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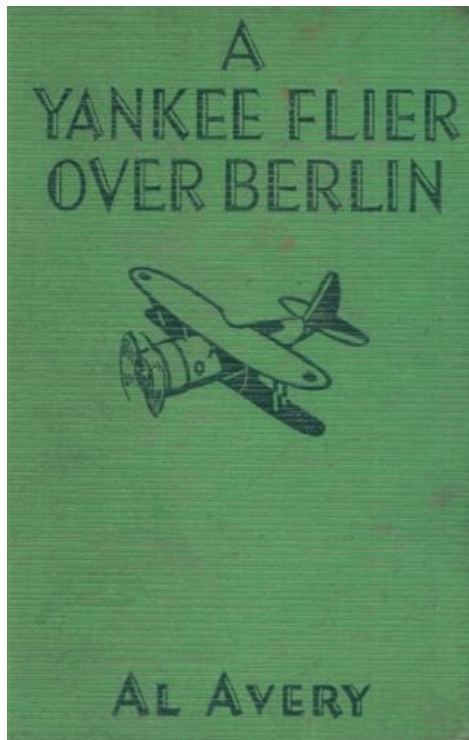
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A YANKEE FLIER OVER BERLIN

BY AL AVERY

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For
LARRY SOUTHWICKE



**THE SPITFIRE STAYED WITH STAN UNTIL THE SPEEDBOAT PULLED
ALONGSIDE.**



BOOKS ARE WEAPONS IN THE WAR OF IDEAS

A WARTIME BOOK

**THIS COMPLETE EDITION IS PRODUCED IN FULL COMPLIANCE WITH THE
GOVERNMENT'S REGULATIONS FOR CONSERVING PAPER AND OTHER ESSENTIAL
MATERIALS.**

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A YANKEE FLIER OVER BERLIN

CHAPTER I

RUGGED GOING

The Commanding Colonel stared at the big map with its red ribbons marking air trails to and from targets. He was spotting the exact point where his Third Fighter group would have to turn back and leave the big Fortresses and Liberators to go it alone into the concentrated defenses of Germany.

Weather Officer Miller looked glumly at the map as Colonel Holt placed his finger on a spot.

"6/10 cloud over station six." Station six was a Luftwaffe fighter field.

The colonel scowled and shook his head. "Are the big boys going out?"

"Yes, sir. Conditions over target are very good." Weather grinned when he said it.

"We won't get much of a whack at the Jerries," the colonel said rather testily.

"The Forts and Libs will make it through," Weather said with a lot of cockiness. He was beginning to act like the rest of the gang around headquarters who believed that the Forts and the Libs could go it alone all the way and shoot down any number of fighters the Germans could send up. Colonel Holt was a strong supporter for fighter cover. He was battling for a flock of longer-range fighters that could accompany the big fellows all the way to Berlin. The way things were going he might not be escorting at all within a few weeks. His Third Fighter Command might be on scouting duty.

"We'll see what can be done about it," he said as he turned away.

The colonel walked out of the high-ceilinged room which was buried under thirty feet of steel reinforced concrete. He came up out of the building into a drab night. A raw wind stabbed at him, and sent light clouds scudding across the face of the moon. Overhead, a night fighter growled its way through the lonely sky. The country spread around the base was flat with only a few hills to break the sameness.

Out on the dispersal area Colonel Holt could see guards watching the shadowy forms of the Thunderbolts. A jeep came chugging up a muddy street and turned off toward the mess barracks. At one-five in the morning the base looked peaceful enough. Sheltered by darkness, its mud ruts and half-finished buildings were softened by the gloom. Still scowling, the colonel strode away.

Several hours later, in a tunnel-shaped hut with a corrugated iron roof and a cement floor, two fliers sat near a wood stove. Stan Wilson was poking wood into the stove.

"I wonder if anyone ever kept one of these gadgets burning all night," he said sourly.

"Sure, an' 'tis against the rules," Lieutenant O'Malley said and grinned.

"I'm beginning to think Allison showed good sense in running out on us and joining a bomber outfit," Stan growled. "Here we are sitting up all night keeping this stove poked full of wood."

"That big bum," O'Malley snorted. "Only today he said that he's livin' in a palace with a sure-enough butler to buttle." O'Malley shook his head sadly. "The spalpeen says that butler can sure bake a foine pie."

"On top of that we get to fly Thunderbolts for the fun of it." Stan jabbed a slab of wood into the stove and slammed the door.

"We've jest been havin' bad luck," O'Malley said. "I can stand a Nissen hut jest to be flyin' one o' them babies. We'll meet up with plenty o' Jerries." O'Malley grinned eagerly, his homely face lighting up. "Remember how we used to mix it with them Jerry bandits tryin' to blitz London?"

"That was a long time ago, as wars count time," Stan answered. "We've been away a long time.

The Jerries don't get near London any more, and I heard a rumor that the Forts and Libs are able to shoot down ten fighters for every one the Thunderbolts get."

O'Malley snorted. "Bombers shoot down Me 109's and FW 190's! 'Tis jest propoganda put out by the brass hats to fool the Germans. I'll have to see it done, me b'y."

"From what I hear we'll probably have a reserved seat for the show. We sit up there and watch." Stan smiled. "But we can always elbow in and fly a Fortress or a Liberator."

"Not me," O'Malley declared. "I'm no good at flying a milk wagon. I'll handle me own guns."

"Tomorrow will tell the tale. We're to get our first whack at Jerry in this new job," Stan said.

"Sure, an' I'd go to bed an' forget it, but the minnit I get me eyes closed this stove goes out an' I'm freezin'," O'Malley growled. "I don't think we'll be goin' any place. Them brass hats meet at Operation Headquarters an' the generals call in Weather. Weather squints out through a porthole an' says, '6/10 cloud over target.' Then the generals up an' go back to bed."

"We sure miss a lot of missions because of bad weather," Stan admitted. "One of these days some fellow will invent a seeing eye sight that will look right through the clouds."

"You been readin' the funny books too much lately," O'Malley said.

"Missed any of yours?" Stan laughed as he glanced toward a pile of comic books stacked beside O'Malley's cot.

"I think our dog robber's been snitchin' a few." O'Malley yawned and stretched his arms over his head. They were long bony arms with huge hands attached to them.

"Weren't you in Berlin before the war?" Stan asked.

"Sure," O'Malley answered. "Bein' a son of good auld Ireland, I was itchin' to get into a fight an' it looked like the Jerries were the only ones preparin' to do anything."

"Why didn't you stay over there?" Stan grinned broadly as he spoke. "I hear there are pretty girls in Berlin and that their mammas can bake swell pies."

O'Malley sighed deeply at the mention of pie. His big Adam's apple bobbed up and down, then his wide mouth clamped shut.

"Sure, an' I don't like bein' pushed around, an' I don't like to see other folks kicked an' slugged by a lot of spalpeens dressed up in brown shirts."

"You may get to wave to that girl when we fly over Berlin," Stan said.

"I could go straight to her house, only she lives a ways out of Berlin. We used to go ridin' in the country on our bikes. Ivery lane we'd ride down some guy in a storm trooper uniform would stop us. I kept pawin' out me Luftwaffe card all o' the time." O'Malley grinned.

"So you got out and joined up with the British and then with us." Stan poked another stick of wood into the stove.

O'Malley yawned again and eyed his cot. "If you insist on keepin' the fire goin', I'll catch me a couple o' winks o' sleep."

"I'll keep the joint warm," Stan agreed.

O'Malley went over to his cot. He kicked off his shoes and crawled under the blankets fully dressed.

The minutes dragged away and Stan nodded beside the stove. An hour passed and he roused himself to poke in more wood. He dozed off again and was roused by an orderly making the rounds calling the crews. The stove was cold and he fumbled with stiff fingers as he lighted it again. When it was cherry red in spots, O'Malley poked his tousled head out from under a blanket. Stan knew he had been lying there waiting for the stove to get hot.

They dashed water over their faces and hurried out into the raw morning. Stan glanced at his watch. It was four o'clock. They walked to the briefing room where they joined a crowd of pilots who were seated on benches staring at a square of transparent talc pinned over a wall map. Red lines showed the route of the Forts and Libs. Soon a sleepy buzz of conversation filled the air. As the pilots talked, they watched the little group of officers gathered before the map.

Suddenly the Old Man, Colonel Holt, turned and faced them. There was an immediate hush.

"A lot of people think we just go along with the bombers to catch a bit of fresh air and to keep from going stale. This mission promised to be our chance to crack the enemy, but unfortunately, Weather reports clouds up to our return point." The Old Man stared unwinkingly at his men. He read the disappointment in their faces. "We are hoping that for once Weather will be wrong."

This brought a few grins and a snort or two from the pilots. The Old Man went on talking.

"You are to fly formation as planned. This will be strictly a team job. There will be no free-lance hunting. Understand?"

Everyone looked glum. O'Malley scowled. It was not his nature to like strict rules. He had learned

what he knew in the days of the Battle of Britain and later in the South Pacific and then over Africa and Italy. O'Malley always had been a rip-roaring fighter who accepted battle against any odds. If trouble did not come his way, he went looking for it.

Stan wondered if that last warning was not aimed at O'Malley and himself. All of the other fliers were trained to this sort of fighting. Stan and O'Malley were the only old heads in the flight.

O'Malley and Stan marched out with the others and climbed into heavy flying suits. The Thunderbolts were high fliers and worked best at twenty-three thousand feet or more. That meant heavy equipment with oxygen and all of the other trappings, including heated undergarments.

The pilots waddled out to their planes and climbed up. Ground crews moved back. They had serviced and checked the fighters and now their Pratt and Whitney twin bank radial engines were turning over smoothly. Exhausts flared blue flames which sent wavering shadows across the wet cement of the apron. Flight Officer Mickle was running about like an old hen with a scattered brood of chicks.

Stan glanced down the wet and gleaming runway. An Aldis lamp winked down toward the shadow bar. Stan eased himself back against the shock pad. He glanced at his temperature gauge and across his instrument board. The throb of his Pratt and Whitney engine hinted at power, though it was rolling over smoothly and effortlessly. Stan remembered other nights many months past when he had sat in a Hurricane waiting for the flash of the lamp and the order from the tower to go up through the blind alley between the barrage balloon cables to wage unequal war against invading Germans. Things had changed a lot since then. Now he was a part of the Eighth Air Force of the United States Army and was fighting for his own country as well as Britain.

"Red Flight, check your temperatures." That was the voice of Flight Leader Sim Jones.

The boys checked in one at a time.

"Up to fifteen thousand. Stay in close," Sim ordered.

Suddenly a motor burst into full-throated roar. A dark form hurtled down the runway and lifted like a flash. Another ship darted away, and then another. Stan slammed his hatch cover shut and opened up his throttle. He jammed down hard on one brake and the Thunderbolt swept around. She poised an instant, then knifed down the slippery runway. Stan hoiked her tail with a blast of prop pressure and hopped her off. He went roaring out over a mobile floodlight and up into the dark sky for the rendezvous with Red Flight.

High above the channel, the ships of his flight tucked in and circled. Soon they picked up the flight of Liberators and Fortresses. At twenty-five thousand feet the big bombers left broad vapor trails behind them. Stan looked down upon the killers from his perch in the sky. Dawn was breaking and the scene was no longer drab.

Red Flight was covering the flank of Second High Squadron. Stan could clearly see Third Low Squadron and First Lead Squadron. Each squadron was composed of a first flight of three bombers and a second flight of three bombers. Stan grinned. He knew exactly where his pal March Allison was flying. He was in left-hand slot, second flight, Second High Squadron, the hottest spot in a bomber formation.

Stan eased over a bit and shook O'Malley off his wing. Sim was wagging his wings, ordering the boys to spread out and get set for interception. Red Flight spread out but stayed in position like a football team moving into formation for a screen pass. The bombers roared on toward Germany, keeping tight formation so as to be able to lay out a deadly cross fire from their fifty-caliber guns. Each Fort and each Lib was a bristling pillbox with nose guns, waist guns, belly guns, and ball turret guns. Stan wondered if he would not be flying one of the big fellows very soon.

Everything went off smoothly and according to plan, except that for once Weather had missed a bet. As the flight neared the point over Germany where the Thunderbolts were to turn back, a cold wind washed the sky clear of clouds and a cold sun shone upon the raiders.

"In the good auld summertime." Stan heard O'Malley humming.

"Shut up, O'Malley," Sim grated.

Suddenly flak began to blossom out from the countryside below. It blossomed in the sky over the bombers and in the middle of Red Flight. Thunderbolts ducked and dipped but went roaring on.

Down below, the bomber boys were scanning the skies.

In his Fort, Allison drawled over the intercom, "Pilot to navigator."

"Go ahead, pilot."

"Everybody set?"

"Navigator to pilot, hot stuff coming up."

"Right waist gunner to pilot, sir. 190's at eleven o'clock. They're after the flight ahead."

"Rear gunner Roger, sir. Flock of Focke-Wulfs at six o'clock. Coming in on our tail."

"I say, old man, don't get itchy fingers. No ammo to waste." Allison's voice was calm and unruffled.

O'Malley's voice broke in over Stan's headset. "Hey, sure an' we ought to go down an' bust that up."

"Stay where you are, O'Malley," Sim snapped. "We have plenty of Me's coming in at twelve o'clock."

Stan had been so busy watching the bombers he had not checked his own part of the sky. A glance showed him Sim was correct. A flight of some twenty Me fighters were diving and circling above.

"Keep them up there," Sim ordered. "But stay in your slot. You happen to be outnumbered and you also happen to have the job of seeing that those Me's stay up there away from the bombers."

Red Flight knifed along through the thin air, ready to smash any Me daring to go down the chute upon the bombers.

"Come on down and fight, ye spalpeens!" O'Malley was yelling.

