



# ACES AREN'T BORN

by ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

**F**LYING WITH THE AUTOMATIC EASE that comes with long experience in war torn skies, Bill Devon twisted in the seat and glanced across the air space at the all green ship riding along in Number Three position in the seven plane formation. In the pit sat his closest pal, both in the States and over here in France. Kirkwood was his name. Chuck Kirkwood. And to Bill, whatever

Chuck did at anytime, and at any place, was better than perfect.

However, as Bill stared at the helmeted head, and the green and red tassel trailing back in the prop-wash, a worried look came into his eyes, and he absently beat his free fist against the side of the cockpit. Something was wrong with Chuck; decidedly wrong. He hadn't acted his old rip-snorting self for almost a month.

Where before, he was usually the first man up and the last man down on every patrol, Kirkwood now did his patrols as though he were in some sort of a trance.

Impulsively, Devon switched his gaze forward to Major Hawker in the lead ship. Hawker had been C.O. for two weeks now. A good man, too. That is, except as far as Chuck Kirkwood was concerned. Hawker acted as though he considered Chuck sore because he, and not Chuck, had been given the command. Bill knew that wasn't true. Chuck wouldn't have taken it as a gift. A skipper's rating was enough for him, he had always insisted. And he'd backed it up by refusing promotion twice before.

No, Chuck wasn't sore about Hawker's oakleaf. But, there was something radically wrong. If Chuck didn't snap out of it soon, a Hun would be bound to catch him off guard, some day. And then it would be too late.

A red Very-light arcing out from the C.O.'s ship cut short Devon's musing. He stiffened in the seat, followed Hawker's pointing hand. Five thousand feet above, and perhaps a quarter of a mile ahead, ten blunt nosed Fokkers were cutting around into the sun. In another minute or so, they'd start down in the blinding glare. Jerking back his loading handles Devon took a quick glance at Kirkwood, and cursed under his breath. Kirkwood hadn't even moved. Not so much as even looked up, as far as Devon could see.

"Come on, Chuck, snap out of it! Damn it, fellow! What the hell?"

Devon growled the words aloud, then directed all of his attention at the job at hand. The Fokkers were in position, and were coming down like ten streaks of greased lightning. They seemed to lose altitude in nothing flat. Devon only had time to swing out a bit for more "fighting room" before a blunt nose was spewing twin streams of jetting flame his way.

Flying with two hands, he belted his ship up over and down in a flash half roll. No sooner had he started the maneuver than he pulled out of it, and charged back at the Fokker pilot trying to follow him through. Eyes narrowed, face grim, he jabbed both trigger trips and raked the enemy plane from prop to tail skid with made-in-America slugs.

Lady Luck rode with the German for the moment, however, and before Bill's bullets could find the gas tank the Fokker whirled and went thundering off into the clear. Devon roared after it, only to give up the ghost in a matter of seconds, and go swinging out to the edge of the scrap in search of a fresh target.

NEITHER patrol was in formation, now. It was a case of every man for himself, and the air boiled with metal wasps darting this way and that through a crisscross pattern of wavy tracer smoke. Swinging back into the melee, Devon took a second out for a flash glance at everything in general. Off to his right he saw two blunt nosed Fokkers trying to crowd Chuck Kirkwood into a cold meat shot position.

A five hour solo fledgling could have beat them to the punch, but Kirkwood seemed content to let them fool around him. At the same time, however, he did not let them drive any Spandaus bullets too close to him.

"Damn fool! Smack 'em, Chuck!"

Devon followed up his words by thundering over and down. That was just too bad for one of the German pilots. He was obviously too intent on plugging Kirkwood, to see Devon roaring in. And when he did, there wasn't a thing in the world he could do about it. Devon's burst was short and sweet, and it practically slammed the German pilot clear down in the pit to the rudder bar.

Pulling out of the short dive, Devon wheeled back toward the other Fokker. Its pilot, however, had witnessed what had happened to his pal. And that was enough for him. He slapped into a vicious power spin, and removed himself from the engagement, hell-bent. Bill Devon didn't bother following him down. There were others of his gang waiting. Instead he throttled and flew in close to Kirkwood. His pal nodded, and raised one hand in a faint gesture of "Thanks."

