



# THE ACTION HUNTER

by ROBERT J. HOGAN

*To the deadliest of slaughter missions lumbered that rookie bomber, and only in the ashen face of The Reaper did that kiwi see the stuff of which men are made.*

**D**EXTER SAT HUNCHED over the stick. His young muscles were taut. His feet on the rudder bar were trembling a little. The knuckles of his stick hand glowed white with the strangle hold they had on that control. His face was a shade whiter than normal. His tight lips were set in an even, firm line of futile determination. He stared about him, with nervous eyes, red from the loss of sleep.

He'd gone through hell in those first two days at the Front. Thirty hours wasn't much experience. Then to top the thing off, to be thrown into a D.H. bomber and sent out on a dangerous mission with an observer about whom he knew nothing, was even more terrible.

He wasn't much of a pilot yet and he knew it. But he was touchy on that point. He was as good as one could become in thirty-odd hours. The old-timers at the Front had told him that, those who had survived one, two or

possibly three months of the death-dealing inferno the Jerries had made of the flaming air over the trenches.

So, Dexter was afraid, not of dying, but of his ability to come through and perform the miracle that was expected of him.

“Blow up the dump north of Charny at all costs,” the laconic orders had read. There had been a shortage of planes at the field, so he had no convoy. A strange observer. A raw pilot. It was a suicide hop at best.

The great D.H, staggered under the tense, nervous effort of the pilot to fly the heavily bomb-laden ship with an inexperienced hand that trembled. The Liberty snarled as it tore the plane through the early morning blue at a dangerous angle of attack, struggling frantically to maintain flight while the heavy bombs in their racks under the wings fought to drag the big ship down to earth again.

Dexter twisted round in his seat and stared back across the cowling that hid the gas tank between the pilot's and observer's cockpit. His eyes were met by the unflinching gaze of his observer's steel-gray ones as they flashed back at him. The look seemed to assure him that the owner could be counted upon in an emergency. He had met him only ten minutes previous to the take-off. His name was Connelly, just arrived from the observer's school at Issoudon.

Connelly was the older of the two. He was perhaps fifteen years Dexter's senior. His countenance, poker-faced and tight-lipped, gave a hint of a life spent in adventure. His eyes seemed to have seen things that had a tang of danger in them. No one knew anything about him. He had come up from Issoudon and there he was in the rear cockpit surrounded by the Lewis machine-gun turret.

Connelly nodded and grinned reassuringly. He was motioning to Dexter, trying to convey some message above the roar of the Liberty without the movement of his thin lips. Then Dexter got it. He wanted him to cut the gun so that he could say something to him for a moment.

The nervous fingers of Dexter's gun hand felt their way toward the throttle and he pulled back the gun. His stick hand jerked the control forward and the nose dropped to maintain flying speed. The white left his face and a tinge of red crept up where the white had disappeared. What the devil would this old rooky observer want to be saying just as they were thundering to the lines? Dexter had enough to tend to with the heavily loaded ship without answering some fool question from a half wing.

He spun round in his seat for an instant. Connelly was shouting at him.

“Lay off fighting the controls so much. You're too tense. Relax!”

The observer's voice crashed in upon Dexter's eardrums like a challenge suddenly blown from a bombshell. The red turned to purple. He shook with rage. A damn half wing telling him how to fly. His answering gaze shot sparks at the man behind. But in his heart he knew that he was right. He struggled to gain control of himself in spite of the conflict of rage and fear within him.

Dexter settled back in the seat and tried to take it easier. He suddenly realized that in that move Connelly had seen that he was admitting his mistake. He hunched forward again. No half wing was going to tell him his mistakes as a pilot and get away with it.

BELOW, the Meuse wound like a silver ribbon. St. Mihiel lay behind. Verdun, Charny and the dump ahead. Dexter jerked tense at the thought. The dump. That would be their objective. And their finish?

In spite of his resentment of the remark from his observer he could not help feeling somehow that there was a man who could fight. There was something about the set of that mouth, the jaw, the piercing, unflinching stare of those eyes that made him have confidence in him in spite of himself. It wouldn't be long before he would know for sure. Those red-writing, butchering Jerries weren't going to let them get by without trouble.

Connelly's steely eyes shot ahead at the back of Dexter's head. He saw him stiffen in the cockpit, and settle against the seat back. His look of satisfaction changed an instant after it flashed across his face. Dexter had jerked forward again, tense once more. Connelly's thin lips muttered soundless words to himself.

