

# THE BALLOON-GUN KID

by ANDREW A. CAFFREY

*Storm was an airman—every inch of him. When he started out free-lancing, even the sullen sides helped him to batter and spin his way to victory!*

**S**TORM'S LIKE A CHUNK of New England weather," the C.O., Major Nixon, said; "and when he's in the air there's no way to forecast what will happen next."

"All you can feel sure of," the Operations Officer added, "is that you'll get a plenty of whatever does happen. But," the O.O. continued, "Good Lord, sir, Storm has no equal in the air. He's too dangerous for ordinary squadron work.

"He's too ornery and reckless for formation work. And he's too darned good to mark on the ground. When he's in action all the Allied pilots want to get out of the air. And the same thing goes for the enemy too." "You say he has seven planes and four enemy balloons to his credit?" the C.O. pondered.

"That many on the books," the O.O. certified. "A dozen planes and half as many more balloons is nearer the true count. I want to get Storm away from the rest of the command for the simple reason that he outclasses them all.

"It's having a bad reaction already—that is, on the others. They think that the kid is cocky. They're beginning to treat him not so good. They also think that he considers himself far better than the rest, and that's bad. Bad for them and very bad for Storm.

"He is cocky. That's sure. And if he wasn't that, well he'd be dead long ago. Fact is, he thinks that the whole war rests upon his shoulders. Of all our pilots, sir, I believe that Storm works least for personal glory. Person, to him, is nothing. That's why he has no fear. He isn't even trying to make sure that he'll get to go home."

"Well," Major Nixon decided, "there's one thing sure that we can do. We can turn him loose to freelance. What think you of that, lieutenant?"

"I was afraid to suggest it, sir," the O.O. smiled,

"but I hoped that it would be your decision. Storm, freelancing, will give them all something to aim at."

"I hear talk of a one-pound airplane cannon," Major Nixon continued. "I've been too busy to give it much thought. Is there such a thing, lieutenant?"

"I've heard some talk of it," the O.O. said. "They say that a certain selected few free-lance pilots are using them with great success.

"As I understand it, these one-pounders are used only on the 220-Spad. The gun lies in the V of the motor, between the two cylinder banks. The muzzle goes out through the hub of the propeller, not through the arc of the blades.

"The recoil, they say, sends the barrel back between the pilot's knees. That must mean that they have to change the Spad over from stick to wheel control, sir."

"It must be a great gun," the old army man in Major Nixon enthused.

"All reports claim that it is," the O.O. agreed. "Also, these guns are being guarded closely. There's a chance that they'll bring our ultimate success in air, sir. That's the talk."

"I'll do my best to get one of those guns for Storm," the major promised. "And if such a gun is in service, I feel sure that we can have one."

"Till then, lieutenant, if I were you, I'd send Lieutenant Storm on private missions. Whenever a balloon is to be knocked down—we'll—give him the assignment. When we have a good piece of equipment, I believe in using it. However, we must keep this under our hats."

THAT little gathering ended then. But later that same day, Lieutenant Storm went out—under orders—and bagged two more German observation balloons before the Hun airmen had time to take to their parachutes. The entire American front said that the performance was the quickest thing ever seen on that sector.

Those two German balloons had been important eyes of the Imperial German army. With such eyes blinded, the Yanks were assured of softer going for a short time at least.

Lieutenant Paul Storm was a few years shy of being twenty. Young? Yes, that was young. But there were plenty more American eagles no older. That air war of ours was strictly a boy's game.

Storm was an exceptional hand with a ship. He had been exceptional from the first time he'd ever taken his place in a rear cockpit for instruction. He learned how to fly in three hours. As a rule, ten hours was considered mighty fast.

BUT about then our new units on the front began to yell for pilots. American Air Service was beginning to take over certain pieces of work. All Yank birdmen were needed just as fast as the S.O.S. training centers could turn them out. Issoudun no longer questioned a boy's age. If he had finished the course, he was all set to jump a train for Paris.

Then east out of Paris to Orly. The latter place was our Air Service supply depot for the front. From Orly a man went out to bigger things, and maybe to other things—death not being the least among them. However, the gang that went out was made up of boys who could meet death any old place on the high-flown airways.

So that was the kind of a Storm that had hit the front when young Paul came up to see what he could see. And what he couldn't see wasn't to be seen. The man with air-eyes has the world stopped. Too few have such eyes.

