



# THE NOËL PATROL

by EDGAR L. COOPER

*Christmas Eve—and the dogs of war were leashed. But Ace-Up remembered his vow of a fifth by Christmas, and the fangs of the Austrian Werewolf were still unpulled.*

IT WAS A BIG NIGHT in the Café Dolomite, a riotous, horseplay night, a binge night for the flyers of the 7th Italian Pursuit Escadrille, and the five lone American pilots attached to the unit at the commune of Montecchio, Province Venetia. It was the night of December 23d of the year '17, the night before Christmas Eve. And the dingy little *trattoria* just beyond the outskirts of the tiny village, rang with the sounds of music, song and revelry.

Slits of yellow light shone dimly from closed windows and doors; within the low-ceilinged wineshop the glow from lanterns and candles was obscured by clouds of drifting tobacco smoke, and the close air was redolent with the fumes of nicotine and liquor. Nattily garbed Italian pilots rubbed shoulders and touched glasses with the scattering of olive-drab men from America, swapping drinks and lies; upon the zinc bar, flanked by the grizzled old *padrone* at his *caisse*, stood

a straight young fir tree, its branches gaudy with bright strips of paper and tinsel. It had been brought down, that afternoon, from the slopes of Monte Fiara on the Asiago.

Flight-Commander Barbieri, glass in hand, stood at his table proposing a toast. Arrow-straight, swarthy-faced, jetty-eyed, his teeth flashed in a smile as he raised his tumbler high.

"It is past the hour of two in the morning," he said, "the morn of the Eve of *Natalie, Noel*. Christmas Eve." He grinned at the five American flyers. "The day we are commanded to forgive our enemies. So, fellow countrymen and distinguished Allies, I raise my glass to an enemy. To a demon in the air, a wizard pilot, a sportsman of the sky. To the thorn in our flesh, a steel-nerved, steel-muscled, steel-brained jousting knight who leads his gray ships with the black wolves on their fuselages."

Major Barbieri hesitated, then drew the tumbler to his lips.

"I drink, fellow pilots and comrades, to Major the Baron Rupprecht von Hentzau, 'Werewolf of Austria,' Commander of the *Schwarz-Wolff Staffel*. Hard and savage as the insignia on his Fokker, but a gentleman withal. Victor over fifty-seven Allied planes, yet still a gentleman. And I drink, gentlemen of America and *Italia*, to a man whom I am proud to call my enemy. *Salute.*"

Chairs scraped as those war-burned veterans of air combat scrambled to their feet, grim, hard-jawed men, bloodshot of eye, cynical of face, thin of lip. Men cynical in the face of ever present death, and contemptuous of life, they were old hands. They knew the Werewolf, had known him for three hectic years; like Barbieri, they were proud to call that tedescho an enemy who had made his name a byword for reckless courage and sportsmanlike battle from Switzerland to the Adriatic. Their glasses went up, and with them a chorus of "*Viva!*" and "*Salute!*"

*Crash!* Glass splintered and wine splashed. The eyes of surprised war birds turned in unison to a corner table where a man uniformed in olive drab sat. He had not risen with the rest at the toast.

Flushed of face, his black eyes reddened, First Lieutenant Duke Rittenhouse swept a bottle of Marsala from the table, accompanying the movement with a curse. He stared about the room belligerently, and his dark, handsome features were twisted in an ugly sneer as he smiled. A slow hush fell upon the assemblage as the American's eyes came to rest upon the figure of the squadron commander.

"Hentzau, hell!" His voice was rasping, brittle. "That bottle was broached for the purpose of drinking a toast. That's why I cracked it. I'll apologize for the bottle and buy a new one. I'll drink to no lousy murderer masquerading as some plumed knight riding the sky. Instead of a wolf, Hentzau's insignia ought to be a damned sneaking hyena. To hell with 'friendly allies'! And you can put that in your pipe and smoke it—all you guys!"

The silence became tense. A soft curse fell, anonymously. Major Barbieri, his face bleak and grim, opened his mouth to retort, then seemed to think better of it. Spreading his hands, he hunched a shoulder and resumed his seat. The other Italians cast cool, puzzled looks at the black-visaged American, while his four fellow countrymen stared at him in open resentment. There had been something peremptory and vicious in that sweep of Rittenhouse's hand and the way the bottle crashed against the little stove a few yards away. There had been something more ugly in the savagery of his sneering remark.