“Poor kid,” he murmured with a sad shake of his head. “Scared stiff and I can't blame him.”

Dexter tensely surveyed his instruments. Everything was working perfectly. He stared below. The blasted earth glared up at him, a grim reminder of the horrors of the war in which he had plunged. Crooked trenches were slipping past a thousand meters below. He was there. He trembled at the thought. Perhaps he had only a few minutes more to live. He scanned the sky for enemy aircraft. The air seemed free at the moment.

*Boom-Puff! Boom-Puff!* Archies were starting their deadly work. Uncontrollable fear gripped him. His

feet nearly shook off the rudder bar. He struggled for control of his fast shattering nerves. The D.H. wobbled unsteadily about him. None of the shells had come close in that burst but the next would. They burst like puff balls about him. The bloodthirsty ground crews were getting their range. The ship rocked dizzily from the blasts. Punching, whining steel ripped through the fabric of the wings, leaving gaping holes that he could see through; some of the rib structure was torn away.

Frantically, Dexter fought to dodge the A.A. fire from the ground. His stick hand slapped the control about the cockpit wildly; his feet, still trembling, kicked the rudder back and forth madly to throw the devils in gray below off their aim.

The old D.H. groaned as another archie burst. The Liberty snorted. Dexter yanked the big ship to the left and plunged on in a staggering climb. It was a desperate attempt to escape out of range of that murderous fire.

Connelly was shaking his head frantically as the heavy ship skidded and slithered about unsteadily through the bomb-blasted air. But Dexter was staring ahead wildly and did not see him. His eyes were riveted on a flight of ships, far to the left, coming in their direction. Panic seized him. Were they Fokkers?

He plunged on. The ships grew larger. He could see them more plainly. They were Nieuports. Seven of them. Probably a Frog outfit. If they would only come to their rescue. Convoy them.

He watched frantically. They were flying at a much higher level than the D.H. They would almost cross their path, but higher.

He waited. Minutes passed. Suddenly his heart sank. They were passing them up. They had business of their own. The Nieuports were not taking any heed of the cumbersome D.H. rumbling along below as long as there was no sign of attack from the air.

The firing from the ground was letting up. With that desperate climb he had drawn out of range of the ground batteries. The thought of being behind the enemy lines sent a panic of fright through him. He struggled to keep his feet on the rudder bar. His bulging eyes wandered about the sky to get his mind off the horrors that lay below. Suddenly he jerked upright with a cry.

FIVE FOKKERS were tearing at them with lightning speed and venomous hatred. Dexter spun around. The finger that pointed the Jerry flight to his observer was trembling. Connelly had seen them.

He waved his hand with nonchalance to the terror-stricken pilot to let him know he was ready. Then, as Dexter whirled ahead, he shook his head and muttered soundless words.

“Poor kid.”

Fokkers slammed down on the heavy bomber, five Mercedes screaming hatred, Spandaus snarling. Dexter yanked the ship on into the whirling mass. His fingers, taut, pressed the trips before he took aim. Flames belched from his guns. White tracers fluffed out and missed.

Connelly spun his twin Lewis guns on their turrets. Steady hands held the butts. Keen, hawklike eyes crossed the sights. He waited, his lips pressed in a thin line of determination. A Jerry crate crossed his sights. He pulled. Tracers ripped into the Fokker. He swung the guns to bring the snorting steel closer to the cockpit.

Dexter was giving up his headlong lunge at the Jerry. He was dodging for his life. Every turn almost spelled death to the heavy ship as it skidded and slipped on turns. Connelly lurched and, swayed inside the gun turret like a drunk. The gyrating ship threw him off his aim. He missed.

The lead Fokker ripped at him, pouring hot steel into the bottom of his cockpit. He whirled, spinning his guns with him, and glared down the sights. The fuselage shuddered from the recoil. He pressed the trips and spun the guns to follow the line of flight of the Jerry leader.

*Tac-tac-tac!* Whirling, with the grin still on his face at sight of his tracers tearing into the leader, he peered across the ring sights as another lunged in to avenge the death of his flight commander. Spandaus rained hot steel down at him.

He cursed as the ship trembled from the recoil of the Vickers up front. Another aim shot to hell. His finger pressed and the ship lurched dizzily. Angrily he spun round and tried it again as the Fokker veered away. Another clean miss.

