

The **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

ACES DOWN!

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

Kirby was an Ace, a fighter, and today they had him “ferry-piloting,” without guns. If the enemy showed, he was supposed to keep out of it. And then the enemy showed, and Kirby, the Ace, the born fighter, forgot those hateful orders, forgot that he had no guns! A splendid, thrilling story of the airmen.

ROIS FIELD WAS THEIR DESTINATION, and the five planes had covered more than half the distance already. Flying conditions were perfect; the weather was clear and mild, the sky a pale pure blue broken only by stray patches of cloud. The four Nieuports and the Spad which led them moved on smoothly, their engines droning in lazy unison. They flew in battle formation, in the shape of a V, though they were not going out to do battle.

These were new ships, not yet equipped with tracer-spitting machine guns, and they were being ferried over to Rois to be substituted for planes that had paid their toll to the Hun.

Kirby led the flight. He led it mechanically, guiding his frail Spad with thoughtless instinct, and performing his various duties with grim detachment. Since he was responsible for the planes, he kept his eye on them, saw that they held the formation. Since he had to pick out their route, he glanced from time to time at the relief-map world which spread below, a world fresh and green in the brilliant sunlight. But

that was all. Kirby was depressed, and the task in hand sickened him.

Not that ferry-piloting was an ignoble business. On the contrary, it was one of the stiffest branches of the service. It was up to these men to deliver planes in safety to the fighting pilots, who would be quite helpless without machines. And in order to do this one had to have skill and coolness, for often planes had to be ferried in bad weather or over bad stretches. To Kirby, however, the job seemed not only tame, but disgraceful. It was no wonder.

Kirby was used to fighting, used to pitting his skill and nerve against a Hun, used to the clatter of machine guns, the burst of A.A. shells, the acrid stench of powder. And he had been more than a good pilot. He had been the leader of that famous and inseparable trio of aces known as the “Three Mosquitoes,” and he had lived to see his name, coupled with the names of his comrades, on the tongue of every airman.

Had been! A pang of bitter humiliation swept him, and his hand gripped the joy-stick convulsively. That was what hurt. If he hadn’t been a famous ace he

wouldn't mind this work. But to be reduced from that to this!

And yet, he admitted, it was his own fault. First of all, the thing could have been avoided. Then, after it had happened, he shouldn't have weakened, cracked. Now if he had controlled his emotions——

ONCE more, for the hundredth time, he reviewed those two painful episodes that had brought him here. Once more he was leading his men across the lines, leading them in perfect formation. "Shorty" Carn, the stocky little fighter, was on his right, and Travis, tall, lanky, and wise, on his left. They were out hunting for Huns, with all the sporting spirit of a hunt, their blood warmed by the desire for a good fight. It was great, that feeling of comradeship, that sense of cooperation which enabled them all to fight with machine-like precision. He could feel them responding to every mood of his own.

They were ground-strafting now. They had crossed the lines and couldn't find any Boche planes, so Kirby led them down "on the carpet," where a minor infantry offensive was going on. They came swooping down like huge hawks and began to fire into the mass of grey, at the same time dropping their twenty-pound bombs on the artillery. But that was not all. If that had been all, Kirby knew, the thing wouldn't have happened. And he cursed the love of glory, the desire to exploit and do the "grand stand stuff," which had been the real cause of their downfall.

They began to get reckless in the strafe, began to perform senseless though spectacular maneuvers. They swooped way down and chased the men all over the ground, driving machine gunners from their nests, and laughing gleefully at the utter confusion. They flew so low that their wheels whisked along the ground, and fatal crashes were avoided by a mere fraction of an inch. Presently the Germans, who didn't enjoy the show at all, got busy, prepared to meet the attack with their guns as the Three Mosquitoes climbed once more. In the third descent, Carn headed for another nest of machine gunners. They were ready for him. Instead of jumping up and running for it, they stuck valiantly to their posts, aimed their guns, and sprayed the swiftly approaching plane with sulphurous tracer bullets. It was over in a second. With dramatic suddenness, Carn's machine turned over and plunged nose first, into the ground. The Germans surrounded it instantly, while Kirby and Travis tried to pull themselves together to work out a course of action.

They wanted to know whether Carn was alive, and if he was alive they wanted to help him. They paused there, seemed to hang suspended over the scene for a few seconds. And that pause led to the second disaster.

