

THE ADVENTURES OF *The* **THREE** **MOSQUITOES**™

THE INVISIBLE ACE

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

*The Invisible Ace was raising hell with the squadron, and—
But it's another great flying yarn about the famous "Three Mosquitoes,"
so why spill any more words about it?*

THE HIGH OFFENSIVE PATROL was out, seven trim Spads which droned three miles above the earth, carrying the war from below into the heavens. Over a sea of snow-white cirrus clouds, they flitted through the thin upper regions of the sky like fragile dragon flies. They flew in an echeloned V, with one end high. It was shortly past dawn. The morning was not yet full, and the sun was just becoming bright. Flying conditions were fine enough now, but it did not look as if they would remain so. The clouds below were thin and white, yes, but off in the distance, higher than the Spads flew, were clouds of different texture and color—dark, ominous clouds which flyers do not like. Slowly, those clouds were drifting inexorably together.

The flight was C flight, of the 33rd aero pursuit squadron. The patrol was between Verdun and St. Mihiel. For two hours these seven Spads must fly up and down, sweeping their particular zone and attacking or accepting the attack of whatever enemy planes appeared. They had been up only ten minutes now. Many things could happen in the hundred and ten minutes which remained. Especially this morning.

For, this morning, they were not just doing a patrol, not just looking for a dog-fight. In the minds of the seven pilots was a different object, a grim purpose which they hoped and prayed they could carry out.

That was why there were three pilots in C flight to-day who did not belong to it at all. They were substituting for original members of the flight, or for the replacements who should ordinarily fill any vacancies. They were well known, these three pilots. They were the "Three Mosquitoes," the famous trio of aces who, in their three-plane formation, had been raising hell with enemy aircraft. However, this morning their Spads did not bear their famous, giveaway insignia—the picture of a very grim-looking Mosquito and a corresponding number—for they did not want the Huns to know that they were flying with C flight. That might spoil the scheme.

Kirby, the young, impetuous leader of the trio, was flying as high end man—his trim Spad was on the right end of the V, above and behind all the other planes. "Shorty" Carn, the stocky, mild-eyed little fighter, flew below and in front of him. The lanky Travis, oldest and wisest of the trio, was end man on

the other side of the V, and was thus below both of them.

The position in which Kirby flew was the most dangerous position in the formation. In an attack from the enemy he would be the first exposed to their guns. All the other planes of the flight were protected from above; Kirby, being highest, had no protection.

And, on this particular occasion, his position was even more dangerous than usual. It was death-defying. He was risking life and limb, banking on one supreme effort, and on the coordination of his two comrades.

The Three Mosquitoes were out with G flight to put an end to the grim exploits of the "Invisible Ace."

The Invisible Ace! Kirby's nerves tensed, and a cold thrill crept through him. The very phrase, the strange nickname of this now-famous Boche pilot, had an uncanny import. And, as Kirby mechanically kept his plane in exact position, kept the other six Spads bobbing in their places before and below him, he wondered whether the Invisible Ace would come. Time and again he scanned the sky above, squinting in the ever-brightening sun. Despite that word "invisible," Kirby was determined to see the man if he showed up this morning. But would he show up? Would his fleeting Fokker come dropping out of nowhere, to disappear before it was even seen?

Many times that Fokker had come before.

Usually its coming had meant disaster for C flight—disaster in the form of a bullet-riddled Spad which went hurtling out of the formation in a fatal spin, plunging earthward like a plummet, or twisting crazily in a mass of flames and black smoke.

Seven such Spads had fallen beneath the twin Spandau guns of that Fokker. Seven Spads—a whole flight. Indeed, the Invisible Ace had changed C flight completely. Not one of the men who flew with it two weeks ago was living to-day.

Just who this Invisible Ace was, what Jagdstaffel he belonged to, what manner of a man he was, could not be ascertained. The mystery in which he was shrouded served to make him all the more impressive and menacing. He was one of those unknown figures who suddenly rose to fame, and about whom so many wild and fantastic legends came to be woven. His enemies could hardly imagine him as a human being, a man who lived, ate, slept just as they did. He seemed more like some supernatural figure, possibly the ghost of some dead German ace who still rode the skies in a phantom plane. A childish idea, perhaps, but men who have lived through the grim horrors of war, especially

war in the air, where life is so cheap, come to think in such terms.

NO ONE had really seen this German flyer; hence, the nickname of "The Invisible Ace." Only a few had caught a glimpse of his ship, and that glimpse was fleeting, very fleeting indeed. A flash of wings in the sunlight, a black-cross insignia, a streaking gray shape—that was all they had seen of him. And, from their hazy descriptions, it could merely be surmised that he flew one of the new-type Fokkers, painted a ghostly gray, with wings of the transparent material with which the Huns were so effectively making their ships difficult to spot.

For some unaccountable reason, perhaps just as a whim, the Invisible Ace had chosen C flight as his particular objective, the material with which he worked. His tactics were simple enough, yet, because they required extreme precision and accuracy to be performed successfully, they could only be attempted by a flyer of great skill and exact judgment.

