

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

SMASHED WINGS

by **RALPH OPPENHEIM**

Once again the “Three Mosquitoes,” with the famous Kirby leading them, go out on a daring mission. The enemy’s Zeppelin sheds had to be destroyed—But could it be done? And Kirby was flying an old plane!

THE FIFTEEN PLANES were moving straight toward the rising sun, three layers of Vs silhouetted against the glowing red sky. They moved slowly because of the five heavy and cumbersome bombing planes which comprised the lowest V and set the pace. It was a difficult pace for their escort of single-seaters: the tiny fighting planes above were like race-horses, tuned for breathless speed and straining to let go, yet forced to trudge along with ordinary dray-horses. But their speed and strength might lie demanded any moment now. There was no telling when they might be called upon to dash down and defend the low-flying bombers which made such easy prey for Boche scouts. So they remained overhead, seven planes forming the middle layer, and above these, high enough to skirt the lower cloud-rifts, the top flight composed of three planes.

These three planes of the top flight were piloted by the “Three Mosquitoes.” The C.O. had assigned the famous trio to the escort because he wanted to take every precaution possible. The enterprise was extremely dangerous, though simple. These bombers were to go across the lines to Staffletz, where, besides

an important railroad junction, there were some Zeppelin sheds. The railway was to be damaged as much as possible, and then the machines were to “lay their eggs” on the Zeppelin sheds. Only one of those sheds, the report ran, was occupied, but that one was the particular objective of the raid. The L 99X, resting from a stormy siege of raids on London, was here undergoing repairs. This was the latest model to have issued from the count’s plant at Friedrichshafen, and it had done more work singly than any other Zeppelin. In its last raid, over the crowded tenement district of London, a hundred non-combatants had been killed or wounded by its terrible acid-laden bombs. There was an angry demand for reprisal, but all attempts to get the dirigible had failed. Despite its bulk, it was amazingly elusive, and always escaped the anti-aircraft fire from the ground or the planes which sped up to give chase to it. It could throw off the guns’ range by hiding in the clouds, and it could outwit the airplanes by climbing to an altitude they could never reach.

But now it lay helpless, inactive, in a repair shed. Protected, to be sure, by plenty of artillery and planes, but if one bomb landed squarely it would be turned into a mass of twisted, smoking wreckage. The

German government would suffer a loss of nearly a million dollars, while the people in London would be enabled to breathe relievedly with the knowledge that a frightful menace had been removed. Such was the purpose of the raid. And the pilots who were participating in it knew that the Germans, as soon as they saw this purpose were going to make every effort to thwart it. There was not the slightest hope that the squadron would not be attacked before it reached its objective.

Thus the C.O. had decided to use the Three Mosquitoes, knowing that these ingenious flyers could do more than their share of defending the slow-moving bombers. They were given the top flight, because it was the most advantageous position: they could swoop way down on any prey. They flew in their usual formation—Kirby, their young commander, leading, with “Shorty” Carn on his right and the lanky Travis on his left. Yet the three planes did not make exactly the same picture as usual. In all their previous flights, no one could have had the slightest trouble discovering that these pilots were comrades, working together. Their three planes had been like triplets, alike in every detail except the numerals 1, 2, and 3, which distinguished one from the other. They had always flown their shining, flashing Spads side by side, and if one of them lost his plane he got another of the same type and model.

BUT this morning only the two planes on the opposite sides of the V were Spads. Kirby’s plane, while it was not an ungraceful machine, looked rather inconspicuous and drab in contrast to the other two. It was a Sopwith Camel, old model, and to those who had to fly them over there the mere mention of the machines will bring a feeling of wrath. The Camels had been excellent when less was known about the manufacture of safe and sound airplanes, but now they were looked upon as back numbers, which ought to be scrapped.

True, they could fly, they had good speed and climb, and they seemed quite graceful and efficient in comparison to the clumsy-looking D.H. Nine bombers below, but they had been constructed before real measures had been invented to stop airplanes from suddenly going into right-hand spins, or from falling apart in mid-air. A Camel was likely to perform one of these unpleasant tricks when under severe strain. Thus it was dangerous enough to fly one of them, and it was dangerous beyond words to engage it in the fancy

maneuvers of aerial combat. And thus the ship had become the brunt of the airman’s hatred and scorn; and scores of jokes, curses, and songs were made at Mr. Sopwith’s expense. There was one dirge which began:

*“Oh Mother, put out your golden star,
Your son’s gone up in a Sop! . . .”*

In short, if there was any chance of getting out of it, you shouldn’t fly a Camel.

Kirby realized this, realized it as he sat cooped up in the cramped cockpit—just big enough for a sizable man to squeeze himself into. Even so, you had to put your knees up to your stomach, and while it was easy to operate the high joy-stick, you had to perform a contortion to operate the rudder-bar. The butts of the two forward machine guns stuck right out at Kirby’s jaw, while if he leaned back his head banged against the gas tank.

