

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

CHALLENGE OF THE AIR

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

Nothing more terrible can happen to a great ace than to realize suddenly that he is suffering from shock—that the old nerve won't answer the call. Kirby was in this condition when the Fokker came over, gained valuable information—and was flying back triumphantly. Like a man half mad, he cursed himself, fought with himself. The next time they came over—

IT WAS RIGHT OVER the dense forest of Bapyonne, well within their own lines, that the “Three Mosquitoes” spotted their prey. They had been out searching for cold meat like the rest—for this was “cloud-dusting” day, when Allied planes were ordered to stay within the lines and keep the air clear of enemy reconnaissance ships which were coming over for information for a Big Push. The glaring blue sky was dotted with these cloud-dusters; to the right and left tiny V-shaped groups moved swiftly on, while in the distant east, nearer the lines, was a confused little whirl of glinting specks which showed that a dog-fight was on.

What the Three Mosquitoes saw was a couple of Rumplers, two-seater reconnaissance planes. They had broken through somehow, and succeeded in getting over the forest, where they hoped to pick up the artillery placements which, thanks to both the denseness of the trees and the ample protection of guns and planes, the Germans had been unable to spot. This particular couple was determined, however. With anti-aircraft shells sprouting like white

mushrooms all around them, they kept circling the forest, side by side, moving slowly because they were heavy, cumbersome monsters. And, in the hope of piercing through those dense trees, they were flying as low as they dared, so low indeed that the bright sun threw their bird-like shadows on the tree-tops, giving the effect of two phantom ships which hung right beneath the Rumplers, flying with them.

They were courageous, those pilots down there. It took nerve to look calmly for information when in their view were scores of Allied planes. But they figured on swift escape; they were ready to retreat if one of those distant formations should suddenly swerve and come toward them.

However, what they failed to realize was that something might come from above—up in the sun where planes can hide, so that you can't see them. And so it was that they didn't see the three flashing Spads of the Three Mosquitoes preparing to attack. Even now Kirby, leader of the famous trio, was giving the signal, waving his free arm to his comrades, “Shorty” Carn and Travis, who flew on either side of him.

“Down on them!” he was shouting, as he always shouted, though he knew his voice was more than drowned out by the roar of motors. “It’s a cinch! We’ll give ’em hell!”

But his actions seemed to belie those words. Usually, when he gave the signal, his plane, followed by the machines of his comrades, would plunge over in a breathless dive—go shooting down in the furious, reckless fashion which was typical of these three intrepid flyers. Then, with their guns wide open, they would take their prey by surprise, and before the Germans had time to get into action, would have the battle half won. It was a reckless style, yes, but it had succeeded many times.

Now, though, Kirby didn’t dive. Instead, when Carn and Travis had both waved their usual, cheerful countersign, Kirby started to descend slowly, cautiously, on a zig-zag course, as if already dodging the Rumplers’ machine guns which had not even begun to fire, and at the same time always making sure that he had the sun behind him. And his comrades, though they would have preferred the swifter and more overwhelming method of attack, followed his course without making any objections—except that they were glancing at Kirby anxiously, with no little worry. For they knew how he felt, knew the thing he had to fight every time he led them into battle these days.

And Kirby was fighting it, fighting it with all his strength, though it did no good. At first he had made up his mind, when he forced himself to shout out those bold words, that he was going to let go this time—come what may. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t cast all thoughts of danger to the four winds and with a what-the-hell attitude, take the great plunge. In the past he was willing to gamble with death any time, and he didn’t give a damn what he was attacking, or how he attacked it. His great fighting spirit had guided him. But now, he felt, that spirit was gone. All that was left was the determination to bull his way through at any cost.

Even his comrades felt it was gone—he could see it in their anxious faces as they flew down beside him. They might deny it was so, might tell him he’d get over it, but in their hearts they knew the truth. No longer was Kirby the reckless ace, the impetuous young fighter they had known. No longer did he seek out combat at overwhelming odds, blazing his way through with defiant gusto. He was a changed man. He seemed to have grown suddenly older, terribly serious, and in the air he was always uncertain, cautious. There

was a hunted look in his eyes—which used to flash and gleam so eagerly when he led his men to attack—and his bronzed face had a slightly gray pallor, looked drawn.

His feeling was that of a champion who has been licked, who feels that his day of triumph is over, and that hereafter he can never be the man he was, can never come back.

For Kirby had been licked, licked decisively and thoroughly by—he could only say—a better man. The vividness of that terrific episode was still fresh in his mind; he saw it now, saw it as he led his men slowly down toward the leisurely flying and unaware Rumplers. A general dog-fight—the Three Mosquitoes and five other Spads from the squadron beating hell out of six little German triplanes. The whirl of motors, the flash of wings as machines wheeled, dipped, and zoomed in an effort to send home their death-dealing tracer bullets.

Kirby had singled out one of the enemy ships, which seemed to be of some importance. A strange and beautiful little ship it was; a Fokker triplane, painted robin’s egg blue, except for its black Maltese crosses, its insignia, and its silvery nose. They dueled fiercely, Kirby and the German—they went through all the breathless maneuvers of aerial combat, whipped at one another. And the German won. There could be no extenuating circumstances, no alibis, about that. Perhaps an unfavorable wind, or the fact that Kirby had been under a severe strain for the past days, had something to do with it. Perhaps he was just not “himself” that day. But he refused to make excuses. He had been beaten, and that was all there was to it.

