

The **THREE** **WASPS**™



DANGEROUS BUSINESS

by **D. CAMPBELL**

Death rumbled in the guns of the waiting German infantry—but death meant nothing to Gary. He swooped down on the scene and rode his quarry to the kill!

THE C.O.'S VOICE WAS GRIM: "It's a most perilous assignment," he told Gary, who stood before his desk in the headquarters shack. "One of the most dangerous jobs I've ever asked you to do. And you must do it alone—without the usual company of your two comrades. The gaff will be pretty stiff. Now what do you say?"

Gary, famous leader of the "Three Wasps," met the cold gaze unflinchingly. Outside, on the field, airplane engines were choking and barking as they warmed up in the chill dawn.

"I'll try anything once!" the Wasp said cheerfully. "But just what is it all about, sir?"

"The facts are simple enough," the grizzled old colonel began. Then, furtively, he glanced about the room as if to make certain that no one was listening. When he spoke again his voice was lower, almost a whisper.

"Understand that what I tell you now is strictly confidential—intelligence stuff. Due to the extreme vigilance of the German intelligence corps lately our spies, have found it next to impossible to return across

the lines from Germany. They can get into Boche territory easily enough, but they can't seem to get out. This has made it difficult for us to get information, and just now we need information badly, for our present offensive.

"Now one of our agents has worked out a desperate measure. Before leaving for German territory, he agreed with intelligence headquarters that, if he saw that his chances of getting back were hopeless, he would write out his information and place it in a certain secret spot where it might be possible for us to get it.

"The idea was that our drive would carry us beyond that spot within a couple of days. But our drive has been badly checked, and we haven't got near the place. Evidently, according to other sources, the man succeeded in getting his information all right—most momentous information revealing the exact position of the Germans in this sector, and their plans. But he hasn't come back. And we must assume that he left the message in the spot agreed upon—drive or no drive."

He paused, cleared his throat, and tapped the table-top with nervous fingers. Then, suddenly he rasped

out: "Gary, that information must be brought before noon to-day. It's now 4:35. That leaves less than eight hours. We've got to have it. Understand?"

The Wasp nodded slowly. "Yes, sir." His voice was calm and determined. "I get the point. Now where is it?"

The C.O. hastily pulled out a roll-map from an inside pocket. He laid it on the desk and pointed out a red square.

"This," he stated, "is field 23, and is fifteen miles across the lines. Intelligence picked it out carefully when they sent the spy over. It's fairly decent for landing purposes, and, as far as we know, is in a vicinity infrequently occupied by the Germans.

There's a chance—a slight chance at least—that a lone plane can get through unnoticed, land there for a few minutes, and then break away. That's why you must go alone. If your comrades accompanied you, the three planes would surely be spotted in the air, and you'd be delayed, possibly stopped, by enemy aircraft. Get the point?"

"Clearly," was Gary's reply. Yet he knew that he would much rather have his two comrades with him. He liked to play the lone eagle at times, but this spy stuff was different.

The C.O.'s voice broke in on his thoughts. The colonel's finger was again pointing to the red square on the map. And again he was speaking in a tense whisper.

"On the north side of Field 23 is a wood. Leading into it is a narrow dirt path which you will have no trouble in finding. Follow this path for a few yards, counting the trees on the right. The fifth tree on the right side of the path is the one you want. Its trunk forks out in two great branches. In the crotch of that fork, covered with dirt and pieces of bark, is an oil-cloth-covered packet. And that packet," his voice rose eagerly "is what we want."

He picked up the map, held it out. "You can take this with you, but under no circumstances let the Germans get it in their hands."

Silently Gary took the map, studied it for a few seconds, then rolled it and stuffed it under his overalls.

A troubled frown came over the C.O.'s face. "Of course," he said sternly, "if you see any signs of Germans down there, or in the sky, you'll have to forget the idea. Those are orders, and don't forget them. Simply do the best you can."

He glanced at his watch and jumped up from his desk. "We mustn't take up any more time. Every second counts."

FIVE MINUTES later Gary stood with his two comrades on the tarmac, impatiently watching his mechanics revving up his Spad. The sun was still a red disk behind the camouflaged hangars, and the planes of the dawn patrol were sweeping into the air, one after another.

Both of Gary's comrades seemed considerably disturbed.

"Hell," drawled the lanky Cooper, oldest and wisest of the trio, "I don't see why you can't tell us what you're going to do."

"I told you I couldn't," replied Gary with slight irritation. "It's nothing serious. So don't worry."

"I don't like these special secret missions," confessed "Shorty" Keen, puffing nervously on his briar pipe.

"I wish the Old Man would quit picking on you."

"Aw, I'll be back in a couple of hours," Gary assured him. "And then we'll all go up on our usual—"

"Come on, captain." The rasping voice of the C.O. suddenly broke in.

The colonel had reappeared on the scene, and he looked worried. He almost barked. "Your ship's ready! Hop into it and be off!"

"Right!" Gary shouted. He turned to his comrades. "So long, fellows! See you later!"

"So long!" they responded, as he climbed into the plane.

Gary settled down in the cockpit, tinkered with the controls for a moment, tried out the throttle. Then he fastened the safety-belt, and pulled down his goggles.

The C.O. came up beside the fuselage, shouted to him above the roar of the engine: "Good luck! Don't take too many chances!"

Shorty and Cooper yelled something he could not hear at all. He waved to them reassuringly, then signaled the mechanics, who promptly jerked the chocks from in front of the Spad's wheels.

With a roar the slender little plane moved forward, bounded out across the field. Looking back Gary saw the C.O. and his comrades staring after him.