Devon glared, shook his head, and went through the motions of touching off a ton or so of dynamite.

"That's what you need, you bum!" he howled into the roar of his engine. "Right under the seat of your pants, too—to wake you up!"

Kirkwood caught onto the idea, grinned, shrugged, and went sailing away. Devon cursed, and swung back toward the fight again. However, there wasn't any fight, any more. The six German pilots who were still alive, had suddenly remembered a very pressing date in China, and they were now all headed that way, engines full out. A quick glance around told Devon that every member of his flight was still in the air. With a grunt of relief, he wheeled around into formation, and followed Major Hawker back to the home drome.

The C.O. landed first, legged out and stood waiting, hands on hips and arms akimbo. As Kirkwood landed, Hawker started over to the all green ship, but pulled up short as a field orderly ran up and saluted. A second

later, he spun around and went trotting over to the squadron office. Devon, watching it all, made a face and groaned helplessly.

"He's just about ready to bounce Chuck right out of the squadron, for keeps!" he muttered. "Can't blame him much, either. Chuck's laying down cold on the job. Damn!"

Turning his ship over to the mechanics he ran after Kirkwood who was shuffling over to his hutment. He caught up with him at the door, followed him in.

"Listen, Chuck—!"

"Keep it, son! I know! I'm lousy. Well, I admit it. The old pep's gone. Maybe I'm tired, or something. Gimme a cigarette."

Devon produced a pack, held the match for them both, then sat down on the edge of the bunk and stared at his pal. Kirkwood looked just the way he said he felt. His steel grey eyes were dull and listless. His face was drawn, and his mouth curved down at the corners. With a grunted sigh he dropped his long frame into a chair, and blew smoke ceilingward.

"Yup," he muttered, "I feel lousy, and I fly twice as bad. Maybe it's because I've had too much of this damn war. Maybe I'm all burned out."

DEVON cursed.

"Nutts, Chuck! Your kind doesn't burn out, A week in Paris would put you on your feet. Why don't you ask—?"

"Hawker?" Kirkwood broke in. "Swell chance he'd say, yes. The dummy thinks I want his job. I damn well don't! You know that! Aw hell, I'll snap out of it, after awhile."

"After awhile, may be too late," Devon growled.

"Hawker is just about ready to rain down all over you."

The other snorted.

"Let him! It does him good to get his pep-talks off his chest. I don't care much, either way. Say, when the hell are we going to get mail around this damn place?"

Devon sat up straight, widened his eyes.

"Oh, I see!" he exclaimed. "A girl, huh? She hasn't written to you recently?"

Kirkwood flung him a scornful look.

"Girl, my eye!" he growled. "I was thinking about my folks. Haven't heard in a long time. What I couldn't do to those blasted swivel chair censors!"

With that they both lapsed into silence, finished their cigarettes. But, right after that there came a knock on the door, and an orderly entered. Under his arm he had a mud spattered parcel about twice the size of a

shoe box. He grinned at Kirkwood, and held it out.

"Mail came while you were on patrol, Skipper. Here's something for you."

Kirkwood let out a whoop, grabbed the parcel, and tore off the string and wrapping paper. Inside was a couple of pounds of home-made fudge, a carton of cookies, a quart bottle of pickles, and one or two other items that neither love nor money can obtain within the borders of the French Republic.

His face lighting up like a Xmas tree, Kirkwood just sat back and beamed at the stuff. Presently, he shoved the box of fudge Devon's way.

"Have some, kid!" he purred. "My sister is aces at that dish. Boy, this is like when I used to be away at school. Dive in, kid, dive in!"

"Oh, so you are alive, after all?" The voice cracked like a whip. Both Devon and Kirkwood glanced up. Major Hawker stood in the hutment doorway. His piercing eyes bored into Kirkwood's face.

"Well," he snapped, "what's the excuse this time, Kirkwood? I saw Devon take that Hun away, right from under your nose. Had you forgotten how to shoot Vickers guns, too?"

Kirkwood looked at him steadily.

"Not yet, Major," he said slowly. "Just off my feed for awhile. I'll come around, I guess."

