



OVER SKULL HILL

by CURTIS MITCHELL

The C.O. had just posted a notice forbidding enlisted men to fly—and that was just the moment for Sergeant-Rigger Eddie Weed to steal one of the squadron's crates and crack it up! But read on—and learn about a new kind of court-martial!

THE FIRST ARMY OBSERVATION DROME at Vavincourt was dead and quiet in the darkness. Spongy turf and curling skid ruts alike were hidden in the thick murk of that blackness which comes in the last hours before dawn. A weak wind slapped hangar walls and munched about the wind-sock with soft, sobbing sounds.

Two secret figures sneaked down the hangar row, until they stood before Number Seven. There they paused. As one rolled back the canvas front, the other sniffed the weather.

"It's a hell of a war when a peilot has to steal his own ship." The words were softly spoken. "If they catch you, sarg, it's worth your stripes."

The lines around Sergeant Eddie Weed's mouth

became bitter parentheses. "More likely, a court-martial." His voice was low, yet in it there was some of the sound raw acid makes when it strikes hot iron.

Lieutenant LeBrix stepped into the hangar and bumped a dolly. His curses rolled through the opening.

"For cripes' sake, pipe down!" said Eddie.

A slight noise on the tarmac whipped his eyes around. His sight sank into the black and stopped, baffled. That noise might have come from a wind puff, a bit of paper scraping the ground, or a man. His senses were tuned to the highest pitch—and he was taking no chances. But there was nothing in the void to hold his gaze. Presently, he followed LeBrix into the hangar.

A dark blob materialized out of the apron and slipped noiselessly toward Hangar Seven. Fifteen feet away, it dropped to the ground and hunched forward like an anaconda.

Sky in the east reddened swiftly and turned again to black, as if some one had momentarily raised a curtain on a burning room. The ponderous thunder of heavies in action pulsed across the miles. Out there, the drama of war was being enacted. Out there were hidden German guns that were strafing Yank dumps north of Bar-le-Duc. Despite thousands of aerial photos, OBS missions, and bombardments, they had escaped detection and now flung their murderous H.E. All that, where the sky alternately reddened and blackened. Here, where all was black, there was another drama.

THE man on the ground edged forward until his hand gripped the rolled front of the Bessoneau hangar. Cautiously, he advanced and peered into the silent structure.

Hands coiled around his throat. Strong thumbs dug into his windpipe and he was jerked within the canvas walls. A light blazed in his eyes and vanished. Abruptly he was flung on the floor.

"It's Private Williams," spat Weed.

Lieutenant LeBrix twisted his fingers in Williams' hair. "What the hell do you mean by crawling on your belly at five a.m.?"

Williams tried to shake off the fingers and failed. "I heard somebody here in the hangar and I thought I'd investigate, sir."

"What big ears you have, grandmother," snapped Eddie.

LeBrix's grip tightened. "As a self-appointed sentry, you're a wash-out, Williams." He jerked the young mechanic to a kneeling position. "Get this! We're going

places and we don't crave anyone knowin' about us. Now, since you've stuck your nose in our party, you'll help us until we're gone."

"Right, sir."

Eddie Weed slipped around and hauled Williams up by the collar. "God knows you're the rottenest mechanic in the outfit—but let's see if you can turn that prop decently." While they adjusted the motor, LeBrix packed the pits. There was a long black box for the rear office and a small one for the front. Within minutes, they were set. LeBrix forked the side and took the controls. Weed took a hitch onto Williams' wrist and bent his fingers over the wooden D.H.4 blade.

"Contact?"

"Contact!" said LeBrix.

Jerk and jump! The motor caught faultlessly and idled. Williams edged up, his face vaguely visible in the exhaust flare.

"I'm mum, fella! Where's this ship going, huh?"

"None of your damned business," said Weed, climbing into the aft seat. "Take that wing tip and walk us out."

They rolled onto the apron. Eddie called the mechanic to him. "This hegira is our affair, see. If I come back and find you've been shooting your lip, I'll push your face in."

He gave LeBrix the signal and the motor revved. Hot thunder blatted down the hangar line like the clanging of hell's fire bells. The tail left the ground. The nose made a harsh silhouette against the flame curtains in the east. Up! They hurdled the boundary hedge with the Liberty singing sweet motor music. Ahead lay Germany.

TWENTY minutes later, Private Williams lay flat on his back in another field, five miles south of Vavincourt. The motorcycle that had brought him was invisible but, now and then, a metallic crackle sang harshly as damp night air hit hot cylinders.

Williams lay flat on his back, staring upward. On his chest was a cone-shaped contrivance that looked like a crooner's megaphone. With his left hand, he held it erect so that its open end pointed at the sky. With his right hand, he held a blinker.

Lying there, he flashed his lamp through that megaphone and the spreading horn shielded the rays from all sides. Ten minutes passed. His thumb grew tired. The signal was a Morse code M—dash-dash, dash-dash!

A faint sound filtered out of the heights. It was not

a motor. Inexperienced ears would have failed to detect it. He recognized it as the slap of wind through a ship's rigging. A triple gleam twice repeated caught his eye. He thumbed his lamp and locked down the button.

The eerie whine increased. Presently, a plane's wings were barely discernable. Then, like a bat, it sloped across the spot where Williams held the light and touched its trucks.

Williams dashed along its wake. The sound of his footfalls were deadened by the rumble of its fuselage. When he caught it, guttural voices cut the darkness. The words were tense and tight with strain, as if the speakers understood that hell might open and swallow them at any minute.

