



BUCK MANLEY, BALLOON BUSTER

by LLOYD LEONARD HOWARD

There are certain things you can't explain to G.H.Q.—sometimes you just have to show 'em!

IT WASN'T ONLY *what* general headquarters had said in that letter, but *how* they had said it.

Lieutenant "Buck" Manley, just returned from an afternoon patrol, had been summoned to Major Duncan's quarters. The major had handed over the official sheet without preliminary word of explanation. As Buck read, he scowled harder.

"Well, if that isn't the bunk!" he ejaculated, handing the paper back to the major.

"I said worse than that," his commanding officer replied, "only words won't help in this case. According to this"—and he flipped the letter to the table—"we've got to show them some action."

"All right," Buck agreed, pulling up a chair and seating himself opposite the major, "what's there to

do? We've had ships in the air patrolling the lines on our sector every decent flying day. Is it our fault that the Heinies don't show up and give us some action?"

"No," Major Duncan replied slowly; that isn't the point, though. The trouble is—at least, I think it is—that G.H.Q. knows we've got a good outfit of flyers in this Fifty-first Squadron, and they're looking for something big. So far, I'll admit, we've sort of failed to produce."

"Then let G.H.Q. move us onto another sector where it's hot," Buck said flatly.

Buck was chafing for action. For nearly ten days he had led his flight patrol up and down the lines of the Meuse-Moselle sector from St. Mihiel on the Meuse River to Pont-a-Mousson on the Moselle. Each

time they had dipped into enemy territory, circling Thiaucourt and across to Lavigneville.

For some reason or other, enemy craft were scarce. Evidently, since the St. Mihiel drive, the Boche had transferred their fighting air units to another front—or else were holding them back in reserve.

Buck felt that letter asking for more patrols, together with the strongly insinuated demand for results, to be unfair in a situation beyond his control.

Major Duncan tilted slowly on his chair, mulling over the situation. General headquarters had to be satisfied. It was up to him to find a way. When G.H.Q. wanted results—they didn't want excuses.

He had sent for his friend, Buck Manley, leader of the squadron's crack Flight C, to help him with a solution.

"We've got to show 'em back there at headquarters, Buck, somehow or another, that we're there with the goods. Else, the first thing we know, they'll fill up the squadron with a bunch of rookies and shift you good flyers back to the instruction fields."

Suddenly the major jerked forward. "Say, Buck! How about balloons? We haven't a balloon down to our credit yet, and that always makes a big hit and showing with the high-ups. How about it?"

"Suits me," Buck asserted. "Bring 'em on—the sooner the better. The only trouble is, every time the flight gets within miles of one—down it goes. It's single work, I believe."

"Want to take it on, Buck?" the major asked his friend. "Alone?"

Buck remained silent for a moment. No one could call him a coward if he refused. Chasing balloons—excellent targets as they were—was suicidal. Below every balloon, were trained ground batteries, ready to fill the air with storms of leaden death.

He could easily send any of the other four of his flight. Send them—to what?

And the major had asked him if——

"All right," Buck assented. "When do I start?"

And that is how Buck Manley started on his lone career of balloon busting.

Back in his barracks, Buck confided the context of his summons to the major's quarters to his bunk mate, Lieutenant "Stubby" Davis.

"Fine! Great!" Stubby told him, beaming in enthusiasm. "When do we start?"

"We? Where do you get that "we" stuff?" Buck retorted. "We aren't going. This is a lone-hand game. The flight stays home for a few days."

Buck felt like relenting and taking his friend along, as he saw the almost tragic look of disappointment on his face. But they—the major and himself—had decided to send one ship at a time; and keep sending them out one by one—meaning, one going out to none returning. So he turned a deaf ear to Stubby's pleadings.

At exactly nine thirty-five the next morning, Buck stepped from the door of his quarters and headed for the hangar. At nine forty he stuck his head in the major's door.

"I'm off," he announced and went on. At exactly five minutes to ten, he lifted his Spad in the air, heading in the general direction of St. Mihiel.

As he cleared the field, a figure clothed for flying, face muffled in turned-up collar, helmet, and goggles, came around the corner of the hangar and disappeared within. At five minutes past ten, a second Spad took off.

CLIMBING to a three-thousand-foot altitude, Buck leveled on a straight flight. Picking up the Meuse River, he followed the course of this silver, winding ribbon. Soon St. Mihiel, that bloody salient, made famous only days before, lay beneath him.

Buck decided to swing on a long, circuiting course. Accordingly, he headed for Lavigneville. The ceiling hung low, making visibility poor. Buck flew along just beneath the curtain.

