

SPECTER STRAFE

by O.B. MYERS



Riddled with Vickers lead, that Yank ship hurtled down to oblivion—and only Stack Sherman and the specter that haunted him knew on whose gun trips rested the murder's guilt!

AT TWELVE MINUTES PAST THREE on the afternoon of July 9th a Nieuport settled lightly to the ground on the tarmac of the 44th Pursuit Squadron, and taxied to the hangars. As the motor was cut mechanics ran to the cockpit, but the pilot leaped quickly to the ground, and without so much as a word strode straight for headquarters. Without stopping to knock, he burst into the C.O.'s private room, and closed the door behind him.

"Major!" he said, in a stricken voice, "I've just shot down an American Spad!"

"What!" Major Cornell, tall, flaxen-haired, young in every feature but his eyes, rose involuntarily to his feet, and the wrinkles across his brow deepened as he stared in astonishment at the helmeted pilot before him. "What's that you say, Sherman?"

With fists clenched at his sides to still their trembling, and voice a hoarse and shaking rasp, Stack Sherman told his story.

"I was alone, lost the formation. Came through a cloud, and met him almost head-on. He fired, and then I fired, one burst. He started to spin, then I saw the cocardes on his wings. Just as he spun into a cloud,

I saw the kicking mule painted on his fuselage, 95th Insignia. For a minute I couldn't do a thing but gape; then I dove through the cloud, and hunted around. But I couldn't find the crash; it was somewhere near Courcelles." His voice dropped to a horror-stricken whisper, as by brute strength of will he forced out the syllables which damned him. "He—he was an American, and I killed him."

The major had listened in grim and rigid attention; now he asked, "You say he opened fire on you, Sherman?"

"Yes, he fired at me. I saw his tracers. But I killed him, major. God knows I didn't mean to, but I did. You'll have to get the 95th, major, and tell them about it. Find out who it was." Stack was pacing the floor, like a caged animal; his voice choked on his words, and his eyes were bottomless wells of pain and remorse.

"It was my fault, all my fault. An American, too. Oh, God! Perhaps it's some one I know. That would be awful! I'll tell them—oh, what will I tell them? In God's name, what will I say?"

"Hold on a minute, Sherman!"

The major stepped around his desk, threw an arm across the pilot's heaving shoulders, and began to speak in calm and even tones.

"Now take it easy, Stack, old man. This isn't as bad as you seem to feel, right now. He fired first, didn't he? Well, you're both to blame then, only you had the misfortune to be the better shot. You just leave this to me; I'll take care of it."

"It's damned white of you, sir—but the 95th? You'll have to let them know."

"I'll let them know nothing. What's the good? If he's dead, he's dead, and nothing can be done about it except to make a lot of hard feelings. Unless and until I have to testify under oath, I'm going to know absolutely nothing about it, as far as the 95th is concerned. Now you forget it, hear? You're going on leave, right away, tonight. And don't show your face around this hole for two weeks, understand? You've been six solid weeks over the lines, and a man's nerves go all to hell damned quickly in this game. I know; don't forget I was a pilot a long time before I was ever a squadron C.O. You should have gone before this; my fault you didn't. Now wipe this afternoon right out of your mind, Stack, get away from here, have a swell time—and I'll see you in two weeks! So long!"

Stack shook his head weakly from side to side, as if to clear unwelcome mists from his brain, and departed gratefully. Only an hour later, when he was thrusting razor and socks into his musette bag, did he remember

that the major had been addressing him as Stack, instead of the usual Sherman. One mighty decent sort, was Major Cornell, he decided anew. No wonder the gang all swore by him.

"Forget this afternoon," the major had said. Well, that was impossible, but he'd try his best.

AFTER fourteen days at Biarritz, Stack had well-nigh achieved the impossible. He swam, he rode, he lay for hours in the warm sand, half asleep; he rose and dressed only to start the nightly binge in the hotel bar. He almost forgot there ever had been a war. But on the last night of his leave his past rose before him with a cruel leer. He was sitting by the window, glancing through the Paris edition of the New York Herald; his eye happened on the casualty lists. A date seemed to rise up and strike him in the face.

"July 9th, Miles, Wm. J., 1st Lt., 95th Squad., A.E.F.
Killed in action ; Marne sector."

For a long time Stack sat, staring at that brief line. He hunted the lists through; there were no other casualties in the 95th on that date. Then that was the man. Miles, William J.—Bill Miles. The name had a familiar ring, somehow, but he couldn't place it. No, he decided, he had never known Bill Miles. He tore the piece out of the paper, slipped it in his wallet, and set about packing for the return trip.

