

KNIGHTS OF THE NIEUPOORT

by ANDREW A. GAFFREY

“Coupe Mike,” they called him. He was named a Lieutenant by the War Department, and Michael by an adoring mother. However, Fate dubbed him a Black Cat for luck until Fate changed his mind and so furnished the material for a bang-up air novelette.

LIEUTENANT MICHAEL HARRIS—they called him “Coupe” Mike—was a peculiar sort of a flying man. Where did he get that “Coupe” nickname? You’d be surprised, for “it is to laugh” as the French might say. Michael Harris won that fitting nickname in his own funny way, and the guy was full of such ways, too. However, though it has nothing to do with this yarn, the wherefore of that “Coupe” thing might interest you. It happened this way.

Mike Harris trained at the big flying center known as Issoudun before he reached the front. Fact is, Mike trained there for so long a period that Headquarters thought he was there to stay. You see, Mike was a little older than the rest of the would-be aces, and it took a longer time for him to get the hang of the thing—also to learn the difference between a coupe button and something else. And it was the darned coupe buttons that just about ruined Mike.

Issoudun, you’ll recall, trained all its pilots on rotary-motored ships, Nieuports for the greater part. First, the student went aloft in the Nieuport-23. It was an awful crate. Next, the student was turned loose on those same mean arks for first solo. After the “23”, for more advanced solo work, he went to the “Nieuport-27—bis.” If you’ll look it up, you’ll find that “bis” means “encore.” No doubt, encore on the hell for the poor student. Advanced flying was taken on the good Nieuport-27 and the better Nieuport-28. But no matter which Nieuport a student was piloting, all the time he was handling a coupe button.

This coupe button was a two-bit sized push button on the top of the joy stick. When the flier brought the thumb of his stick hand down on that button, it cut the motor. The jiffy he lifted his thumb, the motor yelled again on full gun. In acrobatic and combat work this coupe button was the berries; for a pilot could

take a left-handful of cawling, hold on like the very devil and do all his work with the right mitt. Also, on his landings, this button gave him full motor control all the way to the last bounce, even through the hectic throes of *le cheval*. That was a bucking-bronc stunt at which a landing Nieuport was so proficient. Rightly handled, the coupe was very jake.

Mike Harris, however, had not trained all the way on rotary-engined ships. Before shipping overseas he had soloed, and put in many hours, on our American Jenny and L.W.F. So, for Mike, the coupe button was something else again, and not so good, were you to hear him tell it. They say that Mike never used the button at all while Fields 5 and 7 were putting him through. But they were satisfied that he could fly, so they okeyed his work and sent him along to Field 8. This Field 8 was the last training field before a pilot went to the front. At 8 the almost-made ace studied combat work. The most important thing at 8 was the camera-gun.

This camera-gun was just that—a gun. It was the size of a machine gun, almost. And it was mounted on the ship’s machine-gun fittings. The film exposure was made by squeezing a joy-stick trigger grip. From the trigger grip, through the pull of a Bowden cable, the student made his shot. He got his man, or his man’s ship, pictured, when developed and printed, on a 2x4-inch scale.

NOW, coming to Field 8, Lieutenant Michael Harris took wing to see how good he was with the camera-gun. He went here and there in the great broad sky and met up with many other students. These other pilots, Mike engaged in aerial combat. For nearly two hours, here and there and everywhere, the boys went round and round. Then Mike came down.

“What luck do you think you had?” the officer in

charge of combat instruction asked Mike. "Get good pictures?"

"Don't think so," Mike said. "I'm not satisfied."

"How come?" the O.I.C.O.C.I. asked. "What seemed to be wrong, lieutenant?"

"Well," Mike told him, "every time I got in position and squeezed my grip, the damned motor would stop."

The O.I.C.O.C.I. tried not to laugh. He said, "Better luck, next time, lieutenant," and went into the flying office.

When Mike Harris had moved along, and the officer in charge of combat instruction was behind closed doors, he broke right down and laughed. A few other officers busy therein stopped their work turned to the O.I.C.O.C.I., and asked, "What a-hell's so funny, Bob?"