Kirby's instinctive quickness saved himself but not Travis. He saw the three Fokkers diving down from the sky. He knew what that meant. When you were down on the carpet, they could get you easily. The shrill staccato clatter of Spandaus rose overhead, and he pulled up his nose to return the fire. But Travis had not seen. A German had dived on his tail, and he was caught, unable to maneuver without crashing since he was so close to the ground. The German hit him before Kirby could come to the rescue, his motor went cold, and he crashed after making a futile effort to pancake.

KIRBY groaned as he remembered that sickening scene. It was the second time, only, that any of them had been shot down, and the first time they had been shot down over the lines. In a sudden burst of black rage, he turned on the Germans and fought his way up with them, his teeth clenched, his eyes afire. It was something greater than skill and courage that guided his muscles this time, enabling him to break a record. In 150 seconds he had shot down two of the Germans, and partially disabled the third, which got away from him.

But by the time he came back to his drome, his spirit was shattered. He was grief-stricken, and torn by suspense as to the fate of his two comrades. Fortunately, word was brought in that the two men were alive and safe, though they had been captured and made prisoners by the Germans. This brought Kirby relief, but it was only momentary relief. Such reports were so uncertain that you couldn't put much faith in them. A thousand doubts assailed him, tortured him. And to add to his worries the brisk old colonel, the C.O. of the drome, spoke to him in a tone of deep reproach.

"Kirby," he said, as the young pilot stood before him in the field office, "this whole thing is most unfortunate. I've been informed that it could have been avoided." His face darkened. "I've warned you men again and again about stunting, about showing off. It's childish and it's not the kind of stuff we tolerate. If you had done your ground-strafting in the orthodox way, precisely and coolly, this would not have happened."

"I know, sir," Kirby said, in anguish. "But, sir, for God's sake——" He broke off, chokingly.

The colonel's voice softened then. He retracted some of his accusations, admitted that accidents would happen, and agreed to charge the whole thing to profit and loss. Before the interview was over, he was consoling Kirby, telling him not to worry about his two comrades, who, the C.O. was sure, would manage to escape by hook or crook. They loved fighting so much that they would spare no efforts to get back to the front. As for Kirby, he had been working hard, fighting continuously, and he deserved a rest.

"So we'll just send you back on leave," the colonel concluded.

To this Kirby stoutly refused. Just because the other two were out of it was no sign that he was finished. He could still fight, and was ready to prove it

"Very well," said the C.O. brusquely, but when Kirby left he shook his head. He knew.

AND he was right. The next day it happened. Kirby went up with the regular patrol, with five other planes led by the C.O. himself. Before they had crossed the lines they spotted a squadron of Pfaltz scouts—easy meat for them. The order was signalled to spread out and dive. And at that moment something snapped in Kirby. The strain had been too much. He had often been without his companions, when they were separated in a "dog-fight," but to-day the realization that they were not at his side, flying there with him, that they were cooped up in some far-off prison camp, made him feel suddenly helpless, impotent. The controls seemed to jerk themselves from him, and he was flying wildly, amateurishly. In his confusion he locked wings with the other plane ahead of him, and the two went hurtling down together for a crash, near the third line allied trenches.

Neither pilot was seriously hurt, but Kirby knew what would inevitably result. Sure enough, the C.O. told him gently but firmly that he must go back to the rear. Kirby argued, entreated, but it was to no avail. And finally he backed down and asked for a ferry job. At least let him do something, keep flying, remain in the service.

So here he was, leading these planes over to Rois. Three trips had been sufficient to make him hate the whole business. The shame of that terrible moment when he had cracked, the vivid remembrance of that downward crash with the other plane, burned him more than ever to-day. If only he had another chance now. But what chance could he have here, fifty miles from the front, in a plane that wasn't even equipped

for fighting? And they surely wouldn't recall him to the front unless his two comrades escaped, came back. No, he was done for. It was useless even to hope.

But he must stop thinking about it now, for thinking about it only made it worse. He tried hard to throw himself into his work. He glanced down, his eyes scanning the ground below. They were nearing a big and heavy forest—Tres Woods. The sight of it stirred up a sort of vague interest in him, helped him forget his own problems for a moment.

He knew about this forest. Due to its rich foliage, it was a splendid place for secret troop movements. At present French and American infantry troops were mobilizing down there, getting together men and supplies to check a major offensive planned by the Germans. The Germans did not know that anyone was going to check them, so the chances of success for the allies were more than favorable. But, Kirby smiled half bitterly, there wouldn't be any fighting here. This quiet mobilisation was about the only sign of war around these "Black Areas."