Over Lavigneville he curved the Spad slightly to the right, following a course that would bring him over Vigneulles. From this place on, he would have a straightaway course of nearly twenty miles.

On reaching Vigneulles, Buck noted that the visibility was clearing. The low-hanging fog banks had thinned out since he had left the river course. As he bore to the right to straighten out into his long stretch of flight, Buck climbed higher. He kept his plane at an incline until the black hand on his altimeter hovered at six thousand feet.

Ahead of him Rembercourt and Thiaucourt appeared to view, like sister cities. His dash chart scaled their distance apart at five miles. Buck planned to keep between them and bear on to Marieulles, the extreme point of his straight-line flight, situated well within enemy territory.

As Buck lifted his eyes from his dash chart, he saw two things almost simultaneously. One thing—and the one for which he searched—lay far in the distance ahead. Behind Marieulles, a sausage-shaped body rode

high at its cable end. The other item, and the one more to his immediate attention, consisted of a flight of three black-cross-marked planes.

Buck groaned inwardly.

“Wouldn’t you know it now? When I’ve got the flight out, we see nothing. And when I’m alone, I get more than my share.”

The three enemy craft passed over Rembercourt toward Thiaucourt. Buck knew there would be no avoiding them. They were winging directly across his line of flight. As they drew together, Buck made them out to be single-seated Fokkers.

Buck saw he was sighted. The three planes broke their V formation, the leading plane of the wedge flying to meet him, the other two circling wide to come in on his right and left.

“Going to box me up, eh?” Buck muttered, tensing himself. “All right, let’s see you do it!”

Darting head-on for the plane in his path, Buck waited till he was within a hundred-yards range. Then he pressed his thumb hard against the trigger on the control stick.

Pfut-pfut-pfut-pfut! Pfut-pfut-pfut-pfut!

Twin streams of lead sped from his guns through whirling, synchronized blades. Buck watched his tracers skim the black-crossed fuselage ahead.

“Missed!” Buck swore horribly.

Immediately he kicked the rudder bar, sideslipping out of line of his enemy’s blazing guns. As the Fokker whizzed over him, Buck veered to the right to meet the second plane—and just in time.

Roaring down to him, the second Fokker was coming into action. Buck nosed up to meet him. Catching him full between his cross-wire sights, Buck let him have a burst from both guns. His tracers streaked true. Lead was following those streaks in deadly precision.

As Buck swung off, he saw his adversary waver, slip sideways then spin earthward. A trail of smoke and flames followed him down.

“Down one—and two to go!” thought Buck.

Wheeling about on one wing tip, he headed back into the fray. He wondered for a moment that neither of the Fokkers was on his trail. Then he saw the reason.

Buzzing in a circle like flies, three planes chased each other. The leading ship, swinging in sharp spirals, bore black crosses. The center plane was a sister ship to his own. The rear plane, a Fokker, was trying to cut in on the Spad ahead.

Buck’s ears caught the faint *taka-taka-taka!* of machine guns stuttering.

“That Spad looks familiar,” thought

Buck, as he winged for the black crosses of the last plane. Slightly above the three whirling craft, he swooped down. As the nose of the trailing Fokker came into his sights, Buck pressed his trigger. A raking stream of bullets tucked a seam leading from tip to tail of the black-crossed body.

Pulling the control stick hard back, Buck zoomed to a new level. There were only two left now, besides himself—and one of those was the Spad newcomer. Far below, his late rival was spinning in a dizzy, sickening dive.

Buck quickly saw that the newcomer could take care of himself. He was sticking to the tail of the lone Fokker like a bur. Buck saw tracers jetting from guns to enter along elevators and rudder.

“He’ll get him in a minute,” prophesied Buck. “Now for that balloon!”

He took note of his bearings. The dog fight, lasting only a matter of minutes, had swept him in well over Rembercourt. The balloon lay about nine miles away. Buck lit out for it.

His eyes never left that weaving, bobbing, ungainly mass of inflated silk riding in the light breeze. This was what he was out to get, and, by George, this was going to be his balloon! He streaked ahead like a rocket.

Half the distance covered, he lifted the Spad’s nose. Altitude was what Buck wanted now. He climbed up, up, up. The black, sausage-shaded affair sank far beneath him. His altimeter pointed to six—passed seven—reached eight. Buck leveled and sped on—on, till that black hulk lay directly beneath him.

Then he dived.

Motor full out, tail flung skyward, the Spad rode down. Wind blasts roared and tore past. A swelling shriek smote Buck’s eardrums.

Down, down, down! The big bag rushed madly at him!

