

SKY DEVIL'S TRAP

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Swiftly those Yank bombers ripped in, blasting that fake staffel to hell. They didn't see the Fokkers swinging down from above; didn't guess they were cold meat—snared in a blood trap from which only the yammering guns of one doomed sky devil could hope to snatch them.

CAPTAIN BILL DAWE, skipper of C Flight, smacked his rudder bar savagely. He growled an oath through set teeth as his Nieuport ripped over in a barrel-roll. And Dawe had something to growl about. It seemed that he was riding the toughest luck of any flight leader in France. Nothing went right, and it was not his fault.

Hell! This gutty Yank had little to excuse himself for. His record, until quite recently, was as long as his arms. But all the devils of Hades and their friends had taken a sudden notion to break him.

Back at the drome of 120, British squadron, the Canuck commander, Major Blair, sat in a swivel chair, while the Yank plowed through a veritable inferno in the battle skies. Blair was riding the young skipper

hard, riding him to a point where Dawe was ready to explode.

This morning, though it wasn't Dawe's turn for duty, the major had ordered him out on special assignment work from Wing—a swift dash over the Lens area to break up Boche reinforcements and supplies, reported to be running up to stem the Allied advance in that sector.

Bill wouldn't have minded—only three of his flight members were new rooks, and it was hell handling these hot-headed young devils who had had the death-or-glory spirit pounded into them by bristling sergeant instructors.

C Flight had run into a veritable hornets' nest. Bill Dawe found himself, without any warning, in the center of a mill of stunting planes, whose noses sneezed hellish flame. A strong flight of Albatross ships had cut down from the clouds to swipe off Dawe's outfit, while Fokkers had sliced down to take on the British DeHaviland bombers.

Dawe hadn't the fraction of one chance in ten thousand to make good. There was only one move left to him—attack! Attack in defense of his four young buzzards who were certainly not wasting any time about emptying their ammo drums.

But that was the devil of it all. The kids were shooting wild. As an Albatross showed itself, Lewis guns yammered—only to waste lead in empty space. These Boche flyers were of the old school, slick as greased lightning at the controls. Their touch on the stick and rudder was precise, light, but amazing. They were matches for men of Dawe's caliber and experience.

The Yank skipper came out of a full roll and streaked down under the belly of a Boche that was holding him at bay. He had no time to take on this red devil. Ahead, two Boches were converging on a Nieuport pilot with Spandau guns wide open.

The skipper swore as his slitted eyes watched the rook turn sharp right to engage a Boche ship head on.

"Bloody young fool," he snarled. "You should be zigzagging for home, instead of that—But that's the hell of a bunch of rooks. God! I wish Blair was riding these sky trails. Don't know why he singles me out for this sort of thing all the time. Blast it! Mebbe he wants me to quit—to get out, but if that's his idea, I'll see him damned first—"

Br-r-r-rpp—the yammer of Dawe's Lewis cut him short. He had instinctively pressed his trip on the stick. An Albatross turned out, winging over as her pilot felt

the whine of lead past his head. Dawe zoomed. He had an advantage. He could at least engage this red devil further, and that would be one less for the kid to handle.

But the action must be swift and decisive. There was no time for a lot of fancy bike riding. By the gods—no!

Dawe ripped up into an Immelmann, then struck down like a striking condor—a lean shape whose eyes were red with the light of a killer.

The Boche was shooting, though, his twin Spandaus throwing a sheet of flame forward. Dawe felt a sharp pluck at his scalp. The entire scalp seemed to be drawn back over his skull, and countless lights danced before his vision.

But the Yank skipper was riding it through, his teeth set, and when he next pressed his stick trigger, there was no mistake. A burst of fifteen rounds almost cut the Boche prop loose. The pilot sagged forward over the stick, and Dawe was forced to zoom hard to avoid collision.

Now, like a parent jungle beast, the skipper lashed his Nieu's tail around. His eyes commenced to search for the rook he had come to rescue. But he gasped; way down, close to earth, a Nieuport spun helplessly to death. On its tail, still firing, was another terrible red Albatross.

A low growl escaped the Yank skipper. That killer plane below was red, but it wasn't quite that plane's color which brought the film of red before his eyes. By God! It was the sight of the helpless rook, already out, being still further riddled by Spandau bullets.