Stan saw that the Forts and Libs were slamming lead at the Focke-Wulfs in a blaze that rivaled a Fourth of July celebration. He kept an eye on Allison's Fort and saw an FW go down flaming after a thrust at the bomber. Stan chuckled softly.

"Allison got one!" O'Malley yelled. "'Tis a sad day, this, for Mrs. O'Malley's son."

Allison's Fort got another FW and O'Malley's flow of abuse against the Me's increased. He was in a towering Irish rage. But it did no good. The Me's hung on, waiting for the Thunderbolts to turn back. It was a case of who ran short of gas first. Now "lace-panty" flak was blossoming all over the sky. It exploded in pretty pink bursts and that was why the boys gave it such a fancy name.

"We have to go in," Sim ordered grimly.

"Go in!" O'Malley bellowed. "Why not give them birds a scare anyway?"

"We'll zoom up and scatter them," Sim said. "But any man who stays to put on a show will have to walk back."

Stan eased over and kicked on a bit more power. The Germans had the attack route well charted. They knew just how far the Thunderbolts would be able to penetrate. With a burst of speed Stan went up and over. Every Thunderbolt did the same, but O'Malley beat them all to it. He roared over Stan's head, almost ripping away his hatch cover.

The Me's ducked gracefully and scattered. They looped and dived for it. Stan saw at once the chase was hopeless. The Jerries meant to tease the Thunderbolts deeper into Germany so that they would be sure to run out of gas. It was infuriating, but there just was nothing that could be done about it. Stan watched O'Malley as he roared after a Jerry.

"Come back, Irisher. They're just tricking you out of gas," he called.

"The spalpeens!" O'Malley roared, but he zoomed up and over, then tailed in after Red Flight which was heading for home.

Stan saw the Me's dive down to overtake and attack the Forts and Libs. He had a cold, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He still was not convinced that the big fellows could take care of themselves. They had a hundred miles more to cover before reaching their targets, and then another hundred to return before fighters could meet them.

Red Flight slid in on its home field, a sleek flight group in fine trim, except for one slight wound. Sim's ship had picked up a small piece of flak, but it had done no damage. Sim had it in his hand when he climbed down and joined his men.

"A foine battle!" O'Malley fumed.

"I was hit," Sim said, grinning.

"'Tis the fillin' out o' one o' yer teeth," O'Malley answered.

"I counted eight fighters shot down by the big boys," a pilot remarked.

"Check in all kills you observed," Sim said. "It will help the bomber boys get credit."

O'Malley stared gloomily up into the sky. Stan nudged him. "How about some breakfast?" he asked.

O'Malley brightened a bit. "I ordered a pie for breakfast," he said. "If that cook forgot my pie, he'll be no more than a grease spot when I get through with him."

O'Malley got his pie, a thick apple pie dripping with juice. He cut it into quarters, slid one slab out on his fist and began munching, paying no attention to the dripping juice. Stan stared into his coffee cup. He was thinking.

O'Malley finished his second quarter of pie. He looked at Stan.

"What you dreamin' up now?" he asked.

Stan smiled faintly. "You know, I have a hunch we might fool those Jerries. They have this all down to a science. A flight is reported to their head man and he figures out just how far we can fly. If we could do say a hundred miles more, we'd have some fun."

"So you're goin' to order planes with a hundred more miles gas supply." O'Malley grunted and attacked his third piece of pie.

"We could take along emergency tanks and drop them," Stan said.

O'Malley halted the movement of his hand. His mouth was open like a cavern. He closed it.

"Sure, an' 'tis a brilliant idea. We'll see the general about it as soon as I've finished me pie."

"No, we'll see Holt. He's our superior officer. Let him have the credit." Stan leaned back.

"If we tell a lot o' brass hats, the Jerries will sure hear about it," O'Malley said sourly.

"I think not. We have to get permission to install the tanks, you know. This isn't the South Pacific where you just go to your ground crew and ask them to rig up something for you." Stan laughed as O'Malley screwed his face into a frown.

"I'll say it's not the South Pacific," he agreed. "We got so many rules here a fellow gets tangled up before he takes off."

"We have lots of time on our hands. We'll barge over and have Allison tell us what happened. He'll be back after a bit."

O'Malley gave Stan a suspicious look. "You're not thinkin' o' askin' fer one o' them crates full o' guns?"

"No," Stan answered. "If I did, I doubt that they'd take me. I've been a fighter pilot too long."

"They took Allison," O'Malley said.

"Allison is a natural for bombers, he has no nerves and he can handle a crew." Stan got to his feet. "Finish your pie and we'll be on our way."

CHAPTER II

ACTION

Stan and O'Malley found Allison in his comfortable quarters, an old English mansion set on a little hill. It stood in the middle of well-kept grounds. As they drove up in their borrowed jeep, O'Malley scowled at the house.

"A blinking castle," he said in mock cockney British.

They parked the jeep and went inside. The boys were gathered around an open fire lounging in easy chairs. Allison moved out of a huddle and crossed the room.

"Welcome, you wallflowers," he said with a big smile.

"Sure, an' yer a disgrace to the both of us, lollin' in the lap o' luxury," O'Malley answered with a big grin.

"How was it?" Stan asked.

"Very rugged," Allison admitted. "Sit down while I order a pie for O'Malley."

The boys seated themselves and Allison described the mission. He loaded his pipe and sat staring into the fire.

"Not much like pushing a Spitfire or a Thunderbolt. You just plow along through the muck and hope the boys will bat down all of the fighters coming at you from every angle."

"How many did you get?" O'Malley asked.

"Six for sure," Allison answered. "The real fun started when we headed for home. We had been plowing through flak as thick as a swarm of bees but we had been lucky. Two of our flight went down flaming and we saw the boys bail out. I thought we were slipping through pretty nicely when an Me winged us with an explosive cannon shell. After that we got hit plenty. We picked up a shell which went off inside our outboard engine. It started rolling smoke but no flames. Then a shell smashed the intercom system and communications went dead." Allison bit down hard on his pipe.

"Must have been tough," Stan said.

"We couldn't hold our altitude. We lost about a thousand feet a minute and nothing the copilot and I could do would hold her up."

"Sure, an' you did a good job of it gettin' in," O'Malley praised.

"When I couldn't talk to the crew I turned the controls over to the copilot and went aft. I got to the top turret man and told him to get the gunners together in the radio compartment. I figured we'd smack right down into the channel." Allison fingered his pipe and stared into the fire.

"I went back to the copilot and we fought her head. She sagged in over the coast and came right on home, smoking like a torch. As we came in, we found we had a belly landing on our hands, so we skidded her in. Poor Old Sal is a mess right now."

"Anybody hurt?" Stan asked.

"Bombardier got a piece of flak in his leg. The tail gunner had his greenhouse blown into his face and is in the hospital. I forgot to say we dumped our guns and everything else we could pry loose. I guess that saved us." Allison leaned back. "When you fellows going to shift over? This is the real thing."

"Sitting duck stuff," O'Malley snorted. "You jest sit there an' take it. You never fired a gun on the whole trip."

"No," Allison admitted. "But we bagged six Jerries and there was plenty of shooting. You should see my boys work those 50's."

"We aim to stir up a bit of excitement," Stan said.

Allison frowned at him. "You birds better remember this is modern warfare, not the Battle of Britain or the Pacific. They'll bounce you high and quick for breaking rules. This Eighth Air Force is big stuff now."

"Thanks for the warning," Stan answered. "But we plan to go through proper channels."

"And it's a deep secret," O'Malley added.

O'Malley's pie arrived and he dropped out of the talk for a time. Stan and Allison chatted about the changes and the amazing way the Eighth had grown up until it took a large section of British farmland to house it.

Stan and O'Malley left early and hurried back to their own mess. They wanted to corner Colonel Holt. They found him in the mess looking very dour and gloomy. He was alone. None of the other men seemed to care about trying to cheer him up. Stan and O'Malley barged over to his table.

"May we sit down, sir?" Stan asked.

"Sure." Holt motioned to two chairs.

The boys sat down. Stan ordered coffee and O'Malley ordered pie.

"I need just a bite to get me in shape for supper," he said when Stan glared at him as he gave his order.

"Lousy show today," Holt grumbled. "I don't mean the way you fellows flew it, but the way the Germans have everything figured out so neatly. We lost eleven bombers."

"We might fool Jerry," Stan suggested.

"How?"

"Suppose we just toted along some extra tanks of gas and cut them loose about the time the show should start. We know their tactics and pattern. We'd have a lot of fun." Stan leaned forward.

"Can't do that," Holt said. "You fellows might have to get busy as soon as you hit the coast. Kicking off a tank can't be done with an FW dropping out of a cloud on your tail."

"Just half of us will go with extra loads. The others can cover for us. We'd sure surprise Jerry." Stan spoke eagerly.

"Foine idea an' one I'd have been proud to have thought up," O'Malley broke in.

Colonel Holt began to smile. "I believe you have something there. The element of surprise and all that sort of thing. We'll take a crack at it."

"Elegant," O'Malley said. "I'm speaking for extra gas."

"You and O'Malley get extra tanks. You're both old heads at lone wolf tactics. I'm beginning to think we have too much handling out of the control room." He bent forward and his smile faded. "But, remember this, I'm under a general who's a stickler for the book, so be careful."

"We won't let you down, sir," Stan promised.

O'Malley just grinned wolfishly. "I got a date with that Jerry with the red beard."

"You boys tend to the installing yourselves. Oversee it yourselves. I'll put through an order clearing everything for you."

"Thanks, Colonel," Stan said. "Now we'll run along and get busy."

"First you come with me and we'll figure out how much tank capacity you'll need and how many men will go along." The colonel got to his feet.

"If you don't mind, sir, we'd like to have you sponsor the idea. We intended to take it up with Lieutenant Sim Jones first. Wouldn't want to be going over his head." Stan spoke quickly.

Holt looked at him and nodded. "That's fine of you boys. Mind if I claim the idea for the present?"

"Not in the least," Stan answered.

"In that case you'll hear from me later through regular channels. I see you men know your way around in this army."

Stan and O'Malley saluted and moved off. O'Malley grinned. "Slick work, Stan," he said. "Now we won't get blamed for anything."

"And we won't get a medal, either," Stan remarked as he matched O'Malley's grin.

Returning to their Nissen hut the boys policed their living quarters and got things in order. The hut was such a primitive affair that little could be done to keep it in order. The round wood stove leaked ashes on the floor which was always tracked deep with mud. There was a little wash bowl and a table which O'Malley used to stack his laundry upon. The cots were GI with GI mattresses.

After they had cleaned up, the boys went over to the huge sheds where the mechanics worked over the planes. They learned from the chief mechanic that Colonel Holt's order had come through.

"I have the boys on your ships," the sergeant said. He did not seem to approve of the idea.

"I'll be after lookin' out fer me own ship," O'Malley said and hurried away.

"You don't seem to like the colonel's idea," Stan said.

"We've tried it before, sir," the sergeant replied.

"What happened?"

"The boys got jumped out of cloud cover and were sitting ducks for the Jerries," the sergeant said sourly. "Too much cloud cover and too many Jerries for that stuff."

Stan grinned. "I'll drop around and let you know how it works this time."

Walking back to his ship he watched the boys working on her. He was soon satisfied that they knew just what should be done and made off. O'Malley did not show up at mess and Stan began to wonder where he had gone. He finally sauntered into the rest room where he found O'Malley shooting the breeze with a group of fliers.

"You missed a steak dinner," Stan greeted him.

O'Malley grinned, "That's what you think," he said. "I had me a steak dinner with the corporal that fixed up me ship. You know that feller hadn't had a steak for a month. He sure went for it." O'Malley seated himself and elevated his feet to the top of the radio. In this position he promptly went to sleep.

Stan talked with the boys until time to turn in. He wakened O'Malley and they sloshed through the mud to their hut. During their absence, two other boys, replacement men, had been quartered in the hut. They greeted the two old heads eagerly.

They were Bugs Monahan and Splinters Wright, both from Toledo, Ohio. They had just finished flight combat school and were eager for action. Someone had given them the records of Stan and O'Malley. They were both eager to talk to the veterans. Splinters was a tall, thin youth with a little mustache. Bugs was short and fat with a round beaming face and a quick smile.

"We've heard a lot about you fellows," Bugs said.

"Never believe anything you hear in the army," Stan advised with a grin.

"Sure, an' ye've been taken in by me auld pal Goebbels," O'Malley added.

"I'm turning in. We'll get a call along about four in the morning," Stan said. "See you boys over at the rest room. That's where we shoot the breeze."

"See you at midnight when we get up to poke wood into that stove," O'Malley contradicted.

"We'll keep the fire going. We're not sleepy," Splinters said. They were both disappointed that the old heads did not want to go into a gabfest.

Stan and O'Malley turned in. They had learned to get as much sleep as possible. The two replacements kept the fire going as they had promised, and the boys did not waken until they were called at three-fifty the next morning. Bugs and Splinters had gotten a little sleep. They were up instantly and eager to trail along and see what was going to happen.

"Ye'll soon learn to sleep when ye get a chance," O'Malley said.

They sloshed across to the operations room and joined their flight. Maps were ready and Colonel

Holt was standing with his fellow officers. The room was filled with a buzz of talk. Something was up and the boys knew it. Stan and O'Malley sat in the second row with Bugs and Splinters beside them. Stan turned to the boys.

"When you leave here you are not to talk to anyone about the operations planned, not even to other officers," he warned.

"There must be something up," Bugs said. "We'll keep mum."

"When we get back we'll give you the story," Stan promised.

Colonel Holt began speaking, and the talking stopped. "Men, we are going to try a different approach. Weather says we'll have clear going." His pointer moved along a red ribbon. "The bomber objective is a fighter station and a plant near Huls. Ordinarily we'd turn back just beyond Antwerp. Today we'll have a flight along which will carry enough extra gasoline to add two-hundred-twenty miles in range. I'll spot those ships for you and it will be the job of those carrying the regulation one-hundred-ninety gallons to protect the specials until they drop their extra tanks."