He played the "dive and zoom game." He would hover high above the American formation, concealing himself in the eye of the sun, waiting for his opportunity. Then, when he was sure that he was not expected, he would swoop down like a hawk, fire one single burst, and pull up in a breathless zoom before he was seen. Usually, that single burst would score, so deadly a marksman was he. The high end man of the flight would fall. Naturally, the German chose the plane which flew in this position. because, being unprotected and behind all the others, it was the easiest to take unawares, an open and vulnerable target.

So swift would be the execution—like the trick of a master magician where the "hand is quicker than the eye"—that the other pilots of the flight could never spring into action until it was too late. They would hear the burst of machine-gun fire, and when they turned they would see the victim hurtling below them. But the Invisible Ace would already be up in the sun again, safe from prying eyes. Sometimes, of course, he didn't succeed in scoring a bull's eye, but always his bullets would do some damage.

Every effort to put an end to the deadly work of this German had failed completely. Decoys, feints, every trick of the game was tried—but to no avail. When the flight expected the German, watched for him with fiendish concentration, not permitting anything else to attract their attention, the Invisible Ace never showed up. When they put some Spads up in the sun,

to guard the flight from above, the German had not only spotted them, but, with diabolical cunning, had shot down their end man. It seemed that his Fokker could attain a greater altitude than could the Spads, for the German was always overhead, always up in the sun regardless how high the Americans flew. And always, the Invisible Ace would make his breathless swoop when, somehow, their eyes were averted.

By the time the third end man had been shot down, that position in the flight had become a jinx to the pilots of the squadron. No one wanted to fly high end, yet no one dared to refuse for fear of being branded a coward. The flight commander had already gone; he was the second to fall, for he had valiantly assumed the fatal position in preference to exposing his men. After that, the remaining veterans of the flight would determine among themselves, by-cards or dice, who would face the jinx next. The replacements who had to fill in for the fallen men were not considered. Not until there were no more of the original members left.

Thus it had gone on, with the German scoring, scoring, and no come-back, no chance to take vengeance. The thing began to prey on the men's nerves; sleep became impossible; they grew pale and haggard, and their blood-shot eyes had a haunted look. Who would be next? That was the grim question. Whose turn now to be plugged in the back by an unseen opponent, who would not come and fight in the open, who was as intangible as the air in which he flew?

Yet, despite their fear and tension, the members of C flight—and stout fighters from other flights had now joined its ranks, to replace their dead comrades—were kept going by a grim, stubborn resolve to finally exact payment of the Hun, to smash his flitting gray plane to bits.

All this time the Three Mosquitoes, being members of the 33rd squadron, had watched and heard of the tragic developments with growing concern. Kirby, especially, was roused by the idea of this Invisible Ace, this unknown menace who dropped from the sun. In his love for performing spectacular deeds, doing big stunts—a love which was more for the thrill of fighting, of blazing his way through, than for the glory of it—he presently felt a keen desire to come to grips with this evidently intangible Fokker and send it hurtling down to earth, thus proving that it was a real plane and a real man.

And so, when the seventh victim had fallen, the Three Mosquitoes had gone to the C.O. of the drome

and requested that they be allowed to join C flight temporarily—a most unusual request. Indeed.

“Just what do you mean by temporarily?” the grizzled old colonel asked; with acrid mirth, trying vainly to laugh away some of the anxiety and suspense which was haunting him. “Sounds pretty pessimistic.”

“No, sir,” Kirby replied, firmly. “It’s just the opposite. We’re optimistic enough to think that we’ll only have to join the flight temporarily to plug that invisible sky-guy.”

The C.O. could not very well refuse, especially since he had a strange hunch that these three intrepid flyers would come through. Carefully, the scheme had been laid. Kirby’s greatest asset was his ability to think quickly and clearly in a crisis; he seldom hesitated, but acted at once, every nerve and muscle responding. In view of this fact, there was a chance—a slight chance at least—that if he flew in the jinx position, and the German did come, he could spring into action before the Invisible Ace had time to get him.

As soon as the Fokker came, Kirby would make a stupendous effort to turn the tables, and would signal the other men of the flight by means of a rocket released by a button on his joy-stick. His two comrades, also being quick to act, would immediately swing in towards him and, with the aid of the other four Spads, they’d try to trap the German, surround him and shoot him to ribbons.

ALL that had sounded well and good when Kirby had talked it over with his feet on the ground. But now, three miles above the earth, perched in the precarious position he had volunteered to assume, droning through the thin sky, things looked different. Again Kirby scanned the blue in all directions. The dark clouds in the distance were still gathering. Otherwise the sky was empty—absolutely empty. It was so empty, indeed, that it would have been extremely lonely if it were not for the other six Spads which spread out before Kirby, their wings flashing in the sun.

The sun! Yes, that was the one thing to watch. Kirby put a thumb to his goggled eye—the method by which pilots try to pick enemy ships out of the sun—and looked up there. Nothing. No sign of a gray Fokker hovering like a buzzard in wait.

To be shot from behind without being able to turn and fight—that was the thought which bothered Kirby, filled him with a strange dread which, despite all his efforts, kept growing stronger and stronger. Presently it had become so strong that Kirby was constantly

glancing back, looking up over his shoulder. No longer did he keep such perfect position in the formation. He had to swing in or put on more speed several times in order to retain his place.

