



THE LAST of SPAD 16

by O.B. MYERS

Every day that lone Yank with the number 16 on his Spad swooped down out of the clouds and attacked single-handed a drome twenty-five miles behind the German lines—a daredevil stunt only one of America's greatest aces would try. You couldn't blame Oberleutnant Schmidt of the proud Schmidts of Brandenburg for plotting to see

THE LITTLE FIVE-SIDED FIELD at Zaunitz lay peaceful, quiet, almost deserted, under the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. Two of the three hangars were empty; over-alled machanics lolled about, cleaning tools to kill the time. In the narrow barracks lay one pilot who was sick; two others were packing knapsacks preparatory to going on leave. All the rest were in the air.

In the square headquarters shack two clerks banged at typewriters, wishing they were machine guns; twenty miles away other men who should have been clerks thumbed the triggers of machine guns, wishing they were typewriters.

In the inner office sat the *Kommandatur* of His Imperial Majesty's 412th *Jagdstaffel*, Oberleutnant Otto Schmidt—one of the Schmidts of Brandenburg, as

he was wont to state proudly. He was at the moment engrossed in studying a report, and the faint, familiar drone of a distant motor did not disturb him. The hum grew louder; still he did not look up.

Suddenly the outer door burst open with a crash; the noise made the Oberleutnant raise his head in annoyance. Hurried feet pounded across the outer room; then his own door nearly flew from its hinges, and in the opening appeared the excited face of a soldier.

"The lone Yankee, *Herr Kommandatur*—he is coming!"

"*Gott im Himmel!* Again?"

The officer rose to his feet as if released by a spring. His impulse to question the soldier further he discarded promptly; first, because the soldier had precipitately vanished, and second, because he now heard undeniable proof of the man's statement. The rapid, harsh clatter of a pair of synchronized Vickers broke out almost over the roof which insecurely sheltered his head, and he heard the ominous phut-phut of bullets through the flimsy walls.

As he plunged through the outer room, he noted from the tail of his eye that the clerks had already left their posts, and made mental note to double their drill hours for such dereliction of duty. But, emerging from the outer door, his foot hit an obstruction; he tripped, lost his balance, and fell heavily on his face. Gathering himself to rise, he saw that he had stumbled over the body of his senior clerk, who lay with a neat hole drilled in the back of his skull. Discipline in this case would be unnecessary.

"Weisbach! Weisbach!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

But his voice was drowned in a crescendo roar from overhead. He looked up to see a single Spad, swooping so low that it seemed he could touch its undercarriage by stretching out his hand. It flashed by, and the thunder of its passage was punctuated by a stunning explosion as a ten-pound bomb landed in the exact center of the first of the three hangars. The squadron commander lowered an arm which had instinctively covered his eyes, and opened his mouth to shout again, but at that moment his adjutant rounded the barracks at a run, and pelted toward him.

"Weisbach, the planes—get them out! Rouse the pilots!"

"Impossible, *Herr Kommandatur!*" panted the adjutant. "Every pilot is already in the air, patrolling the forts. There is not one plane on the field which can fly—your orders, sir—"

"Donnerwetter!" grated the Oberleutnant, crimson with rage. "Are we helpless? Must we stand here and let one cursed Yankee pound us to pieces like this? Have we no guns, no bullets—"

ALONG *r-r-r-r-rip* from the overhead interrupted him. The Spad had wheeled over the far woods, and was tearing back again, Vickers blazing. Little spurts of dust kicked up from the dry ground in front of the hangars; mechanics ran in all directions like scared jackrabbits. The Spad's nose lifted; the spurts marched inexorably closer. Without a word the *Kommandatur* and his adjutant threw themselves flat on their faces. The throaty roar of the Hiss descended upon them, increasing in volume to its peak, then—*wham!*

This time the bomb landed just on the other side of headquarters building from where they were sprawled. Hissing fragments tore their way in one wall and out the other; only their prostrate position saved the two officers from mutilation. The drone of the exhausts softened as the plane circled away, but the Germans did not rise. Cautiously the *Kommandatur* raised his head, and with an angry snarl hissed through his teeth.

