

A PARACHUTIN' FOOL

by RALPH OPPENHEIM

*Slade watched Harlan jump, saw the parachute open, yet he kept his seat in the burning plane!
Why? A thrilling vital yarn of the aviation corps.*

DRESSED IN HEAVY FLYING TOGS, John Slade stood in a corner of the big, fireproof hangar. The hangar was one of the group which comprised a United States airdrome in France, and it housed half a dozen planes. Just now, however, there was only one plane to be seen—a small, observation two-seater. The others had already gone up to do their daily work of raiding and scouting. The remaining plane was being prepared for flight by four mechanics who climbed about it like industrious ants, tuning the engine, testing controls, and tightening flying wires. In a few minutes they would wheel it out of the hangar.

John Slade seemed scarcely aware of these noisy activities. He stood staring at a bulky square package, wrapped in canvas and bedecked with leather straps, which lay on the floor before him. This package, he could have told you, was a parachute. It was a simple and yet a most remarkable contrivance. This particular type, one of the earliest “release-ring” parachutes, had been perfected by a pilot of Slade’s own squadron. If a man pulled the ring which hung at his breast, the folded silk spread would be released, and, due to the weight of him to whom the ropes were attached, would flutter open, umbrella fashion. In this way one could glide down to earth slowly and easily, instead of being dashed to pieces.

All this John Slade knew, and yet the mere sight of that wonderful device filled him with inconceivable terror. He was afraid of the parachute, all the more so because it was about the only thing he feared. Give him a plane and he would fly to the end of the earth: he would plunge right into a whole squadron of Boche planes and literally thumb his nose at death. But tell him to jump from this plane in midair, to count three and pull the rip-cord, and he would be completely paralyzed by fear.

That his fear was perfectly idiotic, he readily agreed.

It would have been excusable if he had felt qualms about going up over the German lines and pitting his strength and wit against theirs. In such a case he would have had plenty of company to share his feelings. But a parachute! Why, even men who trembled every time the wheels of their plane left solid ground paid scant attention to their ’chutes.

Yet, like every man who has some great fear, John Slade could have offered reasons which would sound plausible enough. First of all, there was the idea of jumping from the plane, with the earth thousands of feet below, of letting himself drop into an empty mile of space. How a man could do this was beyond his conception; the very thought was more than he could bear. Secondly, even if he could summon enough courage to jump, he was certain that he would be too overcome with panic to pull the rip-cord. Thirdly, even if he managed to pull the rip-cord, the parachute might fail to open. That was improbable, but it was also possible. He knew of two such cases; the men had hurtled down to inevitable death. And finally, granting that none of these dreadful imaginings materialised, granting that the parachute did open properly, he would be unable to escape the experience of remaining suspended in the air, of floating slowly own with nothing under his feet, nothing to hold on to.

John Slade’s fear of parachutes was, of course, a deep secret. No one in the squadron knew it, and Slade’s shame and self-contempt kept him from speaking of it. The rest of the boys looked upon him as a most daring aviator, who had scored a record of four Boche planes in only two months of active service. One more and he would be an “Ace.”

Thus far he had been fortunate. He had never been forced to try his parachute. As a matter of fact, until recently he had had none to try. The prevailing types of parachutes had been too crude and impracticable to be used except by balloonists; only after inventors

had racked their brains did the devices become part of the air plane pilots' regulation equipment. And Slade's squadron was perhaps the only one having such a modem type.

SINCE the time the new parachutes had been put into use Slade's plane, though badly shot up on several occasions, had never been so incapacitated as to necessitate a leap. He had been able always to remain at his controls, held securely in the cockpit by the strong safety belt. But, prior to each flight, he would go through a terrific spell of panic and suspense. There was always the thought that this time he would have to use his parachute. It was bound to happen. He felt it in his bones.

To-day the terror was full upon him, more devastating than ever. This because the colonel, the C.O. of the airdrome, had said, clearly and specifically, that he might have to leap from his plane. Through an ironic destiny, the task which had been assigned to John Slade was of such a nature that a parachute jump seemed more than likely.

