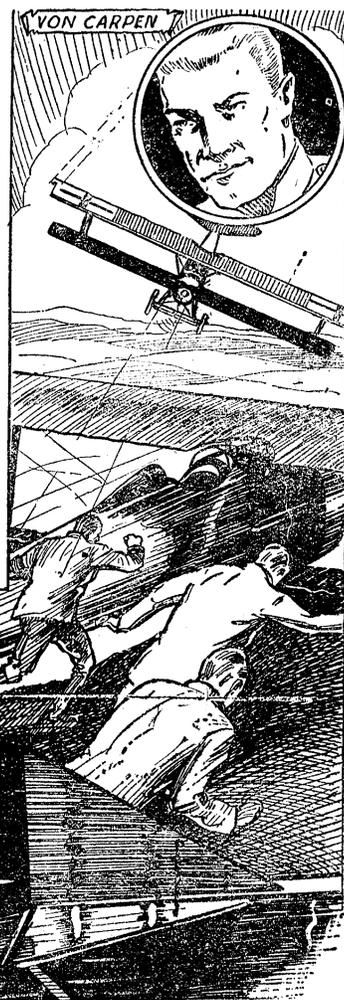


THE RETURN OF SILENT ORTH

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON



*A Hun Bomb Blasts a Wounded Yank from a
Hospital Cot to the Middle of Battle!*

CHAPTER I ORDEAL BY FIRE

FOR MONTHS SILENT ORTH, who had earned his nickname because, in the beginning, he had been anything but silent, had blazed a trail along the skyways of the Western Front—a trail of fallen Germans, of blazing crates, of victories snatched from the very brink of defeat. He had seemed to bear a charmed life.

His wingmates had sworn by him. His enemies had whispered his name in awe.

He would never be slain, his wing-mates thought. The man who got him, his enemies, would rank in fame with von Richthofen.

Then, one afternoon, Silent Orth, the great Silent Orth, was missing, and none knew why, nor where, save Silent Orth himself and the Germans on his tail. There had been five. Now there were three.

His Spad was in flames. Bullets splattered all around him. He was seven kilometers behind the German lines, and making no effort now to reach his own.

He could never have made it, even if the three Germans had not been riding him so closely. He knew all three of them. Von Carpen, Liegstrom, Steinwold, aces all. Men against whom he had fought a dozen times; men whose fame rested on the fact that they had fought Silent Orth and escaped with their lives. Enemies who had always got home somehow after their battles with the American ace.

NOW they were having their innings.

Delicately he maneuvered his crate and even in the face of death he planned ahead, as though even death might be cheated. If he could just get down the stairs,

five thousand feet of them, he might somehow land and walk away from the flaming wreckage. He thought beyond that; of winning free, of eluding German patrols, of getting back through the German lines to his own, of reaching the tarmac of the 6th Pursuit, and coming right back, perhaps even today, to get the trio that this minute rode him down to death.

He didn't try to avoid their bullets, because if he maneuvered his crate he might cause one sheet of flame to play back over the cockpit. If that happened he was done. It was strange, too, for there had been times when he had thought of burning. Several times he had said what he would do, to his wingmates.

"If I'm ever going down in a flamer, I'll stick my head right into the smudge and get it over with, fast!"

But he was curiously reluctant to do it. He was still alive, and while a man lived he might well live on. And it would be a good thing to come back for this trio, with his Vickers blasting, his Hisso roaring, and his wings singing their song of speed as they led him into battle.

He hadn't been able to whip five Germans, but he had got two of them before one lucky Spandau burst had fired his crate. They were probably using incendiaries against him, the sauerkraut eaters. And if he could get two, he should be able to make it three. He'd done it before, and it was borne in upon him that he would, and must, get a chance to do it again.

"About fifteen hundred feet now," thought Orth. "If those blasted Heinies give me a break at all, I'll grab a tree limb, going in, and pull out of this."

Impossible, yet he had already done things, times without number, that other men found impossible. Once, in the beginning, he had talked about those things, and because his wingmates thought he was boasting they had started calling him "Silent" Orth—and the name had stuck, and become a synonym for Nemesis along the Western Front. And the German who fought him, and lived to tell the tale, was a hero to his own friends and countrymen.

Now the ground was very close. It rushed to meet him with amazing speed. Orth put his left hand to the fastenings of his safety belt. His fingers felt numb, almost useless. They made him think of the "cracklin's" of his youth, and the pigtails, curled and crisp, which he had loved to eat when lard had been "rendered." His fingers were almost like that.

Yet they must serve his purpose. If they did not he would never be able to kick himself free when the crate went in.

He would land, hold his breath until something happened—until the gas-tank went and brought death in a flaming hell, or he was thrown or jumped clear.

The belt came free. The Spad crashed in.

He felt it start to nose over, felt himself being hurled from the pit at bullet speed. He thought, as he somersaulted over and over, that he heard the gas-tank go. Then he relaxed, sighing, letting his breath out with a vast explosion. He thought he must have been burned almost to a crisp. Intolerable agony scorched him.

Then, oblivion.

HOW long it lasted he had no way of knowing. His next feeling was of agony too great to be borne by a human being; his next knowledge that he stood on his feet, and that someone was slapping him on the back—his sunburned back, which hurt like hell. In his ears, German voices.

