

"SQUARE—HELL!"

by O.B. MYERS

"Give them both guns in the guts"—that was the flight commander's treatment for disabled enemy flyers. But air warfare to Larry Fowler was still a game, to be played according to certain rules of sportsmanship.

LARRY FOWLER WRIGGLED his weary body down into the cockpit of his Spad, trying to find a comfortable position. But as soon as he relaxed and slid down to comparative ease, he found that he could no longer keep his eyes on "Bull" Gans, the flight leader. With a sigh he straightened.

This was the third patrol that day for C flight. Larry wished it were over and done with, so that he could catch some much-needed rest. Usually he started on patrol with a feeling of zest, of anticipation, a pleasant thrill such as he used to feel before a big game at New Haven. The grim business of war was to Larry but a gigantic game, wherein if you outwitted and out-maneuvered the other fellow, you won. If you lost—but Larry had not lost yet, and did not let himself think about what that meant. Although he had been almost a month on the Front, and had two Germans to his credit, he still thought of aerial warfare as something in the nature of a sport.

They were now crossing the front lines into enemy territory. Imperceptibly, the five Spads drew a little closer together, and five short, rattling coughs told that the pilots were trying out their guns. With an occasional glance at Bull Gans' ship to check his position in the formation, Larry scanned the skies above and before him.

Far to the east, a group of black specks pin-pricked the blue; he had to nod his head up and down to be sure he was not seeing spots on his goggles. The next minute he was turning sharply to follow Bull, who had banked abruptly toward the east.

"They're way the hell beyond our sector," muttered Larry to himself. "Wish he'd stick to our own sector, and let 'em alone."

But even as he spoke he knew that there was no such chance. The implacable Bull Gans was not the man to leave an enemy alone in any sky, sector or no

sector. He saw Bull turn in his seat and look back, first over his right shoulder, and then over his left. Then Bull's left hand came up, and passed slowly across his throat. It was Bull's habitual signal before joining battle. The gesture said, as plainly as a shouted phrase, "To a finish!" Larry inched his throttle back a trifle further, and set himself for action.

The two groups approached each other; Larry could now see that there were five in the enemy formation. They circled cautiously once, feeling for an opening. Then the five Germans, as one man, executed a simultaneous renversement, and zoomed up under the Spads, machine guns hammering a staccato scream. For a few moments there was a mad snarl as the Spads banked and dived to return the fire. Then the tangle gradually resolved itself into five individual combats, each Spad paired off with a Fokker.

Larry found himself following a Fokker round and round in a steep bank. He pulled his stick back into his belly and hugged the air at ninety degrees. He was gaining; his Spad was turning just a hair closer than the Fokker. He gave his stick a final twitch, his ring sight just touched the tail of the other plane—and the German fairly leaped out of his bank and began turning the other way. Larry laughed aloud, and followed.

His tired feeling was gone now; once more he was keyed up to fighting pitch by the thrill of the combat. Forgotten was the exhaustion of the first two patrols; far from his mind the thought of rest. His whole being was fired with the elation of the game he was playing with his opponent. The game itself was the thing; the stakes he never considered.

In his eagerness he pulled on his stick a little too hard; his Spad jerked into a spin. He righted the ship almost instantly, but the Fokker was on his tail. He saw tracers slicing through his wings. He pulled up, as if to loop; the Fokker followed. But then he

suddenly pushed his nose down, cutting his motor. This unexpected maneuver caught the German pilot unawares, and he shot past over Larry's head. Larry immediately jerked open his throttle, pulled his ship up vertically, and for a brief instant found the enemy in his sights. He squeezed his triggers.

There was no time to draw a bead on the other cockpit, but he saw his stream of lead ripping the Fokker's tail surfaces to shreds. The next moment the Fokker was careening earthward in a series of gigantic swoops. Larry circled widely to watch.

Obviously neither pilot nor motor was hit, but the plane was completely out of control. Larry knew that the victory was his. Mixed with his feeling of elation was a feeling of pity for his opponent; he actually hoped that the German might have the luck to bring his disabled ship to earth without killing himself.

