

# THE "ACE-IN-THE-HOLE" GANG

by F. H. GRIGGS, JR.

*Captain Billy's lust to kill should have been satisfied before he ran into a flight of five Fokkers, but he had a debt to pay—and the story of how he paid in full will remain with you as an unforgettable memory as long as you live!*

**C**APTAIN WILLIAM HARDING, better known as Captain Billy, wobbled the wings of his little scout as he plunged into the soft, fleecy clouds with his two flying mates close on his tail.

They were flying over enemy territory, thirteen thousand feet high, looking for trouble. It was sailing along serenely the other side of the cloud, five biplanes carrying black crosses on their wings. They had not seen the three Americans, and held to their course.

Inside the moist vapor Captain Billy zoomed, and his comrades flew straight through to engage the enemy. It was their favorite maneuver, and seldom failed to score because they had it timed to perfection. At the height of the dog fight, Captain Billy would dart out of the concealing whiteness, pounce upon the nearest enemy plane and send it spinning down to earth.

Because of this plan of attack, Captain Billy and his pals had been named the "Ace-in-the-hole Gang," and had painted on the fuselages of their ships a device of four playing cards, three aces showing, and the fourth card turned face down. When asked who was the fourth member of the Gang, they answered that Lady Luck rode with them.

That the enemy respected the Gang's prowess was reflected in the order issued by the High Command for all squadrons to shun clouds when flying in an area where the Gang was known to operate. As a consequence, the famous team shifted their scene of operations never stopping at the same field more than a day or two, and dropped in at the nearest squadron for supplies and food as fancy dictated.

Captain Billy and his pals were "on their own". His word was law; he saluted none but brass hats, and few of those. If G.H.Q. wanted the Gang at any particular

point, it sent sealed orders to all fields, and waited results. Though they were a unit unto themselves, they did not abuse the privileges.

Drawn into the great conflict from different walks of life, and widely separated parts of the country, they met in the same squadron, and became fast friends. In civil life. Captain Billy was a banker in a small Minnesota town. Lieutenant Westover had worked at various trades in California, and Lieutenant Nelson sold gasoline and oil in New York.

They got their heads together one night after mess, and worked out the cloud trick. Captain Billy took it up with the wing commander, received his sanction to try it out, and from that successful trial had grown "B" Unit of the American Air Force.

Each of the three men had in his make-up, a strong sense of duty, a responsibility for being in the thick of things, and as time went on the love between them defied death itself. Of the trio, Captain Billy received the lion's share of the affection, and he complained bitterly that his pals watched over him like a baby. It disgusted him beyond words that he seldom found opportunity to return the many favors they accorded him, and he often declared that a guardian angel rode in his cockpit with him keeping his tail clear of enemy planes. But more often, he found that the angel rode in another ship, and that it was either Joe or Nellie sitting high above him to prevent a surprise attack from behind.

As a result, most of the planes downed fell before his flaming guns, but he always reported to G.H.Q. after this manner—

*"Requesting acknowledgment of—number of enemy planes shot down this date by "B" Unit."*

He never wore his many decorations except under pressure, and squirmed uncomfortably when, on rare

occasions, his Unit was paraded for citations. For the most part, he was silent preferring to show his affection for his flying mates by giving them the best planes he could work out of the supply depot, and "B" Unit flew better ships than were regular issue. He personally looked after the three ships, keeping them in the pink of condition, and was liked as well as admired by every flight sergeant and mechanic.

WHEN the silver ships hurtled down from the skies to land on some squadron field, there was much rejoicing in that squadron, though mess that night was a sore trial to the cook because of the pre-emptory demand for a "spread" in honor of the occasion.

The only announcement of the Gang's arrival was the whistling of the wind as they dropped, plummet like, to land in vee formation.

Such was their arrival at the—Squadron field on a July afternoon just at dusk. The close of a hard day's flying had found them near Major White's outfit, they had stopped with him some time ago, and Captain Billy led his comrades earthward with a sense of relief at being able to use his legs again for walking.