"Pig-dog! It is the same as yesterday, eh, Weisbach?"

"Ja," agreed the adjutant, failing to hide the quiver in his voice. "The number 16—I saw it."

"A Yankee, without question. See, the center of the cocardes—they are white, *nicht wahr?*"

But the adjutant was not studying markings just then. He was trying to bury his ashen face as deeply as possible in the unyielding turf, for once more the Spad was swooping downward. The smooth hum of the motor rose to a brazen roar, the staccato chatter of the guns rapped out their message of death. The whirl of rushing wings was very close, and the cringing adjutant could almost feel the shadow which flicked across his back. Then his ears rang with the detonation of the third and last bomb, this time against the side wall of the barracks. The *Kommandatur* hauled him to his feet.

"Come, Weisbach! It is over—he carries only three. See—he is leaving, curse him! Quick, the extinguishers!"

Oberleutnant Schmidt seized a metal cylinder from its rack by the door of headquarters, and dashed toward the barracks, where a spurt of crimson flame licked the wall. His shouts drew others from their hiding places; mechanics, perceiving that the Spad faded into the distance, grabbed fire extinguishers and buckets of water and rushed to help. After ten minutes of furious effort they had the blaze under control; though when

the afternoon patrols returned to land some time later, there was a charred and gaping hole in the side of the building. Also, just across the lane, was to be seen a burial party, performing last rites for the senior clerk and three other victims of the Spad's machine guns.

At eight that evening the *Kommandatur* called the adjutant and his three flight leaders into conference—not, in truth, to ask their advice, but to announce to them the plan already formed in his mind. For Otto Schmidt rated his own intelligence above that of his subordinates. The 412th was not a front-line outfit, but a reserve or second-string squadron, assigned to the defense of Metz, and particularly to protecting that city's southern string of forts from bombers.

"For two days in succession," he told them grimly, "the field has been attacked by the lone Yankee. Both times at the same hour, when he knows no doubt that all our planes are out on patrol. Both times the same man. I ask you, gentlemen, are we going to suffer these attacks like sheep—or are we not?"

The four officers regarded him silently; they knew perfectly well that their commander expected no suggestions from them.

"We are not!" scowled the *Kommandatur*. "Otto Schmidt—of Brandenburg—does not sit supinely by and allow one enemy to shoot his field to ribbons. That *verdammte* Yankee has the nerve of the devil, but the brains of a Schmidt shall defeat him. By superior wile shall we trap this daring ace."

"He is—*Herr Kommandatur*—one of their aces, you say?" ventured the adjutant hesitantly.

"But certainly!" ejaculated the squadron commander. He consulted a list which lay on the desk. "Rickenbacker, Luke, Campbell, Holden, Lamer—it is one of those, you can wager. Who else would have the audacity to attack single-handed a drome forty kilometers behind our lines? One of their premier aces, without a doubt—and the more credit to the 412th when we shall have destroyed him."

He leaned forward to fix his eye on the three flight leaders. "In patrolling the forts at dusk," he asked, "how many times in the last month have you encountered enemy bombers?"

"Not once, *mein Herr*," answered the three simultaneously.

"*Gam gut!* Then tomorrow the dusk patrol can be safely omitted. Twice has that cursed Spad appeared at the same hour; tomorrow the attack will undoubtedly be repeated. If it is, it will be the last, for we shall erase him from the sky. Listen carefully."

IN PRECISE phrases the *Kommandatur* explained his scheme. At five o'clock five planes of B flight were to station themselves on an auxiliary field at Lommes, some two kilometers to the west. At the same hour *Leutnant* Gaulmann, leader of A flight, was to take post with two of his best pilots on the large meadow at Grafln farm, slightly over a kilometer to the south. The rest of the planes and pilots were to remain on the main field in readiness to take to the air at a moment's notice. If the Spad appeared at six o'clock as usual, those at Grafln farm were to wait until he had passed overhead, then rise behind him to cut off possible retreat. The others were to take off as soon as his arrival was certain. In this way the attacker would find himself surrounded, and could be easily overwhelmed by numbers. The *Kommandatur* himself would take up a Fokker from the main field and issue the orders.