But suddenly a Spad plunged by Larry's wing, so close he imagined he could have touched it. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the number; it was Bull Gans' ship. Like a rocket it whizzed downward, straight for the disabled Fokker. At a hundred yards. Bull's guns began to hammer. Larry could see the enemy ship quiver under the impact of the bullets. Futilely the German pilot manipulated his controls; his plane swooped and fluttered like a wounded bird, and then slipped off on one wing. But again Bull bored in, his guns belching flame; and again and again. Now a puff of smoke blew from the cockpit of the Fokker, and the black-crossed ship began to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster. As the flaming wreck rushed toward the ground, Bull sent one last long burst after it.

Larry sat petrified, watching this performance. Horror gripped him at the brutal and needless slaughter of a human being already crippled and helpless. Had not Bull seen that the German was out of control? Surely the rules of the game did not call for murder to be added to victory! He shuddered with nervous revulsion, and joined his patrol, which was reforming.

BACK on the field, after the patrol had landed, Larry left his ship in front of the hangars and walked toward the group gathering at the operations tent. He had it in his mind to ask Bull about that, but Bull spoke first.

"Say, Larry, you had that guy groggy—why the hell didn't you finish him off?"

"Why, I didn't think it was necessary!" exclaimed Larry. "He was crippled, and due to crash, anyway!" "Yeah?" Bull's tone was hard as nails. "And what if he was shammin'?"

"But—but I could see he wasn't," stammered Larry. "And why murder the poor devil when he's helpless? He had little enough chance as it was—that wouldn't be square!"

"Square! Square—hell!" Bull's heavy forefinger on Larry's chest drove home his words with deadly grimness. "Listen! This is a war you're in, kid; not a damned game! You're out there to kill, and don't ever forget it! Remember that if you get squeamish, and let some Heinie get away alive, tomorrow he'll be back, shovin' lead up your own backbone. All's fair in this game; there ain't no rules about bein' soft-hearted. Give 'em hell, and don't let up till you know they're too dead to care. Those guys will never show you any mercy, bank on that. Remember it after this. When you get 'em where they're hollerin', *Kamerad*, give 'em both guns in the guts!"

Several in the surrounding group nodded and murmured in assent. Larry stammered, "All right, Bull. I'll—I'll remember."

He wrote up his report, and walked down toward the barracks, deep in thought. Was it really necessary? Did war have to be like that? His own experience, and that of others, all pointed to the correctness of Bull's advice, and yet his breeding, his every instinct, his very nature, rebelled at the thought of cold-blooded murder of a helpless opponent. Perhaps the war on the ground might be like that, but flying—that was different. That was why he had chosen flying; combat in the air held a glamor, a flavor of chivalry, of individual conflict, which demanded, he believed, a code quite different from that of the mud-clogged creatures on the ground who crawled through slimy trenches and fought bitterly for months without ever seeing their foe. He resolved to play the game hard and fair, and see what happened.

He slept heavily that night, and was on the airdrome early the next morning. Bull Gans stopped by Larry's cockpit a moment before going to his own ship.

"Keep the old optics peeled this morning, Larry. We'll bear over toward the east again. I have a hunch that same gang we scratched yesterday afternoon will be back for more."

Larry grinned and nodded. He could not help but admire Bull's fierce and unyielding courage. Not a pleasant playfellow, maybe; but the big Texan certainly had the guts.

The thunder of warming motors filled the air; then a brief period of suspense, while Bull made sure that every one was ready. Then one motor burst into a full-throated roar, and Bull's Spad began to amble across the muddy ground. Before Bull had lifted his

wheels, Larry opened his throttle and followed. The three others trailed close behind; in a compact V they climbed toward the lines. At four thousand feet they zoomed through a layer of clouds, but emerged above into clear cold air. Through occasional holes Larry could see the ground flowing past beneath them, but in keeping his eyes on Bull's plane, leading, he soon lost track of their exact position.

The attack came suddenly. Larry did not know whether the Fokkers dove on them out of the sun or climbed up out of the clouds. He did not even have a chance to count, although his first glance told him there were more than five. He found himself being spattered with bullets from behind, and promptly soared into a climbing turn.