"That will be fine!" the C.O. blazed. Then with a sudden change of expression, "Dammit, Kirkwood, you're top man in Huns! You've got a record any pilot would be proud of. Where's your pep? Let's have some of the old steam I've heard so much about. I don't want to bust you, Kirkwood. But, I damn well will if you keep on flying like an old woman. Come on, what do you say? Let's make you an ace *again!*"

Kirkwood fished for a cigarette.

"I reckon I'll do better. Major," he grunted. "Don't worry too much."

The C.O. nodded his head enthusiastically.

"That's the spirit I want!" he said. "Ten minutes ago, I was going to bounce you, Kirkwood. But, maybe my words have sunk in. Anyway, I'm going to give you another chance. No one can say I'm not fair. Both of you, come over to the squadron office, at once. There's something damn important on tap."

WITH a quick nod to them both, the C.O. turned on his heel and walked out of the hutment. Kirkwood grunted, crammed two big hunks of fudge into his face.

"Come on, kid," he mumbled. "Let's see what this

wonderful last chance is all about. Another pep-talk, I bet a nickel!"

Devon grinned inwardly. A bit of the tired look had gone out of Kirkwood's eyes. That was some progress, at least!

Three other pilots of the squadron, and Major Hawker, were in the squadron office when they arrived. The C.O. was busily tacking a sector map to the wall. When he had finished, he stepped back and looked at the pilots.

"Wing called up a short time ago, men," he said. "We've been detailed a mighty important mission. Within the next forty-eight hours our ground forces are going to launch a surprise offensive, here, in the very middle of the Contreau Sector."

The C.O. paused, long enough to place a finger on the map.

"It's flat, sparsely wooded ground, as you all know," he went on. "Therefore, the success, or failure, of the drive will depend mostly on the element of surprise. In short, the Huns must not even have cause to guess at the location of our offensive. Now, to make that certain, G.H.Q. is going to launch a fake offensive, up here in the Issy sector. Almost right in front of us, as a matter of fact. The plan, is simply this. At a given zero hour, to be announced later, our batteries in the Issy sector will open up with a hour or so of bracket fire. Then the thin line of troops, holding that sector, will move forward. Naturally, the Huns believing a real drive is under way, will suck in their flank forces, and thus weaken the defense of the Contreau sector. You follow me?"

The five pilots nodded silently.

"Good!" Hawker grunted. "Now, here is where we come into the picture. Late this afternoon, you five, and I, will take off from the drome, here, and fly low altitude to this small field next to the woods, here."

Hawker took time out to "spot" the place on the map.

"It is not over a quarter of a mile behind our second line," he continued, "therefore we've all got to sneak in at low altitude, and hide our ships under the trees as soon as possible. There is an old shack, there, where we can bunk tonight. A lorry is on its way up there, now, with Cooper bombs, extra gas, and ammo. A field phone, direct to Army Corps H.Q. will be set up. Once we arrive there, we will be strictly on our own. No mechanics—just us. In other words, we will make the fake drive look like the real thing. When we go into action, the Huns will think us a shock

squadron, moved up. We are to give them hell with everything we have, and keep tearing back to the field for re-loading.

"One thing, though! We're bound to get lots of action. Half the Hun air force is likely to be tossed against us. But, we've got to stick to our job, and make it look real enough until the Hun flanks are sucked in, and the time is ripe for the real offensive in the Contreau sector. That is why I have selected you five pilots to go with me. You've got the stuff. And, I know damn well you can deliver."

Hawker stopped, nodded for emphasis, and looked straight at Kirkwood. Out the corner of his eye, Devon glanced at his pal. Kirkwood did nothing. He didn't even nod.

"And I mean you, in particular, Kirkwood!" Hawker said suddenly. "This is the chance you need, lad. You're going to slam in and show them you haven't lost the old grip, now aren't you?"

Kirkwood half smiled.

"Sure, Major, sure," he grunted. "Anything you say."

"That's it, lad!" Hawker echoed. "Now, one thing more, all of you. We may be gone for over forty-eight hours. Go to the mess and draw iron rations for three days. Stow the stuff in your musette bags, and park it in your ship. Well, that's all. Be ready to take off in a couple of hours. And, the best of luck to all of us. I don't need to tell you that Wing is counting plenty on us. And, we're not the type of let Wing dawn at a time like this. All right, dismissed."