He hunched forward over his gun butts and took careful aim at another Fokker that dove at him. The air about the ship was a wild, whining fog of tracers. His fingers pressed. The twin Lewis guns snorted and belched their steel.

He grinned as he saw them tearing into the fuselage of the Fokker that hurtled toward him. They flashed from sight back of the engine. That would bring them crashing through the cockpit just under the pilot's legs. His steady hands on the butts brought the gun muzzles up a fraction of an inch, barking as they came.

Instinctively, he ducked for the frail shelter of the gunner's cockpit as the Fokker wobbled, and lunged on, out of control. It missed the tail by inches, flopped over on one side and turned the cockpit toward him. He could see the Jerry pilot in mortal pain as the thing went slithering down. His lips tightened a little as it disappeared from view.

He spun round on another. Trembling from the recoil of the Vickers on the nose, the D.H. lurched on toward its goal. Connelly nodded with satisfaction. The kid had guts, even if he couldn't fly like a veteran. It took pure guts to be scared to death and go on fighting.

The three Fokkers had turned and were droning down at them. Vengeance was in their motor whines. They came to avenge their fellow airmen who had gone down at the flashing hands of that observer with the deadly aim.

A movement in the front cockpit caught his attention. Dexter, in a new frenzy, was pointing wildly to the east. Connelly stared. More Fokkers were hurling themselves at them to head them off. There were so many he could not count them.

He turned back to his guns. Dexter was flying the ship. He had no duals in the rear. Dexter, frantic with fear and mad with the realization that he was much less a pilot than he had thought, could hold himself in check no longer. His trembling hands turned the ship around in a crazy, skidding arc and headed for home. He shoved the stick ahead and began to dive for the lines.

CONNELLY realized what was going on and cursed. It burned him up to fight their way that far and then turn back without laying a single egg. What were a dozen or so Fokkers when there was an important job at hand? He had been in a game before where there wasn't room for the word "Can't".

The cloud of Fokkers swooped down after them. Motors screamed. Spandaus snarled. The air was split with slithering ships and ripping steel. Connelly glared angrily across the sights. His lean, lightning-quick fingers pressed the triggers. His guns snarled. Out of their muzzles flowed a steady stream of hot steel. He grinned as he saw his tracers fluff into wings and fuselages, engines and cowlings. At that, it was good target practice. Live targets. And they wouldn't live long if he had his way.

*Bam!* Steel struck the steel of his Lewis mounting. The bullet ricocheted off at an oblique angle and

whined into the void below. He whirled as a Fokker flashed past, following it with his sights. Tracers poured into the engine, the cockpit.

A puff of black smoke burst from the side of the engine. Tongues of flame like hungry fingers crept out and reached back along the sides. The pilot, climbing half out of the cockpit in agony, slumped from sight beneath the cloud of smoke and flame that enveloped him as the gasoline tank let go.

Connelly caught sight of Dexter as he followed the burning ship down with his eye. The poor kid was done up. Finished. Perhaps he could help. He'd have a talk with him if and when they got back.

His mind flashed to the bombs. No use carting them around now. He glanced below. Might as well drop them where they would do the most good. They hadn't reached the congested area just back of the German front lines.

Fokkers whirled about them. Again his guns went into action. He might be able to account for another before they reached the lines. The old lumbering D.H. was being ridden hard, but the thought of not getting back hardly occurred to him. His fingers pressed the triggers again and again. His hands on the butts moved the guns back and forth, back and forth, raking the snarling Jerry crates as they swarmed about like angry hornets. He was making little effort to take aim. The best he could hope to do was make those Jerry pilots more respectful of the D.H.

The Fokkers began to thin out as they approached the lines. Archies went into action. The A.A. guns were grunting up at them, trying to bash them from the skies.

Connelly felt for the bomb releases. His hand closed over the lever and he pulled a test drop. *Bam!* The first bomb burst behind, some distance from the Archie batteries. He tried another. It burst closer. Several batteries were bunched just ahead. He pulled the lever again and again. His face twisted in a slow grin as he watched the eruptions from their bursting; they had hit their mark. That alone was worth the trip, to see those things go up in grunts.

They flashed across the lines less than three hundred meters up. Allied archies went into action as a few of the Fokkers followed at a respectful distance. Connelly turned to his guns and emptied all the shells left at the depleted Jerry forces. Three of the Fokkers turned for home. The rest hung on. Archie fire increased in volume and a few moments later the rest turned tail and ran.