"A daredevil's stunt," were the C.O.'s words, as Slade stood before his desk in the field office. "That's why I'm picking a daredevil to do it, Slade." He eyed the tall young man with unconcealed admiration. "Our infantry troops want to take that salient—the ruined village of Dubonne across the lines. If they capture this, they will be in a position to launch a new drive, one of the biggest offensives yet. Now we know that the village is infested with Huns, but we want to know more about it. Only photographs, taken at the points I've shown you, can serve the purpose. And I'm trusting you to take Harlan, our photographer, there and back."

Slade's hearty laugh filled the room.

"A cinch, sir! Well get those Fritzes to pose pretty for us. I'll tell them to watch the birdie—it'll be right over their heads—and Harlan can get his pictures. Oh," he added, with firm conviction, "we'll get them!"

"That's the spirit." The colonel smiled. But then his hard, stern face darkened. "However, Slade, I don't want you to entertain any false illusions about the job being easy. I said this was a daredevil's stunt. It is. The danger is unusual because you will be alone. I'd send out more planes, but they've gone up to raid that airdrome, and we want to get the pictures right away. Of course, if you can't get them alone, I'll have to send out the squadron later. But——"

"You won't have to send out the squadron, sir,"

Slade assured him quietly. "We'll come through all right."

"If the German air scouts don't spot you, I have no doubt that you will—regardless of the A.A. and machine-gun fire from the ground. But if they do spot you and attack, you'll be in a devil of a mess. In order to get the pictures, you must remain in certain positions for a long time, with no other plane to protect you. A neat target, I'm afraid! Yet," he added slowly, "we do need those pictures. So, though I hate to do it, I'm ordering you to stay up there as long as you can. When you have the photographs, beat it for home."

He paused to clear his throat. And then he spoke those unforgettable words, which had a serious import to Slade.

"It is needless for me to add, Slade—you know the game too well to be deceived—that in event of an air attack the chance of your being brought down is, of course, greater than usual. Be sure to take your parachute. If anything happens, forget the pictures—you couldn't save them anyway—and jump for it. Try to keep from getting captured—get back to our lines somehow. Above all," he spoke sternly, "don't get killed. We need you, Slade."

"Yes, sir," said Slade, but now his voice had a nervous note in it "I'll do my best, and so will Harlan, I'm sure." The C.O. gave a few more instructions, handed Slade a chart, and wished him good luck. The aviator saluted, went to the hangar, and rigged himself up. Then he took out a parachute.

NOW he stood staring at it, dreading to put it on. If he put it on, it followed that he would have to use it. Yes, to-day he would certainly face the crisis of his life. It was bound to happen. He felt it in his bones!

He was aroused suddenly from his broodings by a sound of squeaking and dragging. The sound came from the plane, and he turned. The mechanics were wheeling the machine from the hangar. This meant they were ready to warm up. In a few minutes he must take off.

He leaned down and straightened out the straps of the parachute. Then, with trembling fingers, he began to put on the harness.

While he was doing this a short, rugged-faced man, wearing flying togs carrying an all-metal camera, came into the hangar. He looked around, spied Slade, and approached.

"All ready, Johnny, old boy?" he asked, setting down the camera.

Slade smiled warmly. At the same time he noticed that the man had on his parachute pack. Funny, it didn't seem to bother him.

"I'll be ready in a jiffy, Harlan," he replied. Then, trying hard to make his voice sound indifferent: "I'm just putting on my 'chute."

"Yeah," Harlan made a grimace. "Looks as if we may be taking a little jump with those 'chutes, don't it? Hope they're strong."

Slade's fingers shook so violently that he could not adjust the straps. He forced a laugh from his dry lips.

"Damn this harness," he complained, and flushed. "I never can get it right."

"Here, I'll give you a lift." Harlan seized the strap in his steady hand and arranged it deftly.

From outside came a series of deafening detonations, a sound of mingled sputtering and barking.

"They're warming up!" cried Harlan. "Let's go!"