The pilots who were to be long-range fighters grinned happily; the others looked their disappointment. The colonel went on giving the details.

"The long-range ships will deploy and go in under the leadership of Lieutenant Wilson. He will have detailed evasion orders."

The boys listened to the rest of the briefing impatiently. Stan stayed after the others left. Colonel Holt went over the plan with him, then Stan hurried out to get his group together. Sim Jones met him as he entered the flight room. He gave Stan a cold look.

"Did you engineer this, Wilson?" he asked.

"I did not ask to be put in command, if that's what you mean," Stan answered.

"You act like you thought you had to take over here," Sim said and his eyes blazed.

"Wilson has forgotten more about flyin' than you'll ever know," O'Malley cut in. "And ye better remember that."

"Easy, now. This is a teamwork job," Stan said. "Your orders are to cover our long-range ships. They'll be heavy and gas logged. My planes have to get to use all of that extra gas, Sim. What we're doing is trying to break the jinx on the fighters."

"Yeah? It smells bad to me. I think you're trying to get yourself an extra bar on your shoulder."

Stan's lips pulled into a straight line. "I don't care what you think of me, personally, but you better cover my flight, and cover it right."

The other fliers were staring at the two officers. They had worked under Sim Jones a long time. Stan was a newcomer the same as Colonel Holt; both had seen much service in other theaters of war. Stan sensed that they were siding with Sim. He turned away and began getting into his outfit. O'Malley was beside him.

"That bird may try something," O'Malley said out of the side of his mouth.

"We sure slipped up when we didn't let him tell this plan to the colonel," Stan said sourly.

The boys slogged out on the field. Stan looked over the dim outlines of the planes. He would have six ships in his penetration flight. His boys had been carefully instructed. They were to break away and appear to leave with the other fighters, then loop up and over and come in on the enemy from out of the sun when he dived down after the bombers.

One by one the Thunderbolts slipped into the raw morning darkness. Stan eased his ship off the ground and up into the sky. He dropped into place in Sim's flight along with O'Malley. They were separated by one ship. The Thunderbolts carrying extra weight were spotted so they could be covered by the others.

Soon they picked up the Forts and Libs and were headed across the channel toward Flushing. Day broke and they could see the bombers below them. The air was clear and cold but there were many scattered banks of clouds all around. Stan kept his eyes open. Today he was not watching the beauty of the bomber formation, he was checking on his own flight of fighters. Sim was holding his ships in perfect formation. They roared along with Stan and his boys using gasoline from their reserve tanks so that they could get rid of them as soon as possible.

Their first action came near the coast. A flight of Focke-Wulf 190's broke out of a big cloud and roared in on them.

"Break for action. Cover specials!" Sim called.

The formation of Thunderbolts broke up and the fight was on. As usual the Jerries were not aiming to close with the Yanks. They were willing to pick off a cripple or a plane cut out from the flight but not to make it a real battle. Their job was to delay and to pull the fighters away from the bombers.

Sim handled the situation well. The Thunderbolts did not break away, nor were they delayed. They met each thrust and stab, but they refused to be pulled into side shows. For once O'Malley was ignoring a Jerry fighter. He was well up in front heading straight for Germany. Stan was in the rear where he had been spotted. Sim was flying his cover, having dropped back for that purpose.

"I guess he's all right," Stan muttered. "He's making it his personal business to see that I get through."

At that moment two FW's dived down at the tail ships. Stan did not shift course.

All Sim had to do was to make a pass at the Jerries, loop over and shoo them away. Suddenly Stan realized Sim was not making a pass. He had stabbed at a Jerry coming in far to the side.

Kicking his rudder, Stan went into action. The Jerries, seeing their chance, had cut him off and now he would be sucked into a fight. The Thunderbolt responded awkwardly. Stan reached for the tank release, then his hand froze. If he kicked loose his tanks, the Jerries would be wise to the trick. They would radio the information to base. Grimly Stan dived and then zoomed.

The two Focke-Wulfs gleefully tore in upon him. Stan gave one of them a burst but missed. He was caught like a clumsy float plane and knew it. Up he went and over, using every evasive trick he knew. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Sim had banked sharply and was coming back to help him. He also spotted the cloud the Jerries had used to ambush the flight. As he laid over and made for it, one of the FW's knifed in and splattered him with lead. He felt the bullets pinging against his armor plate and ripping through his wings. Ducking, he went down under the cloud, just what the Jerry wanted.

Sim had cut out one of the FW's but two others had joined the hunt, bent on finishing the Thunderbolt they had cut off. Stan laid over and wobbled around just as though he was hit bad. The Jerry banked and went up a bit to get a better dive. He figured he had plenty of time because the Yank was crippled. That was what Stan wanted. He kicked the Thunderbolt wide open and zoomed for the cloud. Too late the Jerry saw what was up. He roared down through the misty edge of the cloud and barely missed a head-on crash with Stan.

The instant the cloud closed around him Stan kicked off his extra tanks, then he dived up and over the cloud. The Jerries were waiting for him. Sim was chasing one FW, but three waited for the cripple. When Stan came zooming out of the top of the cloud, they were a bit startled and showed it by their hesitation. Stan grinned as he snapped his ship over and dived on the nearest Jerry.

Before the German could get going Stan had him in his sights and his thumb had squeezed the gun button. His six 50's flamed and the recoil set the Thunderbolt back on her flaps. The Jerry shuddered an instant, then broke in two and burst into roaring flames. Stan went over the wreckage and cut in between the other two Jerries. They were alive now and in action. Around the three went, up and over, painting the chill sky with streaks and loops of vapor. Stan did not hold on long. The instant he had a chance to dive and run for it he did. And the Jerries did not chase him. They were convinced he was no cripple.

As Stan roared after his formation he saw Sim closing in from far to his left. He was red-hot and wanted to tell Sim a few things, but he knew the setup was such that he had to keep his mouth closed. Sim had made an error of judgment in going after the lone Jerry and letting the other two cut him out. Stan was sure it was intentional, but he could never prove it.

Another thing that worried him was that he did not know how much gasoline he had used out of his reserve before he kicked his tanks loose. He was flight leader of the group headed for Huls. If he went on with his flight and there was much dogfighting, going and coming, he might not get home. Sim's voice came in.

"Wilson, sorry I couldn't handle all three Jerries. You'll have to go back with our flight."

Stan scowled. Sim appeared well pleased with the idea. "I'll use my own judgment," Stan snapped back.

"Name a leader and go back," Sim barked. "That is an order."

"Sorry," Stan answered. "I'm taking the boys on through."

CHAPTER III

HULS

Stan overtook his formation and dropped into place. The flight was deployed with the Jerries perched up above and around waiting for the Yanks to go home. Below lay the fields of Holland.

"Are you clear, specials?" Stan called.

"All clear," the boys called back. That meant they had zoomed down and ditched their tanks in a

way the Germans would not notice.

Flak was coming up and a flight of FWs were worrying the Fortresses and Liberators below. One big fellow was out of formation and having a tough time. Fifteen FW's were after it.

"We'll go down and have a crack at those FW's on that Fort," Stan called. "So long, Sim, see you at mess!"

One after another the six special Thunderbolts zoomed down upon the FW's. They came down in a screaming dive and their first burst sent five FW's smoking to earth. Instantly the whole battle changed. The flocks of Jerries up above were taken by surprise because this was not according to the book. The Yanks should be keeping altitude, holding them pinned to the sky, and they were due any moment to start running for home.

Stan and his crew covered the limping bomber and she began to pull up into place where her flight had slowed to help her. Up above, the Jerries cut loose and the Yanks got a crack at them as they tried to filter through. For five minutes the sky was a battlefield, then the Thunderbolts up above had to leave. They broke off and headed for home. Behind them they left the wreckage of eleven Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs.

With the bombers, O'Malley was putting on a show which reminded Stan of the old days. He was stunting so wildly and slamming lead so fast the Jerries began giving him a wide berth. Stan began to realize that their mission was not to be any picnic. One Thunderbolt went down, slashed open by a cannon shell. No chute blossomed out beneath it as it twisted and rolled toward earth.

There were too many Me's and Focke-Wulf fighters. They were everywhere, stabbing and diving, slashing at the bombers and ganging up on the fighters. Stan realized that his flight should have had at least thirty planes in it, and he began to suspect someone back at headquarters had marked this down as an experiment, figuring upon losing only six planes.

Another Thunderbolt went down and then another. O'Malley was still taking care of himself and Stan was doing all right, but his gasoline gauge was leering at him and its needle was rolling steadily around. When the fourth Thunderbolt broke into flames, Stan knew it was time to go home. He probably would not make it, but there was a chance.

"O'Malley! Stan calling. Head for home!"

Looking through the smoke and the bursts of flak, Stan saw nothing of O'Malley. The Irishman had been in the midst of a fight a few minutes before, but now he was nowhere to be seen. He checked the bomber flight. It was going in for its bombing run and the batteries on the ground knew just where the automatic pilots would take over for the run. They were putting up a box barrage at that point.

The Forts and the Libs rode into that blazing inferno of fire without wavering or shifting formation. Stan saw bombs dropping, sticks of big fellows. A Fort directly below him was plowing ahead when a puff of smoke enveloped its tail. The smoke swirled away and there was the Fort without any tail at all, only gaping holes where the rudder and the high tail had been. The Fort sagged over and went into a terrible dive. One after another chutes blossomed out until Stan had counted six. That was the number alive in the Fort, the others were dead.

Stan laid over and made a sweep, ducking in and out of the flak. The Jerries had pulled away and gone back to their fields for more ammunition and more gasoline for the interception of the Forts and Libs on their return trip.

Looking about, Stan saw nothing of O'Malley's ship. He headed for home with a grim frown on his face. Everything went well until he reached the channel. He met no German fighters and had a fair tail wind. But his gasoline supply was very low. The needle kept bouncing off the empty peg, riding clear, then dropping back. The English coast was a long way off.

Stan was flying at twelve thousand feet and that gave him a chance to drift a long way, but not far enough if his gas ran out. Steadily he drove toward the friendly shore. Below him the channel looked cold and choppy.

Thinking of O'Malley added to his gloom. When you work with a man in the air, you expect the day when he does not return with you. But when the time comes it is a stabbing shock. Stan and O'Malley had seen so much action and had tackled so many tough jobs, they had come to feel they always would pull through.

Glancing at the gas gauge Stan saw that it registered empty, and the needle was not showing any signs of movement. He glanced down at the gray expanse below him and frowned. His ears strained for the first break in the steady throbbing of the Pratt and Whitney radial.

The engine kept hammering away for a long time. Stan checked his Mae West suit and made other small preparations for a bath in the channel. Then the engine sputtered, smoothed out, then sputtered again. With a wheezing blast it went dead.

Stan eased the nose down to hold his speed and began sagging down a long slope toward the channel. He scanned the choppy sea for signs of a British patrol boat. Several of the fast rescue boats should be patrolling the flight line, ready to fish Yank pilots and crewmen out of the water. He saw no sign of a boat.

Slowly the Thunderbolt settled down. Floating a fourteen-thousand-pound fighter in over a long distance is not like slipping along in a glider. If there were any up-drafts, the Thunderbolt paid no attention to them. She sliced on through and Stan had to nose her down to keep her from falling like a rock.

The sea came up to meet him and he began judging the spot where he would take his bath in the icy water. Suddenly he heard the roar of plane motors and looked up and back. A Fort was nosing down toward him. Stan squinted to see if he could catch the markings. He could not make them out, but he knew the ship was a bomber returning from Huls.

There was no time for further looking. The Thunderbolt hit and hit hard, as though she had slammed into a stone wall. She slewed around, jerked and bobbed, slamming Stan back against his shock pad. He palmed the hatch cover open and kicked loose from his belt and chute harness. In a moment he was leaping into the water and the Thunderbolt was swirling down into the sea. She lifted one wing as she slid from sight, as though saluting him.

"Tough luck, old girl," Stan said. He got a mouthful of salt water and began sputtering.

The Fort was low over the sea now and Stan saw that it was shot up a bit. Then he saw the name painted on its fuselage. It was The Monkey's Paw, the Fort Allison had taken over for the raid. He waved, and the Fort dipped her wings. She went roaring on toward the thin black line which was the coast.

That meant rescue unless the high waves battered him and pulled him under before a boat located him. He was struggling to stay afloat on the rough sea when a Spitfire began circling overhead. The Spit dropped down lower and lower. It wove back and forth and finally it dived toward him. Stan waved some more.

The Spit stayed with Stan until an orange-snouted speedboat appeared over the foam-rimmed horizon. The boat came roaring toward him, guided by the Spit. Stan grinned eagerly. Nice teamwork. Allison had radioed, the Spitfire pilot had picked up the message, and he had been rescued.

The speedboat pulled alongside and strong hands caught hold of Stan.

"Up you come, me hearty," a seaman shouted.

Stan was so chilled he had to hang on to the arm of the sailor to keep his knees from buckling.

"A bit chilly, eh?" a young officer asked. "Come along. We'll wrap you in a newfangled blanket your Uncle Sam just furnished us."

"It wasn't exactly a Turkish bath," Stan admitted.

"I'll radio in for an ambulance," the officer said as he helped Stan wiggle out of his soggy clothes and into the electrically heated blanket.

"No ambulance," Stan said. "I'll catch a ride over to my base with someone."

"The ambulance is the fastest way," the officer said.

"They'd take me to a hospital, and that's the last place I want to see. Just dry my outfit if you can."

"Glad to, old fellow, and we'll have a spot of hot tea ready for you in a jiffy." The officer turned away.

Stan drank hot tea and toasted himself inside the blanket until they were near the port where they were to put in. By that time his clothing had been dried by one of the machinist mate's men in the engine room.

Getting dressed Stan went on deck. They were edging in beside a pier. Stan was the first over the side. He shook hands with the British officer and waved to the crew, then he headed for a row of cars parked along the street near the wharf. Picking out a car with a uniformed girl at the wheel he walked over to it.

