

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

HIGH DIVING

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

It was against orders, but Kirby and his pals weren't worrying about that. They wanted to meet that big German formation—and Kirby wanted to give battle to the "Black Devil," the famous German Ace. A splendid flying story.

THREE PLANES FLEW in graceful V-shaped formation through the hazy morning sky. They were Spads, fighting single-seaters, and their pilots were known throughout the air service as "The Three Mosquitoes." A learned squadron commander who read Dumas claimed the distinction of inventing the name, which was more than a mere pun. For, like the pesky little insects, these three had an effective habit of humming around the Boche planes, of buzzing insistently until they could draw blood. And their stingers consisted of malicious, steel-barreled machine guns which could pour out a steady stream of sulphurous tracer bullets.

Kirby, the D'Artagnan of the group, led the formation. Though the youngest, his amazing skill in handling a plane, especially when it came to diving (he could dive upon an enemy with a speed and precision which made him feared and envied by the whole German air force), had won him the position of flight commander of the trio. On his right flew "Shorty" Carn, bald, stocky, and mild of eye, but nevertheless

a dead shot with the machine gun. On his left flew Travis, the oldest and wisest of the trio, whose lanky legs made it difficult for him to adjust himself in the little cockpit.

Kirby kept his eyes peeled ahead, sometimes looking through the telescopic gun sights in front of the cockpit. By this time he was considerably worried. It was no light matter to flagrantly disregard orders.

An hour ago, just when day was breaking over the big 'drome near Amiens, Kirby had gone into the field office to get instructions from the colonel. The C.O. wasn't there, so Kirby waited. While he waited, the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and got a report from staff headquarters. The Huns were flying over towards Dubonne, either to raid the town or to do some reconnoitering. Kirby knew that he should inform the C.O. at once, so that the squadron could be sent up to stop them. But he didn't inform the C.O. Some deep impulse made him take a different tack.

His little scheme seemed quite logical and right to him. At any rate, it was harmless. The C.O. would eventually learn of this raid, and send up the rest of

the squadron in due time. Meanwhile, why shouldn't the Three Mosquitoes go up by themselves and try to defeat the enemy squadron alone? After all, it was about time they did something to preserve the lustre of their name. Several envious aces had questioned their right to the title. If they could manage to beat up a whole enemy squadron no one could cast the slightest aspersion toward them.

But that wasn't the true reason why Kirby wanted to pull such a stunt. He had been wanting to put on a "big circus," as they called it, for months now. And it was on account of the "Black Devil."

EVEN as he thought of this hated rival of his, Kirby's whole body stiffened, his teeth clenched. He put his eyes to the sights, peered out hopefully. If only he met the Black Devil to-day! He'd show him and the rest a thing or two.

Nobody knew just who the Black Devil was. The mystery which shrouded his name made him all the more impressive. They only knew that he was a lone scout flier, who sat in a black Fokker and, appearing in the midst of a dog-fight out of God knows where, picked off the Allied pilots one after another, like flies. This alone would have been enough to make Kirby want to get him, but he had an even more personal reason. The Black Devil was the only man, though Kirby wouldn't openly admit it, who had ever shot him down.

They had met in the midst of a big dog-fight, quite by chance. Kirby did not even have time to pull his triggers. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself hurtling down in a loose-winged spin. He wasn't hurt—the plane landed in a soft dirt road—but the humiliation and shame of the thing were more than he could bear. It was not as if he had lost a hard fight. He might have swallowed that. No, he had been too slow to move at all, to spring to the defense, and he was reputed to be one of the swiftest airmen alive. He could just imagine the German contempt for him. And he knew he could not rest until he had evened the score. That became his one great wish, his fervent hope. He must meet the Black Devil again, prove to him that he was the superior.

So it was in the aviation game. Aerial combat may have been the most modern type of warfare, but basically it was as old as the hills. In these dangerous scraps, at close quarters, it was man-to-man stuff. It depended on individual skill and courage, not on the range and size of a high explosive shell. And like all such combat, it was as much a matter of rivalry, in the

sporting sense of the word, as anything else. A great ace on one side would often literally challenge a great ace on the other side. There was Navarre, the smooth-faced Frenchman, who kept dropping insolent notes across the lines, demanding that the great Immelmann come up and fight him for "championship of the world." And the "super-hawk," being a good sport, had complied, had come up and shot him down.