Bull happened to make the same maneuver. For several minutes, as Larry engaged his antagonist, he caught glimpses of Bull's plane close at hand. Then Larry's opponent chose to climb, while Bull's Fokker went into a dive through the clouds. Larry saw no more of Bull for the time being.

His first straining glimpses over his shoulder showed him a Fokker with upper wing and landing gear decorated with broad red stripes. Must be a flight or squadron commander, he thought. At any rate his antagonist was evidently an experienced pilot; he skillfully avoided Larry's every attempt to get on his tail. After several minutes, however, Larry managed to seize an opening from the side, and delivered a burst which raked the Fokker from prop to rudder. Quickly he threw his Spad around to, follow up with another burst from the rear. But oddly enough, the German no longer maneuvered. Larry lined his sights on the cockpit, tightened his grip on the triggers—and then paused.

RIGHT in the center of his ring, he could see the German pilot's head, lolling back against the fairing. He could also see an arm, dangling loosely over the edge of the cockpit. The man was either dead or wounded, by his first burst. The Fokker was for the moment holding to a straight course, only by virtue of the machine's flying balance.

As Larry looked at the inert man and plane in front of him, he remembered Bull's words of the night before: "Square, hell! Don't let up till you know they're too dead to care!" His grip on his triggers tightened—but then relaxed. He could not bring himself to shoot at a helpless, wounded man, perhaps a corpse. Maybe they were all right, maybe he should, but he couldn't squeeze those triggers.

While he struggled within himself, the Fokker in front of him went into a long, gradual swoop. It rose gracefully, then fell off on one wing. Larry followed, watching. Another long swoop, steeper this time, and falling off sharply into a sideslip, the Fokker disappeared into the layer of clouds. Larry knew that the same uncontrolled maneuver would repeat itself until the plane finally crashed into the ground, but just to be sure he dove through the clouds in pursuit.

When he emerged five hundred feet below, he did not at first see his opponent. But he did see a Fokker and a Spad, a short distance away, engaged in whirling combat. It was the Fokker Bull Gans had followed in a dive through the clouds, and Bull himself. As Larry watched, the German straightened out in a dive, with Bull in close pursuit. Bull's Spad was gaining slowly; now he was almost close enough for a finishing burst—but what was that? In the twinkling of an eye another Fokker had dropped out of the cloud bank, to sit right on Bull's tail. Horrified Larry saw that the wing was striped in red. It was his own Fokker, which he had thought on the way down to a crash.

He whipped his ship around in that direction, but it was already too late. In a few seconds it was all over. Bull, intent on the German in front of him, never saw the one on his tail. Larry was too far away to hear the crash of the machine gun, but he saw Bull's Spad wrench suddenly out of its course. The next instant it was spinning downward.

The two Fokkers never turned back.

At breakneck speed they plunged on into Germany. Larry circled, half-dazed by the suddenness of the catastrophe, and watched Bull's whirling ship below him. His heart leaped as he saw it stop and level off, but the next instant it was spinning again. Three times this happened; Bull was evidently making herculean efforts to regain control. Just before striking the ground Larry saw the Spad straighten out once more; then it melted sickeningly into a grove of trees.

The return trip to the field was, to Larry, a year of self-torture. He was in a cold-fury—at the enemy pilot for working such a despicable trick, and at himself for falling for it. Bull, his flight leader, his friend, the best fighter in the squadron—lost! All because he had failed to carry out instructions. He could not be sure whether Bull had been killed in the crash or not, but it had taken place far behind the German lines. The best, he could wish for Bull was life in a prison camp.

Why the devil hadn't he squeezed those triggers, when he had the Fokker helpless in front of him?

He remembered the pilot's head, how it had rolled aimlessly around, and the arm, flapping in the slipstream. Unconsciously he found himself making excuses. Maybe the German really was wounded, and came to, falling through the clouds. But it made no difference now. Bull was gone.

