



HELL'S SKYWAY

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

*The Fate of the Allies Depends on a done American Flyers Speed and Skill
in this Rip-Roaring Novel of Whirling Props and Screaming Struts!!*

CHAPTER I MISSION OF DANGER

IN THE HUTMENT which was his quarters, Lieutenant "Streak" Davis, fighting hellion of the 34th United States Pursuit Squadron, hastily buttoned up his teddy-bear and reached for his helmet. His reckless face was tense, apprehensive. Only a few minutes ago. Major Hopkins, the squadron C.O., had notified him of the urgent phone message which had come from Chaumont itself.

A staff car, that message had said, was even now on

the way to the 34th's drome—by the time it arrived Streak Davis was to be dressed in his flying togs, and he was to hop aboard the staff car immediately. Also, he was to bring along his terrain map.

He was taking out that map now—folding it into its oilcloth wrapper. It was a big affair, a maze of locations, of numbers, of routes and boundaries. Streak Davis treasured it—for it was a thing of his own creation. Scores of reckless missions across the lines, of perilous strafes made against the enemy in the headlong, arrow-like manner which had won him his nickname, had made him fully acquainted with the grim, ravaged part of France which was the Western Front.

ONLY once had he allowed the map to get out of his hands. Intelligence had asked for it two days ago, to

copy down some data they needed. They had returned it the same day.

Folding the precious chart, Davis thrust it within the breast of his teddy-bear. A strange inner excitement was rising in him, more and more. What in hell was Chaumont calling him for—coming to fetch him in a staff car? A flying job of some kind, of course—but why wasn't he to do it right from this drome, in his regular Spad? It certainly must be something big, something—

The squeal of skidding tires rose abruptly in the morning air outside. Streak sprinted towards the mud-spattered Cadillac sedan, while a few of his squadron mates on the field looked at it with the tense curiosity which staff cars have always aroused.

The khaki-clad doughboy chauffeur of the car reached out through the front window, and opened the rear door as Streak Davis came up. A tense voice called out from the rear interior: "Get in. Hurry! There is no time to be lost!"

Streak Davis obeyed with alacrity. The men on the field saw the rear door of the sedan slam shut—saw the Cadillac leap forward, whirl onto the road and disappear in a cloud of dust and exhaust smoke.

And in the rear of the speeding car, an awed Streak Davis was just recognizing the stern-faced, khaki-clad colonel who sat beside him, recognizing him as a man whose position was far more powerful than his mere rank. The stern-faced man was Colonel Saunders, chief of United States Intelligence in the 1st Area of Advance.

"You brought your map, Lieutenant Davis?" the Colonel was asking in his crisp voice, as the car sped down the highway.

Streak Davis nodded, tapping his teddy-bear. The colonel leaned towards him in the swaying car. "While we're on the way, I'll try to explain the details to you as fast as I can. As I told you, there will be no time to spare. We're on a narrowing margin right now: there are scarcely two hours left.

"As soon as you step out of this car," his voice came grim, emphatic, "you will step into the cockpit of a plane—ready to fly as you've never flown before."

STREAK DAVIS nodded again, his face unflinching. Like a good soldier, he asked no questions: he waited patiently for the colonel to explain. The car lurched as the doughboy chauffeur took a sharp turn virtually on two skidding wheels, and they were whizzing down a branch road with trees rushing past on either side in a blur of green and brown.

"Two days ago," the colonel's crisp voice resumed, "we received word from one of our operatives in Hunland that the Germans were up to some mysterious business at Luennes."

"Luennes?" Streak Davis repeated. "Isn't that where the Krupp Brothers built a branch factory so they could make guns right in captured France?"

"Yes, that's the place. It's never been any worry to us, because owing to the lack of facilities, the Boche found they could never make any big guns there. They have only turned out the small field and trench pieces, and also specialized in armor-shields for gun placements. That's why we're at a loss to understand what could be going on at Luennes now.

"But we did not hesitate to act on our operative's information. With the military situation as it now is, we could take no chances.

"As you know," he went on, "the big push which started three days ago is the crucial test for our armies. General Pershing won his way with Foch to launch this hundred-percent American operation. The goal is the Argonne—and three army corps are forging towards it. Montfaucon has already been stormed; Vauquois has fallen.

"But at present our armies are on the plains below the Argonne terrain. They are practically in the open, with no protective shelter, and we feared that the Germans were planning some menace to strike at them, so we acted on the Luennes information at once.

"We decided to destroy the Krupp plant there by one of the most stupendous bomb-raids ever sent out. That was why we borrowed your terrain map, Lieutenant. Your systematic charting of anti-aircraft zones and enemy squadron locations was more complete than our own.

"WE SENT out three full bombing squadrons, equipped with the new Liberty-engined D.H.4's. Thirty-six of them went out, just before dawn this morning."

In the sudden flash of sunlight which darted into the car window from between the passing trees, his face looked haggard, deep with lines of worry and pain. "Those bombers never got through, Davis. They were wiped out, every one of them, before they got near their objectives!"

Streak Davis' heart constricted within him, and his face went grim. Thirty-six bombers—seventy-two men, counting pilots and observers!

Suddenly his expression changed to one of surprise. His eyes narrowed. "That seems mighty strange," he said slowly. "Let's see now." He pulled out his precious

terrain map, spread it over his knees as best he could in the bouncing, speeding car.

"Look, Colonel, here's your Luennes." He dabbed a little circle deep within the Hun side of the chart. "Now, there are just two ways of approaching it by air—straight ahead, or by a roundabout northern course. The straight way would be pretty rough, because von Stohlmann's circus has its drome right in that area—and von Stohlmann's gang is good!"

He said this last with a grim, grudging admiration. Von Stohlmann had become Germany's ace of aces, the pilot who was said to have the maneuvering skill of Immelmann, the cunning defense of Udet and the deadly marksmanship of the late Richthofen. Streak Davis longed desperately to meet this Boche ace, to match him in one of those great sky duels—even if he'd only lose his own neck in such an attempt.

He snapped out of this secret thought, resumed aloud: "But I don't think von Stohlmann's crew could have done for those thirty-six D.H.4's!"

The colonel shook his head. "The D.H.'s didn't take that route. They took the roundabout course, hoping to accomplish a surprise attack."

Davis drew a puzzled breath. "But that roundabout course is only protected by anti-aircraft zones—and all those zones are marked clearly on my map! If they just followed my markings, zigzagged between the zones, they should have got through safely!"

"PRECISELY what we hoped," the colonel's tone was weary. "But evidently those pilots weren't able to fly between the zones—or met with something unforeseen. They didn't get through. And later this morning, a carrier pigeon brought us a last message from our operative in Hunland."

His face grim as death, the colonel pulled out a thin, folded sheet of onion-skin. He unfolded it and passed it to Streak Davis. The latter held it before his eyes. He saw hastily scrawled writing:

"Am surrounded in cafe hideout in Luennes. Will try send this by pigeon before they get me. Unable to learn secret of Krupp factory, but from overheard military conference know Germans have something to annihilate our troops on open Argonne flatlands, and that they plan to finish preparations by twelve noon today. Advise you destroy Luennes factory at all costs by that hour. This is big, as saw Hindenberg himself on scene. Must quit now, they're closing in. It was a good war. So long.

"C-14."

The terrible vividness of that brief message stirred Davis to the very soul. For an instant he had a hideously clear picture of a brave Yank spy, writing his last valiant words in some dismal cafe while the gray-clad hounds of Germany closed in, baying for his blood. And by now, no doubt their firing squad had riddled him, for spies were quickly executed these days when caught.

HE GLANCED across at Colonel Saunders, and he saw the grief in the colonel's eyes. "C-14 was one of my best men," the colonel said simply, but that was all. At once his face hardened and he came right back to the subject in hand.

"You can see now why we are in such a hurry. Noon is less than a couple of hours away. And that's why we've called you, Lieutenant Davis."

His eyes went to the Yank pilot's face, with a strange, implicit trust. "You have a reputation for speed, and you know the terrain better than anyone else. Also—"

He broke off abruptly, as the sedan passed suddenly into a flood of dazzling, open sunlight. They had swept off the branch road onto a small, smooth clearing, fringed with trees. Streak Davis identified the place as the tiny secret airdrome which Intelligence used for its clandestine aerial operations. The whole field was heavily guarded by alert doughboy sentries who paced with shouldered rifles.

In the center of the field, its propeller ticking over at revving speed while three coveralled mechanics tightened wires and checked fuel and oil, squatted a lone Spad. And even the first glimpse of that Spad gave Streak Davis a warm thrill—the thrill any pilot feels when he sees a beautiful "job."

This ship was of the very latest type, its khaki wings and fuselage shaped to the new streamlining, its cowed Hisso engine a thing of rugged might. Squatting there with only its propeller moving, the Spad nevertheless gave the impression of tremendous speed—its upslanted fuselage looking almost as if it were in zooming motion. It was like a greyhound straining forward, ready to leap at the slightest impulse.

And now, as the staff car slowed to a stop, Streak Davis saw, fastened to the racks beneath the streamlined belly of the Spad, four huge, black, pear-shaped missiles.

"Those are special, concentrated lydite and T.N.T. demolition bombs," the colonel was crisp. "That Spad can carry those four thirty-five pounders, and they are powerful enough to blast the Luennes plant off the face of the earth, if they can be dropped on it."

HE LOOKED at Streak Davis. No orders were necessary. The colonel said simply: "We feel that one fast ship might get through unspotted. The only question is, can it get there in time?"

Streak Davis glanced at his wrist-watch. It was ten minutes past ten. "What speed can that Spad make, Colonel—including bombs?"

"She ought to do a hundred and thirty."

Davis calculated rapidly while he refolded his terrain map. "There will be a slight head-wind—say one hundred and twenty, ground speed. Two hours. Enough time to take the roundabout course."

He reached decision. "I'll take it—the other way is half as long, but I don't want to run into von Stohlmann's circus—not today at any rate."

Streak and Colonel Saunders moved at once towards the revving Spad. Davis went up to the trim ship, felt its firm nacelle—the fabric as taut as a drum. He flung his oilcloth-wrapped map into the cockpit, turned to the three greaseballs.

"Is she all set?"

The mechanics nodded. One of them spoke respectfully. "She's warm and rarin', Lieutenant." He moved off, with one of the two others. The third mechanic, however, was tarrying at the engine.

"I just have to check the exhaust, sir."

DAVIS nodded. He walked back to Colonel Saunders, tightening his helmet straps. "Don't worry, Colonel," he said, with firm confidence. "I'll find my way to Luennes. I'll get there well before noon, and blast that Krupp factory and whatever is in it to hell!"

There was a warm look in the colonel's eyes. His hand shot forward, seized Davis' and gripped it firmly. "There's a man at Chaumont whose shoulders will feel lighter if you get through, Lieutenant," he said. "That man is General Pershing. He instructed me to tell you that his hopes and confidence will fly with you on this mission."

Streak Davis nodded, his resolution strengthened by this knowledge. He turned back to the plane, then gave an exclamation of impatient surprise. The one mechanic who had tarried to check the exhaust had lifted up the engine cowl—was bending over the throbbing cylinders of the Hispano-Suiza.

"What's the matter there?" Davis snapped. Evidently the mechanic didn't hear him; his ears were close to the throbbing engine. Impatiently Davis stepped forward.

"That engine's okay, isn't it?" he said more loudly. "It sounds okay and—" He broke off with an amazed shout, his eyes staring.

Bent over the engine, the mechanic was holding a small cloth bag directly over the oil intake! Sudden enraged realization came to Davis then. With an infuriated curse he started to leap forward!

But at the same instant the mechanic whirled, snatching the little bag to him. His grimy face was ugly, with two eyes glowing like live coals. A guttural, foreign snarl broke from his lips—and the automatic flecked from its hidden holster like some springing snake.