"Oh my; oh my! oh my!" the officer of all those six aforementioned letters roared, "and, oh my! again. That man Harris has been trying to shoot camera-gun pictures with his coupe button. Ha! ha! That's the funniest thing that's happened at this center. Ha! ha!"

And from that second. Air Service had an interesting exhibit called "Coupe" Mike.

YOU'D'VE felt sorry for Mike Harris had you been there to see how earnest the fellow really was. War, for Mike, wasn't a lark. Early and late, you'd find him working ship in the hangar. Field 8, with two squadrons of enlisted men, was trying to keep upward of sixty pursuit ships in commission. That was work! Such men as Coupe Mike, a few such men, actually helped the mechanics in their spare time. When it rained—and when didn't it pour?—Mike spent whole days at a time trying to make sure that he'd have some sort of a craft to fly when a clearing should come. There wasn't an enlisted stiff on the field who didn't like Coupe Mike—well enough to borrow money. And Mike was the guy to put out, too. Therefore, the grease-balls took good care that Coupe Mike should always be well supplied with ships.

Keeping Mike in ships was no graft, either. During the duration of his stay at Field 8, without a word of a lie, Coupe Mike smashed more flying equipment than any other man to ever pass through the school. Why, as the flying officer said, you'd think Mike was a major the way he tried to quit the ground, and get back on it.

They'd call Coupe Mike in to stand on the C.O.'s carpet and explain why he should not be sent back to Field 3 for more preliminary training. The C.O. always tried to be nice about it, too.

"You see, Lieutenant Harris," he'd say, "there's no hurry about this thing. A man wants to be right when he goes out of here. The front's next, lieutenant, and it's no bed of roses. Don't you think a few weeks more at D-C, over at Field 3, would just about fix you up? You don't seem to have any idea where the ground is, lieutenant . . . you're take-offs are abominable. Abominable!"

"Abominable?" Coupe Mike would repeat, and question; with all seriousness, too. "Abominable? Sir, they're worse than that. They are rotten, what I mean. And I know it too."

But would Mike quit? Would he pack his duds and move over to Field 3? What a question!—most emphatically, he would not! He had an ace in the hole: a flock of aces, in fact, in several holes. Mike would trot out a few of his strongest-speaking aces.

"But look at my machine-gun reports, sir," he'd say.

"None better," the C.O. was forced to admit. "O.K."

"And my aerial combat, sir. I'm up to snuff."

"The instructors, lieutenant, say you're the best," the C.O. would agree. The Old Man couldn't be too hard.

"And my camera-gun shots—now that I've learned to lay off the coupe button, damn it, sir!—are all jake too."

"Lieutenant," the C.O. would finally concede, "there isn't a thing or earth wrong with your air work. Not a thing."

"Well, sir," and these here are Lieutenant Michael Harris' exact, oft-repeated words of argument, "that's where I expect to fight the Hun—in the air. Sir, damn it all! won't you agree, sir, that I'm not going to fight on the ground?"

What would you do? What could you do, were you the C.O. of Field 8? You'd give this bird Harris another chance.

EACH time—three times in two weeks—the C.O. listened to that plea, rang long fingers through his hair, and said, "Well, lieutenant, we'll see what we can do about putting you through. You know, Lieutenant Harris, you've mentioned machine gun work, and combat. Also, you spoke of your camera-gun shots. But what you didn't bring up—and of course you wouldn't, not you—is your unbounded, unlimited, ding-busted sportsmanship. Harris, look," and the C.O. pounded his desk, "if you weren't so white, if you didn't double in grease with the mechanics, if you didn't put everything on the ball, well I wouldn't keep you here for an hour.

Any man, lieutenant, who has been through the smashes that you've had, and still wants to fly, must want to fly mighty bad. Hop to it. But get off our hands as soon as possible. That's all, lieutenant."

DIRECTLY from the C.O.'s desk, Coupe Mike went over and stood on another place where there might have been a carpet, but wasn't, in front of the officer in charge of combat instruction's desk. "What's bothering you, Harris?" that officer asked, without looking up from his work.

"How about a ship?" Coupe Mike asked.