Just when the turning point had come he did not know; all he could remember was the German crowding him, crowding him, creeping on his tail, his own vain efforts to shake him off, and the awful sensation of that plane behind him, clinging there, its machine guns popping at him. Helpless, already sensing defeat, he had looked back at that plane in horror—to catch a glimpse of a grim, hard face and two eyes gleaming from behind their goggles, gleaming with hunger for the kill. And at that same moment there had come a sudden, terrific blow on Kirby’s head, and he was sinking, going out.

The rest was like a confused nightmare, vague and horrible; the scream of his descending plane—hurtling down through space with a bullet racking his skull—darkness closing around him—then a final, blinding crash which mercifully blotted out all consciousness.

For five weeks he lay in a hospital while the war raged on, and his comrades continued to fly and fight. His wound was not as serious as had first been thought—a fraction of an inch had saved him—and they told him he might soon return to the Front. But that five weeks gave him a chance to do some heavy thinking, and for a war pilot, heavy thinking is not healthy.

They tell how Richthofen, the German ace of aces, was a changed man when he was sent hurtling down in a similar manner. Up to the time an enemy bullet had found him he had had that feeling most big aces have; a sense of confidence, of personal immunity, a stubborn, unyielding faith that they can't be licked. Then he had been licked, had literally felt the cold hand of death tugging at him, and that confidence had dwindled, his recklessness diminished.

SO IT was with Kirby. That German had taken the starch out of him, had shattered his morale. In the past he had had planes shot from under him, had escaped perhaps even more certain deaths than this, but always he had come through the victor, had triumphed in the final showdown. Never before had he been beaten, battered to a pulp like this. The German had knocked him down, and he couldn't get up. It had all given him the awful feeling that his reign as an unbeatable ace was over, that he must relinquish the crown. That was why he looked older now; he felt older, the old champion bowing to the new. It was indeed, almost a sense of going stale—and to an ace nothing could be worse.

His comrades, visiting him, were shocked by this change in both his appearance and manner. They couldn't understand it. Both of them tried desperately to pull him out of it.

"Hell," said Shorty Carn, putting his hand on Kirby's shoulder, "don't let it get you—this business. That blue-bird might have plugged you, but you can beat hell out of him if you ever meet him again!"

"Of course you can," the lanky Travis put in, with his customary gravity. Being the most mature of the three, he half sensed the problem. "Just remember we all have to take a licking sometime—and we mustn't take it too hard. It's all part of the game."

But it did not help; they could not bring him back.

He could have retired on leave but he refused. Though he dreaded it, he insisted on returning to the Front as soon as they let him. Back there, the change in him became even more apparent. In the air he was almost like a scared beginner. Yet he kept making a valiant struggle to come back, to bull his way through. He never once

backed out of a fight, even though, in every encounter, he was slow, cautious. And his aim with the guns was faulty—the first sign of an ace's deterioration.

Worst of all, there was the constant suspense about the German who had beaten him. Suppose he should meet him again and—but he tried hard not to think of that.

Soon the whole squadron was talking about the matter. Opinion was divided; some thought Kirby had his "wind up," others thought he was going stale. The C.O. began to worry about him, and made casual suggestions that he take a long rest. Kirby refused, but he knew this could not go on. Presently he would have to obey, have to quit.

At length his two comrades, sensing that if this went on the famous Three Mosquitoes would be broken up, unable to carry on their wonderful work, decided they must force the issue. They realized that the issue depended on the German who had beaten Kirby. It was that beating that had changed him. And if he now beat the same man he would doubtless recover his old spirit, prove to himself what no one else could prove—that he was not stale at all, that he *could* come back.

As they realized this more and more, they began to hope the German would appear, and kept watching for him. But he was nowhere to be seen. So they had taken the only remaining measure.

They argued with Kirby, told him what they had concluded, and he knew they were right. He said nothing, but dreaded what he knew must come. And when they suggested that he drop a challenge across the lines, he obeyed. Where the German's drome was located they did not know, but Kirby remembered his insignia and plane well enough to be specific. He dropped his message over a German anti-aircraft battery, a message, in accordance with the code of the knights of the air, challenging the German to a duel for "championship of the sector."

Then he waited in frightful suspense, dreading that the German would accept. The reply came in a few days—forwarded by a field artillery battery, where it had been dropped:

Mein Herr Captain,

While I appreciate the captain's excellent sporting spirit, I wish to remind him that this is war, and not a friendly little prizefight. My duty is to fly where I'm ordered and to fight what planes I meet. Therefore, I cannot arrange for a friendly little duel with the captain. If we meet it is fate, and

if we do I will be glad to accommodate you. And while I should like very much to tell the captain where I will be—say, tomorrow—my duty forbids. Our movements are not supposed to be discussed.

Thanking you captain, I am,

Just a pilot in the Imperial Air Force.

At first Kirby breathed a sigh of relief, but then he realized that it would have been far better than this had the German accepted. Then, at least, he could bring the whole thing to a close—either come through or be finished. That was better than going on like this, and especially, going on in the constant fear that eventually he *would* meet the man.

These were Kirby's thoughts on this bright morning, two weeks after his return to the Front, as he led his men slowly down on the Rumplers, as he fought to get back what seemed to be lost. They were getting closer and closer to those big ships now, and they kept zig-zagging down, cautiously, reluctantly, with painful slowness. To the men down on the ground who were at an angle where they could see all the planes, the three Spads looked more like real mosquitoes than ever. Not mosquitoes who recklessly lit on their victim and took a chance on getting a bite, but mosquitoes who were trying to bite a person who had been driving them off, threatening them with extinction, and over whom they paused, buzzing and gyrating, looking carefully for their opening.

