



Those twelve confirmations chalked up beside Terry Ralton's name on the blackboard back at Wing didn't mean he could take whole killer-flock of black-crossed buzzards!

SPANDAU SALUTE

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

TERRY RALTON WAS GOING DOWN. Spinning in with a dead stick, a center-section strut shot to pieces, and a flock of black-crossed buzzards swarming eagerly around their kill.

His long, thin mouth generally carried a humorous

quirk; but now his lips were set in a bitterly defiant snarl. There were twelve confirmations chalked up beside his name on the blackboard at Wing, and as many more chalked up in the records of the German air service, from battles he'd fought far behind the enemy lines. He had attained the peak of his usefulness to the

Allied cause; and now he was to be snuffed out because of the treachery of a man whom he had trusted.

But he *wouldn't* die. Rage thrummed through him—and he fought his riddled, staggering Nieuport, wrenching at the controls like a helmeted and goggled madman. His lips writhed. Damned if he'd give Chet Hawley the satisfaction of getting away with this thing. It was the big, grinning Hawley who had haywired Ralton's LeRhône on pretense of souping it up. Hawley, who had taken off in a brand-new ship to accompany Ralton on this voluntary patrol; then when they tangled with the Boche, Hawley had displayed a white streamer from his pit, had flown straight into Germany. . . .

And Terry Ralton pushed back his goggles, felt of the ugly Spandau-slug gash which coursed along his right temple, and yelled a defiant curse against the mushy dirge of his flying wires. Somehow he'd get out of this damned spin—

But Hawley had done his job too well for that. The LeRhône had torn completely free of its mount-plate, had dropped out of the ship. Now the Nieuport was too heavy to respond to the controls.

The gyrating dun mass which was the earth reached up eagerly. There was a vicious *swisssh*, then a rending impact—then, oblivion.

Terry Ralton was just about half conscious when men in spiked helmets hauled him from the wreckage of his ship, carried him out of the wood in which he had crashed. Not conscious enough to move a finger—but plenty aware of the fact that these guys were Krauts.

They put him in a car. A ramrod blond officer with a pair of silver wings and a pair of glacial blue eyes gave him a drink of very good whiskey from a flask. And that, helped by the rush of the wind against his face as the car careened over rough roads, snapped him out of his crash-shock.

His captor grinned. "I am *oberleutnant* Borg. You feel better now, *hein?*"

The German's eyes gave Ralton a chill and impersonal inspection.

"Yeah!" Terry Ralton said. He was rigid in the car's seat, staring straight ahead—and in his manner there was some quality of brittle deadliness that made the enemy pilot stare.

The car passed a rumbling train of supply trucks, turned at last into a shrubbery-flanked lane which led to a grim old castle. From beyond the dark stone structure came the throb of motors.

"Our field," Borg stated, "iss out there. Now—we get out of the car, *hein?*"

With a jolt, Ralton realized that the car had stopped.

"We always giff our prisoners a party to welcome them to the Fatherland—" Borg prompted.

TERRY RALTON would not have called it a party. He would have termed it an exultant, drunken binge of triumph. His wounds and bruises dressed by a physician, he had been given a cot in a room upstairs, and had been allowed to rest, under guard of course, all afternoon. And now he faced the enemy pilots who had tried like blazes to wipe him out of the air before he killed any more of them.

They were young, polite. They drank a toast to him; and probably they wondered a little about the way in which his eyes kept roving around, like those of a caged animal. He saw two of them whisper to each other, then shrug expressively.

But it was not escape that was in Terry Ralton's mind. He was thinking about Hawley, about the black treachery which had lurked behind that easygoing smile. Hawley was an old-timer on the 98th, but had been absent on leave when Ralton joined up, and had returned only a week ago. Ralton had wondered about the big man, had suspected that Hawley's affability was a mask.

Sure, he told himself, he'd been a fool to trust the guy—but somehow he had been drawn to the big pilot. The bonds of friendship are strange things that cleave not to the rules; and now, somehow, Ralton would nail Hawley and batter that affable traitor to—

His thinking processes stalled right there. With blinding clarity he saw Hawley come striding into the big dining hall, escorted by a couple of young Krauts. The three of them were laughing—*laughing!*

And Terry Ralton flung himself from his chair. Trembling like a released steel spring he hurled himself upon the traitor.

This thing was done so quickly that none of the Boche could block it. Fighting mad, Ralton sailed into Hawley, drove battering fists against the big man's face. Hawley threw up an ineffectual guard, but was hurled back against the wall.

Breathing hard, Ralton charged, following up. But the astonished German flyers intervened, pinioned both struggling, panting men.

Borg barked a guttural command. Both Ralton and Hawley were taken into an adjoining room where there was a big desk, fabric from Allied rudders on the

walls, and a light fixture made of a rotary motor with bulbs in the spark-plug holes.