Dawe knew that the Boche pilot was the *meister* of the *jagdstaffel*, one of the big fellows, a Prussian aristocrat, a ruthless killer, who had perhaps sat at a high level until some of his lesser members had singled out a British plane for him, crippling it so that he could swoop to his fifty-sixth victory.

"Ya-ah—" Dawe's lips snapped shut over the exclamation.

IN A terrible mood, the skipper dived. His flight was in a jam, and there was no way by which he could successfully pull them out. Wing had ordered the patrol. The responsibility would have to rest with Wing and—with Major Blair, who had ordered Dawe and his rookies to the assignment. One flight leader can only do so much.

Bitter as gall, the young Yank leader struck for his kill, wind screaming fiendishly through his rigging. His

dive was so steep that he was forced to toy backward with the stick to prevent the little Nieu from wallowing over on her back, or hurtling into an outside loop.

Below, the great red *meister* of the Prussian flight smirked with satisfaction as his rookie prey smashed hard into earth, his battered plane consumed instantly by withering flame. His thick Prussian lips parted, and he congratulated himself. He was pulling up in a climbing turn, ready to streak eastward to report another victory.

That his flight, those left, were still in action, mattered little to the *meister*. He had another victory to report—to drink to—his fifty-sixth—

Suddenly his brows shot up. The grin which smeared his face was displaced by another expression, an expression of concern—fear. Out of the blue, roaring down dead on came a silver Nieuport. *Gott!* Already the *verdammt* single death gun was yammering—yammering for blood.

The Boche gunned his Mercedes all out and cut eastward. But Dawe had him nailed. A couple of his bullets stopped that move, forcing the *meister* to bank around to westward again. For the first few seconds, the Boche chief seemed in a frenzy, but his Prussian spirit soon took over. He became the precise killer again—the killer beast at bay, and his lips cracked in a snarl.

The Albatross nose dipped. There was only one move left: an Immelmann. If it failed, then—

Brr-r-r-rpp—Dawe's Lewis smacked a burst of fire which caught the Boche's portside longerons as he half turned. But Dawe was just a little over anxious. He realized this when it was almost too late. Had he not been in a dive as the Boche came out of his spectacular turn, Dawe's number would have been up. The sheer speed of his dive saved him. As the Boche came out, his twin Spandaus crashed murderously, their fire dead onto the target—a lucky break for the Prussian.

Dawe should have zoomed. As it was, his rudder took a smashing blast of fire before his diving Nieu swooped him clear.

Quick to realize his mistake, the Yank did the only other thing left. He emulated the maneuver of the Prussian and backsticked hard into an Immelmann turn.

They came together, head on, with Dawe gaining a few feet of altitude. Two desperate master flyers had no time or room for any other maneuver but a head-on attack. They struck!

God! They would collide. Surely they were both

mad—stark, staring mad. But Dawe never touched his stick. His slitted eyes seemed to be the target for those devil Spandaus, but he never wavered. Facing death, he was ready to go out thus. It would be swift, sure—

But the great Boche *meister*'s Prussian spirit must have left him, all in a split second. His Spandaus, which had slivered Dawe's struts and smashed his dash, ripping at his clothing, suddenly ceased. Eighty feet separated them—a matter of split seconds before they would slam together.

Dawe's Lewis, which had held fire, now spurted, spewing a burst of hot flame. The Boche sagged. He dipped his Albatross' nose. Dawe's nose went down. Like a flash of lightning he roared in.

There was a sharp pluck at his plane, which whirled around on her axis. She skidded off, and Dawe was forced to fight her. By the gods! One of his wheels had ripped an upper wing off the Albatross, that now whipped into a ghastly, flaming death spin.

The Yank was strained to the limit. His face a mass of oozing or matted blood, lips parted, cracked and bleeding, he cursed his ship, slamming her rudder hard, and working the stick as a cow-puncher might handle his bridle lines on an outlaw bronc.

The Nieu struck madly for earth in a skid, then Dawe recovered himself completely. He let her rip sky for almost a thousand feet before he commenced to humor her out of it. He flattened, but there was again the tendency to skid. He realized that part of his undercarriage was torn away. By God! He was in for a sweet time.

But—he held her to it, forcing her back to his drome, sick at heart in spite of his victories. He would come back again, for the second time in three weeks, without a full flight. He was sure one rook went out. Heaven knew how many more.