Not built for comfort, he thought gloomily, and glanced sadly at the two long, slender Spads flying beside him—the men eased down in their spacious cockpits. And he cursed himself for a fool, told himself it was plain lunacy to fly a Camel when he could have flown a Spad, when, indeed, he was supposed to fly a Spad.

Yet, looking down at the middle layer of planes, he realized that those pilots had to share the hardship, too. They were all flying Camels. What right did he have to kick? In truth, it was for that very reason he was flying one himself, though now he cursed the altruistic impulse which had prompted him to do so.

The thing had developed slowly, starting back at the time the Camels were assigned to the squadron. Up to then the boys were all flying French Spads, and everyone was satisfied. But then headquarters suddenly took away the Spads and handed them to another squadron, explaining that the latter, being in a sector which was soon to see a major offensive, needed planes at once and needed good ones. The bereft pilots were told that other planes of the latest type would be sent as substitutes: America was shipping some over, and the British were bringing out a new model. Meanwhile, for a week or so, they could use some of the Camels which seemed to be so plentiful, perhaps because the British were washing them out of their own squadrons. The Camels came—and stayed. But the Three Mosquitoes, because of their record, because headquarters wanted to give them everything in equipment which might help them pile up their long string of Boche victims, were allowed to keep their Spads.

At first the rest of the men had accepted this in good grace. Then Kirby, after a terrific fight at overwhelming odds, had crashed his disabled plane on the airdrome field. Promptly a new Spad was given him. He crashed this one a week later, and his two comrades crashed theirs—all badly damaged by a barrage of A.A. fire from the ground. At once a fresh trio of Spads was brought in for them. The men began to show signs of resentment toward the three pilots. Words, bitter and vindictive, began to fall from angry lips. If there were enough Spads to keep the Three Mosquitoes supplied, why couldn't they all have them? Why should favoritism be shown? It wasn't fair. The feeling of hostility grew, became more and more open.

The climax was bound to come, and it had come last night. It was raining, and the air was dank and muggy. A gloom had settled over the big drome. Most of the men were gathered in the dimly-lit messhall, playing cards, talking, while the smoke from cigarettes and pipes rose in acrid layers and hung on the long, low ceiling. Nerves were taut, worn: fighting had been hard and bitter this week, and the men were thinking of the hazards they would have to face on the morrow.

Kirby's comrades, exhausted from the day's work, had turned in, but Kirby wasn't sleepy, so he strolled into the mess-hall to join the gathering. At his entrance the murmur of voices died abruptly, and he knew then that he had been the subject of their conversation. The men all seemed intent on their cards, or each other, but Kirby detected a hostile glance every now and then.

HE WAS in the center of the room now, for he had wanted to find some men who would make up a little poker game. Suddenly he felt acutely self-conscious, a lone actor on a stage being watched by a hostile audience. A flush spread across his face. He stood, looking around at the men.

"What's the idea, fellows?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. "Gosh, it makes a guy feel punk to see everyone down on him like this. What's the matter? Just tell me, so I can try to straighten it out. We've all got to stay on the best of terms—we've got to have a spirit of comradeship and good feeling if we want to do our work right."

Whereupon Captain Brown, youthful leader of A flight, moved forward in his chair. He had always been a staunch admirer of the Three Mosquitoes, and one of Kirby's best friends, but now his voice was bitter, edged with sarcasm: "It's easy to have a spirit of

comradeship and good feeling, captain, when you're the owner of a brand new Spad. Perhaps, if you had to fly one of those lousy Camels you'd feel a little different about matters."

For a second Kirby stiffened, fists clenched, and the men sat tense, apprehensive, expecting a fight. But then a look of pain came over the Mosquito's face.

"Pretty low of you to talk that way, captain," he said, deeply hurt. "I don't see why you have to take it out on us three just because we happen to have better planes. What have we to do with that? We're under orders same as you. We can't help it if headquarters gives us Spads and deprives you of them. We're as sore as you are that you have to fly Camels. It's rotten luck, but why blame us for it? Why?"

There was a silence. The men shifted. The rain beat on the low wooden roof, while in the distance rose the dull boom of artillery.

Then Kirby went on, with ever-increasing earnestness: "Why, I'd be willing to share the same boat with you fellows—take the hardships you have to take. I don't consider myself superior to you, and neither do my pals. We don't want any favoritism. We'd be perfectly willing to take the same medicine as you."

He paused again. Captain Brown gave a short, harsh laugh, almost a grunt: "You can afford to talk that way," he sneered. "It doesn't cost you anything."

Kirby's face turned crimson. He leaned over the table, his narrowed eyes fixed on those of the other officer.

"Just cut that out," he warned, and something in his voice brought a tinge of shame to Brown's features. "You know damn well I mean what I say, and I'm willing to prove it. In fact,"—there was a note of triumphant finality in his tone now—"I'm *going* to prove it. I'm going to take one of those damn little Camels and fly it through hell just to show you!"

He was glaring at them all now, glaring from over the table. There was challenge in his eyes. The men shifted again, this time uncomfortably.