A streak of flame severed the blackness. A thunderclap was echoed by a man's scream. There was no mistaking that sound. A Colt .45 calibre automatic had made it. There were no more words but in a moment a motor roared. An expert would have recognized it as the song of a Mercedes 180. Red exhaust daggers stabbed the night and gave birth to thunder. Black wings fled away across the earth. Rising, they turned toward Germany and climbed.

Private Williams did not return—but a slim, dark shape lay in a spreading blood pool where the ship had landed.

SERGEANT Eddie Weed leaned over the side and watched the black waste that was Germany. Three flame spurts showed hard ahead. Within an instant, five other tripleshots incarnadined the ground along a five-mile front. He saw them and cursed.

Damn the Boche and his big guns! This was one reason they had never been discovered. He knew that only one of those splashes marked the real battery. The others were dummies designed to baffle Yank observers. Nevertheless, he tried to fix the spot in his mind for a photograph when the sun was up.

His hand slid down the side of the long box between his legs. In it was a camera. He had spent the odd moments of six weeks developing and building it around a captured German twelve inch lens. Three years in the Eastman labs at Rochester had given him some ideas. Here, he had worked them out. And now—his lips twisted as he remembered his last interview with Colonel Dunbar, commander of the First Observation group—an order was thumbtacked against the squadron bulletin that put the kibosh on flights by enlisted men.

Eddie Weed was a sergeant rigger. He had enlisted

to fly—before he learned that an E.M. rating was no way to get into the air. Experience on cameras and natural wizardry for working in wood got him an assignment with the 201st Squadron. By hook and crook, he had made himself so invaluable to various pilots that they carried him across the Front as observer. Some of them had taught him to fly. It rankled that he had to sit in the rear pit. His ambition was the peilot's bucket.

This camera between his knees was his only hope of skidding clear of his rigger's berth. If it was good—and he'd know about that pretty damn soon—it might get him a transfer to Issoudun. After that, he'd come back with wings on his chest. Wings on his chest—that was glory.

Nobody in his outfit knew Eddie Weed had ideas about cameras. He was saving it until he was sure his notions were not cock-eyed, until the job was perfect.

Yesterday, he finally lamp-blacked the inside of his box and gave it his okay. It was ready to test at any altitude. It just happened that Colonel Dunbar's orders hit the bulletin board fifteen minutes later. Effective immediately, no enlisted men were to be carried as observers. Twice, recently, a D.H.4 with an E.M. in its back pit had vanished. That was the colonel's reason. But it wasn't good enough for Weed. He demanded and got an interview—and presently was thrown out on his ear by Colonel Dunbar himself. There would be no flight to try out a home-made camera, or for any other reason. And that was that.

Lieutenant LeBrix had carried Eddie regularly for the past two weeks. He knew about the camera and Eddie's ambitions. He also knew that he himself was slated for a tubercular camp in south France, in any case, as soon as his replacement arrived, so he was sympathetic when Weed dished up the plan for this daybreak detail.

Eddie leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder. The sun was showing like a scarlet ball through the ground mist. They were at 15,000 feet, taking it easy. In minutes, they would have light. Then, a slow traverse from Skull Hill to the village of Vitry. Somewhere between, they knew, Boche big guns lurked under camouflage. Eddie patted his new camera. Maybe the big sky eye would find it.

The cold air that raced around the D.H.'s pit was raw tonic. Here was room for war. And here was a weapon, this fat-nosed D.H.4 with its cowl-mounted Vickers. He forgot that he was a groundhog—by the colonel's orders.

The earth lay a gleam under the sunlight. LeBrix swung over Skull Hill and Eddie bent across his viewfinder.

For ten minutes, he slipped plates and worked the shutter. One of those plates should get the German battery. Unless it did—

They turned over Vitry. He sighted a trio of morning glories taking off the Boche drome four miles on south. LeBrix saw them, too, and tilted his nose. No use taking chances. The Boche swung away and crossed the lines. They started back toward Skull Hill.

Eddie ducked over the camera. "We'll find 'em"

A FIST on his shoulder jerked him about. It was LeBrix, sprawling back across the camel-back. His free hand pointed over their tail. Half a dozen specks bordered the flaming sun ball. Eddie swung the Lewises and watched them flash in and out of the blazing disc. They came in, swelling like rubber bats, with speed to burn. Gas flame poured from heavy-set muzzles and the bright sky choked with cotton balls.

His guns snarled an answer. Two black shapes whipped by on right and left. LeBrix crossed behind them. They turned together and came back, boxing his nose. These were old sky fighters.

The four ships behind started throwing lead. One stream ate the heart out of an aileron. A flipper turn brought a black wing into his sights. He saw his tracer crease a German side. The Jerry skidded off the line of fire and dived.

A side blast rapped the Liberty cowl and chopped through a strut. LeBrix sky-hooked his prop until the burst slipped away. Then, hard rudder turned him over and laid his nose straight for the black earth.

Eddie caught another black shape across his sights. He plugged it with a tracer spearhead. The ship straightened and zoomed. He followed it up, thumbing both triggers through a murderous fandango. The Jerry slipped and flattened. A figure lurched backwards, chased by a flood of flame. First blood for the Yank.

LeBrix' front gun burst into a sobbing spasm. The pilot was fighting. A gust of tracer curled back through the D.H.'s right wing. They ducked left and ran into another blast. A looping Boche came up from under with gagging guns. His burst smashed the D.H. nose. LeBrix half-rose in the pit and folded across the combing. Another burst. The prop shattered like glass. Eddie threw the dual ignition switch and killed the Liberty.