"You understand, then?" he asked finally. All nodded eagerly. "To your barracks, then, and instruct your men carefully. Tomorrow at six the wit of a Schmidt shall triumph over the gall of a Yank!"

The morning and early afternoon patrols took off as usual, flew their route over the forts of Metz, and returned to report nothing unusual. But as five o'clock approached, a change took place in the regular routine. Instead of the whole squadron going up *en masse* for the last patrol of the day, five Fokkers took off in a group, zoomed away to the west, and were shortly seen to drop out of sight below the low hills in the direction of Lommes. Then three more left the ground, circled a short distance to the south, and sank quickly to earth. Those were the three from A flight, under Gaulmann, taking their position at Grafln farm.

The remaining dozen the *Kommandatur* arranged in two lines, one behind the other, in front of the hangars. Since the field was not large enough to permit twelve ships to leave at once, the front rank of six was to take off first, followed immediately by the second line. But the *Kommandatur* made it plain that no movement was to commence until he himself gave the word.

As the minutes rolled by he paced nervously about, speaking in guttural undertones to the waiting pilots, inspecting ammunition belts to make sure that they were full, and consulting his watch with great frequency. In his eye was a gleam of anticipation, and of confident hope. Already he could visualize the downfall of that intrepid but too daring Yankee, and could foresee the praise and congratulations which would be his reward for bringing down one of the

ranking aces of the enemy. It would mean an Iron Cross of the first grade, at least—perhaps even the ribbon of the “*Pour le merite*” around his neck.

AT A quarter to six he ordered every motor started, so that there should be no delay when the alarm came. Each pilot stood rigid and tense by his cockpit, awaiting the signal. Mechanics fingered chock ropes nervously, watching the sky to the south. The very atmosphere was heavy with tension.

The *Kommandatur* entered his room in headquarters, pulled on his helmet and goggles, and carefully adjusted the strap beneath his chin. He had announced that he would go up himself, and he was a man of his word. For he was not lacking in personal courage, this Otto Schmidt of Brandenburg. A full year's experience against the British in Flanders had won him his present rank; and it had not been his own wish that placed him behind the real Front, in command of the 412th. He stepped into the open doorway, and directed a last look about the field.

Adjutant Weisbach stood a few paces away, and suddenly there came over his face the strange, intent look of a man who thinks he hears something, but is not quite sure. *Kommandatur* Schmidt stepped quickly to his side, seized his elbow.

“What is that?” cried the adjutant. “Do you hear something? Do you hear—firing?”

The *Kommandatur* strained his ears. Yes, above the stutter of idling motors he was certain that he distinguished a sharp crackle which sounded very much like a machine gun in action. It seemed to come from the south; he peered in that direction, but could see nothing above the tree-tops. If there were planes there, they were too low to be seen from his present position. Suddenly he remembered the small observation platform atop the roof of headquarters; perhaps he could see better from up there. He leaped for the rungs nailed to the wall of the building, shouting to the adjutant to wait where he was.

As soon as the *Kommandatur* got his feet on the elevated platform, he saw a sight which riveted him to the spot. About a kilometer to the south, over the position of Grafen farm, two planes circled closely about each other, so low as almost to scrape the tree-tops. One of them was a Fokker, the other a Spad. Although the distance was too great to see, he did not doubt for an instant that the Spad bore on its side the number 16. The lone Yank!

The *Kommandatur* quickly guessed what had

happened. The Spad, on its way to the main field, had seen the three ships at the farm, and by attacking them forthwith had sprung the trap. Either that, or his three men at the farm had tried to take off too soon, before the Spad had passed overhead, thus betraying their location and their purpose prematurely. But in the latter case, where were the other two? There was but one Fokker in the air giving battle to the Yank—probably, Gaulmann.