Then the other captain, putting all the bitterness he had left into the thrust, snorted: "Yes, you would!"

It was like a cue for the others. Voices rose from different parts of the room, voices raised in unbelief, in scorn, in resentment.

"Aw, quit kidding!"

"Now I'll tell one."

"The hell you will!"

"Won't I?" Kirby asked, furiously, banging his fist on the table to make himself heard. "Well, just wait. I'll

get permission somehow and I'll take it up to-morrow. I'll put it through everything I've put a Spad through, and even if the damn thing falls from under me I'll bring it back and land it on the field. I want to show you guys I don't need any de luxe equipment to do my fighting, and that it isn't only the plane which makes a pilot!"

Bold words, to be sure, but the men knew now that Kirby meant them. He strode out, left them sitting awed, wide-eyed, marveling at his amazing nerve. And a look of admiration had supplanted the look of resentment in more than one pair of eyes.

Kirby went straight to the C.O., and made his request. The grizzled old colonel, seated at his desk in the field office, heard him out; then, in his characteristic, harsh manner, snapped: "You're crazy."

Kirby summoned all the power of eloquence he possessed to convince the C.O. that he was perfectly sane, and that his idea was logical. Slowly the C.O. began to weaken. As a matter of fact, he was more in favor of the idea than he was willing to admit: he saw in it a means of strengthening the falling morale of his men. Besides, he felt somewhat guilty about assigning the Three Mosquitoes to the bombing escort on the morrow: they were usually allowed to go out on their own, pick their own scraps and perform their own deeds. This was a rather tame job for them, and the C.O. felt he owed them some recompense for making them undertake it.

But outwardly he was still adamant in his refusal.

"It's ridiculous to take a Camel when you've got a nice Spad."

"But, sir," Kirby insisted, springing his one great trump, which he had been withholding for the climax of his plea, "didn't you tell the men they had no kick coming because Camels were as good as any other planes?"

The C.O. flushed, but then his eyes twinkled.

"Well, what the devil is a C.O. to tell his men? And anyway, I don't think a Camel's half as bad as they make it out to be."

"That's just the point," Kirby put in, triumphantly, "I want a chance to prove that. I'm sure the mem will feel better then."

The C.O. tapped his desk thoughtfully. Then, coming to a sudden decision, he rasped: "Well, go ahead—but I see where I put in a day of worry. Remember, you're to keep above Captain Brown's flight in that escort to-morrow—each of you can handle his own flight independently. But, for God's

sake, don't kill yourself in that Camel. I'm letting you fly one because there's nothing extraordinary you have to do: just stick to straight, conventional fighting." His tone was ominous. "No stunts, mind you!"

"No, sir," said Kirby.

HE DID not tell his comrades until the time for the take-off was on hand. And compared to handling them, bringing the C.O. over was child's play. Both of them laid into him.

"You get the weirdest ideas," said Shorty Carn, puffing away at his inseparable briar pipe for a last smoke before the take-off. "I wouldn't be surprised if you suddenly took it into your bead to take the Wright brothers' original bus and go out to give battle in it."

"I'd be game," laughed Kirby, calmly going on with his preparations.

"Don't be a fool, Travis said in his stern voice, as he adjusted his helmet "It's all right to take chances, but not unnecessary ones. Of course, it's tough the men have to fly Camels, but you must remember they don't go through the lunatic stunts we damn fools always pull off. You can't do it with a Camel."

"I can try."

And they could not stop him. Finally, they began to talk about taking Camels themselves, but Kirby, being commander, gleefully used his authority to prevent them. So, shaking their heads and scolding him bitterly, they surrendered, let him have his way.

At first he had difficulty with the new machine. He had done some work on Camels long ago, but after continuous flying with Spads, the controls and movement of the plane seemed unfamiliar and strange. His take-off was far from perfect, though he knew enough to safe-guard against the right-hand spin a Camel was tempted to fall into when it left the ground. In the air, as the whole party started off, he fell uneasy—his hand was not as smooth as usual. But slowly he became acquainted with the particular characteristics of his plane, and was less air-conscious.

Yet he remained far from his best form. That spirit of reckless dash and devil-may-care abandon was not with him to-day. He was cautious, and couldn't let himself go completely. And he was worried, for he knew that there was bound to be a showdown, when he must make good his words of last night by fighting with the same brilliance and precision that he had fought with in his Spad. He glanced down at the middle layer of Camels again, and his glance came to rest on the plane at the apex of the V, leading the flight.

This was Captain Brown's machine. The two men had not met since last night, perhaps because Brown was rather ashamed of his conduct and did not want to face Kirby. But no matter. . . .

They were passing over the brown-black, shell-torn Front now, and presently, as the red in the east spread into golden and the day began, they crossed the lines. And like an angry watchdog barks at trespassers, the anti-aircraft guns barked at these enemy planes which flew so smoothly and unwaveringly toward their objective, Shells began to burst behind the squadron with their peculiar, racking cough, and mushrooms of black smoke sprouted and stood fantastically in the sky. The pilots, however, like hardened burglars, were not bothered much by these threatening barks. They kept to their course, knowing that such pot shots at swiftly passing targets seldom scored.