The cameraman picked up his camera, and they walked out. John Slade felt the pull of the twenty-six pound 'chute pack which hung behind his back. With each step it swung and struck him like a heavy pillow. He wished he could forget about it. Well, he would, once they got into the air. He always did.

THEY came out on a smooth wide field, partly grass, partly hardened and leveled earth. The bright morning sun gave everything a cheerful gleam. The camouflaged hangars looked gay where the light bathed them. Here and there an airplane rested on its wheels. Across the field some artillery officers were examining the A.A. guns.

The two men went over to the little observation plane, which was throbbing from nose to tail, its propeller whirling. In the cockpit stood a mechanic, operating the throttle to put the motor through the warming-up process. Another chap was testing the exhaust.

"She's about ready," said the man in the cockpit. "Guess you can take off now."

"Righto!" And the cameraman climbed into the rear cockpit, taking his camera with him and clamping it on the cowling. He turned it around, pointed it up and down, assured himself that he could focus it with ease.

John Slade put his foot on the little step, to climb up.

"Did you give us plenty of ammunition?" he asked, glancing at the two machine guns which protruded from the front cockpit.

"Enough to send three Fritzie pilots to hell!" the mechanic said, with relishing enthusiasm.

"Good!" Slade climbed into the plane. As he did so the parachute pack jogged up and down, jerking straps tight around his chest, under his armpits. How he hated that damned parachute!

He sat down, fastened his safety buckle, and sought the controls. There was a roar like Niagara; the propeller became totally invisible in its whirling speed. The mechanics jerked aside the wooden blocks which had stood in front of them. They were above a dense forest, forward, taxied down the runway——

TWENTY minutes' flying brought them within sight of their destination. They were above a dense forest, at an altitude of seven thousand feet. At the end of the forest was a hilly field, and at the end of the field lay the remains of what had once been a quaint, trim French village. Now it was just a pile of ruins, some of them suggesting, in a grotesque manner, the buildings which used to stand there. Here the side of a house, with paneless windows, stood up valiantly, waiting to be razed by the next bombardment. There a cellar, its interior in perfect order, lay exposed as if the building had simply been lifted off. Yonder a broken chimney, with a pathetic semblance of a fireplace at its base, rose uncertainly from the ground.

But the village was not without life. In strange contrast to the rains, a grey line of German infantry marched, in perfect step, down a cobblestoned street, their bayonets flashing. An immaculate officer, mounted on a beautiful dark horse, galloped up and down to keep his eyes on them. In other spots artillery could be seen—huge cannons poking their noses from broken walls, nests of machine gunners ambushed in cellars. Sentries and pickets were posted all about the ruins, watching for the first sign of the enemy.

"Got my first picture!" Harlan shouted, to make himself heard above the roar of the motor. "Now, if you'll go down farther, we can get some more."

Slade nodded and pushed the control stick forward. The plane dipped and swept downwards.

A group of officers, apparently hearing the sound, glanced up. One of them ran off hastily. The next moment a siren blew, shrill and loud.

From one of the walls came a terrific spurt of flame and smoke. The two men heard the familiar whine, then a shell burst close enough to rock them.

Slade's laugh rang out above the roar. He jerked his head back towards Harlan, who had paled a little behind his helmet.

"Don't let them scare you!" he shouted. "Those A.A. guns couldn't hit a barn wall! Never worry about them. The only way they can get us from there is with machine guns."

His words proved to be prophetic. In a few moments there came a *rat-tat-tat*, rapid streaks of flame from one of the cellars. A fusillade of bullets whistled past them. Slade maneuvered to keep them from getting his range.

"All right!" the cameraman yelled. "Got another one. Only a few more. Let's get them quickly!"

They consulted the chart. Slade turned the plane, and they flew to another section. Here a fresh bombardment of A.A.'s and machine guns greeted them. This time a few bullets struck the lower wing, but no damage was done. Slade knew his work. Deftly and swiftly he kept dodging out of range.