"You're in luck," the combat officer told Mike. "Just five minutes ago, that new '27,' No. 444, was ferried over from the Main Field assembly. Guess there's no reason why you can't hop her, Harris. But for the love of your own guardian angel, and the great archangel Michael, take good care of it." The O. I. C. O. C. I. craned his long neck, watched the mechanics push a new ship from the gas pump to the dead-line, and added: "It's on the line now. Go to it."

Coupe Mike, clad in the only flying suit he ever owned—the blue denim fatigue clothes of the enlisted man—went out to the line. He spoke to the sergeant in charge of section. The sergeant called two greaseballs, and said: "Hey, you guys, give the lieutenant a start. Yeh, 444. Wind it up, and make it fast! Where t'hell do you guys think you are—working for the city or sumpin', eh?"

By then, Coupe Mike was in the cockpit. The two macs called for "switch off" and "wide open on the gas." Mike gave them that. "Gas off, and contact!" they called, and got that too.

Slowly, the 120 LeRhône warmed up. It snapped out its shots in fine style. The sergeant threw Coupe Mike's shoulder straps over his hump, leaned into the cockpit, and said: "Good motor, lieutenant. Brand new ship, guy. Let's see you use the dam' old bean this time, feller. If you crack this cull, I'll never let you in my hangar again. Worse than that, I won't mooch any more jack off you, either. Cut your gun. Want to bum her up on the ground? . . . Hey, you, simple"—this to one of his mechanics—"pull those blocks!"

At that exact second, another Nieuport-27 was coming in for a landing. Its landing direction was parallel to the dead-line from which Coupe Mike was about to start. Mike did start. Without any kind of taxiing, as was the way of those Nieuporters, he slapped full gun to his motor, pushed the stick far ahead, fanned his rudder, brought up the tail, and went—went hell-bent and *bang!* right square into that landing plane.

WITH the mighty bang, hardworking macs popped out of twelve dead-line-fronting hangars. Men came from Headquarters. Gold-bricks came from the Y.M.C.A. and other places where they'd been in hiding. And the whole command watched the dust settle and bring to view the twisted, shattered remains of two "27's." Then, before the ambulance could reach the pile, Mike and the other boy pushed aside what had been holding them down, and shook hands. "Coupe Mike Harris," the command exclaimed. "Just another little incident in the life of a brave soldier. Hell, we thought that maybe something really had happened."

When the salvage gang had removed what was left of the two ships, with Coupe Mike's willing help, the other pilot went to his barracks. Enough was enough, that boy figured, and any more flying, that day, would be more than enough. Not so Coupe Mike. He went right back to the flying office.

"I know what you're going to say," Mike intercepted before the O.I.C.O.C.I. could speak. "Sure it was bad, but hell, man, that might happen to anybody. How about another ship?"

"Harris," the O.I.C.O.C.I. said, "it was bad. Still and all, you want to fly, eh? Want to go right ahead?"

"I've got to go ahead," Coupe said. "I'm not going to let these cockeyed little accidents stop me!"

"Little accidents?" the O.I.C.O.C.I. mused. "Little? Ha!—that's good. Harris, when this *guerre* ends, I only hope that you and I can get a hold of as much jack as that little accident cost your old Uncle Sam."

The officer in charge quitted his desk. He was very much troubled. He paced the office. He scratched the nape of his neck. He pulled his nose. Fact is, the man did everything that is supposed to help a man think. Then he came back and handed Coupe a smoke. "What would you suggest, Harris?" he then asked.

"Well," Coupe decided, "I don't want you to put it up to me. You see, If I were in your place, I'd throw me to hell out of this office. I know that I should be drawn and quartered, Scotch-hobbled, and given the bum's rush. Ain't it the truth? Sure it is. However, I want to finish. Lord! how I want to get up on that front. Now you decide what's to be done. I'll take whatever you hand me." The O.I.C.O.C.I. paced come more. Then he came back to his desk, stared glazy-eyed through the window, and speared a pen into the desk top till it stood on end, and that settled it. He sat down and drew a list of ships toward him. "You still want to fly, eh?"

IN THAT list of available ships was one old Nieuport that had little or no economic value. Field 8 used it as a sort of work-out ship. The old ship was 173.