"Stay back, *schweinen!*" the man snarled with blighting malice. The black muzzle of the automatic arced past Davis' face—it pointed straight at Colonel Saunders as the latter turned to call the sentries. "One move and I kill your Intelligence Colonel! And you, too—you dog of a flyer!"

CHAPTER II SPLIT SECONDS

FOR AN INSTANT that tense scene stood still—a picture carved in stone. The colonel stood gaping with surprise. Streak Davis remained half-crouched, afraid to move lest this enraged Boche shoot at the colonel. And the Boche stood with those glowing, fanatical eyes, his automatic level, steady.

It was crazy, in a way, because within shouting distance were all those sentries and the other mechanics. But they did not see: the group at the plane was too close together, and the Boche was holding the automatic close to his grimy coveralls, half hiding it. The man was determined, Davis was thinking in flashing thoughts. Evidently this Luennes thing was as big as C-14's message had claimed.

All this in the first split second. In the next, Streak Davis, reckless hellion that he was, acted!

The tableau broke into sudden flashing motion. There was a wild curse from the spy, as Streak Davis shifted with a panther-like leap—a leap which brought him between the colonel and that menacing gun. And simultaneously, the Yank pilot hurled forward with both arms outstretched.

Crack!

VICIOUS flame spurted from the automatic. But the deadly bullet went wide, for Streak Davis, cursing,

had knocked up the spy's gun wrist. The automatic went flying to the ground—and Davis was upon the spy then!

The desperate Boche proved to be of amazing strength; he wrestled like a professional, tying Streak Davis up. Furiously the two grappled across the ground. Colonel Saunders had pulled his own revolver now, but was powerless to use it, as spy and pilot were locked close together. The sentries, having heard the shot, came rushing in confusedly from all sides, their rifles leveled.

Wrestling, their feet slipping over the dusty tarmac, Davis and the Boche were suddenly directly in front of the Spad's ticking propeller blade! With cold horror, Streak Davis realized the Boche was trying to push him into the whirling propeller—so it would club his skull open! Davis saw, in that split second, that aid could never reach him in time—even now the Boche was forcing him back, further back! He heard the mighty propeller whistling right behind him, felt its suction against the nape of his very neck!

Sheer desperation lent him strength. With one mighty lunge of his whole body, he swung the spy half-around. At the same time he freed his left arm, and his hand doubled into a fist of iron.

Pough! The short, terrific uppercut landed under the Boche's jaw, half lifting the man. He sprawled sidewise. In the next moment came a horrible, thudding sound—and the spy collapsed on the ground, his own head split by the propeller blade into which the blow had sent him.

Dazed, breathless, Streak Davis pulled himself together. The doughboys had rushed up. Colonel Saunders, his face taut with alarm, saw that Davis had not been hurt, and immediately he became the Intelligence commander. His voice barked crisp instructions. The body of the pseudo-mechanic was moved away from the Spad. The colonel bent over it.

And now Streak Davis saw the great thinking, quick-witted brain that guided United States Intelligence at work. In mere seconds the colonel had wiped the grime and blood from the Boche's face. With instant certainty he crisped:

"IT'S Z-102. I've seen him before. One of the *Nachrichtendienst's* most cunning agents. But this mechanic guise is unusual for him. As a rule he plays a staff officer, mingling with our own right at Chaumont. We've been trying to get him for months."

The other two mechanics had been brought up.

Colonel Saunders was examining their credentials, questioning them. In mere seconds the wily colonel had pieced the facts together. Three trusted mechanics had been ordered to this field. One had been out drinking with the "mechanic" who now lay dead. He had suffered unusually ill effects from the drinking—and now of course it was clear that those drinks had been doctored. The false mechanic had volunteered to take his place, and no one was going to say anything about it.

Streak Davis, meanwhile, had recovered the peculiar little cloth bag which he had first seen the spy holding over the engine. He opened the bag, and found it full of tiny, blackish particles of sand.

"Emery," he stated grimly, handing the bag to the colonel. "The oldest gag in the game, sir. He was trying to pour it into the oil pump. It would ruin the lubrication and the engine would conk in no time!" He hurried to the Spad, examining the oil inlet. "Luckily I got him in time. None of the stuff got in."

THE colonel's eyes were narrowed slits. "The Germans are certainly anxious for us not to destroy Luennes. I'm afraid this is only the beginning." He glanced at his watch, and the worry lines in his face grew deep. "It's ten-twenty! Lord, how can you ever make Luennes in time now?"

"I'll make it," Streak Davis gritted. "There's still time for a roundabout course—though now I'll have to break records. But I wouldn't dare take the straight way now; it seems the Boche are wise."

Hastily, as he spoke, he was going over the whole Spad, to make certain the spy had not tried sabotage elsewhere. Nothing wrong; he gave a sigh of quick relief. But he felt a little shaky now: no longer so brimming over with confidence. This shocking beginning to his mission brought home to him fully and devastatingly that he was embarked on the most perilous adventure of his blazing, streaking career.

But, fighting down this inner tremor, he stirred himself and swung into the cockpit of the Spad. Lucky the spy had not gotten his precious chart, destroyed it! Streak opened it, folded it back so that the oblong portion including the terrain between here and Luennes was revealed.

Then he hooked it onto the dashboard, strapped in, and jerked down goggles.

Streak Davis, face reckless and grim, jerked the throttle lever clear across the arc, and the Hisso burst into a deafening, Niagara roar. The trim, streamlined

ship responded as Davis knew it would respond. Unleashed at last, it literally catapulted forward, black smoke trailing from its exhaust stacks. The colonel and several doughboys stood in the tearing slipstream, watching—and the colonel's face was tense and white.

Ruddering into the wind, Streak Davis sent the Spad thundering down the little tarmac. Despite the heavy load of bombs, the plane got its wheels right off. And Streak Davis was rocketing over the tree-tops, zooming into the sunny blue with the straight-on, arrowing speed which had won him his famed nickname.

SPEED! If ever he needed it, he needed it now. Hisso thundering, smoke trailing from exhausts, wind shrieking through the flying-wires and flogging his goggled, helmeted face—Streak Davis was in his element! At two miles a minute he was racing on a roundabout course to his goal—his goal which was deep in Hunland!

The Spad was a flashing winged thing in the sunny sky—a streaking, blurred eagle of the air. The miles rushed by—the relief-map earth swam below in green and brown and gray. In seconds, Streak Davis was sweeping over and past the First Area of Advance.

The terrain grew rougher. Now he saw 75's—field pieces, manned by the olive-drab men, firing great salvos. Ahead of them he saw waves of khaki moving forward. The Big Push! The great American drive!

Streak Davis, rushing by that mighty pageant staged by General Pershing, felt an awe such as he had never felt before. A gleam came into his goggled eyes. By God, he thought with fierce pride, he was a Yank too—he had the same blood in his veins as those brave doughboys. And if they could storm Montfaucon, he could storm Luennes! He was in this Big Push—his streaking Spad was a vital cog in the great machine! And behind him, at Chaumont, stood the great, square-jawed Yank General who was showing Europe how to win a war! And he was depending on Streak Davis to help him show them!

CHAPTER III MAELSTORM OF FURY

MISTS OF SHELL-SMOKE. The hideous green vapors which were clouds of chlorine gas. Trenches now—and mud! And then, the real battle-front! The Argonne plains—that stretch of open ground before the grim maze of forests where the Germans had their last retreat, their Hindenberg *Stellung*.

The plains were a maze of shallow trenches, bristling with tin helmets and bayonets. Streak Davis looked down at them from his fuselage grimly. No shelter there: fully two divisions of Yanks were crowded down there, in open land. And at Luennes, even now the Boche were planning to annihilate these Yanks!

The maze of trenches swept on below. But now, abruptly, the color of the insect-sized men in those trenches changed from olive to gray. Boche! Boche, firmly intrenched at the fringe of the wide plain, and under shelter of tree-branches and natural hills. Well-protected Boche!

THE first lap of Streak Davis' mad race against time was finished. He was crossing the lines—he was hurling into enemy skies, and his eyes were on the terrain-map, already using it to guide his careful course.

A black mushroom sprouted with a dull cough to his right, staining the blue. Another grew beside it, then still another. The first Archie battery was cutting loose. Streak Davis grinned, and thumbed his nose over the side of the cockpit. He had located that anti-aircraft battery on his map and was passing safely to its side, well out of range.

He picked up the glistening silver sheen which was the Meuse River, and followed it for several miles. Then he curved away, zig-zagging to avoid another zone of anti-aircrafts marked on the river bank. He saw them spewing into the sky behind him with impotent fury, and he chuckled.

"No use, Fritz!" he gritted, beneath the Hisso's mighty roar. "You won't catch me today!"

Hell-bent, he went on, picking his way by his map deeper and deeper into Hun terrain. The minutes

passed. It was 11 A.M. by his wrist-watch now. One more hour to go.

He should make Luennes with time to spare. Make it, and drop these deadly bombs.

He coaxed his racing plane on, on into Hunland. Thank God for this map of his. The anti-aircraft zones were hotter the deeper he got into enemy sky, but he was avoiding them, passing them all wide and—

B-R-OOM! B-room! B-room!

His very eardrums seemed to split, and his Spad reared like a frightened steed. With a cry of frenzied horror and incredulity, he saw the black shells burst all around him—he saw the spreading, smoke engulf his Spad, and his nostrils clogged with the acrid fumes of it. A rain of livid shrapnel showered down. A piece tore through his upper wing and missed the cockpit by inches.

AND Streak Davis realized then, realized with cold panic, that he was in the very midst of the worst anti-aircraft barrage he had ever seen in his life! A barrage that was erupting from all parts of the ground below, spewing at him from every direction, shrieking, howling at his Spad and making it toss and bob like a cork at sea!

With frantic instinct, he was struggling with controls, zig-zagging to dodge the deafening shells and their showering shrapnel. At the same time, he was peering at his terrain-map wildly, trying to see how in hell he had gotten off his course and run into this zone of Archie fire.

His eyes widened behind their goggles. Confound it, he wasn't off his course! According to the map, there should be no anti-aircraft zone here! And yet, actually, there was the worst anti-aircraft zone on the whole front!

His panic increased while the air grew denser, and the blue sky turned almost black as night with bursting shells. God, could his map be mistaken? Could it be that he had charted it wrongly, and that the thirty-six D.H.4's which had gone out yesterday had been betrayed by his mistake?

But this momentary feeling of horrible guilt passed instantly. No, he had made no mistakes. He had checked up his map too thoroughly for that. But on the other hand, this couldn't be a new anti-aircraft zone, established since he had last corrected the map! It was too big, too well-prepared, to be new!

Madly, in a growing frenzy, his mind racked by conjectures, Streak Davis struggled to get out of the

growing maelstrom of hell, the inferno of shells and shrapnel. He followed the map, hoping that if this were all some mistake, he'd get out of the zone soon. But the fire only increased! His ship began to vibrate from nose to tail. God, the barrage was growing thicker, thicker!

Again he peered at the map. He snatched it off the dashboard. He held it close to his goggled eyes so he could see it in the darkening air—and meanwhile held the joy-stick between his knees. And then—

Sheer frenzied horror descended upon Streak Davis. This thunderous roar of anti-aircraft shells suddenly sounded like a ghastly mockery of death.

Betrayed—those shells screamed at him, roared at him, howled at him with their whizzing shrapnel. *Betrayed*—even as those D.H.4's must have been betrayed.

Z-102! Oh, it was clear now, hideously clear! This map was not the terrain-map Streak Davis had originally thrown into the cockpit of his plane. It was a copy, so nearly like the original, so neatly forged, that he had been fooled by it—fooled into believing it was his own!

THAT damned Boche spy had substituted it for the other map—changed the two when the original lay in the cockpit and Davis wasn't looking. Z-102 had then wanted to make doubly sure and had tried to ruin the oil supply—the trick that had cost him his life! But now it seemed the spy had triumphed, even in death!