According to custom, the gang greeted him as if he had merely spent the night in the nearest town. There were three new faces in C Flight, one in each of the others. "Poke" Masters had gone down in flames; Wally Gore landed alive, taken prisoner. The others were grouped under a noncommittal "Missing." The major remarked that he looked like a million, and that there was a brand new ship waiting for him in the hangar. A little later he got the C.O. alone in a corner of the mess, and spoke the question which was uppermost in his mind.

"Anything about that—er, you know?"

"Not a thing," said the major quickly.

"I found his name," said Stack quietly. He fished the clipping from his wallet. The major read it in silence.

"I'd tear it up, if I were you," he advised, "and forget the whole thing. Nothing has ever been asked about it, officially or otherwise. It's assumed an enemy bullet got him, I suppose. Anyway, it's water over the dam, as far as you're concerned. Here, come over and have a drink with me."

Stack fell quickly into the routine of the field; inside

of a week he hardly remembered that he had been away. The present occupied all of his attention; no man could engage in active patrols over the Front with his thoughts wandering in the past. After "Pop" Warner crashed in No-Man's-Land, Stack was made leader of A Flight, and shouldered even more responsibility than before. Then came the big *mêlée* over Fismes on the 12th, and the squadron casualty list was increased by five in one afternoon. The next evening, as Stack walked past headquarters, the major called him inside.

"Replacements came in about an hour ago," the C.O. told him. "I've assigned two to A Flight."

"Right, major. I'll see that they're take care of."

"One of them," said the major, looking at him intently, "is named Miles." Everything seemed to stop moving inside of Stack. The world was suddenly very empty and still.

"Miles?" he repeated, almost stupidly, although he had caught the significance of the name immediately upon hearing it.

"Yes, Peter B. Miles. And do you know what he asked me?"

Stack shook his head numbly.

"He asked me for the name of the pilot who was flying Nieuport Number 6 on the afternoon of July 9th." For an instant Stack swayed dizzily on his feet, and into his eyes came the dreadful look of a haunted man.

"His brother," he whispered, in a tone so low as to be scarcely audible. "And he knows."

The major shrugged. "Perhaps. But not everything. I told him I didn't remember who was flying Number 6 on that date, and that our records would not show it. You've been using Number 1 ever since Pop Warner was bumped, so there'd be no reason to suspect you. It's nothing to worry about, Stack."

Stack was looking at the major without seeing him. His gaze was focussed on something far, far away. His distended eyes seemed to gaze into the mists of the past, and to see clearly there a Spad, bearing on its side the replica of a kicking mule, spinning into the gray oblivion of a cloud bank. He shuddered briefly.

"I must tell him," he said in a hollow voice.

"Tell him, hell!" protested the major instantly. "You'll do nothing of the kind. What's the good? Let sleeping dogs lie, I tell you. I can't afford to lose any more pilots, right now."

READING the look of dismay on Stack's face, the major leaned forward and spoke confidentially. "Look

here, Stack. We'll get rid of this fellow. I'll find some excuse to send him back, or get him transferred. Then he won't be around to bother us."

"No, no, don't do that," protested Stack quickly. "I wouldn't want that on my conscience, too. Let him stay; I'll be all right, I guess. I'll get used to having him around."

"Well, all right, if you say so. But if he makes any trouble, I'll barge him out any time you say the word. I can get along without him much better than I could without you. And as for that, friend Jerry may help us out."

WITHOUT fully grasping the significance of the C.O.'s last words, Stack left the office and walked toward barracks. He steeled himself for the meeting ahead of him, but when he came face to face with the new replacement found it less difficult than he had expected. Pete Miles was a light-haired, gray-eyed boy, with a diffident and almost bashful manner which made him friends from the start. But in the air, behind the stick of a Nieuport, all his bashfulness left him, as Stack discovered shortly. He exhibited just that combination of recklessness and timely caution which is needed to make a first-class pursuit pilot. Stack saw to his breaking-in, and led him on his first patrols, and within a week Pete Miles had his first accredited Boche, a flamer over Craonne.

The days lengthened into weeks, and Pete Miles became decidedly one of the gang. But either because of his bashfulness, or some stiffness in his flight leader's manner, he and Stack never became very intimate. Between them there seemed to be an invisible barrier, an intangible shadow of the past. In the presence of the other Stack could never feel at ease; he was forever imagining a peculiar significance in Pete's look, and avoided meeting the youngster's eyes. But never in Stack's hearing did Pete ask any question about July 9th, or so much as refer to a brother who had been killed. Sometimes Stack wished he would.