Every time Kirby went up he kept his eyes open for the lone black Fokker. But thus far he had not seen it. His hope had begun to diminish. He feared that somebody else had bagged the Black Devil, that the news merely hadn't been reported yet. At times he was so convinced of this idea that he grieved as if he had lost his best friend. And finally, realizing that Fate was working against him, he decided at least to pull some tricks that would rival the famous German. That was why he had formed his plan today.

When he laid this plan before his two comrades, who were sitting on their cots in the little cubicle they all shared together, Travis shook his head.

"Ridiculous," he drawled. "We can't disobey orders like that. You must tell the Old Man about this raid at once."

"But it won't hurt," Kirby argued, almost plaintively. "Come on!" He cast a wistful glance at Carn. "Don't you agree with me, Shorty?"

Carn took his briar pipe from his lips. His eyes twinkled slightly.

"Well," he said, "of course it's pretty risky, but you're the boss. We've got to obey your orders."

Travis gave a little contemptuous snort.

"You talk like a couple of kids!" His voice was paternal, "I admit it's a glorious stunt, but you'll have to convince me it's the proper thing to do."

Kirby took that job in hand. Later Carn joined in. Travis, secretly as anxious as they were to pull off such a show, weakened more and more. They half dragged him out to the field, and his protests began to lack conviction. They plopped a helmet over his head, and he began to agree with them. They got him over to the planes, before the line of hangars, and he surrendered completely.

While the mechanics dragged the three Spads out to the line and set their propellers whirling through the warming-up process, Kirby explained his way through the suspicious queries of some of the pilots.

"Just a test flight," he stated quietly. "We've got to try out our new elevator controls. We might try some target practice too."

This was partly true. The Three Mosquitoes were constantly putting new improvements on their planes, and testing them out. And shooting at the Huns would be target practice indeed!

Nevertheless the three hastened their preparations. They did not want to meet the C. O. before they took off. If they met the C.O. they would have no excuse for not telling him everything.

PRECIOUS time had to be taken for revving engines and looking over machine guns. But then Kirby pulled down his goggles, waved his arms, and the mechanics jerked the blocks from his wheels. The plane roared down the runway. Close on its tail came the other two. All three took the air with a grace and ease which other aviators always envied. Kirby led them up through the mist which had settled over the big 'drome, and, coming out in the hazy sunlight, started a straight course for Dubonne.

Now, after twenty minutes of flying, the ruined French village came into view, over the wooded hills. The Germans should be getting here too, very soon now, Kirby figured. Again he peered ahead. Nothing in sight. Well, so much the better. He'd catch those Huns before they even came near Dubonne, catch them maybe before they crossed their own lines.

Again his thoughts wandered to the Black Devil if only he met him today! He sighed hopelessly, remembering how many times he had made this same wish. But if he did meet him, he'd show him a trick or two. He'd destroy some of those fantastic legends about the German ace. He'd prove he wasn't so slow after all. He might have blundered that first time, but never again.

They were passing over Dubonne now, a ruined French village occupied by American and French troops. They were low enough to see men moving about—marching columns of khaki, clusters of artillery, a tank lumbering down the cobble-stoned street. As they passed over the town somebody fired several rockets from a Very pistol. It was merely a friendly salute, wishing the airmen luck in whatever enterprise they were about to engage.

Suddenly Kirby became aware of a shadow at his side. He glanced around. Travis was bringing his plane up alongside of him, wing-tip to wing-tip. When the third Mosquito was directly in line with Kirby, he started waving frantically, pointing off to the left. Kirby could see him shouting, but could not hear him. No human voice could compete with the mingled

roar of two Spad motors. However, Kirby glanced in the direction signified, and the next moment sat rigid, tense, his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

WAY off to the left, and forward, a series of tiny specks moved slowly on, glinting as the bright sunlight hit them. It did not take much guesswork for Kirby to realize that they were Boche planes. But why were they going that way? Certainly they were not headed for Dubonne, where the raid was supposed to take place. He scanned the country to his left. Then he saw. There was another town over there, beyond the wooded hills, directly on line with Dubonne. The Germans were moving straight towards it. What did they want there? Well, whatever it was, he was determined to stop them.