Paul Storm was always on the alert. Day after day, following the time when Major Nixon and the O.O. decided to turn him loose to freelance, he flew alone. He was never "jumped." And nearly each day one or more new victories came his way.

He could leave his own area more frequently now and he spent much time with the French and English squadrons. He even flew into the far southeast to learn how the Italians handled their air. Cocky or not cocky, he got along with them all. His name went along the entire front like wildfire. And he lived—fought and lived.

During the second month of his free-lance career, Major Nixon contrived to secure a one-pound balloon gun for Storm's ship. The wild kid was elated. He knew that such guns were in use, yet he never even hoped to possess one. It was a gala day in his busy flying career. His Spad was put "in work," and macs swarmed over it.

"YOU'LL be dangerous now," Major Nixon kidded Storm, while they were watching mechanics mount the gun and change the 220 Spad's cockpit control from "stick" to wheel. "Think you'll be able to make this gun pay its way, lieutenant?"

"Major," Paul Storm enthused, "I'm no good at all if I don't manage to get balloons and planes two at a time now. No kiddin', sir, I've seen the times when I could have drilled two in a line with the right gun. There's a German balloon group back on the Aire that flies its kites mighty close together. I've picked two bags off that line, you know. I'll clean them up now.

"Isn't it a neat-looking piece, sir? Wouldn't that make anybody want to work overtime at the business?"

"These guns are scarce, lieutenant," the major told the anxious kid, "so it's up to you to see that nothing happens to this piece. And it's also up to you to take care that it never falls into enemy hands.

"If you're forced down behind the German lines, burn the whole works, and chuck away as much of the gun as you can remove. After a fire, there'd be nothing left but the barrel. That, of course, is orders—set fire to your ship."

"Me—forced down?" Storm mused, as though he'd never given such a thing much attention. "Yes, sir. Oh, sure, I'll remember that. I'll fire the works—that is—if I'm forced down. But I don't think I'll ever be crowded down, sir. I have a hunch that I won't."

"Hunches are good," the C.O. admitted. "Play yours for all it's worth, lieutenant. But if you ever get a hunch with reverse English on it, play that too. The man who knows how to play hunches both ways, lieutenant, goes on living."

It was a day's work to make the necessary changes on Paul Storm's Spad. It was a long day's work, in fact, for two good armorers, three motor macs, and four plane men. The two armorers had been sent along to mount the gun. They were birds with good jobs, and they knew it too. Mounting one of those balloon cannons here and there, their jobs carried them all along the lines.

They had yarns to tell about those guns, and about the few men who were fighting and piloting behind that type of scarce weapon. Being on detached service, the armorers were plenty loud. They'd talk to lieutenants and majors just as freely as they might to buck privates or lousy M.P.'s—that is, if they were on fast-moving trains and the M.P.'s were on station platforms.

"Ya got to handle this gun right, lieutenant," one of them told Storm. "If it gets too darned hot, it's likely to

run wild. Man, if this baby gets mad its recoil will stop your ship every time you fire. I'm not kiddin' you, Big Boy. Ask my mate here."

LIEUTENANT STORM didn't have to ask the speaker's mate, for that worthy took up the telling. He said, "The sergeant is telling you straight, lieutenant. What I mean, the recoil on one of these guns is worse than a '75's'.

"For a fact, I've seen 'em turn ships around before the pilot knew what was coming off. Lots of pilots forget and leave their shins in the way. They get busted legs that way. Man, they're hot! Hot! that's the Avord. We could tell you a lot about these guns that you wouldn't believe, lieutenant."

"You wouldn't kid me, would you?" Paul Storm asked, and smiled. "The recoil turned those other ships around, you say. Sure it didn't loop 'em, and drop the pilots out?"

"Oh, well, if you don't want to take our word for it, you don't have to," one of the armorers grumbled.

Anyway, those visiting armorers were only running true to form. All over the A.E.F., whenever any new piece of equipment came into usage, those nearest to the issuance, installation and upkeep of the new gadget were sure to build up an awful line of bunk around their pet. The A.E.F. seemed to have a corner on all the gosh-awfulest liars on earth.

At six-fifteen that evening, while there was yet a little light, the armorers, motor macs and riggers stepped back and told Paul Storm that his Spad, and its new one-pound gun, were all set to do it.