KIRBY and his men were to pass over the forest on their way to Rois, so he banked slightly to the left and went on, leading them past the edge of the woods. Again he glanced down with vague curiosity. Those trees certainly made excellent camouflage. It was hard to believe that the place was swarming with men. Only once did he catch the dim outline of a big gun.

They were flying over the forest at five thousand feet now. Kirby glanced back at his men, satisfied himself that the formation was in good order. Then he glanced ahead, and this time his interest really was awakened.

There were two planes in the distance, over the other end of the forest. He had not seen them at first, and even now they were merely two glinting crosses circling slowly around. He surmised that they were protecting planes for the forest. Yet, it struck him that they should know better than to fly planes directly over the place, obviously giving away the fact that something was going on. He glanced ahead again, as he drew closer.

It happened then. From the ground something came streaking upwards, there was a dull crash and the thing burst white and mushroomed out in the sky. Another crash and burst followed almost instantly, and now Kirby was sitting tense, rigid, fully aware of the situation.

A.A. guns! That could mean but one thing. The

planes were enemy planes, and they had come over here to pick up information. It was incredible that they had slipped through and succeeded in getting so far within the lines. Yet it had happened. And evidently they had their information. Certainly the men down below were desperate, were determined to get those two observation planes, else they would not give away their location by firing A.A. guns.

Instinctively, Kirby put on full throttle and started to race ahead, entirely unaware of the confusion he was causing in his own formation.

And as the smoke of the A.A. shells cleared it revealed something else. Three planes came diving out of the sky, directly on the two Germans, who rolled to meet them. Kirby could see little streaks of flame dart from the noses of the machines. It was a dogfight. The German planes had been attacked by some allied planes which luckily had come that way. Now the five of them were zooming, diving, banking up there. Kirby, his mind in a daze, went dashing on, straight towards the scene. He was all tensed up, ready for the fight. He leaned forward to look through his sights, put out his thumbs to reach his triggers——

AND then he remembered, bitterly, futilely. For there were no sights, and there were no triggers. This was a ferry plane! What was the matter with him anyway? Didn't he know the rules? Ferry planes must keep away from dog-fights, must change their course to avoid them. He must lead his flight around the forest, at a safe distance from the scrap. The scrap was none of his business.

"Hell!" he snorted, with a dry sob. "Hell!"

But then he slowed up, glanced back. The four Nieuports were several yards behind him, and they came up and got into formation again. He led them on. In spite of himself, he could not resist the temptation to go closer to the dog-fight. Prompted by an uncontrollable impulse, he decided to pass alongside of it, just far enough to insure safety. His men might not like it, but the devil with them!

He drew closer, and now the details of those diving, zooming planes became visible. He saw that the Boche had two-seaters, powerful planes equipped not only with the stationary gun in front, but with a flanking gun for the observer in the rear—a dangerous weapon. The allied planes were single-seater Camels. The three of them were——

He stopped short. Was he crazy? Hadn't he seen three allied planes diving for the Germans? There were

only two there now. Why, the Germans had gotten one already!

Even now he was passing that hectic scene, off to the left. The fighting planes were not aware of him and his squadron. He wished that they would see him, because they wouldn't know he had ferry planes, and he might throw a scare into them.

He glanced around again and a joyous thrill went through him. One of the Germans hung perfectly still for a second, then broke into flames, crumpling as it went down. But his joy soon left him, and was supplanted by a shock of horror. The other German, doubtless enraged, did a beautiful vertical bank, got into firing position, and shot off the wings of the second Camel, which went down in a tight spin. Kirby started abruptly. There was something strangely familiar about that maneuver, about the way the trick was done. He fumbled around in his cockpit for a pair of field glasses, found them, and with his free hand started to adjust them.

ONE glance confirmed his suspicions, filled him with feverish excitement. For, through the glasses, he had caught the insignia of the two-seater——had seen, painted on its fuselage, two hands clasping one another. The Block brothers! He had heard of them. Two young brothers who worked together, one piloting the plane, and the other observing. And he had learned to hate them with that half-envious hatred he felt for all the great German aces. He knew that due to the reconnaissance work of these brothers, many drives had been checked, and many German offensives had succeeded. And now they had information which would tell the Hun that a counter-attack was being planned!