They followed their course, taking picture after picture. Often Harlan had to wait until the dense black smoke of the shells cleared away.

"Now, we only have one more!" Harlan shouted, at length. "Then we can beat it?"

They headed for their next position. Harlan adjusted his camera. Then, suddenly, a startled cry broke from his lips.

"Holy mackerel! Look what's coming! Gee—"

Slade, turning, saw that Harlan, his face filled with mingled horror and wonder, was pointing forwards and up. He looked.

OUT of the sun appeared, as if by magic, a squadron of German Fokkers.

"Boche planes!" exclaimed Slade, excitedly. "Gosh, what a crowd—nine, ten, twelve of 'em! Ain't they a sight! Boy, oh, boy!"

They were a sight indeed. Flying in perfect V-shaped formation, their wings shimmering gold in the sunlight, they moved slowly on. A steady drone, like that of a bumble-bee, rose in the air.

"Got to get that picture quick and beat it!" Slade shouted. "Otherwise we haven't a chance. Got it?"

"No— Pull up your left rudder. That's right. Top rudder now!"

Down below, encouraged by the appearance of the German planes, the men directed a fresh attack against the two-seater. Shells burst all around it, and the air once more turned black with smoke.

"When it clear—I'll get it!" Harlan shrieked.

The Fokkers were now overhead. Looking up. Slade could see the black Maltese crosses on their

wings. They had sighted their prey. Now two of them swooped down like monstrous hawks to make short order of it.

"Hold it, Slade!" Harlan blurted. "Wait until this damned smoke clears. You can dodge, but stick around this spot!"

Slade nodded grimly. He looked back. The two Germans, thorough aviators that they were, had come down behind him, the object being to "get on his tail"—shoot into him. He saw that one Boche had his sights on him already. The other was trying to get under him, to hold him in position. He must do something quickly. With an abrupt jerk, he side-slipped and banked. This fooled them. The one on his tail was too surprised to change his course. He came speeding past the two-seater, so close that Slade could see the man's hard intelligent features. Slade waved his arm. The German, smiling, waved back. To them it was just good sport. Like prizefighters, they greeted each other before the battle.

The second plane was maneuvering beneath Slade, trying to get on his tail again, and shooting up at him. There was a sound of ripping and groaning as the tracer bullets tore through the wings and fuselage. Well, he would show them something too! His blood tingled with exhilaration. He had forgotten all about parachutes. This was a fight!

While he dodged the German beneath him, he crept up stealthily on the one in front. He adjusted his sights. Then his gun spat. The plane of the pilot who had just waved to him lurched, seemed to hesitate, and then went down in a nose dive—out of control. Slade could not look to see its ultimate fate. More Fokkers were swooping down to the rescue.

"How about that picture?"

"Got to go back!" yelled Harlan, nervously. "It's back there, you know. How can we with those planes, though?"

Four of the Germans were on the American's tail now. Others were diving beneath him. The rest were shooting down from overhead. Like maddened hornets they swarmed all around him. Yet Slade had to go back to get that picture. He would try another trick. He opened the throttle wide, as if he meant to dash on, in retreat. They followed suit. Then, with dramatic suddenness, he pivoted around in a breathless Immelmann turn and went crashing straight towards them. Thrown into confusion, they banked to avoid a crash, and he went by, giving them a fair exchange of bullets. They recovered themselves and turned to resume the attack.

SLADE glanced back at Harlan. The latter was clinging to the cockpit cowling, visibly shaken "For God's sake—I thought we were gone that time!" he gasped. "Don't try any more of those tricks—please!" "Get that picture!"

Harlan leaned over and took his picture at last. Slade waited no longer. Plunging forward, he made for home.

But the Fokkers, evidently guessing that he had an important mission, were determined to get him. They swooped down en masse and followed, pumping out a steady stream of bullets. He rolled, dipped, swerved, and climbed to avoid the shots, now and then firing back—aimlessly, because he did not have his sights on them. He put on more speed. The Germans, not to be outdone, did the same. They were racing through the air at more than 200 miles an hour, bullets whizzing back and forth.

