

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

## THE ACE OF SPADS

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

*Kirby's eyes glowed when he saw the new-type Spad, one of the most beautiful ships ever delivered to the Front. It was to be his job to try it out in action. But he was not to go over the lines—the Germans would lose no opportunity to get their hands on the new ship. Once in the air, however, with a Fokker in sight, Kirby—forgot. One of Oppenheim's best flying yarns!*

IT WAS JUST A LITTLE AFTER DAWN when the C.O.'s orderly cautiously opened the door of the coop where the "Three Mosquitoes" bunked, and entered on tiptoe. The three cots were revealed in the furtive gleams of light which came through the window, and the orderly looked from one to another. All three men were sound asleep. Kirby, the impetuous leader of the famous trio of aces, wore a calm and peaceful expression which seldom graced his fighting countenance. "Shorty" Carn, the corpulent and mild-eyed, was snoring with great gusto, as if to proclaim to the world his keen relish for sleep. Travis, oldest and wisest of the trio, slept with his feet sticking out from the foot of his cot, because of his lanky stature.

It was to Kirby's cot that the orderly tiptoed, and leaned over the sleeper. Timidly, he began to shake Kirby, and the shaking increased in violence as the orderly gained courage. Kirby stirred, rolled over sluggishly, blinked. A prolonged yawn came from him, and he stretched out his arm. Then, all at once, he seemed to jump out of his sleep with a start, and was wide-awake, thoroughly alert. So it is with men who

are experienced to being called to duty at any time, and at a moment's notice.

The calm and peaceful expression had vanished from Kirby's features; a frown had taken its place. He propped himself up on one elbow, looked at the orderly inquiringly.

The orderly spoke in a whisper, as if fearful of disturbing the other two sleepers. And there was a strangely mysterious note in his voice.

"The colonel wishes to see you at once, sir. He's waiting out on the field."

Kirby waved a hand towards his two sleeping comrades. "Wants to see us, does he?"

"No, sir," the orderly corrected. "Just you, sir. He gave orders not to wake the other two men. Said you should dress quietly and come out."

A puzzled look came into Kirby's eyes.

"Just me? That's funny. What in hell?" He broke off with a shrug, then snapped tersely, officiously: "Tell him I'll be right out."

The orderly departed noiselessly. Kirby hopped out of bed. Taking care not to wake the other two men, he

dressed as hurriedly as he could. It took him just three minutes to get into his clothes. Then, still looking puzzled, he tiptoed out of the room, went down the hall of the barracks, and came out on the field. The sun was just rising in the east, behind the camouflaged hangars. In the misty light of early morning the few planes which stood out on the field looked like strange, ghostly birds squatting on the ground.

The C.O. was waiting for Kirby, right outside the barracks. There was a businesslike look on the grizzled old colonel's face. Kirby saluted.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, captain," the C.O. replied in his gruff voice. "Sorry to yank you out of bed at this unholy hour, but I've got a special little job for you. Want you to attend to it before the regular day's routine. The dawn patrol is in the air. Most of the other men are still in bed. That's what I want. We don't need any curious crowds watching this business."

The colonel's words only increased Kirby's puzzlement the more.

"Pardon me, sir, but what's it all about?"

"I'll show you," the C.O. said. "Just come along with me."

Wonderingly, Kirby followed him. The colonel walked over to the tarmac, where mechanics were swarming around the few planes which had been brought out of the hangars. Up to one of these planes the C.O. went, and as they approached the ship, and it stood before them in all its details, Kirby's eyes widened. He whistled.

"Oh, boy!" he murmured incredulously, and the pilot in him, the lover of planes, felt a warm glow of admiration. Never had he seen a prettier or more modern-looking ship than this. True, the plane looked familiar, seemed to be a Spad—the type which Kirby had been flying—yet what a difference! It was all shining new, beautifully streamlined, and with a huge, silvery nose whose rough contours revealed the strength and power of its engine. All in all, it was as graceful as a swallow, yet, with that engine, with the powerful struts and stays which supported its two pretty wings, and with the strong-looking undercarriage on which it rested, it had the rugged firmness of an eagle. Twin machine guns glistened above the engine. The motor was not running, but mechanics were obviously preparing the ship for flight. And a man in flying togs stood in the cockpit, looking over the controls.

For several seconds, Kirby stared at that ship in

breathless awe. Then he exclaimed: "Gosh, what a pippin of a plane! Boy, oh boy!"

"It's a new-type Spad," the C.O. told him. "The latest word, they say. Two hundred and fifty horsepower Hispano-Suiza engine. It was ferried over here late last night. If it measures up to expectations, the whole squadron will be equipped with such planes."

Kirby's eyes lit up. "Hell, if we had planes like that, those damned new Fokkers wouldn't get so fresh," he sighed wistfully. "What wouldn't I give to take this baby up!"

The C.O. smiled faintly.

"Glad you feel that way about it," he said frankly. And, without further preliminaries, he pulled a paper from his pocket, handed it to the Mosquito. Kirby read the typewritten message. It was from staff headquarters.

"Commanding Officer,—the aero pursuit squadron.

On September 2, one of the new-type Spads will be brought to your field. Our test pilots have all concurred on the excellent performance and merit of the ship, but it remains for tests to be made at the Front itself. Therefore, the plane is to be entrusted to one of your most skillful pursuit pilots, who will take it up, flying without any escort ships so as not to attract curiosity or attention. If possible, the pilot will engage the plane in combat with an enemy aircraft. However, the pilot is not to place himself in serious danger at any time. When satisfied that he has put the Spad through a thorough test, he is to make a detailed report on its performance as a fighting machine, which report will determine whether our pursuit units in your sector will fly the new ships during the present offensive."

A grim laugh broke from Kirby. "That's rich, about the pilot placing himself in serious danger! How in hell do they expect him to pull off a scrap without risking his neck?"