Over the drome he circled, to give those below a chance to signal the damage done to the Nieu, damage he couldn't see.

It wasn't long before he caught the signal. Men were waving tires, and he realized that his only safe bet for a landing was to flop his Nieu into a patch of willows in a left skid. It was not much to look forward to, this idea of smashing into a patch of shrubbery, but—it was all that was left.

As he spiraled down, his lips suddenly compressed. He was bitter again, bitter toward his chief. Major Blair must get a piece of his mind, by God! When he landed, the first thing he would do would be to tackle Blair for an understanding. It was too much, this persistent

riding by the major. A man didn't have a chance in a thousand.

"I'm riding herd on no more rookies, blast you!" he would snarl. "Not that I mind the danger of it, but—hell! I'm human enough to hate seeing those kids go out—so soon, before they have a chance to get dry behind the ears in this game of war. Blast you, Blair, I used to think you liked me, as I was proud to like you. But—"

Down—it was time to throw the Nieu on her side.

Cr-r-r-ash—She smacked in, and Dawe felt a dozen spearlike spikes of willows scrape his body and face. The jar of landing almost took his breath, but, save for a bad bruising, he was all right. For a few seconds he sat staring into space, scarcely seeing the pilots and mechanics who darted toward him. Then he unbuckled his belt and climbed unsteadily down.

A fellow flight leader said something to him, but the Yank merely grunted. He wanted to be alone—to think—and strode on to his hut. A brief rest, a wash-up for his scalp graze, and he would be ready to see Blair. By God! How he wanted to see Blair—

MAJOR BLAIR looked up through a set of bushy brows. "You wished to see me, Dawe—" The chief's face was pale, and a couple of pouches beneath his eyes were slightly purpled. His whole expression seemed to be that of dissipation, of sleepless nights or drinking orgies. But Blair didn't drink; Dawe knew this. Not to any extent, at any rate.

Seated beyond the major's desk, reading, was the squadron surgeon, a stout chap whom everybody liked. He and Blair seemed to be the greatest of pals, for they were seldom apart. Captain Pierce, the medical officer, had even moved his bed into Blair's headquarters.

"You wished to see me on something very important, Captain Dawe," repeated the chief. "What's on your mind, son? Spill it. I want to get your report later. Wing has called up with a confirmation or two on your good work. But—only one of your flight, besides yourself, came back. You can let me have the report as soon as you've unloaded what you have to say—"

The surgeon was now looking up over his book, watching the muscle-play in the face of the major. Blair had a mighty fine record as a sky fighter, largely gained in the old days. Of late, he had sat tight in his office chair, a strict disciplinarian, but fairly well liked by the entire squadron.

His eyes met Dawe's and for a moment never

wavered. He didn't bat a lash for a moment, but as Dawe scraped forward his chair, a look of concern crossed the C.O.'s face.

"I came here to tell you that I'm damned good and sick of your attitude toward me, sir," snapped the Yank. "I'd like to know just what in hell you think I am. You're riding me as though I'd done you a lot of dirt, instead of trying to play the game. If you're wanting to railroad me out of this squadron, you'd better find, some other way. I'll go when I go feet first. I've sort of grown up with this old squad, major. Reckon I'm sticking, get me?"

Major Blair shuffled in his seat. His face had suddenly gone deathly white. Captain Pierce leaned forward in his chair, a look of deep concern on his face.

Dawe was letting his words sink in, his slitted eyes not missing a single move of the major's. All at once he saw the chief's right hand slip up to his mouth. The C.O. gulped, and Dawe started back.

By God! The skipper had it! Major Blair was doping himself. He was a lousy hophead, and Captain Pierce was trying to shield him.

The Yank scraped back his chair and got to his feet, a snarl at his lips. For a moment he stood tense, rigid. Was it actually possible that this squadron commander was a dope fiend, a ruthless devil who, while under the influence, sent out rooks to the slaughter—hounded Dawe until he was ready at times to crack up under the strain? It seemed damnably incredible, and yet—in piecing things together—the Yank was being forced to believe it. Here was the surgeon in continual attendance on the major. Dawe had seen the hand slide highly to the major's purpled lips. By God! He had seen the chief's throat convulse as he gulped down a tablet—

"I'm beginning to get the drift of things," he suddenly snapped, turning full on the major. "I can see now why you dish up your death sentences from your swivel chair. Well—let me tell you that I've stood enough of it. You ride me no longer. From now on, I'll take a hand in the running of my affairs—"

Major Blair's face had now gotten back some color. He was steadier; his hands were firmer as he spread them out on the desk before him and leaned forward. The tired, drugged look had gone from his eyes, strangely enough. Dawe watched his firm thin lips compress, then suddenly part. The old iron man was back in action. The old sky devil whose record hadn't yet been beaten for all-round efficiency, was taking a stand.

