

HELL-FIRE CURE

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

An Ace of the Air Rides Like a Winged Devil Against the Flaming Guns of the Enemy!

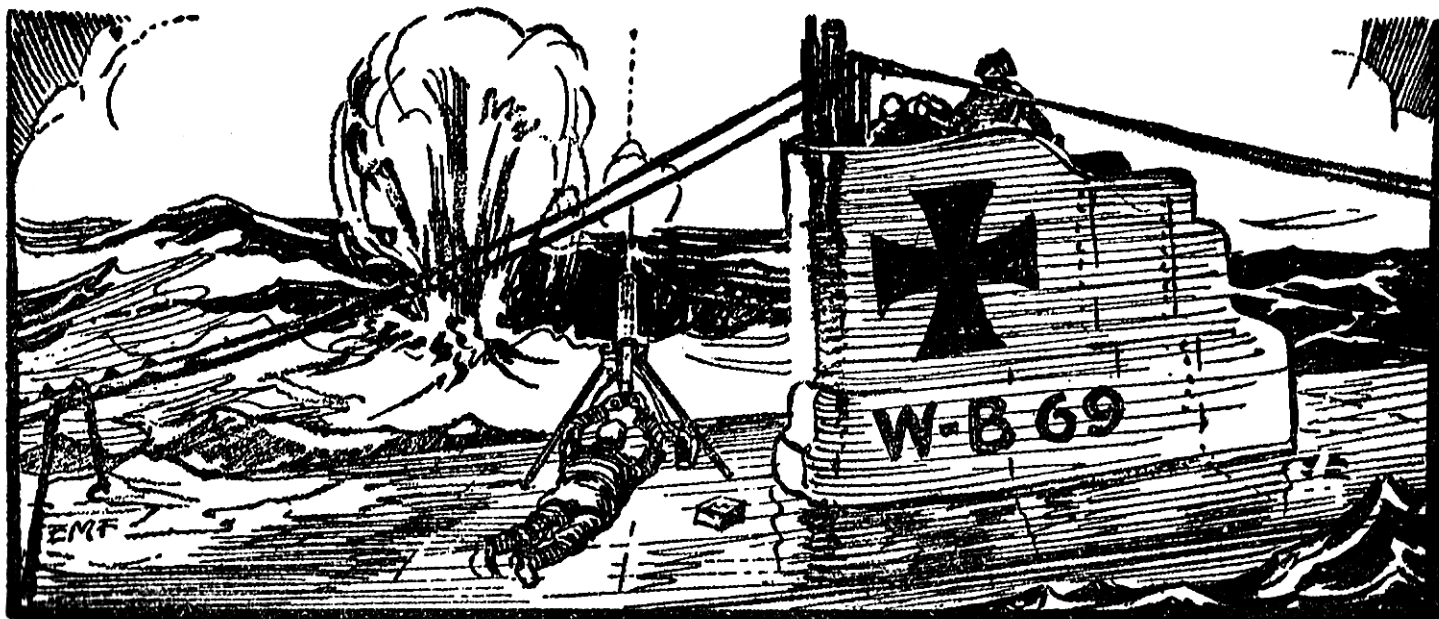
CAPTAIN TED BARTLETT'S thumb was already tramping pressure down on his trigger trips when a Spad member of his flight flashed across his bows. In that split-second the German Tripe, on which Bartlett had centered all his skillful efforts in the past

blistering ten minutes, side-slipped off, and got clear.

The skipper of the crack Yankee flight drummed a terrible tattoo on his rudder bar as he swung his ship out.

"Carter, again, damn his soul!" he growled.

But then a wave of self-reproach flushed his mind.



Lieutenant Carter was to be pitied. Carter's nerve fibres had been frayed by constant action, frayed to such an extent that not even a stiff slug of liquor held him up now. It was pitiful. Carter, the hell-cat of "A" Flight, the man with a long list of Hun ships to his log—was done. Washed out.

It was a pity, for Bartlett, ace flight leader of the Forty-third American Pursuit Squadron had known no man with whom he'd sooner have ridden the war-crazed skylanes. Carter was his deputy. But for the past gruelling four weeks, Carter had been steadily slipping. And his slipping had been observed by the S.C. It was hard to cover up the apparent weaknesses of any individual member of a squadron. Bartlett had tried it. But Major Powell had a keen ear, and a keen pair of ears.

This evening's action had been the payoff. Carter was through. He was a dangerous man to have topside with the flight in action, for his old control over his nerves had seemed to sputter out.