Below them stretched the dense forest they had passed before. Slade knew that they were only five miles from the lines. If he could get there, the Fokkers would molest him no longer.

But then a keen pilot got his sights on them, and Slade, using all his wits, could not shake them off. *Rat-tat-tat* went the machine gun. They were being hit. The German was finding his mark. The other planes tried to help him, tried to force Slade into range.

Slade dived, but the German dived right after him, and held his sights. The bullets kept pumping into the two-seater.

"Damn him!" cried Slade. "The leech! Can't get rid of him!"

He tried every trick he knew. But the German knew them all too, and stuck close to his tail.

Suddenly the two-seater gave a great lurch. Slade knew at once that something serious had happened. He darted a swift glance over his shoulder.

Half of the rudder had been shot away!

"Did they get us?" asked Harlan, shifting in his seat.

Slade shook his head slowly, "We can still fly," he replied.

It was true that they could still fly, but now fancy work—diving and zooming—was out of the question. The only thing to do was to go straight ahead, at all the speed they could make, and hope to get across the lines in time.

Slade worked furiously, taxing every muscle to keep the controls in hand. The plane flew along jerkily. Its speed had slackened considerably. The Germans followed at leisure, and continued shooting.

"Hurry up!" Harlan exclaimed. "They'll pot us if you don't!"

"I'm trying!"

"Well, I hope—" Harlan broke off his own sentence with a cry of horror. "God! We're burning up! They've got us! We're on fire!"

At first Slade thought he was crazy. But he wasn't crazy. Smoke was issuing from the broken tail. It was burning. That the fire didn't consume them at once, that the plane didn't burst into flames, was something Slade couldn't understand. The only possible explanation was that the wind was rushing past them, and it blew the fire away from them.

The plane rolled dizzily, and began to side-slip.

"We're burning up!" Harlan repeated, in frenzy. "We've got to get out, or well be roasted to hell! Let's jump for it!"

For a moment Slade did not grasp the significance of these words. Then a horrible chill crept through him, and he turned deathly pale. But he was not surprised. The crisis he had always anticipated was on hand. It had been bound to happen. He had felt it in his bones.

"Come on, Slade! If you stay any longer—"

Harlan was standing up in the cockpit, arranging his parachute straps. The reason was obvious. They were in a burning plane. The only thing to do when you're in a burning plane is to get out, as quickly as possible. And the only way to get out is by using your parachute.

Yes, it had come to a showdown. He must jump. The C.O. had told him to jump. Harlan was telling him to jump. And something deep inside of him was telling him to jump. If he didn't jump he would die a coward. He did not want to die a coward.

A determined expression came over his face. He reached for the safety-belt, started to unbuckle it. But then he stopped, his hands limp, the blood seeming to freeze within him:

To jump out there into space, to let himself drop!

Nausea seized him from head to foot. Perspiration broke out on his forehead. He could not move.

"Damn you, Slade, come on!" Harlan was holding onto a strut, hesitating to jump until he saw that his companion would follow.

Somehow Slade found his voice; it rose, strange and unnatural:

"Go on! I'll follow!"

Without the slightest reluctance. Harlan let go of the strut and leaped clear of the plane. As Slade saw

him drop he shuadered in anguished horror. He dared not look down.

He slumped back, nerveless, in the cockpit, full of self-contempt. So he had failed after all. He didn't have spunk enough to go out and jump. He cursed himself, called himself names. He was a weakling, a jellyfish. And a coward. A sob choked him. He didn't want to be a coward.

YET, while his emotions ran havoc, his mind was still the mind of a keen aviator. All this time he had been trying instinctively to keep the plane level, flying straight ahead. He knew that the German Fokkers had turned away. Evidently they had seen Harlan jump and had decided that the job was finished. And it certainly looked as if they were right. The fire was spreading slowly, creeping around the broken rudder. Soon it would reach the fuselage, and soon later the gasoline would be touched off. The end would be swift and merciful.