"Sit down," he snapped.

Dawe found himself sitting down. He was glad of this sudden outburst on Blair's part. By the gods! He hoped that there'd be an everlasting white-hot scrap out of the deal. He knew that Blair wasn't the man to resort to court martial. He was a fire eater—a fire eater to be feared, until—well—hell! Now he was doped. It was all so utterly confusing. This old sky warrior was having to dope himself up in order to put up a fight.

Captain Pierce was on his feet. He ranged himself alongside the C.O. and this fired the Yank to action. By God! If he had to fight both of them, he was ready for it.

"I don't want you to be a fool, Dawe," barked the major. "I want you not to forget that while I occupy this 'swivel chair' I'm in command of the squadron. You'll be taking your orders from me and, hard as they seem, you might be thanking me—someday."

"Bah! What the hell have I got to thank you for, major? Why did you pick on C Flight for this afternoon's shoot? It wasn't even our turn for patrol. You sent a bunch of rooks down to their death, blast it! Have you an answer for that?"

The major seemed staggered for a moment. He gulped and clutched at his throat, slumping in his chair. Captain Pierce slipped a hand down to the C.O.'s pulse, but Blair waved him away.

"Yes, I've an answer for it, Dawe. You buzzards didn't know that I received a stand-by order from Wing this morning—an order for all the ships I could spare for a special raid on the Von Liedervelte's drome—a hellish assignment. I might have held C Flight for this duty, but—I didn't. You took the replacements up, at my orders—to be sure you did. I wanted them up out of the way, in case the major shoot was put into effect."

"It wasn't put into effect!" snapped the Yank. "A bunch of seasoned pilots loafed back here while my rookies—stout young kids they were, too—ran into the staffel of the great van der Beltz. He—"

"Der Beltz! Good God! Was it his flight!" The major's face turned a sickly ashen gray. His shoulders convulsed, and he gripped hard at the desk top.

"You'd better leave, Dawe, if you please," jerked the surgeon.

Dawe nodded and, with a last swift glance at the chief, he turned and strode out of the billet. He hadn't liked the looks of Major Blair, and a wave of sympathy seemed to want to force his bitterness from him. God! He hardly knew what to think as he lurched to his hut. There he found the skipper of A waiting for him.

"Hello, Stanford," he jerked. "How's things?"

"Fairly well, old son. You look as if you'd run into something with spikes on. Who did you meet today?"

For a moment there was no reply. Through slitted eyes the Yank was gazing deeply into nothingness, his mind a blank to all save the eager, bright faces of the kids who had taken off with him earlier in the day.

"Van der Beltz," he suddenly jerked, snapping a cigarette to his lips. "I got him, and one of his buzzards—flamers, but—that isn't enough, Stan. I lost almost all my new flight. By God! I reckon you can see how it's going with me. Heard anything? Has anyone any reason to believe that the chief's trying to railroad me out of this squad?"

"Good God, no, Dawe. Not that. There isn't any reason to believe that, but—we are all sort of sick at the way he's running you. Can't make it out. But, listen—have you noticed anything about him lately? Sort of slipped, what? I tried to have a chat with Pierce about him, for I heard a rumor—" Stanford shot a swift glance about him—"just a rumor that the C.O. is—well, damn it, I hate to say it, Dawe."

"Then I'll say it," jerked the Yank. "You mean you heard that he was taking dope. Is that it?"

The other nodded.

"Quite, yes. That's it. Hell, isn't it? Yet—it hardly seems credible. Hell's bells, old Blair shouldn't have to resort to the needle to bolster up his guts. There isn't a pilot or C.O. in the whole cockeyed air service who can hold a candle to his record. Well, what can we do about it? I'd hate to think that I was a squealer, Dawe. By God! I can't see myself reporting him. Another thing: if he were shot out of here, we'd get that damn bounder, Burrows, from Wing. I could stand anything but that, skipper. Guess we'll have to grin an' bear things, eh? Cheer up, old son. If ever I can take over a patrol or anything, to help out, let me know."