A deep sigh shook Bartlett, as he fired an "all-out" flare, and pulled his flight into formation for the trip back to the drome. Tonight, he would have to break the news to Carter—that he was through. Hell! If only Rusty Carter had been clipped by a Spandau slug, or fragment of shrapnel! If only Bartlett could have marked him out to hospital—wounded. It was going to be tough to wash the gritty young son out, to have to tell him that his usefulness was done. For no pilot in France had been possessed of so much nerve as Rusty.

Ted Bartlett thought of the telegram Carter had received some weeks ago, right when the young pilot was beginning to make a real comeback showing—a telegram to say that his only brother had been killed in action when the destroyer he had commanded was blown up by a German submarine. What made it worse was that Harry Carter, the brother, was Rusty's twin, and only kin.

NIGHT! And save for the distant drum of gunfire forward, an eerie quiet seemed to smother out all life in the vicinity of the Forty-third Squadron's drome.

Captain Bartlett jerked up his head, and for a long moment stared hard at his S.C.

"There's no other way, Major?" he suddenly crisped.

"I've tried everything, Ted. Sorry, but Carter leaves for England by plane, tomorrow morning. If he's lucky he might find a job in the south of England, at one of the schools. I've recommended that, after a couple of weeks' rest. Or—well, it might be back to the states."

"It'll break his heart, Major."

"That's done already, Ted. Well, do you want to tell him, or shall I?"

"I'll do it, sir. I think he understands me best." Bartlett got slowly to his feet, saluted, and withdrew.

HE FOUND Rusty Carter seated in his quarters, jaw in his palms. An automatic lay just within reach on the youngster's crude table.

"Chin up, Rusty," Bartlett jerked. "Goin' to take it lying down, buddy?"

"Buddy?" The youngster swung, his eyes strangely ablaze. "Bud—Oh, it's you, Skipper. Excuse me. I feel rotten. Sorry. You're the best pal I ever had."

Bartlett moved in and clapped an arm about the youngster's broad shoulders.

"It's tough, Rus, but you've got to take it like the old sky hellion you always were. You're sensible. You know you're through. Now don't go and make a mess of the rest of your life. Get the rest offered you, and who knows but you'll be back with us greater than ever. Keep your eyes and ears open, over in London, and you'll—"

"London! What d'you mean, Ted?"

"Just that. Rusty. You're leaving for England tomorrow. Now hang on to yourself. Take it, and like it. It's for your own good." Bartlett's voice was low, yet it had a meaning ring to it.

He reached forward and closed his hand over the Colt on the table. He lifted out the clip and dropped it into his pocket.

"I'm sorry you thought—of this, kid," he husked. "But try to forget it all. Get back and rest up. There's no tellin', you might get a chance of some coastal work. Submarine patrol work. It's—"

Rusty Carter jerked himself to his feet, and spun on the skipper.

"Ted, you mean there is a chance! I'm not being totally washed out?" His eyes were dilated to their full capacity.

"There's always a chance, Rus. Always a chance. It was a U-boat that got Harry, wasn't it? All right—all right, I know. Button up your lip. I'm trying to do the best I can for you—trying to give you a hope. Savvy?"

"Yeah, I savvy, Ted—U-boat Sixty-nine—that was it, Ted. Sixty-nine. Hell! It's that that's damned near sent me mad since I heard. She got away. She's been swimming in my mind every second since I heard of—Harry. Ted, he was all I had in the world. Maybe you don't understand just how big the tie is—was—between twins."

Ted Bartlett snapped out a cigarette case. He was tough, about as tough a pilot as ever lanced the sky with tracer bullets, but at the moment he had to do something quick, to fasten a hold on his deeper emotions.

“Mmm—sure. I understand, kid,” he gulped, through puffs. “But from now on, you’re—uh—master of—your own destiny. It’s up to you to drag yourself back to what you were a few weeks ago, one of the best damn sky hellers I ever saw!”

Rusty Carter’s eyes were misted. He stabbed at his underlip while he fought the greatest fight of his life, a fight against the urge to tackle Bartlett, recover his gun, and finish things right then.

But Ted Bartlett’s influence won. Quivering, shaken by sobs that were uncontrollable, Carter dropped to his bunk. Ted Bartlett’s influence had helped him win the round.

Bartlett was himself shaken. The only thing he could think of to do at the moment was to cuss like about seven devils rampant. It helped. He bunked at Carter’s hut for the rest of the night; saw the young pilot aboard his Spad the next morning. His last words were to ring forever in Carter’s ears, even at times when, a week or so later, he was about to toss in the sponge.