Larry wrote a brief report of the patrol in a shaking hand. The C.O. beckoned him aside. In the privacy of the major's quarters, Larry told him every detail of the scrap, putting the worst possible construction on his own actions. Without hesitation he shouldered the blame for the loss of Bull Gans. When he had finished, the major eyed him keenly for a minute before he spoke.

"Fowler," he said quietly, "I don't need to tell you that Bull Gans will be missed, as a fighter, as well as personally. Whether he's alive this minute or not, we'll never see him again till, after the war, unless the son of a gun escapes. But the point is, are you—*er*—prepared to carry on in his place as leader of C flight?"

Larry did not need to ask what he meant by that; he drew himself up stiffly as he replied, "I think I've learned my lesson, sir. I've found out that war is not a game, and that there's no such thing as playing it square."

"Square—hell! I used to have a delusion about sportsmanship myself once. But I threw that overboard long ago, when—" The major stopped abruptly; then shook his head heavily from side to side, as if to rid himself of memories. "It's not just the Germans, Fowler. Both sides fight the same way, you know. And soft-heartedness is sometimes easily mistaken for lack of guts. You must think now of the men who will be following you; they've got to be taught, and led. You won't forget?"

"No, sir," said Larry. The picture of Bull's plane, tangling itself in the tree tops, was etched indelibly on his memory. "I won't forget."

"No patrols this afternoon," added the major. "You'll start leading C flight in the morning."

LARRY tossed restlessly in his bunk that night. His sleep was tortured by a recurring vision of himself, standing with a revolver in his hand, facing two figures. One was Bull Gans; the other was a wounded German. He could see the blood trickling down his neck. The ghostly figure of the major stood at his elbow saying, "You must shoot one: which do you choose?" Each time, as he raised the revolver to obey, he awoke in a perspiring agony. He was glad when the pale light of dawn crept in through the paper windows.

The C flight patrol that morning was uneventful.

When Larry landed he found a new replacement waiting to report to him. A boyish lieutenant, fresh from Issoudun, introduced himself to Larry as "Bellinger, Bud Bellinger." saluting in that nonchalant fashion peculiar to aviators. Larry liked him instantly. He took particular pains to see that the new arrival was made to feel at home, and had a Spad assigned for him to take up that afternoon to get the feel of the ship.

Their acquaintance speedily ripened into friendship. Larry had hit it off with Bull Gans because they were in every respect so different that they intrigued each other's curiosity. He took to Bud Bellinger because their dispositions and natures were so similar; they might almost have been turned out of the same mold.

The second morning after Bud's arrival they were standing on the field while the Spads were being trundled from the hangars for the first patrol. This was to be Bud's second trip over the lines. Suddenly he hurried to Larry and said,

"Say, I heard Bill Hulbert talking last night about shooting down a German who had already been wounded by archie. He—he didn't really mean that he did that, did he?"

Larry had known that this was going to come some time, but still he was not ready for it. He temporized by replying, "Sure! Why not?"

"Why, that would be—be murder! It doesn't seem exactly—exactly fair."

All of Larry's instincts arose within him, telling him that Bud was right—it was murder. But the picture of Bull Gans was still clear—only too dear—in his mind, and the major's words came back to him.

"Listen, Bud, I used to think that myself." He wanted this explanation to be tactful and kind, but he deliberately forced himself to be harsh. His face hardened as he continued, "But I found out you can't feel that way about it. War is all murder; nothing else. It isn't a game, and you can't play it square. Any advantage that you get; unfair or not, take it and follow it up to the end. Get 'em, and get 'em good, or else they'll get you. Never let up till the other man is on the ground dead; then you know he can't come back. Just when you think you've got him, give him both triggers again, because he's probably shamming. Remember, kid; no mercy!"

Bud had been hanging on every word; now he murmured in reply, "All right, Larry. I guess you're right. You ought to know!"

With a thoughtful look on his face he strolled off toward his ship. Larry climbed into his Spad, and sat

looking at his wrist watch. A few minutes later the six planes zoomed off the ground and headed into the north, Larry, the flight leader, flew at the apex of the V; Bud's was the last ship on the right leg.