The cleverness of the Boche! He had left most of the chart unchanged, left in all the familiar towns and zones, so Davis would not get suspicious. The first aircraft batteries he had marked in the correct positions, so Davis would get blithely past them. Then, subtly, he had begun to shift the anti-aircraft positions. And now, Davis, way in Hunland, was trapped in a hellish maze of them, being tossed around crazily, giddily, with death threatening him from all sides!

MORE than that, Davis was certain now that the D.H.4 squadrons had gone out with false maps just like this. Hadn't Colonel Saunders said that Z-102 usually posed as a staff officer around Chaumont? When Intelligence had borrowed Streak Davis' map two days ago, that spy had doubtless again substituted a false copy for it.

Then, when the D.H.'s had left with the treacherous maps, he had replaced the original—so it was returned to Streak Davis at his hutment.

All these thoughts rushed through Davis' brain in these few hellish seconds, as he struggled with his protesting ship. God, why hadn't they searched the dead spy thoroughly—they would have found the original map on his person, no doubt. But no use thinking of that now. Davis was in a trap. The false map was useless as far as the anti-aircraft zones went. Following it would only increase the ghastly predicament in which he now found himself.

He gritted his teeth. He must get through to Luennes, anti-aircraft shells or not! He bent fiercely to his controls, and with that hellish fire bursting all around his ears, he began to maneuver with the consummate skill and speed of sheer desperation.

Roaring, his Spad ducked and darted and banked amid the bursting shells. It zig-zagged past them; it pirouetted; it zoomed for altitude; and when the gunners again started to range it, it dropped down in wild falling leafs and went streaking ahead. He must get through—must get through somehow!

And it seemed, for a while, that his fierce determination lent him the wings of an angel—or a fool. Through that sea of Archie spew he was staggering, lurching, avoiding the bursts by scant inches. *B-room!* A shell detonating under his left wing sent the wing flying up—and his plane half-rolled of its own accord. *Blang!* A second burst made a vacuum beneath him, and his plane dropped sickeningly like an elevator, wings smacking against the solid air five hundred feet below.

The frail, lone little Spad was a pirouetting insect in the shell-blackened air. Stubbornly, thinking of those troops out on the open Argonne plains, this lone Yank pilot tried to defy the Germans most modern instruments of aerial destruction, tried to outwit the gunners who sought his range, the sighters who tried to hold his Spad in their telescopic sights. Blindly, guided only by his general knowledge of terrain, he was trying to go on towards Luennes.

BUT there was another enemy which aided those anti-aircraft guns, an enemy which he soon found himself helpless to combat. That enemy was time! Time, merciless and cold, ticking by—minute after minute.

And before long, Streak Davis saw by his wrist-watch that time was winning. There were but forty minutes left for him to get to Luennes before noon. On this roundabout course, even by the speediest, uninterrupted flying, he could not make that spot in forty minutes. And held up as he was by this thickening barrage of anti-aircrafts which threatened at any

moment to blast him out of the sky—he couldn't win that race even by a miracle!

Beads of sweat broke out on Streak Davis' forehead, and his face seemed to grow long, grayish, as a sense of frustration began to overwhelm him. But God, he must get through somehow! He couldn't fail! He couldn't let the work of a dirty spy ruin his mission! Not when Pershing himself depended on him, was relying on him!

And suddenly in that infernal spew, Streak Davis knew what he must do. Hellish though it was, suicidal though it might be, he must retrace his course. He must abandon this route and take the straight way—then he could make Luennes in time.

EVEN with the thought, he banked his ship blindly, was staggering back through that barrage—westward a ways and towards the south. He knew that a menace even more potent than anti-aircrafts lurked along the straight route—the menace of von Stohlmann, Germany's greatest ace—and von Stohlmann's circus. But if, by furious speed and luck, he could get through before that waiting circus spotted him—!

The thought seemed hopeless, but Davis had no alternative. The straight route was short. It was the only way, now, by which he could have even a ghost of a chance of reaching that Krupp branch factory before noon.

Even now the deafening detonations of shells began to dim in their intensity. The black smoke began to clear. The Spad straightened, and like a bird, happy to be free, it shot out of the zone of fire as it went to the southward. He was out of that area now. But he was getting into the area which was patrolled by deadly Fokker D.7's.

CHAPTER IV VULTURE'S PREY

EAST NOW, HE BANKED. The straight course—he was on it! He was on it, with little more than half an hour to spare! He scanned the blue ceiling of translucent sky. Nothing in sight yet, thank the gods. Perhaps—his heart beat with wild hope—perhaps he would get through unspotted, by some miracle.

But somewhere in the path would be von Stohlmann's drome. He must pass it, pass close to it. There was no other way. He steeled his nerves, gritted his teeth. He decided not to chance it at this altitude—he'd surely be seen. With a grim curse, he shoved his joy-stick forward. The nose of the Spad dropped—the streamlined ship with its load of bombs went screaming down a long hill of space.

Down over jutting tree-tops which whisked past beneath his undercarriage. He was going to hedge-hop it—and perhaps in that way he could dash past the area of von Stohlmann's drome. With a lurching smack, his wings flattened over the trees. And like a missile, the Spad streaked over the carpet in its mad dash.

If his calculations were correct, he should be dashing past to the north of von Stohlmann's famous drome. He must be nearing it even now. Again he glanced up at the sky. His throat tightened suddenly, and his body went rigid.

Across the sun he saw flitting dragonfly-like shapes. Fokker D.7's on patrol. Fully twenty of them! He held his breath and prayed, for they were right overhead. The dragonflies flitted on, went past two miles above.

A joyous relief swept Streak Davis. They hadn't spotted his Spad, clinging down here to the tree-tops. His desperate tactics seemed to be working. No doubt those Fokkers were from von Stohlmann's outfit. And no doubt there would be more. His heart pounding like a sledgehammer, his every nerve taut, Streak Davis hedge-hopped on. Somewhere to the side, over the tree-tops, that drome should be now. He couldn't see it, didn't want to see it—for if he did, it would mean the Boche there could see him. He was using the trees as a shield.

SPEED! Again the mad urge impelled him. He had the throttle all the way across the arc. He was coaxing the plane over the trees like a jockey coaxing a race-horse. He was screaming through the air, hellbent, hoping to get through before they knew it.

But in the next instant it happened!

All this time Streak Davis had been watching the sky above and around him, watching for any Fokker that might spot him.

But now, suddenly, as he turned forward again, his very blood froze to ice—his heart stopped and a strangled cry tore from his throat. As if by magic, a Fokker had sprung directly before his path. It looked like some monstrous bird. The horrified Streak Davis

realized at once that crate must have just taken off from the Jerry drome ahead and to one side. And now it had suddenly met the Spad face to face!

With both ships treacherously low, they were rushing toward each other with terrific speed—head-on, hellbent. The coffin-nose of the Fokker loomed behind the transparent arc of its propeller. A checkered ship, with black crosses. God, it was von Stohlmann's! It was the ace of Boche aces himself!

And it was von Stohlmann's guns which first fired as the two ships still rushed headlong toward each other. *Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!* Jagged streaks of flame spat from its twin Spandau muzzles. Tracer snaked in zig-zag sulphurous lines right past Davis' face. And then, cursing, still holding his ship straight, Davis was pressing his own Bowdens—his Vickers were trembling on their mounts, spitting back at the oncoming Hun.

It was the Fokker which veered as both ships came together. It veered in a flashing bank which made its wings shine like two mirrors reflecting the sun. It did a breathless skid-turn at which Streak Davis marveled, and then it was suddenly behind him.

Rat-ta-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat! Invisible drumsticks beat a vibrating tattoo on the Spad's tail-fins, and the whole crate lurched. Von Stohlmann was trying to get in his famous kill position—and once there, like. Richthofen, he never missed!

FRANTICALLY, Streak Davis skid-turned himself, then—he slewed the Spad around on a dime, with a tree-top below almost touching it like a pivot. High overhead he could still see the other Fokkers. If they saw these two ships, came down—! With the desperate thought, Streak Davis again pressed his stick-triggers, his Vickers sending their vicious stream toward the Fokker which was momentarily broadside.

They were at it then in earnest, these two aces. The longed-for wish to meet von Stohlmann in a duel had come true for Streak Davis—come true the one time when it was the last thing he wished for! All he wanted now was to get away from this intercepting Fokker, to get through to Luennes before it was too late. But von Stohlmann was apparently grimly determined to stop the Spad from getting through!

With fierce instinct, Davis was struggling to keep the combat down on the carpet—the only hope of finishing it without those high patrolling Fokkers coming down on him. And von Stohlmann seemed perfectly content to carry on the fight at such low altitude.

VON STOHLMANN, Streak Davis found out in the next hectic seconds, was a wiz at low-fighting—contour-fighting, as it was called. The German was still holding the offensive, pressing the attack against the Spad, and his bullets were ticking through Davis' fuselage, drilling through his wings.

It was the maddest kind of dogfight Streak Davis had ever participated in. With undercarriage literally grazing the tree-tops, the two ships fought virtually in two dimensions instead of three—scarcely daring to bank or lose altitude. They slewed at each other, guns spitting, engines roaring.

With all his skill, Streak Davis was trying to outdo the contour-fighting of his opponent. If only he could beat off this German—beat him off at this low altitude and then still get through without being seen by the Fokkers above, get through and—

He broke off from the thought with a sudden wild shout of horror and alarm. For at that instant, the helmeted figure in the cockpit of the German plane suddenly raised a gauntleted hand—a hand which gripped a rocket pistol. *Puff!* Into the sky streaked a flaming red line of fire—up, way up toward those Fokkers above.

And that signal brought instantaneous response! In the very next second, before Streak Davis could move, the sky literally seemed to open and rain Fokkers. Down they came, exhausts sparking—the whole score of them. Down, down, like blood-lusting vultures who have spotted prey!

A sobbing curse of wild, inchoate rage broke from Streak Davis as he saw those plunging ships coming down from all sides of him. Above the growing din of yammering motors and shrilling wires, the frantic Yank hurled curses toward the checkered ship of von Stohlmann.

"You yellow skunk!" he yelled. "You wouldn't dare fight it out with me alone—and they call you a great ace! You had to signal your whole *staffel!*"

He felt outraged. Von Stohlmann had violated the code of chivalry which characterized the air forces of both sides. Yet, even in that hectic moment, Streak Davis knew in his heart that von Stohlmann had merely done his duty—he wanted to stop this Spad at all costs, and wasn't interested in any sporting little duel!

AND the worst of it was, by encouraging contour-fighting, von Stohlmann had drawn Davis into a neat trap. Down here on the carpet, with those Fokkers

hurling on top of him, he wouldn't stand a chance!

That was why, desperately, Streak Davis was now trying to get the very altitude he had avoided before. Trying madly to zoom high enough at least to put up a fight. Rearing, his Spad struggled upwards.

And then the Fokkers struck.

They struck with the fury of hell itself, struck with guns spitting in terrible unison. A literal spider-web of tracer criss-crossed itself around the Spad.

Fabric began to shred from the Spad of Streak Davis. A cabane strut split in two, jumping out of place like an arrow shot by a bow. A bullet seared Streak Davis' face and left a track of oozing blood. The air was dense with flying, screaming cupro-steel and lead and tracer. The Fokkers were walling the lone Spad in a criss-cross prison of bullets which grew tighter and tighter. And Streak Davis knew then that they had him—knew with sobbing anguish that he had failed.

BUT the desperate Yank had not given up even now. In a fury he was trying to face his innumerable attackers—and his Vickers were raising their lone, shrill voice against the roaring voices of those Spandaus. Trapped, he was going to go down fighting!

His eyes narrowed to slits of hate and fury as he glimpsed again the checkered Fokker of von Stohlmann—somewhere to the side.