He turned and looked at the trio who watched him, with hands on the butts of their Lugers.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, and his voice was a harsh croak, "we meet again, it seems, at much closer range."

Von Carpen stared at him with black, beady eyes.

"Your name is Orth," he said flatly.

"Yes."

"And you are our prisoner!"

"I am honored that it has taken three German flyers to hem me in. Let's see: Von Carpen, von Liegstrom, von Steinwold, an illustrious crew."

If only he hadn't been so badly injured he would have liked nothing better than to fling himself at the three and lash out with fists and feet until they had gone down and he had given them the boots. They knew he was in agony, were deliberately prolonging it, gloating over his hurts which they had been the means of administering.

Von Carpen stepped in, lashed out with his right palm. The palm struck Orth's tortured cheek with a sound like a pistol shot. Behind the palm it seemed to Orth that the skin peeled from his cheek, as one might peel the skin from sunburned flesh.

Orth reeled back. But the expression on his face did not change. His lashes were gone, and his eyebrows, and his lids were swollen to twice their normal size. The spot where von Carpen had struck him was an aching bed of flesh, intolerable pain.

He straightened, merely facing the German, holding his lips tightly locked. There was nothing to be gained in argument with men who held the upper

hand. He saw a group of soldiers debouching from the woods, and their *pickelhaube* helmets glinted with fire. And everything that hinted of fire gave off fresh heat with which to torture him.

“Let’s go,” he said finally, “wherever we are going.”

Von Carpen turned on the others.

“Back to the field,” he said. “Send someone for my Fokker. I am marching in with the prisoner.”

THE men, mouths agape as von Carpen barked the identity of the prisoner at them, circled him, their bayoneted Mausers at the ready. Von Carpen took up the lead.

“How far is it?” asked Orth.

“Two kilometers.”

He must walk those two kilometers, though his brain reeled and his stomach turned, and his body was a ball of aches and pains. And yet, to have ridden on a stretcher would have been infinitely worse. His feet in his boots did not seem even to belong to him.

The soldiers set a smart pace, led by von Carpen. They took a meandering trail through the woods, walking close on Orth’s heels to keep him from slipping away.

High officers exited from buildings at the far end of the field, to come and meet him. His lips curled again. It was, in a way, a triumphal entry for him, too, though the Germans did not seem to realize it.

His feet scuffed against the ground. His agony had reached a point where it no longer mattered. If he stopped, if he lay down, he thought, he would never rise again.

A curious feeling went with him as he walked, so that he wasn’t walking, really, but still diving down in his burning Spad, with flames roaring away across his left wing. The sound of his Hisso still roared in his ears. The ground under his feet was not the ground, but the cushion of air built up under his airfoils by the speed of his plunge. It came to him then that this thing would never leave him; that always he would hear the Hisso, the blasting of three sets of Spandaus behind, all around him, and the screaming of Mercedes motors.

A thousand times, sleeping and waking, he would crash into that clearing, be hurled into oblivion, returning to hear the guttural voices of his captors as in some ghastly nightmare.

THE group came to a halt as a high-ranking German, his face a mask of authority, acknowledged the heel-clicking, the salute of von Carpen.

“Von Carpen, sir. With a prisoner of war.”

“His name?” barked the high-ranker.

“Orth.”

Not by so much as a flicker of the eyelids did the German indicate that he recognized the name. But Orth knew that telephones had long since advised these headquarters of his capture. The high-ranker did not look at him, ignored him as though he had been of no account. He was putting Orth in his place as a prisoner, without stopping to think that he was honoring him, admitting his importance, by coming to meet him.

“From what organization?” asked the high-ranker again.

“Sixth American Pursuit.”

“Good. He will have information. I delegate you the task of getting it from him. I wish to know, and German Intelligence will wish to know, the numbers and disposition of the Allies in his sector. Find out how many planes they have under cover that are effective, how many replacements in readiness to come up. You understand, the usual information. You will get it, von Carpen.”

There was an unholy light in the eyes of von Carpen, now turned on Orth.

“Yes, sir, I shall get it,” he said grimly.

“Hurry,” said the high-ranker.

Orth was hustled to an office, where he was forced to stand before the desk of von Carpen, surrounded by soldiers.

“Now, Orth,” said von Carpen, “some answers to questions.”

“I’ve no answers to supply, von Carpen,” said Orth. “You must certainly understand that!”

Von Carpen came swiftly around the desk. Soldiers closed on Orth, their bayonets against his back. Von Carpen’s left hand shot out, to fasten in the neck of Orth’s flying garment. He yanked it free, and it seemed to Orth that all the skin of his torso went with it. But he kept his face calm, stared straight into the face of von Carpen.

“I’ll kill you for that, von Carpen,” he said dispassionately.

Von Carpen went berserk. He began to lash out at Orth. Foam flecked his lips as he mouthed obscenities.

Orth reeled from the man’s attack. He started to fight back and bayonet points pierced his flesh. He was to take a beating then, without fighting back, or lose his life, here and now. The high-ranker had given him, without reserve, into the hands of von Carpen.

A roar suddenly broke over the German field.

CHAPTER II
MERCY ARMADA

VON CARPEN STEPPED BACK from Silent Orth as the roaring of many crates broke over the German field. His dark face went darker still with rising fury.

“French and Americans,” he said hoarsely.