"Hi, Yank," the girl greeted him. "You look a bit wrinkled."

"I just had my daily bath in the channel." Stan grinned at the girl. "My butler forgot to pack my bathing suit so I went in as is. How about a lift?"

"This is Sir Eaton Pelham's car. I'm afraid it isn't available." She smiled sweetly when she said it.

Stan glanced at the other cars. There were no other drivers about. He looked back at the girl.

"Sir Eaton a kindhearted man?" he asked.

"Very," she assured him. "He carries a pocketful of cracker crumbs for the pigeons."

At that moment Sir Eaton Pelham appeared. He was a burly Englishman, wrapped snugly in the folds of a greatcoat. His ruddy face beamed and he nodded to Stan.

"Jolly nice weather for one day," he said as he opened the door of the car.

"Very," Stan answered. "How about a lift?"

Sir Eaton looked at Stan closely for the first time. "I say, a Yank flier. What could you be doing here?"

"I was just fished out of the channel by one of His Majesty's patrol boats and want to get back to base."

"Hop in, old man. Where is base?"

"Take me to Diss," Stan said as he climbed in.

"Right-o." Sir Eaton did not ask any more questions. He spoke about the country they whirled through, but never mentioned the war at all. When Stan got down at Diss, Sir Eaton waved his thanks aside. "Good hunting, my boy," he said. Turning to his driver he said, "Whitehall, London. We'll have to hit it a bit fast to be on time for my meeting."

Stan stood staring at the car as it whirled away. "Whitehall," he muttered. "Pelham." Suddenly he began to laugh. He had hitched a ride with one of Winston Churchill's right-hand men. And he had taken the honorable assistant secretary many miles out of his way.

Hailing a jeep Stan hooked a ride to the camp. He walked into operations and up to the desk. A major looked up and then started.

"Wilson!" he exclaimed. "We had you marked down as lost. Sim Jones reported you short of gas."

"I hitchhiked back. Caught a ride with one of Churchill's secretaries," Stan said dryly.

The major looked at him sharply, then shoved a pad across the desk. "Just put that in writing," he said.

Stan made his report, then headed for his hut to change into an unwrinkled uniform. There was no one in the hut, but his things and the belongings of O'Malley had been neatly stacked. Stan scowled.

"They gather a man's stuff up in a hurry around here," he muttered.

He put his own things back and did the same with O'Malley's. There would be no rush about making O'Malley out a dead man. Getting into his uniform he headed for the mess. He was suddenly very hungry.

Walking into the little dining room he halted and his mouth dropped open. At a table, with four youngsters listening open-mouthed to his talk, sat O'Malley. He looked up and for a moment held a big piece of steak poised on his fork. Then he shoved the steak into his mouth and waved a big hand.

Stan crossed the room and seated himself. There was no warm greeting. O'Malley swallowed his steak and grinned at his pal.

"Ye're a bit late, but in time for the pie course."

"I took a bath on the way back," Stan said.

"That spalpeen—"

"Now, now," Stan cut in. "No names named."

"I said a spalpeen let you down," O'Malley growled.

"And what happened to you?"

O'Malley grinned. "Me? Oh, I had the boys tuck an extra sixty gallons o' gas aboard. The colonel said we was to handle fixing the tanks, so I fixed mine like that."

"You dropped out of sight at Huls in a hurry," Stan said.

"I ran out of ammunition, and havin' a spot of extra gas, I did a bit o' sight-seein'," O'Malley explained. "An' did I get an eyeful!"

The four youngsters sighed and got to their feet. It was time for them to shove off.

"See you when I got time to tell you how I chased a Nazi birdman right down on a British landing strip," O'Malley called after them.

"You've been stringing the kids along," Stan said.

"I gave them only a bird's-eye view o' the life o' the great O'Malley." The Irishman leaned back and surveyed the platter where the steak had been. "Now jest a wee bit of apple pie an' I'll have the edge taken off me hunger."

He ordered a whole pie. Stan ordered a steak and coffee. As soon as the orders were placed before them, O'Malley leaned forward.

"Sure, an' I saw the strangest sight today," he began. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it."

"What was it?"

"I was flittin' along over the tops o' trees an' the spires o' kirks when I zoom out over a wooded slope with a big cleared field in the middle o' the woods. There on that field was at least seventy Jerry fighter planes." O'Malley paused to cram a large bite of pie into his mouth.

"Fighter field. Did you get its location?"

"Sure. An' I thought I'd give those fellers a grand scare. There wasn't a plane in the air, so I was safe. I zoomed up an' over an' came down in a dive." O'Malley paused and shook his head. "You'd never believe it. I could hardly believe me own eyes. When I came back down to scare the daylighters out o' them Krauts, there wasn't a plane on that field. They just vanished." O'Malley looked hard at his pie and kept on shaking his head.

"It's all right to tell that yarn to me, but don't ever tell it to a general," Stan said. "Did they all take to the air?"

"Nary a plane in the air. It's some black magic them Krauts have conjured up, if ye ask me."

It was clear that O'Malley was in dead earnest. Stan believed O'Malley had seen the planes. He also believed there was some trick the Germans had worked out to hide their fighter fields and to protect them.

"We'll have another look," O'Malley said. "I have the place spotted."

"Being able to get fighters out of sight so quickly would account for our not being able to knock out their fighter fields," Stan said. "We'll have to give this some thought."

"It ought to get us special duty," O'Malley said.

"I'll bet you slipped inside their warning system and caught them flat-footed. But there must be some way they get parked planes moved so fast."

"We'll be the b'ys to find that out," O'Malley answered.

"I doubt if we ever make anybody swallow your story," Stan said.

CHAPTER IV

SCOUTING MISSION

Stan and O'Malley had a visitor that night. Allison drove over to see them. Looking around the Nissen hut, he grinned broadly.

"Sure, an' I'll call the butler," O'Malley said. "He just stepped into the drawin' room."

"Sit down, pal." Stan motioned toward one of the cots.

"Homey spot you have here," Allison observed.

"How did it go today?" Stan asked.

"You fellows did a swell job, but why only six fighters?" Allison's smile had faded.

"The brass hats knew I was goin' along," O'Malley replied.

"One of those little experiments," Stan explained grimly.

"Pretty expensive try, I'd say," Allison answered.

"O'Malley spotted a big fighter base all equipped with vanishing planes." Stan got to the point he wanted to discuss at once.

"There must be dozens of them, but we have never been able to spot any of them to knock them out. Those Me's and FW's just sprout out of the ground as we go along." Allison frowned and shook his head. "If we could spot the fields, we could send out separate missions ahead of a raid and knock off those fields."

"O'Malley says they snap the planes out of sight in less than a minute. He slipped in over one of them, circled, and when he came back there wasn't a plane in sight."

"I figure there were at least seventy planes parked when I popped in over the field. When I came back over they were gone." O'Malley shook his head.

"Think anyone would believe such a yarn?" Stan asked.

"Every bomber pilot and crew member would believe it," Allison said grimly. "Why don't you report it and ask for a chance to check up?"

"I've already gone over the head of Sim Jones once and got socked for it," Stan said. "But O'Malley ought to report it."

"Sure, an' I'll be after seein' Colonel Holt meself." O'Malley ran his fingers through his mop of red

hair. "I'd as soon have this Jones bird after me as not."

After that the talk got around to the raid on Huls. Allison's ship had come through with only a few bullet holes. His bombardier had laid their eggs squarely on a factory building. It had been a good show for the Forts and Libs.

"What I'm worried about," Allison said as he got ready to leave, "is that the Wellingtons and Lancasters will blow Berlin off the map before we are able to penetrate that far."

"Them nighthawks?" O'Malley showed his scorn by frowning savagely. "Flyin' boxcars!"

"They haul a lot of TNT and they get through, to their targets, but there'll be a lot of stuff for the precision sights of the Forts and Libs," Stan said. "You notice when they want important targets like locks or sub pens or carefully placed factories they send you boys to get them."

"I know, old man," Allison said with a grin. "But I'd like to make the Berlin run."

"With those hidden fighter fields out of the way you could go in and out alone," Stan pointed out. "The way it is now, they keep sending up fighters all along the route."

"I have to run for it," Allison said. "Pilots meeting."

After he had gone Stan and O'Malley headed for Colonel Holt's office. Bugs and Splinters came in just as they were leaving. They were both highly excited. They had been assigned to active duty. Stan smiled at them but he was thinking that they were taking the places of the men who had been in his flight.

The boys were waiting for the colonel when Sim Jones came out of a side door. He paused for a moment. Stan eyed him coldly; O'Malley walked on into the colonel's office without speaking.

"I suppose you think I deliberately tricked you, Wilson. You're headed for the Old Man." His lips pulled tight. "I don't blame you, but I didn't pull that stunt to get you cut out. It was a boner on my part."

"It was," Stan agreed dryly. "And I'm not squawking to the colonel."

Sim looked Stan in the eye; he flushed a deep red. "I figured I was so good I could cut back and take out all three Jerries."

"Forget it," Stan said and grinned. "We all pull 'em."

Sim turned and hurried away without another word. Stan was still smiling as he entered the colonel's office. O'Malley scowled up at him.

"Did you bop him one?" he asked.

The colonel was seated at his desk. He looked from Stan to O'Malley and lifted his eyebrows.

"No," Stan said. "I made a date to have lunch with him."

O'Malley's eyes opened wide. The colonel leaned back. "Go ahead with your story, Lieutenant," he said.

O'Malley finished his story and the colonel considered the matter for a few minutes.

"It sounds fantastic," he finally said. "But it fits in very neatly with what we have been able to learn about German fighter tactics. I think we should look into it. I'll let you men know what I plan to do."

"Could we have any special assignment growing out of this?" Stan asked.

"You will get the special assignment," the colonel promised.

"Thank you, sir," Stan answered as he got to his feet.

They saluted and left the office. O'Malley was still in a sour mood.

"You made up with that Jones bird?"

"I did," Stan said. "Now let's head for the mess."

When they entered the mess, the boys greeted them warmly and crowded around. There was no trace of resentment or jealousy. The fellows were eager to know what had happened over Huls. Stan and O'Malley were the only two pilots to get back. Sim sat at a table alone.

Stan talked with the boys a while, then walked over to where Sim was seated. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Glad to have you," Sim said and meant it.

After a bit O'Malley came over. He had noticed that Stan and Sim were laughing over something and he did not know what to make of it.

"Sit down," Stan greeted him. "Have a pie on me."

"Sure, an' I'll do that," O'Malley said. He sat down and waited to hear what he could.

Stan and Sim laughed and talked and finally O'Malley joined in. It was clear that the boys had buried the hatchet, so he saw no reason for being grumpy. Besides, the cook had just made some blueberry pies and they were extra tasty.

After mess Stan got a call from Colonel Holt and hurried off, leaving O'Malley and Sim together. The colonel had two officers with him when Stan went in to see him.

"General Ward and Major Kulp," the colonel said. "This is Lieutenant Wilson."

The men shook hands and all sat down. The colonel passed several papers across to Stan.

"You are on special detail. You'll be equipped with P-51 ships and have a flight of three. General Ward suggests you do a bit of rhubarb raiding."

"Thank you, sir. These 51's are the new long-range fighters?"

"They have the same range as the Libs and Forts." The colonel smiled. "But we have only a few of them. Later, perhaps, we'll have a great many."

"Check carefully on location and construction of fields. Each ship has a camera to record the details of any fields you locate." General Ward spoke in a Texas drawl.

"Don't trust the cameras entirely. Get down low and see all you can," the major added.

"The third pilot, who is he?" Stan asked.

"Did you have a man in mind?" Colonel Holt asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I should have consulted you, but I already have promised a man the job."

"Who is he?" Stan asked, trying not to show his disappointment.

"Lieutenant Jones."

Stan began to grin. "The same man I had in mind," he said.

"Good. Now take over."

Stan hurried away. He found the boys listening to the radio in the rest room. At his nod O'Malley and Sim joined him at a reading table.

"We get special rhubarb detail," he said.

"Foine," O'Malley said eagerly. "Only we'll never be able to fly far enough into Kraut territory to see anything."

"I get to go along?" Sim asked.

"Colonel's orders," Stan said and grinned. "And we get P-51 ships with the same range as the Forts."

"Sure, an' we'll fly to Berlin," O'Malley said.

"You better be thinking about locating that airfield," Stan answered. "There was a general at the meeting I just left."

"As long as he won't be askin' to go along, it's all right," O'Malley said.

"Now let's get some shut-eye." Stan got to his feet.

In the operations room the next morning, their papers were ready and they headed out on the field where three big Mustangs stood ready and warmed up. They were powerhouses with wicked armament and plenty of wingspread. In addition to wing guns, they had bomb racks which were fitted with extra gasoline tanks.

"Sure, an' they're one-man bombers," O'Malley crowed.

"They weren't built for hedge-hopping, but the major said they could do about four hundred miles per hour on the treetop level," Stan explained.

Sim whistled. "Wait until the Eighth gets a flock of these," he said.

"You plot the course, O'Malley," Stan said. "We'll stay in close until we start down over Germany, then we'll keep within striking distance to cover each other. We're camera equipped but we have to use our eyes, too."

The boys climbed up and got settled. Control gave Stan clearance and he called to his flight.

"Rhubarb Raid, check temperatures. Sim, take off first. Rendezvous at twenty thousand."

Stan leaned back and checked his instruments. He watched Sim slide away and shoot skyward. The 51's were plenty fast. O'Malley went off next and was in the air almost at once. Stan kicked his throttle open and roared after his pals. The Mustang hopped off as though she weighed only a

few pounds instead of three tons or more.

The three P-51's slipped into close formation and headed out across the channel. The day was a good one for reconnaissance, because there were many banks of clouds at high level with a very high ceiling. Stan kept his eyes open for enemy interceptors. He half hoped a few Me's would spot them so that they could try out the new ships. No fighters were seen until they reached the mouth of the Rhine.