By this time he had passed the scene of conflict, and had to glance back to see the lone Camel trying to send down that powerful two-seater, with only the important A.A. shells to help. Still, he must not think about it. It was none of his business. He was a ferry pilot, and his job was to get these new planes to Rois. If anything happened to them, he would be in for it. Such things were a serious offence.

And so, reluctantly, he resigned himself to his dull, monotonous work. There was nothing else to do. He decided to take just one more look, just to see how the Camel was making out. He jerked his head around, and then his heart stood still.

The Camel was floundering downwards, not entirely done for, but damaged enough to put it out

of business. And the two-seater which had zoomed upwards, banked suddenly off to the right and went racing away—for the German lines!

It was all obvious, all perfectly clear. The Germans had their information, and unless intercepted on the way would get it over to their lines. And the chances of their being intercepted were slim, Kirby knew. They would take plenty of precautions about their course, steering clear of all signs of the enemy.

Yet, what should he do about it? True, he had four planes at his command, but they were without guns, practically helpless, and he could not order them to pursue or fight. And if he broke away from his flight, pursued by himself—

He wanted to sit still a moment, wanted to think, piece his confused thoughts together. But he couldn't. All the time they were moving further and further away from the place. And looking back, he saw the German plane fading rapidly into a tiny speck. A few more seconds and he would lose sight of it.

"Damn!" he burst out. "It's none of my business anyway!"

No, he must ignore the thing, as if he didn't know about it. If he tried to help, all the thanks he'd get would be a discharge. He resolved to go ahead to Rois, put the thing out of his mind.

BUT even then, in the second it had taken him to make this decision, a warm, tingling feeling rose in his chest, surging until it enveloped him completely. He sat up straight in the cockpit, his eyes gleaming, his teeth clenched in a grim smile. He knew that feeling. It was fight! And he had not felt it since his two comrades had been captured. When it came he could not resist it, it swept him off his feet, impelled him.

Then he was jerking out his Very pistol, from his overalls. He held it in the air, fired three pink rockets. That was the agreed signal. It meant: "I'm leaving the flight. Carry on by yourselves."

And without waiting further he banked around and put on full throttle. He flashed by the Nieuport on the right side of the V, saw the pilot waving frantically to him, as if telling him to give up this crazy notion.

"Go to hell!" he bellowed, wishing the man could hear him. He scanned the sky ahead of him. There it was, that speck! And he'd stop it. He didn't know how, but he'd stop it!

And so the race began. He flew as he had never flown before, urging on his plane with skill and strength. And the Spad responded with a thunderous

roar, its whole fuselage trembling at the break-neck speed. He clung to the thought that he had one advantage. Ordinarily a Spad could go faster than a Hun two-seater. But perhaps those brothers had a better plane. He did not know. At any rate, they had a head start, and he must catch them before they reached the lines, before they could land with their information.

He was gaining now, he saw the speck growing, and he leaned forward, every muscle taut, every nerve alert. Damn it, if only he could push the plane forward, hurl it like a missile. The speck continued to grow. He went on. And then his heart sank.

There were some clouds up there, a dense group of them. The German plane zoomed up and lost itself in them. And Kirby knew now that his chances were slimmer than ever. He might go up there and circle around, hoping to meet the Huns, but they could shoot him easily then. And they might stay there or come through, using the clouds as a shield to hide their course.

But that terrible moment was soon over. The Germans came out of the clouds and went on. Kirby followed again, his hopes rising. But now he was not gaining so steadily. Evidently the German pilot had put on more speed, and Kirby had all he could do to keep from losing sight of the two-seater.

THUS the race continued. Kirby was like a man possessed, bent on one thing only—catching up to the Germans. He did not realize any more that he had no guns, that his frail Spad was powerless. He did not stop to consider that he had broken the rules, that he was doing something which even the least conservative airmen would condemn as idiotic. He simply went on, after those two brothers, cursing when they lost themselves in the clouds, exulting when they reappeared, gaining on them, losing, but always following.

For the last five minutes the air had been growing sort of bumpy, but he hadn't noticed it. Now he looked down and with a start found himself at the front! The bumpiness was from the concussion of shells below, for the Germans were sending them over in big quantities today. Outside of the white puffs, the ground was a dull brown blur. But then he recognized the zig-zagged trenches. The reserve line already! Why, they were nearing the German lines now. If the two-seater got much further—

A grim determination seized him. It wouldn't get

much further! He worked again to get more speed out of his machine, cursing at it, yelling at the engine to go faster.