Orth stood, panting, listening to the sounds of motors. The ground shook with their blasting. Orth estimated that there must be twenty planes of different makes. He could pick out Spads, Salmsons and Nieuports. His heart hammered with high excitement. Did his friends know he was here? Was this an attempt at rescue? Or a revenge offensive? There was no way of knowing just yet.

He heard crates burst into song on German deadlines. Von Carpen hesitated for just a moment. Then he snapped at the soldiers.

“Hold him until I get back. If he makes a move to get away, let him have your bayonets through the body. Don’t be afraid to hurt the American swine!”

Then von Carpen was drawing on his gauntlets, hurtling for the door. Orth got in his way.

“Take care of yourself, von Carpen,” he said grimly.

“Why?”

“Because I want you for myself!”

Von Carpen snarled, whirled on the soldiers.

“If in the slightest doubt as to what is happening, shoot or bayonet this man!”

Then von Carpen was gone, and the field had become a bedlam. Orth heard a Fokker take off with a rush and a roar, just outside.

There was a great lump in Orth’s throat as he diagnosed the might of the attackers, tried to guess why they had come. In fancy he could see them starting, grim, savage men, bent on avenging him or freeing him and willing to stake their lives for his sake. Great guys, the French and Americans and British. Thought nothing of expending a few lives for the sake of one.

He heard a hangar go up in flames, and he felt as though those flames were wreathing his body. He could breathe fire and brimstone. His body writhed

with the crippling, charring, roasting heat in which he knew other men were trapped, were dying. But this was war—

He heard small bombs let go, and for a moment he thought how slim his chances were. His wingmates could not possibly know where he was. One of their bombs might well crash through the roof of this building and blast him asunder.

As though in answer to this very thought the roof began to vomit savage, spiteful bullets. A Spad pilot was sending a burst into the building just for luck. Orth glanced up and saw the ends of splinters cut from the ceiling, hanging down like a ghastly kind of lace. There were bullet holes in the floor, with splinters rising before and behind them.

Behind the desk he saw himself in a mirror, and horror rolled over him as the flames had rolled over him. He could see the marks of von Carpen’s palm against his cheek, and the mark was greyish dermis in the midst of browned skin. There were streaks across his chest, whence von Carpen had yanked his flying togs.

His face was a hairless, eyebrowless horror.

He grinned at himself, and the grin was a gargoylesque mask.

“If I live,” thought Orth, “I’ll look like nothing so much as some Frankenstein monster invented to frighten women out of their wits. By God, the Germans will pay me for it yet, though!”

Orth whirled as hurried footsteps sounded on the threshold of the building. The Germans whirled, too, and gasped, and their rifles came to the ready.

Two American officers stood there, with automatics in their hands. One looked at Silent Orth.

“Your name Orth?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we haven’t got all day. There are two crates down on the field, and the others still up are trying to keep Heinies away from them until we can get back. We’ve had a time finding you.”

THE officer punctuated his remarks, shouted to be heard above the roaring of combat, with flat spanking sounds from his automatic, sending bullets into the thick of the Germans. The clothing of the Americans was bullet-riddled, proof that they had indeed been through plenty to reach him.

He flung himself at the door. An automatic barked in his face, and behind him a bayonet slid through his clothing, grazing his scorched right side. The American

had shot the soldier who would have bayoneted him in a desperate effort to obey von Carpen's last orders.

Orth sped onto the field with the two flyers. Bullets whined as they struck the ground at the feet of the trio, and sped off into space. Dirt was kicked in their faces, but they still kept on.

Zigzagging as they ran, Orth and his rescuers, neither of whom was known to him, raced for a Spad and a Nieuport that stood side by side, while seven or eight Allied crates almost touched the ground with their knife-blade wingtips as they fought to keep those crates of the spinning props safe for the trio.

Orth jumped, forcing his body to obey him, to the wing of the Spad, close against the motor section.

There he fastened his hands in wires and struts as the crates started to move. He wrapped his tortured legs around any supporting thing he could find. He heard bullets strike. He gritted his teeth and willed to hang on. He felt the Spad rise into the air with a great rush. He heard Fokkers diving on it, with Spads and Nieuports diving to keep them off. He willed at the last to cling with feet and hands, with arms and with legs, until they cut him free.

Then, save that he dreamed of flying through the flames of hell, in a crate that burned constantly brighter and hotter, he knew nothing for a long time. Then—

Orth heard voices. They seemed to come from a far distance. He felt as though he, not they, were approaching. He felt as though he were swimming in a lake of fire which perpetually bathed all his body. He knew, when he began to know things with reasonable definiteness, that he was lying on a hospital bed. He could smell narcotics, antiseptics, hear the soft voices of nurses. The war seemed miles away, where he could scarcely hear it—with one exception: his ears were always filled with the last sounds of his own fall.

When he opened his eyes to peer through slits in bandages it seemed to him that the flames themselves had burned hatred of the Germans deep into his body and soul. He didn't blame them for sending him down; that was war. But what sort of soldiers would torture an enemy, merely because that enemy had done his duty, by which some of them had fallen?

Time after time he thought of the needless abuse he had taken at the hands of von Carpen and his soldiers. Over and over again he whispered the names of the trio which had ridden him down:

"Von Carpen! Liegstrom! Steinwold! Von Carpen! Steinwold! Liegstrom!"

Their names became a song, a song of hatred. He could hear those three flyers singing through bared teeth, snarling their own names like wolves with fangs ready for rending.