"Well, staff headquarters sometimes has peculiar ideas," was the C.O.'s laconic explanation. "It's a pretty tall order, I admit. Requires not only a good pilot, but also a good fighter." His piercing gray eyes studied the Mosquito shrewdly. "How about it, Kirby? Feel up to it?"

Kirby grinned cheerfully. "Why not?" he replied, looking over the new ship again. "Don't see why I shouldn't be able to handle her. I'll shoot right over to Hunland and pick out any Jerry who shows his nose or—"

"No you don't!" the C.O. cut him off with peculiar harshness. The colonel's eyes narrowed. His voice was ominously emphatic. "Your orders, Kirby, are to remain on this side of the lines. Understand? Under no circumstances are you to fly over German territory. Remember, this is a new ship. Intelligence has reported that the Germans have instructions to bring down one of these planes on their side of the lines at all costs, so they can study it. Of course, they're bound to get one sooner or later, but by that time we hope to have them in general use, and it won't matter as much. We can't afford to take any chances now. It's true that Huns seldom come over to our side of the lines nowadays, but you might nab one on reconnaissance or after a balloon. If you can't, come back. Is that clear?"

Kirby nodded thoughtfully. It was clear enough.

The C.O. then called to the man who was standing in the cockpit of the Spad. He climbed out.

"This is Captain Hammond," the colonel informed Kirby. "He ferried the ship over from Revon, our aerial supply base, and he'll give you a few pointers on handling the bus."

And Captain Hammond, in terse, technical language, explained all the novel features of the ship to Kirby, who listened with eager interest. He learned that the new ship ran like any other Spad, only her flying speed was greater, making landing a more difficult operation.

"Then there are those machine guns," the captain added. "They're the latest Brownings, nicely synchronized to shoot between the propeller, and they can fire more than 600 shots a minute and still trip properly. Of course, like all such guns, they're sensitive, and they're apt to jam if you overtax them. But if you'll just 'handle them with care' you oughtn't to have any trouble with them."

"I get you," Kirby stated soberly. Then he turned to the C.O. "Now when do I start, colonel?"

"As soon as possible. And try to get back within a couple of hours, before those two comrades of yours get up and start worrying. You know them!"

Fifteen minutes later Kirby, having gulped down some coffee and munched a roll before stepping into his flying togs, strapped himself in the cockpit of the beautiful little ship and shouted "Contact!" to the mechanics who swung the prop. The powerful engine roared into life, and its steady, thunderous throb was music to Kirby's ears. Slowly he pulled out the throttle, and revved her up.

The C.O. came up beside the fuselage to yell a final instruction to him: "Remember not to cross the lines!"

Kirby nodded, then signaled to the mechanics.

They jerked aside the chocks in front of the wheels, and leaped out of the way. The Spad moved forward, bounding gently across the field. It gathered flying speed with amazing swiftness, and took off with hardly any effort on Kirby's part. Gently, he pulled back the stick and climbed through the fine haze which hung over the ground. And the farther the ground receded from him the more serious grew the look on his goggled face. Like most flyers, he could not help but feel a faint distrust of a new ship which he had never flown, and that distrust made him cautious. The plane was responding beautifully to his control, yet he hesitated to "let her out" for fear that something would happen, that she would fall apart or explode or do some equally unpleasant trick. Besides, the fact that the ship was new also bothered him in another way: he didn't want to knock her around, soil her.

At two thousand feet he leveled off to try a few evolutions. He started, cautiously, with figure eights, and found he could do them without losing a foot, of altitude. Then he did a few vertical banks, and from that went into a series of barrel rolls. His confidence was increasing as the ship responded perfectly to every maneuver, but nevertheless, he felt more than a slight tremor of doubt when he started the more dangerous stunts. He looped three times, then slid down sideways in a falling leaf.

And then he took a really big chance. He kicked the plane into a spin. Down he went hurtling in a rush of wind, fearing that he would never be able to pull out. But he did pull out. He had no trouble changing the spin to a dive. Bravely, he dove right at the ground, and at scarcely fifty feet above the field, pulled up into a breathless zoom. When he had gained altitude again, he decided to try one landing. He circled to head into the wind, and glided down. The speed of that glide was greater than he had ever experienced in such a case: the Spad came streaking down hellbent, and he held his breath and was afraid of crashing. But he was a good pilot, and in the end he set the ship on the field with an ease which surprised him.

The C.O., standing with a group of mechanics on the tarmac, waved to him encouragingly. Kirby waved back, then reopened his throttle and took off anew. This time he climbed to five thousand feet, emerging from the haze into the clear and bright sky above. The sun was quite brilliant now, and flying conditions were ideal. The sky was a pure translucent blue, with just a few stray wisps of cloud. Visibility was perfect for miles and miles.

Kirby leveled off, and then set out in quest of any enterprising Hun who had ventured across the lines. He was quite satisfied with the ship so far, but—his expression grew even more serious—the real test was yet to come.

Not long after Kirby's departure, Travis, waking up, was startled to discover the empty cot. He woke Carn and the two dressed hurriedly. They went to the C.O.'s headquarters shack, and voiced an anxious inquiry. The C.O. decided at once to confide the truth to them, though not the whole truth by any means.

"I just sent him up to try out a new-type Spad. He'll be right back. You two wait for him."

The two Mosquitoes looked at one another with grim understanding.

"Sounds safe enough," Shorty Carn admitted. "But," he shook his head, "somehow I have a sneaky feeling that he's going to run into trouble."

"Strange, I feel the same way," drawled the lanky Travis. He turned to the colonel, almost pleadingly. "Wish you'd let us go up after him, sir. See if we can find him and—"

"Nonsense, nonsense," the C.O. snapped with impatient irritation. "It would just be useless, a waste of time. You'd probably never find him anyway. Good God," he sighed, "why are you two always worrying like a couple of old women? Kirby can take good care of himself, or I wouldn't have sent him in the first place." His stern eyes pierced those of the two men. "Now you two are to stay right here on the field, understand? When Kirby returns you can all go up for your regular morning patrol. Those are your orders, and I won't stand for any foolishness. That will be all."