Ten minutes more, and an observation balloon, silhouetted against the sun as it swung from its cable like a bloated bologna, came into view. At the sight of it Kirby's excitement mounted, his nerves tightened. For he knew that this balloon marked their goal. It was directly over the Zeppelin sheds, behind the railway, and was up there to be on the lookout for the enemy. Even now, as the planes moved in its direction, it began to slowly descend. They were pulling it down because it was too vulnerable a target. And, since this meant they had been sighted, Kirby knew an aerial attack was sure to come any moment.

Suddenly the D.H. Nine leading the lowest V wiggled its great wings, and the apex plane of the V above, Captain Brown's plane, promptly followed suit and wiggled vigorously. Kirby got the signal and waved to his men, then shook his own wings to show that he was ready. One and all, the three Vs dipped gracefully and went downward to a lower altitude—bombing range. They must be almost there now.

Kirby scanned the ground anxiously, and dimly made out the network of railway tracks which lay before them. He saw tiny, toy-like engines and cars, some crawling along, others resting. The planes slowed down, and were coming almost overhead of the junction. Kirby was ready, alert to everything around him. The squadron was to pass over these tracks, drop a good part of its cargo, and proceed to the sheds—the big long buildings which Kirby could now distinguish, too.

Several new batteries of anti-aircrafts opened up, and the bark of shells became as deafening as the roar of the engine in Kirby's ears. The air grew darker with

the smoke, shrapnel flew dangerously close. But it was still clear enough for perfect visibility. The planes had slowed down even more, and were almost directly over the tracks now. Kirby, looking down, watched.

SOMETHING black suddenly dropped out of the bomber in the lead and went spinning down, shrinking as it went through space. Kirby saw a mighty flash below, then a great puff of smoke. A few seconds later the slower-traveling sound of the concussion reached his ears—a dull thud. The puff of smoke cleared away, and left a white ring of twisted wreckage and torn-up ground. Instantly another missile went hurtling down from the first bomber, and this was followed by several more, as the other D.H. Nines got into range. Flashes and puffs were breaking out everywhere, and though he could not see clearly from this altitude, Kirby discovered that the damage was considerable. Tracks were torn asunder, a bomb fell right on a train and a car leaped into the air, falling in scattered debris.

A minute, and it was over—they were going for the sheds now, going straight for them. This was the real objective, and the shells from the A.A. guns got more and more threatening. The planes began to zig-zag to avoid them. And as they went on, they kept dropping their bombs. Nearer and nearer they drew to those six sheds, knowing that the center one housed the Zeppelin.

Then, suddenly, Kirby saw them coming—saw them as they appeared, as if by magic, out of the sun. He had been expecting to see them, had known they would come, and yet their sudden appearance startled him, made him stiffen involuntarily, jerked his nerves taut. There were two flights of them, one off to the right and the other off to the left of the squadron. Simultaneously, both groups wheeled to the left and right respectively and came swinging in toward the Americans. Kirby saw as they drew closer, that they were all Fokkers—those fast, efficient, fighting single-seaters against which a Camel looked so poor. His heart beat wildly. Eighteen of them—nine in each flight! Their goose was cooked!

Now, with the amazing co-ordination which seemed to prevail between the two German flights, both groups suddenly plunged into a long dive, speeding down on lines which would converge with the bombers below. Kirby still kept his men above, waiting with drawn breath, for he and his comrades were not to play their part yet. This, first cue was for

Captain Brown, and the latter acted at once. As soon as the Germans had gone into their dive, the middle V of American planes dived to intercept them. Down shot the three groups of planes, and the three oblique lines drew an inverted pyramid in the sky. Kirby kept waiting, and the strain of that tense moment gripped him more and more. Against odds like these, he would have to fight as he had never fought before, perform all the reckless tricks of the game. And he was flying a Camel!

The bombers were rolling clumsily now, trying to get out of the way as all the planes came right on top of them. Streaks of flame spat from the nose of every machine, and the observers flanked their guns around to ward off the attack. For a second, as they all came together and leveled off, there was utter confusion: but then the bunched-up mass of planes scattered and paired off, and it was a dog-fight.

This was Kirby's cue now. The moment had come for him and his men to swoop down, compensating their scant numbers by dropping right on the Germans and taking a few of them by surprise. He glanced at the two pilots on either side of him to see if they were ready. He knew at once that they were, even before they waved for him to proceed, for Shorty Carn had his usual fighting grin, while Travis' goggled face bore that stern, intent expression he always wore in combat. Kirby waited a second longer. Then his arm darted upward to give the signal, and the three planes plunged over as one.