Then the Spad's wheels whisked off the ground, and gracefully Gary got into the air. He climbed his ship gently through the morning haze. Up, up, up, until, a mile from the earth, he leveled off in the clearer regions of the sky and banked to the east.

He was off! He glanced at his wrist-watch—ten of five. He had seven hours and ten minutes left to carry out his task.

The Wasp's lips drew up into a tight little line. He unrolled the map, and hung it on his dashboard. All

set now! With his motor roaring mightily, and his propeller churning the slight mist which drifted in the sky, he flew straight towards his objective.

Scarcely ten minutes after Gary's departure, the C.O. burst out of his shack and went rushing across the field. Straight to the tarmac he dashed, where he found Keen and Cooper preparing their planes for flight. One look at their superior officer, and the two **Mosquitoes** knew that he had some frightful news about Gary.

They stood, faces drawn and pale, waiting for the C.O. to speak. The colonel was panting, had to catch his breath.

"MEN!" HE BLURTED, I've just gotten a wire from intelligence. Gary is going to sure death unless you act at once. He's to land on a field across the lines. The Germans have learned that we've sent a plane there, and they're laying for it—troops on the ground.

"They're going to let him get out of the plane, and find a certain message which is concealed there, and for which they've searched in vain. As soon as he takes the message, they'll capture him, wrest the information, and deal with him as promptly as they've been dealing with all spies lately."

He stopped, fumbled in his pockets. Cooper stood perfectly still, frozen. But not Keen. The little man, eyes wild, clutched the C.O.'s arm convulsively, and shouted with frantic anguish, ignoring his rank.

"Where is he? For God's sake, don't let's stand here wasting time! Give us the course!"

The C.O. finally found the roll map. "You'll find the course charted out on this. Don't look at it now. One of you take it and lead the way!"

"Yes, yes!" Cooper snapped, seizing the map and rushing for the machine. Keen stumbled over to his, and hoisted himself in with wild haste.

"Hurry!" the C.O. yelled, as the engines roared thunderously. "Full throttle! You must catch him!"

Cooper got off first. His Spad roared across the field like a streak, swept into the air and zoomed. Close on his tail came Keen. Cooper, letting his plane out to the last notch, unfurled the map, glanced at it hastily, and set the course.

Hell-bent, smoke pouring from their exhaust stacks, the two ships raced through the sky.

Meanwhile Gary was flying at full speed. He had already crossed the lines, and had come through a storm of harmless but annoying anti-aircraft fire. Now, at full throttle, he continued on his course.

Every second brought him nearer.

Why was he going so fast anyhow? There was plenty of time. It was only two minutes past five, with the sun just getting bright.

He shoved the throttle down a few notches, and the roar of the motor lowered to a more steady drone. Slower now. Sailing through the ever-brightening sky. That was better.

But the continued slowness began to give him more time to think. He became worried. Hell, it would be better to hurry, to get the damn thing over with. He would! He'd go as fast as he could! Determinedly he pulled out the throttle wide again.

Once more the motor burst into a deafening roar. The Spad shot forward, cleaving the air like a dart.

But things move fast in the air. During the brief period when Gary had slowed down, his two comrades had begun to gain on him.

On they rushed, their two planes lurching, shaking, as if the terrific strain must break them to pieces. Their faces were grim and set now, their eyes peered through their goggles, straining to catch a glimpse of a plane in the sky ahead.

Now Gary knew that he was getting closer to his objective. A road had just appeared on the earth below, a tiny winding ribbon of brown. He must follow it. He ruddered over, kept it swimming beneath him, raced on.

Presently, in the distance ahead, he saw a blurred patch of green looming towards him. The forest!

And on the other side of the forest, he knew, was Field 23! Getting there now, getting there! Again he franked slightly to keep his course.

AT THAT VERY moment Cooper spotted him! Frantically, he signaled Keen, who responded with equal excitement. They must attract Gary's attention, somehow.

Cooper fumbled for his Very pistol—got it out of his teddy-bear. It was loaded with orange rockets—a special color. It was the color used exclusively by the Three Wasps for the purpose of identifying themselves to each other.

Carefully, Cooper held the pistol in the air, pulled the trigger. The orange rocket zipped upward through the sky. Cooper waited, watching the distant speck anxiously. Then he shook his head. No, Gary couldn't have caught the signal.

The speck ahead moved on. Furiously, Cooper and Shorty redoubled their efforts to get more speed out

of their ships. Again the eldest **Mosquito** fired a rocket, determined to keep sending them up until Gary saw them.

But Gary was now concentrating all his attention on the landmarks below, and the map on his dashboard. He must make no mistakes. He rushed on, and presently he was sweeping over the forest.

Damn, how quickly those green-tops were receding! He would be on the other side in just a couple of minutes. Almost there!

He began to strain his eyes for signs of Field 23. At first he could not see anything; but then, dimly, he picked out a lighter-colored, oblong patch, surrounded by trees and shrubbery.

His heart jumped. He knew that he was there!

Forcing himself to remain cool, he began to work out his course of action, plan his landing. Better start going down now, so that, by the time he came over that field, he would be low enough to swoop right down into the wind.

Gently, he started to shove the joystick forward. Then he paused, and instinctively looked about once more to make sure that no enemy planes were at hand. He squinted up at the sun, put a thumb to his eye. Nothing there. He jerked his head and looked behind him.

Then he stiffened.

Advancing high in the western sky, coming straight towards him, were two tiny specks. On they moved, glinting in the growing sunlight.

Were they Jerries?