IN THE silence that followed Rittenhouse's outburst, the growl and mutter of gunfire could be heard, drifting down from the Montello on the wings of the rain-washed wind. Christmas Eve, and men were up there, fighting, dying.

"What in hell's bitten you, Ace-Up?" demanded "Red" Kirby harshly. "Are you haywire as well as drunk? What if the Werewolf did knock down Dave Gordon, and he happened to be your sidekick? That's war."

Duke's fist smashed against the table with a bang.

"War?" he snarled. "Yes, maybe it is. But when you come praising a Jerry who followed Dave to the ground with his guns wide open—even after Dave was in a flaming kimono, finis—praising him, and calling him a sport and gentleman and all that friendly enemy bushwah, well you're just a bunch of damned dumb simps, that's all."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" snapped Kirby. "You know the sky game isn't for softies, and that a crippled ship is fair prey. Dave, or you, or myself, would have done the same thing if we'd caught the Wolf by the ying-yang the way he did Dave. You're drunk, or you wouldn't talk or act like this. You owe the major a damned neat apology, Duke."

Rittenhouse lurched to his feet, his face livid, lips twisted into a slitlike slash of fury. He kicked the chair from under him, caught up his Burberry from the floor, and shook himself into it.

"I'm apologizing to nobody," he said thickly. "You Sunday-school boys stay here and drink to Hentzau and Emperor Karl all you like, and hang presents on that tree for 'em. Me, I'm going out, then up, and God help any Boche that gets in my way. 'Peace on earth, good will to men'—hell!"

He lurched across the room amid stony silence, reached the door and flung it open. Turning, he saluted sardonically, bowing from the hips.

"Hentzau's my meat," he flung back. "And you carol singers watch your turns if you happen to make a dawn patrol this morning. If you get in my way, it'll be just too bad. Go on and drink your toast to the hyena—I'll quaff mine to him with Vickers and hot lead."

The door slammed behind him, and for a long instant the smoke which hung over the littered tables stirred with the draught, then became lazily coiled again.

The men sat looking at each other. The men from the States, hardly hardened to the fury of war in the air, knew how utterly boastful and ridiculous the outburst of Duke Rittenhouse must have seemed to the war-burned Italian pilots. Any man who thought he was big enough to go up alone and bring down Rupprecht von Hentzau was a fool, no less. Yet they understood quite a bit more of Duke Rittenhouse's attitude and state of being than did the Italian flyers, but couldn't make excuses for it.

Duke, whose recent *nom de guerre* was Ace-Up, ranked high man among the Yanks attached to the 7th in credited Austrian planes. His tally was four, with only one to go to make him a full-fledged ace. He was an impulsive, fighting, flying fool who could take off on a dime and land on an army blanket, and turn his crate wrongside and inside out in the air. And he had sworn to rate himself an ace before Christmas, or wash out in the try. That accounted for a lot of his recklessness.

Then there was the affair of Dave Gordon, his buddy. They had gone to college together, stuck together from Kelly Field to the drome at Montecchio. And two weeks previously Gordon had been shot down by Hentzau in a dogfight with his staffel east of the Piave. Rittenhouse had sworn vengeance; he hated the Wolf with a rare savagery. Major Barbieri, who also had lost many comrades under Hentzau's guns, was war burned enough not to harbor a grudge against the Austrian top-ace, and couldn't comprehend the American's flare-up.

But he merely shrugged, smiled a frozen, pleasant little smile, and refilled his thick tumbler. Glancing at the men in the room, he lifted his glass.

"Happy hunting!" he said evenly. "*Sante!*"

"*Salute!*"

They scrambled to their feet, bottle necks clicking against glasses. The air was suddenly alive with curses and laughter once more as the relief from the momentary strain made itself felt. Hell, after all, this was Christmas Eve. In Italy, Austria, America, people would be entering, in their various fashions, into the spirit of the old man of peace. Back in mirage-like America there would be holly and red berries and cedar trees, roast turkey and cranberries, fruit cake and egg-nog.

"To *Natalie! Noel!* Merry Christmas!"