Stanford strode from the hut, leaving Dawe with a lump in his throat. Stan was a Britisher, one of the real sort—a damn fine head and a fearless skyman.

THE following day, and the next, were blind days, and Dawe was glad of the rest. Visibility was poor. Pilots played cards, loafed, or ran to adjoining towns. Some were fed up. Lack of action and the attendant element of suspense got their nerves. There was a feeling that out of the fog and the low-lying clouds would come something special.

On the afternoon of the third day something did happen. An orderly mustered all flight leaders and pilots to the C.O.'s office. The wires had been

burning from Wing. The weather was rapidly clearing. Reinforcements had come up from base headquarters.

Captain Dawe was the last to arrive at the major's billet. He slouched to a chair and nonchalantly, indifferently, lighted a cigarette. His face was drawn, his eyes slitted, as he watched the chief through a cloud of smoke.

Major Blair raised in his seat. He swept the room with a glance. The older squadron members knew what was coming. Something big. They were used to these meetings.

"I suppose you have some idea of what I have to say," snapped the chief. "Well, perhaps you have, but I don't think one of you could hazard a guess as to what it is. Wing has wired in that our squadron is called upon to take part in one of the strangest assignments ever known—"

The buzzards exchanged meaning glances and smiles. God! It was good to hear of something like this again—some action, something different, something that sent a tingling sensation along their spines.

Major Blair coughed and clutched at his chest. For a moment he was unable to go on, then Dawe saw him pass a hand in front of his mouth and gulp.

The Yank half raised to his feet, a suppressed snarl at his lips. But he slumped back in his chair. Hell! What was the use even thinking about Blair and his capsule-swallowing habit. The Yank turned away from the desk and bit savagely into a new cigarette.

"Wing, as I said, wired in that news, gentlemen. But, here's the meat of the whole thing. A composite flight is to leave just before dusk tonight and engage the *jagdstaffel* of General von Liedervelte of whom you know so much. Von Liedervelte, commonly known as the 'Sky Demon,' has established himself east of Lens. He is to be attacked by a squadron of DeHav bombers, with an escort of picked pilots from brigade. Major Burrows will lead the scouts—"

A low murmur buzzed in the room at the mention of the Wing major's name. This had altered everything. Nobody wanted to fly with Burrows, who had been slated to take over a squadron on more than one occasion.

"But there's something else," the major continued. "Only one pilot from each squadron is the allotment—one, and he is the squadron commander. I—I regret very much to find myself in this position: Captain Pierce has forbidden my taking part in this assignment, and I have therefore nominated Captain Dawe in my place—"

Dawe's lips compressed. His body stiffened, hands clenching into hard, knotted fists. By God! Here was the crowning thorn of them all. The major had railroaded him into this hellish assignment. He swung sharply, but Captain Stanford beat him to the floor.

"I rise to object, sir. It is beyond all reason, and I don't mind telling you quite plainly that your action isn't approved by the rest of the squadron. Dawe can speak for himself, I know, but I'm going to tell you, sir, whether you like it or not, that I think you have carried your game too far. Dawe has been ridden almost to death, and right here I want to turn in my wings. To hell with such—such treatment of any man. If you haven't the guts—I beg your pardon, sir—if you aren't able to go yourself, then Captain Dawe is the last man in the line for this duty. What the hell have the rest of us done? I shall resign my commission before I stand for this any longer."

Dawe flashed Stanford a swift look of gratitude, but he made no effort to get on his feet.

Major Blair's face had found some color. With an extra effort he managed to control what, in the old days, would have certainly been a volcanic eruption of some sort. Instead he swept the room until his glance settled on Stanford.

"I'm sorry to hear you talk like that, Stanford," he called. "I'll see you about your remarks later. Captain Dawe has the right to refuse this assignment, if he—if he doesn't want it. What about it, Dawe?"

The chief turned to Dawe, his chest heaving, as though under some terrific emotional storm. Major Blair was battling with something hidden, some lurking force which was a mystery to everyone save Captain Pierce, the medical officer.

Dawe jumped to his feet, and for a moment stood rigidly at attention.