Dexter heard the lull in the staccato Spandaus'

bark. He spun round in his seat. His marble-white, terror-creased face, a horrible mask of fright, turned questioningly to Connelly. The observer's hand shot upward in his nonchalant wave of assurance. His thin lips curled in a friendly grin. Dexter tried to throw back a smile in answer, but the effect failed. He was too far gone to force himself to smile.

The D.H. rumbled on. It quaked, as it tore on homeward, with the trembling of Dexter's -frenzied body. Connelly, standing up in the rear, shook his head sadly. He'd have a talk with Dexter as soon as they landed. He might be able to reason him out of his half-crazed condition.

Dexter plunged the bomber down on the home field unsteadily. The ship came to earth with a bound, lurched to one side, straightened, and rolled to a stop. His trembling hand felt for the gun and the Liberty blasted into action again, yanking the jolting ship after it to the tarmac.

CONNELLY was out of the ship at a bound. Dexter followed more slowly. His whole body was still shaken from the terrible experience of the past half hour. His foot slipped from the stirrup as he climbed out, and he fell to the ground. Connelly was helping him up, talking softly to him.

"Look," pleaded Connelly, "let's go over behind the hangar and talk this thing over. I'd like to help you out, if you'll let me."

Dexter only faintly heard what he said. He followed dumbly as the other helped him around the end of the hangar, out of sight of the ship.

"Here, have a cigarette," Connelly offered, handing Dexter a well crumpled package. Dexter took one with an eager hand that shook. He puffed frantically at it. His wild eyes were staring at Connelly questioningly. Connelly began to speak.

"Now listen, old man, I hope you'll take this in the spirit in which it is given. Perhaps you don't think I know anything about flying and maybe I don't, but I've seen a lot of big shots do their stuff and I think I know how it's done."

Dexter's nerves were badly shattered. Connelly was leveling a knowing smile at him as he talked. Dexter glared back at him with that red tinge creeping up through the roots of his hair once more.

"If you could only smooth up your air work, you'd be a wonder," Connelly went on evenly. "As far as guts are concerned you're all there, but as a pilot, well, you need more time and confidence in your ability. You

can fly all right if you just hang on to yourself and think you can, but some of those turns you made a little while ago were too close to suicide for comfort."

Dexter grew purple with rage, but Connelly went on. There was something about that soft, even voice that compelled Dexter to listen in spite of himself.

"Why not let me put the duals in the rear cockpit and show you what I mean?" Connelly went on. "Say this afternoon?"

Dexter's nerves were nearly breaking. He flew into an uncontrolled frenzy of anger.

"So that's it, you yellow dog," he screamed. "You're afraid to ride with me. You think you know more about flying than I do. Where the hell did you ever learn so much about flying?"

The frantic pilot lunged forward like an angry bull. His right fist flashed out before Connelly could draw away. It struck the astonished observer a glancing blow on the jaw.

Connelly, caught off balance, staggered back a little but stayed on his feet. Dexter came in again with a mad rush. Connelly ducked under his flailing arms. He could take care of himself easily, now that he knew what to look for.

"Fight, fight," came the cry from the throats of several pilots who had happened to see the first blow struck. But with only one contestant executing what punishment there was, it could hardly be called a fight. Connelly was weaving and dodging the murderous onslaughts of his larger pilot with the ease of a professional. Dexter wasn't touching him.

Then Connelly moved like a blurred flash. He ripped in close to the half insane man, his arms grasped him in a tight clinch and he forced the fists of the frantic pilot into the air where they could do no harm.

Other pilots reached the scene. The two were parted. Dexter struggled like mad to free himself from the grips of those that held him.

"Here," roared a captain running up. "What's going on, anyway?"

Dexter was puffing like a steam engine. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Then he found his voice.

"This damn yellow observer," he blurted out. "He was trying to tell me how to fly. Said I didn't know my stuff. Wanted to put duals in so he could give me some instruction. The damn half wing. I'll beat hell out of any observer before I'll take that from him. Damn their yellow hides. If they know so much about

flying why don't they enlist to fly, instead of playing nursemaid to a couple of turret machine guns?"

DEXTER glared across the space that separated him from Connelly, who was standing with no one holding him. Connelly's gaze held no malice. Instead his eyes had only pity for the nerve-racked pilot who had lost control of himself. Dexter suddenly felt a little ashamed. Connelly had only been trying to help, and Dexter knew he was right in everything that he had said. Still he would not admit it, even to himself. The captain walked to Connelly. "And what's your explanation of this affair?" he challenged.