Outside the wind was howling across Venetia in a banshee whine, rising now and then into a violence which rattled the windows of the *trattoria*, driving before it a fine mist that was turning to sleet. More bottles were broached in the wineshop. Tracers and cognac—to hell with the *guerre* for this day and the next! To hell with Duke Rittenhouse—let him go up and comb the sky for this gallant ancient enemy who had sent so many men these Italians knew down to earth. Let him carry on his feud solo, and make Red Kirby write a letter to his folks back home as a Christmas present.

DAWN patrol for the members of the 7th would be a mere gesture that day. And dawn would find them all in the Cafe Dolomite. The minutes ticked away amid song and shouting, badinage and horseplay, in which a miniature effigy of a *tedescho* soldier was hung upon the fir tree by his heels.

The drone of a motor, warming up on the T, came faintly to the red-eyed men in the close-packed, overheated *trattoria*. Lieutenant Dick Worthing, a dog-eared pack of cards in his hand, glanced through the chinks in the curtained window, then unsteadily reseated himself.

"Be light in ten minutes," he said.

"Dealer's choice?"

The dirty, thumbled cards were distributed in silence. A bottle clinked. Old Beppo, the sleepy *padrone*, was making black java, lots of it. Major Barbieri slowly began buttoning his tunic, yawning the while. Some of his war birds were snoring at tables. The Spad's roar grew more even and the motor ceased its hopping. The major shrugged indifferently. The

four Americans studied their cards. In the back of his mind each man knew exactly what Duke was doing out there on the line.

"I'm stickin'," Kirby observed, shoving in his ante. "Nothing wrong with his motor, is there?"

"Plenty nothing," nodded Worthing. "I'm in, too. Deal 'em."

A lurching Italian pilot opened the door, letting in a swish of cold air. A fine powdery gust of snow came with it. The Yanks looked at the door, then at each other. They liked Duke Rittenhouse, his wit and ready smile. He knew his way about in the clouds—but Hentzau was the Werewolf and visibility would be nil that dawn.

The drone of the Spad became a bull-throated roar as it taxied for the take-off. The roar deepened, faded, died toward the east in the chill wind of dawn. Red Kirby wet his lips and nodded.

"Go to it, old son. We'll carry on with these bottles a while. Luck."

"Luck is right," said Dick Worthing. "Oh, damn the blamed fool!"

At seven thousand feet Duke Rittenhouse took his Spad across the Piave and into Austrian territory. It was bitter cold, the cold of late December in the clouds. Cold, and with a fine film of snow falling that made a white blanket far as eye could see and completely shut off the earth from his vision. Duke raised his goggles and tried to rub the film from his eyes with the back of a gloved hand, but only succeeded in making both eyes sting like fire from the gasoline and oil that stained the gloves. With a curse he shook his head angrily, and banked his ship down river.

The haziness of the long drinking hours had worn off, and there was a sickish feeling in the pit of his stomach. Duke was a little ashamed, too, of his outburst in the *trattoria*; it had been mostly cognac talking then. He realized now how it must have sounded to those veteran Italian pilots. Then his dark, handsome face twisted, and his lips crooked in an ugly smile. But for that son Hentzau, old Dave Gordon would maybe be bingeing with him now instead of being marked by a broken prop somewhere in Tedescholand.

His motor sang a silky song of power as he drove it south toward Comuda and the river bend. This day he would make himself an ace, or bust a gut trying. But very few Austrians would be up in this sort of weather, damn 'em. They would be doing the same thing as

those chaps back in Montecchio, celebrating around a fir tree and singing songs of Noel and toasting brave enemies, likely. That was no way to win a war. Those lads down below in the ditches, saying Merry Christmas with hot lead and steel, had the right idea.

Dawn broke bleakly, with a sky the color of a shark's belly, and the snow stopped. Like a fine powder it lay over the countryside, mantling the scars of war, hiding the shell-smashed ugliness. Duke's jaws set as his eyes swept the murky heavens in a three-sixty-degree arc. Up toward Solighetto a trio of "rubber cows" were taking the air.

Duke threw his dun-colored ship about in a vicious bank that left it quivering in every strut before she straightened out. He reached into his flying suit, drew out a flask of cognac, and drank deeply. Shuddering, he gave his Spad the gun. The blood thumped across his forehead and boomed, drumlike, in his temples.