Cursing, he banked, heading for it. If only he could take that Boche to hell with him! But von Stohlmann's circus had no intention of letting the Yank get a crack at their leader. They bunched together in front of the Spad like a flock of protecting eagles, and from them came such a fusillade of tracer that Streak Davis was virtually blasted off his course.

He half-rolled madly, and as he straightened one of the other Fokkers streaked past his sights in a blur—left to right. He kicked right rudder and banked. His guns began squirting like a hose even as the nose of the Spad swung around—and the line of tracers caught the Fokker broadside. And that Jerry plane actually buckled in two under the withering stream of Yank lead. It buckled and plunged to earth like a stone.

But then the other Boche, enraged by the insolence of the Yank they had cornered, closed in with renewed fury. And von Stohlmann's checkered crate led them. Its guns paved the way for other guns. And against the Spad they poured a concentrated hail of fire—from all sides.

The Spad lurched like a wounded bird. The Hisso engine choked, sputtered as if gasping for breath.

Then, with a hissing sigh, it conked out cold! And Streak Davis saw sky and earth turn upside down, heard the shrill scream of wind, and knew he was in a dizzying, stomach-sickening tail-spin.

They had got him!

So fast was the Spad dropping from its scant altitude, that the scores of Fokkers were left above. But now they were following, to finish their slaughter. And with his ship motorless, Streak Davis knew it was the end. Only the persistent instinct of self-preservation made him keep struggling madly with the controls. Made him steer rudder and stick in the direction of the spin.

THEN, dazedly, he saw the merry-go-round below stop whirling. He was out of the spin: he was in a dive. The joy-slick and rudder were suddenly gripping again—fins and ailerons had got hold of the air once more. He had control! But it would be of little use at this low altitude—without an engine to carry him anywhere!

He shot a furtive glance over his shoulder. The Fokkers were diving somewhere behind him. They had lost him for the moment. The instant they spotted him again, he'd be slaughtered. His desperate eyes held on a little rough clearing in the woods, ahead. The Spad floundered, settling. The tree-tops whisked past, closer beneath. But in a supreme effort of skill, Davis held the Spad up, up. And then the trees disappeared, as the clearing at last gaped below—a rough, desolate stretch of stubble. Gingerly, knowing what would happen to those bombs he carried if he slipped up and crashed, Streak Davis eased the dead ship down. The clearing slanted up to meet him.

B-r-rump! His wheels hit, bounced, but then held. And on the clearing the Spad rolled to a stop. With consummate flying skill, Streak Davis had made the perilous landing.

HE LOOKED around, tensely. Overhead, he heard the Fokkers roaring nearer, looking for him. He unfastened his safety-strap and leaped to the ground. His face was drawn with bitter lines of frustration. He had failed in his mission, failed utterly!

He glanced at his wrist-watch. It was twenty-five to twelve! Only twenty-five minutes before the margin of time was up—and Luennes was still miles, miles away.

He looked dismally at his Spad to see just what the Spandau slugs had done to it. They had done plenty. An hour or so ago this ship had been a brand new thing, shining with freshness. Now it was a mass of

ripped fabric, of peeling dope, of splintering struts and—

Suddenly a cry of renewed hope broke from Streak Davis. For, lifting the engine cowl, he saw that the Hisso itself was undamaged! The cylinder heads stood up intact, as did the distributing wires. Nor had the gas tank been punctured by the German guns.

All that was wrong was a kink in the feedline, a kink made by one of those Spandau bullets. God, if he could straighten it—somehow get off again, there was still time, still hope—

His nerves jerked suddenly taut as he heard the roar of von Stohlmann's Fokkers coming closer over the tree-tops. They were coming this way in their search! In seconds they would be passing over this clearing—they would surely spot the Spad down here! And then there would be no chance, not even the fleeting ghost of a chance!

And then, even as the roar of Mercedes rose louder, closer, Streak Davis acted with the strength and speed which only a desperate man can attain. His keen eyes saw that the branches and foliage of one of the trees hung out over the clearing, forming a small but umbrella-like shelter. He rushed to the tail of the Spad, and somehow, exerting all his might, grunting with the effort, he was dragging the bomb-laden plane under that foliage shelter.

He saw the Fokkers—grim searching vultures—flash past in a maze of trim, black-crossed wings. They circled perilously close overhead. Then to his intense relief, they passed by, to continue the search elsewhere. The drone of Mercedes faded in the morning air.

They had not spotted him—thank heaven!

CHAPTER V STEEL NERVES

WITH EAGER HASTE, Streak Davis rushed to the tool-chest of the Spad. He tackled the kinked feedline, began to work with frantic haste to fix his ship. He prayed fervently that the Fokkers would move far off in their search, and that then he might take off and slip past von Stohlmann's drome once and for all. That drome, he knew, lay close by this clearing—but he was still behind it.

A sudden crackling of twigs—the tramp of heavy, hobnailed boots—made him whirl with a frenzied start of alarm!

Startled, he saw three gray-clad Boche soldiers come bursting upon this clearing through the trees! Two of them were privates, and carried bayoneted rifles. The third, holding a long-barreled Luger automatic, was a scar-faced Prussian *uberleutnant*!

A savage, guttural shout broke from the Germans as they clearly saw the Yank standing by his Spad under the tree. And at a rasped command from the *uberleutnant* the two privates charged forward, leveling their rifles!

AND then a berserk yell broke from the throat of Streak Davis, and a wild light blazed in his eyes. He half-crouched, drawing his own Colt from his side-holster and firing desperately, blindly, even as he drew.

Crack! One of the charging soldiers dropped like a log, rifle clattering before him—a bullet in his heart. The other charged in, bayonet before him—while the *uberleutnant* aimed his Luger, and tightened his finger on the trigger.

Crack! Crack!

The two reports blended into one—as Luger and Colt both spat. But it was the Colt which had spoken a fraction of an instant sooner. And the Luger shot went wild, as the *uberleutnant* sprawled backwards, and fell—with a round, ugly hole in his forehead, just below his visor cap.

But now the third Boche soldier, his Teutonic face mottled with frenzy and savagery, lunged madly at the Yank with his bayonet. Cursing, Streak Davis side-stepped just in time. The flashing blade slithered past him, cutting the sleeve of his teddy-bear. The Boche pulled the gun backwards to lunge again, but this time the desperate Yank was upon him, grabbing at his gun-arm, and at the same time bringing up his own Colt.

Davis did not fire this time. Instead, with his fist around it, he brought the heavy butt of the .45 right down against the side of the Jerry's soft cap. There was a cracking thud, and the Boche soldier dropped; and dazedly Streak Davis saw that he, too, was dead. He had not realized that in his desperation he had struck so hard with the Colt butt.

His face sweating and pale, Streak stood tense, listening. In the distance, the fresh sound of tramping feet and the clink of rifles drifted to his ears. More Boche—scores of them! They were combing the woods, looking for the fallen Yank! But they were not

near this clearing yet. Apparently they had not heard the shots; and only these three who lay sprawled on the ground had searched this part of the woods.

But the sound of those tramping feet and clinking rifles stirred Streak Davis to desperate haste. He resumed his work at the stubborn, slowly yielding feedline. And in a few seconds more he had that kink straightened. The line was fixed. The Spad, though badly riddled by bullets, should fly again!

HE STARTED for the ignition switch, then paused, as again, close overhead, he heard the dront of the Mercedes engines. At once, with wild haste, he dragged the three dead Jerries under the concealing foliage of the tree. He peered up at the blue patch of sky. A helpless despair grew upon him, brought a sobbing groan from his throat.

For over the entire forest now, wheeling in great, circling formations, the entire *staffel* of von Stohlmann—with the exception of the leader's ship itself—spread out like a net, a net through which no lone Spad could ever hope to get away! Those Boche were taking no chances of the Yank's still getting through! With all those Fokkers up there, blocking the only route, Streak Davis knew he'd only be shot down like a rat the moment his Spad rose above the trees!

What to do? He racked his brain madly with conjectures. Death, or at least capture, was closing in on him! And noon was drawing nearer and nearer. Noon, when the mysterious menace which the Boche had been creating at the Luennes factory would be unleashed upon the Yank soldiers!

And then, suddenly, as he looked about him as if for some loophole, some way of escape, his eyes fastened on the three dead Jerries sprawled at his feet. His glance passed over the two privates, focused on the *uberleutnant*. The dead Prussian officer was just about his own build.

SLOWLY a wild idea formulated in Streak Davis' desperate brain, grew on him. Crazy it was beyond measure, reckless beyond words. And yet, if he could do it, it might get the Fokkers out of the sky and also steer off the ground troops. It might enable him to take off and get through after all! There was no time to mull it over. And, besides, he could speak the German language well.

His face set with grim, fierce decision. And once having decided, he wasted not an instant. He bent down over the dead *uberleutnant* and, with swift

fingers, stripped off the man's gray uniform and boots. He got out of his own flying togs then, was slipping into the Jerry clothes. The fit was tight, but it would have to do. In mere seconds he made the quick change—the change which would now condemn him to the firing squad if he were caught.

He looked himself over as best he could. He ought to pass—but how about his Yank features? He smeared his hands with grime from the Spad engine and wiped some of it on his face. The identification disc on the Boche, he saw, read: *Uberleutnant* Schwartz, Karl. But he wouldn't dare assume that identity, lest someone who knew *Uberleutnant* Schwartz recognize Davis as the impostor he was.

CLOSER, ever closer, came the sounds of the Boche in the woods. Damn it, he must hurry, hurry! He sheathed the dead Boche's Luger, and was ready, ready for the grim masquerade.

He glanced at his watch. Little more than quarter of an hour left before noon. But if he could hurry and accomplish his reckless scheme, he might still reach Luennes. If the battered Spad would still respond, and he could fly like the very wind, he should cover the distance in about ten minutes. But he must not start it now, and betray himself to the enemy.

The Boche were so close he could hear them pushing through the brush and foliage—coming this way. He steeled his nerves. Then, swiftly but stealthily, he crossed the clearing—deliberately headed towards the sound of the approaching Germans. At first sight of the familiar field-gray through the tree-trunks, he craftily changed his course—circled behind the Jerry soldiers so it would seem he had approached them from a different direction than from the clearing where the plane was hidden.

CHAPTER VI KILLER OF THE SKIES

STREAK WAS COMING OUT boldly behind a whole group of them—a score of soldiers with bayoneted rifles. He drew a tense breath. Then, summoning all his knowledge of German pronunciation and grammar, knowing that one slip might betray him, he raised his voice harshly: "*Achtung! Halte—alles!*"

The tone simulated that of a rasping Prussian, and into it he tried to put all the contemptuous superiority he knew was characteristic of a Prussian officer.

The Jerry soldiers whirled, stiffened like ramrods. All they saw was a tall figure in the tight, trim uniform of an *uberleutnant*—and that was enough to make them click their heels together and present arms.

"*Der Amerikaner ist gefunden!*" Streak Davis rasped out. "We found the American! I have just come from the other side of the woods. We discovered the wrecked Spad, and the dog of a Yankee was killed in the crash."

He stopped, his heart scarcely beating, as he waited for the effect of this reckless speech.

The Boche soldiers stirred, eyes widening. And then there was a guttural murmur of savage approval. A ramrod *korporal* stepped forward, and Davis quickly lowered his grimed face lest the Boche see him as an impostor.

"*Das ist gut, Herr Uberleutnant!* We can discontinue the search. Shall I tell the other searching parties?"

"*Ja*, tell them!" Streak Davis gutturalized, more confident now. By God, it was working—the troops would not go on, would not find that clearing!

The *korporal* was running off through the trees. Davis, listening, heard him shouting the news through this side of the wood, heard other guttural voices picking it up—heard detachments halting. But, overhead, the drone of Mercedes still sounded loud and monotonous.

Streak Davis turned to the alert Boche soldiers again. "One of you—*schnell*—go to the *staffel* of von Stohlmann," he ordered, daringly. "Inform them that the planes need not continue their search and guarding overhead, since the Yankee has been found. The flyers could not see the wrecked airplane anyway from the air."