As they started down, he jerked the auxiliary stick from its clamp. A turn spun him against the side—the bus was spinning! He socked the stick home and pushed it away. The dive increased. Earth and sky and stretches of black streaks whirled about like a merry-go-round. He ruddered into a straight dive and leveled off.

They were miles over Germany. The Jerries circled, licking their chops. Eddie looked over the side. Vitry lay to the south near the Boches' own drome. Below, a green-black forest stretched for miles. One white gash showed like a scar in thick fur. Toward the front, three Pfalzes were coming back and Eddie cursed as he realized that they had been down there merely to keep his eyes out of the sky.

He headed for the white gash. Fast! Wind rasped about his flying wires, singing and snarling. The scar was a dry river bottom of hard, white sand. A limestone cliff teetered over one end, along one side. He checked the breeze on the trees and came in crosswind. The trucks whipped thin branches, tore clear, and shot into the open. The ship dropped into the chasm and flattened. They hit, skidded through a pebble patch, and rolled. The limestone wall blocked their path. Eddie fanned his tail up and around. They slowed, slowed, and nudged the rock with a useless prop hub. The wall was hard and high but its base had been undercut by water. And twenty paces from the plane, there was a cave.

THE Germans were circling overhead, while below limestone, pine forest and white river bottom hemmed them like prison walls. LeBrix straightened up with blood running off an ear. A bullet had almost scalped him. He tried to grin.

"Guess it won't be a court-martial after all, sarg."

Eddie glanced down the river bed. Gray-green riflemen were advancing at the double. He lifted the tourelle and propped it on a knee. His thumbs fanned triggers and a barrage of lead stopped them.

LeBrix crawled to the ground and looked at the cave. "We could hole up for a while."

"Why not?" Eddie swung his camera over the side and LeBrix carried it to the hole. Slipping out hingepins, he lowered the Lewis tourelle to the ground and then set the guns across the rocky mouth. The cave was low and dry, with a natural stone rampart half closing the opening.

Lieutenant LeBrix collapsed against a wall. "Hold 'em, sarg," he cried.

Eddie saw soldiers starting forward again, firing. Their bullets whistled uncomfortably close. He whipped them with a merciless burst. Two men plunged to the sand. A third lost his rifle and limped back. An officer ran out of the woods, blowing a whistle. The soldiers dropped and started to dig in. Weed unclamped his triggers.

LeBrix opened his eyes. "I'd better bust up that camera."

Eddie's teeth grated. Was that to be the end of all his labors, all his ambitions? He heard the lieutenant's weak voice. "You hop out to the ship and put a Very ball in her gas tank."

He started forward and saw a German officer advancing with hands held above his head and carrying a white handkerchief.

"Wait a minute. Maybe we can bargain with this bird."

He stopped the Jerry at fifty feet. "Hold it, brother. What's the big idea?"

The officer addressed them in clipped English. "You must surrender."

"Yanks don't surrender."

The German looked annoyed. "We'll blast you out."

"Blast away," said Weed.

"Imperial Air wants your ship, my enemy. Surrender it and you will be given every consideration."

Eddie thought of Lieutenant LeBrix and his need of a doctor.

LeBrix limped out of the cave. "I'm just going over to burn her," he said. "You tell the Kaiser to build his own crates, Fritz."

The officer raised his right hand and a crashing emma gun split the sand four feet ahead of LeBrix. Eddie saw a Maxim snout frowning across a rocky emplacement at the cliffs base eighty yards away. A squad of gunners had set it up while the officer talked.

"You will find it very hard to reach your ship," said the German.

Eddie's neck got hot and his fingers itched. "We'll be here when this *guerre* is over, mister, and you'll still be minus that D.H."

LeBrix crawled back into the cave. The officer started away. Something wet and clammy smacked the back of Weed's neck. His fingers tightened in a spasm of pain. The Lewises belched and jerked. He leaped up, fighting the thing on his face. It dropped to the ground and scuttled off. It was a giant rock lizard.

LE BRIX screamed, "Look!" Eddie looked across

the sand. The German's body was a bloody hump. The accidental burst had gutted him. A volley lashed out from the squad of infantrymen. The Maxim gang echoed it. In an instant, the air filled with whirling, boring death.

"Get down!"

They hugged the shelter of the rock parapet, wondering if they could outlive the storm. The cave was filled with a bedlam of ricocheting slugs. Spent bullets stung their bodies and rock chips tore slits in their clothes. Gradually, the fusillade diminished. Eddie looked out at the dead German. There was real pain in his eyes. His lips moved. "I'm sorry about that, old man. That's soldier's luck."

"There'll be no surrender now," said LeBrix. "Nobody in the world would believe that was accidental."

Minutes dragged by. Fresh squads appeared and dug in. More minutes. The sun rose out of the trees and climbed the heights. A military truck thundered up the river bed dragging a twenty-inch searchlight to a position behind the Maxim. The crew sighted it on the D.H.4 and sat down to wait.

"It's a siege," LeBrix said.

Eddie looked out. "They've got us and they know it—but we've got them, too. They can't come after the ship while we're here. And they can't blast us out without blowing up the bus."

"How about digging a trench to get at her? A match in the gas tank?"

"Look," Eddie said. "We're about to have another visitor."

The man was a captain, and two medals gleamed on his chest. He swung arrogantly across the sand.

"Something tells me I've seen that bird before," thought Eddie.

The German stopped for a moment beside the dead man and callously investigated him with a boot toe. Turning, he came on toward the cave. Eddie stopped him at twenty feet.

"Now what's your game, Jerry?"

The German smiled. "It is lucky for you, my friends, that I have arrived." The voice was familiar and the words were unaccented.

"Spill it."

The Boche tilted up his cap visor.