“It’s your nerve, and the recollection of your coolness and skill in action that have held me up all these months. Rusty,” Bartlett had said, while he squeezed Carter’s hand in good-by. “You wouldn’t let me down now, huh?”

Rusty had been unable to speak. He swung above his stick, waved an arm to the mechanics and gave her the gun! And as he backed away, Ted Bartlett told himself that perhaps after all Carter would come back.

BUT Rusty’s comeback was slow.

He found rest in drink and solitude. A month slid by. Hospitalization had been provided for him—rest, at a comfortbale spot on the Thames.

On a day about six weeks after his departure from active service with the Forty-third Squadron, he sat alone in the hospital park. A Zeppelin raid had taken toll of a number of civilians the previous night. War was carrying its threat to the peaceful homes of Great Britain, and France.

Something creaked nearby. Carter retained his sullen brooding mood, though; and then he caught a shrill bird whistle, which was followed by a trill of similar notation. And then a laugh.

Carter whirled around on his bench. A man in casualty blues, in a patent wheel chair, was seated underneath a big chestnut tree. Carter’s heart began to leap. That man—he had seen him before, with always a smile on his face. He was making perfect bird calls below the chestnut. What was more amazing, he was being answered by a thrush. And then, as though in synchronized duet, man and bird treated Carter to one of the most appealing treats he had experienced in many weeks. He found himself walking toward the casualty, as the bird song finally ceased.

War! Here were its marks. Why, good Lord, this man was short both legs above the knees, and was minus an arm—his left—at the elbow. And yet—he was laughing—*laughing!*

“How’s, buddy,” Rusty called.

“Hi, sir. Fine day, ain’t it? My oath, it makes a feller feel proud he’s alive an’ kickin’. ’Ear the concert, sir? I’m practicin’ up a bit. Figger I can get a job in some music ’all later on—imitator. Strike me, it’s great! I’ve nearly got the thrush orf perfect. She’s a great ’elp, that little beggar in the tree yonder.”

Something clogged in Carter’s throat. He hunkered down by the side of the wheel chair.

“You’re great, brother,” he gulped. “Where—how did you— get it?”

“Oh—this, sir. Submarine action. The blighter shelled us in the open boats. We ’adn’t a chance. Dirty dog, sir, the U-boat 69!”

“What? Hell, you weren’t by any chance under command of—”

“Lieutenant-Commander ’Arry Carter, sir. That was ’im. I got special permission to transfer to ’is ship, an’ ’e was the greatest commander I ever see, ever served under, Gor’s truth!”

Rusty Carter squeezed the man’s only hand, and backed slowly away. That casualty had done something to him. He had awakened the old spark of Heller Center, of old Forty-three Squadron.

The U-B 69—U-B 69—Rusty could not get it out of his head. But it no longer got him down. It was lifting him up, pulling him back. Rusty Carter had refound himself!

“Make your patrol off the Bristol Channel, Lieutenant Carter,” crisped a high ranking officer of the British Naval Air Service. “Stand clear of any interference with our Q-Boats, though. They resent it. Watch closely, for there are two of the Germans’ new, super-subs watching for our coming convoy. Luck, sir!”

RUSTY'S past deeds had got him a transfer to the Naval Air Service, that and a bit of pull through Ted Bartlett. Today he was going out sub hunting. Lord, it was good to be alive! And as his ship's floats kicked up gouts of spume he felt like letting out a Comanche war-whoop.

For a couple of hours he rode above the drear, foreboding waters until his patrol began to pall. Searching the grim Atlantic for miles he saw nothing to interest him. Hell! This wasn't so hot. After all, perhaps he should have applied to be sent back to service in France.

It was almost dusk when a lurid flash of orange-red slid across his vision. Gunfire! He kicked his ship about. And then he glimpsed her, a tramp at sea wallowing along in the trough of a troubled sea. And she was getting hit plenty.

Rusty jazzed up his motor. Here was a chance for some action at last, for he could now sight the sub lying off the starboard beam of the tramp at about four thousand yards. She was closing in the sluggishly crawling old sea hog, raking her with a withering fire.

A sub! Rusty's frame seemed to shiver beneath his hard muscles. Soon a tin fish would go streaking into the vitals of that tramp. Rusty could visualize it. He saw the smoke increase from the tramp's lone funnel. Evidently she was running for it—running for it at less than eight knots—her maximum speed.