His broad shoulders were drooping as he sent his bus down the long slide into the field, and his angular face was marked with lines of fatigue. On the ground, he climbed slowly out of his ship.

Short and chunky Nelson pried his body out of his bucket seat with equal relief when he reached the end of his roll, and swept goggles and helmet from his normally florid face with a groan.

At first, his legs refused to bear all his weight, and he staggered drunkenly for a few steps before regaining control of them.

Joe Westover climbed stiffly from his cockpit and without removing his gloves, stuck a cigarette between his lips. With a characteristic movement, he struck a match along the much scarred fuselage of his plane, and coaxed it into flame between cupped palms as he let it bite the end of his fag.

The match served its purpose, and died in the first cloud of smoke exhaled from his lungs. The smoke seemed to impart new life to his drooping figure for he joined his companions with a brisk step.

The ground crew silently rolled their machines into the hangars as Joe and Nellie followed Captain Billy toward the mess shack. At the door, he paused, and stripping his gloves spoke to Westover.

"Joe," he said, "something in the wind. Keep your ears open and mouth closed 'til we find out what."

THE —SQUADRON was having an early supper, and a low hum of voices filled the room. It was evident that the topic under discussion was one of grave concern, because the entrance of the Gang was hardly noticed. Major White simply nodded to them and waved them toward some empty chairs, returning to the contemplation of the long ash upon his cigar.

None of the men of the Squadron accorded them more than a glance as they dropped wearily into the chairs, and even the mess boy set food before them in utter silence, effacing himself as soon as their needs were attended to.

They stowed away the victuals unhurriedly. The meal was good, and the spirits with it diffused a warm glow through their tired bodies. G.H.Q. was sparing neither man nor equipment in these days of strenuous fighting, and the Gang took the arduous task along with the rest.

Westover, pushing away his empty glass and lighting another of his interminable cigarettes, leaned over and spoke to Nelson.

"Good grub, Nellie. Do you get the drift of all the talk?"

"Couple of fellows this outfit thinks a hell of a lot of was handed a raw deal by the Flyin' Baron, an' they're fixin' to square it," he replied.

"Huh!" grunted Westover flowing out a cloud of smoke.

Major White rose from his chair and walked over to where Captain Billy sat. Stopping behind his chair, he tossed a scrap of paper on the table, then turned and walked out of the shack. Silence followed his departure, and all eyes turned on Captain Billy as he read the paper. It was written in the precise hand of a foreigner who has at last mastered English writing, and read—

*"Stay on the ground, or all will die so!"*

The seal of the Prussian Eagle was affixed beneath the single letter, "R", which constituted the signature. Captain Billy read it carefully, and passed the paper to Nelson without comment.

"What happened?" he asked of the youngster sitting across the table from him.

"What happened?" the youngster almost screamed, "Hell, Captain, they killed five of our men!"

"That's too bad," said Captain Billy simply, "but you don't expect to fight a war without someone getting killed, do you?"

"Hardly. Captain Billy," interrupted an older

member of the squadron, "but a man should have a fighting chance, at least."

"Why, yes," replied Captain Billy.

"None of them did." continued the speaker. "Two of 'em, we know, could have landed if those red devils hadn't sat on their tails all the way down, pumping tracers into their backs 'til they crashed. Is that a fighting chance?"

"The Circus did *that*?" demanded Captain Billy, whose face was dark with rising anger.

"And that's not all!" shrilled the youngster again. "They follow'd the Skipper down, and shot him like a rabbit when he ran from his blazing machine!"

The string of blasphemy which ended this tale of the Circus' latest violation of the airman's code was a distinct shock even to Captain Billy's hardened ears. After it subsided, he again addressed the older man.

"Where did you get this note?" he asked.

"A red 'tripe' buzzed over and dropped it shortly before you came," the flier answered.

"That guy won't drop any more notes, brother," said Nelson. "Joe got him."