173 was all that a piece of flying equipment should not be. It was oil-soaked from prop boss to the frayed ends of its rudder covering, and from wing-tip to wing-tip. Its flying and landing wires were filled with green mold and wet rust, also those wires were plenty slack. There wasn't a tight square foot of linen on the whole lay-out; and 173's motor was actually loose on its fixation plate. Yet—and you'd wonder how come!—the poor old wreck could get off the ground, fly, and set down again without falling apart—providing the pilot was careful. 173 had been officially condemned half a dozen time. It was still at 8, however, merely because the salvage gang was too busy to lean on it with an axe.

The O.I.C.O.C.I. turned once more to Coupe Mike and said, "I can't give you any more first-class equipment, Harris. At least, not at this time. It wouldn't be fair to the rest of the boys. We have not got any too many ships, and, Old Top, you'll agree that you've had your share, eh?"

"And then some," Coupe agreed. "I'm not kicking."

"But," the officer in charge went on, "I see no reason why you should not fly 173 if you wish to. What say?"

"Say yes," Coupe agreed, "and gladly."

"Now don't be too willing, or too anxious," the other warned. "173 is no fit ship for combat work. I don't need to tell you that; you've seen the old wreck yourself. I'll have it sent to erection-and-repair hangar right now. They can put a few hours in on the old box, tightening the awful thing up. It will be ready for you first flight in the morning.

"Now don't overdo the thing. If you'll merely put in the required successful periods for a few days, make the required moves, and show us that you can take 'er off and put 'er down, we'll shove you along. How about it?"

"Done!" Coupe Mike enthused. "I'll fly low and slow just like a major. I'll use a balloon to pick it off the good old ground. And I won't land till the boys lay a French mattress for me. You're going to be proud of me. And you're going to miss me too. I've shown this field a good time during my lengthy incumbency, what?"

"You have,"—the other admitted. "Man, if destroying our own ships counted, you'd be an ace right here, without ever leaving Field 8."

Starting early the next morning, Coupe Mike flew 173 steadily for three days. His take-offs and landings

were none too smooth. Truth of the matter is: they were Very rotten. But old 173 fought back. Coupe Mike could not discourage that old girl. She'd been out with lots of bum pilots, and one more made little difference in her hard career.

Coupe treated 173 rough on the take-offs, got her tail too high and her nose too low, but she took off. He roughed the poor old crate on the landings, skidded her in and she "chevalled." Then she kicked dirt, stood on her tail skid, and flopped hard on her gear, yet would not give up. She was one too many for Coupe Mike, and he knew it.

At the end of the third day, holding its official breath, lest something might yet happen, Headquarters gave Lieutenant Michael Harris his lache. They told him to pack, grab himself a train, and go up to Orly.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, Lieutenant Michael Harris went directly to Orly without missing a single train in Paris. That's a world's record, you say? Well, maybe. But Coupe Mike was in a great hurry. He was due now to make up for much lost time.

It was well past eleven o'clock of a stormy night when Lieutenant Harris arrived at Orly, awoke the Headquarters corporal on duty and reported in.

"1st Lieutenant Michael Harris reporting for duty," Coupe said.

"Well," the half-awake non-com grumbled, "what a-hell of it, eh? Wouldn't this war keep till morning?"

"But," Coupe said, friendly enough, "I want to know where to go."

"I could tell you where to go!" the awful enlisted stiff bit off.

"But look here," Coupe continued, "I've got to know where to sleep."

"You would want to know that, wouldn't you? Where's your blanket roll? Bring it with you?"

"Here's my whole kit," Coupe Mike told the Orly man.

Mike's whole kit seemed to be two old army blankets strapped tightly around those old blue denim flying overalls, and a few other things. The hard corporal studied the kit.

"Guys on their way to the front," he said, "usually tote their own cots and mattresses! Chances are, if this punk weather holds out, you'll be here for a stay."

The corporal walked Coupe to the door. He pointed into the wet and dark night. "See that barracks right opposite where that sentry is now? Well that's where you curl up and pray for morning to come."

"Thanks, corporal," Coupe said; "you can sure write home to your troop tonight. You've done your daily deed. But don't forget to tell the adjutant I'm here. By the way, who is adjutant here at Orly?"