"Watch me, Sausages," he gritted. "I'm out for no good this day!"

USUALLY pursuit pilots didn't bother with observation balloons, for as a rule each cow marked a death trap for an attacking ship. Below, on the ground, where the crews serving the balloons labored, a score of machine guns placed in a ring and mounted on wagon wheels to give them ease of handling a vertical elevation, commanded every approach to the *Drachen*.

And if a hostile flyer in a sportive mood decided to make merry with the cows and came driving down to the attack, he found himself the bull's eye of a barrage of vicious fire; an easy target for Skodas and Spandaus, caught in a net of whistling steel. If he were lucky enough to escape, he seldom attempted such a thing again, for his luck wouldn't hold a second go at it.

Duke Rittenhouse hadn't bothered, heretofore, with the *Drachens*—and he wasn't ignorant of the mare's-nest that trio of Sausages three miles east of Solighetto represented. The three represented the base and one angle of a triangle, a perfect range-finding machine. But madness was in his brain that December morning, as he hurtled his fleet Spad northward along the Piave reaches toward those unwieldy balloons swaying against the murky sky.

Crouched in his cockpit, tense hands gripping stick and gun trip, his slitted eyes watched the cows come closer every instant. Save for them, the sky in that sector seemed clear of ships or other balloons.

On the ground a startled Austrian artillery observer snatched at a telephone and yelled guttural words

into the mouthpiece. Around the balloons there was a sudden, feverish activity. Ground troops ran madly to the swiveled machine guns, others rushed to the winches to draw down the rubber cows. Spandaus began to yammer and rave.

But the gray plane with the red, white and blue cocardes on its wings was upon them. Like a ghost it had slipped from the murky heavens.

Duke Rittenhouse, with a single look at the ground, sent his Spad spinning in a dizzy bank. The fat belly of a Sausage loomed fifty feet in front of his spinner cap; he saw the two observers leap in wild panic, their chutes fluttering open as they fell. His thumbs smashed hard on the Bowden trips as he cut in the guns in a savage burst of steel and tracers into that flabby side, and without waiting to see the result of his rafale, kicked the rudder violently and dove for the second one.

There was a snapping and crackling about his ears, a ripping sound through the plane wings. Chips and splinters and bits of fabric flew. The gunners on the ground went into action. But like a plummet Duke hurtled straight for the second Sausage, viciously thumbing the trips. Two more white chutes blossomed like mushrooms as scared Austrians leapt from the basket.

Vickers burring like a mad rattlesnake, Duke saw his tracers stitch a pattern along the gut of the second cow; he jerked stick and kicked rudder. The Spad went over on a wing out of the dive. Ace-Up cast a lightning-like glance behind him. The first balloon, gas ignited by the tracers, was collapsing to the ground, burning fiercely.

"How do you like those onions, you Kraut sons!" he gritted.

Shaking his head like a goaded bull, he whirled to attack the third cow, now being frantically hauled earthward by gray-green figures. A splinter from the cockpit tore a long gash across his left cheek, the blood streamed down over his chin and onto the oil-smearred surface of his flying coat. Duke barely noted it; he didn't even wipe it away. His left side felt hot and sticky, but he paid it no heed. Nor did he notice the steel snapping and whistling about his head.

He held his Spad at the third balloon without a quiver, diving relentlessly. He'd give the lousy stein-bangers something to sing about on Christmas Eve! Give it to 'em right on the chin. His thumbs came down hard on the triggers; the twin Vickers vomited fire and smoke and hissing yellow slugs. And his fixed

diabolical grin grew into a wild, madman's laugh as he watched the tracers cut into the awkwardly swaying Sausage, saw its fat belly suddenly pucker and buckle.

Like running a snickersnee through the body of a man too fat to fight or run, it was. Duke threw the Spad on its ear and held its nose up, reverse rudder. It slithered and slipped away, flying eccentrically. He saw the third balloon, like the other two, become a raging volcano of flame as it crashed to the ground.

One last glance he took overside at the moiling beehive below, then Ace-Up was away, low and fast, making for the Piave and the Montecchio tarmac, many kilometers distant. The snapping and snarling sounds gradually died away; he drew a deep breath of relief. He was clear.