And at about the same time the colonel was saying those words, Kirby, flying just a mile behind the Allied lines, spotted his Hun.

Off to the right, he had seen several white puffs breaking out in the clear blue sky. Allied anti-aircraft guns. And anti-aircraft guns did not shoot just for the fun of it. There must be a Hun there.

He swung the Spad around to the right, heading for that zone of anti-aircraft fire. And as soon as he turned, he saw the German ship.

It was a speedy scout, which glinted silvery in the sunlight. It was sailing calmly through the storm of anti-aircraft fire, moving steadily westward. Kirby scanned the sky in that direction. A light of grim understanding came into his eyes. Over there, several miles way, a sausage-like shape swung against the blue. A French captive balloon. The German had come over to nab it.

Without hesitation, Kirby set his course on a line which would bring him overhead of the German scout. Then he opened his throttle wide. With a mighty, full-throated roar, the Spad shot forward, cleaving the air like a dart. The German scout continued to fly towards the balloon. The Mosquito, a good thousand feet higher, sought to cut in on a right-angle. Kirby's worries about the new ship had lessened considerably; he was quite accustomed to the controls now, and the engine was turning over nicely. But as he drew closer and closer overhead of the German, a tense feeling began to grip him, and his nerves grew strangely taut. Now for the big test!

Already the anti-aircraft guns had stopped shooting, as the Spad swept into their zone of fire. The gunners on the ground saw the shining little ship with the red-white-and-blue markings, and were leaving the Hun to Kirby, knowing that a plane was the only efficient weapon to use against another plane. The German, however, went right on with serene indifference, heading for the distant French balloon. Though he must be aware that something was coming, since the anti-aircraft shells had ceased, he could not see Kirby, who had placed his Spad between the dazzling sun and the enemy ship, thus blinding the German's sights. Skillfully, the Mosquito was maneuvering above and behind the Hun, getting into a position to dive.

Glancing down, he took careful stock of his chosen opponent. The silver-colored German scout was clearly revealed in all its details as it moved on below and ahead. Kirby could see its insignia plainly, see the black crosses on its wings and fuselage. It was a Fokker. And it was one of the new Fokkers, the speedy, deadly scouts which had been raising hell with Allied aircraft lately.

Kirby's eyes narrowed, and his lips drew up in a tight little line. The test would be a good one. He would have to match his Spad against the greatest ship the enemy had!

He was in a position for his dive now. He had already tripped his guns, and thrown on his synchronizing gear. All set! His hand gripped the joy-stick tightly. For one final second he paused, paused like a high-diver pauses before jumping into the infinitesimal tank far below. Then, with a reckless oath, he shoved the stick forward.

The nose of the Spad dropped precipitously, and the blurred earth a mile and a half below swung up before Kirby's line of vision. Then he was diving, plunging down like a plummet, plunging straight for the Fokker. Down, down, down—with his motor

roaring wide-open and the wind shrilling through the flying wires. The German was looming up below him. Tensely, he leaned to his sights, and his fingers closed about the stick-triggers. Coming into range now, *coming!* He sought to catch the Fokker in the little ring of the sights. Then he pressed those triggers.

*Rat-tat-tat!* With a thunderous clatter, his twin machine guns blazed into life, spitting two streams of speeded-up tracer. Kirby watched the smoky course of the bullets. They streaked past the Fokker to the left. The German suddenly became vividly aware of his attacker. The silver ship rolled from its course in a flash of sunlight, and threw off Kirby's sights. The Mosquito came on down, and his dive carried him below his adversary. Hastily, he started to pull up.

But the German was not idle. Accepting combat, he swung around and tried to roll onto Kirby's tail. Kirby, cursing himself for his tremors, shot up for an Immelmann turn. But he was too cautious, and performed the maneuver too loosely. The German banked and forced him on the outside arc of the turn. There was a shrill staccato clatter from the Fokker's Spandau guns, and a stream of tracer streaked by Kirby's left. The Mosquito drew in his breath sharply. Shooting down this Hun was not going to be simple! The German was too good; he was obviously an experienced veteran. He knew how to fight!

Determinedly, the Mosquito split-aired to face his opponent again. And then the fight was on in earnest. The two planes began the swift succession of maneuvers which would mean death for the first man who fell into a disadvantageous position. They circled, rolled, and gyrated about each other, flashing in the sunlight.

The anti-aircraft gunners below watched the dog-fight through their glasses, watched spellbound. To an inexperienced onlooker the sight would not have been exciting. The two glistening planes looked like fragile dragon flies, buzzing peacefully around one another. But the men, hearing the sound of gunfire which drifted down from the sky, knew how grim and breathless the situation really was.

The further the fight progressed, the more Kirby realized that he was up against an extremely skillful opponent. As yet neither man had sent home a shot, but now, slowly, the German was beginning to gain on the Spad. Kirby was still too cautious, afraid to open his new ship out fully and put her at her best. The German, on the other hand, had absolute confidence in his Fokker, and was letting his ship out more and

more. He was getting the upper hand. Breathlessly, he was whipping around on Kirby's tail. His Spandau guns blazed anew, and the tracers whistled in Kirby's ears. A line of perforations appeared, as if by magic, in the wing surface above the Mosquito.

The sight of those bullet-rents in the new, freshly-doped fabric, brought a sudden rage to Kirby. The Hun was shooting up his brand new plane! His goggled face turned crimson.

"Damn you!" he bellowed, though his voice was more than shattered by the roar of engines. "I'll show you a few tricks, you square-headed son!"