A soldier leaped forward, snapping rifle to present arms. "*Ja wohl*. I will go, *Herr Uberleutnant*, and—"

"*Was hat passiert?*" a new voice interrupted harshly. And Streak Davis' heart constricted, as a haughty Boche *oberst* stepped through the trees, onto the scene. "What is this about the American being found? Who is calling off the search?"

DESPITE an inner growing panic, Streak Davis nevertheless had the presence of mind to crisp out a good imitation of a Prussian salute, his heels clicking together. As an *uberleutnant*, he was outranked by this high officer.

"I called off the search, *Herr Oberst*," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I myself found the dead American with some other men."

"Who are you?" The *oberst* stepped close, was confronting the Yank. Keen gray, penetrating eyes went to Davis' grimy face. God, was he going to be betrayed now, just when everything seemed to be going so smoothly? "Who are you?" the haughty *oberst* repeated, impatiently.

"*Überleutnant* Friedrich Klein," Davis got out the first name that had occurred to him, and tried with all his will to conceal the rising panic he felt.

"I do not know you. I do not recall your name," the *oberst* said harshly. And Davis felt that the net was slowly closing about him, enmeshing him. But then: "You must be new here, *nicht wahr?*"

"*Ja wohl, Herr Oberst!*" Desperately Davis took that cue. "I have just come up."

But he knew that a few more pertinent questions like this and he must surely betray himself. Darn this keen-eyed, inquisitive *oberst!* Now the Boche high officer was frowning darkly, seeming to scrutinize Davis' grimy face. His voice came then like a rasping file: "Your face is filthy! You should learn that soldiers who come to this corps keep themselves trim and clean. This is not the battlefield!"

HARSH though the reprimand was, it filled Streak Davis with instant, heartfelt relief; for he had expected further questions about his rank and identity. He framed his words carefully. "It is the grime from the crashed airplane," he explained truthfully, but then stretched the truth. "In helping to pull out the *Amerikaner's* body, I got my hands and face dirty."

The *oberst* grunted, but seemed to accept the explanation. "Where did you say the airplane was found?" he demanded then.

"On the other side of the woods, west of here," Davis pointed with a finger. "It is in a dense portion of trees. Men are there now." And again his impatient haste made him bold, reckless. "I called off the search, naturally, and I was about to send this man here to notify the Fokkers above they need not continue their looking."

The *oberst's* eyes narrowed in thought. "Well then," he said officiously, "you had best go to von Stohlmann's *staffel* yourself, *Leutnant*. Advise them to withdraw the Fokkers. They will not listen to a mere private!"

STREAK DAVIS felt his hopes sinking dismally again. For him to go in person to von Stohlmann's drome not only would cost more of the precious, dwindling time, further delaying his take-off, but it would be pulling at the very whiskers of death! Risking betrayal in every sense of the word.

Besides, he did not know precisely where the drome of von Stohlmann was—he only knew it was somewhere in this vicinity, somewhere in front and to the side of the clearing where his hidden Spad was now squatting.

Again he spoke out of desperation. "*Herr Oberst*, perhaps my being new here would also cause them to doubt my word at the *staffel*. If the *Herr Oberst* went himself—"

"*Nein!*" The *oberst* shook his head. "I wish to go with these soldiers to the other side of the wood and see with my own eyes the wrecked airplane of that *geihichter* Yankee. You report to the *staffel*, *Leutnant* Klein. There will be no trouble if you just say *Oberst* von Roth sent you. They will heed your report."

The desperate Streak Davis felt a wild, almost uncontrollable impulse then to return to his Spad instead of going to that *staffel*. But those Fokkers overhead had to be gotten down—or he could never take off!

But first he must know where that *staffel* was exactly, so he would not waste time looking for it! Too frantic to hesitate, he took the longest chance he had yet taken. He glanced around at the trees, as if looking for something.

"*Ach*," he sighed, "for a moment I lost my bearings here; everything is still new to me. How stupid of me—the *staffel* is in that direction, is it not, *Herr Oberst?*" He pointed vaguely in the general direction he surmised it to be.

For one awful moment he thought surely then that he had roused the *oberst's* suspicion. The Boche high officer's eyes narrowed angrily. "*Dumkopf!* Of course it is. You should know that by now, new or not! Go right through those trees and you are on the path leading to the *staffel*. It is but a short walk. You cannot miss it!"

And so grateful did Streak Davis feel then that he could almost have openly thanked the *oberst* for giving him the information. A short distance—then there was still hope! If he could get those Fokkers down and then get back to his Spad before these Boche soldiers came back from the other side of the woods, he might still get to Luennes!

He wasted not a second more. Steeling his nerves,

he clicked his heels together and snapped out another Prussian salute. "*Zu beiehl, Herr Oberst*. I go to the *staffel* at once."

AND turning, he hurried off through the trees. Behind him he heard the *oberst* rasp a command, heard the Boche starting to head for the other side of the woods. He came then upon the path the *oberst* had told him led to the *staffel*—a narrow dirt road. With no Boche to see him now, he ran along this path as fast as his legs could carry him, sprinted madly to win this race against time and betrayal.

And in a scant two minutes, he was slowing his pace again, discreetly—catching his wind. He was emerging out of the trees onto a wide, open stretch of ground which proved to be the tarmac of von Stohlmann's *staffel*. Beetle-roofed hangars lined the field, and before them squatted a few motionless Fokkers with silent engines. Among them was the all-checkered D. 7 of von Stohlmann, which Boche mechanics were patching up. Evidently, Streak Davis thought with at least a small sense of grim satisfaction, his own bullets had done some damage in that first hectic contour-fight with the German ace.

OVERHEAD the scores of other Fokkers were still circling like watchful vultures.

Streak Davis, trying to simulate all the haughty bearing of a true Prussian officer, strode across the field, outwardly calm and cool. With the grime still on his face and the visor cap low, he marched directly to the large, elephant iron shack which was obviously the headquarters. Several alert Boche sentries instantly formed a gate before him with their rifles, their voices a polite challenge.

Streak Davis drew himself up. He scowled at the sentries as if they were some species of vermin, and his guttural German sounded Prussian indeed:

"*Schweinhunde!* How dare you intercept me when I come on such important business! *Herr Oberst* von Roth, himself, sent me, and if there is any delay you will answer for it, *verstehen Sie?*"

The sentries quailed before the lashing words. They murmured apologetically.

"Don't cackle at me like geese!" Streak Davis roared. "*Achtung!* Stand aside!"

And, frightened, they obeyed, shifting from either side of his path and presenting their rifles. With cold arrogance, Davis strode through the doorway.

He came into a large office, its walls hung with maps

and also bedecked with grim trophies which brought a pang of grief and anger to the Yank. Broken propellers, hubs, crash-pads, parts of gun and fabric—all from Allied crates, many of them Yank! Grim trophies of the hunt! Every one of them represented the life of one of Streak Davis' countrymen or comrades-in-arms.

There were several Boche in the room. Facing them from behind a desk was a small, hawk-like man with eyes as gray and cold as steel. Dressed in the uniform of a *Hauptmann* of the Imperial Flying Corps, a *pour-le-merite* cross hung below his tight, gray collar.

And Streak Davis knew that this man must be Karl von Stohlmann, Germany's premier ace—the killer of the skies who had first attacked the Spad!

CHAPTER VII BERSERK COURAGE

THE YANK SALUTED, stepped up to the desk, and was facing the man with whom he had been trading machine-gun bullets in the air just a short while ago. The man he had wanted so desperately to down—but to whom he now mustn't even give the slightest hint that he was an enemy.

"*Herr Rittmeister,*" Davis snapped, in his best German. "I am *Überleutnant* Klein, sent here by *Oberst* von Roth. The *Oberst* instructed me to tell you that some men and myself found the crashed ship and the dead body of the Yankee flyer on the eastern border of the wood."

Von Stohlmann's eyes lighted, and the other Boche in the room started with surprise.

"*Gut!*" von Stohlmann cried. "It is a relief to know the Yankee is out of the way! He was a devil—I have met many good men in the air but never one of such daring and recklessness!" He spoke with grudging admiration, little knowing that the Yank he praised was listening to that praise—listening with an involuntary surge of modest pride. This was flattering indeed!

"GOOD work, *Herr Leutnant!*" he continued. "I will see that there are the proper citations."

Streak Davis was trying hard to conceal his feverish inner impatience. There was a clock on the wall, and its hands pointed to eleven minutes to twelve! God,

how could he ever finish here, and still get back to his Spad in time to make Luennes?

"The *Herr Oberst* thought, *Rittmeister*" his haste made him speak out quickly, "that you could withdraw the searching Fokkers—now that the Yankee is found."

And to his frenzied relief, von Stohlmann nodded instantly. "*Ja wohl*—a good idea! They will only waste petrol and energy flying circles up there now. *Leutnant* Hertz, you go and signal them down!" One of the Boche pilots in the room hurried out at once, seizing a semaphore flag from the wall.

"I doubt if the Allies will try to send any more ships through," von Stohlmann chuckled grimly. "They can never get through to Luennes in time anyway. And I don't believe they yet know its secret. We caught the *verfluchter* spy who sent them word to bomb the place! And thanks to our own operative Z-102, the D.H. bombers as well as the pilot they sent over today ran into our anti-aircraft zones.

"They were easy prey for my gentlemen and myself," he gloated. "Crippled already by the anti-aircrafts, they floundered under our guns."

Streak Davis had all he could do to conceal his rage and hate. At that moment he wished he could haul off and bash the gloating, hawk-like face—avenge those D.H.'s. But that would be futile: the only way he could really avenge them was to get to Luennes, to do the job they had tried so valiantly to do!

And even now, outside, the drone of Mercedes rose loud overhead, and then the Boche motors were dying out sobbingly, and flying-wires were shrilling. Through a window, Streak Davis saw the pilot who had gone out standing on the field, waving the semaphore in signals. The Fokkers were coming down. The shadows of their wings flitted across the windows as they streaked onto the tarmac, landing one by one.

NOW, if only Streak Davis could get back to his Spad, get out of here before *Oberst* von Roth found out that the eastern part of the woods was devoid of any wrecked Spad!

"May I report back to the *Oberst* now?" he asked, respectfully, praying that the dismissal would come.

"Yes," came the relieving answer. "And you may tell the *Herr Oberst* that —" von Stohlmann broke off as the harsh jangle of a telephone on his desk interrupted. The German ace lifted the receiver—and Streak Davis again felt a sense of panic.

Was that going to be a message which might betray him? Whatever it was, it meant another delay: he still

dared not leave the room without von Stohlmann's dismissal—

"*Ja*, von Stohlmann speaking!" the Boche ace crisped into the mouthpiece. "*Was?*" Of a sudden von Stohlmann's face filled with utter awe—an awe that amounted almost to reverence. His tone became servile with respectful humility.

"*Ja wohl*, *Herr Exzellenz*—It is an honor, that you—our great *Felt-Marshall* von Hindenburg himself, should speak to us."

IT WAS the turn of Streak Davis, as well as the rest of the Boche in the room, to be awed now. Von Hindenberg! An impressive silence fell over the room.

"*Nein*, *Herr Exzellenz*!" von Stohlmann went on, in the same humble tone, "*ja wohl*—there will be no interference. The accursed enemy should be taken by surprise! *Ja wohl*." The Boche ace hung up, turned to the awed men in the room—his face flushed with excitement.

"Our illustrious Field-Marshal has just left the Krupp plant at Luennes. Everything there is in readiness." He turned to Streak Davis, whose ears were suddenly keen and tense now.

"*Leutnant*, it is fortunate that you relieved our worry about the *Amerikaner Fluger*. Perhaps you do not realize what a momentous thing has been at stake!"