And luck (if an encounter with that two-seater could be called luck) was with him. The German plane, oblivious that it was being followed, slowed down and went more leisurely. Kirby surmised that the two men were probably noting the front line trenches, seeing just how things stood there.

Now was his opportunity. He dashed ahead then thought better of it, and began one of his famous climbs. The air became thinner, the sky bluer. It was cold, but he didn't notice it. He was fairly bursting with exhilaration. He was at the front again! It seemed incredible—a short time ago he had been so far removed from the “big racket”—but here he was, and he was going to do battle, guns or no guns.

Twelve thousand feet and he leveled off and raced ahead, got above the two-seater, between the sun and the enemy plane. And then, despite his desire to get right into action, he paused. What was he going to do? Swoop down, yes, but what then? He had no guns. The German plane had three guns, one of them a movable, flanking one.

YET he must hold up that information. Perhaps—a faint gleam of hope flickered in him—he could delay the Germans, stop them until some other planes came along. Surely the men in the trenches, seeing his predicament, would telephone for help. He looked down. He was right over the allied front line trench now. He could see the clumsily zig-zagged cut, crowded with tiny human specks and their flashing bayonets. He could see the white piles of sand-bags, the penciled lines of barbed wire. His eye swept along the ground, across pock-marked No-Man's-Land, where the shells were bursting continually. There was another zig-zag cut over there—the German front line trench. What a place to stage a show—right over both front lines, in view of all those men! Yes, his old, insatiable appetite for glory was getting the better of him again.

And it was lucky, because it gave him courage. He was directly over the two-seater now, in a position to dive. He was gauging his distance. He thought he saw the tiny specks in the allied trench waving to him. The sight encouraged him.

“Hell!” he exploded. “I'll trust to luck!”

And with an almost savage gesture, he pushed the joy-stick forward. The nose of the Spad dipped, and

he was thundering down, with the wind whistling past him, through the flying wires. He was thundering down to attack, trusting to skill and a natural instinct for flying.

He was descending on a dead angle, where the Germans couldn't hit him. Down he plunged, faster and faster. The men in the trenches, both Germans and Allies, were watching now, holding their breaths. They saw the liny speck of a Spad dropping out of the sun, plunging down like a comet with a trail of smoke in its wake, diving for the larger two-seater, which hovered there in the blue, unawares, its great wings shimmering in the sunlight. Was that American pilot crazy? He was going straight toward the German plane. There would surely be a head-on collision. A few feet more now and. . . .

SUDDENLY the heavy two-seater was rolling to get out of the way. It was a hasty half-roll, and the plane lost several feet of altitude. Kirby swept past, almost brushing it with his wings. He caught a glimpse of two grim men in the cockpits, saw their stern faces behind their goggles. The observer was flanking his gun around to spray the “Mosquito” with bullets. But Kirby was too fast. Already he had gotten beneath the two-seater, where the guns couldn't reach him.

The German plane tried to start a climb. Kirby acted at once. Without even thinking of those machine guns, he zoomed up from under the two-seater, looped, and, flying upside down, threatened to crash into it again. Once more the Germans lost altitude in a half-roll. But the observer was determined. *Rat-tat-tat* went his machine gun, and Kirby saw the smoky tracer ripping through his top wing surface. The sight stirred him to savage action. He rolled around to right his plane, but he rolled so close to the German plane that the latter lost some more altitude.

And then, before the spell-bound onlookers in the trenches, there was enacted one of the strangest and most spectacular dramas they had ever witnessed. Having taught himself this new trick, Kirby began in earnest, began to show that it was possible to fight without a gun, even if your adversary had one. Braving the Germans' sulphurous fire, which often sprayed his machine, he commenced to worry the two-seater with feints and lunges, for which the delicate and graceful Spad was admirably equipped. And always his bluff succeeded, the Germans constantly lost altitude.