FOR the first time Duke noted the gash on his face, the stinging, sticky pain on his hip. With a twisted grimace he looked at the bullet holes in wings and fuselage, at the ragged tatters of fabric flapping in the wind. His nose and throat burned from the powder fumes that had been flashed back by the slipstream, and his eyes were watery and bloodshot.

But as he headed high over the Montello toward the drome he took a long, deep drink from his cognac flask, and threw the empty bottle over side. Stamping his feet to restore circulation, he lustily sang that ballad of the war birds known from the Channel to the Adriatic

"Stand to your glasses steady.  
This is a world of lies,  
Here's to those who've gone West already,  
Here's to the next one that dies!"

By four o'clock that afternoon, Duke Rittenhouse had done his bit in depleting Italy's supply of cognac. He was just as drunk, and in as ugly a mood, as he had been the previous night, and the Italian pilots, as well as his four American compatriots, let him severely alone. For Ace-Up wasn't pleasant company when he was deep in his cups, and brooding upon the death of Dick Gordon.

Red Kirby had taken one look at his bullet-riddled Spad, and shook his head in wonderment. Confirmation had come back to Montecchio via phone about the burning of the three *Drachens* at Solighetto. Army corps had sent congratulations, even though the stunt had brought down a hurricane of Austrian artillery fire in reprisal. Major Barbieri congratulated Duke politely, then left him to his own devices. Captain Piombo, the

escadrille surgeon, cut a slice of steel out of Ace-Up's nether extremity, swabbed his face with antiseptic, and ordered him to bed for two days.

"Two days hell," retorted Rittenhouse. "You don't know, you compound cathartics. Soon as those grease-monkeys get my crate patched up a little, I'm going for another joy ride. Meanwhile, I'm exercising the old right arm by hoisting cognac glasses. You boys stand on the ground and sing Christmas carols. God rest you, merry gentlemen!"

So at four o'clock Duke sat at the corner table of the Cafe Dolomite, a half empty bottle of Martel Three-Star before him, staring surlily out the window with reddened eyes. Outside of a rather stiff left leg, he felt the same as ever, and was prime for any sort of trouble.

Major Barbieri had announced that there would be no dusk patrol that evening. That night the squadron would gather about the Christmas tree, mix a huge bowl of alcoholic punch, and make high wassail. Just the masculine gesture of many men far from home, on the Eve of Noel, to observe the occasion. And some of them would die before the birth of the New Year.

In the tiny commune of Montecchio, the villagers were already celebrating Christmas Eve. The carillons in the *campanile* were ringing out their bronze notes; youngsters in bib-and-tucker shouted joyously and pelted one another with snowballs. The village in its coat of ermine, looked as if it were expecting a visit from Santa Claus.

Snow lay thick on the thatch and in soft, downy ridges on the red-tiled roofs. It covered the rubbish heaps of farmyards, and the old oak beams of barns. Away over the lonely country which led to the trendies, every furrow in the fields was a thin white ridge, and the trees stood ink black against the slate-gray sky. Some of them looked like frosty cobwebs. Venetia would be white that night, even in the darkness.

"On earth, peace—Good will toward men," they were singing in the church; women were journeying there carrying long tapers in their hands. Many of the Italian pilots turned their steps the same way. The bells rang out, their tones carrying far as the afternoon deepened and the sky darkened. A few vagrant snowflakes began to fall. Christmas Eve—nineteen hundred and seventeen years ago.

"And to-night—this!" muttered Duke Rittenhouse. He got to his feet, drained the cognac bottle, and left the *trattoria*. He looked up at the sky, all about him, then rapidly strode away, with a little limp, toward the tarmac.

His motor was idling, and he had a foot in the stirrup ready to fork the coaming when Red Kirby and Dick Worthing came up to him. They said nothing, only watched as he climbed aboard and settled himself into his seat. They knew it would be no earthly use to argue, though both were far from sober.

"I'm off," shouted Ace-Up. "Off to a rendezvous—" and the sound of his voice was lost in the bull-like roar of the motor.

For a minute the two pilots attached to the 7th watched grimly. Then Red Kirby broke the silence.

"Famous last words," he said slowly.

"Old Ace-Up's taking off on his last patrol."