"Captain Willis," the corporal said.

"Willis?" Coupe Mike questioned. "Little Cupie Willis?"

"That's him," the non-com told Mike.

"Know Willis well," Coupe Mike mused. "See him in the a.m. Goodnight, corporal."

HALF AN HOUR after that the sentry down near the salvage pile was attracted by an unearthly rustling about among a pile of board and timber odds and ends. The sentry sneaked up on the noise, brought his piece to port, and barked: "Who's there?"

The figure of a man stopped rustling. "Member of the post," the challenged made answer. "Lieutenant Harris."

"Drag your hip bones a few paces forward, Member of the Post, and let me look you over,"—the sentry demanded.

The figure came out of the pile, stopped again at the second challenge, and sure enough it was Coupe Mike. In his hands he carried hammer and saw. He wore neither overcoat nor blouse; but appeared to be a man who might be contemplating a job of work just ahead.

"You look all right," the sentry decided. "But what t'hell are you doing here, lieutenant?"

"Me?" Coupe Mike replied. "Why, guard, I'm just trying to find a few 2x4's and some wire netting, if there's such a thing around. Is there?"

The guard took a new and firmer hold upon his piece and yelled: "Corporal of the guard! Post number 5!" Then, to Coupe Mike Harris, he said, "Stay where you are, buddy. Maybe you're all right, but I'm going to pass the buck."

"But, guard," Mike started to say,

"But it out with the corporal when he comes," the sentry advised Coupe. "They was a cuckoo got away from the nuthouse up the line only last month, came in here, and burned down two hangars. We got to be careful."

Splashing through the night, the corporal of the guard came in view. The sentry told him all he knew. The corporal turned to Coupe Mike, looked him over, and asked: "What's the idea of looking for chicken wire and 2x4's at this time of night, lieutenant? Going to catch and cage a whang-doodle or a whiffle-snatcher, eh?"

For a few minutes Coupe Mike worked hard in

explaining his idea to the corporal. At the end of five minutes the corporal was back at the guard-house. The officer of the day was there.

"She's getting to be a strange army, lieutenant," the corporal complained to the O.D. "Awful queer."

"Meaning what, corporal; and why?" the O.D. asked.

"Well," the corporal explained, "just a few minutes ago I get a call from 5. The guard has a regulation flying looey under the gun when I get there. The looey's in the wood pile. He's looking for 2x4's and chicken wire. Now, in a thousand years or so of rapid guessing you'd never guess what he wanted the building material for. Give a guess."

The O.D. laughed He roared. "I'll give you the right answer on the first guess, corporal," he said. "The looey was going to build himself a bunk."

"By hell!" the corporal gave up, "how the devil did you know that? Bunk is right."

"Also," added the O.D., "the lieutenant's name is Harris. Right?"

"Correct again, sir. Do you know him?"

"I knew Mike Harris back in the States. Trained with him in Texas. Was with him at Mitchell Field. Came over on the same transport. Left him back at Issoudun. And, corporal, wherever Mike goes he carries nothing but a hammer and saw. Builds his own bunk. It's hard on the rest of the command. I've seen him come into a new camp at 2 a.m., start to sawing and hammering, and wake the whole post up."

"No good sense to that," the corporal decided. "Why does he do it?"

"Oh, the man's O.K.," the O.D. said. "This, I guess, is merely one of his idiosyncrasies."

"One of his what?" the corporal barked.

"One of his idiosyncrasies," the O.D. repeated.

Raising a hand the O.D. pointed through the open door, off into the night, toward where the dull fall of a hammer sounded. "He's at it, corporal," the O.D. whispered.

AT MESS next morning Coupe Mike Harris bumped into many of the old, hell-for-leather gang. "Heard you were in, Mike," each one said. And each one was sure to bear down hard on the "heard."

The adjutant, when Coupe Mike reported to him, shoved out a glad hand and yelled: "lo, Harris! Heard you were in."

"All right, Cupie," Coupe shot back, "now tell me when I'll be going out."

"Not so fast," Cupie Willis advised. "There's a long

string of boys before you, Mike. You'll have a few days here to look us over. What do you know about Spad-220's, eh? Well, Mike, take a tip from me—study the dam' French contraptions.