Rooted rigidly to the spot, the *Kommandatur* watched their frantic maneuvers. Gaulmann or no, the man in that Fokker was having his hands full to hold his own against the Spad. Around and around each other they wheeled, neither one able to gain an inch of altitude, nor a position on the tail of the other. But suddenly he saw the Spad level out, and point its nose up into a zoom. Instantly the Fokker followed suit.

But now, with the lightning-like agility of a dragonfly, the Spad whirled upon its course to point its nose down and back. The man in the Fokker, foreseeing possible collision, jerked aside, and fell off in a sideslip. But this was the opening for which the Spad had maneuvered. Had there been plenty of altitude it would, perhaps, have been a different story, but the tree-tops were too close to allow the slip to continue, the Fokker pilot was forced to flatten out in a hurry. Like a hawk the Spad was on his tail.

The *Kommandatur* could just see the faint etching of tracer smoke which poured from the guns of the Spad. He held his breath in agony. Before the sound of the shots could travel to his ears, he saw the cockpit of the Fokker belch forth a ball of black smoke. This swelled prodigiously, disclosed in its center a flash of brilliant flame. The Fokker swooped instantly downward, already a living pyre, it struck some trees, and disintegrated in a hellying cloud of smoke and leaves. At that instant the *Kommandatur* heard for the first time the rattle of the Vickers, which had consumed five or six seconds in traveling the kilometer to where he stood.

SCHMIDT took a step backward, then halted while his mind calculated rapidly. From finding three planes waiting for him at the Grafen farm, the man in the Spad must have perceived that a trap had been prepared. Therefore he would now undoubtedly abandon his purpose of strafing the main field, and would escape quickly to the south. But the *Kommandatur's* eyes seemed about to pop from his head; a glance told him that the Spad, instead of

running for its life, was now headed directly toward the spot on which he stood.

As his feet stumbled from rung to rung in his hurried descent, he thought first of the five planes at Lommes. They would be watching, not the neighborhood of Grafín farm, but the air above the main field. Therefore they probably knew nothing as yet of what was transpiring. First he must notify them to take to the air and cut off the escape of this devil. Then he must give the signal to the dozen in front of the hangars, who of course could not see what he had watched from the observation platform. His feet touched the ground; without turning he plunged into the door. As his hand went out to grasp the telephone instrument on his desk, the bell began ringing loudly, insistently. He snatched it up.

"Hello, hello! The post at Lommes, quick! . . . What's that? . . . Yes, this is Schmidt—but get off the wire! I'm in a hurry! . . . I must get Lommes immediately! . . . What's that—who are you?"

Kommandatur Schmidt suddenly went pale as a ghost. The hand which held the instrument to his ear trembled violently, and his bloodless lips stammered in confusion.

"*Ja, Herr Oberst!*" he said thickly, "What was that you said—I am sorry—I did not hear—"

The voice which came over the wire was thin and distant, but keen as steel, and sharp with anger and excitement.

"I said, where in damnation are your planes? The American bombers are over us here—they're blowing us off the map! Your patrols are nowhere in sight. What has happened to them? For God's sake, man, send us some protection immediately, or—"

The voice was suddenly swallowed in a terrific blast of sound which shook the eardrums of the *Kommandatur*, who heard it over twenty kilometers of telephone wire. He did not need to be told again that the forts were being bombed, he had just heard one of the bombs explode. He lowered the now silent receiver, and holding it motionless in his hand, stared at it for a moment almost stupidly.

Now he saw things as they were. These audacious attacks by a single Spad were all a ruse, calculated to goad him into holding his planes at the field to repel the strafe. And while his planes were all here, the Yankee bombers were swooping upon the forts at Metz, to deliver a crushing blow, the more crushing because they had no opposition to contend with. What a frightful calamity! And entirely to be blamed on him,

too. He had fallen for the trick—hook, line and sinker. Instead of a "*Pour le merite*," he now saw himself facing a court martial, perhaps a firing squad.