And in his overwhelming fury he forgot his fears about the new ship. His caution left him. As the Fokker came swooping for his tail, he recklessly crossed controls and threw the Spad into a shivering stall. The Fokker swept past to the right, so close that Kirby could see the pilot's helmeted head, and the flash of his goggles. The German seemed to be peering curiously at the American plane. He was studying the new Spad! Then he had passed, and was in front of Kirby. Savagely, Kirby pounced for his tail like a hawk pouncing for a chicken. He fired, and a surge of triumph rose in him as he saw his tracers ripping into the Fokker's tail fins. Bits of wood and fabric flew from the German ship.

Suddenly, to Kirby's astonishment, the Fokker swerved off in a breathless skid-turn which headed it towards the east. Then it plunged into a long dive. Furiously, Kirby plunged after it, following its tail. The Hun was trying to pull out! And Kirby, with fresh triumph, assumed that he was pulling out because he knew he would be beaten. He was trying to escape to his lines. And, having gotten a head start on Kirby, he had succeeded in diving out of the Mosquito's range. Abruptly, at about three thousand feet, the Fokker leveled off, under full throttle, sped straight in the direction of Hunland!

Kirby, intent on getting him, followed. On they raced, one behind the other, hell-bent. Kirby began to gain. The wonderful Spad was chewing up the gap between itself and the Fokker, creeping up on the German's tail. Eagerly, Kirby leaned to his sights. His blood tingled with warm exhilaration, as he threw himself into the spirit of the chase. He was the hunter, stalking his quarry. And there was only one thought in his mind now: to catch that tricky Hun and knock him down. Everything else was forgotten. No longer did he remember that he was testing out a new ship; no longer did he think of the C.O.'s warning.

On—on—on— Now the two planes were streaking over the Front, streaking across the blurred, pock-marked battleground where a great Allied drive was in progress. Shells were bursting everywhere down there, causing both planes to wobble a trifle by their concussions. But Kirby was blissfully unaware of the infernal upheaval. He did not see the front-line American trenches receding beneath him, did not see the German trenches swimming towards him, approaching closer and closer. All he saw was the silvery Fokker which bobbed and swayed ahead of him, and which, as he kept creeping nearer, he sought once more to frame in the little ring. He caught it, momentarily, and began sending short staccato bursts ripping from his guns. But the German cleverly zig-zagged and half-rolled, and managed to throw off the Mosquito's sights again and again.

Now the German trenches were also receding from the two planes. And without realizing it, Kirby had flagrantly disobeyed orders. He had crossed the lines. He was in enemy territory.

The German kept leading him on the wild chase, penetrating further and further into Hunland. But now Kirby was so close behind that the Fokker's maneuvers to throw off his sights began to lose their effect. Relentlessly, the Mosquito was crowding in. Again he pressed his triggers. Again his guns blazed, pouring out their streams of tracer. The bullets streaked above the German's fuselage, a little too high. Gently, Kirby eased his stick forward, and down came the nose of the Spad, so expertly handled that it moved down steadily, inch by inch. And with the nose, down came the two forward-shooting streams of tracer. They touched the Fokker, went ripping along its fuselage. A little farther down, and they were pumping right into the silver ship. In another moment Kirby must score. In another second—

There came such a burst of machine-gun fire right behind him that he almost jumped out of his seat. The terrific clatter shattered the drone of his engine, rose shriller and shriller. At first he scarcely realized the significance of that hellish sound, though he saw the smoky tracers cutting zig-zag lines on both sides of him. In his confusion, he forgot the Fokker ahead of him, which promptly maneuvered out of his line of fire. He jerked his head around and glanced back.

Then the blood drained from his face, and his heart stopped.

Sweeping down on his tail, cutting him off from his own lines, were four more black-crossed ships!

They, too, were new Fokkers, silver in color. And as they came whipping down on him, whipping down with jagged streaks of flame biting from them, a hideous awakening came to Kirby, and he froze with anguished horror. Now at last he recalled the C.O.'s ominous warning: "*Remember not to cross the lines!*" Now at last he realized that he was flying a new-type Spad, a Spad which the Germans were determined to get in their territory. God! A groan escaped him. Fool that he was, he had let the clever German pilot trick him. The Hun had identified the Spad, and had cunningly lured Kirby across the lines, had sucked the Mosquito right under these four other Fokkers. Kirby, in his blind determination to get his man, had clumsily blundered into a fatal trap that even inexperienced flyers would have had sense enough to avoid!

Frantically, as he felt the Fokkers' shadows closing in on him, as the air grew thicker and thicker with their screaming lead and tracer, Kirby turned in a wild effort to break for his lines. But as he turned he saw at once that he could not get through. They had him walled in Hunland. Two of them bobbed in a position right above and in front of him, whence they could dive and slaughter him if he tried to pass. The third and fourth were sweeping on either side of him. The fifth, the pilot who had led him into the trap, was now behind Kirby's tail, and Kirby realized that he must be the leader of this clever, crack flight. For he was signaling the others with Very lights—different colored rockets which popped from his cockpit. He was directing the slaughter!

Slowly but inexorably, Kirby saw the noose tightening about him. The sky seemed dense with Fokkers. They were swarming all around the new Spad like death-dealing hornets, peppering away. And their bullets were beginning to tell. With a triumphant shriek the tracers tore through Kirby's fuselage, ripping up fabric and splintering the wood frame-work. Desperately, the Mosquito commenced doing half-rolls, zig-zags, and turns to throw off their sights. For the only thing to do, when surrounded like this, was, in the words of the pilots' unwritten rule-book: "*Sit tight and pray!*" However, Kirby remained the fighter, refusing to resign completely. Defiantly, he pressed his triggers whenever a Fokker-like shape streaked past in a flash of silver. But it was useless. He could not straighten out to take aim, for the moment he straightened out they could hold their sights on him and shoot him to ribbons.