Streak Davis saw now that all the men in the room looked curious. Then they did not know the secret: it was all right for him to show he didn't know it either. And though the minutes were ticking by on that wall-clock, and soon the *Oberst* must be coming to betray him, the reckless Yank realized that if he could learn exactly what was at Luennes, he might at least be forearmed. He would know just what had to be done—perhaps find other ways of accomplishing it if he failed in his original way.

"There have been rumors, *Herr Rittmeister*," Davis said aloud, with a little, tight smile. "It is said the swine American troops are going to be thwarted!"

VON STOHLMANN gave a guttural laugh of triumph. "Within a few hours, *meine Freunde*, those Yankee troops which were threatening to crush our army will be more than thwarted—they will be annihilated! There is no reason why you should not all know now—it will lift the spirits of you soldiers! For months the work has been going on at the Krupp branch."

It was one of the Boche who raised an awed question. "Guns, *Herr Rittmeister*? But I thought they could not make more than field pieces and armor shields there." Von Stohlmann snorted. "It is something better than mere guns! Something that will revolutionize war tactics!" His voice rose in almost savage joy. "Trench-strafting planes! That is what we have made at Luennes! Trench-strafting planes capable of wiping out those American troops on the open Argonne flat-lands! Against these new, wonderful ships they will be helpless—they will be mowed down like rats!" Only by a supreme effort did Streak Davis hide the tumult which rioted within him. The news had struck horror into his very soul, for as one who was up to date with aeronautical activities, he knew that the trench-strafting planes had been the longed-for goal of both Allies and Germans ever since air fighting began. If a plane could be designed that could safely fly low through shell-fire and defend itself against opposing aircraft—such a ship could wreak unheard-of havoc.

"Trench-strafters!" von Stohltmann went on. "And never have greater ships been designed!" He spoke with the same airman's love for a good plane as Streak Davis himself felt. "Though they must fly at a low ceiling because of their weight, they are as invulnerable as they are destructive! Their under-surfaces are armored with bullet-proof steel, and there are other armor plates around the cockpit and fuselage!"

That explained, Streak Davis thought with swift understanding, why they had been made at the Krupp branch factory—where that armor-shield metal was turned out.

"They carry six machine-guns and eight tremendous bombs—all of which one pilot can handle with ease!" von Stohlmann was saying, carried away by his enthusiasm now. "And they are invulnerable to any attack from above or beneath: anything that tries to down them is thwarted by the armor protection or the position of the six machine-guns!"

"Why," he burst out, "the whole *verfluchter* Allied air force could not stop the fleet of them that is going out very soon! A fleet large enough to clear the Argonne plain, to annihilate enough of the *Amerikaner* to make possible our counter-offensive! The tide of the war will be turned, and the Americans will learn that it is *Deutschland Uber Alles!*"

There was a lusty, guttural cheer from the Boche in the room, a cheer which curdled Streak Davis' blood. God, he must go now, get out of here! He had less than ten minutes. And if he did not bomb that plant before

the new trench-strafters got into the air, it would be too late—those planes could not be attacked in flight!

THE Yank stepped forward again, almost insane with impatience now.

"*Herr Rittmeister*," he pleaded, "let me go and convey this momentous news to my men. As you said, it will have a great effect on morale—and when it spreads, through the grapevine, from mouth to mouth, our soldiers will take on new courage."

Von Stohlmann nodded, his eyes gleaming. "*Das ist richtig, Oberleutnant*. You may tell your men." It was the longed-for dismissal, at last.

Streak Davis clicked out a salute, then turned and strode to the door.

But even as he was reaching it, there was a rush of heavy footsteps—and through the doorway burst the haughty *Oberst* von Roth, and a whole score of Boche soldiers!

CRIMSON with anger, the *Oberst* pointed directly at Streak Davis, shouted savagely:

"You lying swine! There was no airplane found in the eastern woods! We investigated and the soldiers there said the report was false! I demand that you explain your stupid blunder at once!"

Streak Davis, every nerve taut, his heart a lump of ice in his throat, groped madly for words. "But, *Herr Oberst*—I saw—"

"You lie!" the *Oberst* roared. He stepped closer, his eyes slitted. "And I do not know you—I have not seen you before today. No one has heard of you! Show your credentials, at once!"

He was stepping closer. Von Stohlmann, face suddenly livid, had leaped from behind the desk now. Like a trapped animal, Davis tried to think of some way out, some answer. And then—

"*Der Amerikaner!*" The voice of von Stohlmann rose almost in a scream. "I see it is him now—even though he has no goggles! Seize him! Seize the *verfluchter* spy!" With yells of enraged alarm, the Boche charged towards Davis, leveling rifles and revolvers. The *Oberst* had brought up a Luger already, and it loomed in the Yank's face, looking huge as the mouth of a cannon!

And then, with a berserk yell, Streak Davis leaped like a jack-in-the-box. His fist crashed before him like a mighty out-flinging piston. *Pough!* The terrific blow caught the *Oberst* flush on the chin before the surprised Jerry officer could pull the trigger of his

revolver. He dropped like a felled tree, and at the same time Davis, leaping forward, had out his own stolen Luger, was firing it even as he drew.

Crack! Crack! Two more Boche dropped, and the rest milled behind Davis confusedly—daring not to fire for fear of hitting their own countrymen in front of the Yank.

Von Stohlmann, safe somewhere in the rear, was howling: "Seize him, you fools! Stop him!"

But a demon seemed to be inside of Streak Davis now, a demon which nothing could stop at the moment. Again he lived up to his famous nickname. Like a streak of lightning, he was hurtling through the door. The sentries outside, whirled towards him in confusion. *Crack!* His Luger barked again, dropping one Boche. The other rushed at his side, and Davis got him on the head with the butt of the revolver, knocked him cold.

MADLY then, on galloping legs, Streak Davis was racing across the Jerry tarmac towards the forest where his Spad was still hidden. And on his heels, howling for his blood, came a whole horde of soldiers and pilots.

Crack! Crack-crack! Rifles barked behind him, bullets whizzed over his head horribly close! He ran on. The field was full of Fokkers—some of them even had engines running, but he knew that a Fokker was useless even if he could get to it. He needed his Spad with bombs. And his Spad was the only hope. He must get to it somehow! Teeth gritted, eyes wild with defiance and desperation, he hurtled on.

They tried to head him off then. A whole score of pilots, responding to shouts from the pursuers in back of Davis, came swarming in at an angle, pulling automatics. Streak Davis whirled like a cornered beast. Again his gun spat, with the deadly accuracy of desperation. One of the pilots dropped—the others stood a moment to take aim with their Lugers.

But in that same split second, with one mighty lunging spurt, Streak Davis reached the fringe of trees, was darting into them like a rabbit into its hole.

INSTINCTIVELY he was running on a zig-zag course now, hoping at least to delay the pursuit. The Boche were pounding after him, but the trees frustrated their rifles. They could no longer shoot at the Yank. And Davis, zig-zagging on, was eluding them, losing himself from them! He straightened his course now, and was running for all he was worth straight towards the clearing where his Spad must still be.

He reached it in the next second! Catapulting over the three dead Jerries who still lay sprawled where he had left them, he was at his Spad at last! Now if only the engine would take—if only that repaired feedline would work!

He leaped to the propeller, seized the big blade and pulled it around, joggled it back and forth to suck gas into the cylinders. Then he rushed to the cockpit, reached for the ignition.

And at that moment a whole horde of Boche came bursting through the trees onto the clearing. The pursuit had caught up with him! They had found the Yank and his plane. With a guttural yell they charged in, leveling rifles.

A curse of defiance burst from Streak Davis' throat. With one swift flick of his hand he had the ignition lever on, and arced the throttle lever open. He ducked from the cockpit, even as a rifle cracked out and a bullet whined over his head.

He was catapulting back to the propeller. The Boche rushed right in. He saw their swart, murder-roused faces. But at the same instant, with all his might, he jerked the Spad's propeller once more, and leaped aside even as the blade whirled from his grasp and the Hisso engine burst into a deafening roar. The feedline was working! And because Streak Davis had deliberately opened the throttle, the Spad at once began to move forward, out from under the tree.

The Boche fell back as they saw its whirling propeller tearing ahead. And Streak Davis vaulted with furious agility onto the moving wing, ducked between the top and bottom surfaces, and threw himself into the cockpit. The Spad was lurching forward giddily, threatening to ground-loop.

But then he had the controls in his firm grasp. He straightened the rudder, had the stick back, and the throttle wide. Boche were trying to grab at his wings, trying to close in on him. Rifles were barking from every side. He ducked low as he could, beneath the cockpit cowling, as the bullets zipped towards him.

THE Spad gathered speed, Boche scampering before it like scurrying rats. But the ship was heavy now, heavy with the weight of its four bombs and the damage already inflicted by the previous dog-fight. Trees at the edge of the clearing rushed towards Streak Davis. With all his skill he coaxed the Hisso to its full capacity—tried to get speed.

And then—blessed relief—he felt that familiar lift and sudden smoothness which told him his wheels

were off the ground. He had flying speed, and just in time he pulled his nose into a steep, roaring zoom—rocketing over the tree-tops.

A hail of frustrated Boche bullets zipped up after him. But he had eluded them.

CHAPTER VIII ONE MINUTE LEFT

HE WAS STRAIGHTENED OUT again towards the southeast, towards Luennes. His helmet was still in the cockpit. He put it on, jerked down goggles; otherwise he was still in his German uniform. His wrist-watch told him there were just about five minutes left before noon.

Yet, knowing what was at stake now, knowing that those new trench-strafters were ready to be launched against the unprotected doughboys, he meant to get to Luennes in time if it was the very last thing he did!

He was shooting forward, low over the trees now. He had to get past von Stohlmann's drome—and now he should have a chance to do so, having craftily gotten von Stohlmann to call down all his Fokkers from the sky.

But even as he was racing his Spad on, even as he started to pass the drome to one side, he saw a sight which filled him with frenzied alarm. Fokkers were taking off. Von Stohlmann had not been asleep. Those Boche ships would be in the air in seconds, and they'd be able to intercept the Spad, this time doubtless to finish it off once and for all!

A reckless light of hell came into Davis' goggled eyes. Of a sudden, he changed his arrowing course. His Spad whipped around—and deliberately he was heading it down straight over the Boche tarmac, straight over the moving Fokkers, several of which were soaring into the air even now!

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

Streak Davis' Vickers opened up thunderously, pouring down two streams of tracer—strafing those Boche who were trying to get up to stop him! But though he got one of the Fokkers—though it fell back dizzily to the ground and collapsed in a heap of wreckage, he saw that he couldn't stop the rest this way. His guns were too slow.

But, the wild light grew in his eyes, he had four high explosive bombs! Certainly he could afford to lose one of them, so that he might have a chance to get the other three to Luennes!

He did not hesitate. Directly over the drome he swooped. His fingers gripped the bomb-release lever. With a savage curse he pulled it.

The Spad lifted appreciably as one of the four, pear-shaped missiles detached itself from the wing-rack—to go shrieking down through space.

B-R-OOOM!

THE ear-splitting explosion rocked Streak Davis' crate and pressed against his eardrums. Right in the center of the Jerry tarmac, in the very midst of the Boche planes on and off the ground, that mighty bomb exploded in a towering column of flame and debris and smoke!

Several of the Fokkers were literally smashed to the ground like hurled toys. But Streak Davis, his desperate tactics having gotten him past the tarmac now, looked back to see five Jerry ships getting off in spite of the explosion! Five of them, zooming up like birds of vengeance. And in their lead—the checkered, fleeting Fokker of von Stohlmann.

Streak Davis cursed between gritted teeth. At least they had not intercepted him this time, but they were right on his tail! Nevertheless, he was determined that they weren't going to stop him! He bent to his controls, opened the throttle to the widest notch. Hell-bent, with every strut of his Spad straining and vibrating, he was racing towards Luennes—racing to beat time and the Fokkers behind him.