"The same," Connelly nodded, "I guess I spoke out of turn. Sorry." The captain looked at him more closely. There was something familiar about that face. Dexter noticed it too, now that he saw the captain staring at his observer. Dexter had seen that face somewhere in the past, but he could not for the life of him think where.

"The best thing for you two," the captain concluded, "is to get together, since you're hooked up in the same bomber. We've got enough trouble stopping the Germans, without fighting among ourselves."

Then the crowd broke up slowly, a little disappointed.

Dexter went to his quarters and Connelly walked slowly, thoughtfully down the field. Dexter did not put in an appearance again until mess.

There, questions of his morning's suicide flight and more about the fight came rushing at him from other pilots. He explained briefly what had happened.

One of the older pilots listened to him closely. All eyes turned to him in astonishment as he told of his new observer getting three Fokkers from the back seat of the D.H. A thing like that from a bomber was almost unheard of. I

"Well, all I've got to say," observed the more experienced pilot after Dexter had finished, "if you wouldn't take any kind of advice from a bird like that, you're crazy. The more you learn of this flying game the more you realize how little you know about it. My advice to you as one pilot to another, is to get all the dope you can, any time, whether it comes from a half wing or a grease-monkey. Maybe this observer of yours doesn't know anything about flying but from the way you say he handles a machine gun, I'll bet he isn't offering any information unless he knows what he's talking about. I've watched you fly, Dexter, and if you want to hear what I think as a dumb pilot, I'd say he'd hit the nail right on the button."

This from a pilot who had lived three months on the Front and had piled up an enviable record for himself in flaming skies.

Dexter said nothing more. It was sinking in. He knew all along he had let his self-pride run away with him. His flying was the sore point in his makeup. He had dreamed in training camp of becoming a great pilot. Then he had been commissioned in those days of dire need for new material at the Front to take the places of those who had gone down before the murder makers across the lines.

Evening mess found Dexter and his observer meeting again for the first time since his childish assault. He felt ashamed; he wanted to apologize for his headstrong conduct, but his pride held him back. He tried to treat Connelly as though nothing had happened. Eyes were watching from the other tables. Connelly was the same quiet, unassuming individual that he had been during the few hours of their acquaintance. He bore no malice, but he offered no more suggestions.

Toward the end of the meal a staff officer stomped through the door, knocking the mud from his feet. The pilots and observers snapped to attention. The officer's voice cracked through the silence that had fallen over the low-roofed mess shack.

"The dump north of Charny still stands. It must be blown to check the expected drive near Verdun. One ship failed this morning against overwhelming odds. I'm asking for volunteers for another attack tomorrow morning."

Dexter was on his feet in a flash. Several others rose at almost, the same time, but Dexter was first.

"I'll take it, sir," he boomed.

The officer turned to him questioningly.

"Aren't you the pilot who flew the D.H. over this morning?"

"Yes, sir," came from Dexter, "but I know more about it than I did then. I've got a plan worked out."

The officer nodded his consent and stomped out of the shack. Admiring eyes turned to Dexter. The boy had plenty of guts. Dexter turned to Connelly by his side. The observer noticed that his hands were trembling a little.

"See what you think of this layout for the attack," Dexter began. "We're sure of one thing. Jerry is guarding that dump like the U.S. mint, now that they know we're after it. That guard will be waiting for us to cross the line from the south somewhere above Verdun. If we fly farther to the east or west and make the crossing there, I think we'll stand a better chance to

sneak up on the dump from behind. At least I'll have to fly over it to get home and that ought to be a help."

He finished this last with a grin. Connelly nodded with a look of admiration.

"Sounds like the right program to me," he affirmed. "How about starting before daylight so we can cross the lines before we're seen?"

Dexter nodded. "Good," he answered. "Let's go over to the hangar and see about having the ship ready an hour before sun-up."

As they made their way to the hangar where their D.H. was being repaired by the mechanics, Dexter tried to get up nerve enough to make a request of Connelly. But somehow he could not bring himself to it. Then Connelly spoke and relieved him of his concern.

"What do you say we put in the duals so I can relieve you in the flight to-morrow?" he asked quietly as though nothing had ever happened between them.

"Great idea," affirmed Dexter. "Then if anything should happen to me in the fight you can fly it home."

"Sure," was the answer.