Lieutenant Paul Storm seemed to live, eat and sleep with flying equipment on. All day long he had been standing around with helmet and goggles in hand. Now he began to put those things on his head, just as though the day were only starting.

"This will be as good a time as any to give the bus a test hop," he said. "If a couple of you boys will give me a throw on that prop, I'll see how she handles with the wheel control. I've not had a wheel in my hand since I soloed. That was on a dep jenny.

"I'll just make a few turns of the field. I won't keep you macs away from your grub. I'll shoot the moon a couple of times, in the general direction of Germany, to get a better idea of this balloon-gun's hellish recoil. Maybe she'll loop me."

WHILE the motor macs trundled the Spad to the deadline and made ready for the start, the squadron

armorer took a look at the ship's regular equipment of Vickers guns.

"How are they?" Paul Storm asked.

"O.K.," the armorer answered. "Loaded for bear, lieutenant. You've sure got more guns now than a dreadnaught. Damn it all, it isn't right.

"The poor Heinie will be all set to stop shot from two regulation guns. And you'll hit him with this big baby without him ever knowing whether he fell or was pushed."

"Now ain't that just too damned bad?" Storm sympathized.

"But take it from me," the squadron armorer told Storm, "you'll want the old guns to back up this new gun's play."

"Don't you think the new gun's O.K.?" Storm asked.

The squadron man must have been old-fashioned, for he said, "Naw, they haven't been tried out. I've heard all about them from a stiff outa the 94th Squadron.

"They look jake on paper, but they have bad habits. Yeh, you'll be glad to fall back on your Vickers twins yet. The old way is always the best. My grandpop used to tell me that, lieutenant, and he knew everything."

"Did he know that this war was coming, sergeant?" Paul Storm kidded.

"No," the armorer said, "but, three years ago, he did tell me not to get married. And I did. Then it took this war to get me outa that mess. Yep, grandpop was never far wrong. Wait and see if I'm not right about this new-fangled gun." The squadron calamity-howler stepped back and stopped crying. The motor macs yelled "Switch off, and a little throttle, lieutenant!"

Then—"Switch on, and contact!" *Bang!*—the 220 h.p. motor was knocking 'em off.

As Paul Storm sat there warming up his motor there were any number of green-eyed boys looking on. A flight had just come in and landed. A few of those pilots were the men with whom he had formerly flown. They were good men too. And it was hard for them to understand why Storm rated a balloon gun while they did not.

Of course, these flightmates didn't talk the thing over right out in the open where enlisted ears might hear. But they were none too strong for the free-lance Storm, and Paul knew it too. Of late he had been trying to keep clear of the gang. Friction in the old outfit isn't so good, you know.

"The white-haired boy's going to put on a show," one was heard to remark as a group stood near the

officer's mess watching.

"Maybe he's going to up and bust hell out of a long row of German balloons just as an appetizer for supper," another said.

"Or perhaps he'll end this war today and get us all out of the cockpits by Christmas," another was loud in guessing.

"And maybe every one of you guys is right," the disgusted voice of a hidden K.P. snapped from within the mess hall. "If you loud babies knew as much about flying as that guy Storm, this war would be over long ago. Cut your round-table panning!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" a good sport in the group bellowed; "we sure have been told. And the food-destroyer is right. We have no quarrel with young Storm. Let's bow low to him. Storm is an airman every inch of the way. Am I right?"

"You and the K.P. are," they were all quick to agree.

THE mechanics were pulling the blocks from under Storm's wheels. The evening was well along. The lone Yank eased throttle to his motor and started taxiing toward the far end of the field. Arriving there, Storm ruddered around till he had his nose in the direction of the evening breeze.

For another minute he hesitated. He took one last look at the sky and field. During that waiting minute, Major Nixon, riding the sidecar of a motorcycle, came honking and waving toward Storm. The flying young Yank throttled lower and waited.

Major Nixon unloaded from the sidecar and ran to Storm's side. "We've just received an alert," he barked. "A brace of Hun ships are coming down toward here from the English sector. Watch out!"

"Maybe you'll have luck. All right, up and at 'em, lieutenant. I'm going to send a few more boys into the air. I'll send all ships that are in commission. Try the sky northwest of here. Take it away!"