He broke off, starting with incredulous amazement. An orange light suddenly popped from one of those shapes, went streaking across the sky. An orange Very light! Why, that could only mean one thing!

A furious oath broke from Gary. "The Damn fools!" he muttered. "Following me! Playing nurse-maids as usual!"

His first impulse was simply to ignore them, to go right on down and do his work as if they weren't there at all. After all, they were still miles away, and by the time they got to him he might have his task accomplished.

During these seconds, while he watched those planes back there, he had mechanically been guiding his own ship straight ahead, continuing to speed over the forest.

Now, with a start, he saw that he was almost directly over that field! It was looming right below and in front of him. It would take him a moment to get down there!

Again his hand started to shove the stick forward. But again he paused, and shook his head. No, it would be foolish to just ignore them and go ahead. For their presence hereabouts might betray him. If the Germans saw them hovering around, they would get suspicious. The C.O. was right. A lone plane might get through unnoticed. But three planes, even two, had little chance of escaping detection.

Keen and Cooper, of course, had no idea that Gary had seen them. Both men were half frantic, and were doing everything in their power to catch their leader's attention. Cooper had already run out of rockets, and now Keen was shooting them off. Both saw that no matter how fast they went, they could no longer catch up to Gary if he were going to land. So they zigzagged, rolled, zoomed and dived, performing maneuvers as only the Three Wasps could perform them.

Gary saw that succession of rockets, saw those two specks gyrating about like insects in play. A feeling of bewildered puzzlement came over him. What in hell were those two guys up to? Certainly they were either plumb crazy, or were trying damn hard to attract his attention.

Well, regardless of everything, he must get them out of here so he'd have the sky and Field 23 to himself. He decided to turn and go to them, shoo them away.

Quickly, he banked vertically, straightened out, and went racing back over the forest, racing towards those two specks. Keen and Cooper, with relief, also straightened out, and reopened their throttles.

Slowly the three planes moved together on converging lines. The specks ahead of Gary began to grow, loom into shape and color. On they came, closer and closer, rocking as they sped through the air.

THE THREE met about two miles from Field 23. At once, Keen and Cooper swung in on either side of Gary, pulling so close that their wings almost touched his. The three cockpits were side by side, and Gary could look across at both his comrades. Both men commenced waving desperately, using every signal they knew.

Gary, glancing from one to the other, was confused. He shook his head questioningly. This went on for several seconds, and then Gary decided to watch only Cooper.

The eldest Wasp worked like a madman to convey his message. He pointed to the ground, shook his head, made pantomimes of slitting his throat. But Gary, little dreaming that they had anything to tell

him concerning his work on Field 23, could not understand.

He shook his head again and again. Cooper, his features drawn taut, began anew.

But Gary did not even see him this time. For at that moment he saw something that brought a frantic shout from him.

Diving out of the sun, swooping down with breathless fury, were four shining Pfaltz pursuit planes! They had caught the trio unawares, had maneuvered into position while the Three Wasps were preoccupied with their signals. And now, before Gary and his men had time to pull out, they were upon the three Spads.

The air above was shattered by the shrill, staccato clatter of machine-guns. The Germans had opened up; red flames were streaking from the noses of their ships. The smoky, zigzag lines of tracer bullets began to pencil the air on all sides of the **Mosquitoes**. A few shots went ticking through their fuselages, drilled holes in their wings.

In a flash, Gary became the commander, the leader of his men. He waved his arm, signaled his two comrades to pull up. They obeyed at once.

The three Spads spread to receive the attack, doing half-rolls to throw off the Germans' sights. The Wasps leaned to their own sights, and placed their fingers on their stick-triggers. Their guns blazed defiantly as the Germans, coming out of their dives, slithered in and out among them.

Then it was dog-fight, a deadly mixup of swirling, circling ships which sought to down one another.

The three Wasps could fight. Enraged by the surprise attack, they turned and charged their attackers with a vengeance. Like winged furies they whipped about, blazing away at every enemy in sight.

Gary, banking, saw a Pfaltz streaking by close overhead; so close that he could clearly distinguish the black crosses on its wings. He pulled back his stick and zoomed breathlessly.

And as he zoomed, it struck him that perhaps this was the gist of his comrades' signals. They had been trying to tell him that Jerry planes were lurking about, and that he was likely to be attacked. Yes, that must be it! Well, they'd settle this quartet!

Cursing savagely, he opened up both guns on the streaking Pfaltz above. The German half-rolled, tried to nose down for Gary; but the **Mosquito** had already shot up past him, and was Immelmanning to swoop for his tail.

The Spad roared down guns blazing. The Pfaltz

veered, and staggered. Then it nosed over and went fluttering earthward. Gary had scored!

Three of them left now. Three of them, but Keen had already badly damaged one. With a crippled motor it was staggering about uncertainly. Really only two to combat. A cinch! Waving to his comrades, Gary hurled his Spad towards one of those two.

Then a thought struck him, filled him with sudden alarm. This dogfight might attract attention, might attract more Jerry planes. And if any more came—if, even, these three held out, Gary would never be able to go down to Field 23 and land. He'd fail to get that packet, and the dope was needed before noon.

It took him only a few seconds to reach his decision. He saw that his two comrades would have no trouble holding off these three Pfaltz planes, perhaps even downing them. Meanwhile, he would pull out and do his work.

Banking, he jerked back his stick and managed to climb beside Cooper, who was clinging stubbornly to a Pfaltz's tail. Hastily, Gary waved. Unlike the message which Cooper had tried to get by, this was a signal which Gary had often used before; many times he had pulled out to do some task while his comrades stayed to fight off German planes.