BUT fast as Davis was hurling through the air, von Stohlmann and his four companions were gaining! The already bullet-riddled Spad, even with only three bombs to carry now, was heavier than the fleet Fokkers—and try as he could, Davis could not get any more speed out of it. He used every trick he knew; he leaned forward, as if trying to urge the racing ship forward with his own body.

And then despair seized him as, behind his back, rose the horrible metallic clatter of Spandaus.

They were on his tail!

With the checkered crate of von Stohlmann in their lead, they were closing in behind the Spad, and spitting tracers at it! *Rat-ta-tat-tat!* Now again he felt the effects of the deadly marksmanship of Karl von Stohlmann. His spad began to lurch in its course,

began to stagger. Fresh fabric peeled from the fuselage behind him. Bullets ricocheted from the metal back of the crash-pad. His tachometer shattered into a thousand pieces. And he knew then that they had him.

And then, in his desperation, he saw only one tiny possibility of a solution! If he lightened the weight of his plane—

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! Von Stohlmann's guns hammered again, and his bullets started to march up the camel-back of the Spad, up towards the cockpit. The other Fokkers joined the staccato chorus with their guns — and a hail of lead was engulfing the lone Yank ship.

But simultaneously, Streak Davis hurled every atom of flying skill into a desperate maneuver. He put down his nose and dived until he gained terrific momentum. And then back came his stick to his very chest, and his plane—carried by that momentum—reared up into a sudden, breathless Immelmann turn, recovering fully five hundred feet of altitude.

The unexpectedness of the maneuver took von Stohlmann and his men completely by surprise. They had not expected the fleeing, groggy Spad to Immelmann suddenly. And now, before they knew it, it was directly over them.

And, jockeying stick and rudder, the reckless Yank pilot fought for position over those planes—trying to get over the ship of von Stohlmann. And then, once more, he pulled the bomb-release.

Down went a second thirty-five pound missile of lydite and T.N.T.

BUT von Stohlmann, quick-witted ace that he was, saw it coming, and slewed away from it in a breathless falling leaf. One of the other Fokkers, however, was not so fast. The bomb, missing von Stohlmann's checkered ship, hit this other Boche craft which was flying below—hit it on the edge of the top right wing. And that was enough.

B-R-OOOM!

The heavens split with that frightful detonation. The Fokker which the bomb had struck was lost in a mighty spew of smoke and flame which made a livid sphere in the sky. And so terrific was the explosion that two more of the Fokkers had their wings ripped off, and their fuselages fell like spent rockets.

Though von Stohlmann's checkered crate had avoided the bomb, though it was far enough away not to be blown to bits—it was crippled nevertheless. And so was the fifth remaining Fokker. These last two Jerries were limping like lame-winged birds for the ground below.

AND Streak Davis, who had zoomed madly out of the radius of that terrific sky-explosion as soon as the load of his Spad was again lightened—was once more bending to the controls. He had killed two birds with one stone. He had lightened his load so he could get speed again, and he had gotten rid of the pursuing Fokkers—though he would have felt safer had von Stohlmann been really downed instead of just crippled.

A breathless skid-turn flung the nose of the Spad once more towards Luennes—and again Streak Davis was hurling towards his goal, expending his last energies into the toughest sky-race he had ever run.

Only two bombs on his wing-rack now. But he had been forced to spend the other two—and he could only hope fervently that these were sufficient to accomplish his grim, reckless mission.

The Spad rushed forward.

Three minutes to twelve—And he was slicing through the air with the green landscape whizzing past his undercarriage, mile by breathless mile. Two minutes to twelve—And he was bending forward like a jockey trying to get to the home stretch. He was even lowering the Spad's nose so that gravity would further increase his mad speed. Roaring, the bullet-riddled ship was vibrating from nose to tail as if the hurtling speed would tear it to pieces. On, on—

One minute to twelve—

A record was being broken. A record which would have held crowds spellbound if they were witnessing it at a spectacular air show. Probably no man in the war flew as fast as Streak Davis was flying during that last remaining minute. With the screaming wind flogging at him, with the Hiss a thunder which deafened his own ears, even he was dizzied at the pace he was making. He felt the pressure of it under his eyeballs, which seemed to bulge from their goggles. He felt it in his lungs, which could scarcely breathe. He felt it in the ground which rushed past.

Seconds now. Split seconds—

And then, with a surge of savage joy, there came into view, below and ahead, a squat, flat factory building on a wide expanse of grounds—grounds swarming with ant-like, gray-clad figures, bristling with anti-aircraft guns.

The Krupp branch at Luennes!

It was just a fraction of a minute before noon now. Streak Davis had reached his objective in time—after all!

CHAPTER IX DIVED HIT

BUT IN THE NEXT SPLIT SECOND, as he raced on towards that brick building, his eyes widened with horrified alarm.

At one side of the building, out on a smoothed field—was a cluster of winged shapes which threw off a glistening, silver sheen in the brilliant noon sun!

The new deadly trench-strafer! Large, armor-plated single-seaters which looked like winged tanks! Fully half a dozen of them were grouped down there, while coveralled Boche mechanics were busy fueling them, preparing them obviously for flight!

Panic gripped Streak Davis. He had expected that if he reached here at or before noon, the new deadly ships would still be confined in the factory building, so that by bombing the building he could destroy them. But evidently the Boche had got word that Davis was coming: probably von Stohlmann, when he limped home, had sent the alarm!

The Germans were going to waste no time getting those trench-strafer into the air. Even while they were making ready the few out on the field, more were being brought out of a huge open doorway in the side of the factory.

FOR an instant Streak Davis, still hurling his Spad towards the scene, was overcome by a spasm of indecision. He had but two bombs. If only he had the two others he had been forced to sacrifice, he might risk dropping at least one on those planes already out on the field, then destroy the building with the rest. But with only two bombs, he could not risk such a stunt.

And then, as he saw that more and more of those trench-strafer were being brought out of the factory, he reached a decision. Better to go for the building, to blast it off the map—and get the scores of trench-strafer still in it. And perhaps by some miracle, he could blast the building with one bomb—then tackle the ships that had been brought out.

His eyes slitted. He would have to try anyway. He bent to his controls and then, straight and true

as an arrow, he was hurling his Spad towards that brick building, thundering down towards it with eyes narrowed to slits, with determined fingers on the bomb-release lever.

And then the Boche saw him coming! They saw him coming and they met him with a hell of anti-aircraft and pom-pom fire designed to blast even the most hardy plane off its very course. From every side of the Luennes grounds guns belched and thundered and spewed!

But Streak Davis was not to be stopped by any anti-aircraft fire this time! Straight down towards that huge brick building he went plunging, hurling. The roof of it, layered with sandbags, was looming beneath him—rushing towards him. Fiercely, with anti-aircraft shells bursting all around him, he held his dive—held it until it seemed his Spad must crash nose-first into the very center of the roof. And then—

His right hand jerked back the joy-stick, and with a gritted prayer, timing the move with expert judgment, putting all his skill into it, his left hand jerked the bomb-release!

So fast did the Spad zoom up that it seemed to lift away from the detached bomb—though actually the bomb was spinning down with furious speed.

B-r-r-r-OOM! Blang!

THE terrific explosion reverberated like echoing thunder through the air. There was a sound of tumbling, crashing masonry, of snapping, yielding girders. And the Krupp plant collapsed! Its roof had caved in where the bomb had hit it—the great brick walls sheered off and went sliding down in clouds of debris and smoke and flame!

Savage exultation swept Streak Davis as he zoomed above the devastation. He had got the factory with just one bomb—got the factory with all the trench-strafer that had been in that building. Those trench-strafer would now be just so much junk and debris, buried in the pile of ruins.

But in the next instant Streak Davis' exultation vanished, as once more his eyes went down to the open field where the group of trench-strafer which the Boche had brought out squatted—still intact! By destroying the building, the Yank knew he had destroyed most of the fleet of new planes—but there were enough of those trench-strafer out there still to wreak terrific damage in the Argonne flatlands! Enough to—

A FIERCE curse burst from Davis' lips, for even then one of those silvery Boche ships down there was moving across the field—was taking off! And heavy though it was, the trench-strafer soared into the air with amazing grace and ease. Incongruously, that armored winged tank was flying—soaring into the blue!

Like a madman, insane with recklessness, Streak Davis was hurling his Spad right down towards that Boche ship! He was plunging towards the climbing trench-strafer like a winged fury! The trench-strafer loomed—its outlines grew flashingly clear in the brilliant sun. Only a few parts of the Boche ship showed fabric and wood.

Wings and fuselage were covered with fluted metal—doubtless some aluminum alloy. And on either side of the cockpit, and on the underside of the ship, were riveted plates of steel armor. The Boche pilot was protected by that armor on every side—save on top, where his knob-like, helmeted head protruded from the open, armored cockpit.

And it was towards that exposed Boche head that the desperate Streak Davis was hurling his Spad, aiming his down-plunging nose. Madly, recklessly, the Yank was firing his Vickers even before he was in range—sending two withering streams of tracer down before him. But then—

A cry of horror broke from Streak Davis' throat—for his Spad was literally flung off its diving course by the most hellish fusillade of bullets ever to meet him from an enemy plane!

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat-tai-tat! The burst came from twin Parabellum guns, mounted on the top wing of the trench-strafer, where the Boche pilot was able to move them upwards at any angle and squirt them into the air like a hose.

With frenzied haste Streak Davis forced his lurching Spad out of that hellish radius of fire which pumped his wings and fuselage. Lord, no wonder these trench-strafer could not be attacked from above—even with their cockpits open! Those Parabellum guns could blast anything that threatened the exposed Boche pilot!

CURSING, Streak Davis stubbornly tried to whip in at the trench-strafer from one side, striving desperately to find some vulnerable point of attack. But though his Vickers were blazing, he saw his bullets ricocheting harmlessly from the armor plates of the trench-strafer now. It was useless: he was not hurting

that ship at all. No matter how he approached it, his attack was resisted either by that bullet-proof armor or by an incredible rain of Boche fire which made his Spad drunk with bullets.

This mad, futile attempt to fight the trench-strafer had thus far been a matter of mere, breathless seconds. All this time the Boche craft had been climbing, until it reached about five thousand feet—which seemed to be its maximum ceiling. Heavy with armament, guns, and also bombs, it could not fly high. But, God, it didn't have to! The Boche pilot, as if he regarded the desperate attacking Spad as some harmless insect, calmly sailed steadily westward—towards the Allied lines!

For a few seconds more, Streak Davis crazily kept after it, trying in vain to damage it. But then, with fresh horror, as he glanced down towards the ground again, he saw that the other trench-strafer were being started now—mechanics were spinning propellers, pilots climbing into cockpits! In another instant they would all be taking off—and now Streak Davis knew by bitter experience that once in the air they could not be combatted, could not possibly be stopped!

WITH this frantic thought, he abandoned the trench-strafer up here in the sky—and it went on towards the west, shrinking away into the blue. And Streak Davis, with his one bomb, was once more plunging in a mad, wild dive—plunging through a new hell of anti-aircraft fire toward the planes still on the ground.

But even as he went plummeting down toward the ships on the ground, and the bark of the Archies and pom-poms grew more and more threatening, Streak Davis felt despair coming over him again. For now he realized that even if he dropped his one remaining bomb into the midst of the group of trench-strafer, it couldn't do much damage. The Boche ships were too far apart. At most he could get one or two of them!

But—he fought against the bitter frustration that was slowly overcoming him—he must stop those armored crates somehow! He mustn't let any more of them get away!

And then, even as the ground with its array of silvery wings was rushing closer, his desperate eyes spotted something that brought a flood of fresh hope over him.

A little to one side of the mass of ships was a huge, open lorry. Its interior was loaded with dark, pear-shaped objects standing like eggs in a crate. Boche

were removing them one by one, wheeling them to the various planes.