"Yes," said Captain Billy, "and it wasn't the Baron. I doubt if that fellow was part of the Baron's outfit. He wouldn't sanction such tactics, and certainly doesn't know anything about this note. He may be a boche, but he's a gentleman, at least."

"But that don't alter cases," said Joe breaking his silence, to which Nellie added, "Nope."

THE gray dawn was just breaking to the accompaniment of a thunderous, deep throated, rumbling of many guns as Captain Billy crossed the narrow strip of bare ground leading to the hangars, and pushed open one of the tiny doors to enter. Outside, on the line, stood seven fast scouts, their engines warm and slowly ticking over. —Squadron was going out.

Presently the hangar door opened, and a silver winged plane issued forth to take its place on line with the other ships. Captain Billy climbed into it, and a mechanic swung the propeller. The motor caught, and in a short time was blasting away in the warming up process. Intently watching his instruments, Captain Billy did not see Nellie's approach, and only looked up when he felt the presence of someone.

His eyes met Nellie's, and what he saw made him look quickly away, fumbling with his guns.

Nellie stood quietly, braced against the stream of air from the whirling propeller, his accusing eyes watching

every move of Captain Billy's hands. At last, unable to ignore Nellie's silent scrutiny, Captain Billy shut off the motor, and folded his hands in his lap.

"Didn't expect to see you so early this, morning, Old Man," he said without looking up. "Just thought I'd get my bus out and tune her up a bit."

Nellie made no move to reply. "How soon will you and Joe be ready to start?" Captain Billy asked, dreading to face what he knew was in store.

"Any time," said Nellie.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Have you?" counted Nellie.

"No, but—, Nellie, what's eating you?" Captain Billy demanded.

"Why was you goin' off without us?" asked Nellie. In his turn, he dropped his eyes and began digging up the ground with his toes much as a little boy who accuses his father. "Have we done something to deserve bein' left out, or was you just bungin' out to lick the boche air force by yourself?"

"I didn't intend to run away, Nellie," said Captain Billy, "but I didn't know how you felt about this thing. The Circus needs a lesson, and I thought—"

"Yeh," said Joe who had come up, and now stood on the other side of the cockpit, "and so do we. Nellie and me talked it over last night. We was going to put it up to you, but we couldn't find you."

"But you fellows don't have to go on this!" said Captain Billy. "It's extra, and there's no use all of us going out!"

"No use arguin' that all over again," said Nellie. "We settled that once before. What good 'ud this outfit be with one of us missin'?"

"But—!" expostulated Captain Billy.

"No buts to it," interrupted Joe.

"And furthermore," said Nellie, interrupting in his turn, and tapping Captain Billy on the shoulder, "if those damn' black crosses gets one of us, they got to take us *all* along!"

"Right!" snapped Joe as he turned toward the hangar to get his ship with Nellie close behind.

CAPTAIN BILLY, watching them, brushed the back of his hand across his eyes with a guilty feeling that someone might catch him doing so. Such friendship between men is a privilege but few are given to experience. Small wonder, then, that Nellie should accuse him of sneaking out on them this morning, and that he should feel so when they insisted upon going with him.

One by one, the pilots of the — Squadron came from their quarters, and climbed into their cockpits for the morning patrol. Each one was silently praying for a chance to take at least one of the Circus ships down to earth with him if he had to go in the attempt. Evidently, this was to be more than just routine flying today.

By the time Major White made his appearance, Joe and Nellie had their ships out and warmed, ready to go. The Major came straight to Captain Billy.

"I'm sorry you have to go so soon," he said extending his hand. "If you hadn't dropped in at this unfortunate time, we could have enjoyed your stay, but the boys can't think of anything but getting even with the Circus."

"Don't blame them at all, Major," said Captain Billy. "We feel the same way, we're going with you."

"With us?" asked Major White.

"Certainly," replied Captain Billy. "Joe and Nellie share my feelings, and your fight is our fight, now."