Orth's body trembled. He thought of taking off again, and was conscious of a sudden crawling of fear. He had taken off shortly after his fall, as a flyer sometimes must to keep his nerve, but he didn't remember any of it; only that he had hung fast, and lost consciousness. Of the return, with Germans shooting at him, he knew nothing.

Now he tried to make out the words of those about him.

"It's a miracle he's alive at all." That sounded like a medico's voice. "And it's a mortal cinch he'll never fly again, never fight again. It will be another miracle if we can save his eyesight, if he can ever walk."

A cold chill raced over Orth's blazing body. He gave no sign, but deep down inside him he thought: "They're wrong. They have to be wrong. Doctors have been wrong before, can be wrong again. It can't be possible that this urge I feel can never be satisfied. A cripple? I? Silent Orth! Never! Not even if they have to build a crate around me, fitted to my requirements. By God, I will fly again. Who cares about a scarred face, anyhow? Where is there anyone to care? A woman? I won't live through the war if I fly again; I won't wish to if I don't—"

As though in answer to his thought a woman's soft voice broke in.

"Poor chap! My heart bleeds for him. I wish I could take him in my arms."

"His skin would peel off on you, nurse!" snapped the medico. "And he won't be much to look at, in the face."

Orth winced. There was so much tenderness in the woman's face. And she cried out as the medico spoke, as though he had slapped her face. But she went bravely on.

"If I were a woman, his sweetheart, I'd be proud of his scarred face! I would be glorified if I had the right to hold his head against me."

"Thanks, all of you," Orth said suddenly. "I'm sorry to have eavesdropped, but I had to know my status, you see. And I've got something to say. I'm going to fly again in spite of hell and high water and all the medicos in France, understand? I can't explain it to you, but I've got to get back. There are three Germans I have to meet, though I walk on crutches the rest of my life afterward. Von Carpen, Liegstrom, Steinwold!"

I can't get them out of my heart. I've got to meet them and even the score."

"Please, Mr. Orth," the woman's voice was piteous, "can't you forget hatred for just a little while? Can't you even think of peace while you are getting well? You have to. You'll be here for weeks."

"I'll be here only until I can get back on my feet."

"That's up to us, Orth!" snapped a medico.

ORTH turned his head. The doctor was slender, and had a spade beard. He looked like a man who knew his business. Then Orth saw the face of the nurse. An angel's face, he thought, the first woman's face he had seen in what seemed like ages of hell.

"Thanks, sister, but I don't need sympathy," he growled. "All I need is whatever it takes to get me out of here!"

He noted that his knees were bent, and it reminded him of what the medicos had said. He gritted his teeth then, deliberately, and straightened his legs.

Knives of intolerable agony shot through him. He felt his tendons crack. Sweat filtered through his bandages; sweat was salt rubbed in his raw wounds, but he persisted until his legs were straight.

"You see, doc," he said, "I've proved you wrong in one thing. I'll prove you wrong in everything else. I'm going back. I will go back! And where am I?"

"A base hospital. And the next step is an experiment in skin grafting."

"Why?"

"You've got to have nuclei from which new skin may grow. You haven't got much that hasn't been burned. That means that somebody will have to supply you with little patches of skin. We cut it off them, paste it onto you, and hope it will take root and grow."

The medicos moved away, softly talking. There was a whispered conference, then a long wait, when the medicos came back. Orth heard again the soft swish of nurses' uniforms, heard the footfalls of shod men, heard cots creak as the men reclined. Some of them jested over their forthcoming ordeal. One said:

"The guy had better be careful with my hide! *I* always have been pretty respectful of it!"

That would be Lieutenant Harbison, one of the smallest and most daring pilots of the 6th Pursuit who, whatever else he did, certainly never tried to save himself. As brave a daredevil as had ever taken a Spad off any field. Orth felt his throat filling.

Orth gritted his teeth as they started to take off the oil-soaked bandages. Tears dribbled from the corners

of his closed lids, in spite of all he could do to prevent. The nurse was whispering, under her breath.

"Please God, don't let them hurt him too much!"

Back to the strong men went the medicos, to garner their minims of epidermis. Back they came to Orth, to stab him again and again as with those hot-tipped pokers, dabbing on bits of skin in what seemed an utterly patternless array.

"That's enough for now," said the medico. "We'll get the legs and thighs tomorrow."

"Now!" snapped Orth. "Let's get it over with, if you've got enough men with the hide to spare!"

So, the work went on, and finally it was finished, and Orth was bandaged again, and trying to sleep. But he could not, because of the motors, rising in sound as they came through the night.

CHAPTER III BLACK GOTHAS

IN THE DAYS AND NIGHTS that followed, Silent Orth was often close to shrieking madness, though none but himself ever knew it. He gritted his teeth against the pain and held himself motionless. In his mind always were three Germans, flying wing and wing against the moon or the sun, or the cirrus clouds, grinning at one another as they set traps for the lives of men which might be saved if only Silent Orth could fly.

The nights seemed never to end, for always he was listening—listening for the thrumming of three special motors, the Mercedes motors of von Carpen, Steinwold and Liegstrom. Times without number he thought he heard them, flying through the night on some mission behind the Allied lines, and at such times he would forget his pain and sit up, and shake his fist at the dark, and curse fate because he could not run out, trundle out a Spad, and take off to fight them.