Dexter knew he was lying to himself. He was not afraid that anything would happen to him on the trip, but he did want Connelly at the stick to get him out of trouble if he got in. He was beginning to admit to himself that as a pilot he was not there. Not yet.

The two arrived at the hangar and inspected the ship. It was not fully repaired from the bad shooting, but the sergeant in charge promised that it would be on the line when they ordered. They checked the four guns on the bomber and went to their quarters to turn in.

It seemed years to Dexter's fear-racked mind before the orderly announced that it was time to get up. Not that he had been asleep. He hadn't been able to close his eyes since his first trip across the lines a few days before. Every time his eyelids closed, terrible things began to happen. Fokkers dove at him from the walls, or the ceiling. Their Spandaus were stabbing hideous monsters at him that tore at his flesh. Once or twice he awoke screaming. From then on he dared not close his eyes.

Connelly was there, calm and self-possessed, waiting for him when he arrived at the hangar. The D.H. was fully loaded with its sanguinary devil-eggs tucked under the wings. The Liberty was warm. The prop was tipping over easily as it throbbed with a throaty *caplunk-aplunk*.

"Just a joy hop across country," announced Connelly. "And remember, old kid, that you can fly as

well as any of them. I'll be with you to get you out of any jam that you might get into. Take everything slow and easy."

Dexter did not resent his words now. He nodded with a simple and sincere, "Thanks."

The first light of dawn found them far behind the lines. They were flying some distance to the east of their objective. Dexter had himself well under control for the time. No E.A. had been sighted. The archies had been silent. They had not heard them cross the line, or if they had, they had paid no attention.

The earth below was bathed in bright sunlight. Suddenly Connelly jerked the stick. Dexter was at once alert. He was trembling again. Connelly was pointing below. Dexter stared down.

He could see many railroad tracks converging from different directions into one center. That must be a terminal. He had heard something about a terminal that had been the objective of many a flight. Now they were flying directly over the great yard. He could see the switch engines as they puffed clouds of smoke. He felt the throttle come back slowly. Dexter turned back to look at his observer.

"While we're here, let's take a crack at those yards. We've got plenty of bombs on. You dive down low and we'll drop a couple on our way," came Connelly's voice above the scream of air.

DEXTER nosed the D.H. down into a shuddering, snarling dive. The Liberty shrieked for mercy as the plane plunged downward. Suddenly the earth crews went into action. A.A. guns and machine guns from the ground thundered up at them. Dexter slithered the heavy D.H. from side to side to make them a more difficult target to hit. The air seemed filled with snarling steel and puff balls.

Wind tore at the ship; tried to rip the covering from the wings. Then he jerked upright in the seat. Something moving to the west caught his eye. Fokkers! Nine of them. Coming like the mill tails of hell to bash them down.

Frantically Dexter pulled out of the dive. He felt the ship leap slightly as Connelly released two bombs in quick succession. It was flying easier now. Making better time with less weight. He held the ship in a steep climb and droned on toward their objective. They did not have far to go.

Below, the two bombs burst near the middle of the terminal. Tracks and cars mingled with blasted earth in that explosion. The yards were wrecked completely.

The old fear was coming back to Dexter. He was fighting frantically to control himself. He twisted round in his seat and stared back at Connelly. The observer was grinning and dancing about in the rear cockpit in glee. That gave him confidence again. Connelly was there if he couldn't make it. Something told him that Connelly was capable of pulling him out of almost anything.

He pointed a trembling finger at the Fokkers snarling down on their tail. For answer Connelly turned and thumbed his nose at them. They had reached their turning point as Dexter had it charted out; they should be directly behind their objective. All he had to do now was to turn south and head for home, dropping the bombs as they flew over the dump. It sounded simple.

*Tac-tac-tac!* Shrieking Spandau steel whined about them. The first of the Fokker flight had come within long range. He wasn't close enough to make his shots effective. The D.H. vibrated from the recoil of Connelly's twin Lewis as he went into action. He saw his tracers plop into the engine of the leader. He grinned as he went spiraling down for a forced landing.

Suddenly there was a whine overhead. A Fokker was tearing straight down from above. Neither knew from whence he had come. His Spandaus were hurling steel into the front cockpit.

The great nose of the bomber dropped sharply. Connelly cursed.

He knew the story. Dexter had been hit. Was hunched over the stick jamming it.

Frantically, Connelly tried to yank back the stick, to bring the nose up out of that perilous dive. His efforts were no good. With lightning speed he tore out the belt that circled his leather flying coat.