Bombs! A truckload of bombs! Bombs, every one of which was three times the size and weight of the one Streak Davis carried under his own fuselage. If those bombs went off—!

A reckless light blazed in Davis' goggled eyes, and he hunched forward in his down-tilted cockpit. Furiously, he veered in the course of his dive. The ship arced, then plummeted like a falling meteor, black smoke belching from its exhausts. Hell-bent, putting everything he had left into the effort, Streak Davis was arrowing down straight toward that bomb-laden truck!

But instantly the Boche on the ground saw the intent of this mad lone Yank. Every anti-aircraft gun and pom-pom on the field cut loose then, barked and roared like a bunch of ferocious watchdogs. Shells burst horribly close to Streak Davis, making his diving plane shiver and rattle. Pom-pom bullets drilled his fuselage and wings. Once more the air was dense with ground-fire—a spewing inferno of it. But through that inferno Streak Davis still plunged recklessly towards his goal.

AND then a cry of wild alarm burst from his throat. For now the frantic Boche were resorting to new tactics. A driver had scrambled aboard the truck. The big lorry was lurching forward like a stampeding elephant, trying to get under cover of some of the factory ruins—and also trying to get far enough from the planes so that if it was exploded it wouldn't blast them! And simultaneously, the trench-strafters themselves were hastily starting to take off—though only half were loaded with bombs. The array of silver wings was moving in a shifting, glistening pattern!

"No!" Streak Davis gritted with an oath that almost brought the blood to his lips. "No—you won't get away!"

Through the spew of ground-fire he plunged on in a last mighty effort. Now the top-winged guns of the trench-strafters were adding their staccato clatter to the din of Archies and pom-poms, as the Boche pilots managed to fire up at the Spad even as they skimmed across the ground. Bullets were tearing through the diving Yank plane, smashing at wood and metal parts, ripping fabric more and more!

But in the next instant, even as planes and truck were separating by a wider and wider gap, Streak Davis was flattening out of his dive and shooting ahead as

if from a catapult. In one mad spurt he was over that truck. And, aiming by instinct alone, he jerked his bomb-release for the last time.

DOWN went his last 35-pound bomb! Down it went, even as Davis zoomed the protesting Spad as fast as he could and—

B-R-R-r-r-OOOM! B-r-r-r-OOOM! The very earth rocked with that mighty eruption! Even Streak Davis' Spad, which he had managed to get far above the explosion before it went off, was flung upwards for fully two hundred feet by the terrific up-rush of the concussion!

His bomb had struck that truck in a direct hit—had turned the explosive-filled lorry into a miniature but potent volcano! The trench-strafters, moving across the field, were hurled to pieces by the explosion. Several of them were blown up by the bombs, others were wrecked and shattered as they ground-looped and collided with one another.

The field was a shambles—filled with the twisted junk of the armored ships and their maimed pilots. A graveyard of ruins and ashes, with the wrecked, caved-in remains of the Krupp plant grotesquely sprawled at its fringe.

CHAPTER X SKY DUEL

AND STREAK DAVIS, having accomplished the mission he had set out to do, was guiding his riddled, shredding Spad homeward—with just about enough gas left to carry him back. And even now he did not feel a complete sense of triumph. If only that first trench-strafer hadn't gotten away—by now it was probably in the Allied lines, strafing doughboys, slaughtering them!

But he could only hope the Allies might have found a way to cope with just that one plane. He had done his best. He'd be lucky now if he got across the lines himself. Again now he was flying low, taking the straight course back.

He knew he once more had to pass von Stohlmann's drome, but this time he skirted around the side of it and hedge-hopped past. No Fokkers intercepted him.

Evidently his earlier bombing of the drome had just about finished that staffel. Breathing a sigh of relief, he went on, flying like a tired, homing pigeon and—

Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat! Rat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

His Spad lurched in its tracks, all but plunging into a spin, as that hellish, familiar clatter rose right behind him. With frenzied alarm, he glanced back over his shoulder. And the blood drained from his face, his eyes bulging with incredulous horror.

For there, blazing away at his tail, was the lone silvery trench-strafer that had first eluded him—the trench-strafer he had thought by this time was way across the Allied lines. It was attacking him, like a blood-crazed vulture. Its Boche pilot was leaning forward in the armor-plated cockpit, face murderous with vengeance and hate and—

A fresh cry broke from Streak Davis' throat then.

The pilot of the trench-strafer was—von Stohlmann!

FOR an instant Streak Davis could not understand it. Certainly von Stohlmann hadn't been in this ship when it had taken off from Luennes. A different Boche had flown it. Besides, von Stohlmann had previously limped off in a crippled Fokker far from Luennes.

But then a sudden, swift understanding came to Streak Davis. Von Stohlmann, doubtless, had got back to his drome and phoned Luennes to send him one of the trench-strafer—he had decided to fly out on the raid himself, tempted by the idea of the new ships.

And now he was trying the ship out, trying it out on Streak Davis' Spad. And he was shooting the heart out of the already riddled Spad. The Boche must have told him of the destruction Davis had caused; for von Stohlmann's eyes gleamed with murderous vengeance and hate at Streak Davis.

With bullets again pumping his fuselage, singing wildly in his ears, Streak Davis half-rolled, banked to throw off the German's sights. He knew he had no chance to fight this trench-strafer. He had tried it before, and a lesser pilot than von Stohlmann had beaten him off with ease! Von Stohlmann would surely slaughter him.

Even now the flashing armored plane was whipping all around him—its six guns spitting at him from every angle! Von Stohlmann, the expert at contour-fighting, was getting him, shooting him to ribbons! The Spad was wobbling, lurching. Uselessly, futilely, Davis' Vickers blazed back against the bullet-proof trench-strafer.

And Davis would have died then, crashed surely

to hell, had he not remembered something which made him suddenly change his tactics. Even as von Stohlmann flashed in for a kill burst, the Yank jerked back his stick, opened his throttle, and forced the Spad into a last supreme zoom for altitude. Up he went.

The Boche's Parabellum guns sprayed after him. Von Stohlmann followed grimly, doggedly, not to be cheated out of his prey. With bullets zipping up after him, Streak Davis desperately held the zoom.

THE altimeter needle on his dashboard crawled snail-like. Forty-six hundred feet—forty-seven hundred. The Hisso groaned, the bullet-riddled elevator fin beginning to lose hold. And like a grim leech the bristling plane of von Stohlmann followed behind, sending out burst after burst.

Five thousand feet—

And then the rain of Boche fire was at last subsiding. The trench-strafer plane was beginning to flounder in its climb, to stall. It had reached its ceiling! And with a mighty roar, Streak Davis' Spad was zooming into higher regions—safe and out of range.

He glanced down, his face a mass of sweat. He saw von Stohlmann straighten out now. He saw black smoke belch from the armored trench-strafer's exhausts. And he saw the glistening plane spurt at full, head-on speed towards the Allied lines.

A helpless frenzy gripped Davis. Von Stohlmann was going over to unleash hell against the doughboy trenches! Probably he had attacked the Spad only so Davis could not get across the lines in time to warn the Allies that the trench-strafer was coming, so they could prepare somehow for its attack.

But now, with a head start and an undamaged ship, von Stohlmann would reach the lines long before Davis did—if Davis reached them at all. And the Yank realized that von Stohlmann, in his savage mood of vengeance, would go on a rampage of slaughter and death! Handled by Germany's greatest ace, that trench-strafer would do plenty to the doughboy trenches!

FEELING utterly helpless about it, Streak Davis nevertheless made a last fight with his Spad—forced it on towards the lines. If only he could beat out von Stohlmann, at least give a warning to the Yanks. But the trench-strafer easily kept its lead—raced on.

And soon, as Davis still pursued in his riddled Spad, the seething, livid battle-lines were coming into view ahead! The Argonne flatlands, with their hordes of shallow-entrenched doughboys! Even now von

Stohlmann's glistening trench-strafer was sweeping out over No-Man's-Land.

Utter desperation gave Streak Davis a second wind then, and somehow he forced that second wind into his staggering Spad. In a red frenzied rage, he made his half-crippled ship spurt forward—coaxed it in a last, frantic race. Already he knew what he must do, even if it meant his own finish. His guns were useless against that trench-strafer. All that could win out now was his sheer flying skill.

His nose dropped. He was arrowing down above and behind the trench-strafer. Von Stohlmann looked back, saw him coming, but went on calmly, waiting for the Spad to get in range of his six blasting machine-guns. Clenching his teeth, holding his controls, Streak Davis swooped down.

The Spad was coming right over the trench-strafer now—coming over the right side of its top, armored wing. Von Stohlmann's Parabellum guns spoke then. A fresh hail of tracers spewed into the shredded Yank crate. But, hovering directly over von Stohlmann's right wing, Streak Davis was cutting his throttle, holding back his stick, and his ship was settling, moving slowly downward like an elevator—its keel level. With consummate skill, Davis was playing his last card—trying a last stunt.

And too late did von Stohlmann sense his purpose! Too late did the Boche frantically cut his own engine and start to drop the trench-strafer from beneath the Spad. For the Spad was over his wing like a shadow, sticking there, following on a parallel. And settling, lower—inch by inch, inch by inch—

Cr-r-r-ash!

RIGHT down on that right wing of the trench-strafer came Streak Davis' undercarriage—as the Yank actually sat his Spad with all its weight on the armored wing-surface.

And armored though it was, no wing could withstand that weight. There was a rending, metallic snap—and the whole right wing of the trench-strafer sheered off!

But because Streak Davis had set her down so gently, the undercarriage of the Spad was left undamaged! The Spad was soaring upwards—even as the trench-strafer, its right wing gone, hurled earthward in a dizzy, fatal tailspin.

Davis caught a last glimpse of the Boche in its cockpit. He saw von Stohlmann's white face peer up at him and then von Stohlmann's hand flicked to his helmet in a salute—a salute to the Yank whose great flying skill had triumphed!

The trench-strafer crashed then, crashed in No-Man's-Land, and von Stohlmann's last landing proclaimed itself by a column of flame and debris which blew him and his ship to atoms.

And Streak Davis, having finished the last of the trench-strafer, and having fulfilled his longed-for ambition to beat von Stohlmann in a sky duel—staggered his Spad across the lines and was flying home over the doughboy trenches, the trenches he had saved from Germany's great menace!

Somehow, he got his riddled ship back to his own drome—somehow he landed it on even keel. A crowd of pilots and mechanics had instantly rushed up to meet him. And in their forefront was the stern-faced figure of Colonel Saunders, Intelligence Chief. He had come here to await Davis' return.

Streak Davis, still sitting in his cockpit, too tired for the moment even to move, grinned wanly at the colonel. The latter was beaming with heartfelt relief and joy.

"You did it, Lieutenant Davis!" he cried. "Our frontline outlooks saw the Krupp plant blow up through telescopes! Why, you flew right over there just as you said you would—got there in time and—" He broke off, eyes widening as he saw the field-gray tunic which Davis was still wearing. "But you're in a German uniform! How on earth—"

DAVIS shook his head slowly.

"It's just one of those things. Don't ask me to explain, sir, because—well, it's a long, long story—"

"Well, the main thing is you did the job," the colonel said. Then he added with grim reminiscence: "And by the way, it's lucky you got that spy, Z-102, when you did. When we searched him, we also found this—" Out of his tunic he drew an oilcloth-wrapped packet. "It seems to be a perfect copy of your terrain-map and—"

"I'll say it's perfect!" Davis cried. "And it's not a copy! I could have broken a couple of Archie gunners' hearts with it a little while ago." He took the map eagerly. "Boy, oh boy, I'm glad I didn't lose this after all!"

The colonel was too relieved to ask questions. "Believe me," he sighed, deeply, "During those two hours since you left the secret field I lived a lifetime, worrying."

"So did I," Streak Davis admitted. "In fact, I feel as if I died a couple of times too. Two hours! It sure is a helluva fast war!"