KIRBY was in the lead, and he was already trying to get his ring-sights dead on the two-seater right below him, the one on the left. Shorty Carn, on Kirby's left, also seemed to be aiming for this one, while Travis had separated from them, off to the right, and was evidently going to attack the other two-seater alone. A feeling of humiliation swept Kirby as he realized that his two comrades had secretly agreed that one of them should stick with him in these encounters—keep an eye on him. It made him ashamed.

But his shame gave way to a tense feeling which jerked at every nerve. For they were coming in range now. It was time to start—to open up. It was up to him to give the signal by firing first. Damn it, why did he feel so shaky? He fought with himself, meanwhile trying to get the Rumppler below right in the ring-sight. He must fight now. Fight!

His fingers groped for the stick-triggers, closed on them tentatively. There was a second of final hesitation. Then he pressed the trigger-buttons.

His two guns trembled as they stuttered and blazed into life. He saw the streaks of flame leap hungrily from their muzzles, saw the smoky course of the tracer bullets as they went streaking down toward the two-seater. In his best form he might have scored on that first burst. But he did not score now. The bullets were wide by several hundred feet.

"Stale!" he muttered brokenly. "Bum shot!"

But there was no time to mope or conjecture now. Already his two comrades had opened up after him, their guns were blazing away, too. The Rumplers suddenly became painfully aware of their attackers, saw at last the three Spads closing slowly but inexorably down on them. Their leisurely circling came to an abrupt end. Like startled birds they were thrown into confusion, and began to turn and half-roll to shake off the terrible tracer. The observers flanked around their guns and tried frantically to aim at the three flashing shapes hovering above, and presently the shrill staccato clatter of their guns was added to the rest.

Kirby saw their tracer zipping upwards and, with a reminiscent flash of that moment when a bullet had found his skull, he zig-zagged and rolled in almost frantic haste. Yet he was determined to go through with it. The two-seaters were banking now, trying to break for home. Though they had not yet secured any important information—Kirby knew vaguely that their real objective was to ascertain whether the forest was an artillery stronghold or not, whether or not counter-barrages were to be expected from this quarter—they realized that, attacked far from their own lines, discretion was indeed the better part of valor. So, putting on their throttles, they tried to flee.

But slow as Kirby was with his men, the clumsy two-seaters were slower. The Three Mosquitoes were already down to them now, leveling off behind them, ready to mix in. But Kirby, despite the shame of it, was no longer in the lead. Travis had suddenly swooped down on the two-seater he had picked out, and was racing after it, his two guns blazing; while Shorty Carn had also sped forward to cut off the other German plane from in front, and to hold it for Kirby, who, due to his good position above its tail, ought to get it easily.

Kirby, always cautious and hesitating, crept forward stealthily, firing burst after burst. But always he was a little too slow; that precise coordination of eye and finger needed to accurately shoot a gun which could only be aimed by aiming the whole plane, was no longer his. He was paying far too much attention to

dodging the observer's fire, for the latter kept shooting that rear flanking gun back at him.

Cursing, Kirby put his nose down and tried to get on the two-seaters "blind spot"—just beneath the tail, where the observer couldn't reach him. Again he fired, and again his bullets went wide. Damn it, he mustn't let this big target slip away! He kept trying, but the more he tried the more his hope dwindled—which only made him worse.

Shorty Carn, seeing that Kirby was failing, now tried to get the two-seater from in front. He was attacking it head-on—a most insolent and reckless attack! His nerve made Kirby feel all the worse, all the more humiliated. If only—

Suddenly there was a red blaze off to the right, and Kirby looked around to see the other two-seater twisting and falling downwards in uncontrolled curves, with flames and black smoke licking up along its fuselage. His eyes lit up. Travis had scored! The third Mosquito, after hovering over his prey for a final second, banked to the left and came over to join his comrades in attacking the other Rumpel.

The surviving German plane, upon noting the fate of its sister-ship, tried frantically to escape, and, through sheer desperation, got a good start on the three. Racing straight past the outskirts of the forest, it broke all records attempting to get to its lines. But the others followed, the three Spads kept attacking it, swooping upon it from the rear.

Again, Kirby, through the aid of his comrades, had an opportunity to score. This time surely he would. He lowered his nose slightly, and again began to fire.

But then he stopped, and a childish irritation seized him. His comrades were breaking away from the two-seater, and signaling him to come with them. What was the matter with them? They had this bird, and they ought to finish him.

Nevertheless, he had no choice but to obey their signals. For as soon as they broke away, the two-seater shook off Kirby's sights, and presently, with its occupants doubtless blessing their luck, it had slipped away.

Kirby glanced interrogatively at his comrades, who were waving excitedly, pointing, even as they turned, back to the forest. He looked.

At first all he saw was a lot of white smoke, coming up and hanging over the center of the woods. This was followed by several red rockets which zoomed up and burst high in the sky. Very lights—and distress signals! They were signaling for the Three Mosquitoes

to come back. It could mean but one thing. Their secret had been discovered, somebody had gotten the information. The white smoke was from A.A. guns: they were trying evidently to trap the imposter in a barrage.

But where was the imposter? At first, confused and bewildered, Kirby thought of the two-seater, and cursed his comrades bitterly for letting it escape.

