess!" He dropped into a doze, to dream fitfully, and finally slumped away into a sound sleep.

TED awakened with a start to find the tall figure of General Malcolmsen towering over him. "Well, you young sky devil," grinned the general. "A hell of a way to carry out a test flight. Ought to be shot at dawn. Just why couldn't you have been sane and gone about your cruise, feeling your wings again like any sensible man, instead of rocking through those Zeebrugge defences and shooting up the Mole? By gad, Strang, it was damned fine of you all the same. I—"

"But, look here, general. Damn it all, there's been a—"

"Tut-tut, son. Never mind the attempt at modesty. I know damned well that you're glowing underneath, glowing with righteous pride. When I got your 'am bombing Zeebrugge,' wireless, I didn't know whether to draw up the papers for a court-martial, or come out with a flotilla to welcome you back. But, I say, Strang, jump into some clothes. I brought a little friend of yours along. You remember the little lady who nursed you, who backed you when we wanted to return you to the U.S.? Well, she's been dying for news, so I brought her out to the destroyer in a launch. Slip out of that Indian Chief's dress an' slide into your togs. They're dry. Hustle."

"I only wish to heaven you'd had an apoplectic strike before you—"

"What's that, Strang," cut in the general, wheeling.

"Oh, I was just thinking aloud, sir. Just thinking what a hell of a messy world this is." Strang bit off his words with a snap, as he dug his feet into his trousers.

"I think it's all a lot of bunk, general. I never did a thing," he jerked. "Honest to gosh, I muffed the whole damn flight."

"Tell that to the marines, Strang," chuckled the chief. "There, you look presentable now. I'll send in Miss Falhar."

"Well, Captain Strang!" She came toward him with outstretched hands, and in spite of his inner feelings, he was thrilled at the sound of her voice again. "So you did make good! I knew you would, and I'm so pleased. At the board, I fought like the devil, to have you retained, when all those sour faces seemed determined to send you back across the Atlantic. I think you've done wonders. How are you?"

"Mentally, darned rotten, Miss Falhar. Glad to see you and all that, but—I'm a damned impostor. Listen—"

But she placed her fingers gently over his lips.

"Now, now. A little modesty is a virtue, Captain Strang, but you can carry it too far—so far that it destroys fineness of character. Why not just let us make a hero of you? You deserve it. What you did has never been done before."

Strang groaned, and wished that he had been boarded back to the States. He wished that he'd let them amputate—anything.

He took one of the girl's wrists in a firm grip and drew her to him. "Listen, Miss Falhar," he jerked. "I like you immensely—think you're a real pal. I've got something to say. Will you please listen, and believe me?"

"H'mmm, all right. 'Fess up, I'll listen," she smiled.

"Well, there's been a mistake," he commenced.

"I did set out to bomb Zeebrugge—had a chance of slipping right through their defences, and wirelessed back for permission. My message read: 'May I bomb Zeebrugge,' and some muffing signaler took it wrong. I'm in a devil of a fix now."

"Is that the truth, Captain Strang?"

"Positively, Miss Falhar. But, I can square it up. I'll sneak away at dawn to-morrow and bomb hell out of that Mole. Keep it under your hat, see? I'll make the grade. Now, I've got the goods. They actually aren't goin' to strafe me, thinking I did bomb. Well, watch my smoke to-morrow. Think I'd better take Malcolmsen into our confidence? He's a great egg."

"I believe I would," returned the girl. So, that day, the three lunched in the city, after Strang had torn himself away from a corps of reporters and officials.

"The damndest thing I ever heard of, Strang," grunted the brigadier, during an interval in the luncheon. "You mean to say you actually wirelessed for permission, and got no reply. Damnation! What a blundering lot of fools we had under those headpieces at the receiver sets. Great Peter! The whole country's stirred up over your exploit. I've helped stir them up,

too. Strang, you'll just have to square this up, though it isn't your fault at all. Now, let's forget it. I'm hungry. While Miss Falhar and I do justice to this salmon, please give me a sketchy report of your test flight."

The general never finished his fish, nor did he eat another thing, for at Strang's report on the Zeppelin crash, he jumped to his feet.

"Then it was you, man. Why in heaven's name didn't you wireless in?"

"I was out without authority, sir," grinned Strang. "Then, I managed to send a sub down. Did the trawler outfit report on that?"

"H'mmm—I say, Strang. Was that you?" The brigadier was trembling, and so was the nurse. Her eyes misted as they focused on the Yank.