TWO hours later, to the dot, the six "shock squadron" ships took off in follow-the-leader style, and headed east toward the gathering shadows of night. Taking off right in back of Kirkwood, Devon watched his pal closely for signs of the same old style of sloppy flying. With a sinking heart, he saw them without half trying. Kirkwood didn't seem to have a thought about the coming drive. He lifted his plane lazily upward, and went drifting east.

When they were all on the ground again, the sun had gone below the western horizon, and their only light was that thrown off by a couple of oil pot flares. Then began the last of the task of preparing to carry out Wing's "bright" idea. With no mechanics to help, it was doubly tough. Every pilot inspected his ship from prop to tail skid, checked instruments, filled the tank, loaded the guns, and put Cooper bombs in the wing racks. And when that was all completed, they went over everything again, just to make sure. No one



spoke of it, but all were conscious of the seriousness of the job ahead. All, save Kirkwood, perhaps. To Devon's worried eyes he seemed to do most everything mechanically.

"Still the same!" he breathed fiercely. "Ye gods, will nothing snap him out of it?"

It seemed not, and so Devon occupied his mind by thinking of his own chances. He knew that Hawker had not shot off his face, when he'd mentioned that probably half the Hun air force would pile down on him. The Germans didn't like surprise offensives. And they always kept a couple of squadrons ready to slam in and nip things in the bud, if they could. Yeah, there would be lots of lead flying once things got under way.

And, so went his thoughts, until dog tired he walked with the others over to the weather beaten shack and sank down on the floor. The others were just as tired, and although there were iron rations in the musette bags, nobody bothered to eat. Sleep was the main thing, at the moment.

Devon passed under about two seconds after he relaxed. And then, suddenly—it seemed to be the very next second—the field phone jangled harshly. Everybody woke up, sat up with a start. The faint light of early dawn filtered through the broken windows. But, it was neither that, nor the jangle of the phone that caused them to stare wild eyed at each other. On the contrary, it was the sudden thunderous roar of exploding shells. No, not American shells exploding to the east of them. But, German shells exploding within spitting distance of their small emergency field.

With a shouted curse, Hawker grabbed for the phone, jerked off the receiver.

"Major Hawker speaking!" he barked. "What the—?"

He cut himself off short, gripped the phone hard. The others saw his eyes widen, then narrow, and the blood to fade down his cheeks into his neck. Presently, he nodded curtly.

"Yes sir!" he shouted. "Count on us! We'll hold out as long as we can!"

The C.O. practically threw the phone away, and leaped to his feet.

"Into your ships!" he cried. "All hell has broken loose. The Huns are beating us to the punch. They're launching a drive, right now—in this sector! If they break through our thin line, God knows what will happen. Corps is going to rush up re-enforcements, as soon as possible. Meantime, it's up to us to straffe them back. Get going!"

Amid curses and excited shouts, they all piled out

of the shack and over to the ships. Taking turns they spun each other's props; helped each other to taxi out from under the overhanging branches of the trees. Meantime, all hell had broken loose for fair. Heavy shells from the hot mouths of German guns way back, were arriving at twenty-second intervals. Every time one exploded it seemed to Devon that the entire six ships were going along with it.

Hell indeed had broken loose.

IN THE confusion all about him he had only one chance to look Kirkwood's way. His pal was putting on speed, helping the slower ones to get off and up into the air. But, as Devon took a second look, he had the sudden empty feeling that Kirkwood was purposely holding back his own take-off. The thought made his chest ache.

Chuck was showing the white feather? Had it gone that far? Chuck Kirkwood intended to let the rest go out and do the job without him? For a moment hot anger seethed up in Devon. As he went thundering across the small field he glanced back just once more. Only Kirkwood and Major Hawker were left.

There was another chance, in a couple of moments, for Devon to look back and see if Kirkwood had taken off. But he didn't even think of doing it. Didn't for the very plain reason that the tide waters of hell itself were bursting forth from the German side of the lines. Through glazed eyes he saw the grey clad hordes of German troops storm through the American position, as though they weren't even there. And just ahead of the grey wave rolled a crimson wave—a wave of vivid flame from a German barrage.