BUT then, in that white smoke, he suddenly caught the vague outline of a plane. Instinctively, though full of apprehension, he got his comrades in formation and led them back over the forest, at the same time straining his eyes to catch a better look. It was all obvious, perfectly clear. Another German plane had slipped through, a plane whose pilot had an incredible nerve. For, defying that deadly barrage, he was flying almost right over the trees—at times it seemed his wheels must touch them—he was so low that he had been able to see just what was going on there. And now he was winning clear of that barrage, that area of deadly shrapnel and tracer. He was skirting out through the wisps of smoke. Suddenly, in the next second, he was out—out in the brilliant sunlight, which flashed on his wings—

Then it was as if a searing wire tightened about Kirby's heart, choking out his breath. A strange shudder went through him, and he felt strangely faint.

For he saw now that the machine, revealed in all its details by the bright sun, was a tiny triplane, painted a robin's egg blue!

For a split second, while he scarcely knew that he was continuing to lead his comrades right over the spot, Kirby stared at that plane with a disbelief and incredulity that almost amounted to a wild hope. No, it could not be true. It was impossible to believe this sudden appearance of the man who had knocked him down, impossible to accept it after all these days of watching, waiting, with no signs of that triplane. No, he must be dreaming, must be in the throes of a nightmare. He was seeing things!

But then, as he glanced at his comrades as if expecting to be reassured by them, something in their goggled faces told him at once that it was true, and all the terror, the doubt, the despair which had racked him for these long weeks was full upon him. Just as he feared, panic was overcoming him—he was going to lose control—he was going to freeze at the stick and be unable to move—as if it was, after all, a nightmare.

Frantically, he looked around, hoping against

hope that some other planes were on hand, so that he wouldn't have to face that single-seater. There were plenty of planes in sight, but they were too far away to get here in time.

Then he knew that there was no escape, that the moment he had dreaded was on hand. The presence of his comrades was the only thing that gave him any strength at all. With them at his side it wouldn't be as bad: they would not let him take another beating. After all, that German was no superman. Against three planes——

Carn and Travis, on either side of him, were waving again, pointing down at the single-seater which was way beneath, and which, like the other German ships, didn't see them on account of the sun. It took Kirby awhile to get what his comrades were driving at. Then, when at last he understood the signal, his face twisted in anguished horror.

Grimly but firmly, they were signaling for him to dive on that German alone!

They realized that unless he faced that man alone, had it out with him, he would never pull out of his condition. And because they were sure that he could beat the German, they were doing what they had never done before—refusing to go down with him. Even in his terror, Kirby could not help seeing the grimly funny paradox of it. Usually, in the old days, he had to curse his comrades and slip away from them so he could conquer some ace single-handed, without their help, which would spoil the glory of it.

Worst of all, he knew that they were right, knew that he should go through with this test at all costs. But the very thought of it almost paralyzed him. No, he couldn't. He shook his head at them, signaled that he would lead them—that was enough. But they kept pointing for him to go down alone. A futile rage against them came over him, and in his fear he found excuses which he shouted out, though they could not hear.

"Fools!" he screamed. "Fools! Don't you see he has information? This is no time for dillying! We must get him—take no chances!" Then, forgetting where he had picked up the next words, which were vaguely reminiscent, he added, "This is war, not a friendly little prize-fight!"

But even had they heard, they would not have wavered. They remained adamant in their decision, though now Kirby saw that both their goggled faces were ashen white. God, how scared they were, too. It was almost as hard for them to let him do this as it

would be for him to do it. He must consider that. He must try, try for their sakes, for the sake of the trio.

He looked down, saw the triplane rolling around as they kept shooting up at it. But abruptly it leveled off now, and then, in a gentle climb, started back for its own lines. It had the information and was trying to get off with it! And that information was important, must not get through!

Kirby realized at once that the slow, cautious tactics wouldn't work. The German was moving away rapidly. The only way to get him was to plunge right down—swiftly.

In a momentary wild impulse, he opened his throttle, started to plunge his stick forward. But he pulled up immediately, his face covered with sweat, though it was cold up here. His comrades continued to hover with him, continued to wave their encouragement, though the look on their faces was growing tenser every moment. Again Kirby tried to take the awful step. He pushed the stick forward and held it there, though it required superhuman effort to do so. The nose of his plane dipped—he was going down now, felt the first rush of wind coming up to meet him. But no—again he pulled back that stick before he had dived a hundred feet, again he leveled off, the strength gone out of him entirely.

No, he couldn't go through with it! He couldn't deliberately dive on the man who had licked him, who had crushed him that way. It was asking too much.

Nevertheless, the tense scene up there continued—while mechanically all the planes would have to speed forward to keep above the retreating triplane. Kirby kept hesitating, trying to make the grade, and always failing. His comrades gave all their attention to him, were completely absorbed in trying to make him take that dive.

And it was this fact which led to the disaster. It might not have happened had Kirby dived swiftly, had the others been able to remain on the alert instead of concentrating on him. But now they were taken completely unawares.

THERE was a sudden shadow overhead—then a terrific roar of wide-open motors and blazing guns—and Kirby, dazed and fearful, looked up to see a dozen Fokkers dropping right out of the sun like hornets from their nests, swooping straight down on him and his comrades. They were trapped! Trapped in their own lines! How the Boche planes had come through he could not guess. But they had succeeded in hiding

in the sun, and were now coming to the rescue of their comrade-in-arms—the triplane, which, of course, was now forgotten by the three in this extreme and overwhelming peril.