He banked sharply to the left. The two others banked with him. Full throttle he raced ahead, on a line that would converge with those glinting specks a good distance away from the other town.

As he flew ahead, he drew an oilskin folder from his coat with his free hand. He opened it on his lap, and exposed a rough map. One glance sent a shudder through him. Tarniers! The name looked grim, for he knew now why the Germans were headed for that town. Though Dubonne was supposed to be the sector from which the new "push" would be conducted, Tarniers was the real center of activity. It was swarming with troops, and Major General Smithers and his staff had set up headquarters there. Heavy artillery and ammunition had been surreptitiously smuggled in. And most of the ammunition, partly for the sake of secrecy, partly for necessity, was stored in a half-ruined mansion, a palatial hall that used to belong to some wealthy duke. It was out of range of the enemy batteries, but a few planes——

Kirby's lips set grimly. He knew that if the ammunition were set off, it would practically raze the town, kill off a score of men (perhaps including a major-general and his staff), and put a stop to the big offensive planned for the immediate future. The Germans doubtless knew that too, despite all efforts to keep it secret. If they didn't know, they wouldn't be headed in that direction. Kirby guessed their intentions. They were going to try to drop a few bombs on that impromptu arsenal. The stuff might even be set off with tracer bullets from machine guns.

But wasn't the place protected at all? He glanced ahead again. The sight which met his eyes brought him momentary relief. There were three other specks in the sky now, flying out from the town, towards the

Germans. Kirby surmised that they were the protecting planes for the arsenal, and had come forth to hold off the enemy until help arrived. Even as he looked, the larger group of specks, a moment ago moving slowly and smoothly ahead, seemed thrown into confusion, and began to swarm and dance. A dog-fight was on.

The feeling of relief vanished as Kirby looked the facts in the face. He cursed himself for a fool. Even granting that the three could hold off the Germans until he and his men arrived, even granting that the six could hold them until the rest of the squadron, getting another call, appeared on the scene, just one bomber, slipping through, could fly over that arsenal and set it off! And all this on account of his petty vanity, his silly scheme! If the whole squadron had come up with him, the Germans would be cold meat. Now, instead of covering himself with glory, he was going to disgrace the Three Mosquitoes. A sob choked him. For such damn-fool stunts they transferred men to another branch of service, or sent them back to be instructors. He couldn't bear either thought.

Nevertheless, he must do the best he could. The Germans were far enough from the town to give him time to intercept them. He must tell his comrades. He waved his arm, signalled them to come up alongside of him. The other planes moved forward, close enough for Kirby to see the men's goggled faces. He held up his map, waved it frantically, pointed towards the town.

"Tarniers!" he roared, knowing they wouldn't hear but hoping they would catch the word from the movement of his lips. "Shells—Explosives——!"

THE two men evidently understood, for they glanced at their own maps. Still flying beside him, they waved and nodded. Then they resumed the formation.

Again he put on full throttle. As he drew closer, keeping his eyes ahead, another grim change took place. The German planes, now grown into birdlike silhouettes, came out of their confusion, reshaped their squadron, and, in V formation, went on toward Tarniers. It could mean but one thing. The three protecting planes had been shot down. And it was up to Kirby aid his Mosquitoes to hold the Germans from that arsenal!

A grim determination seized him. He would stop them! If he could attack by surprise, he might get three of them at once. And if he kept his course, and they kept theirs, they would meet at a safe distance from the town.

Reaching his decision, he led his men up in a

steep climb, higher and higher. Slowly and jerkily the altimeter needle kept moving around . . . 10,000 feet . . . 11,000 . . . 12,000 . . . They were flying in wisps of clouds now, and it was cold up there, a thin clear coldness which bit into the very marrow. But Kirby did not waver. He had his plan.

The Germans were nearer now, flying at a lower altitude, and at a right-angle to Kirby. They were soon close enough for him to give them a cursory examination. Three two-seater bombers, he counted, and nine fighting single-seaters—Fokkers—to protect them. Could he stop them? It seemed impossible, stupendous, and yet—if only he could hold them back from that ammunition store long enough for the rest of the squadron to get here!