The men below gazed at the sky, squinting their eyes in the sun. They saw the two planes up there,

one small and one large, saw them banking, dipping, dropping, now silhouetted against the sun, now glinting golden in its light. They did not know how things stood, but they guessed that Kirby did not have the use of his guns, and had to resort to this daring trick. And he was more the "Mosquito" than ever now, as he kept lunging his tiny plane insistently at the powerful two-seater, pestering it into helpless frenzy, making it flounder ludicrously. There was something in it all which thrilled the blood, something of David going after Goliath, of the little fellow overcoming the big bully. And they cheered Kirby, cheered him as he forced the two-seater lower and lower. Even the German soldiers seemed inclined to favor him. For when an ambitious machine gunner aimed his gun in the hope of getting Kirby from the ground as the allies had gotten Richthofen, his comrades jerked him roughly away, admonished him to stop. Nobody wanted the show spoiled. Indeed, except for the thunder of big shells from the "heavies," it seemed that the war had been suspended temporarily so that this thrilling sport in the air could be witnessed.

SLOWLY, bit by bit, as he banked and lunged, Kirby was working the two-seater down on the carpet. By this time a feeling of triumph possessed him. As he zoomed up past his big victim he saw those two brothers again. They were not so grim-looking now—they were moving around frantically, trying vainly to get the plane under control, to maneuver out of this mess. He waved to them, roared with mocking laughter.

"Try this one, brothers!" he bellowed, wishing they could hear. And he nosed his ship towards them again, pushing them still lower. Yes, they would be the laughing stock of the whole air force, letting an unarmed Spad get the better of them.

They were down on the carpet now, with Kirby employing all the tricks he knew, making eye and muscle co-ordinate with machine-like precision. He never gave them an inch of leeway. As soon as he forced them down a little further, he clung to the spot, so they couldn't rise again. Just what he'd do when they got close to the ground he didn't know. But he was going to get those two brothers! Five hundred feet . . . four hundred and fifty . . . four hundred . . . The planes were so low now that the men in the trenches could see the helmeted pilots plainly. Kirby, in a free second, waved to them. The men went wild, jumped up and down, waved and shouted for all they were

worth. One young enthusiast clattered up over the parapet and, oblivious of the danger, sprang to his feet, yelling hoarsely:

"Come on you son-of-a-gun of a sky guy! Bring the square-head down! Come on, damn you, or mother hang out my golden star!"

And they had to drag him in again and sit on him to keep him quiet.

Kirby was getting tired, though he refused to accept the fact. This jerky method of flying required a tremendous amount of energy—and he had to keep moving the joy-stick and kicking the rudder-bar. But when he glanced down, for a second, and saw those men waving up at him, he fought with renewed vigor. Why, this was a stunt!

Almost down to a hundred feet now. He banked off to lunge again. A little more and the German would be down.

BUT then he started in sudden alarm. Shells were whining directly below the two planes, bursting right there on the ground in rapid succession. The concussions were shaking his machine violently now, and the trick of pushing down the German became more and more difficult. If they went much lower they would doubtless both be shattered by those shells.

Then, at that very moment, he heard a ripping of fabric in the rear fuselage. He looked. The German observer had temporarily caught his range, and was spraying him again. He rolled slightly, just enough to get out of the way. Another shell screamed by. He lunged. The ground was closer, he could see the shell-holes, the mud. He would get that plane if he could hold out a little longer. Perhaps one more dive would do it.

Some sixth sense prompted him to glance upwards. He did, and the discovery came like a tremendous blow, shattering his hopes, breaking his courageous determination. He had to restrain himself from slumping down in his cockpit and resigning completely, throwing up the sponge.

Five of them! Five Fokkers diving down out of the sky, each equipped with a pair of guns! He didn't have a chance. His only protection were the shells, and the fact that he was down low. Perhaps they wouldn't venture here.

And as he hesitated, wondering what to do, the two-seater below took advantage of the situation, pulled up its nose, and started to zoom. Rage seized him then, a blind rage which overshadowed all other

emotions. He didn't care what happened, but he would triumph over those two brothers! By God, he would crash into them and be done with it!

A HUSH had fallen over the tense onlookers, and they stood rooted to the spot, torn by the suspense of that awful moment. Closer and closer came those five new Fokkers. Every man of them hated those planes, even the Germans hated them, for interrupting the "game." But meanwhile Kirby was working frantically, down near the smoky ground. He was maneuvering now to get in a position above the two seater. Could he manage it? The men sensed that the climax was on hand. Kirby was now directly over the German ship, his own plane leveled off. He seemed to pause a second. There was a sudden intake of breaths.

Then——

Kirby's plane did a perfect pancake right on top of the two-seater. He plopped his machine down, keeping it level. And the German pilot must have become confused, must have forgotten that he was so low. He tried to dive out. And he dived, nose first, into the ground. The big plane turned over clumsily, then burst into flames.