To Devon it seemed that he had hardly left the small field, before Yank soldiers were racing westward across it in wild retreat, with the Germans hot on their heels. And then, he had to take his eyes from the heart chilling sight below. From out of the dawn tinted skies above him, seemingly countless fire spitting Fokkers came sweeping down. He had only time to jerk his nose up, before he was in the midst of a swirling, whirling mass of yammering sound, and crackling flame.

Something flashed past his gun sights. Instinctively he jabbed his trigger trips. A split second later a sheet of flame leaped skyward, and in the center of the crimson hell he saw the blurred outline of a Fokker. Then it was gone, and he was thundering toward another one.

Five seconds, five minutes, or was it five years, when

he suddenly found himself in the clear, streaking down at the grey clad hordes below? He didn't know, nor did he care. Outnumbered in the air, practically helpless to do anything about the wild enemy advance on the ground below, it was just a case of fight, fight, fight until he went down, or he ran out of ammo and gas.

Checkmate! For once the Germans had pulled off an attack trick, and were playing it for all they were worth. Slamming down, and zooming out only to slam down guns blazing again, Devon cursed G.H.Q., Wing, and everybody else right on down the line. My God, six pilots to stop all this? Never! Hell, it couldn't be done in a hundred thousand years. It would be a miracle if any of them were even alive by the time air and ground re-enforcements were rushed up. But as for—

He suddenly cut off the thought, jerked up in the seat and bellowed in wild excitement. A flash of green lightning had whizzed down past him at twice his speed. It was a plane, Chuck Kirkwood's plane! And it's pilot had seemingly gone stark raving mad. Right! No one, even in the heat of battle would go as daffy as Kirkwood had gone. Like a thunderbolt he charged straight down at the center of the grey wave, blasted it with Vickers bursts, and Cooper bombs. And when he pulled out of his dive he was less than three feet from the ground. Through wide eyes Devon saw German soldiers fling themselves to the ground, missing Kirkwood's sweeping wings by inches. A few of them didn't miss. The charging plane hit them, flung them off like sacks of wet meal, and kept right on going.

For a moment Devon forgot all about himself. Chuck Kirkwood had found his old fighting self at last—*and how!* The way the pilot hurled his ship this way and that was proof positive of the fact that Major Hawker's parting words, whatever they had been, had hit home with a bang. Never, since his very first patrol over the lines, was Kirkwood flying as he was flying now.

TWO Fokkers thundered down on him, but he seemed not to notice them. His targets were the grey clad troops on the ground, and only them. Never zooming up more than a hundred feet or so over their heads he slammed them with burst after burst, spilled them on the smoking ground like ten pins—and then spilled others who remained on their feet.

Shouting, cursing at the top of his voice, Devon streaked down to lend a hand. But, he might just as well have tried to trail after a comet gone berserk, as

far as keeping pace with Kirkwood was concerned. The madman was here, there, and everywhere in nothing flat. More Fokkers came down, and for awhile Devon lost track of his pal as he fought with every ounce of his skill to save his own skin. He got two ships, and his own was almost in ribbons before he was out in the clear again.

Heart in his throat he searched wildly about for the crazy flying green plane. It was seconds before he saw it, and when he did his heart seemed to turn to ice. Kirkwood was below him and back toward the west a bit. No jetting flame was spewing from his guns. They had either jammed, or he had run out of ammo. But that, was making no difference to the berserk eagle. He still had gas, and his wings were still on his ship. Again and again he was charging the German troops, plowing into them recklessly, and bowling them over with his under-carriage and leading edges of his lower wings.

Each time he zoomed up he cut back toward the thin American line, leaned half out of the cockpit and waved savagely at them to go forward. One crazy man, without ammo or bombs, charging the German troops, and charging them again. A million rifle bullets streaked up at him, but the hand of Lady Luck, herself, must have been brushing them to one side, for the all green plane kept plowing into the Germans, filling them with fear of the devil.