Larry wondered if Bud had absorbed his advice literally. He could see that it had gone against Bud's grain, just as Bull's words on the subject had at first gone against his grain. He sincerely hoped that Bud would not have to learn by as bitter experience as he himself had, had to undergo.

They passed the line of swaying balloons, and were now nearing No-Man's-Land. Suddenly Larry's roving eye picked up a group of black specks, dead ahead. As he watched, they grew rapidly into the shape of Fokkers, flying directly toward him, about a thousand feet lower. He half-expected them to turn aside at the front lines, but they held their course.

THERE was something odd about those Fokkers. Larry studied the group for a minute before he realized what it was. The arrangement of the formation was unusual, that was it. One plane flew alone, far out in advance of the rest; the other seven straggled rather irregularly behind it. Suspicious of a trick, Larry circled once, watching them and the skies above. But he could see no signs of danger outside of the oddly formed group, which held a straight course to the south. They were now almost directly below him. Wagging his wings once, he nosed over in a vertical dive toward the open space between the leading plane and the following seven.

The last thing Larry saw before the dog-fight started was that Bud, the last plane on his right, had banked off to the side to attack the leading Fokker. This did not quite suit Larry's plans; he wanted to keep a protecting eye on the new pilot in his first scrap. But it was now too late to change his attack; besides, for a few minutes he was too busy to keep an eye on anybody.

Larry found himself maneuvering for an opening with a Fokker covered with orange spots. Round and round they spun. Then like a flash Larry pulled a dive and a quick, up-twisting turn which put him on the German's tail. The stream of lead from his Vickers spat through the enemy's wings, but did not touch the pilot. It was close enough, however, to put the fear of God into the Heinie; he shoved his nose down and beat it. By sticking to a long stern chase, Larry could have got him, but he chose to let that one go, and see what was happening to Bud.

He circled off toward the south and scanned the milling groups. Shortly he picked up Spad number 28, in desperate combat with a Fokker. He slid over in that direction and watched for an opening to cut in and assist Bud if the kid got in trouble. But the two planes, were so closely engaged that no opening presented itself. Larry circled above and watched. Suddenly he gripped his stick and plunged downward; the German was on Bud's tail! But before the German fired a single shot. Bud twisted away, and their positions were reversed.

Once again the same thing happened; this time the German sat for several seconds in perfect position for a burst, but no fire came from his guns. Larry was puzzled, until it occurred to him that the German's guns might be jammed. He sideslipped down until he was close enough to look into the cockpit of the Fokker as it banked past him. He squinted over his cowl at the enemy pilot, trying to see if the man was attempting to clear a jammed gun, and then his squint changed to a stare of amazement.

As the Foker swooped past, he had seen the pilot lift his hand, and deliberately drew it across his throat. Bull Gans' old familiar gesture from the pilot of a Fokker. His eyes must be going to pieces on him. As the black-crossed plane swung, again around the circle, Larry slid in a little closer than before. This time he looked directly into the cockpit, and what he saw made him gasp in unbelief. The pilot wore neither helmet nor goggles, and his drawn and haggard face was dark with half a week's growth of beard. Instead of the fur-trimmed gray flying coat, which flyers wore, he could see that the pilot's shoulders were encased in a khaki coverall. And in spite of the dirty, gaunt, bearded countenance, Larry was sure that he recognized Bull Gans.

His heart leaped in exultation. The son of a gun had somehow made his escape, and must have stolen a Fokker for his getaway across the lines. That explained the peculiar formation; the other Fokkers had been pursuing Bull. That explained, too, why he had not once fired at Bud—he was only maneuvering in self-defense. Larry felt an immense joy at the discovery that Bull was alive, but the next instant this feeling turned to one of apprehension.

It suddenly struck him that Bud Bellinger did not recognize Bull. Bud had never seen that signal of Bull's; he scarcely knew Bull's name, except as one of those who had gone West before he came up. And at that very instant Bud was riding Bull's tail, his guns spitting a vicious stream in his direction.