And as he went screaming into that dive, thundering down to attack, Kirby forgot momentarily that he was in a rickety old Camel. The spirit of combat, the love of a good fight, rose within him once more, warmed his blood and sent the old thrill tingling through him. He was diving as he always dived, and his comrades were diving with him—he was aware of their flashing shadows at his skies. He leaned forward to his sights, his triggers—

Then the Camel began to shake from nose to tail, its wings vibrating as if they must fall off. And he remembered once more, remembered that it was folly to dive like this in such a plane. It would fall to pieces. He cursed, shouted out wild oaths at the machine, and at himself for taking it instead of his Spad. Why had he done the fool thing anyway?

He had to cut the motor and pull up a little to slow his dive. The two Spads went right past him, for they were going so fast they could not see what he was doing. As Kirby went down more cautiously, he saw the other two level off on top of those zooming,

swerving, flashing shapes, saw them send a Fokker hurtling down to earth.

A SECOND later he was in the fight himself, firing as he came down on a Fokker's tail. The German half-rolled beneath him and did a sharp bank. Kirby banked, too, but the Camel did not respond so readily, and he was forced to overshoot. A feeling of chagrin seized him. What a rotten machine! He couldn't maneuver with the damn thing. Now the German was whipping around to get on His tail, and it was his turn to half-roll.

Again he cursed the sluggishness of the Camel, for he was too slow once more. Tracer bullets began to beat a tattoo on his tail-fins, some of them, hissing past his ears. He started to Immelmann, but was forced on the outside arc by the German pilot, who kept crowding him. He was losing altitude, and the more his machine bungled its maneuvers, the less confidence he had in his ability to handle it. He was in a tight predicament, being beaten down by the swift little Fokker.

Then Shorty Carn's Spad came swooping down, and soon drew the German away. Kirby breathed more freely, but at the same time felt a sense of bitter humiliation. All those other pilots were flying Camels, and seemed to be holding their own against the Germans, yet here he was fighting like a rookie. He must do better!

He was turning now, and suddenly a Camel flashed by above him with a Fokker in hot pursuit, flame spitting from its nose. One glance told Kirby the Camel was Captain Brown's, and at once he pulled back his stick and sped up to that officer's assistance.

He came right up on the Fokker's tail, and at an opportune time, for the German was getting his range closer to the Camel. Kirby let go with both guns, poured out two streams of lead. The German rolled, and Captain Brown began to bank around. Kirby caught the pilot's eye and waved to him; Brown waved back eagerly, a smile on his goggled face. Kirby maneuvered again then to get on the Fokker's tail, but he always kept forgetting to gauge his time, forgetting that a Camel couldn't do those break-neck turns and twists that a Spad did. Before he had his plane under control again. Brown had swung around on the German and fired a few bursts. A flame darted out from the Fokker and went licking along its fuselage as the machine went spinning slowly down. Brown waved to Kirby again as he sped away.

Despair came over Kirby then. He had done nothing so far, and had lost a man after ranging him, while Captain Brown had shot him down with accurate precision. It wasn't that Kirby didn't know how to fly a Camel: it was simply that he could not discard a habit of long standing. He couldn't forget he wasn't in a Spad.

He plunged into the thick of it, growing desperate. The fight was getting fiercer and closer every second, but it was a losing fight for the Americans. The Germans, with their superior numbers and planes, were forcing the squadron further and further back toward their lines, away from the sheds. Several times bombers tried to slip through that wall of Boche planes, but they were too slow, and were always caught.

Kirby was with his comrades now, helping them force Fokkers into disadvantageous positions, though he himself had not scored as yet. He began to think of the purpose of the raid—the Zeppelin. If only one of those bombers could sneak off, climb way up, and slip past high above the fight until it could get over the shed, the object could be accomplished. But he knew this was impossible, since the bombers could not make much altitude. Only a single-seater could climb way up and over like that. And a single-seater was equipped solely with two tracer-spitting guns and a few tiny, close-range bombs; thus it was inadequate for any serious bombing work.

Yet, if a single-seater could go right down on top of the shed, get within a couple of hundred feet of it—Kirby's eyes began to gleam. The thought intrigued him, set him to conjecturing. Impossible perhaps, and to all appearances, certain death, but what a stunt it would be! Just the kind of a stunt that would redeem him, show the others that he meant what he said about taking a Camel through hell.

The more he thought of it, the more flaws he saw; but, paradoxically, the more impractical it all seemed the more tempted was he to try it. He called himself a jackass, and tried to forget the idea by throwing himself into the task in hand, maneuvering to trap a Fokker for Travis. No use starting any such fool tricks, he reasoned; he'd do better to get one of these Boche planes right here, to do the work which had been cut out for him.

But against this reasoning, against all common sense and logic, was a strange, exhilarating glow that seemed to burn in his breast, surging until it enveloped him completely. It was a feeling which he could not resist, a feeling to which his whole nature responded.

It was the desire for reckless adventure, the youthful lust for deeds of heroism and daring. He had lost it for awhile, due to his worry about the Camel, but now it had returned once more, stronger and more overwhelming than ever.

"Damn it all!" he burst out. "I'll take a shot at it!"