Then, suddenly, an amazing thing took place. The Fokkers kept closing in, and Kirby knew that soon

they must catch him in their deadly cross-fire, yet, all at once, though their guns did not cease clattering entirely, the bullets stopped pumping into the Spad! Kirby's first impulse was to come out of his furious maneuvers and try to break for freedom, but one glance at the five planes which buzzed around him made him think better of it. He might have been tricked once to-day but, by God, they would not fool him again! He knew the crafty way German formations had of getting their victims cold. They'd hold their fire, and you'd straighten out. Then, with their sights dead on you, they'd shoot you to hell. Determinedly, Kirby continued to roll, zig-zag, and twist, hoping against hope that finally he would find some real loophole, some way to get out.

Then he got another surprise. All at once the leader of the German flight, the silver Fokker Kirby had chased, was pulling up to the right of the Spad. Skillfully, the German maneuvered until the two planes were side by side, wing to wing, and the pilots could look right across at one another. Kirby no longer dared to zig-zag for fear of locking wings with the Fokker, but he kept going in a wide circling flight to hold off the sights of the other Huns. The German flight leader, however, managed to stay right alongside of him by duplicating every movement of the Spad with amazing precision. Kirby could see the man's goggled face clearly. It was a stern, grim face with hard lines and straight, determined lips.

Suddenly the German, using one hand, began to signal him! He was performing a series of pantomimes. He pointed to Kirby's plane, then pointed down towards the earth a mile below. Glancing down, Kirby saw that the terrain, though mostly woods, had a few open stretches of level field. Tiny gray-clad figures were swarming on every one of those open stretches, and a road close by was jammed with German traffic and troops. The pilot of the Fokker went on signaling. His hand swept downwards, and clearly depicted the graceful sweep of a plane making a landing.

At first Kirby did not quite grasp what the man was driving at. Then, with a sudden shock, he understood. The German was telling him to surrender honorably, to land his Spad on one of those fields down there and his life would be spared.

The Hun's motives were clear enough. They would rather have the Spad in good shape than shoot it to pieces. But if Kirby refused—

The German signified the four planes which continued to hold their positions on all sides of the

Spad. Then the Boche pilot tapped his own twin machine guns, and ended by making a pantomime of slitting his throat. Speech itself could not have had clearer import. And Kirby realized that they would not have much trouble carrying out that threat now. By the position of the German planes, he saw that they had him where, even though he might throw off their sights, they could get him in their criss-cross fire, wall him in a prison of lead.

Kirby paled at that prospect, and felt strangely cold all over. But, scared though he was, he refused even to consider the German's demand. *Surrender?* Deliberately place the new Spad in their hands? Throw up the sponge when he was still able to fight, still unwounded?

He scowled with defiant contempt at the stern goggled face across from him. His eyes blazed behind their goggles.

"I'll see you in hell first!" he bellowed, wishing the man could hear. And since the man couldn't hear, Kirby made himself clear by a single gesture. Carefully and deliberately, the Mosquito thumbed his nose at the Boche. The German, however, repeated his signals once more, as if warning Kirby to think twice before he refused. Kirby thumbed his nose again, this time with both hands, and then, to show how little the German's threat was going to influence him, he recklessly opened fire on a Fokker which swept in front of him. The German flight leader realized that there was no use arguing further with this determined American. Abruptly, the silver Fokker swerved away, falling back to its position behind Kirby. And that meant—

*Rat-tat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!* The infernal clatter rose with fresh and deafening fury. Kirby had refused their alternative, and they were going to finish him off! *Rat-tat-tat!* Streams of tracer came streaking down from all directions, and Kirby's frantic rolling and zig-zagging availed him nothing. Instinctively, he ducked low in the cockpit as the bullets began to ricochet from the cowling in front of him. *Crash!* A trailing edge of the top wing was shot away, and hung dangling in shreds, though thank God it wasn't a vital part yet! *R-r-r-r-r-rip!* They nicked a big chunk out of his rudder. A bullet tore through a sleeve of his flying togs: another grazed his helmet.

With a shrill, splintering shriek a strut shivered in its place, started to crack. The five Fokkers kept swarming about, making breathless swoops at the cornered Spad. The bullets kept coming, thicker and

faster, pumping into Kirby's ship. In a second they must hit a vital part, or hit Kirby, and it would be over!

Then, once more, as he saw his beautiful ship being shot to hell, saw the fabric being ripped and the wood splintered, a deadly volcanic rage swept Kirby. Damn them all, he was going to fight! They might have him cornered, but damned if he was just going to sit here and calmly let them shoot his pretty ship to ribbons! To hell with rules and conventions! "Sit tight and pray!" Bah! He was going to try to blaze his way out of here, regardless of the consequences. And when they did get him, he'd go down fighting!

With a savage jerk, he pulled open his throttle, and recklessly straightened out, pointing his nose right towards the Allied lines. The Fokkers blazed away in shrill unison, and a fresh hail of tracers pumped into the Spad. But Kirby laughed at the bullets, ignored them. And luck stood beside the Mosquito in that awful moment, gave him a break. The unexpectedness, the total surprise of his insolent, breathless move, had taken the Germans unawares. They were momentarily confused, and their confusion opened a loophole in their deadly trap. And Kirby, crouching low in his cockpit and gritting his teeth, crashed straight ahead at full speed, crashed right through the maelstrom of lead.

A Fokker swept down ahead of him, guns blazing. With a berserk oath which almost brought blood to his mouth, the Mosquito zoomed straight at the ship. The German, loving life, swerved to avoid a collision, and Kirby fired point-blank. The Fokker stood stock still, like a bird surprised by a sudden wound. Then, slowly, it turned over on its back to plunge earthward in a fatal spin, with dead hands at its controls. And a grim, mirthless smile came over Kirby's lips. Anyway, he had done his job! He had shot down a Fokker!