"I shall introduce myself. *Hauptmann* Wilhelmse—formerly Private Williams of the 201st Squadron."

Eddie's fingers twitched. It was impossible! Private Williams had helped them off the Vavincourt drome. Yet, here was Private Williams in a field-gray uniform

and a *Hauptmann's* tabs.

"You blackguard! I thought you were too rotten to be a real mechanic. So you're a spy, eh? Well, it's your move."

Hauptmann Wilhelmse spread his feet lazily on the sand. "Why did you kill this man?" His nod indicated the body.

"It was an accident."

"Too bad," said Wilhelmse. "I believe you, of course, but I don't know how I can make my compatriots see it that way."

"What of it?"

"You shot an unarmed man under a flag of truce. That condemns you to death."

"That's okay with us."

The *Hauptmann* smiled. "I can save your lives, my friends."

"Yeah?"

"Gentlemen, it was five weeks ago that Imperial Intelligence sent me to trace an important camera lens that fell behind your front lines." He stopped to light a cigarette and then went on. "The lens was a new type of supreme importance to us. If your experts had studied it, they would have learned secrets that would enable them to improve their own cameras immeasurably. It was most imperative for me to find the lens."

Eddie colored. Six weeks had passed since he picked the glass out of the dirt twenty yards from a Rumppler crash. And instead of turning it in, he had kept it for his own experiments.

LE BRIX spoke up. "What's that got to do with us, Williams?"

"Hauptmann Wilhelmse, please." The German's chuckle was diabolical. "I could have taken the lens a dozen times, lieutenant, but I saw that your thick-headed sergeant, while too dumb to appreciate its real value, had stumbled onto a novel camera design. I know cameras, you see, and I wanted that box for the Fatherland."

"How the hell did you follow us across the lines?" Eddie snapped.

"Easy," said the Boche. "Each night Our ships come over to pick up messages. I signaled a pilot down and took his place. Unfortunately his motor was too weak to carry both of us and he had to stay. He didn't want to trade, but my mission was important." His voice slid down a couple of notes. "I managed to convince him."

Eddie's spine writhed as Wilhelmse looked at the D.H.4. "A new camera and an old plane, eh? A nice bag

for one morning."

Eddie swung his Lewis barrels menacingly. "I've got a notion to let you have it, Williams."

"Go ahead! It'll gain you nothing." He laughed unpleasantly. "By the way, you've no idea how handy having this D.H. is. I'm told von Killig's squadron at Vitry caught one yesterday. It landed on their drome with a frozen motor. He wants to match it against our own latest two-seater, but he needs a Liberty." His eyes narrowed. "Burn your ship if you wish. We only want the engine."

"You won't get it."

A clanking, rumbling disturbance jarred the air. Down the river bed, a light tank advanced across the sand.

"We're not fooling," cracked the Boche. "We take what we want."

"I'll smash the camera before you can touch it."

Wilhelmse frowned evilly. "I want to talk to you about that. As things stand, you are doomed, both of you. Give me the camera and the D.H. and I'll save your lives."

"That's your story."

"You knew me as a poor mechanic, friends. In the Kaiser's service, I am of sufficient importance to do with you as I will."

Eddie's eyelids wrinkled. The germ of an idea was in his brain. "We've got to think it over—all night, see? We'll give you an answer in the morning."

"How do I know you'll not destroy the ship or camera?"

Weed thought fast. His mind leaped four miles away to a flat tarmac and possible salvation. "We'll give you our word we won't bust anything."

"Listen, Jerry," growled LeBrix. "We'll trade and here's the first bargain. Give us tonight to figure it out, and I promise we won't tamper with a single screw."

Wilhelmse's eyebrows made a black bar. "I don't like that."

Eddie shook his guns. "Then come on and take us! Bring on your tank! Charge us with those guards you've got back there and we'll blow the daylights out of every man that crosses the sand."

"Give me your word. I'll wait until dawn."

"Okay," said LeBrix.

NIGHT slipped down over the tree tops and the searchlight blazed in the river bed. Men made adjustments and the cave filled with light.

Weed tightened his belt a notch and remembered

that it was time to eat. Then he studied the light's beam—and the shadow pattern it made around the wings of the D. H.4.

"Trapped," LeBrix said.

Eddie's eyes closed a trifle. Dropping down, he slid out of the cave. In a second, he was gone. LeBrix, weak from loss of blood, was too sick to look after him.

Eddie came back. "I can do it."

"Do what?"

"Never mind. How's your head? Think you can keep those squareheads back?"

LeBrix crawled to the Lewises and Eddie stripped. "If I'm not back before daylight, do as you think best." He was gone.

A slight rise in the center of the river bed kept the shaft of light off the sand floor along the base of the precipice. In that layer of darkness, Eddie hoped to escape.

Fifty feet to the edge of the light flood. He crept forward with infinite slowness. The beam itself was less than an inch from his back. Suddenly, he was aware that the light was on him. The rumble of a truck sounded through the night. The Germans were moving the light to the higher ground beside the Maxim emplacement while he lay paralyzed. Now he was in the full glare, but he counted on his white body and underwear being invisible against the sand.

Barely breathing, he edged on inch after inch. The illumination dimmed as he reached the border of the silver shaft. Bellying ahead, he reached deep darkness. Finally, he lay among the trees and let the smell of grass and wood give strength to his body. Five minutes later, he started walking toward the German airdrome at Vitry.

GROWLING war dogs in the west kept him company as he marched, and momentary curtains of flame that rose to the heights and crashed down over a million mud-bound men. Overhead, a high ceiling cut off the stars and the only near sound was the dripping, curselike drone of a France-bound Gotha.