Once his decision was made, he stuck to it—for such was his nature. Leaving his comrades engaged with one of the German planes, which they were driving down, he banked around and opened his throttle wide. Out he raced, straight in the direction of the Allied lines, as if in retreat; and he noted with satisfaction that he wasn't being followed. Swiftly the gap between himself and those fighting planes grew wider, until, looking back over his shoulder, he saw them all fade into distant specks which swarmed and danced, glinting as the sunlight struck them. He began to feel a sense of loneliness as he moved further and farther from human company, and was once more painfully conscious of the little, rickety, crampy plane he was flying. But he did not waver.

AS SOON as he felt certain that they could no longer see him, he pulled back his stick and went into a steep climb, went roaring up toward the few but heavy clouds which patched the blue sky. Up . . . up . . . up . . . Finger-like cloud-wisps caressed his roaring plane, and the mist closed in around him, cold and damp and fiercely penetrating. Then he was out in the clear, infinite regions above, and was climbing on through the ever-thinning air. He wanted to go as high as he dared, for he must get back as far as the sheds without being discovered. The clouds would help, and extreme height would do the rest.

So he kept climbing, until, the Camel's old rotary engine sputtered in protest, and his own lungs labored as oxygen grew scant. Then at last, when he had left the clouds floating like pieces of cotton below him, he leveled off, and was going back. Again he was prey to that awful feeling of loneliness, for up here was solitude in its most desolate sense, a vast, limitless dome of pure blue, and miles of space down to the blurred earth which lay far beneath the clouds.

It relieved him to pass over those other planes again, though they were almost two miles below him, almost seemed to be on the ground itself. But the relief did not last, for he saw now that the Americans were fleeing, heading back for their own lines in a confusedly organized flight, with the Germans in hot pursuit. The two tiny planes in the rear, he knew, were

his comrades, and the sight of them almost made him change his mind. He longed to go down and join them, feel them flying at his sides again.

But he urged his sluggish plane onward, kept going toward his objective. He had the ship under much better control now, for he was getting used to its ways, learning its tricks. A little further, and he was over those sheds, though he could scarcely pick them out way down there. But now that he was here he could go lower; he had worked over to the place, and it didn't matter as much if they saw him now—they must see him soon anyway. He swept down until he brushed the cloud-tops, until the blurred earth became distinct once more, like a motion picture coming into clear focus, and he could see the six sheds plainly—the long, peculiar buildings which were all roof, their sides sloping from the ground like the sides of a tent. And Kirby knew that the biggest shed, the longest and highest one, housed the Zeppelin. He maneuvered to a position over it, way up above, and then, despite his desire to plunge right in and get the thing over with, he paused perplexed.

He knew that in order to do the trick he had to go down slowly, carefully, maneuvering to get his range. But he saw now that this was absolutely out of the question. There was a multitude of guns down there—guns trained on the sky: A.A.s, pom-poms, and machine guns. They could send up a barrage that would blow any plane coming into its midst to smithereens. Once down there, Kirby figured he might be able to zoom out before they got him—but how to get down?

He racked his brains, but could find no answer to the question. And then, hopelessly, he began to realize that he couldn't do the trick, that it was physically impossible. Fool that he was, he should have considered this unsurmountable obstacle. What was the matter with him, getting such wild, ridiculous ideas? And with a Camel to fly!

He shook his head in mingled disgust and bitterness. He had to give up, and he hated to give up after his poor showing. He glanced down behind him, and found that the rest of the planes were gone altogether. He must go back now, too, before some enemy ships came and shot him to ribbons.

Yet, some stubborn resistance within him refused to surrender completely. He began to circle around up here, keeping himself concealed above a large cloud over whose edge he could get a clear view of the sheds below. Vainly, he kept seeking for an inspiration. And as he circled, he saw something happening on

the ground below. A big, gray-brown bag was slowly rising—not far from the Zeppelin shed. It was the observation balloon. They were him putting it up again, now that the planes were gone. They had not seen Kirby. He watched it rise slowly, swinging with the wind, and he smiled, thinking that at least he would get something for his trouble. It was no feat nowadays to bag a captive balloon, but it was better than nothing. He waited patiently. When it was high enough he would plunge on it. The guns below would not dare shoot at him as he came down, on top of the bag, because by so doing they would doubtless hit their own balloon. He would use it as a shield, and then bust the shield apart. It—

HE STOPPED short, his very blood tingling with a strange elation. Like a thunderbolt, the longed-for inspiration had come. Why, of course! The smile on his face spread, grew into a triumphant grin. What was to prevent him from using that balloon as a shield and going all the way down to the Shed? Of course, it might not work—in which case he was a gonner—but suppose it did work, suppose his bluff succeeded?

He could hardly wait until the balloon reached its full height. Yet, when the bag actually came to a halt and hung serenely still, he hesitated. He was like a high-diver, staring way down at the infinitesimal tank below, hesitating to let go. It was that awful moment before taking the reckless plunge, when the danger looms up with terrific vividness, and common sense and the natural instinct of self-preservation cry “No!”