Cooper caught the idea at once, and his goggled face filled with horror. He shook his head, began signaling back frantically. But it was too late. For already Gary's ship had swerved away.

SWINGING AROUND, Gary shoved his stick forward; got his plane into a mild but speedy glide-dive. Tracer streaked after him, but he ignored it.

And in a second he was out of the fight, rushing, hurtling down a hill of space. Down he went, and the forest below loomed closer and closer.

Looking back he saw the fighting planes fading into tiny specks. And also he saw a flaming Pfaltz plunging earthward in a trail of smoke. The disabled one, most likely. They had plugged it!

Then he turned forward, and gave all his attention to the task in hand. Now, once more, Field 23 was approaching. At a thousand feet Gary leveled off and flew straight ahead.

His Spad roared on, was coming over the field. He glanced down, scanned the patch of earth.

The field was fairly large, and sufficiently level. Sure enough the forest bounded it on the north side, and even from here Gary could see the path. Bushes and heavy underbrush lined the other three sides.

The place seemed absolutely deserted. No signs of life on it.

Gary banked over and circled to get into the wind.

Meanwhile Keen and Cooper found themselves in one of the most harrowing predicaments they had ever faced. Tortured by the knowledge that every second brought Gary nearer to the field, they nevertheless had no choice but to stay and fight the two remaining Germans. And they found their hands full.

The Germans, enraged by losing two of their comrades, had suddenly thrown themselves into the battle with surprising viciousness. Recklessly, they took the two Wasps head-on, and blazed away at them. Keen and Cooper stubbornly kept them at bay and held them off.

And then Cooper, glancing down toward Field 23, saw the tiny speck which he knew was Gary's Spad starting to glide into the wind. A feeling of reckless desperation seized the eldest Wasp.

Ignoring the bullets which whistled about him, he tried to break away as Gary had done before. But one of the German ships instantly swept in front of him, heading him off.

Cooper, seeing that the only result of his efforts would be a fatal collision, had to turn and resume the fight.

By this time Gary had headed into the wind. He reached forward to cut his throttle. He cut the engine and started down.

Gracefully, the Spad glided towards the ground, the wind singing through its flying wires. Down, down, down, with the field coming inexorably closer. With expert control, keeping a cool head, Gary was bringing his ship down for a flawless landing.

The wheels whisked over the ground, caressed it, settled upon it. Gently the Spad bounded along. Gary gave her more throttle, taxied around to pull up parallel to the forest, in a position whence he could take off again into the wind. The Spad slowed up more and more, coasted a few yards. Then, easily, she rolled to a stop.

With his motor idling, purring softly, Gary sat for a moment in the cockpit and glanced about him.

Quickly, he unstrapped himself. With one leap he was out of the plane, on the ground. He was breathing heavily. He had a strange dread of walking away from his ship. He wanted to stay near it.

He steeled his nerves. The path was over there. He started for it. He walked, then began to trot. Then he ran, faster and faster. He was nearing the line of trees. The path was only a few yards ahead.

Then his blood went cold. He stopped.

Through the trees ahead Gary's keen eyes had picked out the glint of rifles and machine-guns—guns whose muzzles were trained directly on him!

He had fallen into a trap! Most likely every side of the field was lined with Germans. He was surrounded! Instinctively, he glanced back at his plane. God, it was way out there on the field!

For a second panic seized him. Then he began to think clearly, coolly. Evidently he had not shown the Germans that he had seen them, or they would have come out after him at once. No, they didn't know that he had found out. They were doubtless waiting for him to get the paper. Then they would jump him!

But if he stood here any longer he would surely betray himself. He must move, move somewhere, as if nothing were disturbing him. He thought fast. Then, deliberately, he turned on his heel.

"Oh, hell!" he exploded, in a clear, even voice, though he had to use all his effort to keep it from shaking. "That damned engine! Eating up gas! Didn't cut her enough!"

It was the tone, he hoped, that would do the trick.

With firm tread, he started walking back toward his plane. He was afraid to run this time, afraid that it would at once arouse their suspicions. One false move and he could be plugged like a rat.

He walked on. Sweat broke out on his face, and his legs felt weak. The plane seemed miles away. It was only about ten yards from him.

But he was getting closer to the plane. He was up to it now! Still taking his time, he went beside the fuselage. He put a foot on the little step, lifted himself upwards. Then he had the foot in the cockpit, was half in. He stayed in this position for a moment, to assure his enemies that he had nothing up his sleeve.

He reached forward, got the throttle. He eased it down a notch, and the motor died out even more. He opened it a bit, moved it back and forth. His hand was trembling now. He longed to just make a desperate break and be done with it. But he must do the thing slowly or he was lost!

Swearing loudly, as if irritated by having to spend time on his engine, he put his other foot in the cockpit. Now he stood, still playing with the throttle.

Slowly, almost nonchalantly, he sat down. Again he had shoved the throttle in, and the motor was purring softly. Gary's hand closed more tightly on the lever. His furtive eye was measuring the stretch of field ahead, judging his distance. His muscles were tensing.

He gathered himself together for the terrific effort,

rallied all his strength and courage. For a final second he paused, knowing that life and death were in the balance. Then he acted.

With one move, he ducked low in the cockpit, low enough to protect his head by the metal cowling. Then he pulled the throttle wide open.

The Spad's engine burst into a series of deafening detonations. The little ship trembled, vibrated from nose to tail. With a roar, it started to move.

And at that moment hell broke loose.

The whole place echoed and reverberated with the report of guns, the clatter of Maxims. From every side of the field they blazed, and their bullets came whistling, shrieking right over Gary's head.