The joy of witnessing this victory was spoiled by the sight of those Fokkers, now right on top of Kirby. But the men broke into hoarse cheers, wishing the lone pilot luck, telling him not to give up. Kirby could not, of course, hear the men, but he felt that they were behind him just the same. The accomplishment of the feat was all he could have wished for. He knew he was trapped now, knew those Fokkers—which were maneuvering for a position to shoot him—would get him in a few seconds. But he didn't care. With reckless indifference, he pulled back his ship and tried to climb out. He heard the tracer whistling past. Three of the Germans were on his tail. The others were above him, in front trying to shoot down at him. He kept rolling, wouldn't straighten out. They shot off a piece of his rudder, and his machine began to side-slip. He was gone. But it didn't matter. He had won that other fight! The bullets were hitting his top wing now, and it was shaking, threatening to come off. A second more, he figured, to live. Then——

HE DIDN'T know exactly how it happened, didn't see it at first, but suddenly he was aware of a general confusion among his attackers. They left him and started to climb. Then he realized, even before he saw. They were being attacked from above, and wanted to

make some altitude so they wouldn't be trapped on the carpet. Kirby pulled out immediately, and started to climb, too. Then he looked up.

Two planes were attacking the Germans, two fast single-seaters. As the sun flashed on them he caught a glimpse of their insignias, and then he wondered if he wasn't dreaming. A yell of wild joy broke from his dry throat:

"Carn!—Travis!" And he was climbing up there as fast as his plane could go. Was it possible? Had his two comrades escaped, come back and gone out to fight again? It couldn't be true. But it was true! As he saw those two planes diving and zooming after the Fokkers he knew it was true. He knew his comrades' flying, knew if well!

They were breaking some records themselves. They had sent down two Huns already, and were in hot pursuit after the remaining three. Kirby was up there now, waving his arms, though he knew they didn't see. Besides, how were they to know him? This plane didn't bear his old insignia. Well, he would show them somehow. He went up there and, since he couldn't shoot, helped force the Germans into the proper positions. His plane was damaged, but he was zooming, diving, banking nevertheless. A Fokker flashed by at his left, with one of the new single-seaters on its tail. Kirby knew that it was Travis who sat in the cockpit, and he waved frantically. Travis waved back. Kirby had been recognized! His scheme had worked—he had made himself known by his flying. A little later he passed Carn, and they also exchanged greetings. Two Fokkers were left now. The Three Mosquitoes went for them, but they raced away, at full throttle. So the Three Mosquitoes turned for home.

ONCE more Kirby was leading them, in a perfect V, and they were on the way home. And overhead, accompanying them, was a squadron from the drome which had arrived too late to participate in the battle. It was a royal escort.

They could hardly wait until they reached the ground.

"You blankety bums!" Kirby swore exultantly. "Where the hell did you come from anyway? I thought you were in a Jerry prison."

"What!" exclaimed Shorty Carn, lighting up his inseparable briar pipe. "Did you think we were going to stay cooped up in a lousy prison camp? We played sick, got in the hospital, and skipped."

"Got back this morning," pursued the lanky Travis,

with his customary gravity. "And not long afterwards a call came in that some single-seater was having trouble with a Hun. We went out and found those five Fokkers. But," he frowned at Kirby, "what about you? How come you're here, at the front, when you're supposed to be ferry-piloting over at Rois, in the 'Black Areas'?"

"What!" Kirby snorted indignantly. "Did you think I was going to stay cooped up in a lousy ferry plane? I skipped, too!" And he told them the whole story.

He told it again, later, to the C.O., when the three stood before the grizzled old colonel in the field office.

"Of course, sir," Kirby was concluding, "I may not have been in the right. But," there was a vibrant thrill in his voice, "I think I've proved I can fight as good as ever. And now the three of us——"

"One moment," said the C.O., his steely eyes narrowing. "All this is well and good, and I'm going to get you transferred back. But there's a condition. Hereafter," he brought his fist down on the desk, "there's to be no more stunting. Understand? That fight to-day, Kirby, was very spectacular, but such stunting——"

"Stunting hell!" Kirby burst out, completely forgetting his rank. "That wasn't stunting! Damn it all, I had no guns. I told you I——" Then he blushed, and stammered, "Er—I beg your pardon, sir."

"No," said the C.O., with a peculiar grin. "I beg yours."