But this was merely a wave which swept over him, overwhelming while it lasted, but soon gone. And before a second wave came, before he had time to change his mind, he seized the joystick in a sort of frenzied grip and plunged it forward.

Down he went through the edge of the cloud, damning the shrieking protest of his trembling Camel, dropping like a plummet on the gray-brown hulk which loomed up to meet him. Closer and closer he drew to the bag.

The Germans on the ground saw him coming, and naturally assumed that he was after the balloon. They credited him with too much sense to suspect his true intent. Frantically they rushed to the cable, and started to pull the sausage down. It began to descend, gathering slight speed as the observers in the basket let out gas.

The Camel, however, dropped so much faster that it was soon right on top of the bag, and the Germans

looked on in helpless resignation, expecting to see the end. But, to their utter astonishment, they saw the tiny plane, which looked like a real Mosquito in comparison with the monstrous sausage, deliberately swerve out of firing position and, pulling up from its dive, continue downwards in a slow, wide spiral right around the balloon! Around Kirby went, feeling his way cautiously, and taking it slowly, painfully. He hugged that gray-brown fabric wall at his side, kept as close to it as he dared. At times it would swish outward toward him, threatening to touch his ship and bring it to destruction, and he would bank hastily, abruptly, only to swerve inward again with the realization that they'd shoot him to bits if he stayed out from the bag. It required every atom of his skill, a perfect coordination of eye and muscle, to guide his tiny inferior plane in this strange and most breathless maneuver.

The Germans, absolutely dumbfounded by the sight which met their eyes, kept pulling the balloon down, clinging to the only shred of logic left them—that they must save the sausage. But Kirby kept coming down, too. Now he was getting underneath the bag, and the frantic, white-faced observers in the basket were trying to aim their machine guns at him. He thumbed his nose at them as he circled them, laughed outright. And he continued to spiral down around the cable, treating his Camel how with all the tenderness of a toother.

Now he saw men rushing all over the field below, rushing in and out of buildings, waving at one another and constantly pointing upward at the amazing spectacle above. A battery of pom-poms began to lift their noses, until Kirby saw that they were pointed straight at him, their muzzles following him around. The fact that they were consequently pointed at the underpart of the balloon too did not comfort him very much. He knew the stem Teutonic code which sometimes regulated such things. It was more than possible, that the Germans, in order to save their Zeppelin, would sacrifice the men in the balloon. Kirby had realized that they would have instantly sacrificed the balloon itself had the men been able to get out. But he had figured on that, and knew that they would not dare to jump with a plane flying around that would cut them to bits as they parachuted down.

The thought that the Germans might take such a measure was enough to keep him in terrific nerve-racking suspense, fill him with a desperate desire to hurry. Yet he had to go on with painful slowness, or everything would be lost.

Four hundred feet. . . A couple of hundred more and he would have to dash out from under shelter of the balloon and make a bee-line for the shed, which lay close at hand. His guns were loaded, his two small bombs ready to be released. . . .

Three hundred and fifty feet, the altimeter read as he came around again. If he could only get at his target, he might be able to zoom right out. Of course he could not use the balloon, for it would be down by that time.

Every gun in the place was aimed at him now, as if awaiting the signal to open fire. He gritted his teeth, and went on. There was a sudden explosion off to his right, and he saw a shell bursting. They were trying to fire at him from an angle, under and past the balloon. But they couldn't, and surely they would get desperate and take the extreme measure soon. The altimeter needle seemed to move as slowly as the hand of a clock. God, would he never get there?

Two hundred and fifty feet. . . His face was covered with sweat, his nerves strained almost to the breaking point. Two hundred and twenty. . . Two hundred and ten. . . His whole body tensed for the great moment, one hand gripped the joy-stick, while the other was on the throttle, ready to transfer to the guns and then to the bomb-release. There was a second of final hesitation. Then, with savage abandon, he opened the throttle wide, and the motor gave a mighty blast.

THE men on the ground stood rooted to the spot as they saw the Camel shoot out from under the balloon as if shot by a cannon. In a dash, before their dazed minds had time to function, before they could open up their guns, the plane was swooping over the long shed. Two streaks of flame trembled in the air as its guns poured out their incendiary tracer, and then, as the machine swept right up for a breakneck zoom, two blurred shapes dropped from it, hit a sloping side of the shed, and burst with terrific detonations, scattering smoke and shrapnel.

And even as the German guns cut loose, tried to ferret out and slaughter the impudent flyer, small flames danced along the side of the shed. A second later the whole building was belching forth a tremendous inferno of fire and black smoke as the Zeppelin within, caught, and burned like a box of matches.

Kirby had no time to watch the completion of his work—though he had made sure it was quite successful. He was zooming up at all the speed the shaking Camel could make, straining the engine. It

was his only chance. Even now shells were bursting all around him, bullets were whistling past his ears. But his zoom for freedom had been so swift the Germans could-scarcely follow it with their guns, and before they could range him for the concentrated barrage that must certainly blow him to smithereens, he was far up in the sky, speeding away in a blaze of triumph.