Suddenly he raised his hand, and with a bloodcurdling oath hurled the telephone into the corner. Too late to think of sending help to the forts now, the bombers would be gone before his planes were halfway there. But that *verdammte* Yankee in the Spad—the cause of it all—he was still within reach of retribution. Ah, he shouldn't escape this time, curse him! Once he might outguess a Schmidt—but he should pay for the guess with his life!

THE *Kommandatur* rushed to the door. There stood the two ranks of Fokkers, pilots in the cockpits, awaiting his signal. He raised an arm to wave, and opened his mouth to shout the command to start. As the syllables left his lips, the high-pitched scream of synchronized Vickers crashed out just above his head, and the roar of a wide-open Hissó drowned his shout.

The fraction of a minute during which the *Kommandatur* had been at the telephone had been sufficient for the Spad to cover the kilometer from Grafín farm. As the squadron commander rushed out of the headquarters door to shriek his command, the intrepid Yankee dived for the tarmac, holding his triggers down. His first long burst he directed, not at the buildings, but at the planes. The front rank of idling Fokkers was lined up in mathematical precision, he opened up on the nearest, and slowly raised his nose, so that his blast of bullets raked the row from one end to the other.

Rat-tat-tat-tat—crash! One bullet drilled a helmet-encased skull, and a corpse slumped over a stick. Another missile struck a spinning prop, which instantly disintegrated to splinters, leaving the cursing pilot no choice but to cut his motor. Still another found a gas tank, which blew up, scattering flame and burning gasoline over the two ships on either side of it. The immediate result was that of the six planes in the front rank who caught the *Kommandatur's* signal, just one succeeded in taking off.

Those in the second rank had seen the signal, too, but when they tried to take off, they found their way blocked by the stalled and wrecked ships in front of them. The pilots shrieked and cursed at the mechanics to move the obstructing planes aside. But most of these last, having no great desire to stop a machine-gun bullet, ran frantically for shelter from that demon overhead. One pilot in the rear row, trying to taxi

out into the open, miscalculated in his excitement and rammed the wing of the ship with the smashed propeller. Confusion became thrice confounded.

But now the *Kommandatur* rushed onto the field, casting aside all thought of personal safety. He bellowed at fleeing mechanics, they turned and came to do his bidding. He himself seized the wing tip of one Fokker, and held it so that the pilot could turn past the debris which blocked his path, and get out into the clear. Schmidt then sprang to the ship in which the pilot had been killed, and with his own hands dragged the lifeless form from the cockpit.

"Here, Weisbach! Take this one, and go up there! If you don't get that thrice-cursed Spad before I get up myself, I'll get you! *Schnell!*"

The adjutant, white-faced and shaking, nevertheless clenched his teeth upon his fear and mounted to the cockpit. In two seconds he was off the ground. The *Kommandatur* hurried to the next plane, but before he reached it, his attention was drawn upward by a long burst of machine gun fire. He saw that the Spad, circling back, had engaged the first Fokker to leave the ground. The Fokker had fired first, but being at a disadvantage for altitude, had been forced to exchange offense for defence. Pressing its advantage, the Spad allowed the foe no opportunity for escape. One wide circle about the field, and the Vickers sang their death-song.

Without slackening its terrific speed, the Fokker careened drunkenly downward. A wing tip struck the corner of Number 2 hangar. The wide-open roar of the Mercedes was suddenly swallowed up in a frightful, splintering crash. The fearful velocity of the hurtling mass carried half the hangar with it, pinning a group of mechanics beneath a tangled pile of canvas and shattered beams. The screams of the living mingled with the groans of the dying.

THE *Kommandatur* did not pause to see more. Tugging at the empennage of a waiting Fokker, he twisted it about until it faced a clear path, and waved it to a take-off. Then he ran toward his own ship, which stood somewhat to one side. He heaved himself into the cockpit, snapped the belt over his shoulders, and reached for the throttle. As he did so, there was a muffled explosion behind him. He looked; the Spad had dropped a bomb through the center of headquarters roof. Smoke gushed thickly from the windows, the walls of the frame shack bulged and collapsed like a house of cards.