They were coming under him now, unaware of him and the others. He had played the old trick of getting between the sun and the enemy planes, thus blinding their sights. All were over a forest, about three miles from Tarniers. The Germans went on at leisure, doubtless certain that the path was clear except for the A.A. batteries, which held but little terror.

Suddenly Kirby's right arm shot upwards. The planes flying behind him, one on each side, caught the signal. In their language it meant simply:

"Give 'em hell!"

And as Kirby glanced around to see that his squadron was prepared, the other two flung out their arms. That meant:

"We will!"

KIRBY pushed the joy-stick forward. The nose of the plane dipped, and the machine went screaming down in a dive. The others, perfect pilots that they were, dived with him and managed to keep formation.

Down they thundered, directly on the Boche planes, their machine guns ready, their eyes trained along the sights. Kirby bided his time. Each of his men was aiming at one of the planes. As he drew closer, he pulled the stick trigger. The gun stuttered into life, streaks of flame leaped from its muzzle. Like an echo came the *rat-tat-tat* of the other men's guns. That first sally was over in a minute. Three German planes, all of the protecting squadron, went down in a tail-spin, out of control.

But now, thought Kirby grimly, it wasn't going to be so easy. The Germans had learned of their presence, and would try to make short order of them.

The German planes all banked abruptly, as though coming to a halt in midair. Kirby and his Mosquitoes

were now beneath them. Some of them dived. But the Three Mosquitoes had not won their names for nothing. Their senses were all tuned by experience. And as the bullets came hailing down, they rolled, dipped, side-slipped or banked.

Kirby led them up again, shooting all the while. The Germans, realizing that they were facing three determined men, concentrated on the attack. The ammunition place could come later.

Then the real fight began. It was a matter of roaring confusion to the men down on the ground who could witness it. But they saw the Three Mosquitoes doing their work, buzzing around the German planes, holding them, fighting with tooth and nail.

But they were so overwhelmingly outnumbered that it was only a matter of time before the Germans, in a concentrated sally, made them retreat, forced them towards the edge of the forest, closer and closer to the town. There the fight raged again. Down below the men aimed their A.A. guns, and their peculiar bark rang out. Shells burst in the air, adding to the deafening confusion.

The Germans concentrated for a new attack. This one forced Kirby and his men over the outskirts of Tarniers. And then Kirby realized. That arsenal was right down there, virtually unprotected. He must stop these Germans from getting there to drop their bombs.

Three out of twelve had already been sent down in that first unexpected attack. If he could get the bombers, the danger would be lessened.

As the Germans reached the town, they dropped two bombs, saving the rest. They were carefully aimed.

Kirby saw a house leap into the air, then fall down in debris. Rage seized him. He must fight now! His left arm shot out, waved up and down:

"Are you with me?"

And the others waved back:

"You bet!"

KIRBY glanced down and his heart stood still. They were almost over the arsenal! He could see it—a big hall with two towers, surrounded by a wall. A road ran adjacent to it. The rest was fertile acreage which had belonged to its wealthy owner. And Kirby noted that several parts of the roof were missing: they had been covered temporarily with tarpaulin. What a place to drop a bomb and blow up the whole town!

But he had no time to conjecture. The Germans were coming ahead at full speed. He led his men into a desperate charge, a steep climb and another dive. Sheer

desperation enabled him to get two more planes. It was three to seven now.

Thus the fight went on. Now and then the Germans came dangerously close to that arsenal, and at such times Kirby would fight as he had never fought before. Down below, around the place, men were gathered. They were shooting up at the Boches with every kind of gun available. Machine guns and A.A. guns roared in unison.

Kirby glanced ahead, and his muscles grew taut. One of the bombers had slipped by, and was headed straight for the arsenal!

He swerved around, opened the throttle wide, and gave chase. The German came closer and closer to the walls. Kirby made one last frantic charge which brought him on the bomber's tail. His machine gun poured out the sulphurous tracer bullets. If they missed, everything was lost! But they did not miss. The bomber seemed to stand stock still, hanging on empty air for a moment, then, with a deafening crash, it disappeared in a cloud of smoke and flame. Its own bombs had shattered it to bits, exploding too far from the ground to do any damage there.