A little mechanic crossed himself rapidly. The Spad bearing Duke Rittenhouse raced across the powdery snow, skimmed over the poplars, and still flying low, passed out of sight in the mists to the east.

IT WAS beyond San Gregorio, above where Mascareda once had been, that things began to happen. And they happened with disconcerting suddenness to Ace-Up.

It was eerie up there in the sky that late evening, darkish and cold and gloomy. His ears dulled by staccato motor noise and the ringing of many cognacs, failed to register the throb of fast flying Mercedes motors. Duke, intent upon the easy kill of a loitering and unsuspecting Halberstadt two-placer that was drumming toward the Belluno mountains, missed the blurred dots that were three Fokker D7s diving from the soup above him.

He wasn't even aware of the approach of Austrian ships until a stinging burst from a pair of Spandaus ripped splinters from his right wing and whined off the flat wires. He whirled in his pit, heart leaping madly, lips drawn back in a snarl. Instinctively he nosed his Spad down and his fist jammed the gun against the post.

The sight that met his eyes brought the blood thumping into his head, and narrowed his lids to knife slits. Behind the goggles. With a curse he threw his ship into a vicious bank and headed back toward his antagonists. And the Spad's stacks sputtered and spat flame and gobs of oil smoke as the cams filled with the sudden rush of raw gas.

He saw the three wolf-gray Fokkers, and on each fuselage was painted the figure of a black running wolf, with a black Maltese Cross under its belly. And on one of the D7s—the second one, crash diving at him—Duke made out the flaming scimitar in the black wolf's jaws, the black nose of the prop.

It was von Hentzau himself, the Werewolf of Austria, staffel commander.

And Rupprecht von Hentzau was flaming to the attack. With a wave of his gauntleted hand he signaled the other Fokkers to draw aside as he drove his ship upon Duke's Spad in that hurtling, full-speed dive.

His mouth a thin white hyphen of fury, Duke gripped the stick with his left fist and jerked it back into his stomach. The Spad leaped straight upward in a wild zoom under full power and hung on its prop, wings quivering, motor gasping, struts vibrating at the strain. It was a lightning quick, perfectly executed maneuver, a rush to meet the Werewolf half way.

A leaping something flew up in his face, hurtled over him with the speed of light and the scream of a banshee as the surprized Hentzau zoomed wildly to avoid the inevitable smash. For the fraction of a second the nose of the Spad bored into the belly of the black-wolf plane, it was a flashing blur between the Vickers ring sights.

Duke's right hand squeezed the trips and his guns cut in. The old familiar tang of powder stung his nose, coming back on the slipstream. It sharpened his senses like a sluice of ice-cold water on his back.

An exultant cry burst from his lips, for he had seen mangled wood and ripped linen snap out from the gray ship as he ripped home that burst at point-blank range.

Gun to gun with the Werewolf at last. Face to face in the sky with the killer of Dave Gordon, his buddy. The long-awaited, long-cherished moment when his vengeance could take full play. And he, Duke Rittenhouse, had drawn first blood.

He whirled the Spad, the grin stamped on his set visage. The Werewolf was hurtling back to the attack, guns hammering, coming head on. Duke could see the cowed figure behind the prop, see the scarlet stab of the guns, hear the whistling zipp of bullets. He wasn't conscious of the black dots stitching wings and fuselage as he crouched behind the pit coaming, swapping burst for burst.

They passed each other by a hair's breadth, Spad and Fokker, then banked and spun back to the battle. In slips and banks, turns and dives, their motors roared like mad bulls. Ace-Up was raging like a madman. Time after time he threw his Spad around on a dime, and its wings trembled with the strain of ninety-degree banks at terrific speed. So far he had held his own with Austria's best, and a wildly screaming something rose up within him.

ON THE ground, in hutment and dug-out and trench, Austrian soldiers with faces turned to the sky watched that duel and marveled. Gray-green figures in tiny villages and Friulian farms looked up and wondered—wondered that war birds could battle so furiously on the Eve of Noel. Even the artillery on both sides, the rifles and grenades in the trenches along the Piave, and up on the Asiago, were silent as men grouped about tiny fir trees and sang *Stille Nacht* and old folk songs. Strange, it was.