Would the jinx work against him as it had worked against seven others? Would he too crumple beneath the Invisible Ace's deadly guns? After all, though Kirby was a great ace, though he was a better flyer than those who had gone down, the tactics which the German used were such that the trick might work even on the best. And though Kirby was thoroughly alert, was watching and waiting, prepared for the Invisible Ace's coming, there was no telling but that the wily German would fool him as he had fooled all the rest. There was no telling, either, whether he would come or not. He might dive in the next minute, or the next second. Or the next hour. It was the suspense of the thing that got you—wondering whether that unseen attack would come. But if it did come—

Kirby's hand closed tightly about his joy-stick. He must keep cool. Mustn't let this idea of a supernatural plane scare him. Don't worry—this stuff about ghosts was the bunk. Propaganda. The Germans were spreading it to throw a scare into the Allied pilots, cripple their morale. It was lousy ballyhoo. Mustn't let it get his goat.

Instinctively, his eyes picked out the planes of his two comrades, as if the sight of them might bring him reassurance. He could see Shorty Carn's helmeted head protruding from the cockpit of the Spad which bobbed below and in front. And he could look across the gap of space and just make out the head of Travis over there. Travis happened to look back at the same time. They waved to one another.

On droned the seven Spads, speeding along a wide road of space which must be kept clear of unfriendly traffic. On, on, on, with seven grim eyes peering through their goggles, with seven hands hovering close to the triggers on the joysticks. They watched only the sky and their formation. They did not bother to glance below, down through the clouds, where a furious battle rolled across the face of the earth in ugly splotches of smoke and fire. Their job was to patrol the sky, and to watch for the Invisible Ace.

Ten minutes more. Never before had time passed so slowly for Kirby in the air. It seemed they had been flying for hours instead of minutes. The suspense was getting unbearable. Worst of all, there was an uncanny sense of being watched by eyes unseen, a sense that an invisible foe lurked above, following every movement of the formation, waiting, biding his time.

The sun was high and brilliant now. But the dark clouds were moving slowly across the sky line like a great blanket which must soon shroud that sun from view. A strange stillness seemed to have come over the air, a stillness which was only emphasized by the monotonous drone of the seven engines. It was the stillness that foretells impending drama, a coming storm.

Kirby was getting finicky—an unusual thing with him. He was shifting around in his cockpit, jerking his head from one direction to another. Damn this stillness, damn this empty sky! If something was going to happen, let it happen now! In his feverish suspense, Kirby longed to hurl himself into action, to fight, fight anything. If only—

The Spad at the apex of the big V suddenly caught his eye. A tiny arm shot out from its cockpit, waved a signal. The signal was relayed back through the flight. They were over St. Mthiel. They must turn and patrol the same area back to Verdun. Kirby's feet planted themselves a little more firmly on the rudder bars. He waited, watched the formation, but never ceased glancing out of the corner of his eye at the sky behind and above.

It is a beautiful sight to see seven Spads turn in formation, and it is an even more beautiful sight to see them from the high end position. In spite of his grim forebodings, Kirby thrilled as the planes in front and below him swerved over, each man keeping his place, all the Spads remaining in echelon, so that every gun had a clear space to fire into.

Falling in, Kirby banked over behind and above. And even as he banked, some inner voice seemed to give a faint warning cry. He became more wary than ever, more thoroughly prepared.

THEN, when the Spad turned with the others, the sun above was suddenly in front of Kirby, and its flashing brilliance made him blink behind his goggles. It was dazzling for the moment, and he hastened the bank to throw it off. Around he swerved in a blaze of light, blinking, squinting—

Rat-tat-tat!

The shrill staccato clatter shattered the drone of his engine. His nerves jumped as if each one had been poked! *Rat-tat-tat!* A long burst of machine-gun fire, growing shriller and shriller. Instinctively, Kirby was working his controls, at the same time defying the glare of the sun to see what was up there. *Rat-tat-tat!* There was a whine close to his ears, and he saw a

stream of tracer go streaking right past him. A line of perforations appeared suddenly in the wing surface above him. Bullets ticked through his fuselage. A cry broke from him, an almost hysterical shout.

“No!” he yelled out defiantly. “No, you don’t!”

Furiously, he kicked his rudder and rolled from side to side to throw off his attacker’s sights. Where was the Hun? Stubbornly, Kirby kept peering right into the sun. Then he stiffened. There—there he was! In the glare above Kirby distinguished a vague shape which seemed to be jumping right down on him. Jagged streaks of flame were leaping from its nose. The tracers were raining down.

All this had happened in a split second, before the flight had completed its turn. And, though Kirby had thought fast enough to roll out of the German’s line of fire, the vague sight of that shape jumping down on him confused him strangely, at least for the moment. There was something so inexorable about it, about the way it was closing in upon Kirby, that he felt helpless to do a thing.

But he had not won his reputation for nothing. And, all at once, his brain began to work with lightning speed. Facts drove themselves home, vivid facts. The Invisible Ace—he was here—he was trying to slaughter Kirby as he had slaughtered seven other pilots. Cleverly, he had waited until the planes had turned into the sun; then, unseen, he had come.