Down they plunged, those Fokkers, seemingly from every side, like gigantic pellets of hail. In a flash they were right on top of the three, closing in on them, their guns spitting streams of tracer which poured on the little trio from all directions. In that first terrible second, all was confusion, a lurid miasma which further convinced Kirby that this was something unreal—a horrible dream. Dazedly he saw those Fokkers swarming all around—saw his two comrades trying to get closer to him—signaling him—

Then a cry of horror broke from his dry throat. For he saw Travis' Spad, off to the right, suddenly reel and turn over on its back, writhing as if in pain from its wound. They had gotten him! In the next second his machine had nosed over, and was plunging down, dropping like a stone in a tight, fatal spin. In horrified suspense, for once forgetting his own predicament, Kirby followed that plunging ship with his eye, watched it going down . . . down . . . shrinking as it went through space. It was out of control! It was going to crash straight into those trees! Sobs broke from Kirby. Travis was done for—poor old Travis!

But then as he watched, watched for the end, a wave of frenzied relief swept him. For the disabled Spad suddenly pulled up lurchingly, and seemed to stagger slowly back to an even keel. Slowly, uncertainly, it winged its way over the forest, though it was slipping ever lower. It would take little less than a miracle to get Travis out of that mess!

But, he suddenly realized, as once more he became frightfully aware of his own predicament, it would take more than a miracle to save Shorty and himself. All this time the Germans had continued to swarm around them, closing in on them, trying to send home their murderous tracer. And Kirby, instinctively, had been rolling, zig-zagging, banking, to avoid those bullets. Now, vaguely, he saw that Carn was at his side, waving for him to hold on. Hold on? To what? The very air was thick with flying, hissing lead: the tracer was making smoky criss-crosses in front of his face, and he could hear it whistling in his ears. Fokkers were swooping down from everywhere: they loomed up fantastically in front of him and came crashing straight toward him, they whipped down from above like weird shadows, they zoomed up from below with flashing wings and spitting guns. Everywhere they

kept appearing and disappearing—further increasing that nightmarish sense, that feeling that he must soon awake. A mad cackle broke from his lips. Maybe he was dead, and this was hell!

Yet he continued to stick with Carn, and the two kept circling and rolling anti side-slipping, trying to protect one another's tails. If they had straightened out for a moment they would have been gonners: only the fact that they kept shaking off the Huns' sights enabled them to hold out.

But Kirby knew they wouldn't be able to hold out long. The bullets kept getting closer—they were drilling through his wings and fuselage. It was incredible that both he and Shorty weren't hit, for those bullets literally whizzed around them. Kirby was getting more and more dazed and bewildered by it all—and now, as he felt that death must come, he was ready to resign, to slump back in the cockpit, let himself go. After all, he realized bitterly, he might as well. For he had failed, failed to go for that German, muffed his once chance to make a come-back. And his hesitation had caused them all to be trapped, had perhaps—his face twisted—caused Travis' death. It would be best if he got killed, too. Of course, there was Shorty to consider, but Kirby couldn't help him anyway.

And he was just about to throw up the sponge, to stop this giddy maneuvering and let the bullets get him, when, thinking of Shorty he looked at him. Carn was waving to him, waving excitedly, and pointing up to the right. Kirby looked. At first he saw nothing but Fokkers. Then, for the first time that day, a joyous thrill went through him, bringing back fresh life-blood. For he saw that other formation, saw it coming in on a long glide-dive. Twelve American Nieuports, sweeping down in graceful unison. They were doubtless that group of specks Kirby had seen off to the right before, a bunch of cloud-dusters, and they had been attracted to this scene; perhaps the men on the ground had signaled them by firing a few anti-aircraft shells.

Now they were coming in range, and their guns began to clatter. Down they swooped, right on top of the surprised Fokkers, which hastily abandoned their prey and tried to pull out. With a roar of engines and guns, the Nieuports spread out, leveled off, and the dogfight was on. At first it was a confused mass of planes which just shot at any target in sight, but presently they paired off, and a series of duels began, duels in which the Germans were getting the worst of it.

Kirby waved to Carn, who was still at his side, and

they started to join the rest, started to pursue a Fokker which was in front of them. Once more Kirby was cautious, slow, uncertain. Once more his doubts and fears were on him, even though he had come through that hell without a scratch.

And with the return of his fears came a realization, a realization which made him start abruptly, causing the blood to drain from his face. That triplane—with the important information—!

Frantically he looked around. The German was nowhere in sight. Of course not. When those Fokkers had come he had hastened to escape. But that fight, though it had seemed interminably long, could have lasted only a couple of minutes. The German could not be far.

He banked his plane around, strained his eyes eastward. Then again he started, sat rigid.

For, against the blue sky, he saw a tiny lonely speck, fading rapidly as it moved toward Germany. And though Kirby could hardly distinguish it at all, he was certain that it was that triplane.

AGAIN that strange terror was on him, and he was trying to find a way out. Surely some American planes would see that German before he got to the lines. Yet, he knew how uncertain that was; and besides, they might unwittingly let him slip through, not knowing that he had information, that he must be stopped.

He was going through that struggle all over again. He realized that this was his only chance, realized what it would mean if only he could win out. Yet he could not bring himself to do it.

Suddenly Carn, next to him, was waving to him once more, pointing to the speck. At the same time, Shorty put on his throttle, and signaling Kirby to come with him, raced out through the mass of fighting planes.

Dazedly, Kirby obeyed, raced beside him. He realized finally that Carn was going to help him—Carn wouldn't take any more chances which might let the German slip through with his information.