The major watched Stack anxiously, and was not reassured by what he saw. Stack withdrew more and more into himself, became almost morose and brooding. He lost part of his old-time pep and vigor, and it showed in his air work. Once, on a patrol over Rheims, he got himself boxed by two Fokkers, and had not the guns of one of the Boche jammed, and Ken Stacy rushed to the rescue, Stack might never have returned. The major perceived that Stack was not himself, and once again offered to cashier Pete Miles

out of the squadron; again Stack demurred positively. The days crept by.

It was shortly after the noon mess when Stack, alone, stepped into the operations office. On the bulletin board he saw the pink typewritten slip, its color denoting special mission. He ran his eye quickly over the brief sentences.

“Attack ordered on enemy balloon at Vailly. A flight to carry out this mission, 3:00 p.m. patrol. Attack to be made by Lieutenant P. B. Miles; balance of formation to accompany as protection. Important: this balloon must be brought down.”

Stack’s heart sank. “Another one of those cursed balloon jobs,” was his first thought. “Hardly a one that we haven’t lost a man on, up to now.” Then his heart stopped beating entirely as he read the name designated to be the spear-point of the attack. Pete Miles! Why should the major pick Pete? Pete had never pulled a balloon-strafting mission before. Of course it was a toss-up, as far as the major was concerned, whom to assign; there was no reason for picking any one man rather than another. But instantly Stack saw, or thought he saw, the motive in back of the major’s choice.

There was a damned good chance of the man who attacked the balloon never coming back, as past experience demonstrated. And the major had deliberately picked Pete Miles for that part, hoping thus to rid Stack of the presence which bothered his conscience. But it wasn’t right, he couldn’t let the major do that! It would be almost like murder! Quickly he stepped over to the door of the major’s private room, and beat on it with his knuckles.

“Not there,” spoke up the sergeant from the corner. “Gone down to Wing, or somewhere. Be back about four, he said.”

STACK turned helplessly away from the C.O.’s closed door. Now he was sure of the major’s strategy. Guessing that Stack would ask for a change in those orders as soon as he read them, the C.O. had purposely absented himself to avoid discussion. Stack walked out onto the tarmac, thinking rapidly. For half an hour he paced between the hangars, without coming to any decision. He must do something, but what? There were the orders in black and white. He couldn’t alter the C.O.’s orders without giving some excellent reason for his action; and what reason could he give? To Pete especially, who, as Stack well knew, would insist on carrying out the part assigned to him. Stack groaned, and cursed under his breath.

He saw a group of pilots enter headquarters, and knew that they were reading the posted slip. A few minutes later they came out, deep in discussion; Stack saw that one of them was Pete. They drifted over toward the deadline, where the Nieuports of A Flight stood in serried readiness. Stack looked at his wrist; it was a little after two already. Less than an hour now. He hesitated, his eyes on Pete Miles, then suddenly smacked a fist into an open palm, like a man who has at last come to a decision. He slipped between two hangars, avoiding the group on the tarmac, and strode rapidly down the path toward the barracks.

The one long room of the pilots’ living quarters was almost deserted; no one saw Stack fumble behind his bunk for a piece of paper and a pencil. He placed the paper on the lid of his trunk, and bent over it to write in a hasty scrawl.

I’m the man who was in Number 6. Pete, the man who killed your brother. Can’t keep mum about it any longer; hope you’ll forgive me some day. If you go out on the strafe at three, and find the balloon at Vailly gone, you’ll know I tried to do something to square things. If I don’t see you again, happy landings.

In his haste he almost forgot to sign his name; correcting the omission, he tip-toed over to Pete’s bunk. Pete’s helmet lay there on the blankets; folding his note once, Stack thrust it through the chin-strap and walked quietly to the door.

To his relief, the A Flight gang was no longer in front of the hangars; probably dropped by the target range for a little practice with the Colts. Stack slipped quietly into his cockpit, and told the mechanic to start the motor. The big Gnome rotary roared into life; Stack thumbed his manettes until its tune was a smooth and powerful drone, then immediately waved the chocks to be pulled from before the wheels. He took off like a wasp from its nest, in a straight line for the north, and the tarmac faded into the distance behind him like a memory that is forgotten.