"Maybe, till you draw an assignment, I'll get you some ferry work. Give you a chance to feel your way up toward the front. See you later, Mike. We'll go places. Yes?"

For two or three days Coupe Mike worked with the gang in final assembly. The Spad-220, with its stationary V-type motor, was to his liking. No doubt, this geared-down Hisso could cause lots of grief for its pilot, but anything, in Mike's opinion, would be better than a rotary—with its darned coupe-button gadget.

"HOW would you like to hop a replacement up to a squadron in the Toul sector?" Willis asked Mike one morning in September.

"It's jake with me," Coupe answered. "Do I pack my stuff and stay up there with the replacement?"

"You do not," Cupie Willis warned Mike. "You'll fly a ship back here, one that's coming back for overhaul. Report to the engineering officer and tell him I sent you. Allez-op!"

Half an hour later Coupe Mike was under way. The end of this two-hour hop would show him his first peek at the front.

FLYING just south of the Marne, he checked Epernay to his left. 75 kilometers were flown when Chalons saw him go by. And then St. Diajer was lagging past far to his right. Coupe Mike's motor coughed. Mike piqued. The motor spit. Coupe rocked his throttle and studied his instrument board.

Mike's heart nearly stopped when he discovered the air-pressure gauge back at 0. He hand-pumped. The hand pump was new, stiff. He barked his knuckles on the ship's side. All the hand-pumping on earth wouldn't shove that indicating hand back to a 31b. reading. Soon he had less than a thousand feet of altitude.

A landing had to be made, and here. The ground came up, Coupe fish-tailed down, and he got away with an A-1 performance. At the last second, he had ground-looped to avoid a staked-out cow.

When the ship stopped rolling, Coupe's propeller was within six feet of a bramble thicket. Coupe Mike went directly to the seat of trouble. The mechanic who had gassed the ship had failed to tighten the gas-tank's screw top cover. With the cover vibrating loose in flight, the air pressure had blown past.

You'd forgive Coupe Mike if he cussed a bit. An out-and-out mechanical failure is one thing, but petty negligence such as this is an unpardonable sin of the air.

The adjustment made Coupe was all set to go, except to pull his ship back from the clump of brambles.

Now a "220's" short, heavy tail is a good lift for any two husky macs, but Mike tackled the job alone. She was going to be a tough lift. Coupe Mike dug his toes in the sod, spit on both big mitts, bent to the job, and gave it all he had. One mighty lift, and something within Coupe Mike cracked. He hit the ground like a felled ox.

"TOUGH PICKINGS," the gang back at Orly said. "Rotten, very putrid luck! . . . You've head about Coupe Mike's latest, haven't you? . . . No? He shot a forced landing. Up toward Toul, somewhere. He tried to lift his ship outa a clump of trees, and what does he do but rupture himself! Let's get together an' send the bird some smokes, and a little something to drink. He's down at the hospital."

That twenty-mile Meuse-Argonne front was pushing well up toward Germany when the hospital turned Coupe loose. He came back to Orly's Headquarters to report for duty once more.

"Now what have you got for me?" Coupe asked.

"Right now, Mike," Cupie told him, "you *chassé* men are in biggest demand on the Meuse-Argonne balloon line. It's a hot spot, Mike. Burning bags. Parachuting observers. Spinning, flaming ships."

"Hell," Coupe said, "write it out for me, and let me get under way."

"Now, Mike," Cupie directed, "you'll ferry your own Spad up to the line. Carry your musette and ship the rest of your junk. We'll have something new along those news lines by noon. Yesterday the pursuit bunch were near Varennes, but they were due to make a change. The war is moving fast, Mike.

Before noon Coupe Mike had his hammer and saw, wrapped in two blankets, stowed away in his ship, and at one o'clock he was in the air, headed eastward.

Daybreak next morning found Coupe Mike ready for his first day on the balloon line. The pursuit squadron's operations officer showed him a pin shoved into the air map and said: "Keep under that."