Below them they could see Rotterdam and beyond, Gorinchem. O'Malley was wagging his wings, signaling to go down. The fighters they spotted, three in number, did not try to intercept them.

Stan signaled back and they all peeled off. The P-51 went down smoothly but with a swift rush that set Stan back against the shock pad. He had to ease on a bit more power to stay with O'Malley who was trying his ship out.

At five thousand feet they flattened out a quarter mile apart and stalled in toward a line of trees and a windmill. O'Malley brushed the sails of the mill as he swept over it. They were close to the ground now, flipping along like cotton dusters on a Texas plantation. O'Malley was hugging the ground, popping over trees and sliding between buildings. Stan saw the white faces of people as they looked up. Most of them waved to the ship with the United States insignia. They were Dutch farmers.

The three ships hedge-hopped on over the low country. O'Malley held a speed that made the ground blur and waver. It also made dodging power lines and missing church steeples exciting business. Stan raked a pennant off the top of a building without seeing the building at all. After that he called to O'Malley.

"Hey, you. Get up a bit!"

"Sure, an' the scenery is foine down here," O'Malley called back. But he did take a little more altitude.

They roared in over Germany and headed for Huls. Twice they were blasted by machine guns, but they were flying so low the German detector system had not spotted them. They were put down as Mosquito bombers out hunting locomotives and trains:

"We're coming in now," O'Malley called.

He had swung wide of Huls and was headed for some low hills. Knifing over the the nearest hill, with their bellies scraping the tops of a row of trees, the three P-51's nosed into a little valley.

Suddenly Stan saw the airfield O'Malley had spotted. In a snap guess he placed the number of planes lined up at one hundred. They were in a long row at the base of a hill. Runways led out to a wide flight strip.

"Strafe them!" he shouted.

The order was not necessary. O'Malley and Sim were going straight down the line of planes, their guns blasting flame and lead. The target was so narrow that Stan had to stall and slip a bit to drop behind in order to get a shot at the line.

The Mustangs went over so fast the Germans did not have time to fire a shot at them. Not a plane moved, except those which blew up or burst into flames under the withering fire from the Yank guns. Up the P-51's went and over the ridge. They were roaring along at such a pace that it took a long zoom and bank to get lined up for a return trip.

When they came back over, the Germans were ready for them. Smoke makers were billowing thick haze over the scene and every imaginable sort of gun was slamming lead and steel into the sky. The air above the field was thick with flaming muck. O'Malley was out in front with Sim close off his port wing. He went into the muck low down. Stan came in a bit behind his pals.

Looking down into the flaming muzzles of the guns Stan stared hard. There wasn't a plane in sight! Not even the burning ships or those blasted to bits could be seen. There was nothing but the green slope of the hill and the smooth runways leading to the flight strip.

"Well, what do you know!" he muttered.

At that instant the muck enveloped him along with the pall of smoke from the edges of the field. Just ahead of him he saw something that looked like a huge rocket lift toward Sim's ship. It exploded with a blinding flash directly under the P-51. Sim's ship shot upward and a wing swirled away like a dark strip of paper torn from a wall. Then the P-51 nosed into the ground and exploded. Cold sweat broke out all over Stan's body as he pulled his ship over and up.

At five thousand feet up and well away from the hot spot, Stan took stock. He tried to call O'Malley and found his radio was shot out. Looking through his spattered hatch cover, he saw that his port wing had three gaping holes in it. But the engine was singing sweetly. His first thought was to locate O'Malley, but he had another when he spotted three Focke-Wulf fighters roaring in on his tail.

"We'll see what you have to offer, sister," he said softly as he kicked the Mustang wide open and laid her over.

The big ship responded with a surge of power that yanked her into the sky and over in a perfect roll before Stan could decide what was going on. Leveling off, Stan looked for the FW's. They had missed him by a wide margin. Stan grinned.

"You don't need a pilot, lady," he said.

Coming over he tried a burst on one of the FW's. It was a long shot, but the Jerry was lined up neatly in his sight. The heavy guns of the P-51 roared and bucked. Up ahead the FW wobbled and dived. The other two went up for altitude. Stan went up, too. The P-51 was a high-altitude lady and would do better up where she had rare air and plenty of space.

Stan eased away from the FW's and did not challenge them. They circled, taking a good look at this new type of fighter. They had learned from sad experience that any new Yank ship might prove to be deadly. The Forts had taught them that.

Stan was well up now where he could look down on the flight strip below. He saw nothing of O'Malley but he did see two wrecked planes at the far edge of the field away from the hill. Nosing down Stan dived toward the field. The two FW's dived after him, but he soon eased away from them.

Sweeping in a few yards above the runway, Stan laid over just a little. He checked the wrecks and saw that one of them was Sim's ship. The other was an FW fighter minus one wing. The Germans behind their hidden batteries opened up with a savage burst of fire. Stan went straight toward the hill, flying low to keep out of the flak. As he shot up off the runway he stared hard at the hillside ahead, then blinked his eyes.

"So," he said softly. "So that's the way it is."

He went up and over the hill, spiraling into the sky in a climb steeper than any ship had ever carried him. The FW's had been joined by five Me 110's, but the Jerries did not close with him. Stan headed for home as fast as the P-51 could travel, which topped four hundred miles per hour by a wide margin.

He was roaring along with no opposition in sight and a clear sky around him when he suddenly spotted a plane in his mirror. It was overhauling him rapidly. Suddenly Stan grinned. He eased back on the throttle and waggled his wings as O'Malley roared over him. Picking up speed, he dropped in beside his pal and signaled that his radio was dead. They roared on home, wing to wing.

CHAPTER V

HIDDEN DROMES

Stan sat at Colonel Holt's desk along with O'Malley. It had taken them just twenty minutes to get from the operations room to the colonel's office. Holt had called in Major Kulp of the photography wing and General Ward from the command staff.

"When I came in to check the wrecked planes," Stan said, "I was able to see how they do it. They have a screen on tracks. It is covered over with brush and leaves and looks from any angle, except squarely in front, like the side of the hill. They just roll it out and it covers the planes."

"You wrecked quite a few of them on the ground?" the general asked.

"We must have smashed at least half of them," Stan answered. "But the part that interested me most was the underground hangars. The screen is only a temporary camouflage. The planes are snapped back into the underground hangar. I say we got about half of them, because the wrecked ones were still out under the screen. The others had been pulled back."

"We can bomb those hangars out," the colonel said.

"I don't think so," Stan said. "I judge there's a full forty feet of earth over them as a roof, and I suppose there's at least ten feet of concrete under that."

"That would make them safe. Have any ideas for handling them?" General Ward bent forward eagerly.

"Yes," Stan replied. "We could skip-bomb them."

"Skip-bomb?" Major Kulp asked.

"Bounce our bombs right into the open end of the hangar," Stan said, grinning.

"It might work," Colonel Holt said.

"The P-51's carry bombs, and I'm sure the boys could rig them so that we could fly at the right angle to bounce them into the hangars. If we went across once, they'd have the ships pulled back in and we'd get most of them."

"We'll try it," the general said. "Wilson, you will have charge of the flight."

"It will be tough going. We lost Jones today and O'Malley and I were just lucky. We both had our ships shot up badly."

"Chances we have to take," Colonel Holt said gravely. "Are you sure Jones was killed?"

"I saw his ship hit by what looked like a rocket shell," Stan said. "I went into the smoke and did not see it until I flew over it on the ground."

Silence followed this remark. Finally the colonel spoke. "We'll report him missing in action and hope for the best."

"Sure, an' I'm thinkin' the Jerries were plenty mad," O'Malley said grimly.

"The thing to do is to check with bomber operations and locate the spots where they run into the most fighters. Then scout those areas with low-level flights. When we locate a set of runways near a hill, we'll check. After the data is in we'll try Lieutenant Wilson's skip-bombing tactics. But we want to make a clean-up, for once we let them know how we do it they'll rig up a defense." The general rose to his feet. "I'll let you know, Colonel, what plans my office makes."

"You have pictures of the hangars?" the major asked eagerly.

"I'm afraid I forgot all about your cameras when I came in over the runway," Stan replied. "I was really looking for Sim and O'Malley."

"You fighter pilots always forget the cameras," the major said sourly. "Well, we'll check what you did get."

"'Tis about time to be eatin'," O'Malley put in anxiously.

"In that case, Colonel, we'll run along," Stan said with a grin.

Colonel Holt looked at O'Malley sternly. "Food is a secondary matter right now, but you may go."

"Thank you, sor," O'Malley said. "It's very important to me."

The colonel looked at O'Malley's lank and bony frame and smiled. He turned back to his desk, and Stan and O'Malley hurried away.

"I thought you had to have water to do this here skip-bombing," O'Malley said when they were outside.

"It can be done on land, too. Our boys can rig a delayed fuse and we can roll the eggs right back into the nests," Stan explained.

"We'll have fun," O'Malley chuckled. "In no time at all we'll be over Berlin."

During the next week, scouting flights from the Eighth Air Force field and from other fields near by were made on a pattern. Long-range P-51's and swift Mosquito bombers went out. They searched a wide band of enemy territory and made many photographs. Every landing strip, even though it appeared to be only an emergency runway, was checked and photographed. Then the boys were called in. The fields had been spotted and their underground hangars located. It was time to strike.

Stan and O'Malley sat in the operations room looking at a big map. Colonel Holt stood before the map with his staff. The men leaned forward eagerly. For several days they had been practicing a new type of bombing with fighters, a skip method. The colonel pointed to the map.

"There are many flights going out at daylight. Ours is just one of them, but we have been assigned to destroy the largest of the fighter bases near Berlin. You all know the tactics. There will be thirty planes in your flight. This is a teamwork job." He paused and looked over the eager faces before him.

The men began to breathe easier as the colonel went on. They knew what they were up against. There would be a long flight during which they would avoid fights in the air. Then there would be a sudden attack to be staged just at dawn. That attack would be rugged going and a lot of them would never come back.

When the briefing was over, they crowded out of the room and into the mess for hot coffee and sandwiches. There was little talking. This was the hour of tension. Weather still had to come through with reports and the men had learned that Weather often let them down. Being let down after getting keyed up for a dangerous mission was worse than going out.

But Weather did not let them down. They got their clearance without delay and headed for the ready room. Eagerly they scrambled into their outfits, then barged out into the night. Stan and O'Malley walked side by side.

"We fly the tail slot," Stan said. "That means some hot going."

"'Tis as good as any," O'Malley answered as he headed for his plane. "See you at breakfast."

Like huge night birds the P-51's took off and headed east. Stan watched the flare of their exhausts as they flamed down the runways and lifted into the dark sky.

"O'Malley ready, Wilson stand by."

Stan adjusted himself and checked his instruments. He eased down against the shock pad and waited. O'Malley went knifing away and he wheeled in behind. Hoiking the P-51's tail he sent her off and up.

Quickly the big fighters, each with a bomb load tucked in where ordinarily extra tanks would nestle, closed into formation. The flight leader, Colonel Wellman held them in tight formation.

As they roared along Stan thought back over the past few days. He had been offered the flight leader's job but had turned it down. When Wellman got back he would be ranked up a notch and shoved into a job where he could fly only occasionally. Already his record and his rating kept him at base most of the time. Stan grinned. He did not want anything out of the war but a chance to fly in action.

They moved across the channel, high up in the cold sky. Roaring toward Berlin in arrow-straight flight, they slid over the Netherlands. There were to be no roundabout evasive tactics tonight, not with bombs in the place of extra gasoline.

Stan checked his instrument panel and his clocks. They must be over Germany now. The country below was blacked-out entirely. There was no flak and no lights below. Darkness still filled the world, but dawn was not far away.

A buzzer signal in his headset told Stan it was time to settle down for low flying. Light had begun to show in the east. Down went the Mustangs, and as the dawn began to lighten the low country below, they roared across the German countryside. Now they were greeted by a few bursts of fire, but no heavy flak came at them. Because they were hedge-hopping at a terrific speed, the German warning systems were not spotting them in time to allow gunners to get set.

"Tactical formation, Red Flight." Colonel Wellman broke the silence with that crisp order.

The Mustangs spread out and made a circling sweep. They had been headed straight for Berlin and would be spotted as a nuisance raid group of Mosquito bombers. No fighters would try to intercept them. The Berlin defenders would depend upon flak, as fighters were useless against the fast Mosquitoes. By swinging sharply east the Mustangs would hit the fighter hangars.

The light was good as the boys roared along at treetop level and spotted the landmarks they had been briefed to expect. They flew in perfect formation. Stan was flying the tail slot along with O'Malley. They were in a mopping-up position.

Stan saw the runways flash into sight, then he saw the lead Mustangs go in with their wheels almost touching the runways. A second later there were many flashes of flame and rolling clouds of dust. At the same moment the earth began to erupt fire and smoke and steel. The second wave of Mustangs disappeared into the inferno. Stan saw two of them blow up, then go bouncing and tumbling along the ground. That was all he had time to see. With his hand on the bomb release he went in.

The smoke and the firing was so intense Stan could make out little. He judged his distance and released his bombs when he caught a glimpse of a yawning tunnel ahead. He saw O'Malley cut his load loose. O'Malley was wing to wing with him. Then the Irishman's Mustang stuck her nose into the ground and went end over end down the field like a wrecked kite. Stan pulled up hard and as his P-51 lifted, he felt something hit her. It was as though he had slammed into a stone wall. She staggered, let down one wing, then nosed over. Stan felt the ground slap her and heard the ripping and tearing of metal as something exploded almost in his face. A blinding flash of light stabbed at his eyeballs and blinded him.