Ralton's breathing was a hoarse wheeze. "Damn you, Chet!" he raged, and strove to tear free of his captors. He knew that it wasn't his narrow escape from death which aroused this murderous fury, nor was it so much the fact that he had been checked off the list of those fighting for the Allies. The thing that seared deep into him, and brought pain that somehow was sublimated into murderous fury, was the fact that his friend had failed him, betrayed him.

And friendship, in the air or anywhere else, can sometimes have strange backfires. . . .

Borg flung a string of Teuton gutturals at Hawley. And the big guy, all grinning affability again now, answered in the same language!

Ralton's astonishment at that held him rooted in his tracks, while Borg and the rest of the German pilots quietly withdrew and left the Americans alone.

And then Ralton realized that this was his chance. "You dirty Kraut spy," he ground out, spacing his words with deliberate finality. "I'm goin' to smash you like a rotten egg—"

Hawley put up a big hand. "Wait, Terry. Hear my side of this. Then—" The big guy shrugged, grinned. "If you still want to smear me, I'll take what's coming to me."

RALTON gave the man a brittle stare. Was the guy actually going to try to bluff his way out of *this*?

"Thanks," Hawley said, "for the chance. My mother was German, Terry. For a while we lived in Jerry-land. My sister—" Hawley's big face worked. "She's doing espionage work—for the frogs. While I was on leave a Kraut spy contacted me in Paris, told me that she'd been caught in Berlin, sentenced to be—shot. My kid sister, Terry!" Hawley ground out those words. "I confirmed that, from French sources. Well, the spy offered me a deal. You were knocking Krauts out of the sky, getting plenty publicity as the invincible young hellion who'd measure up to Fonck and Nungesser—you were knocking the Boche flyers' morale into a cocked hat. The price of sis's life was—that I cross you up. I guess maybe I'm a rat, but I took up the proposition. If you knew my sis maybe you'd— Well, to hell with that. I figured your motor would let you down in enemy territory before any of the Jerries jumped us. Well, it didn't work out that way. But now sis will go free, and we'll rot in prison camps—and you know the story."

Terry Ralton trembled, violently. All of his training, all of his ideals stacked up to make him hate this man who'd been human enough to slip from the status of an ideal soldier. He *wanted* to hate Chet Hawley—but he couldn't.

For Ralton, up to now, the war had been simple, and easy. Either you knocked down the Jerry, or you got knocked down yourself. But he knew that if he'd been in Hawley's shoes, he would have been too damned likely to do exactly what Hawley had done. . . .

And he stuck out his hand, simply. They gripped. And for once Hawley's mask of high affability slipped, revealed the real man underneath. "Thanks, fella," Hawley said in a hoarse whisper.

And Borg rapped imperiously on the door, strode into the room. He had an unfolded bit of paper in his hand—and he clicked his heels, gave Hawley a negligent salute.

"I haff word for you, *leutnant*," the German pilot stated. "From Berlin—"

"Yeah?" Chet Hawley said eagerly, leaning forward as Borg paused. Terry Ralton glanced at the big guy's face—and the unconcealed eagerness which he saw there was almost painful. But then, Terry Ralton had a sister too, back in K.C. . . .

And he whipped his glance back to Borg's blond face. He just barely heard Hawley's words: "Is she—all right, Borg?"

The German ace allowed no flicker of expression to cross his face. "The man who talked to you in Paris," he stated, "had no authority to make that offer. By orders of *der General Stab*, your sister was executed, a week ago." A deathly silence, broken only by the strident ticking of a small clock which had been set into a piece of shattered prop and placed on the mantel, lay its crushing weight upon the three men in this room.

Hawley was as motionless as rock. His eyes were akin to those of a man belly-stabbed by a bayonet—filled with wordless pain, and stunned reproach. And last he drew in a hoarse breath. His mouth twitched.

"You Boche rats," he said in a strange, taut voice. And in his eyes blazed something akin to madness. "I sold out to you. Crossed up the finest guy that ever lifted a ship off the ground. I made myself lower even than you—now you won't keep your part of the bargain."

Hawley was thinking with his emotions, not with his head. And such a man always is dangerous.

Borg knew that—and drew his Luger. "There iss nothing I can do about idt—"

"Nothing!" Hawley roared. "Damn you, I'll break you in two!" And the big guy lunged forward.

IN THAT split-second during which Borg's finger tightened on the trigger of the Luger, Terry Ralton realized that in his hands lay Hawley's life. Ralton was almost at the German's side, due to the fact that he had been facing Hawley when Borg came in. And without thinking consciously about it, Ralton lunged.

Borg's attention was centered upon Hawley's suicidal rush. He made no attempt to stop Ralton—probably was unaware of the younger pilot's move until Ralton slammed one fist down on the Luger, drove the other to Borg's head just behind the ear.