Kirby swung back to help his comrades. It struck him now that he must, above all, get the other two bombers. If only he could tell his men to do so! Well, maybe they would understand.

He performed a feint. He charged straight down, ostensibly for one of the single-seaters, which prepared to meet him. But then he maneuvered towards a bomber. The single-seater dived after him. Carn, catching the move, dived after the single-seater. Travis kept his altitude position, ready to join in. And Travis luckily caught another single-seater trying to go over the arsenal.

The bomber, aware of its attacker, maneuvered skillfully. Kirby tried to get him in range, but failed. Carn dived on his single-seater, but the latter also rolled out of the way. For once things weren't going right, thought Kirby grimly. The reason was obvious. They were all tired, and couldn't fight with their usual precision. He lost his bomber, and Carn lost his single-seater. As a matter of fact, now, they had all they could do to defend themselves, not to speak of keeping the Germans from going over that old building. They were in the last ditch. Kirby knew it, and a groan escaped him. He knew that the next sally of the Germans would probably get by. They would pass and drop their bombs.

He waved his arm to encourage his comrades. But

it was almost helpless. The Germans started to reshape their squadron, now only six planes—two bombers and four single-seaters. Then they came, advancing with their guns shooting.

Kirby gave the signal to break formation and attack in any fashion, each man for himself. He stuck to his sights. The Germans came closer. He had to bank to avoid a collision. But his gun spat. He shot more carefully and patiently than ever before. Nevertheless he missed, and the only reward for his pains was a dose of lead in his wing, close to the aileron.

His heart sank. The Germans were passing. They were going straight for the arsenal. Vainly, without the slightest shred of hope, he gave the signal to turn and stop them. And as he turned, knowing the uselessness of pursuit, a wave of grateful relief swept him.

DIVING down from the sky, having come up unawares by the same trick of getting beneath, the sun, were nine fighting single-seaters. Kirby saw their insignia, recognized the type. They were Nieuports and Spads. His squadron! The C.O. had gotten word at last!

The Germans were taken so completely by surprise—they had been concentrating on getting over the arsenal, and had been nearing its walls—that the thing became a matter of slaughter. The Three Mosquitoes, their spirits revived, joined in. One after another, Boche planes were sent spinning down. The bombers were gone. The rest, realizing that their schemes had been foiled, started to retreat, with the American squadron in full pursuit.

Kirby relaxed in the cockpit. It was all over. His scheme had worked. He and his men had held off the Germans until help arrived. Now they could go back.

But then something happened. They were all several thousand feet from the arsenal, chasing the Germans, at an altitude of about 7,000 feet, when some sixth sense warned Kirby to glance back. He did.

A dark streak came diving out of the sky, swerved, and went speeding towards the arsenal. Where it had come from he did not know. But the sight of it sent a thrill tingling up his spine, made his eyes gleam.

It was the Black Devil!

He was certain of it, for he could see the outline of the black plane, a Fokker single-seater of the latest model. And on its wings, grotesquely painted, was a white skull and cross-bones. In the night time, Kirby knew, these grim symbols were luminous.

The other planes were busy with the fleeing

Germans. Kirby was the only one who saw the Black Devil. He knew he shouldn't go after it alone, at such a critical time, but some deep uncontrollable impulse prompted him to do so. Banking vertically, he dashed toward the Fokker. The German was not going at full speed. He thought the way was clear.

So, thought Kirby, as he neared the Fokker's tail—they were still some distance from the arsenal—he was going to meet this man again at last. He was going to face the terror of Allied aviators, Germany's greatest ace, the only man who had been able to shoot him down!

And even as he thought this his gun spat out a stream of smoke and fire.

It is funny how a skilled pilot can tell what emotions are passing through his adversary's mind by the action of the other plane. As the German rolled instinctively to avoid the terrible tracer bullets, Kirby knew the man had been taken by surprise, that surprise had turned to rage and the determination to do away with his enemy immediately. Sure enough, the German started to Immelmann around. Kirby tried to get him half over, but only a few bullets went home. In a second the German confronted him, his gun firing.

Kirby was ready. He reached for the joy-stick to start the machine in a climb, then paused abruptly, clenching his teeth in a sort of childish rage.