But then a new thought came to Slade. Perhaps he could manage a landing, since he was afraid to jump. He glanced down, and his heart sank instantly. He was still over that forest. No landing could he made here. His eyes swept along the ground, in front of him. Then his hopes rose again. About a mile away, he spied the smooth wide field of his airdrome. There was a chance, a fleeting chance, that he could get there before the plane cracked.

He opened the throttle wide, damned the slowness of the engine, and began to fight with tooth and nail. He heard a crackling of wood as the framework began to burn. It wouldn't be much longer now.

That mad race with the flames lasted only about a minute. To Slade it seemed a matter of hours. It was all a blurred nightmare, though there were vivid flashes when he was painfully aware of his predicament. He would find himself jerking at the control stick until his arms grew numb. He would watch himself making a fresh effort to jump, only to succumb to the terror, the terror of space. He would feel his hopes sink listlessly as he glanced over the fuselage, only to see the dense foliage of that impenetrable forest. He had never known the forest was so big. It was tremendous. He didn't seem to be getting any closer to the smooth field which lay ahead of him. Like a mirage, it kept floating away.

The fire kept spreading. It had reached the fuselage already.

Another interminable period of torture dragged

by. Then he glanced down, without hope, expecting to see those same treetops. The sight which met his eyes brought him up in his seat with a start. At that moment, no other sight could have been sweeter. It was the field, directly below him. He stared incredulously, but there was no doubt about it. He could see the big white T, the beacon set out to welcome the returning pilot. A feeling of grateful warmth swept him. Tears came to his eyes. This was home.

If only he could make the machine hold out a little longer now, if only he could make a landing!

With trembling hands, he pushed the joy-stick forward. The nose of the plane dipped, and he glided downwards.

The field loomed up below him. He must be careful now, or there would be a smash-up. In that case the plane would burst immediately into flames.

He drew upon all his skill, all his experience as an aviator, to make that landing. It seemed impossible, with his tail so badly damaged, and the fire constantly spreading. But he was a good pilot. He knew how to handle a plane.

Throttling the engine, he commenced a painstaking struggle with the controls. He swooped down several times, saw he couldn't make it, and had to level off again. There were men on the field now. They came running out from all directions, and stood gaping at the strange spectacle of a burning plane trying to make a landing. But they could not help. Slade must manage it by himself.

This time he determined to bring her down, regardless of the consequences. If he stalled any longer, he wouldn't have a chance anyway. It would be better to have the plane crack on the ground than in midair.

Again the control stick darted forward. Again the ground rose to meet him. In frantic haste, he turned off the switch and struggled to unfasten his safety belt. There was a dull thud, followed by a series of jolts. Slade was bounced up and down, then thrown violently backwards. His head banged against the metal camera, and he sank into darkness with the stench of smoke in his nostrils.

HE GAINED consciousness only to fall into a deep sleep, a sort of coma. And in this sleep he was tormented constantly by nightmares. He saw himself, always, in an incapacitated plane, looking out to jump, then succumbing to terror.

This time, he thought, he must jump. He simply

must. He was creeping around the wing of a plane, looking down into that awful space—miles and miles of it. No, he couldn't do it. It was impossible. But then, to his horror, the wing broke off—he was dropped. He couldn't find the rip-cord. There was no rip-cord! He was hurtling down, head over heels, furiously, fiercely-

With a cry of agony he sat straight up. Then he blinked his eyes. He was in a bed. This was the infirmary. Men were gathering around him. Some one was feeling his pulse.

"He's all right," he heard a gruff voice say, and now the voice spoke to him. "Nice sleep you had, eh? Been sleeping all day!"

"What—what—?" Slade began.

Then he saw the colonel approaching, and he managed a salute. The C.O. came over and laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder.

"I know just what question's on your tongue, Slade, being a pilot myself. I'll answer it for you. Everything is all right, though you had us scared considerably! When we saw that burning plane we didn't think you could ever land her. But you did, and we got both you and the pictures out before she cracked."

"The pictures?" Slade had forgotten all about them.