As he climbed steadily toward the lines a great care seemed to slip from his shoulders. The frown which had creased his brow for months was gone; with a light heart and a smiling countenance he faced his great adventure. It was as if he had all this time been avoiding a problem which pressed itself upon him; now he faced it squarely, and was glad. All his old-time vigor and acuteness was with him again; a load was lifted from his conscience. Once he laughed.

At two thousand meters the ragged trenches slid

beneath his wings. He was now in position to see his objective ahead of him, a gray, bean-shaped blur against the lower horizon. It was a thousand meters below him, he estimated, plenty of room for dive. But as he warmed his guns with brief bursts and surged forward, his eyes swept the space above, and came to a halt on a spot directly above the position of the enemy Drachen.

There circled lazily a widely spread group of specks, which before his on-rushing approach ceased to be specks and became banking planes. He could not see the markings, but the silhouetted shapes were enough, and their location betrayed not only their identity but their purpose only too plainly. They were Fokkers, waiting there to protect that balloon from over-zealous attackers. And Stack saw at a glance that they were so deployed as to cut off approach from any direction whatsoever. He pulled his Nieuport off on a tangent to the east, and considered his strategy.

DURING the time it took Stack to make one complete turn his plans were laid. Again he swung toward that same spot over Vailly, now climbing more and more as he advanced. Under ordinary circumstances his tactics would have had to take account of two factors. First, to reach the balloon and shoot it down; second, to get away afterward. But today it was different; he had but one end to accomplish. He must get to the balloon and down it; after that he cared not what happened. Thus could he eliminate the customary caution from his tactics; his attack, in consequence, was like unto a rapier of light in its keen swiftness.

He plunged like a heaven-sent meteor straight for the gap between two circling Fokkers. They altered their courses, to take him from the flank. But his flank passed so quickly that not a shot was fired. Straight through and on he hurtled; the Fokkers, followed by three more, heeled over in hasty pursuit. Tracers at long range streaked the air behind him, but Stack did not turn his head, nor shift his line of flight by so much as a degree.

They blanketed his tail neatly and efficiently, he knew. But they could not catch him until he turned, and before he turned he was going to have one long blast at that balloon. The speed of his long-continued dive became terrific. The wind was a rushing, shrieking demon, which tore at his goggles and clutched with live fingers at his stinging cheeks. It blurred his eyes with tears. They narrowed to grim slits, through

which he peered along his sights. The pressure on his tail-surfaces grew and grew, until the stick seemed determined to climb back into his lap. It took all the strength of his right arm to hold it in diving position.

His fingers relaxed for an instant, then curled around his trigger grips. That gray blob was now a hulking mass before him; no longer need he use the crossed wires of his sights. Indifferently he noticed the two swaying circles of white far below; the balloon observers, quick to note his approach, had already jumped. The bulging bag seemed to leap up at him; now he could make out the criss-cross of ropes which held it to its cable. Five hundred meters, four hundred, three hundred—time to open fire! Spasmodically his fingers closed on the triggers. The two guns before his eyes shook and chattered; stabbing streaks of smoky gray spat from their muzzles. Steady, now, hold her where she is!

“Damn it all to hell!”

Only one gun was firing. His 11-millimeter special balloon gun had jammed; the other, a standard-bore Vickers, was loaded with the customary ratio of four solid to one tracer—and no incendiaries! What rotten luck! His left hand reached up for the cocking handle, but instantly he perceived that there was no time to cure a jam now. The balloon was almost within touching distance. He let the stick back hastily, and his Nieuport shot up into a climbing curve as if released from a catapult.

While one hand guided the ship in a complete arc, the other yanked twice at the mechanism of the gun. A defective cartridge flew out into space; when he pressed the triggers now a steady stream of hissing incendiaries belched forth through the prop. He swung on a wing-tip, until the balloon was again before him, then straightened out for a second rush. But already he was flying through an atmosphere of intersecting gray threads. Tracers zipped at him from all sides. The angry Fokkers were upon him.

Stack fixed his eyes rigidly on the balloon, and tried not to think of the death that struck from side and rear. His triggers were down hard, his guns vomiting a veritable inferno of steel and fire. Like a vengeful hornet he hurtled for his target, knowing that it was his last chance. If he didn't get the balloon this time, he would be riddled with bullets before he could attempt another turn. It was now or never. A prayer gritted between his teeth.