His face went livid with rage. He must get that cursed Yankee, if it was the last act of his life. Under the urge of its 220 horsepower his Fokker raced across the field and sprang into the air. He circled immediately to the left, but the Spad was not there. Instead of seizing the last opportunity for escape, that reckless Yankee was indulging in a final swoop over the field, spraying the shambles with bullet and bomb. The *Kommandatur* ground his teeth, and zoomed for altitude. In a few seconds he was between the Spad and the south, and took a moment to look about him.

One more Fokker had succeeded in leaving the ground, there were now five in the air above the field. Furthermore, he saw in the distance the five from Lommel, on their way to take a hand. That would give them ten, against the lone Spad. The *Kommandatur* allowed himself a grim smile. No pilot, be he man or superman, could fight against odds of ten to one, and live.

The Spad now scraped the tree-tops in a rush toward the south; its pilot evidently saw the situation, and attempted to flee. One Fokker was in full chase from the rear, the *Kommandatur* nosed over and plunged to cut off escape from the fore. Closer and closer he lunged, his fingers curled about the triggers as he calculated his distance.

But the instant when he opened fire, the Spad shot up vertically in the beginning of a loop. At the top it twisted upon itself in a perfect Immelmann, and in a flash was directing a blast of fire at the Fokker which had been its pursuer. The pilot of that Fokker, having witnessed the devastating marksmanship of the Yankee, chose not to exchange tracers, but veered off hastily. The Spad promptly reversed in a wing-over, and was once more in full flight toward the south.

But the *Kommandatur*, playing safe, had retained his position. Now again, with another at his side, he dived to cut off escapes. As before, the Spad waited until the last instant, then careened away. But now the five from Lommel had drawn near, and an interlacing curtain of tracers blocked the Yankee's path to the rear. The Spad never hesitated, but spun in a full spiral to resume its headlong dash to the south. The quickness of the about-face almost caught the *Kommandatur* off guard. He had to reverse from a right bank to a left, and had he been the only one at that point, the Yank might still have slipped through the noose. But two other Fokkers shot in from the west, and once again forced the Spad to turn aside or be riddled with singing steel.

THUS did the grim struggle progress, drawing to its inevitable close. Closer and closer the Fokkers hemmed in the fighting Spad. Shorter and more hopeless became the rushes toward the south. Each rush gained some distance, but less and less as the *Kommandatur* and his men tightened the ring. The mad mêlée had drifted to a point almost directly above the Grafen farm, but no further could the frantic Yank press his escape. Screaming steel cut him off on every side, belching Spandaus blocked his path in every direction. One after another the Fokkers plunged, and wheeled away to plunge again, like vultures who scent the kill.

For a moment the Yank, desperate, seemed to abandon all hope. His ceaseless maneuvers came to an end, the Spad lagged in level flight. Three foes leaped from the side, another sprayed a hissing stream of fire from above, still another banked across his nose, but in an instant the Spad came to life once more. With tracers tearing wings and fuselage to ribbons, that Spad turned like an avenging fury upon its attackers. A vicious blast of tracer poured from its guns, straight to the mark.

The *Kommandatur* saw one Fokker, in the middle of a turn, suddenly stagger, and begin to spin. The blast of tracer moved on toward the next. But the *Kommandatur* pushed on his stick, and the tail of the Spad swam into his sights. His eyes narrowed to grim slits, and without haste his finger's settled on his triggers. The Yankee, peering ahead, never saw the doom which menaced him from behind, the Spad did not swerve. The *Kommandatur's* fingers tightened.

As the hail of bullets raked him from end to end, the Yankee jerked into a turn. But the aim of the *Kommandatur* was good, and the damage was done. Watching, he saw the Spad slump into a slipping turn.