Out they raced, straight toward that speck. Both kept opening their throttles, wider and wider, until the roar of their engines rose to a mighty Niagara. Now they were gaining, the speck was growing. The Spad was the fastest plane going, and could overtake that triplane.

And it wouldn't be so bad, with Carn. Good old Carn! A glow of warm affection for the stout little man burned in Kirby. Shorty wouldn't fail him!

But even as he thought this, fate played one of her ironic tricks. All at once Carn's plane was slowing down, and when Kirby had slowed down beside him Shorty was signaling.

His gas was running out! The Huns had punctured one of his tanks, and his auxiliary tank held just enough to take him home!

There was nothing for him to do but turn out. Kirby's first impulse was to turn out with him. But Carn literally ordered him to go on. He must hold up that German—both on account of the information and himself.

And now Kirby's terror rose as high as it had when they had tried to make him take that dive. He felt cold all over, yet that clammy sweat was on his brow. But the memory of what had happened gave him a weapon to fight his fear; he fought it, cursed it, and finally, through sheer force, opened his throttle and was racing off alone, racing again toward that speck.

It was hell, having to chase this man he feared so, having to pick a fight with him when the latter would be delighted not to fight at all, but Kirby had to go on. So he urged his plane forward with skill and strength, made the motor respond faster and faster, until the whole ship was trembling, threatening to jerk to pieces.

Always he was scanning the sky. It was funny how all the planes which had specked that blue on all sides had suddenly disappeared. Then he realized the reason. Looking down, he saw that already he was over the Front—he saw the shell-marked ground, the zig-zag trenches, the smoke. They were nearing the lines. He must hurry.

If only it wasn't so damned lonely, if only some friendly planes were in sight, at least. . . . Damn him, he must watch that triplane. It was growing now, as it flew ahead of him, at about the same altitude. It was assuming shape and color. Soon the test must come. Either he would come through or be finished completely. His worst fear was that he would fail to force the issue—freeze as he had before.

Suddenly his eyes lit up. Far off to the left, behind, he had vaguely picked out a tiny formation which, due to its direction, he knew must be Allied planes. If he could signal them for help—

Again he struggled with himself, struggled with all his strength. And again, to his own surprise, he won. He would go it alone. That was the only way.

A deafening explosion right behind him made him start upright. It was followed by more explosions—and he saw the black smoke of the German anti-

aircraft guns. They had crossed the lines. That meant the German might land any moment. And now the issue was even more stupendous. In Allied territory, he would have only had to force the man down and he'd be taken prisoner. Now, his lips set grimly, fearfully, he could not let that German land alive.

He zig-zagged out of range of the shells and fought to get more speed out of his throbbing engine. Hurry—he must hurry! Now he was creeping closer, suddenly amazed at the small gap between himself and that triplane. The gap was closing—he was getting there. In a moment he would have to open up. God, could he go through with it? Chills were racking him; he was trembling with sheer terror such as he had never before experienced.

Just a second more! He must hold on. . . . Here, he was coming in range now. His heart had stopped beating, but that didn't matter. He must fire.

His shaking fingers closed convulsively on the triggers, and he sought to get his sights on the plane ahead. Then, like a man sealing his own doom, he fired.

Ten shots ripped out, zipping on their smoky course. He saw them go past the triplane—several yards to the left. He fired again. The bullets went safely over the German's head.

Immediately, the German began to zig-zag and half-roll, though he kept on going for home. He had no desire to fight, which made it so much harder for Kirby.

Kirby, having a new advantage in speed over the German because of the latter's zig-zag course, suddenly caught up right behind him, only a few yards away. Once more he saw that helmeted pilot plainly. The German jerked his head back, glanced over his shoulder. Kirby, in a frenzied effort to get back some of his old fighting spirit, his sense of sportsmanship, waved to him, forcing a smile. But the German did not smile back, and the sight of that same grim, hard face redoubled Kirby's fear.

He hesitated.

The German suddenly plunged over and dived as fast as he could to escape his pursuer. His only object was to land with his goods. Kirby wavered, but then dived after him. But now the German began to illustrate what a good flyer he was. Every time Kirby would try to attack, he'd slip away like an elusive eel and go on his way. The fact that he could not come to grips with his foe, that they were getting-further and further in enemy territory, only served to increase

Kirby's desire to get away, to stop this hellish business. God, if he had to fight the German, he must fight him now—or else he wouldn't have the strength left.

But still the triplane kept eluding him. Kirby began to curse, yelled out berserk challenges to the German, though his words were only lost in the roar of motors.

"Damn you!" he shrieked. "Come on and fight! You yellow-bellied skunk!"

The next moment his heart stood still. For now once more he saw a distant group of specks. These were far in Germany—to the side. They were not coming this way, but the German in front of him had changed his course slightly—and was heading for them! There must be a drome there. And if Kirby got near those enemy planes, he'd have no chance at all!

And then, suddenly, an overwhelming rage came over him, a rage which, to his own astonishment, overshadowed everything else. That Hun was not going to get away, was not going to get to those other planes, or to his drome!

WITH a savage oath, Kirby opened his throttle once more, and this time deliberately shot past the German. Again he caught a glimpse of that grim face, but he hurled a defiant curse at it. Banking in a skid turn that seemed almost to raise a cloud of dust, he cut right in front of the Hun's airpath, intercepting him.

The German seemed suddenly to realize then that he must fight it out with this stubborn American. For, instead of trying to dive out, he turned abruptly.