"I have nothing to say, sir," he snapped. "Although—I am thinking something along the same lines as Stanford. I'll take the assignment, sure. But—when I come back, if I do, I'm coming to see you, Major Blair. There'll be a showdown, by God! There will be a few words between you and me—and Captain Pierce. I expect this will be my last run for the old squadron, but—before I leave, I'm going to dig up something—you get me, major?"

"You will dismiss, gentlemen," jerked the major, whose drawn features carried the suggestion of a thin smile. "Er—if you come out of this Dawe, and—I hope you do, this won't be your last run. And—I'll be here when you want me—and—get that?"

A FLIGHT of DeHavilands was winging through the drift clouds, headed east over Lens. High above them, flanking Major Burrows, Captain Bill Dawe bit hard at a bristling mustache. But, although his mind was filled with a number of conflicting thoughts, he was keenly alert. This Liedervelte *meister* was no fool, nor was the German Intelligence napping.

Major Burrows, the dapper, swaggering fancy-dress disciplinarian from Wing, pushed a Spad through the air like something mad, now ripping ahead of the bombers, now circling spectacularly back to his escort flight.

Nothing had happened until the raiders sighted Lens, and then a number of archies commenced rapid fire.

Bill Dawe's lips parted in a grim smile.

"That's just the beginning," he snapped. "If these tin-hat soldiers think they can pull a semi-daylight raid on that Boche, they're out of their minds. Those archies have us ticketed off. Right now I'll bet every kraut flyer for miles back knows all about us. They—God!"

The Yank's head jerked up from overside, as a bright flash of flame belched from a fringe of clouds below him and slightly ahead. A British bomber had taken a burst of shrapnel amidships, their own load of bombs and her gas tank had exploded with a deafening roar. In fiery pieces of wreckage she hurtled earthward. The Boche had spoken—with the voice of a devil.

Major Burrows scudded back to his flight. Dave could see his face. It was white, drawn.

The bombers cleared the city of Lens. They were rushing east into the already gathering dusk. A half light blanketed the wastes below. Each pilot and observer was tense, alert, ready for action. And then, their flight leader broke out a signal. Ahead, in a fold of ground beyond a screen of woods, lay the tarmac of the devil von Liedervelte.

Above, the lone Yank eagle's head darted this way and that. He craned his neck at the ceiling. Through occasional ports in the clouds below, he knew what was going on. Now he dived. He wanted to see the commencement of the shoot. He could see the tarmac beyond the woods, with its twelve or more trim hangars. Then he gasped. By the gods! He had been wrong in his conjecture, for a number of planes sat on the tarmac—trim shapes just outside their hangars.

"Damn strange, this," he breathed. "You could never have got me to believe that we'd have caught Liedervelte napping like this. Reckon I've been all wet right along. But hell! It—"

He climbed once more, cruised for a minute or so in deep thought. Suddenly his eyes dilated. A speck had appeared in the distant east. Another, and another. Planes—a large flight of them, at a slightly higher altitude than Dawe flew.

"By George, I've got it!" he snapped. "That dump below is a blasted fake. We've been kidded. Those planes are phony, and—those damn planes heading this way are von Liedervelte's staffel. He's gypped us right, by God!"

Scarcely breathing, the Yank shoved his stick forward and flung his Nieu into a screaming dive.

The Yank saw the bomb leader turn into wind. By God! A bomb load was screaming earthward.

At full gun he roared on past the nose of a second bomber and signaled with his clenched fist. Major Burrows came down, and Dawe coded a signal to him, but the chief waved him away.

The Yank insisted. He pointed topside, giving the signal that he had spotted hostile craft, but Burrows was firm. He ordered Dawe into the flight. Another bomber heaved her shape into wind, and the toggles were tripped. A two-hundred-and-fifty pound bomb slobbered in to blast another crater in the dummy tarmac below.

With a grunt of disgust, Dawe gunned his Nieu for altitude. To hell with Burrows. He was going into action his own way.

"There'll be guts to clean now," he breathed. He was thinking of those heavy bombers who would, any minute now, become cold meat. He was thinking also of the half dozen damn fine sky fighters with the escort—all of whom had seen years of service. They would be trapped, all because Burrows thought he knew everything.