But it was usually a Gotha, headed somewhere with bombs.

The war went on—and on.

And the cot held him. His wing-mates came to see him, and he noticed that there were new faces among them, and missed the faces of men who had been flying when he had been with the 6th.

"Who got Harbison?" he asked, when he missed

the little fighter on the second week of his stay in the hospital.

“Liegstrom. A flamer!”

Then next day: “Who got Michaelson?”

“Steinwold. Dropped on him out of the sun. He was cold meat, never even knew he was in danger, probably. Five kilometers behind our own lines, just lazing along, probably thinking of his girl. He’d just got a letter from her. They were to be married when the war was over.”

And then, one night—

He wakened from the first prolonged sleep he’d had in hours to hear an unrhythmical sound of motors in the east. He stared at the black ceiling, waiting, unmindful of the pain to which he had become so much accustomed.

“Gothas!” he told himself. “They’re headed this way!” a man cried out. “They’ll bomb us all to hell! And I haven’t got but one leg to run on!”

“Shut up, you!” snapped another. “You’re living on borrowed time, anyhow! What do you care?”

“I can’t stand it. I’ve had enough! If I got hit again—”

Now other wounded were crying out, expressing fear. A door opened and Orth knew that the nurse was coming. The angel of mercy.

She had just come in when he thought—though he didn’t believe it possible, really, to recognize them—he could make out the motor blasting of at least two of the crates the trio had flown. Nobody had shot down one of those three Fokkers, he had been told. The trio still used the three crates in which they had downed Silent Orth.

He shook his fist at the ceiling. He swore softly to himself. He lay back, so that the nurse should not find him sitting up, and give him hell. “Take it easy,” she was saying to the others. “Nothing is going to happen to us. They couldn’t possibly see the hospital. The night is as black as death itself.”

“They know, I tell you!” said crippled Kelly hysterically. “They’re coming straight at us.”

THERE was infinite pity in the voice of Lira, the nurse, as she answered.

“Lie back, Sid. Even if they knew the hospital was here they couldn’t hit it. Even if they hit it there isn’t one chance in a million that they would hit us!”

“I was hit before, wasn’t I? In all the Western Front that particular bit of shrapnel found me and I lost my right leg. That’s the hell of it, just lying here, unable to move, or run, or dodge—”

Orth knew she was beside Kelly’s bed. He thought he heard her kiss the doomed man, but could not be sure.

Then other sounds.

“Hear them!” cried Lira. “The French and American flyers are after them!”

It was true. Orth could hear the chattering of Vickers, the answering chattering of Spandaus. He heard an explosion, as though the Gothas were beginning to drop their bombs.

Another bomb. This time the walls of the hospital seemed to jump from under the roof, which started crumbling down, a mighty load. The bomb had struck the roof a terrific crash.

There was a blinding glare.

In that glare Orth looked swiftly about him, forgetting his own pain completely for the first time. He could see Kelly, sitting up in his cot, with his mouth open in a soundless scream, his eyes starting from his head. Then a great mass of stuff fell on Kelly.

And Orth could see the nurse with her hands crossed on her breast, her eyes lifted to the ceiling. He saw her standing there. And then, all at once, her white waist was red as blood, red as the flames which had all but slain Silent Orth.

RED—red as blood, because it was blood. With her head still lifted as though she had been stiffened in death instantly, as she posed, the nurse fell in the hospital’s aisle.

It had happened in the space between two heart beats. Kelly was dead. The nurse was dead, the nurse with the beautiful, kindly face—a face that was covered now with gouts of blood. Then something fell on her, too.

At the same moment another bomb let go, and Orth was out in the yard somehow, as though a great wind had reached in and pulled him free of the falling debris in time to save his life—and the whole wing of the hospital which had sheltered him was a mass of wreckage, underneath which fifty men were lying, most of them surely dead. Orth had been saved by a miracle, a ghastly, costly miracle.

He found himself running away, with a roaring in his ears, from the battle overhead. He heard someone sobbing, was surprised to discover it was himself. Instinctively he headed east. Overhead a Gotha roared down.

Heading east he blundered into trees, whose limbs slapped him harshly across the face. He thought wryly

that no matter how much they slapped him, they could never erase the mark of von Carpen's hand from his cheek. And as he ran it seemed to him that the patches of skin he had taken from fellow flyers—some of whom were now dead at the hands of the trio he hated—was growing to keep pace with his running, to make him as nearly whole as possible when he reached the tarmac and the real beginning of the task he had set himself.

He didn't know what he wore. It didn't seem to matter.

He guessed it must be within two hours of dawn when, muddled with much stumbling through the slime, bloody from the lashing of limbs, and burning as intolerably as ever he had, he stood at last on the edge of his own tarmac. There he paused for a moment to stare across the field of misty dawn, before advancing.

He reached the door of Headquarters building, in which he knew Major Wellman slept on a cot in a corner. He knocked.

He heard the cot creak. He stepped back a little, and partially slipped the bandages on his lower face. The door opened. The touseled head of the major looked out, without recognition.

"Lieutenant Orth reports for duty, sir," Orth said softly.

There was a pause of almost a minute. Then Wellman said:

"Great God, Orth! It isn't possible. Yet I've wished for something like this since the day we brought you back. Come in, man!"

Wellman jumped down and started to put his arms about Orth.

"Careful, sir," said Orth. "I may come apart in your hands, and make you feel like hell."