But now the other Germans, enraged by the fall of their comrade, had pulled out of their confusion and were closing in with fresh fury. Again their tracers pumped into the Spad, and the little ship actually lurched under that hail of lead. But Kirby knew he had a chance now, with the odds lessened and the Spad no longer in such a tight hole. It was a fleeting chance at least, and he would make the most of it. Recklessly, he kept heading for his lines, racing onwards with the four German ships swarming around him.

The Spad's powerful engine roared at full throttle, and black smoke poured from the curved exhausts. The Mosquito was putting up a running fight with those four silver Fokkers. And it was something more than skill which guided him now, something more,

too, than the fact that he had a wonderful plane which stood the gaff and responded perfectly to every maneuver. Ordinarily, Kirby was a great pilot, one of the best. But when he got "lighting mad" he was more than a great pilot. He was a deadly wild-cat, a crazy, devil-may-care fighting fool who laughed at death and scorned the odds against him. It was as if a demon possessed him and took over the controls.

Eyes glued to sights, fingers on triggers, he hurled himself at the Fokkers which sought to block his path. He was everywhere among them, always surprising them by the breathless fury and unexpectedness of his maneuvers, outguessing them, out-daring them, taking them head-on. His Spad, opened out to the fullest measure, hitting in top form, was a roaring monster which, cornered, had suddenly become deadly and ferocious.

Already he had succeeded in moving a half a mile towards the lines. If he could make about three miles more he would be in Allied territory. That was all he wanted. They might get him there, but it would not matter so much then. As long as the Spad was not shot down in Hunland!

Cursing, laughing crazily, he went on. Bullets kept tearing into his Spad, splinters flew at his face, but he did not feel them. Vaguely he saw the Fokkers looming up before him in flashing succession. There were still four of them, despite his wonderful shooting. He kept blazing away at them, kept firing endlessly. And while his Spad was tough enough to stand the strain, his guns were a different matter. He was using them as aerial machine guns were never meant to be used. Instead of giving them a rest once in awhile, breaking up his bursts, he was pressing the triggers steadily, his common sense blinded by his crazy rage. There was no danger of running out of ammunition: the new-type belt which unwound into each gun was still long enough for several hundred rounds. But there was another and equally terrific danger. He should have remembered Captain Hammond's warning not to overtax those guns. But he didn't. In his determination to blaze his way through, he kept firing, firing—

The thing was bound to happen, and it happened even as Kirby, triumphant, realized that he had created enough confusion among the Fokkers to enable himself, in all probability, to hold them off until he reached the lines. It happened just as he was spitting two streams of tracer at one of the silver German scouts. He was holding his triggers down, and his guns were clattering, vibrating as they blazed away.

Abruptly the clattering ceased. Both guns froze into a ghastly and ominous stillness. Their muzzles no longer spat forth the jagged streaks of flame, though Kirby was still pressing the triggers!

At first he could not quite believe the awful fact, and continued to hold the triggers down. But when there was still no response from the Brownings, he knew, knew for certain, and a wave of giddy horror swept him.

His guns had jammed! Unable to fire, he was helpless, entirely at the mercy of his enemies!

Frantically, he reached up with his right hand, using his left to keep hold of the joy-stick. He fumbled with the breech-locks, feeling out the trouble. A forced feed! Two bullets had gone in at once, because of the momentum which the ammunition-belts had gathered from the speed of uninterrupted firing. The whole mechanism was blocked by that jam.

Ignoring everything, he began to work like a fiend at those guns. He must clear the stoppages! His skillful fingers tugged, pushed, jerked at the breeches.

It took the Germans just a second to sense his predicament. They saw what had happened, and, had they desired, they could have shot the Spad to bits then and there. But, at a signal from their leader, they held their fire, though everyone except the Boche commander had his sights on the helpless Spad. The commander himself swung in beside Kirby for the second time, caught the Mosquito's eye. Again he signaled. Again he told Kirby to land.

Panic seized Kirby as he realized the position he was in. He became desperate. Continuing to work frenziedly at the guns, he opened his throttle, and tried to drive towards his lines, threatening to crash any Fokker which got into his path. But then—

*Rat-tat-tat-tat!* Once more the Germans opened up. They fired one single burst. With a terrific crash, the windshield right in front of Kirby's eyes was shattered, smashed to bits. Pieces of glass cut into his face, and blood trickled down into his mouth. God, they had him cold! They had fired that one burst just to show him how accurately they had him lined in their sights. He couldn't possibly get out! It was just plain suicide, and an act of folly, to try to escape. He pulled out of the dive. The Fokkers swarmed about him, holding their fire again, waiting.

He must think, think fast! He racked his brain with conjectures, though all the time he kept working feverishly at the guns. So far he had accomplished nothing in the way of fixing them, but there was a

chance that, if only he had time, he could succeed in clearing those stoppages. God, what to do? What to do?

If he didn't obey the Germans they'd get his Spad anyway. He couldn't possibly prevent them. But if—a wild hope suddenly flickered in him—if he did what they said, started to land, and then managed to fix his guns before he reached the ground.

Hastily, he waved to the German leader, who was at his side again. Slowly, with obvious resignation, Kirby nodded his head. The German nodded back grimly, and then pointed downwards. He was pointing out a small field, surrounded by trees, which lay behind all the planes. He directed Kirby to turn around and descend.

For a few seconds Kirby paused in anguished doubt. The Germans at once became impatient, and sent a stream of tracer just past the Spad. The Mosquito promptly banked vertically, still tinkering with his guns. There was one thing in his favor. The Germans were very unlikely to see just what he was doing. He might manage it.

The German flight leader signaled impatiently. Kirby nosed down gently, started to descend at a slight angle as possible to stall for time, he cursed the new Spad for its terrific flying speed. He could not go slowly, and there was still so much work to be done!

Then began one of the strangest dramas which airplanes ever enacted. The four Germans, all crack pilots, were literally herding the line Spad down towards the earth, forcing it to move just where they wanted it to. Several times Kirby tried to stall, but on each occasion they warned him, spurred him on with tracers, and realizing that they would not hesitate to kill if they became too impatient, Kirby had no choice but to obey them.