With a savage oath, Kirby sprang into action. He pulled out his throttle wide, and his fingers dosed about his stick. He pressed the rocket-button which had been put there. A red light popped from his cockpit, trailing across the sky. At the same moment the Spad’s motor gave a great roar. The little plane leaped upwards as if shot out of a gun. With breathless speed, though he could hardly make out his foe, Kirby zoomed up for an Immelmann turn. Up, up, up, faster and faster, with smoke pouring from his curved exhausts.

The German’s guns had stopped clattering. This time his burst had not been fatal. Kirby had spotted him too soon, and had maneuvered to throw off his sights. But a ripped up trailing edge on the right wing and a big chunk out of the rudder bore proof of the Hun’s excellent marksmanship.

Again, as he went shooting up, Kirby saw that dark shape against the sun. It was pulling up for its zoom. Trying to get away, as usual. Kirby gritted his teeth. His eyes narrowed to mere slits.

“No, you don’t!” he repeated. “No, you don’t, you skunk!”

He summoned all his skill as a pilot, urged his plane on with every trick. Meanwhile, the other six Spads were breaking formation confusedly, whipping around. Carn and Travis had caught the signal. They were swinging in at full speed, as planned.

The damned sun again! In his eyes! Blindly, banking on one great hope, Kirby pivoted around for his Immelmann turn. Over he went, with breathless grace. Had he made it? Had he succeeded in surprising the Hun by his swiftness, and so gotten above the German?

He had!

Dazedly, he saw the German plane below and in front of him. The Boche was still zooming, as if he did not see Kirby above. And now the enemy ship was no longer a vague shape swimming in a blaze of sunlight. It was a trim, gray Fokker with fragile-looking wings, on which the black-cross markings stood out clearly. And the tiny head of the pilot could be seen in the cockpit, leaning forward to his sights between the glistening barrels of his twin Spandaus. The Invisible Ace, no longer invisible!

His hopes high, Kirby nosed down right towards the German plane, to cut it off from above. At the same time he saw the Spads of Carn and Travis sweeping in, the former from in front and the latter from the left side. The German saw them too. He also saw that he could not zoom out. Swiftly, he banked to the right and tried to pull out on that side. But then the four remaining Spads of C flight, guided by a desire for vengeance, closed in with breathless speed.

Guns stuttered into life, sending out streams of tracer which made smoky, zig-zag lines in the sky. Kirby opened fire as he swept down overhead. The German was being trapped! He became desperate. His Fokker turned like a crazy thing, tried every means of escape. His guns defied the guns of his enemies. Kirby had to marvel at his skill in flying. The ghostly gray ship seemed to be everywhere, whipping about, streaking between the Spads which were on it like a pack of hungry wolves.

It was all so simple that Kirby could hardly believe it. Was it possible that they had this terror of the skies walled in a trap? Was the score actually going to be paid?

It certainly looked that way. For the seven Spads had cleverly blocked every path of escape. They had surrounded the flitting gray Fokker and were shooting at it from every conceivable angle. Kirby, also firing short bursts at it, saw bits of wood and fabric leaping from its fuselage. The Hun didn’t have a chance.

He was going to be slaughtered as sure as he had slaughtered his seven victims.

STRANGELY enough, Kirby, though he had hoped for just this, could not feel any sense of elation or triumph as he saw the end coming to his hated foe. In fact, there was something about it which bothered Kirby unpleasantly. True, it was all fair enough, and this was war, but somehow the idea of seven Spads all blazing away at a lone Fokker didn't seem quite right. It was not one of those sweeping victories that would have come if Kirby had fought the man alone, beaten him in an open, hand-to-hand duel.

Slowly, but with grim precision, the Americans kept closing in on the lone Fokker, pumping bullets into it. The German was a brave man; he did not relax his stubborn resistance for a second. A wave of admiration for his foe passed through Kirby. Regardless of his nasty tactics, that man had guts! With death staring at him, leering at him from all sides, he kept turning, rolling, weaving in and out whenever there was an opening. And his guns continued to blaze, though, under such circumstances, he had no chance to score.

Again and again the Spads kept making short, deadly swoops on the gray ship, clinging to its flanks. It was the end of a long hunt for a beast of prey. The beast was now at bay, and the hunters were putting a finish to him. In a second, Kirby figured as he sped among the swarm of planes, the Invisible Ace must fall. In a second——

The thing happened so unexpectedly, with such startling swiftness, that the Americans were not at all prepared for it. It happened even as the German plane began to lurch beneath the rain of bullets, began to stagger——

A sudden, unearthly clatter of machine guns overhead—a roar of wide-open motors—and Kirby, glancing up, saw nine Pfaltz scouts dropping out of the sun like hornets from their nests, diving right down on him and his six comrades, who were absorbed in shooting at the Invisible Ace. The Hun formation had come up above, hiding as was customary in the sun's brilliant eye. They had seen the plight of one of their Comrade ships, and were swooping down to the rescue of the gray Fokker.

Before C flight had a chance to pull itself together, before the seven American planes could get into fighting formation, those nine slender-nosed Pfaltzes were upon them. Like blood-crazed vultures the German planes leaped on the Spads, and in the first

flurry the ship which had flown at the apex of the American flight was sent fluttering earthward like a dead bird.