The Mustang rolled over and over, her sturdy fuselage refusing to crumple. Stan's one thought was of fire. He pawed aside what was left of his hatch cover and heaved himself upward and out. Staggering free of the wreckage, he found himself enveloped in a choking pall of smoke. Off to his left, a heavy explosion shook the ground. Dirt and sticks and bits of metal peppered him and the smoke surged away before the concussion of the explosion. Stan staggered back and as he did so, four soldiers leaped at him out of the smoke.

One of the men lunged at Stan from the side and two from the rear. He felt a solid impact on the back of his head and felt himself slumping forward, then everything went black.

CHAPTER VI

PRISONER

Stan opened his eyes and found himself in a big room with stone walls and high windows. Sun was streaming in through two of the windows and gleamed upon piles of straw littering the floor. A dozen Yank airmen and several R.A.F. men sat on the straw. Stan lifted his hand to the back of his head and groaned. An R.A.F. man near him said:

"A bit of a tough rap? Can I get you some water? It's all we've seen so far in the way of refreshments."

"Thanks," Stan said. "But where am I?"

"A Jerry prison. I take it you were one of the boys who bombed the fighter fields. I'm Captain Prentiss." The Britisher smiled.

"I'm Stan Wilson. I'm not sure I bombed anything. Is there an Irishman here by the name of O'Malley?"

"Right-o. He was dragged in with you." Prentiss got to his feet. "I'll go tell him you're awake."

"Thanks." Stan heaved himself to a sitting position and looked around. Several of the boys nodded to him but none of them got up. All of them were strangers to Stan, men from flights he had not worked with.

O'Malley came in from a narrow hallway and hurried across the room. When he saw that Stan was sitting up, a dark scowl on his face turned into a grin.

"Sure, an' I've been yellin' at them Krauts, tryin' to get them to send a Doc in to fix you up. They jest laughed at me."

"I don't need a doctor. How did the raid go?"

"The boys say we blew 'em off the map. I talked with a couple of Lib boys just brought in. We cleared the path to Berlin." O'Malley grinned eagerly. "I'm glad ye're feelin' foine now. We have to get out o' this hole."

Stan looked up at the high, barred windows. "Yes, we do," he said, more to encourage O'Malley than because he had any hopes. They were deep in the heart of Germany and soon would be in a closely guarded prison camp.

"They're takin' us to another prison in a few minutes. The guard says we get to eat before we're locked up again. We have to be questioned by the Gestapo." O'Malley leered angrily.

"You mean German Intelligence," Stan corrected.

"All the same. Himmler runs 'em both," O'Malley answered.

They were interrupted by a shout from the hallway. A burly German officer stamped into the room and stood looking at the men.

"Get to your feet!" he yelled.

The men slowly rose and stared at the officer. He glared at them, his eyes moving over them slowly.

"You should be treated as swine, you bomb cities and kill non-combatants. Der Fuehrer does not like this," he snarled.

"We are only following the example you set at Warsaw and Rotterdam," a British major said as he stepped over and faced the German. "We are prisoners of war and you'll treat us as such, my fine fellow."

Stan moved forward quickly. The R.A.F. major stood with his feet planted well apart, facing the German. The German lashed out suddenly with a knotted fist. The major swayed a bit and ducked the blow. He started a right cross for the German's jaw but Stan dived in and pinned his arms.

"Swine! Dog!" the German bellowed. "You will pay for this."

"Take it easy. Knocking his block off won't help you any," Stan said as he released the major's arms. "There ought to be better ways."

"I'm sorry," the major said stiffly.

The German glared around him. He puffed out his chest and struck a stiff pose.

"You are to be moved to other quarters. Anyone trying any sneaking business will be shot. Is dot clear?"

"It's clear. Get on with the moving," Stan said crisply.

"You better be after feedin' us," O'Malley broke in.

The officer blew a whistle and a squad of soldiers filed in. The men lined up and the officer began splitting the prisoners up into small groups. He sent six men away with the guards and whistled for another squad.

"They must think we're tough," Stan said and grinned.

Before Stan and O'Malley were sent out, a young lieutenant entered and spoke to the officer in charge. He faced the remaining men.

"Lieutenants Wilson and O'Malley are wanted at once for questioning." He glared about him.

Stan and O'Malley stepped forward.

"Come with me," the young lieutenant snapped.

"What? No squad with fixed bayonets?" Stan asked and grinned.

The lieutenant smiled. "Where we are going there will be no need for an armed guard." He walked away with Stan and O'Malley beside him. O'Malley kept a sharp eye open for a chance to escape. Stan was afraid if they passed an open door O'Malley would bolt through it.

They entered a long hallway and were marched to its far end where they entered a small room. There was a table and a few chairs.

"You may as well sit down," the lieutenant said.

"You almost talk United States," Stan observed.

"I should. I spent ten years in Pittsburgh," the lieutenant explained.

"How did you come to get over here in Germany?" Stan asked.

"During those years I was working for the greater Germany," the officer answered stiffly. "Heil Hitler." He did an about-face as precisely as though he had been on parade before Hitler and marched out of the room.

"Don't tell them anything," Stan said.

"Sure, an' the Gestapo has my life history written down anyway," O'Malley said. "I think we're in Berlin and I'd be after likin' it if I could get loose."

"We'll be watched very close at first. We'll have to wait," Stan warned.

Two officers, a major and a colonel, accompanied by the young lieutenant, entered. The ranking officers seated themselves at the table; the lieutenant stood before Stan and O'Malley.

"You are a part of the Eighth Air Force?" he asked.

"Yes," Stan answered.

"Do you know how many fighters and bombers your force has?"

"No," Stan answered.

"How many of the new type of fighters do you have? The sort you were flying when shot down."

"I've heard some of the boys say a couple of thousand," Stan answered. He was merely reporting a bit of mess rumor he had heard the day before.

The lieutenant scowled and spoke in German to his superiors. After that the questions came fast, but neither O'Malley nor Stan offered any further comment. They answered simply yes or no or refused to answer at all. Finally the senior officer got up in disgust and stamped out.

"You are fools," the lieutenant snapped.

"Would you talk if we caught you?" Stan asked pleasantly.

"Of course not, but we are a superior race. Now you will be given comfortable quarters and food. We observe the rules of war." He turned about and motioned for them to follow.

The boys were fed soup and fish with a slice of bread and a brown liquid which passed as coffee. O'Malley grumbled a lot, but he ate everything set before him.

"If this is what the Geneva treaty said captured officers were to eat, I'm a spalpeen," O'Malley muttered as he marched away with Stan to their quarters.

They found themselves quartered in an old stone house which had at one time been a residence. There was a high wall around it with many guards pacing back and forth and two searchlights located on platforms which were also occupied by a machine gun and its crew. But there was a yard and a few trees and shrubs.

"Not as bad as a prison camp," Stan said.

"Not very good," O'Malley said as he stood looking up at one of the machine-gun nests.

The boys were taken to a room on the ground floor where they met several other fellows from the Eighth. They had been located at the camp for several months and were eager to hear news from England.

Stan and O'Malley talked with them for a while, answering their questions. One of the boys, a bombardier from a Fort, explained the workings of the camp.

"They change us around quite a bit. New men come and some of the old heads go. I figure they do that to nip any escape attempts in the bud." He laughed sourly. "I never heard of anybody getting away from one of these camps."

Another chap drifted in and seated himself. He was a lank Britisher with a mop of black hair.

"I hear you hail from the fighter strip near Diss."

"That was our outfit," Stan said.

"I just got a new roommate who says he's a Yank who was stationed at Diss," the Britisher grinned. "He got shot down a while back. He just came out of a hospital. Got a bad rap on the head."

"We'd like to meet him. He must be one of the boys we lost on our first bombing coverage." Stan got to his feet.

He and O'Malley went upstairs and into the little room. Two men were seated on a bed playing cards. Stan halted in the doorway. Over his shoulder, O'Malley said:

"Sim!"

At first Stan was not sure. The man looked like Sim Jones. He was thinner and he had a freshly healed scar on his cheek. His face was sallow and he looked much older.

O'Malley barged past Stan and caught the man's hand. "Glad ye're alive," he said eagerly.

"O'Malley?" Sim stared at O'Malley as he said it. He looked up at Stan. "Wilson, you here, too."

Stan grinned. "Yes, I'm here. We cracked up on a fighter strip while bombing with Mustangs. I'm glad you made it safely. When I last saw you, your P-51 had buried its nose in the ground."

Sim's eyes narrowed sharply. "That crack-up knocked me silly," he said grimly. "I don't remember much." He put his hand to his head. "I was nuts for quite a while, I guess. Even now I forget things. Sometimes I forget what's happened."

"You'll come around," O'Malley said cheerfully.

"They might let us three have this room together," Sim said. "I'd like to have you fellows around."

"It could be fixed," the Britisher said. "They let us line up about as we wish. I'll help you fix it. I've been here a couple of months."

Stan went with the R.A.F. man. They located a non-com who told them to shift around as they pleased. He seemed to know who Stan was and all about him and O'Malley.

"Ve treat you goot," he said.

As they went back the Britisher said, "Some of these Nazis are beginning to try to make friends with us. I guess they figure they may need some friends among the Allies one of these days."

"They certainly will," Stan agreed.

The two boys with Sim gladly moved out and Stan and O'Malley moved in. They found Sim silent and moody, as though he was brooding over his capture and captivity. Stan spoke to O'Malley about it out in the hall.

"Sim is in bad shape. He ought to be in the hospital. We'll have to watch out for him."

"He'll be after comin' around," O'Malley said confidently.

They entered the room and found Sim staring out of a window. Again Stan was struck by the change in the boy. He seemed to have aged at least ten years. He turned toward them, then got up and closed the door. He walked over to a picture on the wall and moved it. Behind it he revealed a small hole in the paper. He placed his hands to his lips and shook his head.

Stan moved over and looked closely, then he pressed on the paper. There was a small cylinder under the paper. He grinned at Sim and O'Malley. Deftly he slit the paper with his fingernail and removed a strip of it, revealing a listening device. Taking out his pocketknife he neatly snipped one of the small wires.

"That will take care of that. Later we'll hook it up again so they won't be suspicious."

"They listen to all new men everywhere," Sim said. Suddenly he began to laugh. "But I have fooled them. I have worked out a way for us to escape."

Stan stared at him. He was not sure Sim was not still insane.

O'Malley said eagerly, "Spill it. Escape is what I'm lookin' for."

Sim went to the door and opened it. He looked up and down the hall, then closed the door.

"I was going to try it alone, but I may be able to take you fellows along." He spoke slowly.

"Sure, three can make a getaway easier than one," O'Malley said. Stan said nothing.

"Germany is cracking up fast," Sim went on. "Rotten inside with half of the guards scared they'll be stood up against a wall and shot when the invasion comes."

"They didn't seem to be slipping much where we landed," Stan said.

"But they are," Sim insisted. "I have a man fixed to take me out of here and across Germany. I'm to get him out of the country and guarantee he'll be safely kept over in England."

"Swell," O'Malley put in. "When do we get going?"

"It will take a day or so. He's no small fry either, he's a non-commissioned officer with some authority. He thinks the Gestapo is about to pick him off for not being tough enough."

"It sounds a bit too easy to me," Stan said. "But I'd take any sort of chance to get back into action."

"Tomorrow I'll let you know if you can go along," Sim promised. "Now you better hook that listening gadget up again."

CHAPTER VII

ESCAPE

When Stan awoke the next morning Sim was gone from his bunk. He sat up quickly, then lay back and let his stiff, sore muscles relax. There was no hurry. He was not going any place that day, perhaps not for a long time. Lying there he listened to O'Malley's deep snores and thought back over the events of the past few hours.

Those events had happened so swiftly and so explosively that they seemed like the shadowy memory of a nightmare. He recalled that he had not asked O'Malley how he had been captured. He had just taken it for granted his pal had been through an experience the same as his own. It was odd, too, the way things fitted together. The oddest of all was finding Sim Jones billeted in the same prison.

A knock sounded upon the door. "Come in," Stan called.

O'Malley sat up in bed suddenly, pawing the blankets away from his shoulders. He stared around the room, then scowled. The door opened and a Nazi corporal entered.

"Heil Hitler!" he said very loudly and clicked his heels together.

"Good morning," Stan greeted.

O'Malley just glared at the corporal.

"I am Hans." The Nazi looked behind him, sticking his head out so that he could see up and down the hall. He closed the door. "It is orders of Herr General that prisoners be up and taking exercises by seven each morning. I have let you sleep because you were very tired."

"That was nice of you," Stan said.

"I am goot to prisoners," Hans said.

Stan swung his feet to the floor. He got out of bed and walked across the room. Flipping a picture of Hitler aside, he exposed the microphone in the wall. Hans rolled his eyes and clicked his heels.

"Heil Hitler!" he almost shouted. "Tomorrow you will get out of bed and be down in the yard by seven."

Stan grinned. He reached up and disconnected the wire leading to the instrument.

"They listen all the time," Hans said. "They watch everyone. There is more Gestapo than guards."

"Nice country to live in," Stan remarked.

O'Malley laughed and pulled the blankets up around his chin.

"Sure, an' it needs a bit o' cleaning up," he said.

Hans looked at him nervously. "You think the British and Americans come soon?" he asked.

"If they're later than next week, I'll be after speakin' to a few generals harsh-like," O'Malley answered.

"Perhaps not next week but soon," Stan said.

"I am not a party member. I will go back to my little farm near Pilsen," Hans said, "if it is permitted."

"It could be fixed that way," Stan said and smiled. "Silence is golden, but too much of it might make the Gestapo boys suspicious." He walked to the picture of Hitler and connected the microphone again.

"You will report at once for mess. Heil Hitler!" Hans clicked his heels and did an about-face. He moved out of the room almost goose-stepping. Stan grinned after him.

"Get up, you bum," he called to O'Malley.

O'Malley got out of bed and began dressing. Within ten minutes they were in the hall. As they walked down it they passed no less than three pictures of Hitler hanging on the walls. O'Malley moved every one of them and peered behind it.

"I don't like the scenery here," he grumbled.