And all the time, as they kept getting lower and lower, the Mosquito was working, struggling with his jammed guns. He was steering his plane mechanically, while he concentrated all his efforts on the twin Brownings. And presently, to his joy, he began to get results! The stoppage was beginning to yield! In a minute or so now he——

The joy flowed out of him, and his hopes sank. They were almost directly over that field! In what had seemed like a mere fraction of a second, though it was really almost a full minute, Kirby, steered by the Fokkers which crowded above him, had come down over the carpet, he was done for now! They, were signaling him to head into the wind and land.

And once down on that field there was not even a ghost of a chance of getting away. The field was hardly large enough for a landing as it was, and it was full of German soldiers. The Boche pilots had signaled the men on the ground, who were preparing to receive Kirby and his new Spad. They had a spot cleared for the landing, and on either side of the pathway they had lined up machine guns. They were taking no chances, either on the ground or in the air. One treacherous move, and Kirby was sure to die!

But again he became desperate. He deliberately misjudged his circle to head into the wind, making it necessary for him to come around once more. The leader of the Fokkers signaled him ominously, and again came a rain of tracers. The Boche pilot was telling Kirby to land at once, that they would stand for no more stalling. And Kirby had to head into the wind, had to get into his glide for the field.

Down he went rushing in the wind, with the ground looming up towards him, and the Fokkers carefully keeping right after him. God, if only those damned guns would yield! He redoubled his efforts, worked furiously, frantically, bruising and cutting his fingers in his violent haste. But the ground kept coming up breathlessly, coming closer and closer. A feeling of utter frustration and helplessness came over him. Wild sobs tore from his throat. There was nothing he could do! For a second a crazy impulse to deliberately crash his ship, to try to destroy it as much as possible, seized him, for he realized that he would never be able to set fire to the plane after landing. But quickly, he abandoned the idea. To begin with, the crash might not do enough damage anyway, and if the Germans saw him making such a move they would shoot at once. Besides, he could not give up yet, despite the fact that he saw absolutely no means of escape. While there was life, there was hope. While the ship could still fly, he could not destroy it.

So he kept working stubbornly at the guns, while the ground rushed up at him. Though he flew with one hand, and his brain was whirling with a thousand anguished fears, he still remained the skillful pilot, and was making a beautiful landing. Now he was streaking right over the edge of the field, right above the Germans down there. He caught a flashing glimpse of coal-scuttle helmets, field-gray uniforms, and glistening guns. The four Fokkers were carefully taking strategic positions above. They spread out overhead, and hovered like vultures, with their guns trained down on the landing Spad. They had the whole field

covered, so that if Kirby tried any trick to take off again, they could strafe him to ribbons—that was, unless the gunners on the ground got him first. True, they strongly desired to capture the Spad in good shape, but if they couldn't, they would at least capture its wreckage.

Down, down, down. The field was directly beneath him now! His wheels would touch in a second! They—

A cry of frenzied relief broke from his dry throat. For, even as the ground was jumping right up at him, he had cleared his guns! They were fixed! They could fire now! He could fight, fight and—

His relief was short-lived. At once he realized how hopeless his position was. Guns or no guns, it was too late to get out now! In a split second he would be on the ground. There was no longer room for him to pull up; if he tried to pull up his tail would catch the ground and crash him. Nor was there any chance to streak across the field and take off again, though he still had his motor. Not only was the field too small for such a procedure—there were trees directly ahead, and it would be hard enough for him to roll to a stop in front of them; but, far worse, the four planes which hovered right above as well as the gunners who were training their Maxims from both sides of him, could stop him short if he tried to streak across that field.

All these thoughts flashed through his mind in that last second, as the ground was just about to touch his wheels. And then, in a sudden flash, it came to him. A ridiculously crazy stunt, and there was only a very slight chance that it would work, but it was the only course open. The new Spad could stand it. It was a stout ship, and its undercarriage was strong.

Immediately, he reached his decision. And as he came sweeping right down onto the ground, just before the wheels did strike, he recklessly shoved his joystick forward and opened his throttle.

The Germans saw the Spad's nose incline precipitously, saw the plane literally plunge at the ground. But Kirby knew what he was doing. It was not the nose, but the wheels which struck the hard earth. They struck it from an extreme angle, and, because of the speed which Kirby had put on, with terrific violence. There was a shrill squeaking crash, and the Spad's undercarriage shivered beneath it, threatening to break. But it held valiantly; nor did either of the tires blow out. And the thing happened.

The violent impact of the rubber-tired wheels against the hard ground sent that little Spad bouncing right back up into the air! Up it bounded, for a full thirty feet!

The Germans did not fire. Naturally, it did not occur to them that Kirby had bounced on purpose. They assumed that he had bounced because he had misjudged his landing, had come down too fast and too steep. Such things happened frequently, though mostly to inexperienced flyers. Often a ship bounced for a full hundred feet, without cracking. Kirby had clung to the hope that the Germans would form just such a conclusion, and give him a chance to surprise them. The Boches were watching now, expecting to see the Spad either turn over and crash or, if the pilot got it back into control, settle properly on the ground again.

But then, to their utter astonishment, the Spad, instead of falling, was straightening out in the air! For a second the Germans were too dumfounded to act, which was just what Kirby wanted. The Boche pilots stared down through their goggles, stupidly, while the men on the ground were rooted to the spot, speechless with awe. But all the while Kirby was struggling frantically with his controls, working stick, rudder-bar and throttle as he had never worked them before, inspired by the thought that one slip would mean the loss of his life and the capture of the Spad.