Kirby, pulling up, saw his two comrades off to the right, waiting to get into formation with him. Quickly, he banked to the right and went speeding towards them. A burst of fire from behind made him turn, and he saw a Pfaltz coming down on his tail, guns blazing. A stream of tracer whistled past him, and the German's bullets seemed to beat a vibrating tattoo on the tailfins of the Spad.

Cursing, Kirby half-rolled out of the way, then opened fire on a Pfaltzlike shape which was circling right in front of him. The German plane veered abruptly from its cirde, staggered and flew queerly for a second, then started to nose slowly over. Kirby could not look to see what its ultimate fate was, for by this time his two comrades were pulling up on either side of him, while the rest of the Pfaltzes were weaving in and out through the American formation with snakelike movements, spitting tracers all over the place.

The Americans, however, had recovered from their momentary confusion. Ignoring the Invisible Ace, they had pulled themselves together and were facing the Pfaltzes with stubborn determination. Fiercely and breathlessly the dog-fight raged. The sky became a churning mass of planes which dived, zoomed, gyrated about one another like a flock of crazy birds.

Kirby had gotten his two comrades in formation beside and a little behind him, and the Three Mosquitoes hurled themselves into the very thick of the scrap, whipped about like winged furies, going for every Pfaltz that came their way. Already Shorty Carn had sent a Hun plane crashing down, while Travis had badly damaged another.

The Germans, however, had the upper hand. They had succeeded in taking the Americans unawares, and with their superior numbers they were cutting off the Spads from their own territory, forcing them slowly into Hunland. Though only one of the Spads had been bagged, it looked as if the rest of them were in for it.

And the Invisible Ace? Suddenly, even as he was speeding ahead of his comrades to cut off a Pfaltz from in front, Kirby remembered the gray Fokker. Hastily, he glanced through the maze of planes around him, searching anxiously. Then he groaned.

The gray Fokker was gone!

Evidently the Invisible Ace had seized his opportunity to escape. Though he might have done a

great deal to help the Pfaltzes, he doubtless preferred to stick to his own tactics. He had slipped out of the noose even as it was tightening around his throat!

BUT Kirby had no time to mope or conjecture over this misfortune. There was too much work to be done. Furiously, he led his comrades about, taking the Pfaltzes head-on, blazing away at everything in sight. And while he fought, he suddenly became aware of a change in the surrounding atmosphere. All at once the sky seemed to have become ominously dark, gloomy. At first Kirby thought it was from the smoke of exhausts and guns, but then he saw that the black clouds he had previously noticed had drifted overhead, where they floated in great, broken groups. The sun was still blazing through a gap in them, however. But visibility was already beginning to get bad: there was a threat of fog in the air, and a threat of heavy rain.

In the graying light the dog-fight continued. And the Germans scored again. A second Spad fell, lighting up the gray like a flaming red torch as it plunged down in a trail of smoke and fire. The Pfaltzes kept gaining, gaining. Already the battle had drifted across the lines—a bad sign.

Then, all at once, everything changed. Abruptly, with a haste which made Kirby wonder, the Pfaltzes were pulling out! Confusedly, the German ships were trying to extricate themselves from the whirling maze they had created, were trying to get back into formation. There could only be one reason. Eagerly, Kirby scanned the gray sky. A joyful shout broke from him.

High above them, advancing with breathless speed, were what looked like nine flitting dragon flies. An Allied formation! They were coming to the rescue of the hard-pressed Americans. And as they came closer overhead, Kirby saw that they were a squadron of French Nieuports—pretty white little ships which showed against the gray.

The Germans proved how well they knew that discretion was the better part of valor. Never had Kirby seen a more perfect withdrawal and retreat. Before the Nieuports had gotten into a position to dive, the Pfaltzes had pulled out, and one and all they were streaking for home hell-bent, with black smoke pouring from their exhausts.

It would have been futile to give chase. Visibility was getting worse and worse, and besides they were already well within Hunland. So, at an exchange of signals between the French Nieuports and the

Spads—Very lights which were sent streaking across the sky—both formations continued on their way. The Nieuports droned off to the southwest. The Spads—now only five of them—turned straight west and started back for their drome. True, they had not by any means stayed out for the full length of their patrol, but they had done sufficient work, and the weather had become so threatening that it seemed wisest to call it a day and go home.

So C flight started back with its mission unaccomplished, its vengeance unpaid. Five Spads sped through the gray sky, with the Three Mosquitoes now making up the majority of the flight. Again Kirby rode in the high-end position, with his comrades in their former places. On they droned, recrossing the lines. Visibility kept decreasing. There was a fine mist in the air now, and the sun was just a dim blur which struggled vainly for life.

Kirby, perhaps partly because of the disagreeable weather, the gloomy murk was filled with a feeling of disgust. Here they had trapped the Invisible Ace, had caught him cold, and yet he had gotten away. The scheme had failed as all other schemes had failed before it. Of course to-morrow, or the next day which was suitable, they must try it again. But next time the Invisible Ace would be more wary. He would look before he leaped.

With a savage gesture, Kirby wiped goggles clear of the mist which was flung back in his face by the furious slip-stream of the whirling propeller. Indifferently, he again watched the formation before him. Only four other planes were spread out there now, and in the misty light they had a ghostly appearance as they bobbed in their places.