"Yes," said the C.O., enthusiastically, "the pictures. They're all developed and in the hands of the proper officers. Every last one of them."

"And—and Harlan?"

"He got back this afternoon—crept along until he was picked up by one of our trucks. He told us the whole story. Said the Germans were sure they got you and the pictures. They won't expect an attack now, so it's bound to be successful. Thanks to you!" he added warmly, and smiled.

"Thanks to me?" His tone was incredulous.

"Yes, and I must say I've never seen a more courageous feat. To think that you could easily have jumped from that plane but instead determined to bring us those pictures! Any other man would have used his parachute, and rightfully. Harlan can't be blamed for taking the jump. Well, Slade," his smile grew broader, "I'm going to recommend you for a D.S.C. for your extraordinary performance, and you'll get it! Congress can't refuse it to you."

"A D.S.C.?" Slade echoed, and pride surged in him. The Distinguished Service Cross was beyond all his wildest expectations. He had never dreamed of winning such an honor.

But then his face fell, flushing with shame. This was all a mistake. He wasn't brave. He hadn't earned

any medal. What they thought was courage had been cowardice. He had been afraid to jump.

"Thanks, sir," there was a strange firmness in his voice, "but before you recommend me there's one thing I've got to do." He started to climb out of bed. The army doctor let out a yell and pushed him back. "Oh, it's got to be done now, Doc, before it gets dark. If I don't, I won't sleep to-night, and I want to sleep!"

And so, after much arguing, Slade won his way. He dressed hastily and went out on the field. The sun was sinking behind the forest, but it was still light enough, he decided. He walked over to a plane which stood in front of one of the hangars.

"Donalson," he said to the young pilot he found at the machine, "I want you to take me up—right above the field here, and as high as you can go."

"Sure thing!" Donalson replied. "But may I ask why?"

"You'll see!"

Ten minutes later they were circling high above the field.

Determinedly. Slade unbuckled his belt. He stood up in the cockpit and looked down into space.

Again the terror was on him, the terror which froze his Mood.

"Hey!" Donalson cried. "What are you doing?"

"Keep on going!" Slade ordered tersely.

But Donalson had something to say in the matter.

"None of those tricks!" he warned. "Have you cracked up because of your experience? Sit down!" He turned around, reached out, and clutched at Slade's clothing.

And then John Slade did a strange thing. He simply pushed the other man off, and, before he had time to think again, leaped from the plane.

There followed a moment of the most blinding agony he had ever experienced. He scarcely knew what was happening to him.

But all at once he was wide awake, and his mind functioned in a perfectly logical manner. He was falling—he felt himself tumbling down. He must find the release-ring. He did, easily.

"One—two—three!" he counted.

He gave the release-ring a vigorous pull. A few more seconds of terror and suspense. Then a sudden lift under his Armpits which wrenched his whole body upwards. His eyes closed, and he was afraid to open them.

He felt himself drifting slowly down. To his surprise, the sensation was not altogether unpleasant. It was almost as if he were flying, or perhaps floating

He opened his eyes. A shudder passed through him. But, as soon as the novelty of the thing wore off, his fear vanished completely. He realised that he had gone through far more terrifying experiences than this. It couldn't compare, for instance, to a dizzying nose dive or tail spin.

He laughed heartily. Afraid of parachutes? Child's play!

And so he landed in the field, a new man. A crowd pressed around him, their faces astonished, their voices inquiring. The colonel stood before him.

"Good God!" he gasped. "What was the big idea, Slade? Have you gone clean nutty?"

A grin spread across Slade's face.

"No, sir," he laughed. "You see, by remaining in the burning plane. I missed the fun of a parachute drop. I've always longed for one, so I went and took it."

At this the crowd roared.

"You are the daredevil of daredevils!" exclaimed the C.O. "I've got to confess that such courage is beyond me! But I'll do my best to see that it's properly rewarded. You'll get your D.S.C., Slade, even if I have to rob it for you!"

"Yes, sir," replied Slade, and then smiled quizzically. "Guess I've earned it."