"I'll do what I can," Dawe snapped. "By God! Somebody'll know I'm sky-side, but—I'm not enough. I can only do so much—"

He was searching the terrain below him as he cruised east. Suddenly he started. Ahead, about two miles lay the drome of von Liedervelte. Great God! It was very like the dummy. Here, though, there was movement. Dawe could see a Fokker taxiing across the tarmac. This place had life. With a groan, he penciled location on a pad, and pin-pricked his dash map. He had it this time—the exact location of Liedervelte's headquarters. Now he turned, and he ripped a warming burst through the snout of his Lewis. He was ready, and a film of red shot before his vision. Perhaps this would be his last sky scrap. He was damned good and sick of the way he'd been railroaded.

The last bomber was ripping in to unload, when out of the sky main above came the yammer of a score of Spandaus. Great God! The deepening skies were ablaze with the flame which belched from deadly twin snouts on the noses of diving Fokkers.

Von Liedervelte hung high in the sky, circling like a wary, veteran eagle. He had sent his famous flight down in the first death blow and now, through slitted eyes, he would watch them, until they had split the Britishers and so singled out a plane or two for him.

He hunted with hounds of hell and, as they pointed, he struck—a ruthless killer, a devilish murderer—

CAPTAIN BILL DAWE raced in to cover the tail of von Liedervelte. There was an urge to kill in the Yank's heart. Below, the clatter of Spandaus, Vickers, and Lewis created a bedlam of sound. The Boche Fokkers were splitting the bombers wide open.

Von Liedervelte watched, his face muscles twitching. He saw one of his Fokkers scream in to split a couple of DeHavilands open. He caught the savage slash of Spandau fire, which staggered a bomber, causing it to turn out to westward, and then—a hellish silver shape hurtled through space. A single Lewis gun spat, and the Fokker barrel-rolled, coughing open in a burst of horribly consuming flame.

Bill Dawe had taken his cue earlier than he expected. He had seen a chance to strike and came in like a plummet. Now, he zoomed hard, but as his nose shot up, he gasped. The famous Boche *meister* was diving in on him, his twin guns blasting a flaming path before him.

Dawe finished an Immelmann turn, then sideslipped out of the track of Spandau lead. But he realized that the Boche chief had an advantage. Off his port spread he glimpsed a British fighter scout—a Spad. It was Burrows' plane, but the Wing man was turning out. By God! He had seen the attack, but had refused to turn in and strike Liedervelte from Dawe's tail.

"Just what a swine like you would pull," snarled the Yank. You're the bird they had slated for command of 120 Squadron. Thank heaven, I'm dishing that squad, if I come out of this—"

If he came out! Why, he was cold meat, as cold as a man could ever be, with Liedervelte coming in like a blast from some upper hell.

But the Yank had a superabundance of sheer guts. You weren't out while your ship was in perfect trim and your gun mechanism clear.

He shot a glance over his shoulder. He glimpsed a flaming wreck floating earthward and gulped. He hoped that this was a Boche, but had no time for further extraneous thought. He was looking now into the two red eyes of the Boche *meister's* Spandaus.

Dawe stabbed his rudder viciously.

Liedervelte grinned coldly, as the Nieuport below him commenced to spin. He ripped a long burst from his guns, and his pale lips parted cruelly as he saw Dawe sag.

Bill Dawe was hit. It was his left shoulder that drooped and gushed blood. As his Nieu spun earthward like something demented, he leaned over right, letting the prop wash blast into his face—cool, invigorating air, which revived him. He felt his fogged senses clear, and then he jerked himself erect.

A glance over his shoulder told him that he was flirting with a thousand deaths—a thousand flaming bullets were streaking in on his wake, with a deadly hand at the Spandau trips.

The Yank suddenly thought of Blair, and the deal he had got. He wanted to live. This thought seemed to rally his every ounce of reserve will.

Now he was counting the seconds. Suddenly his battered body stiffened. He touched his rudder, then—his hand tensed on the stick. The Nieu responded. She flattened, dipped her snout, then flung herself at the sky main in a zoom that took the wind from her pilot.

Von Liedervelte snarled an oath. He jockeyed his Fokker, trying to stay his dive, but the bullet-riddled Nieuport ripped over his back, then down in a dive. Bill Dawe had pulled a master stroke. And now—he dived with his Lewis gun yammering its chant of death.