After an hour, he found the field. Vitry—home drome of the Kaiser's eagles! Hot blood pumped through his veins as he realized he was alone in an enemy camp, that one false move would rip away the security of darkness and turn him into a hunted beast.

An owl hooted to the right. A flutter of wings and it was gone. His spine shivered. A stick snapped under a heavy tread less than thirty feet away, and a thick-bodied man loomed through the black to crash on into obscurity. Eddie leaned against a tree and wiped

salt sweat from his cheeks.

The airdrome was quiet. He crossed to the hangars—four of them. Behind and up a rise, a dim chateau blotted out a chunk of sky. Its windows were lighted, and snatches of broad conversation filtered from its walls. A low-slung Mercedes car stood in its gloom. Eddie knew that men were there—and danger.

He inspected the hangars—canvas-covered wooden frames—and slipped into the foremost. Fokker planes lay wing to wing. Searching swiftly, he passed through the structure. What he sought was not there!

The next hangar was no better. In the third—his heart turned to ice as a dog's near-by yelping shrilled through the night.

Here was the bitter, acrid end! Each bark sounded like the clap of doom. He foresaw LeBrix on the morrow, trying vainly to stave off the tank's assault, trying to destroy the camera and the D.H.4 before German hands dragged it away—while he himself lay in irons in a Jerry backroom.

Crouched beside a Fokker tail, he waited. Minutes passed and finally the dog quieted. More minutes. No one appeared. The only sound in the hangar sepulchre was his own feverish breathing. He felt his way into the open.

"My lucky night," he told himself.

When he said that, he was entering the fourth hangar. Here was blackness intensified by paint. These ships were jet as a raven's wing and, except for gloomy white crosses, they were totally invisible. He found the end of the line and felt the wing tips. He went from ship to ship, treading like a catamount. Square, all of them. In a corner, his head bumped a prop hub. He felt upward. His fingers severed darkness and caressed familiar D.H. outlines. Blood raced through his veins as he patted the big prop.

This was the buggy Wilhelmse had mentioned—the one that had landed yesterday with a frozen motor.

"Here's our ticket home."

He discovered a wrench on a bench and attacked the hub nuts. When they were off, he jarred the air screw. It stuck. He dropped the wrench and set his shoulders against the cowling.

A canvas hangar wall slatted against wood with a crackerlike report. Far away, a machine gun ripped loose. The slippery sound of wind made a macabre anthem. He dropped his arms, tense as coiled spring. He could hear the faint sound of a dog's breathing.

A bark shattered the night and a fury of teeth and claws drove against his legs. He reached for the

wrench, and a wicked jaw crunched his wrist. A voice bellowed a command and a light gleamed, blinding, stunning. He ducked aside and leaped for the door. The dog lunged at his shoulders. Hands out he fell. His fingers crashed along the rubber of a Fokker tire and slid off. His chest hit a strut and his head cracked an axle hub. For a blinding moment he fought away the hot flood that curdled his brain. He knew that teeth and claws were at his throat—and then unconsciousness swept over him.

A CLAMMY, insistent something lay on Weed's face. It shook him back and forth, worrying him as a pup worries an old shoe. He felt the black mists receding, and a thin light leaked beneath his eyelids. He tried to sit up. The thing lifted and a sharp slap stung his cheek. He opened his eyes and looked about. The eyes of *Hauptmann* Wilhelmse glared down at him.

"Ach! You are a long time coming around."

Eddie looked about. He was in a sort of store room. Dope and fabric and wing tape lay on shelves. Oil tins and grease cans occupied a corner. On the floor was a glittering array of instruments and a small black bag.

"Can you stand?"

Eddie swung his feet under him and got up. The German grinned so that his cheeks folded into wrinkled crêpe. He tossed bandages and instruments into the black bag. When he was through, he swung around and faced the Yank.

"So this is the way you keep your oath of honor!"

"Well, I'm here. What are you going to do about it?"

"You'll see, my friend." The man's eyes were terrible. "Tomorrow, we'll stand you against a wall and kill you. Lieutenant LeBrix will be given another chance to surrender—and when he does, we have a surprise for him."

"You mucker!"

Chuckling like a fiend, *Hauptmann* Wilhelmse caught up the satchel and went to the door. "Somehow, fool, you stumbled on a camera design that is superior to anything any army is using. I tell you this because you are doomed." He winked sardonically and bowed. "In behalf of the Fatherland, I thank you." The click of the lock was the last sound he made.

Eddie inspected the room. There was little there that would help him. The single candle flame swayed as he passed.

Death at dawn! LeBrix, too. Would LeBrix be able to break up the camera before they got him? Of course

not! He would wait—and at dawn the Boche tank would cross the sand and search out the cave with Maxim fire.

The door was solid and securely hinged. He found a window, but strong strips had been driven over it. Beyond, the world was jet and impenetrable. As he started to turn away, a light flared at fifty feet. A man's hands cupped around the blaze and lifted it to a cigarette. It was a sentry, leaning against a tree.

Eddie's muscles tensed. He searched the room swiftly, his brain burning. There was a way out.

Stripping off his underwear, he stood nude. A forty kilo grease can was in the corner. He pried up the top and scooped handfuls onto his torso. Within a few minutes, he was plastered from head to heel. A desperate man, slick and naked; the hardest creature under God's high sky to hold.

He extinguished the candle and waited for its smell to vanish. Then, muting his voice, he called, "Help!" The night was still as a tomb. He called again. Footsteps advanced cautiously and stopped beneath the window. He knew it was unlikely that the sentry could understand English, so he filled his mouth with saliva and groaned through it. The noise was a gurgle of torment.