Sweat burst forth on the face of Major Wellman.

"Well, Orth," he said, "what's the idea?"

In cold, dispassionate tones, Orth told him of the bombing and of his own miraculous escape. He left out nothing.

"You have to go back, of course, Orth," said Wellman. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't keep you here. The medical officer will put you in bed the minute he sees you."

"You wouldn't have me killed, would you, sir?"

"I don't get it."

"I'll die if I go back."

"What are you after, then?"

"I want to take off on dawn patrol."

"Impossible!"

"Steinwold, Liegstrom and von Carpen—They are still alive?" From the lips of the major came heartfelt curses.

"Alive, yes, and they've run up such a string of victories that it seems nobody can stop them. But what has that to do with you?" Orth leaned slightly forward. "Which hangar has the newest Spad, ready for business?"

Wellman, his face convulsed, looked up, whispered the number of the hangar.

"It's letting you go out to die, Orth," he said.

"It's giving me new life, sir, which the medicos said I would never have."

Orth turned, made for the door. After he had gone, with some of the major's uniform under his left arm, the major sat for a long time staring at the top of his desk, fiddling with paper and pencils. Then he blew out the light, went back to his cot, and stared at the ceiling until dawn, trying to see against the blackness what the horror-masked man in Hangar Three was doing all that time. Finally the major dozed off, sighing:

"I hope my breeches fit him!" Only the blasting of Hissos on the deadline wakened Major Wellman. He stayed on his cot for a few minutes until there came a low cry, as from a hundred voices, out on the tarmac. A strange low cheer that must have come from the very hearts of the men who uttered it. Silent Orth had come back.

CHAPTER IV THE HIGH WHINE

THE FIRST FLYER OUT saw the man in the pit of the middle Spad, and his mouth snapped open. "Good Godalmighty!" One by one the flyers trooped out, one by one they saw the still man in the cockpit of the middle Spad, one by one each expressed himself after his own way. One by one they showed him they felt his return was a miracle they could scarcely believe. Then came Captain Logan, flight leader. His face held a frown, which fled away somewhere when he spotted Orth.

He hesitated, strode to Orth.

"What's the idea? Who are you?"

"You used to know me, Skipper," said Orth grimly. "The name is Orth!"

Logan stepped back. It was strange, perhaps, that he lifted his hand to his forehead in swift salute.

Nothing else. Then, seated in his own Spad at the right of the line, he held his right hand aloft, as though offering a kind of benediction which Orth took to himself as his own. The Spad started rolling. Orth almost sobbed to feel the rock and roll of a ship under him again. Like coming home after a long absence, he thought, to find that all his friends remembered him and that even the Spad was glad to bear him out to meet whatever awaited him beyond the snake-trace trenches of the front lines.

Faster roared the Hissos. The tails of the Spads were off, one by one, two by two. Orth held his stick forward, willing his body to forget the pain of his wounds. Then he brought the stick back, and the Spad roared into the growing morning like a wild bird of prey.

Orth opened his mouth to shout his sheer joy into the slipstream as he shot swiftly up to fifteen hundred, leveled, gave her the gun, shot up fifteen hundred more, leveled, rose swiftly to the altitude of rendezvous.

Then he pointed his nose toward the front lines and waited for his wingmates, some of whose faces were familiar, some of whose faces were new, to form for the flight across the opposing forces on the ground.

But what was this that was happening?

Captain Logan slid in beside him, but to his right rear. The next senior officer of "B" Flight slid in to Orth's left. That made Silent Orth the point of the traditional V. He stared a question at Captain Logan, Who grinned and nodded. And his grin said, and his nod said:

"You have come home, old-timer. Now take command of these buzzards and show the cockeyed world what a man can come back from the dead to do!"

The wind in his face was soothing, seeming intent on washing so many hurts away. The roaring of motors behind him on either side was encouragement. How could he be afraid, anyhow? Not that he thought of being. It was so good to be there, that even if one died, within a minute from now, for the privilege, one would have lived a happy lifetime.

He saw the trenches come toward them, mist-shrouded by the creeping fog of early morning. He saw white faces looking up. He saw gunners crawl into

their pill-boxes, and laughed in glee when the Archies began to write their white and black messages of futility on the sky above "B" Flight.

He tested his Vickers briefly. He heard his men do likewise with theirs. He had checked his crate times without number as he had waited for the dawn.

He was ready, if a man half dead could ever be ready.

And then the Fokkers began rising out of the trees ahead, and the heart of Silent Orth began hammering in high excitement. Here was a dream coming true, a dream that only yesterday had been beyond all possibility of realization.

Just once again he looked back, into the faces, one after the other, of his men. Captain Logan smiled and nodded.

One after the other his wingmates smiled and nodded. And there was no question, no hint of dismay or terror, in a single nod or smile. Just that soul-satisfying confidence, that sureness of themselves, which seemed to have encompassed the heart of each of them with the return of Silent Orth.

NOW the Germans were coming on, hell-bent. Eyes straining, Orth sought for the hated trio, tried to pick out their crates. Only when he spotted them would he waggle his wings for the attack. Then, his eyes narrowed, his wings waggled, and the hell-hounds of war closed in.

Captain Logan drew first blood. He smashed head-on to meet the second in command of the German flight, and the German, fearing a head-on collision, nosed up instead of diving, and Logan drilled him through the belling with bursts of hot lead whose tracer smoke was like thrown swords.