The hand clasp which the two men exchanged said far more than words, and the Major climbed into his ship with a lighter heart.

The whispering motors roared into life as the scouts flashed across the ground and into the air, taking up the vee formation of a flight of geese. Joe and Nellie took their places as the last planes on the open ends of the vee; Joe on the right, and Nellie on the left.

Captain Billy pushed on above the formation, midway between the open ends where he was in a position to cover stragglers. On they flew, ten thousand feet high, and at better than a hundred miles an hour. As though in response to a radio message from the Squadron, the Major headed for the spot where the famous Circus took the air.

Captain Billy shook his head and speculated on the advisability of such a move with so many young pilots in the formation. The Circus was composed of veterans, and was an outfit not to be reckoned lightly with.

As they flew deeper into enemy territory, tiny specks appeared against the rising sun, and Captain Billy doubled his vigilance. He fired a few bursts from his guns to warn them, and observed with satisfaction that his two flying mates did likewise.

His confidence in their ability to look out for themselves gave him opportunity to watch the machine flown by the youngster who had sworn so scorchingly last night.

For some reason, he had taken a liking to the lad in spite of his vile language, and appointed himself his guardian in the fight which was drawing closer by seconds.

FROM his previous experiences with the Circus, Captain Billy knew that it could climb faster and higher than the machines the Americans flew. His own ship, and likewise Joe's and Nellie's, could maneuver with the Circus busses, but that wouldn't help the — Squadron unless it knew how to meet the first onrush of the enemy.

The specks against the rising sun resolved themselves into definite shapes. Seven biplanes, like strange flies with their bellies flashing in the morning light as they rose above the red bail of fire coming up out of the mist. They seemed suspended in the sky by invisible wires as each fly was lifted or lowered by the irregular air currents. The fascinating thrill of watching the Circus' beautiful flying never failed to cast an almost enchanting spell over Captain Billy. It seemed so clean, fighting in the air, each man picking his individual jousting partner, and not all messed up on a bloody battlefield.

The thought of that last long dive into eternity, or the possibility of being burned to a crisp in a flaming coffin held no such terrors as the ever present fear he felt on the ground of being blown to bits by an unseen shell. In the sky one could at least see his enemy.

He was abruptly plunged into realities as his wandering eyes caught sight of another flight of enemy planes coming up from the south. They were flying at an angle to converge with the Circus, which was even now fanning out into that deadly formation for which it was noted.

A quick glance at Major White's plane told Captain Billy that he was unaware of this second batch of enemy planes. He was signalling to meet the Circus in its own fan-like formation, confident that his superiority of numbers would balance his lack of altitude.

The Squadron spread out. Joe and Nellie lagging in the rear, as the Circus dived at the Major and the ship on either side of him. Machine guns rattled, and when the first whirlwind contact was over, three planes did not wheel to get into position for the coming dog fight.

One, wabbling uncertainly, turned over on its back and fell into a spin as it went down. Captain Billy saw with a shock that it was the Major's bus.

The second, the youngster's plane, was still



staggering about half out of control with a spluttering engine, but a fair chance to make home, and the last of the disabled trio was one of the red Circus ships. It was still diving steeply followed by a long trail of smoke.

SOMETHING with a crimson snout was climbing up at him, and Captain Billy opened his engine as he shoved over the stick to drop at it. His guns flamed a few seconds before he kicked his rudder to sit on the tail of another Circus bus as the first one went down out of control. One! thought Captain Billy. Five left, twelve when the second flight joined them!

Just as he was in beautiful position to let go a stream of lead which would surely have shatter the Circus pilot's spine, his tachometer dissolved into fragments and a fantastic design of holes appeared in his instrument panel. Captain Billy pulled up into a stalling loop, and an all red plane flashed past beneath him.

"The Flying Baron!" he muttered to himself.