The Luger thudded to the floor. Borg went down like a felled tree.

Hawley kicked savagely, unthinkingly, at the German ace. But Terry Ralton snatched up the Luger, darted to the door, clicked the heavy bronze lock-bolt into place.

His wounded temple was throbbing furiously now; and his heart was pounding like a triphammer. But he forced himself to listen.

And through the heavy door came the sounds of discordant, drunken singing—the pilots' revelry had kept them from hearing the brief and bitter struggle in this room.

Ralton swung around. "Quick!" he flung at Hawley. "We've got to get out of here Chet, c'mon!"

They swung open a window, crouched down while a sentry paced across the garden; then they slipped out and dodged through the shrubbery.

"I should have killed that dirty rat back there!" Hawley panted.

Ralton gave the man an edged, analytical glance—but said nothing. And they raced on, out to the hangars which crouched at the edge of an orchard which had been partly torn up to provide landing runways.

Light gushed out from one of the hangars. The rhythmic clang of hammer upon iron made music in the night. Farther down the line, a greasemonkey was trying to start a balky motor.

Ralton shifted the Luger from his right to his left hand—in striking the weapon while Borg still held it, Ralton had broken a bone or two in his hand, from the way the hand felt.

And the two Americans prowled between two of the hangars, crouched in the shadows to get the lay of things.

There were two ships on the line—and two only.

The Nieuport which big Chet Hawley had surrendered was almost in front of the pilots. But most of the fabric had been torn from the ship's lower wing by inquisitive Boche engineers. . . .

Ralton heard Hawley's guttural curse; and then he swung his head to look down the line. There were three men, not just one, working on the Pfalz which crouched down there. One man was at the prop, another in the pit, a third standing on the leading edge of the lower wing and tinkering with the balky mill,

"Not so good," Ralton said. "The Nieuport sure won't carry double—" Hawley took hold of Terry Ralton's arm, in a viselike grip. "To hell with that! These Boche murdered my sis—my little sis, understand! By God, they'll pay, for that! Get into that Nieuport. I'll twist the prop—"

But Ralton resisted Hawley's push. "What about you?" he demanded.

In the deep shadow, even, Ralton could see the bitter expression which came to Hawley's face. "I've been a fool—but I'm not too much of a fool to know where I stand. To hell with me! I'll grab that Pfalz if I can. An' if I can't—" The big guy shrugged.

"Chet," Terry Ralton began. "I want you to know that I'm not blaming—"

The sudden blare of an alarm siren ripped through the night, and cut him off. Back at the castle there were shouts, confused sounds of movement.

"Quick!" Chet Hawley barked.

AND the two Americans darted out onto the tarmac. Terry Ralton flung himself into the Nieuport's cockpit, adjusted the mixing valve. Hawley seized the prop, spun it furiously. The rotary motor coughed, spat, settled down to a smooth purr of power.

Men had, by now, come streaming out of the hangars. A crimson stab of gun-flame reached out toward the Nieuport—but the shot missed. And a gun crew raced toward a machine gun that was mounted on a wagon wheel set on a post. A searchlight beam swung around like a fumbling finger.

But Chet Hawley yanked the Nieuport's chocks, bobbed up at the side of the pit, stuck his big hand over the coaming. The beam of the searchlight fumbled across the ship at just that moment—and Ralton saw that Hawley's raw-boned face was set in the old, mocking affable grin.

"Luck old son," he boomed.

Their hands met in a quick, firm grip. "What about you—" Terry Ralton began.

"Hell, I'll get out of this. Them three guys have left the Pfalz, see? An' just when they had the motor goin'!"

Ralton looked—and saw that Hawley was right. The three men who had been working on the Pfalz were legging into a hangar, probably to get their side-arms. They were mechanics, not soldiers. . . .

And the others were perilously close to the Nieuport now. Ralton revved the motor, swung the ship. Hawley already had started a dash toward the Pfalz—and Ralton guided the Nieuport in a straight line, keeping between Hawley and the hangars. Men raced toward the Nieuport, yelled and fired shots that zipped past Ralton's head. But then the flailing propeller, glinting wickedly in the light, drove them back.

The mechanics who had deserted the Pfalz to get their guns realized their mistake—but it was too late to do anything about it, when they halted in confusion at the hangar doors. Big Chet Hawley flung himself into the ship's pit, jumped the chocks, whipped the Pfalz around.

Pfalz and Nieuport raced down the field. The Boche ship lifted easily into the night, with the searchlight's beam clinging to it and its wing-surfaces shimmering. But Ralton had a tougher time, with the partly-uncovered Nieuport. Fabric flapped and tore away from the lower wing. The ship lurched, bounded drunkenly, and at last munched into the air, barely clearing the trees at the end of the runway.