It swooped wildly downward, but a desperate effort by the pilot brought it to level once more. The *Kommandatur* saw that the Yank was trying to land in the field of Grafen farm, which was directly below. Closer and closer it drifted to the end of the flat field. It bounced, as its wheels touched once, but momentum carried it helplessly forward—straight into the wall of surrounding trees it crashed. There, at last, it stopped, half-hidden by a screen of branches, a limp and shattered wreck. The *Kommandatur* grunted.

About him wheeled his remaining Fokkers. Each one he approached in turn, and by a gesture ordered to return to the main field. In Number 6 sat his adjutant Weisbach, him the *Kommandatur* directed to stay

at his side. Through the gathering dusk the others streaked for the tarmac, as the last headed off for Zaunitz, the *Kommandatur* put his ship into a glide, and slid down toward the meadow. Setting his wheels in the middle of the open ground, he rolled almost to the trees, and stopped.

He jumped to the ground, and waved to Weisbach to land. While the adjutant glided, the *Kommandatur* looked about him, and read the story of the Spad's first attack. One empty and silent Fokker stood near the farmhouse, its propeller shattered, its pilot nowhere in evidence.

Among the trees, hardly fifty feet from the present position of the Spad, lay the wreck of another. That Yankee's bullets had prevented one of Gaulmann's men from ever getting into motion, and had driven another into a take-off crash. The destruction of the third the *Kommandatur* had witnessed from the observation platform. A veritable demon, that Yank! But his end had come, as the *Kommandatur* told himself with pride, before the guns of a Schmidt.

Weisbach's plane now settled to earth, and the adjutant leaped from the cockpit. Together the two lifted the tails of the ships, so that they faced back toward the field. Leaving them with motors idling, they walked side by side toward the wreck of the Spad. Dusk was falling now; in the open it was still light, but under the trees the gloom was deepening. Peering ahead of them, they advanced several paces into the underbrush, and halted.

THE Spad did not seem to be badly broken up by its crash. One wing had crushed itself against a tree-trunk, but the fuselage was almost intact, the fabric scarcely wrinkled. The pilot, however, must have opened his safety belt before landing, and thus had been hurled from his seat by the impact. His body lay where it had fallen, face down against the base of a large tree, in that indescribably, limp and cast-away attitude which could mean but one thing.

"He is dead," said the *Kommandatur* softly.

"Ja," murmured the adjutant, repressing a shudder. "Gott set dank!"

"He was a brave man, Weisbach. Too brave—for he attempted the impossible. Let us look—"

The *Kommandatur* happened to turn his head. Approaching diagonally across the field was a man in German pilot's uniform, his helmet and goggles, combined with the faintness of the light, made his face indistinguishable at fifty paces.

“Who is that?”

“One of Gaulmann’s men, probably,” ventured the adjutant.

“Good. He can give us details. But first let us inspect the other wreck, Weisbach.”

With the adjutant at his heels, the *Kommandatur* picked his way through the bushes toward the shattered Fokker. This plane had suffered much more than the Spad in its impact against the trees. Its wide-open motor had driven it full force into a tree-trunk, the fuselage had telescoped, and the wings crumpled to ruin. There was no sign of the pilot, his corpse was no doubt hidden beneath that tangled mass. The *Kommandatur* stood regarding it silently, and shook his head in grief. But suddenly he spun on his heel in amazement, to stare toward the field.

The roar of a quickly opened throttle came to his ears—his own plane was taking off! That helmeted officer—he must have climbed into the cockpit, without asking permission or offering an explanation—but why? The *Kommandatur* showed his astonishment.

“What is—who was—Weisbach, did you see who that was? Was that Gaulmann?”

“No, sir, I could not see—”

“But why is he taking my ship?” The adjutant, however, was as much at a loss as his commander, he said nothing. And before either of them could cover the few paces to the edge of the bushes, the Fokker rolled swiftly across the field, leaped lightly into the air, and soared away in a curving zoom. Leveling off, it faded from sight toward the east.

“But—but I do not understand!” The *Kommandatur* showed signs of becoming angry. “What does he mean by taking my plane? Now I have no means of returning! Look here, Weisbach, it will soon be dark. You fly back to the field, and send a car here for me, I’ll be waiting. And if that was Gaulmann who just made off with my Fokker, order him under arrest. The gall of the man!”