In the brief instant that his ship lay over on its back, he saw the kid's bus wobbling toward home, and a red bird starting down after it. He flipped right side up, and once more with his motor pulling to its utmost, he plunged down in a terrific dive to protect the youngster. He prayed for speed, more speed! If his wings held, he might save the youngster from the same fate the Circus had meted out to those five yesterday.

A hasty look behind, showed both Joe and Nellie coming down to protect his tail. Captain Billy wondered why both of them thought such a maneuver necessary, but he was not long in doubt. The second enemy flight had reached the scene of action!

Now he was within a hundred yards of the scarlet bird sitting on the kid's tail, and dropping fast. Not quite close enough! Another second!

A burst of fire from behind told him that Joe or Nellie was in action, but he dared not look back to see the result. The distance to that red hawk was right, and he loosed a stream of lead at its tail watching with cruel eyes their effect. They bored a hole in the fuselage and as he eased back on the stick, they sewed a jagged line on up into the cockpit.

He fancied he heard the pilot scream as his body jerked upright, and his head snapped back. Then his lifeless body slumped forward, fell against the stick, and sent his ship into a vertical dive from which it never recovered.

A cold sweat suddenly seized Captain Billy. He had a premonition that this was to be his last fight. He

looked behind as he began carefully pulling out of his dive. The kid was well on his way home, and should make it, but Joe was in trouble.

Joe, with his one yellow wheel, was surrounded by a whirling circle of fast Albatros's holding him at bay until a lone ship with black crosses on its wings could climb up and get him from above.

Nellie was nowhere to be seen, but a tiny silver thing a mile below, visible through a rift in the clouds, was flopping over and over as it fell. Captain Billy leaned far out of his cockpit even as he started to Joe's assistance, and waved a hand in mute salute to Nellie.

"See you soon. Old Pal," he shouted before his throat tightened to choke him. The next instant he was speeding straight at the circle surrounding Joe.

IF HE had a plan of action in the back of his head, it was nothing definite. At any rate, the circle opened just before he crashed his bus into it. The lone ship above was diving on Joe, and Captain Billy nosed up to spray it with lead. A single shot jumped from his guns, and they jammed. He made a desperate attempt to free them, but without success. His only hope now of saving Joe was a collision, so he flew straight on. Joe must have sensed what Captain Billy meant to do, and took matters into his own hands.

The Circus pilot, seeing two apparently easy victims, chose Captain Billy as the first, and swerved to get him. In the fraction of a second it took him to act, Joe swept toward him, his guns spitting venomously, motor wide open.

Seconds seemed years to Captain Billy. He waved frantically at Joe yelled at him to turn out, but Joe was intent on finishing his task, and did not see him: he couldn't have heard him if he had tried.

He knew that this was the end for him, and he played the hand that fate dealt him to a glorious finish.

The crash, as his ship met the Circus bus, literally filled the air with parts of airplane, and Captain Billy spun down missing destruction in the whirling mass by inches. As the wreckage fell, it took fire, and before Captain Billy's horrified gaze, a single figure dropped out.

As he flew home thinking about it, he prayed that it might have been Joe. Better to fall, he felt, than to be burned alive.

BACK in the —Squadron mess shack, a stunned and silent few ignored the breakfast set before them, and called for whiskey. The youngster sat

beside Captain Billy, and in his eyes was a look of understanding for the man who had lost more than he. He was no longer a boy, but a man far older than his years, and he was able to see things in a different light.

The last chapters of many friendships had been written in lead and smoke on that dawn patrol, but the machine of war rumbled on unheeding. Of the ten who started, but four returned, and Captain Meade, the ranking survivor, sat in a corner writing his reports while the wires to wing headquarters were already carrying his insistent demands for replacements.

By nightfall, the vacant chairs in the mess would be filled, filled with lads eager for their baptism of fire under enemy guns, and more friendships would spring up to be rudely shattered in the succeeding days.

The "Ace-in-the-hole Gang" no longer existed, and Captain Billy found himself alone in a world of strangers. The faces about him seemed different, and he resented all their efforts at consolation, demanding to be let alone.