The German dropped a wing and slanted down the sky, and did not come out, because he was dead at the stick from the bullet that had cut into him through the seat.

Logan struck again, and killed his man, all within the batting of an eyelash. Orth saw him do it, and shouted again. The others saw him, and felt in that instant that the tide had definitely turned in favor of the Allies, that the balance of power, though the Germans were twice the number of the Allies, had swung back to the latter as though struck back by a sledgehammer in the hands of a giant proud of his strength.

"Where's Steinwold?" Orth asked himself. "And Liegstrom? And von Carpen?"

Before he could spot any of them in that mad mass of whirling wings, of tracer smoke from thousands of Spandau and Vickers bullets, he saw two Germans on the tail of one replacement named Taylor, whom he had met for the first time this morning.

Orth shaped a maneuver with his lips:
“The double thrust.”

No sooner had he shaped the words than his Spad was executing the maneuver, diving on one crate with Vickers blasting away, shooting pencils of tracer smoke full and true to the mark. The first German crate, with the pilot’s hand on the trips, and his thoughts concerned only with the kill of which he was sure, jumped out of line.

The German, with blood dribbling down his chin, looked about for the American who had downed him, spotted Orth, and tried to lift his hand to his brow in the victim’s salute. But the hand was too heavy, and Orth did not see him anyhow, for he had lifted his nose in the final movement of the double thrust, and was pouring bullets into the neck of the second German.

Young Taylor looked back, zoomed, waved at Silent Orth, thanking him, telling him he could handle his own after this.

Once a Fokker slid up past his nose, reaching for the bell of a Spad ahead and above. Orth sent his guns yammering before the Fokker came into line of fire. The Fokker zoomed right into the bullets, and Orth saw the German clutch at his throat as Vickers lead ate into him. He slid to the right as the Fokker went into a series of crazy contortions, prefacing the zigzagging roll down the sky to the far ground—ten thousand feet below.

There were so many more Germans than Americans that not all of them could get into the battle.

His eyes narrowed. He’d spotted his men before engaging, lost them, now had found one of them again. *Steinwold!*

HIS masklike face, his gargoylesque face, with the marks of the palm of von Carpen dully showing became grim and hard, and the jaw muscles stood out.

Deliberately he shut everything from his mind but Steinwold. He shut the other Germans out, and his wingmates, and the swirling dogfight.

He dived down beside Steinwold to perform a maneuver even Silent Orth had never tried before to get one wing under the fuselage of the Fokker, and to

rise under that Fokker close enough so that its pilot could look across at him, across and down—close enough that Steinwold must recognize him, if he could.

And Steinwold should be able to, for Steinwold had been one of the first to see him after his capture, ages ago, now it seemed.

Orth had never been surer. He could have dived through Steinwold’s cockpit without injury to his own crate. He could fly his Spad through the eye of a needle. He could do all the impossible, miraculous things he had never before tried to do.

Orth grinned, a grim, ugly grimace and dived at the back of Steinwold. He missed a Fokker by the breadth of a piece of paper. He missed a Spad by a hair. And he noticed neither. Steinwold was letting others look out for themselves; Orth did likewise. Let them see, and make way. As for himself, Orth held his stick with his knees, and his thick, ugly hands hovered over his trips, while his injured eyes tried to bring the back of Steinwold against the crossed wires of his ring-sights.

But always, though Steinwold did not look back, the German managed, by ever so little, to elude him, to escape to the right, or to the left. Orth grinned again. Steinwold was diving. He would soon burst through the dog-fight as through a cloud, and then he was finished beyond a shadow of doubt.

Orth watched him keenly.

The German darted one look back, and Orth read his intention as surely as though it had been telegraphed to him. Orth nosed up. A split-second later the German zoomed—and rose into Orth’s line of fire. First came his motor section, and Orth’s stream of lead was hammering into that section with deadly surety and savage intent before Steinwold himself rode into the line of fire.

As Orth saw the flames burst forth and the black smoke, he tried to stay his hand. Let Steinwold go down, burning, as he, Orth, had gone down. But Orth had miscalculated by a fraction of a second, and the flames which shortly rolled over the Steinwold cockpit rolled over the cockpit in which a dead man sat over useless controls. Orth’s bullets had all but blasted Steinwold apart.

Simultaneously bullets smashed past Orth’s ears from behind. He rolled to the right before he looked back, before there could be a second burst. Then he turned and shouted his wild exuberance again into the slipstream as he recognized Liegstrom in the pursuing crate.

Liegstrom was very close.

Liegstrom must see him, must know that he fought Silent Orth, whom he could not possibly know was back in the air. Grinning, Orth let his crate spin down through the dog-fight again, toward the ground, and watched Liegstrom with the grim, machine-like precision of the practised butcher, ride down to administer the *coup de grace*.

Orth turned on him, leveling from a dive out of a spin, and flung head-on to meet the German. The German should dive. The German did dive. Orth dropped his left wing, slanted to the right under the terrific drive of his power, and looked down into Liegstrom's set face as he went past. There was instant, startled recognition on the face of Liegstrom, and a song of satisfaction in the heart of Silent Orth.

His Vickers blazed. They sewed patterns on the wings of Liegstrom's Fokker.