“Ja, Herr Kommandatur.”

The adjutant mounted quickly to his own cockpit, took off, and disappeared over the tree-tops. The *Kommandatur* was left alone. His thoughts were not pleasant. Practically everything had gone wrong with this afternoon’s affair. He did not yet know the extent of the disaster at the Metz forts, but he foresaw disciplinary action for himself. Just when his patrols had been needed, they had been absent by his own order. It meant the loss of his command, a reduction in rank—perhaps disgrace. His only satisfaction

was the destruction of one lone Yankee. But then he remembered his guess as to the identity of that Yankee. If the Spad pilot turned out to be one of the enemy’s foremost aces, the situation perhaps would not be quite so bad. He would find that out at once.

THROUGH the underbrush he pushed to where the khaki-clad figure lay. Kneeling, he gingerly rolled the inert form over, and felt for the identification disc about the neck. He was somewhat surprised to notice that both tunic and breeches were unbuttoned, as if they had been very hastily donned. Or perhaps the terrific impact of the crash had ripped the poor devil’s clothes open, he had known such things to occur. His fingers found the metal disc on its string, pulled it out where he could see it. The letters stamped on its surface burned themselves into his brain.

“Gaulmann, Rupert J.,” he read. “Leutnant, Staffel 412.”

His hand shook. Then, for the first time, he looked closely at the face. Yes, this was Gaulmann, or rather the corpse of Gaulmann. But next to the wrecked Spad—and in khaki! He must be going out of his mind, how could that be? He himself had seen the Spad, flown by the Yankee, crash on this spot. Yet here was Gaulmann, in the Yankee’s clothes.

A faint suspicion of the truth was born in his stupified brain. Fifty feet away lay a crushed Fokker which might have been Gaulmann’s. The Yankee, unhurt, perhaps, by his mild crash, had been alone on the ground for three or four minutes. Long enough to change uniforms hastily with a corpse.

The *Kommandatur*, staring in rising horror at the face of the corpse, now saw a piece of paper thrust through the chin strap of the helmet. He plucked it out, held it up to the waning light. It was an empty envelope, addressed to Gaulmann, it must have been taken from Gaulmann’s uniform pocket. But on the reverse side was a scribble in pencil.

“Sorry to rush off this way,” read the scrawl, “but I have a date in Bar-le-Duc tonight, and your friend’s clothes don’t fit me too well. Thanks for your Fokker. See you again soon. In case we don’t meet formally, my name is—”

The *Kommandatur* rose slowly, holding the scrap of paper so as to catch the last dim light on the signature. His eyes protruded from their sockets, his face grew purple with repressed emotion. He stood, rigid as a man turned to stone. The breath hissed through his clenched teeth.

Then suddenly he balled the paper in his huge fist, and flung it from him.

A quarter of an hour later the headlights of a car appeared on the lane by the farmhouse. The *Kommandatur* entered the tonneau, and was driven to the field. He was unusually silent, Weisbach noticed, saying scarcely three words during the trip. But upon arrival, he immediately called all of his pilots together—such as were left alive—and addressed them.

He was resigning his command, he told them, his successor would undoubtedly be appointed shortly. Lest any of them fail to appreciate his reasons, he described the afternoon's debacle from beginning to end. He told quite frankly of finding Gaulmann's body, and the explanation of the Yankee's escape. His pilots listened in frozen silence. Their amazement at the exploit itself was only equalled by their astonishment at the cool manner in which their commander was discussing it. The chagrin of defeat was in his tone, yes, but mingled with it was a feeling that held an odd ring of something very like satisfaction. They could not understand it.

With but little apparent concern he told of finding the highly insolent note, even repeated its contents for them, word for word. They gasped.

"And he signed—his name?" asked Adjutant Weisbach curiously.

"Yes—his name," said the *Kommandatur*, with a strange smile. "He signed his name, simply—'Gus Schmidt, of Milwaukee.'"