The mess was a large room which once had been a living room and dining room combined. There were twenty prisoners, mostly R.A.F. men, all of officer's rank. They looked bored and listless, but they greeted the new arrivals with friendly interest. Sim was seated at the table. He looked up and nodded.

Breakfast was not bad and the boys ate everything set before them. After breakfast the men went out into the yard. The sun was shining and the air was warm, but there was a feel of winter in the wind which blew over the high wall.

Stan and O'Malley sat down on a bench with Sim. The other men busied themselves with handball and quoits. Sim bent down and traced a line with a stick in the dirt.

"I have everything lined up. We get away tonight. A British colonel is giving a lecture in the big room at nine tonight. I have fixed the checker. We'll get away while that is on." Sim did not look up.

"Hans is the checker?" O'Malley asked.

"Yes."

"Sure this isn't a trap? Things have been working too good around here," Stan said.

"This will not be easy," Sim answered in a low voice. "The chances are about even we'll be shot before we get clear of the wire and the guard lines. These guards do not shout at you, they shoot and then yell." Sim laughed shortly. "But I'd rather be shot than rot here."

"Sure, an' that's me, too," O'Malley agreed.

"We'll be ready," Stan answered.

"You cannot take anything with you," Sim warned. "Now we have to break up. The guards are watching us." He got to his feet and walked away.

"I think he's acting nuts for the benefit of the guards," O'Malley said.

"If it turns out he really is nuts, we may find ourselves messed up with lead," Stan answered. He got up and walked over to where the R.A.F. boys were pitching quoits.

"Care to get in?" a captain asked him.

"Thanks, I'll have a try," Stan answered.

O'Malley stretched out on the bench and went to sleep. He slept through until lunch call was sounded. Stan mixed with the British officers and learned what he could about conditions. He got their names so he could report regarding them if he did get away.

The afternoon dragged away and mess call sounded after one of the R.A.F. officers had put the men through a stiff drill and a series of sitting-up exercises. After mess Stan and O'Malley went to their room. Sim was not there.

"I didn't see Sim around the mess when we left, wonder where he went?" Stan whispered.

"You worry too much about him," O'Malley answered. "I bet he's snoopin' around gettin' set to get us away."

Stan stretched out on his bunk. They waited for Sim to show up, but he did not come to the room. At eight o'clock Stan began to squirm.

"They've probably nabbed him," he said sourly.

"Sure, an' I'll start working on Hans if they have."

They had been speaking in very low tones. Now Stan spoke louder. "Better be getting ready to go to that lecture."

"Sure," O'Malley agreed.

The boys settled down to wait. O'Malley kept looking at his wrist watch. Stan lay with his eyes closed. He was checking every angle of the strange business. As near as he could gather, things were going badly in Germany. The big crack-up might be near at hand.

At five minutes to nine they heard steps in the hall. They passed down the stairs. Boys from the rooms along the hallway were going to the lecture. Stan got up and disconnected the microphone. O'Malley was pacing about like a caged lion. They heard single footsteps and there was a rap on the door. It opened and Hans stood there.

"I am glad you have not yet gone to the lecture," he said. "Herr General wishes to speak to you. You will come with me."

Stan looked at O'Malley and O'Malley looked at Stan. Stan spoke smoothly.

"Couldn't we see the general after the lecture? We'd like very much to hear the colonel."

"It will not wait. Herr General is a very impatient man."

There was nothing to do but go with Hans. Stan and O'Malley walked along the hallway with the corporal, keeping a sharp watch for Sim. They did not see him in the hallway or downstairs. Hans took them past the guards at the outer garden gate and across the street to another house. In a small hall room he nodded toward chairs.

"You will be called," he said, then turned and hurried away.

The outer door was open and the boys could see two sentries standing on the front porch.

"We have to get out o' here," O'Malley said.

"Not a chance. There's no window and those two guards would see us before we got within ten feet of them," Stan answered. "It's just a case of sitting tight and hoping Sim waits for us."

Near where they were sitting a door opened into another room. Stan leaned over and looked at the door. It was not latched firmly and was open about a half inch. He could hear men talking in the other room. They were speaking in German.

"You understand German. Listen to what they are saying," Stan whispered.

O'Malley moved closer and listened. The men seemed to be arguing hotly. Every once in a while one voice would be raised in anger. There were three men in the room. O'Malley edged the door open a bit more and peeped into the room.

After a bit he straightened and grinned at Stan. "Sure, an' the general is eatin' the tails off his staff. Some of 'em seem to think the war is lost. They been tellin' him the German people are demandin' peace at any price. I figure he's goin' to have one o' them shot."

At that moment an orderly came rushing out of the office. He charged past the boys without seeming to see them, and rushed out of the building.

"The general says if this leaks out, the Allies will invade at once. He's sure mad." O'Malley laughed softly.

A few minutes passed and the orderly returned with a squad of armed soldiers led by a lieutenant. They stomped past the boys and into the office. When they came out they were marching a captain and a major before them.

Five more minutes passed and the orderly came out. He seemed much agitated.

"You will come now," he said in husky English.

The boys followed him into the office. Herr General was a burly fellow with a bald head and a narrow chest. He had a monocle screwed into one eye which made him look fierce and tough. He glared at the boys, then snapped an order to the orderly. The man scurried away.

"Come up to my desk, you," the general snarled.

The boys moved up and stood waiting.

"I have checked the answers you gave to questions asked you when you were captured. You said an invasion will come at once. Why did you say that?"

Stan stared at the officer. "We didn't say any such thing," he answered evenly. He decided that the general had heard some of their conversation over the listening device.

"Sure, an' you got big ears, General," O'Malley said.

Stan kicked him on the shin. The general jumped and puffed out his chest. He fixed O'Malley with a cold glare.

"Pig! Fool! Keep a civil tongue in your head or you will regret it much."

"If you brought us here to get information, you will be disappointed, General," Stan said. "We will not talk."

"I brought you here to tell you that we intend to make you talk," the general barked. "I merely wished to warn you and then to let you have a little time to think it over."

"We are prisoners of war," Stan reminded him.

"The code provides for disciplining prisoners of war. We have some very effective methods. You will talk and be glad to. Now get out."

Stan and O'Malley turned toward the door. Two armed men stood waiting for them. They marched out with the guards close behind them.

"Sure, an' this is a nice mess," O'Malley grumbled.

"Could be worse," Stan said.

The guards left them after passing them into the yard of their house. They headed for their room. Passing through the outer hall, they saw that the lecture was still going on in the living room. They went up the stairs.

Stan opened the door and O'Malley shoved into the room close behind him. They stood looking at

Sim's bunk. The straw ticking of the mattress had been slit open and some of the straw was scattered on the floor. Sim was not in the room. Stan walked over to a little table. One small light bulb was flooding the room with light.

"He was here and left in a hurry. He didn't turn off the light."

"I'm gettin' out o' here," O'Malley growled.

"Sit down. We're staying," Stan said sharply. He pulled off his coat and tossed it across his bunk, then he seated himself on the foot of his bed.

"We're going to get it in the neck, anyway," O'Malley scowled.

"Do you know where we are, in what part of Germany?"

"Somewhere near Berlin," O'Malley said.

"Sure, but where? We need more dope on the grounds and on the country around us. We wouldn't get a mile from this prison farm if we did break out."

O'Malley sat down on his bed. "Sure, you're right. We should have had Sim tell us something about this deal."

"Now that you mention it, Sim never told us anything," Stan said.

"Probably didn't know anything," O'Malley growled.

They sat looking at each other, waiting, trying to discover some lead that might help them. Finally Stan said:

"We'll have to clean up that straw and fix Sim's bed before anyone comes in here snooping around."

"Yeah," O'Malley said but he did not move.

CHAPTER VIII

FLIGHT

Stan began cleaning up their room so that the guards checking rooms that night would not notice Sim had gone. He wanted to give Sim as much of a start as possible. While he was brushing the straw under Sim's bunk the door opened. Both boys turned quickly. In the doorway stood Sim. His lips were parted in a thin smile.

"Sim!" Stan took a step toward the door. "We thought you had gone."

"Quiet," Sim whispered. "Come with me."

He turned and moved out into the hall with Stan and O'Malley at his heels. They walked down the hall and into a corner room. Sim crossed the room and opened a window. They saw a rope dangling over the sill.

Stan peered into the darkness below but could see nothing. "There should be a guard right under this window," he whispered.

"He has been taken care of," Sim hissed. "You go down. We will follow."

"Didn't you get any guns or grenades?" O'Malley asked.

"No," Sim answered sharply. "Hurry."

Stan climbed through the window and slid down the rope. When his feet hit the ground he wiggled the rope. A minute later O'Malley was at his side. Sim arrived within another minute. He caught the boys' arms and began moving away from the house.

Sim led them to the wall and along it until they came to a gate. It was open; Sim paused and Stan and O'Malley peered out. A small light burned above the gate. The light revealed a truck filled with cans. Stan grinned in the darkness. The truck was a garbage lorry. The night breeze carried that information to him. The truck smelled very strong.

"We hide among the cans," Sim whispered.

At that moment two men appeared carrying a can. They heaved it into the truck. One of them fastened a chain across the back opening, then they moved toward the cab of the truck.

"When the light is snapped off!" Sim whispered.

From the kitchen of the house a voice shouted something in German. The truck driver answered. The light snapped off and Sim started forward with the boys beside him. The truck was sputtering and backfiring, pouring out rank smoke as they reached it. They went into it as it lurched forward. All of the cans came clanging back against the chain, almost shoving the boys

out.

Quickly the three moved cans until they were up in the front of the truck next to the cab. There they crouched down with their knees pulled up. The cans made so much noise there was no danger of the boys being heard.

"'Tis a sweet smellin' cab ye called," O'Malley observed.

"The smell will keep the Germans from examining it very closely," Sim answered and Stan heard him chuckle. "When we come to a lighted town we'll each have to get into a can."

"They're full o' garbage," O'Malley protested.

"We'll empty three cans," Sim said. "Might as well do it while we're on this rough country road."

The truck was bouncing and the cans were banging. The noise was terrific and the darkness total. Stan got hold of a can. It was heavy, but with O'Malley's help he was able to lift it up and tip it over the edge. The contents poured out on the side of the road. Two more cans were dumped.

"There goes a lot of meals for the prisoners in the ghetto," Sim said and laughed.

"You mean to say the skunks feed prisoners garbage?" Stan asked.

"I've been told they let the prisoners of the lowest class pick over the garbage," Sim answered.

Stan felt his stomach begin to turn over. O'Malley said nothing. For once he was stumped for words. They moved the cans to the center and well forward and crouched beside them.

The truck rattled on through the night. Presently they saw lights ahead.

"According to my map," Sim said, "that should be a well-lighted inspection post. We better get into the cans."

The boys got into the cans. Stan kept his head well up out of the can. He meant to keep it up in the wind until it was absolutely necessary to duck down.

The truck swung in under a row of lights. Stan ducked down and held his nose. There was much guttural shouting. Several men moved around the truck. They poked bayonets among the cans and against them. Stan felt a blade strike the can he was in. The can gave out a dull clinking sound, indicating it was full. Stan grinned. Someone shouted an order and the truck rolled on.

As soon as darkness closed over them the boys popped out of the cans. O'Malley was talking to himself in very rich Irish.

"If I'd known this was goin' to happen to me I'd have brought along a blanket to wrap meself in," he growled. "We'll smell so bad we won't be able to hide any place."

Stan laughed. "They won't need blood-hounds to track us," he admitted.

"We will get other clothing," Sim said.

The truck rolled on, crossing a hill and dropping down toward a town. Lights winked ahead of them and the road became smoother.

"We unload pretty soon," Sim said. "There will be a small farmhouse on the right with tall trees. We get off there. The farmer is a member of the underground."

"Underground in Germany?" Stan asked in surprise.

"They told me it was well established and doing a big business. People are paying well to get out of Germany before it collapses." Sim was swinging a leg over the side as he spoke.

The boys got out of the truck and clung to the outside. They saw dark forms of trees and a light in a window.

"Now," Sim whispered as he swung away from the truck.

Stan heard him land with a thud. Stan jumped and landed in a hedge beside the road and rolled on into tall grass. O'Malley hit close beside him, and they crouched behind the hedge watching the truck. It went rattling on into the night. Sim called to them.

"Come on. We have to hurry."

They moved over beside him and he headed across an open field toward the lighted window. As they neared the house, a dog began barking. Sim halted and they stood waiting. A door opened and a man shouted at the dog. Sim moved forward.

"Hello," he called.

The door closed suddenly and Stan heard the man walking over gravel toward them. They advanced to meet him. Sim spoke as soon as he was close.

"We were sent by Hans."

"Goot. Come, I show you," the man answered.

They walked with him to the house and he opened the door. "Quick," he mumbled. He began pushing them through the door.

There was no need to shove. The boys dived inside and the German closed the door. He moved to a window and pulled down the blind, then he faced them. He was a short man with a beefy face. His stomach rolled out over a wide leather belt.

"I get you clothes," he said gruffly.

Disappearing into another room he returned after a time with an armload of clothing which he tossed on a table. The boys changed into rough shirts and dungarees. The clothing was coarse, but it was clean. The German gathered up their uniforms.

"These I burn," he said and left with them.

"We have to move on at once," Sim said. "This place will be searched before morning. The Germans are very thorough."

The boys seated themselves and waited. Their host was gone for a long time. Finally Sim got up.

"I'll go hurry him along," he said. "You stay right here." He left the room hurriedly.

"Sim is no nut. He has this all worked out," O'Malley said.

"He certainly has," Stan agreed. He got up and moved to the door Sim had just closed. Opening it gently he went into a dark room. Feeling his way he moved to another door. He could see a shaft of light under the door. Halting with his hand on the knob, he listened. Sim was talking with their underground agent in German. Stan opened the door quickly. The two men whirled about and faced him.