THE crackle of boards outside the door and the metallic snick of a key sent chills through him. He stood back, sweating through his coat of grease.

"Vas? Vas?" The sentry flung back the door and thumbed a torch.

Eddie struck with every bit of strength in his right arm. The blow drove the Boche aside. His rifle clattered to the floor. The right pumped up again! The man fell across his gun. Eddie grabbed a roll of fabric tape, took the bayonet from the German's belt and hurled the body.

Ahead, four hangars bulked through the night. A backward glance showed the chateau all dark with the exception of the door in which a whipcord figure stood silhouetted. The Mercedes car was still there.

He raced for Hangar Four. White teeth and eyes blocked the way and a savage growl slowed him. Raising the bayonet, he plunged on. The animal crouched and sprang. Eddie planted the point and side-stepped. The dog struck the earth, vomiting blood, with the blade showing between his shoulders.

Hangar Four! Black and belligerent! Unseen objects cut his shins as he careened off them. He found the D.H. in the corner and got the prop in his hands. A

heave and a tug! It stuck on the uncapped bolts. His foot struck the wrench. He used it to jar the hub. The prop slid off.

Shouts thudded through the thick night as he slipped back into the open. Now the chateau was ablaze with lights. Men spurted through the light gash before the open door. He circled through the outer darkness and crept toward the car. Torches gleamed about the hangars.

The car was ten paces away, empty. "Good-bye, Fritz," he whispered.

Powerful hands grabbed him from behind. He twisted and the hands slipped off. He reached the Mercedes and flung the prop and other things into it. His assailant lurched into him again and they hit the ground. Arms stifling his shoulders, legs wrapping hips in a bear like hug, the attacker clung like a leech. Eddie screwed through the grip and smashed an elbow into his enemy's face. A savage cry blatted into his ear and he recognized the voice of *Hauptmann* Wilhelmse.

Fingers dug into his spine, paralyzing, torturing—

"You damn—" The words died on Eddie's lips. Fire shot through his brain and buried conscious thought under a deluge of pain. His body curved back and up. Bridging, with the German on top, he dropped and twisted. The breath left his lungs. Still those fingers gripped his spine like tentacles. He heaved himself around, afire with the knowledge that this demon atop him would soon kill him.

Fists balled, he drove out against the Boche's Adam's apple. He broke the hip hold and got a leg clear. He was naked, with no more weapons than the bones in his balled fist—and the heavy boots on his feet. Now he kicked out. The heel went home. He kicked again, striking hard. A guttural sob from the black ground and Wilhelmse slumped.

Footsteps pounded the night into bedlam. Harsh commands were split by small-arm fire. Slugs thumped the car. He hurdled the door and tramped on the starter. The motor's roar was answered by a hundred mad voices. In gear! Gas! He rolled down the slope straight at a knot of charging airmen.

Fenders sawed through them.

Wheels spread-eagled them. Eddie fed the soup. One man hurled himself onto the running board and clamped his arm about Weed's neck. A shake and a shove and aviation grade grease shed the strangle hold.

He shot into the clear on two wheels and hit the road. Four miles to the gulch. Four miles to LeBrix—
And liberty!

WITH a quarter-mile to go, Eddie turned off the road and forced his way through thin woods. He remembered that twenty-inch searchlight and the Maxim crew at the bluff's foot.

Using his headlights sparingly, he got within fifty feet of the edge. The giant beam still lay along the sand bottom. Lesser lights still showed where sentries were on guard. He looked at the sky and judged he had another twenty minutes before dawn. Softly, he ran the car to the brink and unloaded.

Once more, he sighted carefully over the edge. Further along, the D.H.4 sat as he had left her.

He went back to the car. Standing on the running board, he pulled the gear lever into low. The bus charged forward. Her front wheels hit the edge and slipped over. The rear tires lifted and spun. He cursed and got a shoulder under the axle. She slipped. He lifted again and she slipped again—and kept on going, with a clatter of rotten rock and boulders! Until she was gone!

The night stood still! Then, with the crash of two tons deadweight, the car hit bottom. Hit the searchlight! Hit the Maxim!

Eddie grabbed his stuff and sprinted along the cliff. Straight over the D.H.4, he slipped a tape noose about a tree trunk and hitched the other to the air screw. Now, as screams and shots poured out of the gorge, the sudden, spirited blast of twin Lewises increased the bedlam. Eddie dropped the prop over the edge. Hand torches tried to cover the ship and the cave, but LeBrix drove them away. Eddie felt the prop strike sand. He put the wrench between his teeth and slid down the tape.

"LeBrix!" He swung half a dozen feet above the Lewis' muzzles.

"Who is it?"

"Eddie!"

"I'm dropping. Don't fire."

"Right."

A German hand torch caught him and bullets smashed the rocks around him. He dropped and rolled aside. LeBrix hit his triggers and the torch spun into the air.

"Keep 'em off," Eddie commanded. "We're going places."

He leaped at the D.H.4 with the wrench. Nuts dropped off in rapid succession. Bullets were probing the ship, but it was still too dark for accurate shooting—but not for long, for already a gray strip

was leaking out of the east.

That prop change was the fastest ever made. With the new fan screwed tight, he set the throttle and magneto switch and spun her. The valves clicked dully. LeBrix staggered up through the dark.

“Empty pans,” he gasped.

Cold chills paced along Eddie’s neck. At the first sound of the motor, he knew every German would charge. He remembered his Vickers.

“Strip the Vickers belts.”