Black smudges showed in the clear air like mud splashes on a sheet. The anti-aircraft guns of the balloon batteries were opening up.

Still he hurtled down. The wind tore at his wings, as though to rend them asunder. Stay wires screamed.

The air was full of black splashes. They sprang up around him in dozens. Flashing streaks reared themselves at him in beautiful slim pillars. Beautiful? Yes, if flaming, leaden death sprayed from machine guns and mortars, can be called that!

Only a few hundred yards left. Buck held to his roaring course. *Now!*

His sights were filled by that squirming hulk. His thumb gripped hard against the control-stick trigger. Flame and lead belched from both guns. The huge bag quivered under the impact of those riddling bullets.

Looping, he came back and over for another attack. The ground batteries had ceased firing. There was the danger of hitting the balloon or their own two men suspended in the basket.

Again! His guns coughed forth bullets to settle into that bloated skin. As he grazed past the bag, Buck saw a white cloud open and sail to earth. Another followed. Both observers had jumped. Somehow, Buck felt glad.

The balloon was beginning to sag. It was lunging and heaving crazily. Winch crews on the ground were working frantically to haul it down.

“Cripes! Has that thing got nine lives?” Buck wondered, banking to come in for a broadside.

Only one gun spoke. The other was jammed somewhere in the mechanism. There was no time to fix it. The bag was rapidly going down; the efforts of the crew below and its own leaking condition were threatening to cheat him.

“You won’t get it!” Buck shouted savagely. Nosing down, he spewed lead among the winch tenders. The descent of the bag slowed perceptibly.

The balloon was over him now, hanging limply. Buck shot the Spad up, aiming for the link stabilizers. This attack would be his last chance.

He opened his one good gun. A stream poured forth—then quit. His drum was empty. The Spad zoomed past.

Failed! Buck choked in rage. He swore to get that balloon if he had to ram it—yes, even follow it to the ground and fight for it!

Whiro-o-o-m-m!

A puff of hot, smothering air bumped him upward. Heavy, black, rolling smoke rose to engulf him. Buck fought for breath and his way out. The denseness obscured everything from sight, confused him.

Plunging out that pungent cloud, Buck lifted his goggles and cleared his eyes. Then, from the clean air, he looked back at the destruction he had wrought.

The balloon was a mass of fire on the ground. His last burst had ignited it. He could go home now. A good day’s work—two planes and a balloon.

He swung over to the Moselle River. Pont-a-Motisson became a speck on the landscape. Gliding low, he swung in back of the town where a balloon hung suspended—one of his own side. A paper note fluttered to the gathered crew below.

FLYING along on an uninterrupted course to his home field, Buck pondered on the colorful events of the hour past. He wondered as to the identity of the occupant of the plane that had stepped in so opportunely in the fight with the Fokkers.

“That chap, whoever he was, deserves some credit for this work,” mused Buck. “If it hadn’t been for him, likely as not I wouldn’t have gotten that balloon.”

Wooded hills and green blocks of fields slipped beneath, as he skimmed along. In the distance, hangars appeared, dotting the edge of the broad expanse of flying field. A few minutes later, his wheels settled to the ground.

Buck taxied his plane to its resting place near the hangar. As he climbed from the cockpit, Major Duncan came running across the upper end of the field, excitedly waving a paper out toward him.

“Confirmation, Buck!” he shouted, breathless and excited. “Great work, my boy—just got it over the wire. Balloon corps phoned it in—said you dropped a note—saw the whole thing—and confirmed. Hot damn, Buck—guess G.H.Q. won’t sit up and take notice now! Hey, boy?”

Buck took the paper from the bands of the capering major and read it through. Yes, it was all there—gave him full credit.

“Yeah—that’s all right,” remarked Buck, handing the report back, “except nothing was said about another plane that stepped in and helped me out of a pinch against three Fokkers.”

Twenty feet away, a Spad plane wheeled to a stop. Cutting the motor, the figure in the cockpit raised his goggles, lowered the upturned collar, and loosed his helmet. As he climbed to the ground, Buck strode to him.

“Say, Stubby, where’ve you been?” Buck demanded.

“Out,” Stubby answered, with a grin. “Yeah, out is right. What’d you do with that third Fokker?”

“Followed the son of a gun clear to Metz, but couldn’t catch him. He’s probably home by now,” Stubby answered, looking sheepish.

“Hell of a guy, you are! The next time I tell you a secret, I’ll keep it to myself. But, just the same—I’m much obliged for the help.”

“Sure,” Stubby replied, drawing himself to his full five feet two inches, “you can’t expect to carry the squadron reputation all by yourself, without my help, can you?”