Pouf! The smoking tracers which had been pouring into the bulging fabric were now pouring into a

puffball of soft, black smoke. For a moment it clung to the side of the balloon, looking like an ink-pot on a piece of gray paper. Then suddenly it swelled to enormous proportions, pushed outward by a geyser of scarlet flame which licked hungrily along the fabric. The reek of it was strong in Stack's nostrils as he leaned upon stick and rudder to careen away.

IN A fraction of a second Stack did three things. He let up on his trigger grips, he swooped into a climbing turn, and he swept a quick look about him. In the next fraction of a second a biting hail of steel intersected his course; with a flick of the wrist he reversed his turn. As the horizon dipped crazily, he saw against it the upper surface of a wing bearing on each tip the black cross of Germany. He caught his Nieuport in the very middle of its maneuver, and steadied the sights on his target.

But even as his guns spoke he was again forced on the defensive. Smoking steel sliced into his cockpit, and his instrument panel splintered before his eyes like a mirror under the blow of a hammer. Oil spurted from the smashed gauge, and blew back to bespeck his goggles. His left hand wiped it away, while his right jerked the plane into a spiral.

He was fighting now like a madman, as a man fights who has no hope of winning, but is determined to make the battle as long and as disastrous for the foe as possible. Two complete turns of the spiral wrenched him out of the sights of one Fokker; he shot out into a zoom after another. His bullets made a sieve out of a black-striped empennage, and he was back in a vertical bank again before the tracers which drilled his wings from behind could creep to his cockpit.

Turn, straighten out to fire, and turn again. No hope of getting loose to run; they were too many for that. The spiral was his only defense, and that could not last him long. For with every maneuver more precious feet of altitude were lost. The *mêlée*, starting at the altitude of the balloon, was now down to within five hundred meters of the ground. A few more minutes; then he would have to flatten out, and the end would come. But he would take at least one more Boche with him when he went.

Flip! He reversed like a flash, and found a Fokker crossing his path. He swung to follow, but the other banked, too, and kept just out of reach of his sights. His stick was back against his thigh, but still the Boche eluded him. His fingers, quivering on the triggers, did not squeeze. Yet suddenly he saw in amazement a stream of tracers which slashed that Fokker from

behind, and concentrated in deadly precision upon the cockpit. The Fokker staggered, swerved dizzily, and then plunged like a stone into a spin.

]Stack's head came around as if pulled by a string. Wings banked on his flank, but they were not the wings of a Boche. They were Nieuport wings! As the other ship careened off into a turn in the opposite direction Stack caught a glimpse of a number. His jaw dropped in astonishment; that was Pete's number. But how come? It was not yet three o'clock. Why was Pete here now? Then he remembered the note. But hadn't he made himself plain in that note, or would a man risk his own life just to be in at the death of his brother's murderer?

An ominous shivering of the plane beneath him jerked Stack from the realm of speculation to that of action. He knew that bullets were striking something, somewhere; automatically his hand threw the Nieuport into a corkscrew dive. The dive changed quickly to a powerful zoom, and a blast from his guns sprayed a black belly above. That German pilot, unable to see the source of the fire, made his first and last mistake. He dropped into an easy sideslip, which slanted him down directly in front of Stack's guns.

]Stack clenched his jaw, stiffened behind his sights, and jammed his triggers down. After a dozen rounds his grip released, and he curved away. But the target was perfect, and a dozen rounds were plenty. A spurt of flame from a gas tank became instantaneously a dazzling explosion, and shattered fragments rained earthward.

]One Fokker less—but there were still seven or eight to their two. And the ground, the end of every sky battle, loomed closer and closer. More and more desperate became the struggle; the two Nieuports were back to back now, circling each other in a mad merry-go-round. Their guns spat briefly at the surrounding ring of Fokkers, but for every bullet from the Vickers came three in reply from the Spandaus. One Fokker curved down and away, helpless with a pierced motor; the others bored in more fiercely than before. Stack's wings were riddled, his struts were gashed, and his cockpit was a shambles of ripped fabric and snapped wires. Blood trickled from his shoulder, his muscles ached with fatigue, and his bloodshot eyes were weary with staring death in the face. But still he fought, on and on and on.

STACK didn't see the other Nieuports arrive, nor knew that they were there. He saw a tree top graze

his lower wing tip, and knew that another turn was impossible. Stiffly he flattened out; his head fell forward on his chest, and in a daze he awaited the coup de grace. But instead of coming closer, the chill rattle of machine guns seemed to draw away, and fade into the distance. Amazed, he lifted his eyes, to see the mêlée, now doubled in numbers, was drifting toward the north, and that half of those numbers were Nieuports.