He found the camera and tossed it into the observer’s pit LeBrix, loaded again, fitted the tourelle on the rear pit. Eddie pumped the prop, set it, and threw the spark. A fusillade screamed out of the sand hardly a hundred feet away. The infantrymen were advancing.

“Smash ’em!” A harsh Lewis snarl was his answer.

He pulled through and jumped clear. The Liberty took with a roar and he skinned the wing to handle the skid. D.H. tails are heavy! Eddie felt the hot blast of bullets as he got his shoulder under this one. He felt sand sink under his feet as he drove his body up, and he knew he had to swing that ship or die. So he forced every fibre of his muscle to the task. He drove and strained and felt exhaustion welling out of his lungs. And then, by the gods, he was moving her—moving her around and planting her with her nose in the wind that rolled along that hard, sand floor.

A SWIFT light flashed from the cliff above, framing the ship. Shouts and shots poured into the abyss. The pursuit from the drome had caught up. LeBrix lifted his Lewises and raked the ceiling. The light vanished.

Eddie stirred up to the back pit. “Take her away, lieutenant.”

LeBrix’ voice was low with pain. He leaned over the guns, clutching his side. “You take her, Eddie. I’m finished.”

Weed reached down and buckled a belt about the lieutenant. Then he forked the front pit and the butt of his hand hit the throttle. The engine was cold, but he had to risk it. There was a chance. No battle plan in history could take punishment like a Liberty.

She began to roll and he leaned into the slipstream. Hard air gagged him. Flame gashes sprinkled the night where desperate Germans flung their hate. Faster! Sand fanned back from the tires in four fine curtains. The path ahead was a narrow, yellow nightmare Beyond a wall of black.

Back-stick, gentle as the tap of a baby’s fist. The

nose lightened but sand sucked at the tires. More speed! He flattened his wings and let the revs wind up. That forward wall of black was death’s worst threat—hell’s own lips reaching out to suck them down. Back-stick again and a bounce to clear the wheels. The bus lifted, settled, and lifted again. They were off and climbing—but thick trees barred their way.

From eight feet. Weed drove his nose in a suicidal slant at the ground. A headlong plunge, it gave them speed and more speed. He held it as long as he dared and then jerked the hickory against his naked, greased belly. The D.H. lurched as though struck. Her nose lifted like a guardsman’s sword. Salute! Salute to death and the fickle gods of chance!

She stood on her tail, scraping the bark of those tall trees with her rubber. She hooked her borrowed prop into the thick air of that gorge and shuddered.

Would she pull over onto her back or would she crash to kindling and blood? Eddie braced his legs and prayed. Straight up, clearing the timber, she began the turn. Even with the motor full out, her speed was only a tortoise crawl, but she kept going up and around. She finished the first quarter of the circle and started on the second, nose high and tail low. And then the nose was low and the tail was high, and she was pointing her wheels at the tracks of dawn. He held her that way for a split-minute and laid the stick against the side. Hard rudder screwed her upright and she scratched a fabric tip through the last tall tree. By all unholy deities, she was over—and around—and out!

Eddie’s voice cackled insanely. LeBrix straightened up and screamed. Climbing fast, the D.H.4 reared into the heights. Ahead, across lines that blazed and shimmered like endless electric signs, the Vavincourt drome was a refuge. Once there, the pile of plates in the rear pit could be developed. The camera that *Hauptmann* Wilhelmse had plotted to steal for the Fatherland could start to work for Allied generals.

Wide open, they churned across the miles. There was a reason. Dawn was flashing across the sky, and Eddie knew that war birds on the Vitry drome would take up the chase.

DAYLIGHT was turning the lines into shadow scratches as he crossed them. Now and then, he looked behind. LeBrix was rolling in the pit, apparently unconscious. There would be no help from him, if they were attacked. He searched north and south for a friendly dawn patrol. The air was empty—except for a

swelling speck in the heights above his tail.

Frantically, he climbed. If that other ship was German, it would have the advantage of altitude.

It came on, showing a full-face silhouette. Eddie saw the D.H.'s climb was slow and he leveled off. Too late! Green wings waggled and he caught the sheen of sun on black crosses. The German came down with red fire fogging his nose. Long distance shots speared space and flicked harmlessly off a right wing. Weed banked away and got a look at the attacker. It was a gleaming two-seater, with two guns fore and two guns aft. The man in the rear seat wore neither helmet or goggles. Eddie recognized his square-set head. The gunner was *Hauptmann* Wilhelmse!

This was Eddie's first time under fire—with the controls in his hands. He threw a glance at the earth. The Vavincourt drome was straight below. There was refuge. But he knew the Boche would nail him if he dived.

A flashing string of tracer poured from the *Hauptmann's* weapons. Steel crashed through the D.H. tail. Then the German was out in front in a stiff climbing turn.

Eddie got his sights on him and tripped the triggers. A five-shot burst sped up and away, but it missed. Cursing, his eyes dropped to the Vickers belts. One hung completely limp and empty. LeBrix had stripped it back there in Germany. The other held six slick cartridges, two of them tracers.

His lips tightened into twin bloodless ribbons as he saw the Boche poise for another pounce. With LeBrix out of action, the tail was wide open.

A second before it came, he sensed the attack and slid away in a desperate feint. The Jerry roared and banked into position. Eddie straightened out and watched him hover.

"Come on! Here's the test you wanted. Here's a D.H.4 against your two-seater. Try and knock me down!"

The Jerry came. Gagging guns swept a snowy trail before her nose, and she slid past the D.H.'s tail. Coming up from below, she bored in close and let go with both rear guns. Holes snapped through wing fabric and triangular tears stenciled half the fuselage. That was Wilhelmse's shooting—the range was under forty yards.