Larry was stunned by his own helplessness. He must do something to avert this horrible calamity—he must! But what? To warn Bud, to tell him that the man in that Fokker was no German but an American, his own flight leader? But how? Larry racked his brain in desperation. It was impossible. He dove in close, and waved frantically, but Bud never noticed.

The situation was rapidly becoming worse. Bull evidently weakened by three days' hunger and exposure, and in an unfamiliar ship, was unable to cope with Bud's persistent attack. Bud now rode him relentlessly; Bull had ceased maneuvering, and, nose down, weaved from side to side as he raced toward the south. Larry dove again and tried to cut in between the two, but Bud's eyes were glued to his prospective victim.

FOR an instant Larry considered turning his own guns on Bud, to drive him off Bull's tail. But he immediately discarded this idea. What price one life at the cost of another?

Now he saw a burst from Bud's guns rip through the fuselage of the Fokker from tail to cowl. The pilot's two hands came up and gripped the edge of the cockpit. Bull was hit! The Fokker began to yaw crazily from side to side, and up and down. Larry knew that Bud must be able to see that he had wounded the pilot. Would he now lay off? Larry looked over at the other Spad with a prayer on his lips, and he saw to his horror that Bud was plunging in for a final burst.

The awful irony of it made Larry groan. Bull's own words to him, which he had in turn passed on to Bud: "Square—hell! When you think you've got him, give him both triggers in the guts! Remember, no mercy!" And at that very moment Bud was preparing to give Bull himself "both triggers in the guts."

But Bud's final burst was never delivered. Something stayed his hand on the grips; he hesitated, only for an instant, but an instant was enough. The pilot in the Fokker recovered control, and threw his ship in a dive toward the ground, which now was only a thousand feet below. By the time the two Spads tipped, over in pursuit, the Fokker was leveling off over an open hilltop. Before Bud could again train his sights on what he thought was the enemy, the black-crossed ship had made a hurried landing, crashing into a tree at the further edge of the field.

Bud circled in one direction and prepared to land; he was determined to take his prisoner single-handed. Larry circled the other way and also glided for the same field. He had a dreadful premonition that if Bull

was not seriously wounded by Bud's bullets in the air, he was probably finished off by his crash into the tree.

The two Spads touched the ground almost simultaneously, one on either side of the wreck of the Fokker. The two pilots leaped from their cockpits and ran toward the heap of crushed wings and twisted struts.

Seeing what was in Bud's hand, Larry yelled, "Drop that gun, Bud! You won't need it!"

Bud's look was puzzled, but he shoved the Colt in his pocket without comment. As they worked feverishly to disentangle the mess of wires and fabric over the body of the pilot, Larry told him in a few brief sentences who was under the wreckage. Bud gaped at him in horror.

"And I shot him down!" he gasped.

"Not your fault," panted Larry. "How the hell would you know!"

Then they heard a hoarse voice below them. "That damned strut, there!" it said, "Lift that off me, and I can crawl out myself."

Hurriedly they obeyed, both heaving upward at once. A disheveled, bloody figure dragged itself out of the mess onto the grass. They dropped the strut and knelt beside Bull.

"You wounded, Bull?" asked Larry anxiously.

"Well, the smash shook me up a little, and I got a bullet through the shoulder, that's all," was the reply. "This the guy that did it?" with a nod toward Bud.

"Yes," said Larry. "Bud Bellinger; he came up the day after you were shot down."

"That's why he didn't get the signal, then. But what I can't understand is, why he didn't finish me off there, just before I dove. What happened?"

Bud, rather nonplused by being asked to explain to a living man why he hadn't killed him, stammered foolishly, "Why, I—you see—I could see you were wounded, and—well—I don't like the idea of shooting at a wounded man. It doesn't seem quite—quite square!"

"What!" bellowed Bull, sitting up suddenly. "You damn fool, do you think you're playin' cricket? This man's army has come to a hell of a state since I been gone. I better get back to C flight in a hurry, before you birds start tying ribbons on the machine guns!"

But this outburst, on top of considerable loss of blood from his shoulder, sapped the remainder of his strength. With a last scornful snort, "Square—hell!" he collapsed limply against Larry's shoulder.