And then someone aboard her sighted Rusty's ship. Carter got a hot message which rang in his eardrums:

"Stand off! For the love of God, stand off!"

And then it dawned on him! He had come within an ace of gumming up the gallant action of one of Britain's Q-Boats.

He kicked around and immediately streaked for the haze which surrounded a dismal cloud bank. By the great horned spoon, he was going to have a grandstand seat to witness one of the nerviest bits of action imaginable.

The tramp was suddenly hit badly, abaft the mizzen mast. She seemed to stagger and shudder like some great sea monster in its death throes. And then that deadly white streaking wake. Carter held his breath as the German torpedo blasted the tramp dead amidships. Steam belched out of the wreckage.

A panic party was battling to get boats overside. They fumbled, and then finally managed to swing clear.

The submarine dived, and for ten minutes, as Carter watched, there was no sign of life aboard the

tramp. She was doomed to go down. Hell! Wasn't there something Rusty could do? He fought hard against the urge to go down and search for that damned devil sea rat.

Just then she broke surface, about five hundred yards astern. She was nosing in, fetching up parallel with the foundering tramp, when suddenly there was commotion aboard the collier. Superstructure clattered down to the decks. A crate splintered, apparently, to a mass of pieces. Carter stared, bewilderedly. Guns were coming into action. A hoarse croak that had been intended for a cheer escaped him. He had never even dreamed of any such action as this!

He could see the crew of the sub diving for the conning tower opening when a shot blasted from a twelve-pounder in the well deck of the tramp. But it's aim wasn't the best. Another gun spoke, and this time she registered a direct hit. The sub was doomed—unable to dive. Carter was dancing on his rudder pedals with sheer exaltation when suddenly he saw the tramp heave over to starboard. She had been hit on the port quarter by another torpedo. A second sub was in action. The short hairs stood up on Rusty's neck.

Now the tramp, or Q-Boat, hadn't a chance. That second sub was breaking surface not more than seven hundred yards distant. She had two big 5.9 guns aboard, and they opened up a lacing fire.

RUSTY CARTER had been told by the Admiralty to steer clear of Q-Boat action, but here was something different. Here was a ship between two fires, for the first sub had a four-incher in action again. And she was hurricaning an open British boat with shrapnel.

The young pilot was gasping. Here was Harry's action being reenacted. It was hell!

So Admiralty orders went by the board. Rusty Carter was seeing his brother below in that mad red-hell welter of blood and fire. And now his glance switched. His brows jerked up, for he could read the letter and numerals on that second sub. It was the *U-B 69*.

Carter dashed a red film from before his eyes. He was going down like a mad condor. Every nerve fibre in his body was taut, but sound and firm. Never had he been so keen to strike. And then he swung around into wind. A Maxim gun jerked up its snout and slashed him with a raking fire. He felt a hot sear in his right side, and one of his legs seemed to grow suddenly numb. But he tore on down, and his hand flashed to the bomb toggles.

The bomb vanes screamed. And then, a murderous crash! The Sixty-nine's snout heaved up toward the sky, but she was settling as Rusty kicked around for a second stroke. She was diving! God, he was losing her! A low half-sob broke from his throat. He jerked on the toggle as a mad splash of flame belched from that deadly Maxim below. He was scarcely conscious of letting go that second heavy bomb, nor of the resultant explosion from the Sixty-nine's vitals. Nor did he hear the cheer that broke from the throats of the Q-Boat's panic party, lying off. He was going down—down—

Eager hands fished him, half-drowned, from the Atlantic. But he didn't feel them.

Almost the first thing Rusty consciously heard was the soft warbling of a thrush outside his hospital ward window. And then a laugh. He came up on an elbow, and a nurse pressed him gently back.

"All right, Mr. Carter," she breathed. "He won't run away. That's Jenkins. He's putting on a special cure for you. You like it, don't you?"

"Yeah, but what the hell—excuse me, Nurse. But just what did happen? I flubbed the whole works, eh? There'll be a court of inquiry, won't there?"

"N-no, Mr. Carter. There'll be a spanking, maybe, if you don't get back to sleep. For the rest— Well, it won't be a court of inquiry, but an investiture at Buckingham Palace. You—were—wonderful! Marvellous."

And Rusty Carter thought that she wasn't so bad herself. In fact, she was—uh—aw, hell! He slipped back into the claiming maw of soft unconsciousness right when he'd found that her eyes were softer than British violets in springtime.