Taking a roundabout course and flying high, to avoid enemy planes, he soon neared his drome once more. He was in high spirits, well satisfied with his day's work and he even felt well-disposed toward his plane, for it had certainly behaved remarkably. He had won his point, he knew. Now to land and confront those men again.

He nosed his ship down into the wind, started to cut the motor. And at that moment the whole plane gave a mighty lurch, and to his blank astonishment Kirby saw parts of its engine flying outwards. The propeller, after a few slow revolutions, came to a stop!

Kirby groaned. So the damned machine had to go bust after all! A couple of cylinders had exploded! If it hadn't been so grimly dangerous, it would have been a hilarious joke. After going through that hell without a scratch, to have the plane crack up right above the drome!

For a few seconds the machine continued to lurch and flounder, and he was struggling to get it under control. Then, to his horror, the right wing nosed over and down—and he was hurtling through space in a breathless, fatal right-hand spin, the awful trick of the Camels. The flying wires sang in the gagging rush of wind which whipped up at the plane, so powerfully that it tore Kirby's helmet and goggles right off. Down he went, faster and with ever-increasing fury.

The earth seemed to jump up to meet him, yet he kept struggling to get the plane out of the spin. Only one thought possessed him, filled him with desperate energy and determination. It was the thought that he must not let his glorious triumph come to a disastrous, hideous close. He must not die like this, when he had been spared from those other awful perils.

The men on the field were watching in anguished suspense now, watching what they thought must inevitably be a fatal crash. Kirby was jerking the stick back, putting it against his breast with a force that pained him. But the plane did not respond. He cursed, and then he began to sob wildly, convulsively, like a helpless child. Still he fought to the last ditch.

He kept manipulating the dead controls, always hoping that they'd finally take. But when he saw the

earth right under him, saw that he was plunging into it head-on, he was ready to give up. He was just about to let go and throw his arms across his face to protect himself as best he could, when, in a last desperate pull, the plane suddenly yielded and, groaning and floundering, came out of the spin. His hopes revived, Kirby continued to work frantically. He was too close to make any sort of landing, but he managed, to keep the nose up—to prevent the fatal crash. There was a dull but violent impact, then a sound of ripping and groaning as his whole undercarriage buckled and broke off, and the fuselage slid down with a lurch that threw him back against the gas tank, almost knocking him senseless.

THE men on the field came rushing up to the scene, crowding around. Kirby crawled out of the ruined plane and was on his feet before they reached him. Dazedly, he lit a cigarette, and stood staring at the wreck.

"The damned—Camel!" he muttered stupidly.

Then he saw his two comrade's anxious faces before him, and he grinned.

"For God's sake!" Shorty Carn burst out excitedly. "How the hell did you get out if it? I thought you were done for!"

Kirby's grin widened, as he became himself once more.

"Guess this was something like the last straw which broke the Camel's back. You know,"—he was looking at the other pilots now, and his voice was a trifle boastful—"I've taken this old ship through a good deal of trouble . . ."

"We know you have." Travts put in sternly, "And you had us on pins and needles when we heard you had appointed yourself a committee of one to carry on that bomb raid. I admit it was a stunt, but—"

"You bet your sweet life it was!" Captain Brown suddenly exclaimed, in a slightly husky voice. "And—damn it, captain—I was a fool last night. You do deserve better planes than the rest of us; I knew it then and I know it better now." He glanced around at the men. "Guess we all feel that way now." And the men chorused their affirmatives.

"Well," said Kirby, who had listened embarrassedly to this outburst. "I don't blame you guys for getting sore. Those Camels are a pain in the neck!"

"What's that?" rasped a hard voice, and all the men saluted as the C.O. appeared on the scene and stepped up to Kirby. "What you doing? Trying to destroy

my men's moral? Why, do you know what I've been thinking?" he went on, with deep gravity. "I've been thinking you've handled a Camel so well, what with pulling off that stunt you did, that you ought to fly one instead of a Spad. Certainly if it inspires you like that—"

Kirby flushed, and looked uncomfortable.

"But, sir—" he began.

"As a matter of fact,"—the C.O. seemed to be enjoying himself—"we are taking away your Spad.

"And we're taking your pals' Spads, too."

Kirby could control himself no longer. "But damn it, sir, what the hell's the idea of that?"

The men shifted, expecting a barrage from their commanding officer, but the C.O. merely grinned mischievously.

"You see, we're getting some new English planes of the latest type—and believe me, they can fly circles around any bus in existence.

"The whole squadron will get them—to-morrow morning!"

He evidently expected cheers to ring out, for he paused dramatically. But to his surprise, the men showed no signs of joy.

"Why the devil can't they let us keep our Spads?" Kirby was lamenting to his comrades, while Captain Brown groaned. "And just when we get used to these damn Camels, what do they do but bring along some new-fangled bus that'll probably break our necks!"