The pin was at less than 2,000 feet. It was low, and the officer knew that Harris was thinking just that. "Remember," he had said, "covering these bags is our work. You have no right above the pin. The Hun ships

that come down on our balloons are yours, nothing else. This is your mission. And you'll find yourself busy, too."

COUPE Mike took the air with three other Spad men. Their destination was a temporary advanced landing field on the balloon line. And they had hardly made a set-down before anti-aircraft guns, down the line, began to fill the sky with puffs, and a flight of Fokkers came in from the north.

COUPE was with D-Flight. Other flights—A, B and F—also contributed to the same cause. In all, 10 Spads took the air with a zoom.

They met those oncoming Fokkers before the latter had located their first balloon; and of seven enemy craft only three lived through the next half hour. Two Yanks, also, had gone west. Mike and the other seven dropped down for landings. Harris was glowing. He didn't know whether or not he'd scored, but he knew that he liked it.

The clouds had lifted. The pin was in the clear. Other Allied pursuit squadrons could be seen, in all directions, patrolling just under the clouds, perhaps at 4,000 feet.

At noon down from an observer in the nearest balloon came an alert. The observers in that basket were getting ready to leave. They could see a two-place fighter, Hun, sneaking up the Aire from far in the rear. "Harris," the officer in charge of the advanced field asked, "how would you like to bag this baby?" Coupe Mike was in his cockpit before the officer in charge finished. "Now, look," the latter added: "These two-place ships are soft if you handle them right. First get the rear-seat man—he's very dangerous. Then with him out of the way, you can pick off the pilot at leisure, but get him before he gets the balloon."

Coupe Mike zoomed.

The officer in charge sent up two other ships to cover the bag in case the Hun two-place fought its way past Coupe Mike Harris. And the other boys on the ground sat back and waited to see how good this new guy was going to be.

Coupe Mike intercepted the raider when the oncoming two-place was within a kilometer of the balloon. That—one kilometer—is very close. Coupe, diving at right angles to the Hun's line of fight, raked the aft part of the ship with both guns wide open. Coupe had accounted for the backseat man! Those aft guns were silenced forever.

Now, out of his diving momentum, Mike pulled up in a chandelle, kicked his ship flat on her back, less

than a hundred feet above the balloon-bound two-plane, and still upside-down, allowed the nose to drop slowly—very slowly—till the Hun was once more in his sights. Then both guns poured lead.

Coupe's Spad settled; and poured lead. Came closer; and still vomited lead. Passed below the tail of the two-plane; and was still firing. Then the Hun, within a stone's heave of the balloon, waved a wisp of black smoke to the rear, fell off on a wing, and spun into the ground.

ALONG TOWARD sunset that same balloon decided to make a change of position. The ground forces had pushed ahead that day at an awful rate.

Their next stand was to be on the opposite side of a ravine on the Aire. They decided to "walk" the balloon along the river, in this way saving a few hours' work. So the winch truck had cut away to come up in the new position by making a detour.

A detachment of engineers were on the hold-down lines helping the balloon's ground crew. Coupe and his seven mates were filling the air with protection. The operation was carrying in fine style.

However there was something that nobody had counted on: just as the balloon-dragging gang reached the east bank of the Aire, a German pill box opened its machine guns and raked those Yanks down like mowed grass. For seconds nobody could locate the source.

"Turn her loose!" the observers yelled. "Make a run for it! Turn her loose!"

Reluctantly the ground men turned the balloon loose and ducked for cover. The balloon, free now, shot straight up.

The covering Spads saw the trouble. They slapped power to their 220's and went out for altitude. At 2,000 feet, with the sausage carrying in toward Germany, the first observer went overside. His parachute opened. Two Spads covered his fall.

The second observer, however, ran up against a tough break. As he cleared the side, his parachute shroud lines tangled in the basket. From that parachute, head down, the observer dangled overside. He was in a mean position.

At 5,000 feet, going almost straight up and to the east, the balloon was entering the lower levels of the clouds. Seconds later, the clouds blotted it out entirely. At 7,000 feet, Coupe Mike and the other five pilots who had followed, came into the clear above those clouds. Still higher up, maybe at 10,000, the balloon was moving off far into enemy territory. And the upside-down observer had managed to climb back into his basket.