"Well, never mind, general," continued the Yank, in a low tone. "You asked for my report. With my last two bombs I managed to send the destroyer, which crashed me, home, with its tail between its legs. I came down then, all riddled like a sieve, with the starboard float hangin' like a piece of Monday's washin'. That's all, sir."

The general attempted to nibble at his salad exchanging glances with the nurse, when he could catch her eye. Then he jerked up his head and faced Strang.

"Tell me, Strang, honestly, can you bomb Zeebrugge on a solo?"

"I not only can, but I'm going to, to-morrow at dawn, sir, in spite of the devil. It isn't my fault that I'm sailing under false colors. Did you see that header in the morning Herald? Lord! What man wouldn't square himself? Yes, sir, if I attack as I was prepared to this morning, I can bomb that Mole. Why, I could have cracked up a fullblown cruiser. Don't let any one kid you that Zeebrugge is sky tight. I'll show you that it isn't, and that's no idle boast."

"Go to it, Strang," snapped the chief. "We'll keep everything quiet. By gad, I feel sure you can do it, an' it'll just mean you've got your praise and so forth in advance. But wait till I spring the rest on the press, and War Office. You'll be a colonel with a chest full of ribbons and orders inside of twenty-four hours."

"Keep 'em, general," said Strang. "All I want is a chance to get back to 27 squadron. Now, how about a show? Off duty to-night, Miss Falhar?"

"Yes—captain. I'd love to—"

"Certainly, certainly, but count me out, you two," chuckled the general. "I've got to dust along south and get a plane chartered for your dawn shoot, Strang. Run along now, and I'll square up here."

And as Strang and the nurse moved away, the brigadier was humming a Palladium hit, beating an accompaniment with a salad fork.

Dawn had barely broken in the east when, with a wave of his hand, Ted Strang signaled for a cast-off. His Napier roared in full tune as he put the trim seaplane into the open sea.

To-day, of all days, Strang knew that he mustn't fail.

Malcolmson had been great. Miss Falhar had been—well, so she should have, after what happened after the show the previous night. She would soon be Mrs. Ted Strang, if the Yank got clear of those deadly flaming onions at the Mole.

A million people were singing his praises, due to the bungling of his messages.

"Just gotta do it, Ted," he told himself, as he brought the ship's nose up into the sky. "You've got to do the 'impossible,' son. You can do it, damn you! Keep your head and remember that you've got to come out of this. Damn funny what a strange hold a woman can get on a man with just one little word."

His feet beat a tattoo on the rudder bar as he climbed up. He tripped the gun lever and warmed up his Vickers with a long burst, then he settled to the serious work of his perilous mission.

WEATHER conditions of the previous day prevailed, with long streaks of drab cloud strata hanging low, running at almost right angles from the Mole, out to sea. He raced for those cloud banks, and thrilled as the sloppy moisture slapped his face, thrilled with the recollection of yesterday's maneuvers in a similar formation.

Wide open, he dived for a second, lower bank, and raced its full length, then—he throttled down and his face took a deep frown. The bank didn't extend as far as it had yesterday. There was a gap of a couple of miles between him and Zeebrugge's outline. An open space, where he could be caught in that mad barrage for which this sector was noted. Another thing that worried him was that the cloud formation was drifting seaward, widening the gap at every moment.

He banked around and ran the cloud bank north again, while he formed a plan.

"Only one thing for it," he jerked. "You've got to run the gauntlet. You can't give it up now! Bust her wide open and zigzag in at this altitude, then—say a prayer, Ted."

His mind made up he kicked his ship around and jazzed the feed pressure. His fingers closed on the throttle and he pulled her open easily, listening to the

thrummed response from his Napier. At full gun he raced for the open, lips set, eyes narrowed to mere slits.

He was in! Or, almost in, before the first archie awakened. He overshot, streaking over the Mole, and swore at himself. But, he kept a cool head and banked around.

Glancing down, he glimpsed the same cruiser warped in to her dock. A sheet of flame spat from her deck, aft. A million lights danced toward him from the burst of a flaming onion, and he gasped as he realized how close he had run into death.

The air was now patterned with black puffs, from the throats of a score of ground guns. He could hear the bombardment, above the roar of his engine, as he stunted like a fiend. That cruiser was his meat. She presented a real target, and he set his nose down dead on.