His Spad was moving faster now, gathering speed. Still crouched in the cockpit, he lifted his head only to see where he was going. And as he lifted it he saw that desolate field suddenly swarm with life.

Gray-clad figures with coal-scuttle helmets sprang out of trees and bushes, came rushing out from every side, rifles leveled. They were firing, but not yet firing to kill.

They were demanding Gary's surrender. At the same time machine gunners were trying to cripple his plane, to stop it as it went bounding across the field, faster, faster.

Stubbornly the Wasp went right on with his take-off. Stubbornly he kept his plane streaking across the field, though he saw his enemies closing in all around. Bullets tore into his ship, drilling it full of holes.

With a crash, the windshield before him was shattered, and pieces of glass showered down on him, cutting his face.

God, he couldn't make it! There was a mob of Jerries right in front of him, guns trained on him. He was done for!

THEN a WAVE of giddy joy swept him. He saw two other planes swoop down overhead like maddened hawks. They were Spads—the Spads of his two comrades!

Down they plunged, their guns stuttering into blazing life. Right for the Germans in front of Gary they swooped, and sent a hail of tracer down into the gray-clad ranks.

The Germans were thrown into momentary confusion. They spread out in one great wave, many of them rushing for shelter like scurrying rabbits. Others were dropped like flies, riddled by the deadly bullets.

Gary streaked on ahead, streaked on until, though

the bullets were zipping and whining all about him, his wheels left the ground and he soared into the air.

Jerking back his stick, he pulled up in a long zoom, climbed away from that infernal spot. And Keen and Cooper pulled up with him, on either side.

The Germans on the ground opened up on them with everything they had, and the bullets kept zipping up after them. But soon, climbing westward, they were free again, out of range.

Gary strapped himself in his cockpit, adjusted his goggles. Then he drew his first real breath.

But it was a short breath. With a shock, he realized that his mission still remained unaccomplished. He had gone through all this hell for nothing! The papers were still down in that tree!

Never before had he failed in his job. And he could not fail now!

He glanced at his watch. It was five thirty-five—still plenty of time. He must make another attempt to get to that tree. It seemed hopeless, yet perhaps there was a way.

Field 23? No hope there. The Jerries would remain on watch.

A vague hope rose in him.

He waved to his comrades, and the three Spads leveled off at about nine hundred feet. They were flying over the forest which bounded Field 23. The danger that the Germans would spot them again was great, but Gary decided it was worth the chance. He might need Keen and Cooper.

Cutting down his throttle and remaining low, he led them about, sweeping around over the forest in wide circles. His eyes were glued to the trees below, searching, scanning every portion.

Minutes passed, and still the reconnoitering continued. And then, all at once, Gary's eyes lit up, and his hope mounted.

A bit to the right, he had picked out a small clearing in the trees. Looked like a possible place. He would see. Again he signaled his comrades.

The three Spads swerved as one, flew over to the spot. Gary scanned it carefully. Gosh, but it was small! Just a tiny gap in the woods. And the ground was rough and uneven. But it looked deserted. It didn't seem possible that there could be Germans down there. The place was too wild.

He continued to circle above, keeping his two comrades beside him, glancing now and then at their bobbing Spads. But he kept studying the ground.

The more he looked at the spot, the more it seemed suited to his purpose. Yet, to land a plane in such a place would be a feat indeed, not to mention taking off

again! High trees all around, scarcely any room. Could he chance it?

Then he decided to make certain of all the details that the thing would involve. Again he signaled his comrades, led them upwards. They climbed higher. At one thousand, five hundred feet Gary had a wider view of the earth below.

He picked out Field 23 again, and compared its position with that of the little spot he had just discovered. About a mile apart, his keen eyes told him.

Then he saw, to his great satisfaction, that if one went due southeast from the tiny field below, he would arrive directly at Field 23. It would be easy to set that compass course on the ground.

Quickly, but with painstaking care, he figured out his bearings.

"Hell!" he burst out, determinedly. "I'll take a shot at it!"

HE GOT HIS comrades closer to him. Slowly and carefully he began to wave a series of signals. He pointed to himself, thence to the little field on the ground. He made a pantomime of going down and landing. Both Cooper and Keen understood.

They shook their heads vigorously, and Shorty tapped his helmet as if to say: "You're crazy!"

But Gary merely waved off their protests. He pointed to Field 23, then to them. By more pantomimes, he made it clear to them that he wanted them to go over that field and circle, so as to keep the Germans' attention attracted to them. They were to serve as decoys. The enemy, intent on them, would not see Gary landing scarcely a mile away.

For awhile Keen and Cooper protested. But in the end they had no choice but to obey their leader.

Gary, giving them a grin of final reassurance, nosed down and swept out of the three-plane formation. Looking up he saw the two Spads winging their way towards Field 23. They would play their part.

Carefully, Gary circled down. In a moment he was right over the tiny field. This time he swooped right above it, to make absolutely sure that no Germans were waiting there. He scanned the surrounding trees keenly, looked for the glint of rifles. Nothing there. He was certain. Now to get down!

He turned, headed into the wind once more. Then, with infinite patience, he maneuvered his ship downwards, judging his distance as he had never judged it before. Every yard counted. One mistake and he would crash on those trees.

The little field jumped up towards him. The Spad whisked past the tree-tops, all but brushing them with its undercarriage. Gary eased back the stick gently. And he made it. He managed to settle the Spad right down on that ground, rough though it was.

Again he sat in the cockpit, looking around. Then, again, he was on the ground. He walked around to the tail of the throbbing Spad. He must awing her about so that he could takeoff into the wind again. There was just about enough room.