Now the German pilot was through trifling. He stayed close and let his gunner slash the Yank. Eddie didn't know battle tactics but he learned them in the heat of questing slugs. Spontaneously, he invented

maneuvers to counter each Boche thrust. Somehow, he kept his vitals clear. The German bored in, determined to kill. Eddie waited doggedly, waited to use his six shells.

The belt of death tightened. Eddie feinted for an opening. Climbing, diving, ducking, spinning, he tried to trick the enemy. There was no escape. Remembering the oldest dodge of them all, he pulled back the stick and kicked into a skid. The craft reared crazily, fell off on a wing, and started to spin! The German fell after him. Eddie watched the sky revolve, the Boche ship a green streak in it. He timed its rhythmic appearance. At last, when he was positive of its position, he broke the spin, pulled out of the dive and raised his nose. The Jerry was dead ahead, in his sights for the first time!

As carefully as if taking a picture, he got a bead on the front pit. Six shots now! He held the position a split second and tripped a trigger. A single tracer slashed across the German's top wing. He nudged the stick and pulled the trigger again. His last three cartridges snapped through the block. The tracer sped straight through the Boche bus and Eddie stood up in his pit, screaming.

Nothing happened—except that Wilhelmse put his flexing guns into the D.H.'s flank and slugged it hard. Eddie felt the stick slap his hand, loose and slack. He knew what that meant. Controls shot away! Sick, he fought to bring his head up.

A muffled explosion jerked his eyes across the combing. The Jerry was ablaze from stem to stern. A tumbling figure below was her gunner. As he looked, she turned on her nose and fell.

The D.H. plunged after her. Eddie struggled to slow her furious speed, but the stick was dead. Rudder kicks only added to the wildness of her course. The ground swelled into a bloated horror. He would smash against it like a bug against a car's headlight.

Wind hurled a gag down his throat. The fuselage began to vibrate and he knew his tail surfaces were weakening. A lurch flung him to one side. He threw his arm over the combing and his fingers closed on tight wires. Without thinking, he pulled. They tore away, cutting through flesh—but the nose rose for an instant.

Wild hope surged in him. These were elevator wires. The break was ahead, between his grip and the stick. He clutched them and pulled again. The nose eased up and the wind's scream diminished.

Fences flashed below less than fifty feet away. He

tried to kill his dive with a zoom. The wires ripped loose again and he caught them just in time to skim a grove of trees. A field opened ahead. Right rudder took him into it like a bat out of hell. Flying with bloody hands, he tried to set down. His trucks hit and bounced. At the top of the hop, he lost control. The next time he hit, his wheels were crooked. The ship caught a wing tip and capsized. A stone wall stopped her rolling.

EDDIE WEED opened his eyes in a hospital room. His hands were heavily bandaged. Both ankles were in splints.

A doctor took his pulse. "How're you feeling, young man?"

Eddie looked around. "Okay. How long have I been here?"

"Five days."

He thought a minute. "Unconscious, eh?"

"Partly," said the doctor. "Most of the time, you were raving about one thing or another."

"Such as what?"

"Never mind now. You've got company outside. Think you can stand it?"

"Sure."

The doctor opened a door and an attendant brought in three chairs and a table. Weed's eyes glittered as he saw the preparations.

"Well, I guess I know what that means," he said. A bitter taste twisted his lips. "They can't even wait for a fellow to get well before they put the skids under him."

His mind flashed back to his last flight, to the ship he and LeBrix had stolen. Well, they'd put on a good show, even if they had crashed. He glared at the table, the chairs. He knew their purpose—a judge advocate, an informal court-martial, exactly what Colonel Dunbar had promised the day he threw him out on his ear.

Footsteps cracked the hospital silence. He dropped his lids until the slimmest cracks afforded vision.

The first man to enter was Colonel Dunbar,

commander of the First Observation Squadron. Two beribboned French officers came behind him. There were other officers, but none that he recognized. Dunbar and the Frenchmen seated themselves beside the table, Eddie watched them through almost completely closed eyes, hating them.

So this was his finish. This court-martial! He wondered if Lieutenant LeBrix had already been crucified, if he had already been stripped of his bar and wings. A white guy, LeBrix, with more guts than this whole roomful of stiff necks. He saw Dunbar signal the doctor.

"Wake him, please!"

Eddie felt the doctor's hand on hip shoulder. He opened his eyes and glared across the room. Colonel Dunbar came forward and stood by the bed.

"What've you done to LeBrix?" Eddie snapped.

"He's gone to south France. He'll pull through."

The colonel gestured up the Frenchmen. They came forward swiftly. "Colonel DeMuth and Captain Armand have come from Paris to see you, son."

"Yeah?" said Eddie.

The elder Frenchman unfolded a paper and read half a dozen paragraphs of meaningless French. Occasionally Weed caught the word, "*Photographique*." The other officer bent forward, pinned a heavy cross to Weed's pajamas, and kissed his cheeks.

Colonel Dunbar grinned. "Sendin' away LeBrix leaves a hole in the 201st, son. After seein' that fight you pulled over the drome, every S.C. I've got wants you. How'd you like a regular berth herdin' a D.H.4?"

Eddie's hands shook with surprise. He tried to speak. The Frenchmen backed quietly out of the room and the other officers followed. He forced words through his throat.

"But you're going to court-martial me! I stole a crate and crashed it. You're going to jerk my stripes and send me back to the States. You said so!"

The doctor pushed Colonel Dunbar toward the door. "You'll have to go," he said. "The poor devil's out of his head again."