Paul Storm took it away. This was going to be good. That is, it would be good if he got the breaks and met up with this brace of hunting Huns. A swell tryout for the new gun!

Before Paul Storm had lost sight of his own 'drome, he could see four other Spads being started on the line. The home field was a busy hive. A few minutes later, at five thousand feet, he passed above the field of another pursuit squadron. This outfit was also putting ships on the line, and into the air.

Two took off before Storm lost interest in their activities. "Too many cooks," Storm figured. "If I don't

come up with these Huns darned quick, there'll be enough of our Yank birds in the air to shag the whole Imperial German Air Force to hell! There's such a thing as overdoing a good thing."

FIVE minutes later, when darkness was mighty heavy and Paul Storm was about ready to fly his turnaround, the sky ahead was suddenly lighted brightly by searchlights and the rest of those burning things that ground batteries had learned to throw in the general direction of raiding airplanes.

Now, still at a good distance, one of the Yank searchlights had picked up the two Hun ships. The Huns, to get away from that blinding, holding ray, flew wide and parted company—for the time being.

The light still held one of those oncoming ships; and Paul Storm, knowing that a bird in the light was far better than any number of birds in the dark, centered his whole attention on this well-illuminated baby. The illuminated Hun was having hard going. He seemed to be carrying the ball in fine style, though, and making a mighty good run through a darned heavy sky-field.

Paul Storm's sympathies went out to this Hun. At least they went out as far as a fellow could dole such stuff to an enemy. No tears, however, were in Paul's eyes. But he did hope and pray that the well-lighted bird might live—live till he could knock him down with a real good high-powered balloon gun.

"If this Hun's any kind of a sport," Paul Storm was telling himself, "he'll dodge all that Archie and die right. Now, if it was myself who had to make a die of it, I know that I'd want to go out in as big a way as possible. I'd sure hate to be knocked down by a peashooter or by accident."

THE YANK was now forcing his 220 Spad to its fullest. He had tried a short, warming burst from each of his Vickers guns, and they were hot and jake. He hadn't shot the moon or anything else with the big one-pounder for the simple reason that it was a thing not to be wasted. The armorers had said it was ready; and that was good enough for Storm. Anyway, it wouldn't be long now!

That second Hun ship, off somewhere in the dark, was going to present a constant menace for the lone Yank. And the Yank now realized the fact. Maybe while his attention would be on the Hun in the light, the second ship might manage to hang it on Storm, burn Paul Storm down before he had time to put up



an offense or change his present course for a quick defense.

The searchlights never let that one unfortunate Hun get away for a single minute. When one light's ray had spent its cast, the lights of other positions took the Hun over. And they were bringing him closer and closer to Storm.

The minute came when Paul Storm had begun to shove ahead on his joystick, ease into his hard dive, and start action. But at that same second, off to his right Storm spotted the flash of a ship's exhaust flames. In that Storm could see the flashes from both stacks at the same time; he knew that the ship in the dark was coming right at him.

Of course, those flashes might have been from a plane with its tail toward Storm, but he knew that such was not the case. The worst had come to the worst, and the Hun in the dark was now a heavy liability on the young Yank's hands.

Paul Storm, handy as the very devil now, right-handed the old joystick hard over; and at the same moment, he kicked in enough rudder to send him, in vertical verage, head-on to meet that Hun in the dark. A burst from the Yank guns, and that enemy pilot made a bid for safety in a quick howling zoom. Still firing, Storm zoomed too. But the enemy's climb was the better of the two; the Yank's tracers—as Storm's Spad hung on its prop—fell short.

Down off that zoom, Paul Storm fell away in a split-S turn. The searchlights, for a brief second, illuminated his cockpit, and then passed. The Hun in the light, Storm now knew, had also passed. But the end of the split-S found the Spad on the enemy ship's tail. Also, the Yank pilot had the ceiling on his adversary. Worst of all, though, the ship in the dark had zoomed to a greater altitude than Storm. It was all fifty-fifty, and Paul Storm felt that he was the dash.

Now the Yank's Spad, in a fast power dive, was coming down hard on the set-up out there in the searchlights' rays. Paul Storm tried another burst from his Vickers.