If only Kirby could have met the Invisible Ace alone, fought it out with the man! This business of organized fighting and cooperation was all very well, but it had not worked to-day. Better that one man should be entrusted with the whole task. And if they could only find out where the Invisible Ace nested, what Jagdstaffel he belonged to, things might be different.

Then a new thought struck Kirby, a thought which made his nerves tense once more. They were still in the air. Suppose the Invisible Ace was hovering above again, now concealed by the clouds or the mist? Suppose he should come once more——

He suppressed the thought with a laugh. No, the German would not come again to-day. He had never attacked in this kind of weather anyway, and rarely had he come twice on the same day. Besides, he must

have had the starch taken out of him this morning. His experience must have made him more cautious. If—

Rat-tat-tat-tat!

Like an ironic mockery to Kirby's thoughts, that shrill staccato clatter shattered the air again! And this time, despite the fact that the Invisible Ace was on his mind, Kirby was taken completely by surprise. He had not expected the attack, and now, as it came, he was confused and bewildered.

Rat-tat-tat! Again came the streams of tracer.

Again Kirby glanced around fearfully. Out of the mist loomed that vague, Fokkerlike shape, grayer than the sky itself, but with livid red streaming from its twin guns. Down it swept, right on Kirby's tail.

The Invisible Ace had come again! Always surprising his foes, he had taken the measure Kirby had not thought he would dare to take. And doubtless he had gone to his drome and secured a new plane. For a plane as badly riddled as that gray Fokker had, been could never dive like this!

ALREADY the long hurst which the German was sending out was scoring, scoring indeed! Confusedly, Kirby heard the bullets ticking through his fuselage, saw them ricocheting from the cockpit cowling. *Crash!* His windshield was smashed to bits, and pieces of glass flew back into his face, cutting him painfully. *Rat-tat-tat!* The Spandaus were still pouring out their deadly sprays. And so swift had it all been that Kirby had not even maneuvered yet to throw off the Hun's sights, nor had he thought of signaling his comrades. The other four Spads, hearing the sound of gunfire, were just as confused as Kirby, and were clumsily trying to turn.

Then at last, when that Fokker was right on top of him, so close that its nose was almost touching Kirby's tail, the Mosquito began to do what had been expected of him—think fast. Furiously, he rolled, zig-zagged, started to turn. But it was too late.

There came such a furious whistle of bullets that Kirby shuddered. His whole plane lurched, staggered beneath that hail of lead. Then it happened.

There was a red blaze off to his right, and he looked out, dazed and bewildered, to see his lower right wing-tip in flames! The German's incendiary tracer had set the fabric and woodwork to burning. The fire, whipped up by the rush of wind, was growing nercer and fiercer, consuming the wing, crawling down towards the fuselage.

All this, as on the first occasion, had happened in a mere second. It had happened before the other four

Spads of the flight had even turned, before they had seen the German. Carn and Travis were just starting to swing in now. But already the Invisible Ace was taking his leave. His guns ceased their clatter once more. His gray Fokker pulled up for its long room. In a second the mist was swallowing the German plane.

And then, all at once, a deadly volcanic rage swept Kirby, a rage that made him forget the fire which crept down his wing, which, in minutes, must reach the fuselage and gas tank and send him up in a shattering explosion. Twice the Invisible Ace had come and gone, despite all their plans. And Kirby had been given the job because he could think fast, act in a crisis—

His goggled face turned crimson, and he swore a mighty oath. By God, the Invisible Ace would not get away this time! To hell with the fire on the wing! Kirby was going to get that Hun, shoot him to ribbons!

The gray Fokker was a wraithlike form in the mist high above. Ignoring everything, ignoring the planes with which he flew, Kirby opened his throttle, jerked back his stick, and zoomed after that shape. Up he shot, with breathless speed, and his Spad responded as if it were a sensitive race-horse. But with the added speed, the rush of wind became all the greater, and the flames on the wing were fanned higher and higher. Down they kept creeping, inch by inexorable inch, licking out as if hungry to touch the gas.

Already, before the four other American pilots had thoroughly grasped the fact that Kirby had zoomed out of their midst, the Mosquito was far above them, streaking up with his eye fixed on the vague shape of the Fokker. And he was gaining! The Invisible Ace evidently did not know he was being pursued, did not expect Kirby to zoom after he had set the Mosquito's wing aflame. But he was going fast enough, and was heading for a break in the clouds. As usual, he wanted to make for altitude, where he would be safe.

Suddenly, glancing down for a brief instant, Kirby saw two other Spads climbing after him in the murk below. His two comrades! As he looked, a red and green rocket popped from Travis' plane. They were signaling Kirby to go down and make an emergency landing at once, before the fire on his wing spread too far. He was crazy to go zooming up like this. He'd be burned to a cinder.

An almost childish rage against them seized Kirby. He scowled down, wishing they could see and hear.

"Go to hell!" he bellowed. "I'll handle this job without any nursemaids!"

And he fed his engine more gas. He did not want

them to come with him, for he was determined to do this job. single-handed, to prove that he was just as good a man as the Invisible Ace.