Kirby did not wait for him to start. He leaned forward to his sights and fired, fired as carefully as he could. Again he missed, but in his rage he was undaunted. In fact, a strange tingling feeling was beginning to warm his blood. Was it the spirit he had lost? It couldn't be, yet—

A fusillade of tracer screamed in on his thoughts. He rolled, then shot up and around in a breathless Immelmann turn. The German whipped at him, tried to force him on the outside arc. For a second Kirby's fears returned; it looked like the German had him. But no—he was faster. He was over, above the German's tail, and he dived, shooting.

Again the German rolled, and Kirby rolled right after him. They circled, trying to get on each other's tails. Fiercer and fiercer grew the conflict, with Kirby gaining fresh confidence. Sometimes he would remember with a shock whom he was fighting, when he saw that grim face—now having that same "killer" look on it—but always he plowed in, doggedly.

Pretty soon exhaustion would claim him. Though he had not given any quarter, he couldn't gain any either. His strength was ebbing, and as the hope of getting the German seemed more and more futile, the rage which had been guiding him began to cool. He must hurry, hurry before it was too late.

The triplane was behind him again—sitting on his tail. Again there was the awful sensation of that man behind him, that same man. But this time Kirby twisted and zig-zagged for all he was worth. He crossed controls and hung in a shivering stall. The German shot past him, only to bank and come racing back. They rushed toward each other, head-on, both blazing away.

In such a position either might be hit. But if the German had the nerve, Kirby must have it, too. On they came—the tracer drawing a lot of smoky lines between them. And then it happened.

There was a sudden crash right in front of Kirby, and he saw big chunks of something flying from the nose of his ship. At the same time the motor rose to a piercing scream, then sputtered. And he realized, realized with horror, what had happened.

The German had shot off his propeller—shot it to bits! And the same burst had gotten his motor. In a minute it would stop.

He had been licked again! Up here, way within the enemy's lines, his only hope of getting back could be a glide which, due to his altitude, might save him. For his plane, without its propeller, had virtually become a mere glider.

But strangely enough he had no idea of gliding for home. All at once he felt very cool, collected. He didn't feel beaten. He felt more that the German had merely had a stroke of luck.

Instantly, while his ship began to flounder and threaten to spin, he glanced around for a sight of the triplane. Despair actually came over him when he realized the German was no longer up here. It did not occur to him that if the German were here he himself would be powerless, without that propeller. And when the motor finally stopped he couldn't fire his synchronized guns.

Then suddenly he saw the triplane at last! The German, evidently satisfied that he had rid himself of his pursuer, had dived and seemed to be making for a field right below. He wanted to land. Kirby must have damaged his plane.

Kirby's cool feeling now took on something deadly. His eyes narrowed, while he pondered hastily on the wild idea that had come to him. The German was

right below. Kirby's Spad—which all the while was floundering and sinking—could dive on it, propeller or no propeller. And, with his motor still running, he could shoot. It would mean of course that he would have to be taken prisoner, but he would have gotten the German, proved that—

He broke off as his plane suddenly started to go into a spin. In one reckless impulse, he changed the spin to a dive—and now he was shooting down, with the wind whipping up at him. He was plunging straight on that German.

He was diving as he used to dive, in his old reckless, insolent style. In a second he would be in range. He leaned forward, put his eyes to the ring-sights.

He realized that if his aim was faulty now all would be lost. He would have only one breathless chance to score—now, at long range. Once down there he couldn't maneuver, couldn't fire again, for his ship could only descend, and not fly level or upwards. And if his motor stopped—!

He pressed his triggers savagely, watched his guns spit. Down ripped the smoky tracer. His eyes lit up. It seemed to go straight into the triplane. But no—the German half-rolled hastily, started to turn as Kirby came closer and closer. Cursing, Kirby fired another burst—a long one. Again the German rolled, banking off and zig-zagging. Then, as if unperturbed, he straightened out and flew on. But now Kirby saw that he was headed slightly toward the west. He changed the angle of his dive accordingly. Perhaps after all he might be able to get back to his lines.

But he must score now—score before it was too late. He watched his sights again, until he got that triplane right in the ring. Then he fired, certain that he couldn't miss. The German ship must surely fall. But it didn't fall, it kept straight to its course! And then he realized that it must be true that he was getting stale. What a rotten shot, to be unable to hit a German who wasn't even maneuvering—perhaps because he held Kirby's bullets in such contempt. Wild, futile sobs broke from Kirby's throat. He simply couldn't make the grade again!

And in the next second the motor sputtered out, and when he pressed the gun triggers there was no response. His last chance was over, he was finished.

But—a wild light suddenly came in his eyes—as long as he was finished he might as well be finished right! A sobbing, defiant laugh broke from him. He was going to die, but he was going to take that German to hell with him.

He was not far above him now, but it would be far enough. He had reached his decision. He pushed his stick forward a little, changing his course. Those on the ground—for by now crowds had gathered to watch this strange spectacle—saw the diving Spad swerve inward slightly, and continue downwards—headed straight for the triplane!

For Kirby had decided to take the fatal but surely successful course. He had decided to ram that Hun head-on, with enough force to kill the man—and, consequently, kill himself, too.

Down he came . . . down . . . down . . . closer and closer . . . always keeping his plane nosed straight for the enemy ship. His speed had become incredible; he was dropping like a streak—coming on in his furious plunge.

The men below held their breaths, clenched their teeth. Some of them tried to signal the triplane, which went right on, as if its pilot were ignorant of the doom which awaited him, as if he didn't believe Kirby had the nerve to carry his bluff through. But even had he tried to get out he couldn't now any more. Kirby was almost on top of him, coming, coming. . . .