Karrumph! His first bomb threshed into the deck, astern, and he saw a gun cupola yawn wide open. He was low now, and took a hellish fire from ground Maxims. But, more determined than ever, buoyed by the result of his first bomb crash, he swung around and unloaded two and three. Number two rocked at 4.7 gun off her mount forward, and his number three crashed down to explode in a magazine. Thick, black smoke coiled skyward, from the very bowels of the ship. He climbed away, side-slipped from a couple of menacing onions, then—he gasped. A couple of Fokkers had taken off from inshore.

It was now or never for Strang! He must trip his bomb release and make a get-away, but archie was putting up a veritable wall of fire between him and the cruiser now. He went down in a spin, and flattened out at five hundred feet. Could he make it? Dare he attempt that last strip of main?

Alert, keen, every nerve tensed to the highest pitch, he found a port. Breathlessly he gave her the gun and roared down. He tripped the release as the cruiser's hull came into his bomb sights. The bomb smashed down into almost the same pocket as number three had, and Strang felt his heart pluck wildly as he raced on over.

An archie fired at point-blank range, and the Yank recoiled as a strip of shell casing struck him in the forehead, smashing his goggles to atoms. Half-stunned, almost blinded, he kept his ship at full gun and roared her north for over a minute, before he reached up with a hand and pushed up on his goggles. He blinked, then back-sticked hard. His pontoons barely skimmed the water.

“God! What luck,” he breathed. “Almost socked right in. Gee! I’ll have to try for that cloud bank.” He shot a swift glance over his shoulder and glimpsed two enemy machines coming in fast.

“Up, sister,” he jerked, pulling the plane’s nose up. “Give her the works. Bust yourself wide open. I gotta date with my future—”

Cr-r-r-r-r. Spandaus had commenced to fire, their tracers skimming past the Yank’s head. But, as he streaked for the cloud strata, he grinned.

“I’ll lose those birds up there,” he breathed. “I didn’t come out to clean up the war in one breath. Of course, Jerries, if you get too damn familiar I’ll sic these Vickers onto you.”

Strang had made good. He had completed his test flight, and had done the impossible. He had no desire to mill any more. The strain had been tremendous, and though he was still game for plenty of fight, he lost the chasing Fokkers in the clouds.

Brigadier General Malcolmson’s haggard face brightened in an illuminating smile as he glimpsed a silver shape coming in fast from seaward.

“By gad, here he is!” he exclaimed, excitedly. “Didn’t I tell you he would, Hargraves.” The colonel at Malcolmson’s side nodded. He too had been under a strain.

“What’ll we do with him now, Sir?” he asked, as Strang’s nose commenced to dive.

“Give him a Wing, overseas, of course. What the hell else could we do? In spite of the devil he’s pulled through the stiffest test you ever heard of. Yes, we’ll give him number five, an’ that’ll put him in command of his beloved 27. Gad! Look how he made that landing. Ahoy—Strang!”

Strang waved as he taxied up. His goggles were back, and his eyes were both blackened, but he was grinning, his even rows of white teeth gleaming.

“Well, I did it, sir. Got a cruiser cold. Now, will you be good? Do I go back to France?”

“Yes! Congratulations,” snapped the general. “But what the hell hit you?”

“An iron foundry, sir,” returned the Yank, “but Lady Luck smiled again. Now, where do we go from here? Any orders?”

“Come along and have a drink, you young devil,” chuckled the general, throwing an arm around the pilot’s shoulder. “A cruiser, eh? ‘Pon my soul, you’re a marvel. By the way, you’ll have to appear’ at the banquet to-night—regular binge in your honor, Strang. And I’ve made it a mixed affair, so that—

h'mm—well, you'll want your fiancée there, eh, lucky dog?"

"Nope! General, you've got it all wrong," said Strang, lighting a cigarette. "You'll either have to cancel that binge or—well, I'm going to wash up and beat it up to the city. Got the license an' everythin' all set. All ready, excepting I haven't got a—a best man, sir."

"Oh, Lord! Sure you have, Strang. I'll be that bird. Hargraves, call the car. Let's get this young devil married before he breaks his damn neck. Ho—ho, 'pon my soul! What a roar there'll be when I announce Colonel and Mrs. Ted Strang to—"

"Say, general, I believe you've already had a snort too many," cut in Strang. "Captain and Mrs.—"

"My word, I forgot, Strang, ol' buy. You'll be temporary colonel inside of four hours, and confirmed by evening. A little gift—a wedding present from Hargraves and myself."

Strang tried to stammer out something, that might have been thanks, but words failed him.