With all his strength, he dragged the Spad's tail around. It took him several precious minutes. But at last he had the little ship headed into the wind, ready to take off as soon as he hopped back into it.

He pulled out his compass. Carefully, he got his bearings and planned his course. Then, compass in hand, he set out. He walked off the field, into the woods. He had to tear through heavy brush. It didn't seem possible that he would ever find his way to Field 23.

He trudged on. Already his feet were aching from the rough tramping. But now the wildness of the forest seemed to be lessening. Paths came into view. Gary's nerves began to tense once more, and he became keyed up, alert. He must be on his guard now.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks. He had just come upon a path. Right beside him, nailed to a tree, was a sign. It read:

"Nach Felt 23."

He could have shouted for joy. The path led to Field 23! And since there was only one path leading from the field to this forest, it must be the very path he wanted!

With fresh confidence he hurried on. Then again he stopped short.

Scarcely twenty yards ahead, on a road crossing the path, was a column of German infantry! Men moving up, moving up on a secret, camouflaged highway.

Quietly, Gary ducked off the path, crouched in the bushes and waited. The Germans kept passing, line after line.

Finally they were gone. Gary came out-of the bushes. He came to the road and started to cross it. He looked up and down the highway. His heart jumped.

More of them coming! Another column, scarcely a stone's throw away. But they would not know him, would not be able to see his uniform from there.

Calmly, he crossed the road, found the path on the other side. Again he tramped on. But now his eyes and ears were alert to everything around him. Several times, when he heard sounds, he jumped, was ready to crouch again the bushes.

Presently, he noticed that the air was getting lighter. There could be only one reason. He looked ahead.

THROUGH THE TREES he saw the clearing which he knew was Field 23!

He was here! Careful now! He clung to the edge of the path, stealthily moved closer. Again that frightful pounding of his heart began. For now, as he looked, he could see scores of gray-clad figures. They were right near the edge of the forest, manning machine guns or standing about with ready rifles.

At the same time Gary's ears picked up a familiar sound in the air above. The drone of motors! His two comrades were doing their work!

He glanced down the path. It was clear. Could he get by? Slowly, stealthily, half-crouching, he went on. He watched the trees on the right side of the path. Quietly now! Germans were all over the place. God, but his shoes were making a lot of noise, snapping twigs and brush. If they heard—

He broke off, realizing with a start that he could go no farther.

Right ahead, just off the path, were scores of Germans. If he tried to get to that tree they would surely spot him.

All at once he fairly leaped for the bushes on the left side of the road. He crouched low, remained still as death.

Down the path walked a German sentry, rifle on shoulder, eyes alert. From his hiding place in the bushes, Gary watched him pass. He went by, walked up the path a way, then came back. This continued steadily.

Up and down, right in front of Gary, the German kept pacing. And as Gary crouched there, a wild idea took shape in his mind. After all, it was the only thing to do. The German was just about his size. And, if he worked quietly, he was far enough from all those Boches to get away with it unnoticed.

He crouched a bit lower and waited for the sentry to pass again. The German was coming. Gary's whole body tensed for the spring, and his left fist clenched until his nails dug into his palm. The sentry walked on, serenely oblivious. Now he was passing. He was here!

With catlike agility, Gary leaped out of the bushes, and swung out his left. It was all over in a flash. Before the German knew what was happening, that terrific blow, backed by Gary's whole body, crashed to his jaw.

Silently he collapsed, sprawled in a heap. But his rifle dropped with a clang which made Gary's blood

run cold. With frantic haste, he dragged the man into the seclusion of the bushes. He kneeled over him. The German was out.

It took Gary just a few minutes to accomplish his work. Quickly he stripped the German's uniform, got into it. It was far too large for him, but over his heavy teddy-bear it fitted well enough. He wanted to keep on his teddy-bear so that, when he went back to his plane, his comrades would be able to identify him. Completing his masquerade, Gary looked himself over as best he could. Rather baggy, but it ought to get by. Now to attend to the German.

Using his handkerchiefs and the Boche's shirt, he tied the man securely and gagged him. Then he rose and strolled out of the bushes.

Reaching the path, he picked up the German's rifle, shouldered it, and began pacing as the sentry had paced before him. Down he went, closer to the spot where that tree must be, and also closer to the Germans who were right off the path. They must see him, he knew. Would they see that he was not the sentry?

He drew in his breath sharply. For now he was going right past a group of Boches who were just off the path, cleaning out a machine gun. They were so close that he could see their begrimed and unshaven faces. They could have reached out and touched him. But they merely glanced up indifferently as he passed.

Relieved, he went on with more confidence. His eyes fixed on a tree whose trunk was forked into two great branches.

Gary knew, knew beyond every shadow of doubt, that this was his objective. It was right beside him. Yet, even now, it seemed unattainable, with those Germans so close at hand. If he made any false moves, they would surely discover him.

So he marched past the tree and walked down to the field. There he glanced skyward. He saw the two glinting Spads of his comrades circling, insolently low, while the Germans were aiming but not firing at them. Evidently the Germans thought that they might trap the Spads as they had trapped Gary.

His blood warmed by the sight of those two planes, Gary turned and paced back up the path. Again he was nearing the forked tree. He glanced about furtively. No one seemed to be watching. It would only take a second. He resolved to try.

At the tree he stopped, yawned lazily. He went up to the trunk, half-leaned against it, lowered his rifle. Cautiously, his hand reached out for the fork.

A COLD, GUTTURAL voice made him wheel fearfully. There, standing before him, was a tall, slender German officer with steely eyes and stern aristocratic features.