Two scenes danced before his eyes, indelibly imprinted upon his mind, the slow, fluttering fall of Nellie's ship, and that terrific crash as Joe sacrificed himself for him.

He paced up and down the little building like a caged beast, and wrestled with those images which drink would not drown.

In the course of his war experience he had seen many unnerved men, and had wondered at their inability to control themselves. He refused to admit that he was like them now, his nerves were all right, it was just that he must somehow even his score with the enemy.

Joe and Nellie! Their loyalty and friendship denied him for always! Damn war, damn everything! Suddenly the passion to kill seized him, and he strode out of the shack, across to the hangers, and disappeared into them.

To those back in the shack came the blast of his motor as he sent his tiny ship hurtling into the sky.

All during the day a silver cyclone whirled across the skies pouncing upon anything that bore a black cross. Several sausages went up in flames, and its observers were harassed by machine gun fire as they floated down with their parachutes.

It attacked two seaters, and ground strafed at every opportunity. It was a holocaust of killing for the pilot of that silver ship, such a carnage as might seem impossible for one man to accomplish.

Indeed it would have been impossible for a sane

flier, but Captain Billy was wrapped in a maniacal mantle of protection. The very fury of his assaults made success possible.

THAT —Squadron could keep track of his movements was made possible when Captain Billy dropped down at some airdrome to refuel and to replenish his exhausted ammunition supply. He did not get out of his cockpit, and the only words he uttered were staccato demands for supplies.

"Gas! Oil! Ammunition!" he barked when he made his first landing on a French drome, and such were his orders at each succeeding stop, varied sometimes by the addition of another word, "Whiskey!" While the ground crews worked, he sat staring straight ahead. His face had the pallor of death, and he stayed on the ground only until they finished, then it was, "Contact!" and the roar of his motor as he took off again.

Captain Meade went up after lunch to try to find him, and persuade him to come down. He found him, and was the eye witness of one of his scraps. They were flying parallel, and Meade was signing him to come back with him when they ran into a flight of five Fokkers.

Captain Billy roared at them downing one and the others fled before his mad onslaught. In the fight they became separated, and Meade returned home alone.

Captain Billy's lust to kill should have been satisfied long before the sun began to sink in the west. He more than evened his score with the enemy early in the afternoon. Then he spent a futile time searching for more victims, but the very sight of that silvery winged messenger of death boiling towards them sent enemy planes scuttling homeward.

Nothing seemed capable of stopping him though Captain Billy's machine was full of bullet holes, and he must have been flying by instinct rather than reason after so many hours packed with effort.

A British bombing squadron out on a daylight strafe located an enemy field lined with bombers ready for a raid, and circled to drop its "eggs". The first bomb had started down toward its mark when a tiny ship dropped past them in a shrieking dive.

The bomb struck the ground, and tossed up a cloud of smoke mixed with dirt which swirled up toward the little plane, but it did not swerve. Holding their missiles until that plane should be out of the way the bombers watched it continue its dive toward the ground. The leader circled lower for a better look.

The lone ship sped on down, and its guns began to

rattle. Figures on the ground ran about in confusion as the bullets began kicking up the dust, and they tried to bring down their attacker by machine gun fire from the ground.

One of their shots may have been lucky, but the pilot of the silver demon flattened out, and almost ran his wheels along the ground as he headed for the first of the bombing planes.

Traveling at nearly two hundred miles an hour, he flew into it. The impact set off its load of gun cotton, and their concussion exploded those bombs on the machine next to it with disastrous results. Then the British laid their "eggs" and completed the destruction. At least one raid would not take place! And Captain Billy's score was paid in full!

This was reported to —Squadron that night at mess, and the news was received in silence as each flier became absorbed in his own thoughts. At length the youngster rose to his feet, and raised his glass.

"Gentlemen," he said in a reverent voice, "a toast to a man like that!"