The great Boche *meister's* arms slumped to his sides. His feet convulsed against the rudder bar and, muttering something incoherently, he passed along, his Fokker bursting into a pall of flame which shut him from view.

Dawe flattened and groaned as pain returned to him. The chatter of sky guns was drawing away, getting fainter and fainter. A couple of DeHavilands limped westward into the dusk, while to the east, three British pilots fought off a number of Fokkers. But, the heart was gone from the Boches. Their *meister* had gone to his death.

With a low groan, Bill Dawe turned out. There was nothing more for him to do but steer a course for home.

TWENTY minutes later mechanics and pilots of the 120th rushed to meet a taxiing Nieuport. In the

cockpit Captain Dawe looked from one to the other, as though in a daze; then a million lights danced before his vision to be replaced by a smothering mantle of black. He sagged out into unconsciousness.

It was upwards of an hour before Pierce was able to pull the gutty Yank out of his semi-coma. He had set and stitched and dressed the damaged arm and shoulder. Bill Dawe came out though. His iron constitution was serving him well.

With the help of an orderly, he sat up, gulped down a big shot of brandy. Shaking his head, he started forward, as if a sudden flash thought had occurred.

"I'd like to see the chief now, doc," he snapped. "I think I can make it, with a little help."

"Right, son," said Pierce. "But let me tell you to hold yourself in check. The major's pretty low. He's had a collapse—and a shock might put him out. He'll be glad to see you, Bill. Be careful not to upset him. He—"

"H'mmm—and did he ever consider me, Pierce? Why should I spare him now?"

"I don't care a double damn what you have in mind, Dawe; nor do I blame you for what you think. But, you've been wrong, as you'll soon learn. The major is a sick man—heart."

"Heart!" Dawe's face clouded. He got up and leaned on the M.O.'s arm. By God! What was this all about, anyhow?

"HELLO, Dawe." The voice was pretty, feeble, and Dawe bit hard at his lip as he glimpsed the thin, drawn face of the old sky devil. By God! There must have been some mistake.

"I'm—I'm mighty glad you're back, son. There's a lot I want to tell you—things you haven't quite understood. At times, I could have got damned mad with you for the way you acted. Hell's bells! You thought I was riding you—riding the best man I've ever had in one twenty squadron. Now—listen, and you too, Stanford. A month or so ago, an old wound started to bother me, close to the heart—shrapnel from a Boche archie over Ypres in '15. By rights I should have gone out. But—but—"

The major broke off, and Pierce darted forward

with another glass of medicine. For a long moment the major lay back, fighting for his breath. Dawe's heart thumped hard. He felt ashamed, and yet—he was not to blame. The major had been so damned mysterious right along.

"But, as I was saying, when I hinted at a new commander for 120, in the event of my ever leaving, Wing suggested Burrows. Burrows, chaps, do you get that? Dawe—" the major fastened a piercing look on the Yank—"there had only been one successor to me in this squadron. That's yourself. All the time when you have thought I've been riding you, I've been throwing you into the limelight—into the spotlight for Wing to see you. I'm fond of all my pilots and flight leaders, but you're the logical man for my job. I got word a few moments ago that Burrows was downed in flames. I'm sorry about that, but—in any case, I have Wing's word that you are to take over here, Dawe. I congratulate you. This squadron will go to hell for you. And—I want to congratulate you on getting von Liedervelte. It's confirmed. Son—you'll wear my wings when you come back from the hospital. Stanford will be your second in command. That's—that's all—chaps. Damn good—luck—to—you—all. Cheerio—"

The major gasped, and slumped back. Dawe darted to his side, forgetting his own wound. Clutched in the major's hand was a set of cloth wings, the wings of the sky devil, which Pierce handed to the Yank.

"These are meant for you, Bill," he breathed. "You know how to wear 'em. Think I can pull him around so that he'll stand a journey to the south of France. Better leave now, boys. There'll be an ambulance along for you and the chief any minute now, Bill. So long, if I don't get another chance to talk to you before you go. I'm glad things turned out as they did. Be glad to serve under you, old son."

Bill Dawe's eyes were misted. His brain was reeling, and he clutched at Stanford's arm for support.

In the Yank's heart a new beat had set up. He wasn't so concerned with his own good luck and promotion as with the fact that Blair, the sky devil, had proved himself a real white head till the last.