The other two Mosquitoes had come back. They were diving down on the Black Devil, for they were not going to give him any chance to reach the arsenal. Kirby knew that they were right, but he resented it just the same.

Carn came down first, shooting with his mathematical precision. And then Kirby saw a feat which amazed him. The German, even as he rolled out of range, pointed his nose upwards. Streaks came from his machine gun. And Carn's plane, for the first time, was incapacitated. It went down clumsily, out of control. Kirby did not have time to see its fate. The German was coming for him. Above, Travis was coming for the German.

All three guns spat at once, and mingled with the roar of motors and the bark of A.A. guns below. Kirby was now beneath the German plane and made the best of his position, tried to hold the German in range for Travis to get him.

SUDDENLY, without warning, he heard a hissing, screaming sound along his fuselage. The German had hit him, not badly, but a hit was a hit. How? How had he shot down from above, for he had not aimed his plane at Kirby's.

Kirby looked up, and what he saw made him retreat momentarily. The German was equipped with two guns. One of them emerged from a hole in the bottom of the fuselage! Kirby saw then what had happened. It was one of the Black Devil's characteristic tricks.

Travis dived directly on the German's tail. The latter, with his customary indifference, calmly rolled out of the way, and Travis went past, a little below. Kirby now saw the German jockeying above the third Mosquito. He wished he could warn Travis about that hole under the fuselage. Instead, however, he maneuvered for the Boche's tail.

Then it happened again. Travis absently got himself under that gun. It spat. This time it did not fail.

Kirby's face fell as the third Mosquito went screaming down. He was furious, and partly envious. This German had been far too shrewd for them. With the odds three to one against him, he had conquered two planes single-handed and now only one was left. It never struck Kirby that one reason for this was that he and his men were practically exhausted, and not up to their usual mettle.

But now the Black Devil, still above, was diving for him. Kirby banked his plane around. Once more he faced the man he had always wanted to meet. He faced him alone, ready to fight to a finish. And, less than a mile away was the arsenal, into which the German wanted to shoot his tracer bullets.

Kirby set his gun, opened his throttle. The fight was on.

It would be useless to describe that struggle, one of the greatest single fights ever staged. Every trick of the game was employed by both men, every dive and zoom and maneuver. They climbed, dipped, and swerved around one another, each one clever enough to avoid the bullets. Down below, all along, from the outskirts of the town to the arsenal, men watched them, spellbound. Kirby did have one advantage. A.A. guns were trying to pick out the German. But this did not by any means make the fight a one-sided affair. First of all, A.A. guns against swift single-seaters are not very effective. Then, they could not really hit because Kirby was right there too. Thirdly, Kirby was tired, a fact in the German's favor.

It lasted ten minutes, but it seemed hours. It ended in a climbing match, with each man trying to make the highest altitude. They were at twelve thousand feet, and the German's last charge had brought them both closer to the arsenal.

Kirby won that race. He gained the high position,

and, his muscles aching, his ears ringing, got his sights down on the Black Devil. He pulled his trigger. Then it was over.

The stream of bullets struck right in front of the German's cockpit. His machine gun flew off and went hurtling down. And he suddenly sat up rigid, as if he too had been hit.

Kirby waited and watched grimly. A few puffs broke out. He knew that the little ammunition the German had left had exploded. If the man was not dead now, he was damned lucky.

Kirby passed down and came closer to the German, so he could see him. In spite of his animosity, he had a strange desire to salute the daring ace in some way, if the man were alive, to show him that he could appreciate good fighting.

But the German had his own ideas. Kirby saw him moving. It was incredible, but he was flying, even as flames began to shoot out of the fuselage. Full throttle he flew ahead, Kirby following, trying to figure it all out.

THEN it dawned upon him, but not until the thing was about to happen. The German, in a last desperate sally, flew past the walls of the arsenal, over the roof. He was there now. And as Kirby came charging down on him, furious at himself for allowing such a thing, the German stood up. Flames rose around him. Kirby was right above him, trying to work out a course of action. The Black Devil raised his face, looked up, then, to Kirby's rage and admiration, reverently thumbed his nose. Then he sank back in the cockpit.