He was pointed south, luckily, for at that moment he could scarcely have mustered the strength to turn. As he droned along his brain cleared, and he realized that death was no longer at his elbow. He was going back alive. Miracle of miracles! He looked at the earth below in awe and a strange surprise, that earth which he had never expected to see again. But he was still too indifferent to look over his shoulder, or he would have seen the other Nieuport which paralleled his course, above and behind him.

His motor coughed, and labored like a wounded beast. A bullet had lodged somewhere in its vitals, and it could not last much longer. To climb was impossible; he barely held his altitude over the rolling, shell-torn fields. The lines crept toward him, and with infinite slowness passed beneath his wings. Now he was over Allied soil, but could he make the airdrome? A hill rose in front of him; he pulled back gently on the stick. The nose came up, but the tail sank; his crippled plane did not climb a foot. The long crest of the hill was higher than he, and barred his path; he would never be able to surmount it. Better to land here, than to crash head-on into that hillside.

He swung off to the right, looking for a level spot. His hand coaxed the last foot of glide out of the stricken ship; the ground rushed up at him. At the last minute he saw the tangle of barbed wire along the edge of the field, and jerked at the stick. But the shattered Nieuport had no zoom left in it. His wheels caught in the wire, and his nose jerked down. In an instant the plane was in the middle of a grotesque cartwheel; the wings crumpled, the tail described an arc through the air, and crashed.

For several moments Stack lay as he had fallen, stunned. The terrible crash echoed in his ears, and blinding lights danced before his eyes.

A little later the dizziness passed, and he heard a gurgling and a hissing near his head. Then his ears caught a soft puff, followed immediately by a faint crackling which grew in volume. Fire!

Instantly he commenced to struggle. His hand fumbled for the belt release, but a fold of fabric got in

the way, and he lost precious seconds. He unsnapped the button, and slid into a heap; a twinge of pain shot through his shoulder. He had been hanging upside down, but did not know it. Now when he tried to rise, he became confused, and instead of plunging out of the side of the cockpit he was trying to force his way forward.

Fire! The crackling grew louder and more terrible. Blindly he tore at the tangled wreckage which blocked his path, but made no progress. But the more he struggled, the more panicky became his efforts, and the weaker his hope.

A FRIGHTFUL hiss tore through his consciousness. Something collapsed at his elbow, and livid flame squelched about his feet. He shrieked aloud in agony, and threw himself backward. Fabric and struts splintered under his body, let him part way through. Merciful unconsciousness closed about his tired spirit; the last thing he knew was the feel of a hand which gripped his collar and pulled. It seemed to pull him off into space, and to keep on pulling him, forever and ever, through a vast, black void.

Hours later Stack sat half erect on an army cot, swathed in bandages, especially as to hands and head. But these bandages left just enough space for his eyes to see between them, and Stack was reading a letter. Since his fingers were encased in gauze to the thickness of an inch, the letter was being held for him by Pete Miles, who had just explained that it was one received from his brother Bill some months before. The date was July 9th, and the letter read as follows.

DEAR PETE,

How's the kid? Things are happening fast here on the Front these days. Had a funny one this afternoon. Got separated from my formation, ran into another plane in the clouds, and I fired on him before I discovered it was an American Nieuport! Can you beat that for dumbness? Well, he fired back, and one of his bullets, as I discovered afterward, pierced a strut, and then struck the end of my rudder bar and lodged there. The force of its blow threw my rudder over, and I went into a spin. By the time I collected my wits, I had spun down through a cloud bank; but then she came out all right, and I flew home. All my fault, of course; would have served me right if he'd shot me down. I sure owe that guy an apology, and I'm going to look him up and deliver it. He was in Number 6; probably from the 44th, though I'm not sure.

Well, I'll have to beat it, kid. Just got word I'm to go out on a balloon-strafting job in ten minutes. Hot dog, that'll make my string five if I get it! I'll finish this, and tell you about it after I get back——

The writing ended abruptly at this point, but across the bottom of the page were a couple of lines in a different hand.

I am forwarding this letter to you. It is three days since he went out on the balloon-strafting job referred to above, and he is still missing, but we have not given up hope.

JOHN H. MITCHELL, C.O., 95TH AERO SQUADRON

Beneath the pile of bandages Stack's voice mumbled something utterly unintelligible. But Pete Miles, standing by the side of the cot, must have been able to guess the meaning, for he smiled a smile which said most plainly, "Squarer than square now. Stack, you buzzard!"