Suddenly, at last, the Germans recovered from their dazed surprise. The men on the ground sprang to their guns, and opened up on the struggling plane above. The Fokkers came whipping down, spitting lead. But in that same second, the Spad's motor gave a mighty roar. And the wonderful little plane seemed literally to leap upwards. Up Kirby shot, in a breathless zoom. Straight into the midst of the four Fokkers he came, before they could close in on him. He leaned to his sights, pressed his triggers. His guns blazed triumphantly, with new life, and he was careful this time to break up the bursts so that they would not jam again.

And then once more, close above the earth, the Mosquito was fighting like a winged fury, hurling himself at the four silver Fokkers, blazing his way up and out towards the lines. And the Germans, having been caught by surprise, actually floundered as that speedy Spad whizzed among them, a wolf among sheep.

In less than a second, another Boche plane crumpled beneath Kirby's guns, and dove into the ground. And a tower of flame and smoke proclaimed its landing.

Furiously, Kirby kept up the running fight. He had worked his way up to nine hundred feet now, and was progressing slowly but steadily towards the lines,

hurling himself at the three remaining Fokkers. He was just opening-up on another one of them when, suddenly, something caught his eye in the sky above.

Streaking down from the sunny blue, plunging straight down towards this dog-fight, were two little red-white-and-blue marked ships. They were Spads, though not new-type Spads. And as they came closer, looming into clear focus, a shout of enthusiastic joy broke from Kirby, and a glow of warm affection surged through him. His two comrades! Shorty Carn and Travis! The two Mosquitoes had sneaked off, despite the C.O.'s orders, and had searched the sky for signs of the new Spad—which was easy to identify. They had suspected that Kirby would impetuously cross the lines, and they had come over to look for him. And at last, though now Kirby was no longer in any such extreme peril, they had found him!

Down they came, their guns blazing. Shorty Carn, sweeping into range first, got the third Fokker of the flight with his first burst. The Fokker's wings buckled and fell off, and it too plunged into the earth. Then Kirby pulled up, and got his men into their usual three-plane formation. All three waved excitedly, joyously, to one another, and then they set upon the two remaining Fokkers. One of these two was the leader of the flight, and Kirby, remembering that this was the man responsible for his whole nerve-racking experience, lit into the Hun with a vengeance. The duel was over in a second. The German, trying to Immelmann, was caught half over. A ribbon of flame spurted from the silver Fokker's nose, went licking greedily down the fuselage, until the whole ship was just a mass of livid fire and black smoke which went twisting down to earth. The fifth and last pilot of the Boche flight was the only one who got away alive. He kicked his plane into a spin, and the Three Mosquitoes, rather than take the time to give chase and slaughter him, let him go.

Then, led by Kirby, the three flew back across the lines, staying high in the sun to seclude themselves from any other enemy planes. And as Kirby brought his new but badly-riddled Spad down on the field of the drome, a feeling of satisfied triumph possessed him. He had not done so poorly! The C.O. ought to forgive him for disobeying those orders. He had shot down three Huns with the new Spad. That was scoring all right!

His two comrades, however, were not so confident. Both of them looked very guilty as they walked with Kirby towards the headquarters shack.

The C.O. glanced up at them from his desk. And if he knew or suspected anything, he did not show it.

"Well, Kirby," he asked, tersely, "how did you make out? Did you engage the new Spad in combat with an enemy aircraft, as specified?"

"Did I?" Kirby burst out. "Hell, I shot three Heinies to ribbons, and jumped 'em when they had me way down on the ground, trying to make me surrender my Spad. And my two men here did their share. They—" He stopped short, as the C.O.'s eyes narrowed ominously. The Mosquito's heart pounded, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't quite understand you," the C.O. said slowly, pursing his lips. "Certainly you're not trying to tell me that enemy planes were forcing you to surrender your Spad this side of the lines? That's ridiculous. And," his eyes pierced those of Carn and Travis, "of course you two could not be there fighting with him, because you'd have more sense than to disobey my explicit orders. I trust you were on the field all the time, though of course I've been too busy to keep an eye on you." And before Carn or Travis could stammer some incoherent reply, the C.O. turned to Kirby once more. "Kindly make yourself clearer, captain. Let me get this straight. Now, what were you saying?"

Kirby paused fearfully, and visions of Blois, of losing his captain's bars and wings, swam before him. Unfortunately, he failed to detect the slight twinkle in the grizzled old colonel's eyes.

"Well, sir, I—" he began, haltingly. "That is—er—yes, I was saying that I tested out the new Spad and found it a wonderful ship, the best I've ever handled." But then he simply couldn't help adding: "And, damn it, sir, I'm glad to be able to stand here and tell you it's a good ship!"

"Very good, captain," the C.O. snapped officiously.

"And now," he went on, slyly, "I presume you are ready, Kirby, to lead your men up for the usual morning patrol."

"What?" Kirby gasped involuntarily, and then groaned aloud and looked at his comrades with pitiful eyes. He was thoroughly exhausted from the terrific physical and emotional strain he had gone through, and he felt no more like going up on a patrol than going to Blois. But since he could not very well back out—for to do so he must tell all that had happened—he nodded dismally. "V-very well, sir. We'll—we'll go right up."

The twinkle in the C.O.'s eyes grew more and more pronounced. Suddenly the old colonel could control himself no longer. He sat back and laughed heartily. The Three Mosquitoes stared at him agape. At last the C.O., with much effort, succeeded in recovering his stern, official look.

"Guess we'll let that patrol go," he said gruffly. "There's not much doing to-day anyway, and you three have worked hard lately and are entitled to a little rest. Meanwhile, Kirby, you can make out your report for staff headquarters." He paused, and then his eyes twinkled once more.

"And in that report, captain, I'd advise you to be a little vague. Just mention that you tried out the new Spad, how it behaved, and so on, and that you shot down three enemy planes. Never mind where you shot them down. You can explain that to me sometime when I'm in a particularly good mood. But staff headquarters will be just as well off without knowing that little detail. Though they asked for full details, they're really more interested in results. And if they're not tickled pink, damned if I won't go over and poke them in the ribs!"