By his uniform Gary saw that he was an *oberleutnant*. The **Mosquito**, despite his tremors, had the presence of mind to salute in the manner he knew German soldiers saluted.

The *oberleutnant* scowled at him darkly, and for a second Gary was afraid that the man suspected him. The German began to bark out a string of angry words. Gary could not understand them, but he sensed that the officer was bawling him out for falling down on his job.

He must be asking what he meant by lolling against a tree instead of sticking to his watch. Gary listened meekly, hanging his head as if in shame, but really to avert his face from the other's eyes.

The *oberleutnant's* voice kept growing more and more angry. Suddenly, with a snarl, he gave Gary a vicious slap on the cheek with the back of his gloved hand. The Wasp stiffened, and tears of rage welled in his eyes. He longed to haul off and bash in that haughty, contemptuous face before him. But he controlled himself, and remained meek and submissive.

The *oberleutnant* spoke again, evidently commanding him to go back on duty. Gary saluted, turned on his heel, and once more commenced pacing up and down. In a moment the officer was gone. Gary shook his head. Damn, but these Boche officers certainly keep an eye on their men! How could he ever get that paper? He must get it soon, before he was discovered, or before they found the real sentry.

For two or three minutes he paced up and down patiently. Then he could wait no longer. Again he went to the tree. This time he looked about most carefully, approached more slowly. At the trunk he started to lower his rifle, then quickly reshouldered it as he heard sounds in the trees. But no one was coming.

He put the rifle down, and again his hand reached out. He reached for the secret nook. Sure enough there were leaves and bark there. He pulled at them. They yielded.

Again he thought he heard someone approaching, and he paused apprehensively. Then again his hand worked to pull away the leaves and bark. It seemed as if he would never uncover the thing.

But suddenly a package was revealed. He pulled it out, shook the dirt from it. It was wrapped in oilcloth.

He shoved it way beneath his flying togs, where he

could feel it next to his chest. He reached for his rifle again.

Then he saw the *oberleutnant* staring at him with blazing eyes.

A wave of giddy terror swept through the Wasp. If the officer had seen, all was over.

The *oberleutnant's* rasping voice jarred on his thoughts. Again came that backhand slap in the face. The German yelled at him, shouted at him. Two dabs of red had appeared in the officer's cheeks, and just beneath his helmet a vein stood out, swollen purple.

Suddenly his tone seemed to become challenging, questioning. He was asking Gary something, asking it over and over again. The Wasp, unable to understand, began to grow panicky. He dared not answer, yet he knew that if he didn't he'd be lost.

He stammered incoherently, choked, pretended to be seized with a fit of coughing. The officer stared at him with peculiar keenness. And now Gary was certain that he was suspicious. He must say something!

"Ja—" he blurted, hoping that he was giving the impression of a soldier so cowed by his superior that he could not speak. "Ja, mein herr. Ich—ich—" Again he choked, coughed.

For a moment the *oberleutnant* continued to stare at him with keen scrutiny. Then, abruptly, the officer threw up his hands in a gesture of disgust. "Dumkopf!" He spat contemptuously. And, to Gary's intense relief, he turned on his heel. But he did not go.

OUT FROM THE TREES ahead emerged three figures. Two were dressed in the uniforms of German privates. But between them, leaning on them a trifle for support, was a man wearing just his underclothes and shoes.

The sentry! They had found him! And now, as the *oberleutnant* barked at them interrogatively, they all came over. Gary stood there stupidly, shoulders stooped, and a strange weakness in his knees. The Germans were talking excitedly. The real sentry was pointing at Gary with an accusing finger, shouting in a humiliated, furious voice.

Suddenly the *oberleutnant*, white with rage, whipped out a Luger, aimed it right at the Wasp.

And then a wave of crazy recklessness swept Gary. He might be caught, but he was going to be caught fighting! His eyes blazed defiantly.

With a lusty oath, he gave a mighty kick at the *oberleutnant's* Luger. The aim was true. His foot sent the revolver flying into the air. One of the privates

impulsively lunged at him with his bayonet. But Gary had already whipped out his own Colt, and he fired point-blank.

The private crumpled, a bullet through his heart. The grim spectacle seemed to startle the other three Germans, whose faces blanched. For a moment they were too confused to act.

Gary seized his opportunity. Turning, he dashed off the path into the trees. A swarm of Boches were right there, but as yet they had not caught the alarm, and simply stared at him with bewildered awe as he went rushing in and out among them.

On he went, leaping madly, trying to lose himself. Shouts rose behind him.

They were after him now!

Turning, he ran back to the path. He got on it again and went dashing along it, as fast as he could. Again he heard the shouts of his pursuers, close behind. The shrill crack of rifles and revolvers shattered the air.

They could not see to aim at him through the trees, but they were trying to scare him. But the sound of the shots only spurred him on. He redoubled his efforts, hurled himself forward.

On, on, on, he went. He was panting heavily, but he plodded along nevertheless. Leaden weights seemed to have attached themselves to his legs, but he forced them to keep running. His body was a mass of perspiration beneath all his heavy clothing.

He kept following the path. The whole forest seemed full of shouts and gunfire now. God, it seemed as if the entire German army were on his heels.

Abruptly, he came to the cross-road again. And again he saw German infantry moving along. This time, however, he did not stop and wait. He had on a German uniform, and he would take a chance.

He rushed straight to the road. Furiously, he broke right through the Boche ranks, ignoring the guttural protests and roars of anger which greeted him. Then he was back on the path, nearing its end. A couple of hundred yards more, and he was again beside the tree to which the sign was nailed.