LUCK—if the absence of his comrades could really be called luck—was with Kirby. All this time the mist had been growing denser, and he was gaining on his comrades as well as on the Invisible Ace. And the next thing Carn and Travis knew, they had lost sight of their leader's Spad. Stubbornly, they continued to climb, determined to find him.

Seventeen thousand feet, the little needle of Kirby's altimeter showed. The black clouds drooped right overhead. The vague form of the gray Fokker was climbing straight for a gap between three of them—a hole through which the lighter sky showed. Cursing, shouting out wild threats and berserk challenges, Kirby employed all his skill as a pilot to make his plane go faster. And he did not feel the spark which flew right on his cheek, which should have warned him how serious the fire was. True, it was still confined mainly to the wing-tip, and the wing was still strong enough, but it could not be long now before those feelers of flame finally found their mark.

Gaining now—gaining. By a stroke of fortune, the German was still ignorant of Kirby. The Mosquito was coming up behind him, just below the clouds. The Spad was pulling into range. The Fokker stood out more clearly now; Kirby could see all its details. Grimly, the Mosquito leaned to his sights, caught the shape of the Fokker in the little ring. Then, furiously, he pressed his stick-triggers.

The Spad's twin guns stuttered into blazing life. Up through the gray air zipped the smoky tracer bullets. The aim was true. Kirby saw the tracer going right into the Hun plane.

The German side-slipped abruptly, accepting the attack. At first he seemed inclined to retreat, as if he didn't care to make a fight of it, but then he must have seen the flames which licked along Kirby's wing, for, with breathless grace, he nosed down and swooped for the American, guns blazing.

Kirby, savagely exultant, crossed controls and hung in a shivering stall. The German swept past, started to whip around. The fight was on!

And it was a strange fight. Up in the mist, just below the clouds which drooped over them, the two planes whipped about each other, one a ghostly gray Fokker, the other a khaki Spad with a livid blaze on its right wing. It was a battle that had to be fought at

close range, because visibility was so bad. Often the two men lost sight of each other; then surprised one another as they suddenly came face to face again. It was grim, fierce stuff. The danger of collision was terrific; at times they missed each other by a scant twelve inches. And all the time the fire on Kirby's plane kept spreading, spreading.

In a few more seconds Kirby did begin to realize how serious that fire was. The burning wing was beginning to weaken, and his plane was tending to fly lop-sided. Furiously, the Mosquito tried to hasten the battle so that he could hold out. But his antagonist was too good. The German was a wonderful flyer; he could match Kirby in every stunt. And presently, as Kirby's wing became weaker and weaker, and his Spad began to lose its swift grace, the German commenced to gain. He was getting the upper hand. His bullets again were finding their mark. Again Kirby heard them ripping up his fuselage and wings.

Desperately, the Mosquito fought as he had never fought before. But even the greatest flyer in the world could not hope to fight well with such a plane. The German's bullets were whistling all about him, and the stench of the fire was in his nostrils.

Then, at last, a hideous clear-sightedness came to the Mosquito, and he realized with horror his terrific predicament. Good God, in another second or so he would be burned alive! And here he was, fighting like a blind jackass, trying to face an expert ace under such conditions! His comrades were right. He should have landed, landed at once to—

Rat-tat-tat! Another stream of tracer from the German, who was swooping down behind him. A strut on the Spad splintered, and one of the instruments on the dashboard shot to bits. A bullet passed through Kirby's sleeve, another actually grazed his face. There was a sound of crackling wood above the roar of the engine. The burning wing was cracking! God, he must do something or he'd be done for!

And then, in that awful moment, Kirby proved at last that he could think fast in a crisis, could act at once. The idea which had come to him seemed wild and ludicrous, yet it was logical enough. It was the only course that could save him.

Reaching his decision, he threw his Spad into a stall to confuse the German. Then, before the Invisible Ace had time to react, Kirby shot up for his second Immelmann turn. Up he went, with his wing crackling, with the flames seeming to be just outside the fuselage. He could feel their heat. Above the Hun he rolled out

of the turn. The German zoomed towards him. But Kirby surprised him again. At full speed, the Mosquito headed his burning ship straight for the center of a big storm cloud above.

Up, up, up he shot, praying that he could hold out. The German was following, following with his guns spitting, but Kirby ignored him. The dark fog loomed towards him above. Nasty-looking stuff, but this was no time to look for a bed of roses. With a rush, Kirby, shot right into the cloud.

IN A second the heavy murk was surrounding him, and he could not see his own ship, could not see the fire on his wing. The roar of his engine became deafening—for such is the effect of being walled in by heavy clouds. And then, as he kept looming, the fun started.

The water held by that cloud began to soak Kirby and his plane to the very vitals. In a second Kirby was wet to the skin, and the moisture was so heavy that he almost feared it would choke his engine. But the Spad's motor held valiantly, and Kirby kept zooming up, though the only reason he knew he was zooming was that he was holding back his stick. There was no sense of direction. For all he knew he might have been looping the loop.