And at the same moment his plane dipped and started downwards. The blood drained from Kirby's face as he grasped the whole upshot of the strategy. The flaming plane, now a mass of smoke and fire, was diving straight for one of the unprotected parts of the roof! It would surely set off the ammunition! The Black Devil was going to have the last say, and what a say it was!

Kirby for once in his life was paralyzed. He could not figure a course of action. A precious second went by. How could he prevent this plan from succeeding, stop a flaming plane from crashing down there? Even now it was getting closer, every fraction of time counted.

And then suddenly it came to him. Instant death, to be sure, but it would mean the last say for him! He would triumph even now! His plane could do it! It was stronger than the other, less inflammable.

He lost no time. From where he was, 12,000 feet up there, slightly to the side of the building, he pushed the stick forward. The nose dipped abruptly. . . .

Down below a crowd of men stood rooted to the spot. Major General Smithers and his staff were there. They saw a German plane coming down in flames, death coming to them all. But then they saw something else.

Like a swiftly falling meteor, Kirby's plane swooped down in his greatest dive. It was so fast that it looked like a streak, with smoke coming from the exhaust. The German plane was lighter, and thus fell more slowly.

And as they watched, breathless, Kirby's plane swerved slightly. It headed directly for the German plane, even as the latter was scarcely a hundred feet above the arsenal. It came down, swooped up suddenly, and plunged ahead. Its nose crashed straight into the underpart of the flaming Fokker, and the terrific impact sent them both outwards together, beyond the roof of the arsenal. The German's plane was shattered to bits. Kirby's plane, its nose a crushed mass, was in flames. That it didn't explode was incredible. It rolled around and around, spinning down towards the road.

And as it neared the ground, a sudden jerk threw Kirby from the cockpit. He was hurled down on the road, and lay inert. A crash rose nearby as his plane hit another spot and cracked.

Men came running up, crowded around him. A doctor bent over him.

The men waited, tense and expectant, for his verdict.

The doctor's eyes opened wide.

"Alive!" he gasped. "God knows how!"

"Sure I'm alive," said Kirby, suddenly but faintly, as he opened his eyes. While the doctor performed some emergency work, the young man scanned the ring of faces above him. His glance finally came to rest on his two comrades, who stood there, full of dirt, bruises and scratches, but otherwise uninjured. Kirby let out a triumphant yell: "Well, fellows, I got *him!* I——" His smile faded suddenly. A tall, erect figure had loomed

up before him. He saw shining puttees, spurs, gold insignias, a stern face whose two stern eyes were fixed on him. It was the major general! Kirby flushed with guilt. He tried to speak, but couldn't.

"Oh, he'll be all right," the doctor was telling the high officer. "Yes, he has had a miraculous escape. A little rest and he'll be ready for service again. It will be all right for you to talk to him now, sir, if you want, before we cart him to the hospital."

The major general nodded slowly.

"Very well. . ." Again he looked down at the injured man. "Captain Kirby," his voice was stern and hard, "I have been informed that you did a rash and altogether inexcusable thing. Your two friends tried to burden the blame, but you are the flight commander, and therefore wholly responsible." His tone became accusing, the words had a knife-like edge. "You neglected to inform your commanding officer as to the reported Boche raid. You wanted to cover yourself and your comrades with glory, do the well-known "grand-stand" stuff. I admit you might have gotten away with it had you met the enemy under different circumstances. Of course you did not know, nor did we, that the Germans had learned of this arsenal. But, regardless of that, you had no right to take any chances. Such childish pettiness is not to be tolerated in the service, Captain Kirby."

Kirby averted his eyes from those of the officer. He spoke haltingly, his voice full of pain.

"Yes, sir. I understand. If I had obeyed orders all this fuss and trouble could have been avoided. Well, I'm willing to take my medicine now. I——" he choked, "I am well aware that I did a damn-fool thing."

"Damn-fool thing is right," the major general echoed tersely. But then, to everyone's surprise, his eyes began to twinkle.

Having finished the lecture which it was his duty to give, he seemed relieved, satisfied. He cleared his throat. "However, Kirby, you had the sense to do another damn-fool thing just now. So——" He stroked his chin, and at last actually smiled, "I guess the score is even."