Then, at last, he paused, listened. The sound of his pursuers seemed further away now. He must take up precious time. He pulled out his compass, got his bearings, picked out the trail again which must take him to his plane.

Then he stripped off the German uniform, and felt a bit freer in his flying togs. Before resuming the dash, he reached beneath his shirt to make certain that the oil-cloth packet was there. It was. Now to get to his ship!

Once more he was tearing his way through wild growth, desolate country. Progress now was slow and painful, and in his haste he was cut, bruised and scratched all over.

He had to keep stopping to glance at his compass, make sure he was not getting off his course.

Minutes went by, seemed like hours. Still he saw no signs of the clearing where he had left his Spad. He thought surely he must be lost, that he was just floundering around aimlessly.

Presently the sound of his pursuers began to rise again. They were close on his trail! Sobbing convulsively, he kept tearing his way ahead, stubbornly clinging to the same route.

Once more the whole forest seemed to reverberate with the sound of running men, the clatter of guns. Gary felt that he could not go much farther. His strength was ebbing, and a feeling of faintness was coming over him.

But in the next second, to his dazed relief, he found himself stumbling right out on the field he had been seeking. He was here, and his throbbing plane was waiting.

Good old bus! The sight of it filled him with new life. He hurried over to it, climbed in. He sat down in the cockpit and touched the controls.

The clamor of his pursuers was getting closer and closer. He glanced ahead to judge his distance. Could he take off? Could he clear those trees right in front of him? He must!

He pulled open the throttle, and the thunderous roar which followed was music to his ears. The Spad began to move.

IT HAD NOT moved a yard before a dozen gray-clad figures swarmed out of the trees and rushed across the field after it. Again came the infernal whistle of bullets.

Gary ducked low, stubbornly continued to take-off. His plane was just leaving the ground when it gave a sudden lurch, backwards. Fearfully, Gary glanced around. A cry escaped him.

Two of the Boches had grabbed the tail of the Spad and were trying to climb it. While their presence made the other Germans stop firing in his direction, Gary knew that if they succeeded in hanging on he was done for, sure to crash!

The Spad bounded along, sluggishly. Gary, unable to do anything to make them let go, employed all his skill as a pilot to lift his overburdened plane from the ground.

The Spad lurched again, its motor roaring in shrill protest. The lurch threw off one of the Boches! The other German clung, however, and was already coming up on the fuselage, wriggling forward.

Drunkenly, the Spad staggered into the air. Its tail was weighed down, and Gary knew that he couldn't possibly clear those trees unless he got rid of his stubborn enemy.

Frantically, the Wasp turned, reached back, trying to touch the clinging, gray-clad figure. The German whipped out his Luger and fired. A bullet whined unhealthily close.

Gary cursed. The trees were looming ahead. The crash was coming in seconds!

Closer and closer, and still unable to get altitude! There was no hope. It was all over.

BUT NOT QUITE all over. For in that last, breathless moment, Gary's two comrades were with him once more! Keen and Cooper, circling over Field 23, had seen their leader's Spad start to take-off, and were hurrying to join it.

Now they were diving down like plummet. Cooper was far in the lead. Straight down for the drunken Spad he came, his keen eyes glued to his sights.

It was a desperate risk the eldest **Mosquito** had to take, a risk of killing Gary or disabling the latter's plane, but it was the only course. As he swept down overhead, his twin guns suddenly blazed. Down came the streams of tracer. But they missed their mark!

Twice more the Luger had barked behind Gary. And now there was only a second left before those trees would be upon the Spad. Only a second, and Cooper's chance was over, since he had already been forced to pull out of his dive.

But though Cooper was through, Shorty Keen wasn't. And in this final second, his Spad came plunging down. The mild-eyed little man was aiming as he had never aimed before.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! The jagged streaks of flame spat from his twin muzzles.

The German on Gary's fuselage dropped off like a dead fly.

As soon as he felt the sudden lift of the Spad, Gary, flying as he had never flown before, used stick and rudder bar with almost uncanny precision. As the trees came rushing towards him in a blur of green, he banked just slightly enough to give himself a little more room. Then he pulled his nose up, and zoomed.

Up he soared, and once more Keen and Cooper were beside him. The three men waved to one another with crazy excitement.

Meanwhile, Germans on Field 23 and on the little field Gary had left sadly watched the three Spads winging their way towards the west, fading into tiny, glinting specks. And officers who had directed the movements to trap Gary shook their heads. They could not understand how he had escaped.

GARY WAS STILL a bit bewildered when he stood with his comrades before a very relieved and cheerful C.O.

"That was a show, Gary," the grizzled old colonel commended. "Really, don't you think you're wasting your talents on us here? Intelligence would be delighted to get you. Can't you imagine yourself as a spy?"

Gary frowned darkly. "Yes, I can," he replied. "And the idea of it is going to give me plenty of nightmares. Believe me, I'd rather have twenty Jerries sitting on my tail in the air than be standing alone on a piece of German ground!"

But then he grinned and turned to his comrades. "Say, guys, just what was all that deaf and dumb play about before? I haven't got it straight yet."

"What?" drawled Cooper incredulously. "You mean you still don't know what we were trying to signal you?"

"Man," exclaimed Shorty. "You couldn't get into intelligence—you're too damned dumb! Here we were doing everything but the St. Vitus dance trying to tell you that there were Germans down on the ground, and you were too thick to catch on."

Gary glared at him indignantly. "The hell you say!" he exploded. "Thick? I found out there were Germans down there all right, didn't I?"

Whereupon Keen and Cooper sighed in unison: "You sure did!"