Wet, soggy, and in the dangerous predicament he was, Kirby nevertheless could see the humor of the thing. He was giving his Spad a Turkish bath in a rain cloud, soaking its fabric, perhaps ruining it. If only he could see the effect and—

He broke off, starting pleasantly. It was getting lighter! He was coming out of the cloud again! Slowly, the heavy fog was clearing, drifting away under the churning blade of the propeller. Up he went, through the last gray fingerlike wisps which caressed his throbbing ship. And in the next second he was blinking in a sudden glare of sunlight. He was above the clouds, in a sky tinted with pink and gold.

It took a second before he could focus his eyes on anything. With his heart in his mouth, he glanced out along the wing.

Then a shout of wild joy broke from him.

The fire was gone! The wing, dripping wet as was the rest of the plane, was no longer in flames. The blaze had been stifled by the moisture in that cloud, just as Kirby had hoped. And while the wing-tip was charred and spoiled, his plane could still fly. That was all he wanted. Now if—

Rat-tat-tat-tat!

For the third time that unholy clatter burst forth. For the third time Kirby jumped, glanced back. And there again, plunging down along the sun's bright rays, swooping once more for the Spad's tail, was the ghostly gray Fokker!

The Invisible Ace, wily flyer that he was, had played another one of his tricks. While Kirby had zoomed through the clouds, the German had come up through the gap in them. Then, perhaps on a hunch, he had waited above, to dive on Kirby as the latter came out.

Such an attack, if carried out properly, seldom failed, for it took the victim at a decided disadvantage. In a second the German's bullets were whistling about Kirby anew, pumping into his already riddled Spad with deadly precision.

But, far from being alarmed, Kirby actually experienced a feeling of savage delight. This was a stroke of fortune! He had not dared to hope that he would find his foe waiting for him!

While he rolled and zig-zagged, throwing off the German's sights, Kirby prepared himself for action. His fingers closed on the stick-triggers, his eyes went forward to be near his gun-sights. There was a gleam in those eyes now, an almost joyful gleam.

The German was right on his tail. Kirby would show him that he too had cunning. The Hun would expect him to do an Immelmann and would be prepared to force him on the outside arc. But Kirby did not Immelmann.

Instead, with furious speed, the Mosquito swung his Spad around in a breathless, almost vertical bank, ignoring the Hun's bullets which came as the German had a chance for an even better shot. And somehow, Kirby made that damaged Spad of his do what he wanted it to do. With roaring fury, his ship came around. The German then decided to Immelmann himself. The gray Fokker stood on its tail, shot upwards. But Kirby had already turned, and, opening his throttle to the highest notch, he pointed his nose straight for the pivoting German ship. He caught the Fokker half-over, caught its gray belly right in the ring sights. Then, carefully, he fired, pressed his triggers. And he sent two streams of tracer straight towards that gray belly.

The Invisible Ace never finished that Immelmann turn. His Fokker lurched backwards, staggered for a second in a vain effort to get on even keel. Kirby, now above, dove again, sprayed the German plane with burst after burst. A ribbon of flame appeared on the hood of the Fokker's engine, went licking greedily

along the ship's flanks. Slowly, as the flames enveloped it, the gray plane nosed over.

And the Invisible Ace fell, fell as so many of his victims had fallen on previous occasions.

Down went the flaming Fokker, twisting and spinning in uncontrolled curves, with burning bits of debris falling from it. Down, down, down, straight for the sea of clouds. Before it entered those heavy banks of fog, Kirby, watching from above with a grim-set face, saw its wings buckle away from it. Then the clouds swallowed it, sucked it in greedily.

The job was done. The Invisible Ace had disappeared forever. The score was paid.

Kirby felt just a little dazed and bewildered by it all. For several seconds, he continued to circle above the cloud which had swallowed up the Fokker. It was a sort of final salute to his fallen foe.

And while he circled, something suddenly caught his eye, something which warmed his blood once more. Climbing towards him, having come up through a gap in the clouds, were the Spads of his two comrades. Carn and Travis! They had found him at last. And as they swung in towards him and he mechanically got them into formation, both of them waved to him with incredulous joy. They could hardly believe that this was the same Spad they had seen zooming up with its wing in flames.

In perfect formation, the Three Mosquitoes pointed their noses towards the west, and, flying above the clouds, they droned homeward. Kirby's damaged wing was worse than he had thought, and the strain of flying kept weakening it more and more, but the Spad was a stout little ship, and it held out.

LATER, the trio stood before the C.O.'s desk in the headquarters shack. Outside, the rain was falling heavily, pelting the roof. The three men were spattered with mud, and Kirby's clothes were clinging to him. He was all in, tired and wet, but grinning cheerfully enough.

"Well, colonel," he said, and could not quite conceal his pride, "now we'd like to request that our temporary membership in C flight be ended. All right, sir?"

The grizzled old colonel smiled. "All right with me, but I guess the boys would like to have you fly with them on every patrol." His voice became gruff and rasping, as it always did when, he tried to give praise. "That was wonderful work, Kirby—and courageous. Your feat of bagging the Invisible Ace despite the bad weather conditions was truly remarkable."

"Despite the bad weather conditions?" Kirby echoed. "I'm afraid you've got that wrong, sir. Hell, if I had plugged that bird without the bad weather conditions, then,"—he nodded grimly—"then it sure would have been remarkable!"