The observer had time now to check the bag's climb. He was cruising and, no doubt, wondering where. Coupe Mike and his mates were soon alongside. For a long time, trying to guess a way out, they cruised that way, throttled low, watching the sky, and moving as near to balloon drift as was possible.

BACK near Montmedy, some thirty kilometers behind the German lines, trouble came up in the form of three Fokkers. The sky back there was fairly clear, and they had been in view of the ground for quite a while. Ten minutes later, those three German pilots were no more, but they got two Yanks before they went. Coupe and the other three Spads escorted the balloon again.

Luxembourg, nearly 100 kilometers behind the front, passed off to the right. Something had to be done. Suddenly, Coupe Mike and the others noticed that the balloon man was valving-off, and pointing to fine-looking landing country off behind Treves. They got the idea, the balloon man's big idea of making a landfall there. Then what? Well, it would be up to one of the Spad men to fly him back.

Fifteen minutes later, that balloon was tangled in a mess of trees just north of Treves. A minute later it was in flames, and Coupe Mike with his Spad grounded in a field one hundred yards away, was ready to take the observer aboard. Finally, with the observer astride the Spad's turtle-back the Spad went back into the air.

MIKE Harris' three mates formed a V before him, as the four Spads plied west. There was no choice, nothing but a straight buck through the center. And they plowed that line!

Archie filled the air around them. A flight of twenty German pursuit ships came down on their rear near Longuyon, still far in the enemy country. Black and Halland, flying those Spads at Coupe's flanks, fell back to fight the mob off. Those two boys gave an account of themselves, went down in glory, but had their minute of life. Coupe, his passenger, and the Spad ahead, carried on.

At times the Archies that tried for them drove off their followers. Coupe laughed as he noticed this. But that fire from the ground was too heavy, too close now, too much the real thing. At Baroncourt, with Verdun in view, a high-explosive shell, making a direct hit, took Coupe's last pal out of the fight.

For a minute then, Mike had nothing ahead. He half turned to see how his observer passenger was getting along. Coupe Mike knew another thrill: that ding-

busted, balloon-going, parachute-jumping Yank was holding on with one hand and fighting off the pursuers with his side arm. Coupe Mike's great thrill was that thrill of knowing how big Yanks can and do grow.

Coupe reached into the open neck of his blue denims and pulled out his own automatic. "Here," he yelled, passing it back, "ammunition up! Ammunition up! Stay with 'em, Lighter-than-Air! Stay with the hellers! Let 'em have it!"

SHADOWS were crossing No-Man's-Land when Coupe's fighting line of flight brought his Spad in above that seemingly neutral space. When the flaming onions grew less plentiful, Coupe guessed that he was getting out of the woods.

Still and all, Coupe knew that he had been in the air, all told, for more than two hours and a quarter, and when a Spad had been on the wing for that length of time, it was high time that a pilot know just where his next landing place might be—and how soon.

Then, north of Verdun, the break came. Down from his left fell a flight of six Spads of another squadron. Up from his right, hopped a flight of four Yank two-place fighters. Then, forgetting his gasoline shortage, Coupe Mike flew a wing-over turn, yelled "Hold everything!" to the hanging-on observer, and went back to lead the wind-up dog-fight of what he was beginning to figure a great day.

First crack out of the box, head-on, Coupe knocked off a Rumpler. Then, as the other Yanks came in, the milling became so general that who was who was hard to tell. But in the end, a long string of enemy craft went hi-tailing back into the eastern dusk, leaving behind them four burning piles in France. The four burning piles were three Huns and one two-seated Yank DeHaviland.

A few minutes later, on the advanced field of another pursuit squadron, Coupe Mike shot his landing. The observer slid to the ground, stretched his legs, and said: "She was sure some ride, lieutenant. Got a smoke?"

LATE THAT same night, the sentry on that advanced field heard somebody rustling about among a pile of boxes and crates. "Halt! Who's there?" the sentry asked, yelled.

A man with a hammer and a saw stood up. He was about to answer the challenge. But the sentry cut him short:

"Carry on, Lieutenant Harris," the sentry said. "I've heard of you. . . . The field will be glad to hear you're in."