Then Rupprecht von Hentzau, the invincible, executed a startling maneuver. He set his Fokker on an ear, looped twice, completed the turn and whipped in behind Duke's Spad as Ace-Up was just finishing a vicious bank. It was a master stroke, and one that permitted him to get position, one of Hentzau's master strokes that had made him the superace of Austria-Hungary.

Duke Rittenhouse, flying like a demon, turned the Spad wrongside and inside out to escape the hail of death snapping about his ears. But the Wolf was striking with rending fangs, following his every move, raking him fore and aft with a sleet of lead that ripped the Spad into a thing of flying linen and crackling wood. His brain suddenly crystal clear, Duke sat in his riddled pit, knowing that Death was touching him.

He laughed insanely. So it was like his, eh? The Door marked D! Many times in the past he had wondered how he would feel in the face of death.

Even as he laughed there was a puff of smoke from in front of his face, a drumming sound like a rivet gun pressed against a thin sheet of metal. Chips of steel and slivers of glass flew back into his face, smashing his goggles and cutting his face. A shower of splinters flew about his head.

Something like an icy-hot snowball smashed him in the back of the neck. The pain made him grind his teeth and whirl in his seat.

The Werewolf was riding hard on his tail, Spandaus vomiting flame and steel.

All right, come on in and finish it. He was helpless, his right arm numb, his face cut to ribbons.

Funny, but he wasn't thinking of death at all. He was thinking of a brightly lighted cedar tree at home, and green wreaths. That was funny too, for now he was taking his ticket West.

Duke was flying straight, no longer trying to avoid the Spandau bullets. He half twisted in his seat, intending to signal the Werewolf to let him have it.

Then, and only then, was he aware that the death

hornets were not zipping by his head or drumming into the camel-back. The wolf-gray Fokker was flying alongside the battered Spad, their wing-tips almost touching.

Duke's bloodshot eyes opened wide. The helmeted figure in the Fokker cockpit grinned with a flash of white teeth, and motioned him to cut his gun. Without thinking Duke did so, and an unreal silence fell where a second before the burr of *mitrallies* and roar of motors had made bedlam. The drone of the other two Austrian planes, circling lazily above, sounded faint and subdued to the American.

Vaguely Duke noted that there was blood on the Werewolf's cheek.

Rupprecht von Hentzau clasped his gauntleted hands together in a handshake, smiled again and held up his right, palm out, in the salute of warriors. "Merry Christmas, *Amerikaner!*" he shouted. "Sometime we will meet again, perhaps."

He cut in his gun, gestured toward the Piave and Italian territory to Duke, and shot off and away.

STILL dazed, Duke Rittenhouse sat slumped in his seat, a queer sort of lump choking in his throat.

Hentzau had given him his life as a Christmas present. The Austrian ace whom he, Duke Rittenhouse, had called a jackal and had refused to drink to the previous night.

Ace-Up, still Ace-Up despite hell and high water, jazzed his Spad dromeward from his Noel patrol.

He didn't come down on the Montecchio at dusk

that eve in the careless sideslip he had used to land that morning after burning the Solighetto balloons. The Spad slewed wildly, tipped on its nose a bare second, then slowly tilted over on a wing before coming to a double-lucky stop without a complete washout.

Italians and Americans, rushing up pell-mell, found Duke Rittenhouse seated in the shell-ripped cockpit, holding his head between his hands. He looked at them curiously, his eyes blank, his face haggard and bloody. A bullet had seared his ribs, a second sliced the muscles of his right arm, the third had drilled a hole above his collar-bone.

"In God's name what happened?" asked Red Kirby as they helped him out of the pit.

"Too much Hentzau," muttered Duke thickly. "Too damned much. Listen, you birds. The Wolf made me a present of my life to-night, a Christmas present. Had me cold turkey."

And when the gesticulating escadrille's surgeon tried to take him away, Duke held up a blood-stained hand. "Not until I've apologized to all of you, and we've drunk a toast to the Werewolf. I was mad and crazy, I guess."

It was amid much hilarity that the black bottles were broached in the *trattoria* of old Beppo before the young fir tree, and the toast downed. Snow fell silently, and there was no rumble of guns from up Asiago way.

"Good will toward men," proposed Major Barbieri. "To your being an, Ace!"

"Merry Christmas," said Duke Rittenhouse. "I'd be content to be still 'Ace-Up.'"