His hands were steel vises as he climbed like a cat from the cockpit over the edge of the cowling that separated the two cockpits. With toes hooked to the Lewis mounting he reached his arms into the forward cockpit.

The ship was screaming through the air, headed straight down. Air tore at his body, but somehow he hung on. There was plenty of altitude below if he worked fast. He bit his teeth into the shoulder of Dexter's leather coat and hung on for dear life. His free hands yanked back the slumped figure. Blood was smeared about one side of the head and one shoulder. A glance at the head wound told him what had put Dexter out. A bad blow on the head, but nothing more than a scalp wound. About the shoulder he couldn't tell. Didn't have time.

He bound the flabby body to the back of the bucket seat. As he moved back to his own cockpit he felt a stinging blow in his right leg. Still he could use it. The wind was terrific. He scrambled back into his own cockpit, yanked back on the stick.

The air was whirling with Fokkers. Connelly was in his element. It was a fight—and what a fight! He was at the control. His guns were whirling and barking. Slithering steel belched from their muzzles, tearing at the Fokkers.

AHEAD and below Connelly could see the dump. It was cleverly camouflaged, but he was sure he was right. The air was misty with screaming Spandau tracers as the Fokkers hurtled about him. He twisted and turned the ship with perfect ease, dodging the terrible onslaught of the Jerry butchers.

Then he was over the dump. An idea popped into his clear head. His mouth set in a firm line of determination. His foot kicked the rudder bar viciously. He yanked the stick back in his lap. The heavy D.H. began to spin. With power full on it turned faster and faster, heading straight for the dump below.

Fokkers watched him go, thinking they had winged him. They circled slowly above, awaiting the inevitable crash. Then, with a hundred meters under him, he kicked the rudder opposite and reversed the stick. The D.H. quivered under the terrific strain. Then it came out level.

Connelly's hand reached for the release lever. He pulled several times in rapid succession. Then as the air burst about the plane he yanked over into a vertical and raced toward home. He turned and looked back. The earth seemed to be a volcano where a moment before had been stored tons upon tons of high explosives.

The Fokkers were screaming down at him again, angry that they had been tricked. But to the south a heavy cloudbank had come up in the early morning. With Fokkers riding him hard, he dove headlong into the mist and was lost to the Jerries. Connelly grinned as he saw Dexter's head move. He was coming round. A great kid. Lots of guts. Wait until he knew a little more about flying.

The big D.H. thundered on toward the home field. She shook like an injured thing as she rumbled along. Vitals half torn out she struggled on, seeming to try to hold herself together until she could get down out of the air once more.

Connelly roared over the field. At the far end he

pulled up and over in a perfect chandelle and came slipping down for a landing. The wheels and skid touched, light as a feather. The Liberty barked and the big ship taxied to the deadline.

Connelly was out of the cockpit in a flash, making his way to Dexter who lay slumped weakly in the corner of the seat. His light body strained with the load of the pilot as he lifted him out tenderly and laid him on the ground. Dexter stared up into Connelly's scarred and weatherbeaten face.

"Sorry," murmured Dexter, his face creased with pain. Then in answer to the perplexed look in Connelly's eyes he went on hoarsely. "Sorry for that sock in the jaw."

Connelly was examining Dexter's wounds. He looked up and grinned.

"That wasn't anything, old kid," he assured him. "This, old jaw of mine has taken worse punches than that many a times when I used to crash with the old pushers."

Dexter's tortured face lighted with recognition. He

knew now where he had seen that face before. In the papers as a kid. Jack Connelly had been his boyhood idol. A supreme pilot of pushers in the old days of Beachey and the rest. But why was he flying as an observer?

Connelly saw his face light up and understood.

"Sure," he grinned. "I tried to get in as a pilot. Then they put me in that whirl-chair thing and when I got out of it they said I couldn't fly. Said I didn't have a sense of balance. I wanted action so I busted into his half-wing racket. 'It's not so bad either; that is, with duals in the back.'" His grin broadened. "Those wounds of yours," he went on, "are just flesh wounds. They'll have you out and in the air again in a couple of weeks. Then you and I'll show those Kaiser worshippers what a hell of a row a good team can raise with an old D.H."

He picked Dexter up in his arms as tenderly as a mother would a child and carried him to the waiting ambulance. Dexter's body went limp, but his lips were twisted in a smile.