Paul Storm was now carrying that well-lighted Hun's cockpit dead-center in his ringsight; and the Hun had, upon getting a peek at the Yank, gone into a dive. Each ship, with less than twenty yards dividing them, was directly in line-of dive; and the straight line that cut from prop through stabilizer of the enemy plane would have passed back through Storm's craft, entering and leaving at the same points. The setup for that balloon gun was as near to perfection as anybody could ask.

PAUL STORM'S brain had telegraphed firing orders to the trigger fingers on his Bowden grips when some sixth sense told him that he was under the other Hun's fire. A half turn of his head at the split second when he fired that new one-pounder showed him tracers that crossed all wing surfaces; and there, almost chewing Paul's rudder with his propeller, was the ship from the dark. That second enemy pilot had Paul cold. Cold as death!

The balloon gun went off with a crack that sounded like all the guns of Doom firing under water with their muzzles choked. A flash of flame filled Storm's cockpit; and a gagging atmosphere of powder smoke told him that all was not well with his new high-powered artillery.

His seat was sagging, his left leg seemed dead below the knee, his control wheels was still in his hands but attached to nothing else. Those armorers weren't so far wrong about that recoil!

Notwithstanding, in that awful moment of flashing, smoke-clogged realization, Paul Storm thought to open fire with both Vickers. He saw his man ahead slouch low into the cockpit. One of the Hun's dying feet must have kicked in full right rudder, for the left wing came high, shot the plane into a barrel-roll, then went onward and down in a spin.

Paul Storm dropped the control wheel that had been kicked away by that hellish recoil—or whatever it was. With the wheel out of his hands, he began to feel for some part of the wheel yoke which might still give him partial control on his elevators.

The left side of that yoke had carried away, and that carrying away was what had cracked his left leg. However, some eighteen inches of the right stanchion was intact. Paul took to that like a drowning man is supposed to take to a straw, and it worked too. It gave him control on his elevators.

Now he had time to think of that rearmost Hun again. He wondered why he was still alive. Why hadn't that second ship wiped him out? He looked around, and saw that the second enemy ship wasn't in view.

Paul Storm now noticed that the searchlights were far to his rear; but those lights were still playing on something. Using his rudder, entirely without aileron control, he managed to fly a wide flat turn. Then he took a look. There it was—that second Hun ship. It was going down for a landing in the searchlight's glare. Paul Storm cut his power and started down too. He could see that the landing Hun's motor was dead, for no flash came from the propeller.

A second searchlight, dropped along the ground, was pointing out a good landing place for the unfortunate Hun. Paul Storm figured that he could use an illuminated field too. When the landing enemy was within a few hundred feet of the ground, a reasonable searchlight crew, not wishing to blind the Hun, took the high light away, and swung their ray higher to find Storm's ship. Storm watched the enemy plane land along the grounded light. The dead-stick landing was okay.

A MINUTE later the searchlight men took that blinding flare off Paul Storm too, and the Yank, turning flat, headed into the wind and put his wheels on the ground. His ship rolled to a stop within fifty feet of the enemy craft. A few Yanks had the German in hand. The enemy pilot was taking things with the usual Teutonic fortunes-of-war resignation.

The Yanks had furnished him with a smoke; and the American cigarettes seemed to be the only thing that mattered in this airman's life. As Paul Storm unloaded from his cockpit, the vanquished enemy was standing there, under guard, and listlessly watching the hot red glow at the end of his fag.

Paul Storm walked up and took a look at the enemy

craft. Its propeller, one blade, was broken off close to the hub. Otherwise, the plane showed no signs of damage.

"What happened here?" Lieutenant Storm asked the Americans.

"Search us," the Yank infantrymen answered. "The pilot here, might be able to tell you," they said, pointing to the German. "He speaks our lingo, lieutenant."

The German spoke in good Milwaukee English: "You threw something at me, lieutenant," he said to Storm. "Just when I got in position to take you down, something came back from your ship and tangled in my propeller. I know I didn't shoot away my own blade, for I was not firing at the exact minute."

"Ye gods!" Paul Storm laughed. "I've got the answer—my new gun recoiled. I'll have to set 'em up for the armorers."

Paul Storm went back to his ship and took a good look at that balloon gun. Sure enough, it had recoiled. It had recoiled in such a way as to kick off its breechlock and shoot that same heavy piece right back through the tail of the ship. "Good gun!" Lieutenant Paul Storm enthused—giving credit where credit was certainly due.