Liegstrom fought like a fury, cold as ice in this emergency, even though he must have known he was through. But the eyes of his wingmates were on him, and he would go out like a German.

His crate burst into flames from the constant hammering of the bullets from Orth's Vickers into his motor section. It was an obsession with Orth to make his enemies die as they had tried to slay him.

And these two, Liegstrom and Steinwold, he was sure, had been with the Fokker escort that night when Nurse Lira had died with her face lifted in prayer to her God.

Liegstrom saluted as smoke and orange flames played over his cockpit. At the last, Orth gave him a burst through the body, in mercy. Then he looked up at something strange, where the dog-fight had been waging.

To the west were the Americans, four in number. Orth studied them, wished that they were a little closer to home. But for the fact that when his next fight was finished, the ten Germans would fall on the four Americans like dogs driven mad with hunger, he would have been deeply content.

For in between the two forces, circling calmly, waiting, was a Fokker he could never forget, flown he knew by a man he could never forget as long as the mark of that man's hand was on his cheek—*von Carpen!*

Von Carpen simply waited, as though he said: "Well, here I am, and what about it?"

Orth considered, looked at his own men, wishing they wouldn't push so close, to be within reach of the Germans when this fight was over. But they didn't move back, and suddenly Orth knew why, and his fear for them departed. They were merely waiting, with ill-concealed impatience, for him to make an end of von Carpen, when they would fling themselves at the Germans and rip them apart, though their number should double and treble. In that instant it seemed to Orth that they could do it, too, without losing one of their own.

Von Carpen dropped his left wing, spun to the left, straightened for Orth's own cockpit. Orth, his jaw muscles taut, swung his nose to meet the German's challenge. His Vickers screamed and chanted and grew hot under his hands. Von Carpen came on. Orth would not give way. If they should crash, well and good, but Orth would never give way for von Carpen.

In the end, von Carpen again dived under Orth. Orth dropped a wing down so that he could see von Carpen and make sure that the German could not get him with a lucky burst from below. He saw von Carpen's face again when the German went under him. Now it was streaked with blood and von Carpen had flung his goggles aside as though his eyes were dimming on him and he could not see.

Orth had drawn blood.

Von Carpen tried every trick he knew to prolong the inevitable, but with thought of those marks on his face nagging him, Orth did not give him a chance.

Orth's own crate was a sieve by now, for Orth only slid out of line of fire enough to escape destruction himself, letting his crate take bullets where it would, even in the motor section. Fire had no terrors for him if only, when the blaze broke forth, he still had time to send a burst into von Carpen.

Carpen attacked, time and again. Methodically,

CHAPTER V THE PHANTOM HAND

A LOFT THE AMERICANS and Germans had drawn aside, as though at a signal. A signal from someone whose imperious will was obeyed by both Germans and Americans. To the east, flying in rough tiers, and circling to keep close, were ten Germans. Down below other Germans were burning.

surely, like a master of the rapier, Orth drove him back—and followed relentlessly, sending his bullets in, probing for the life of von Carpen which, minute by minute, eluded him.

Orth dived, leveled, rolled on the axis of his own fuselage, then looped, rolled out, and looked again for von Carpen. The German was above him, diving once more.

“Now!” shouted Orth.

His Vickers began again their chant of the kill as Orth let them go, let them get hot on the nacelle. His eye was glued to the ring-sight hairs, and von Carpen’s prop-center, behind which was the motor section, was squarely bisected by both hairs. Orth watched his pencils of tracer eat through that prop, saw the splinters of the prop become visible, knew without being able to see that von Carpen was desperately trying to cut his motor before it was thrown from its bed by the mad vibration.

Then Orth sighed. Nothing von Carpen could do now would save him. For the flames of hell came from his motor housing, black smoke came with it, and von Carpen was through.

THE Fokker became a black ball of hellish flames and smoke as it started to drop down the sky. Orth drew off to watch it go, stared at the murk intently, in which he could not see the form of von Carpen.

Then, all at once he saw von Carpen, somersaulting over and over, falling down the sky.

The four Spads dropped down to Orth’s level like shot birds. Again Logan waved Orth into the lead.

Orth’s crate was smoking, but he didn’t mind. Let it smoke. No flames yet.

Two to his right rear, two to his left rear, Orth led his wingmates home, and his heart was filled with a vast contentment.

Then, his own tarmac, like the open arms of a friend or a loved one.

Finally he was down, stopping his crate near the deadline, while his wingmates, still like birds, dropped down with him, ran their crates up close to his. Mechanics came running when Orth signaled. They helped him from his pit.

“Take me to my hutment,” he said softly.

They helped him all the way home. He looked for a mirror, first thing. He was looking into it when his four wingmates came bursting in.

“Orth, you have the damndest luck!” yelled Logan. “Your crate burst into flames the minute you closed the door of your hutment!” Orth did not seem to hear or understand. Instead, with the mirror in his hand, he turned to Logan and the other three, and said:

“Maybe I’m a little crazy, fellows, but I’ll swear this mark on my face—it looks like the mark of a hand, you know—is fading out. What do you think?”

Not understanding, they didn’t answer. Orth dropped the mirror and headed for the office of the medico.

“I’ll just let the guy know,” he grinned at Logan, “that I’m back—to stay—and that not even fire and bullets can keep me out of the air until the very last German crate is down!”

“Crazy is right!” said Logan. “I only wish, though, that all of us were just as crazy!”