IT WAS a touch-and-go proposition. Hurtling over the shadowy trees, Terry Ralton fought with all the flying ability he had to gain altitude. And his success was slim. At a hundred feet the denuded ship hit her ceiling, refused to climb another inch.

Grim-lipped, Ralton held her straight. He knew that one turn would cost all the altitude that he had gained, crash him in the forest which was streaming by underneath.

An exhaust flare sidled up to him. That was Hawley, in the Pfalz. He could see the big guy's bare head, in the pit of the black-crossed ship; and Hawley waved exultantly.

Ralton waved back—but there was no exultation in his gesture. Maybe they'd get out of Jerryland, all right. But if they did—what about Chet Hawley then? Military law takes no account of human failings. And the thing that Hawley had done, in the mistaken hope of saving his sister, was treason.

There was just one answer to that. A firing squad.

Terry Ralton would go a long way for a friend. Might even lie for Hawley, whose weakness was that he was perhaps too damned human. But that would do no good. Ralton's fall probably had been noticed, reported by the artillery observation balloons. In any case, there would be the fact that Ralton had returned in Hawley's ship, and Hawley in a Pfalz, to explain.

Ralton shook his head. Lying can take a man far—but only into trouble. And he would be doing Hawley no favor by helping him in that way.

He wrestled with the problem, and wrestled with the staggering Nieuport too, while they crossed the silvery ribbon of a river, picked up a railroad, followed it along until they roared over a town where blast-furnaces threw a scarlet glow into the sky.

That would be Verny—and now the Americans knew where they were, knew that there was only a short distance to go before they crossed the lines.

Ralton was amazed that no enemy ships had made a pass at stopping them. That Borg had not gotten into the air in time to pursue them was not surprising—every ship on the field, with the exception of the one Hawley had taken, had had a cold motor. This Nieuport's motor was a rotary, and needed very little warming. But surely word had been telephoned frantically ahead to other Boche squadrons—

Terry Ralton jerked, tensed in his pit. A new exhaust flare swooped down on the Americans, like some evil comet. Spandau guns stabbed out twin lances of flame. Slugs banged into the Nieuport.

There was just one attacker, a Fokker D-7. Probably the Boche had scattered along the line, to form a net which must at some point catch the escaping Americans. But this Kraut was out to kill—ten yards behind Ralton's flippers he rocked his ship while the Spandaus mushroomed their deadly flame and slugs howled past Ralton's head.

And the hell of it was that Ralton couldn't do a thing to protect himself. On all this flight, he had been unable to gain any altitude. It was all his wide-open motor could do to keep the Nieuport staggering through the air. And one turn would put the crate down in the forest.

Ralton was pinned down, like a beetle in an exhibit case, for the Boche to riddle—

No! Hawley whipped the Pfalz around in a flipper turn, rammed toward the Boche. The enemy pilot veered—there was nothing else for him to do. And Ralton, twisting around in his pit, saw Hawley go plummeting past, following up the Boche and

meanwhile hammering at the Spandaus which crouched on the Pfalz's cowl.

Instantly, Ralton caught the significance of that. The Pfalz's guns were either empty, or of such different construction from the Vickers that Hawley couldn't make them work!

AND the Boche, too, caught onto that fact. He rolled, showed crimson Spandau fangs in a tentative attack upon the Pfalz. And then, when Hawley failed again to use his guns, the Boche was sure. In a more maneuverable ship than the Pfalz, the Kraut baited Hawley, rushed him and drew away.

Hawley, always a headlong plunger, was an easy mark for that sort of tactics. He rushed like a maddened bull.

And the Fokker's Spandaus spat flame, raked the Pfalz at close range.

With a stab of pain that was as real as if it were himself who was hit, Ralton saw the Pfalz stagger. Saw flame lick briefly back from the ship's sleek motor cowl, saw that flame grow and spread with sinister speed.

Hawley saw it too. And Hawley was dead certain

that he saw the big guy wave one arm, exultantly, as he swung the blazing Pfalz sharply around, rammed into the astonished Boche.

Pfalz and Fokker met with an impact that seemed to shake the sky. Flame blossomed cruelly, wrapped itself eagerly around the ships as they dropped, one crumpled mass, toward the earth close below.

Just as they struck, a gasoline tank explosion hurled flames a hundred feet into the air. In that blinding light Ralton saw trees shrivel as the heat struck them. . . .

And yet Ralton was bathed in icy sweat, when he turned back to his controls. His wounded temple was throbbing again. And the muscles of his throat ached. But the lines were close ahead.

Hawley had slipped, as any man might have slipped, in that foolish attempt to save his sister. But he had more than paid. And he had earned one thing, at least—

Terry Ralton turned again in his pit, looked back at the viciously blazing fire which he was rapidly leaving behind. And his broken right hand lifted, in a crisp salute.

"Good-bye, soldier," he said.