It couldn't go on forever. And it didn't. Unable to bring down the miracle man from hell, who kept charging into them, the German troops halted their advance, broke and then started falling back. Their action gave new life to the hard pressed Yank soldiers. They rushed forward, led by Kirkwood's wild flying plane, and went hellbent after the panic stricken Germans.

Like a man who is watching a crazy quilt nightmare unfold before his eyes, Devon tore downward, and slammed the rest of his own slugs into the retreating Germans. As he tried to keep pace with Kirkwood he saw more planes thunder down. For a split second his heart froze. Spandaus slugs would get them both. They would be trapped between two fires. Then suddenly he roared with joy. The diving planes weren't Fokkers! They were Yank Camels, and Spads, and S.E.5s. The whole sky was full of them. Foot by foot half of them drove German craft toward the east. And the other half slammed down to finish the chaos below that Chuck Kirkwood had started.

One man—just one man—!

Devon cried out in sharp alarm. Kirkwood had suddenly zoomed up for altitude. A blast of fire from the very pit of hell, itself, spewed up at him. Devon saw tracers bite through his pal's wings. That is, through what was left of them. Kirkwood's plane staggered off on one wing. Then it was righted, and began to slide slowly around toward the west.

YET, Kirkwood kept it up, somehow. A dozen times, Devon saw it half fall over, as though starting down in an uncontrollable spin. But, each time, Kirkwood managed to haul it back on even keel, and nurse it back westward over the heads of the hand-to-hand fighting troops below. Helpless to do anything, Devon could only keep pace with his pal, and pray fiercely that his luck would hold out.

Dully, he was conscious of another plane riding along with Kirkwood on the other side. But, Devon didn't even give it a single glance. As though the very intensity of his gaze may help keep Kirkwood's ship in the air, he stared at it fixedly.

Presently, however, the nose of the all green ship dipped, and it went slanting earthward. Tearing his gaze from it, Devon looked down, breathed a deep sigh of relief. Kirkwood had forced his ship to hold out long enough. It was now heading down toward the small emergency field, across whose shell cratered surface waves of Yank secondary defense troops were sweeping.

They split and veered to both sides as Kirkwood's plane wobbled and fluttered downward. During the last twenty-five feet of descent, Devon held his breath clamped tight in his lungs, and kept his eyes fixed on the all green ship. And then, its wheels touched, hit a small mound of dirt. The plane bounced upward for about ten feet, and fell back like an exhausted bird.

By that time, Devon's wheels were touching, and he was forced to jerk his gaze back to his own ship.

Seconds later, though, when he had settled, he looked again, and shouted with joy as he saw the lean figure of Kirkwood struggling out from the heap of tangled wreckage. Leaping out himself, he raced over, reached his pal at the same moment Major Hawker did. The C.O.'s plane was also on the ground. Blood oozed out of a slight bullet crease across Kirkwood's left cheek, but he grinned as Hawker and Devon rushed up. The C.O.'s face was lighted up like a four alarm fire.

"Good God, man!" he cried. "I never saw anything like it! There never has been anything like it! You stopped the whole damn thing all by yourself. By God, I'll see that you get the Congressional Medal for this, if it's the last thing I do."

Kirkwood half nodded, started to move off.

"Thanks, Major," he grunted.

"And I will, too!" the C.O. repeated. "I'm proud of you, Kirkwood. I knew you had it in you. Damn right—I knew I could make you an ace flyer again."

"Reckon you did, Major, I guess," Kirkwood muttered, and started trotting across the field.

Wondering what the hell, Devon chased after him, followed him into the old shack. Kirkwood went directly to his musette bag of iron rations in the corner. It didn't contain iron rations, however. It contained fudge, cookies, pickles and so forth, sent from America.

As Kirkwood pulled the stuff out, Devon chuckled.

"Oh! Then it wasn't a pep-talk by the ace maker, huh?"

Kirkwood snorted, crammed fudge into his mouth, and held out the box to him.

"Pep-talk, my eye!" he mumbled. "He kicked me up stairs before I could grab up this stuff. Nuts! I've been waiting two months for this. Think I was going to leave it here for a lot a square-head Huns to gobble up? Like Hell! Here, dive in, kid!"