A straggling group of doughboy prisoners were staring up, together with their captors, staring with incredulous eyes.

"Holy hell!" one of them gasped, wiping the perspiration from his brow. "He's coming right into him! Can you beat that?"

"That's one of those crazy American Mosquitoes!" a German major puffed in reply. "Brave fool! *Gott*, here it comes—!"

IT WAS coming now, in a few seconds.

As Kirby came right down on top of the other, a few last thoughts flashed through his mind. His comrades they would never get over it. Yet Travis might be gone, too. And it was best to die like this. Though stale, though not at all his former self, he could at least go to death in the old breathless, reckless fashion. It was fitting. . . .

Space—gagging rushes of air—and the other plane loomed right up under him, assuming gigantic proportions. Its wings showed flashingly, it stood out in every beautiful detail. Now Kirby could look right into its cockpit and see—

In that split second he was absolutely frozen. His plane kept plunging.

For in the cockpit of the triplane he had seen its pilot—seen him bending over his controls. But he was

not working those controls. His body was stiff, rigid, his face bloody, his helmet in shreds. He was dead!

Then, with a thrill of triumph, Kirby realized. His bullets had scored after all! He had been a damn good shot! At long range he had gotten the German, though, by a queer freak, the tri-plane's controls had gone into neutral, keeping the ship level. He had won!

But in the same instant the triumph faded from his face, he went white, and then he was struggling with tooth and nail now to avoid crashing that plane.

He jerked the stick back frantically, but still that triplane kept looming up. God—he must live now!

The men on the ground kept watching, holding their breaths. Down the Spad kept coming, hurtling, its nose still pointed straight for the German ship. There was only a small gap between them now, and this was closing with terrific rapidity. They waited, waited for the awful sound they knew two planes made when they collided in mid-air.

Another second went by. Then——

A loud, splintering crash—a shrill of breaking struts, of ripping fabric——

But as they looked, awed and incredulous, they saw that the planes had not collided! The Spad, in the last split second, had pulled up frantically, to side-slip over and past the German plane. The strain of that giddy maneuver had been so terrific as to smash a strut and rip off a big part of the lower right wing-tip, but now Kirby, his spirit revived entirely, had no more fear. For he had made his comeback, and the old feeling of confidence and glorious gusto was with him once more. He must try to make the lines now. And he would make them! He'd get back somehow!

Keeping the Spad's nose up, and compensating for the broken wing by stick and rudder-bar, he got into a long glide. And before he had gone far he saw the German plane hurtling down back there. Death had let go of the controls it had been playing with.

Down Kirby glided—and now he was over a forest, so low that he was almost touching the tree-tops. The German third and second line trenches were down there. He struggled to keep the plane's nose up, and the wings stable. For a second, despite his carefree confidence, he didn't see how he could clear those trees—his undercarriage seemed to be right in them. But he did clear them and, with more free space beneath him, went on.

He saw the first line German trench now, looming up toward him, so close that he could look right down at the bristling bayonets, the startled upturned faces.

He whisked over them like a streak, even as his plane began to settle, settle. Then he was shooting across No-Man's-Land—a few scant yards above the seething, shell-torn ground—and once more the whistle of bullets was in his ears. Shells burst to the right and left. If he crashed here they'd get him sure. But, he swore lustily, who in hell said he was going to crash here?

He could see an Allied front line trench right ahead of him now. If he could get to it, pancake behind it—

He employed every last atom of skill and strength to keep that nose up. He was whisking over the barbed wire entanglements now, losing his few feet of height with ever increasing rapidity. In another moment he saw that he couldn't possibly make it. He was going to crash now! Hastily, he reached for his safety-belt, started to unfasten it.

The speeding, gliding plane suddenly lurched backwards, as if some giant hand was tugging it from underneath. With a crash, the undercarriage, caught in the wires, was torn clean off, but the fuselage kept right on going. It seemed to slide forward over the parapet of the trench and then, with a great lurch, it tumbled in, nose-first, amid a cursing bunch of doughboys who confusedly jumped out of its way.

Kirby had popped out of the wreckage before they got to him. He was unscathed, though quite dazed. The doughboys in the trench clustered around him, staring at him as if he were some strange creature from another world. At last, a husky sergeant spoke.

"Welcome, sky-guy!" he greeted, amiably. "I see you've just dropped in on us, hey? Well, it ain't so nice here but it's probably a damn sight nicer than where you must have come from. Who knocked you—Richthofen?"

But Kirby did not hear him. For a few seconds he continued to stand there, dazedly.

Then a light of joyous triumph appeared in his eyes.

"Sweet Marie!" he burst out, excitedly. "I got him! I'm a damn good shot! Believe it or not! I licked him, and I can lick any damn Hun!"

The men stared dumbly, the sergeant blinked and scratched his head, then confided to a buddy: "Shell-shock! I always thought them aviator guys were nuts!"

That afternoon all three Mosquitoes—for it turned out that Travis, too, had come through without a scratch—stood before their C.O., giving their report. Kirby was grinning his old grin, and the sight of it made his comrades grin with him. He was himself again, younger, more impetuous and carefree than ever.

"Well, Kirby," the grizzled old colonel was concluding. "I've been worried about you, but I guess I was mistaken. That was pretty good work. However," his face darkened ominously, "I must remind you to be a little more cautious hereafter. You're getting far too reckless."