"I didn't know you spoke German," Stan said.

"You should not be sneaking around," the German said sharply.

"I have always spoken German," Sim answered. "I learned it in school back home. How did you think I managed to line things up so well if I didn't know German?"

"We got worried," Stan said. "Thought something might have happened to you."

"I just wanted to make sure these uniforms were burned," Sim said and laughed. "German farmers are thrifty people. They hate to burn good wool cloth, which can't be bought for any price here. These people have only ersatz cloth."

"We go now," the German said and scowled at Stan.

"Did he burn them?" Stan asked.

"He buried them in his orchard. We don't have time to waste having him dig them up," Sim answered.

O'Malley had heard the talking and joined them in the kitchen.

"Everybody's here, so let's go," Stan said. He was trying to remember if Sim Jones had ever talked to him about his past. He could not remember the flier ever having said much about himself.

The German took the lead and they followed him out through a back door. They walked down a path and came to a small barn. Stan heard a horse snort. The German spoke softly to Sim in German.

O'Malley answered the man in German. The fellow jumped and O'Malley laughed. Too late Stan kicked O'Malley warningly upon the shin. Stan frowned. He should have warned O'Malley. Now the man knew he could speak and understand German. Sim looked at O'Malley and laughed.

"It seems we will be able to get on very well with two of us speaking the native tongue," he said.

"You talk Kraut?" O'Malley asked.

"Come, we waste time," the German said. He moved into the barn with the boys at his heels.

The guide untied a horse and led it out through a back door. There, by the light of the stars, the boys saw a two-wheeled cart loaded with hay. The German hitched the horse to the cart.

"Hide in the hay," he said.

The boys climbed into the cart and burrowed under the hay. Stan worked his way well forward with O'Malley and Sim close beside him. They were forced to lie very close together because the cart was narrow. They worked an opening for air and lay on the hard boards. The German spoke to the horse and the cart moved off.

The cart joggled over rutty roads for hours. Daylight began to show through the straw opening. Stan wiggled over against the slats on the side of the cart and poked a hole to look through. They were moving along a country lane. The cart turned out and a wagon passed. It was loaded with farm workers. Behind the wagon came a motorcycle and sidecar. A German soldier sat in the sidecar, while another, with a rifle slung across his back, drove the motorcycle. The driver

shouted at the German on the seat of the cart, but he did not stop him.

O'Malley began squirming. He was in the middle and could see nothing at all.

"Be still!" Sim snapped. "You'll shake hay loose and someone may become suspicious."

O'Malley lay still but he made Stan tell him what he saw. They passed other wagons loaded with slave labor going to the fields, as well as many farmers, both men and women, on the way to work.

The German kept on driving and no one stopped him. Noon came and he still kept on. The boys were getting hungry and thirsty, but the driver did not halt. He pulled out a bag from under the seat and munched a sausage sandwich, washing the food down with draughts from a brown jug. O'Malley was able to see this.

"Sure, an' I've a mind to reach up there an' grab that sandwich," he said hungrily.

"Better not," Stan warned.

O'Malley held his appetite in check, but he kept on grumbling.

"Stop watching him eat," Stan advised in a whisper.

"Sure, an' I can't take me eyes off that sausage sandwich. 'Tis the most appetizin' thing I iver seen," O'Malley said mournfully.

The cart rattled through a village and moved on down another narrow lane. Presently they came to a gate and the driver pulled up. Stan ducked back.

"German soldiers," he whispered warningly.

The soldiers were shouting at the driver. He got down and began talking to them excitedly.

"They're looking for escaped prisoners," O'Malley whispered in Stan's ear.

Three burly soldiers walked over to the cart and began thrusting their bayonets into the hay. Stan stiffened. If he was stabbed he meant to make no outcry. He felt the cold steel move across his body a few inches from his chest. It slipped back, then stabbed again. Stan was glad the bed of the cart had a ten-inch high board around it.

After more shouting and poking the driver got back on his seat and the cart moved forward.

"Boy," Stan muttered. "That was a close shave."

"I got a small cut," Sim said.

"And you didn't yell?" O'Malley spoke admiringly.

"It would have been the end for us if I had yelled," Sim answered.

The cart continued to jog along slowly. Long shadows fell across the road and the cart passed many farmers returning from the fields.

"I could eat a boiled dog," O'Malley grumbled.

"We'll eat later," Sim assured him.

Darkness settled slowly. The driver turned off the road into a narrower lane as soon as it was dark.

"No traveling is allowed after dark," Sim explained. "We must be near our second station."

The cart halted and the driver called to them.

"Come out now."

They climbed out and flexed stiff muscles. O'Malley faced the driver.

"I'm hungry. Got any food?"

"Come with me," the man said.

They entered a grove of trees and walked up to a tiny house. The house was dark but, with the aid of a flashlight, the guide located a trap door under some loose straw. He pulled it upward, revealing a stairs. The boys went down into a cellar where their guide lighted an oil lamp.

The cellar smelled stale but it had boxes to sit on and a table. There was a box on the table.

"Your food," the German said, nodding toward the box.

He turned away and went upstairs again. They heard him close the door and rake straw over it. O'Malley opened the box at once. It contained a loaf of heavy bread, a few pieces of cold sausage and three boiled potatoes. Also there was a jug which contained milk.

Sim produced a heavy clasp knife and cut the bread. The boys made sandwiches and munched them. The jug was passed around and they drank out of it.

"Sure, an' this is not a bad dinner," O'Malley said. "It compares favorably with the last roast duck dinner I had in London." He grinned at Stan.

After finishing their meal the boys sat waiting for their guide.

"He has to care for his horse and dispose of the hay," Sim explained.

CHAPTER IX

TRAPPED

The boys left the cellar very soon after finishing their meal. Their guide led them down a country lane. They hiked along steadily for several hours, then detoured through a field, making a wide circle.

"We have to go around the patrol stations on the road," Sim explained.

"It's nice to have a guide who knows the way," Stan said.

"I understand the patrol posts are cleverly hidden. Without a guide a man walking down the lane would trip an alarm wire and be caught in no time at all." Sim seemed to know all about the methods used by the Nazis to trap anyone fleeing the country.

They kept walking until midnight. Then they rested for a half-hour, lying in a hedge beside the road. After midnight they moved more slowly. Several times they dived into the fields along the road to avoid patrols moving swiftly along the lane on motorcycles. Once they almost ran into a bicycle patrol. The cyclists did not make any noise and were upon the boys before they had time to duck. A leafy hedge saved them from being sighted.

"We will have to cross the Dutch border soon," Sim said after talking with their guide.

"There won't be much of a guard there, will there?" Stan asked. "The Germans have made Holland a part of Germany."

"There is a strict border control," the guide answered. "The Dutch are just pigs and are kept in their pen."

"That's what the Nazis say," Sim added.

"Sure," the guide agreed. "The Nazis say that."

"How are we to get through?" Stan asked. "You must have a method which works."

"Sure," the guide said. "But it has always been risky. We may be separated. If we are separated, you will ask a Dutchman to take you to 76 Mamur in Arnhem. Do not speak to a Dutchman wearing a swastika. Ask only of a farmer or other working person."

"We all will meet there," Sim said. "After that, we will have no more trouble. The Dutch will take care of us."

"Now we go," the guide said.

"At any rate, we know where we are," Stan said to O'Malley. "Arnhem isn't so far from Rotterdam."

"Sure, an' that just means nothin' to me. I'm stickin' with this here guide," O'Malley answered.

They moved along at a fast pace for some time. Finally the German called a halt. There seemed to be quite a bit of activity ahead; besides, dawn was not far away. They had spent most of the last hour ducking patrols roaring up and down the lane.

"We must move very carefully now. We will leave the road. Keep close to me," the guide said in a low voice.

The party moved off the road and through a hedge. Beyond the hedge they found themselves in a plowed field. The ground was soft and damp. Moving slowly now, because they sunk in to their boot tops, the boys crossed the field and came to a canal. Stan could see murky water in the ditch. He judged the canal was about fifteen feet wide.

They followed the canal for some distance. Lights ahead caused the guide to halt. Stan could see men on both sides of the canal. They were silhouetted against the sky and were moving back and forth.

"We must pass through the guard lines here," the guide whispered. "There will be soldiers with rifles on each side of the canal. There is much barbed wire and many electrical alarms along the border. We must take to the canal."

"Sure, and it looks cold, that water," O'Malley muttered.

"We will keep close to the bank, two on each side. When we pass the guards above we must

crouch down in the water and stay against the bank. We must go very slow. Waves or movement of the water will be noticed."

"Lead on," Stan said grimly. "Let's get it over with."

"Those on the far bank will wade across after we pass the border. We will then go to Arnhem and hide there during the day." The German was sliding down the bank into the water as he spoke.

"O'Malley and I will cross over," Stan said. He wanted to keep O'Malley with him.

The water was icy and numbed their bodies almost at once. Stan and O'Malley waded across the canal. The bottom was muddy and the water came up to their necks. With chattering teeth they reached the far bank and began moving along in the black shadows next to overhanging grass.

Slowly the boys inched forward, being careful not to send ripples out across the water. As they neared the sentry post the water was well lighted from electric floodlights set on each bank. Stan halted and flattened himself against the grass.

A sentry was standing on each bank, his rifle butt resting on the ground. Both were looking down at the canal intently. Stan pulled O'Malley close to him.

"We'll have to get down until just our heads stick out, then inch forward," he whispered.

"Inch away," O'Malley whispered back. His teeth rattled louder than his words.

Stan sank down into the water and they began moving slowly ahead. Inch by inch they entered the lighted area and moved on. A water rat swam past them in the middle of the canal. It left a wide ripple behind it, and the sentries jerked up their guns. One of them laughed and picked up a rock. He tossed it at the rat. The rat dived with a loud splash. Both soldiers laughed loudly and one of them lighted a cigarette.

Stan shoved ahead a bit faster. They moved directly under the sentries and kept on going. Slowly they edged away down the stream. The light on the water became dimmer and finally faded out.

"How about crossin' over? I'm frozen stiff," O'Malley hissed between chattering teeth.

"O.K.," Stan answered. They moved out into the canal and waded across. Climbing out on the bank, they sat shaking and shuddering.

"Wonder where Sim is?" O'Malley asked.

"We better wait here. They may not have moved as fast as we did." Stan began rubbing his legs to warm them.

They heard no sounds except those coming from the post on the bank of the canal. Finally Stan moved.

"We stayed in the canal quite a long distance. They may be up or down the canal. But no matter which way, they are sure to be waiting for us. We can't stay here because daylight will be breaking very soon. I'll work my way back toward the border; you move the other way. When we find them, we'll turn back and meet."

"Good idea," O'Malley agreed. He moved off at once.

Stan headed back along the bank of the canal. He kept as close to the edge as he dared, because he figured Sim and the German would be sitting on the bank. After going a few yards he got down on his hands and knees and crawled. He would be able to go only a few yards more because the floodlights were growing strong. In a few more minutes he could turn back and be sure Sim was downstream.

He was moving along, crawling slowly, when he felt the bank under him begin to sag and slip. With a swift effort he tried to pull himself away from the canal. The cave-in took a big slice of earth with it. Stan's grasping hands found only torn roots and wet mud. He went over the edge and into the canal along with a half ton of earth. He and the dirt hit the water with a terrific splash.

Instantly a floodlight snapped on and swung around to sweep the canal. Stan went down in a mass of mud and water. He came up pawing and struggling. Men began shouting on the shore. Stan ducked under the icy water and plunged toward the bank. He came up against the grassy bank and shook the water out of his eyes. Both banks were swarming with soldiers.

Stan thought fast. He wanted the others to escape. They had to get away. He was getting set for another dive when the searchlight found him and pinned him to the bank like a trapped animal. Guards with machine guns covered him threateningly. He didn't have a chance. An officer was shouting at him in German.

"Hold your fire, I'll get out," Stan shouted. He wanted to hold the attention of the men until his friends got away.

"A Britisher," the officer shouted. "Get out on the bank!" His English was a bit thick but understandable.

Stan climbed out and was surrounded by armed men in an instant. He was marched up the bank

and halted under the floodlight. The officer stood glaring at him.

"Where do you come from?" he demanded.

"I came out of that canal, and it was a bit chilly," Stan answered. "I'd appreciate some dry clothing."

"American!" the officer exclaimed. "A spy dressed in the clothes of a farmer."

"I just borrowed these. I'm not a spy. You can check up on that." Then Stan clamped his lips shut. If he revealed his identity now, the Germans would know where to look for O'Malley and Sim.

"A spy, no less," the officer snapped. "Come with me."

"Gladly," Stan said.

He was taken to a small shack a few yards back from the canal. There was a stove in the shack and Stan edged close to it. The officer stepped to a wall phone and put through a call. He talked quite a while and finally began to laugh loudly. After he hung up he turned to Stan.

"The colonel agrees you are a spy and a very dumb one. You will be sent to him and he will have you shot at once. It is easy to see why you Americans cannot fight the Germans. You are careless fools, all of you."

Stan grinned. He figured the officer was the dumb one. He had not even asked Stan if there were any other men with him.

"I guess you're right, Captain," he said. "But if I'm to be shot I should be made comfortable. How about some dry clothes? I may contract pneumonia and die before you get to question me."

"I will deliver you to the colonel. What he does with you is no affair of mine." The captain opened the door and called to his men outside.

Stan walked out and a squad of four men marched him to an open car. He was shoved into the back seat and the guards climbed in, three with him and one in front. Stan was grateful for the packed condition in the rear seat, because chill air began to swirl back on him as they roared away. He got a little warmth from the soldiers crowded in with him.

Day was breaking as they moved into a city. Stan figured it was Arnhem. The car pulled up in front of a long stone building and Stan was hustled inside. He was taken into a bare room and left there alone. There was some heat in the room and he ceased shaking.

An hour passed and a tall soldier came into the room. He beckoned Stan to follow him. They walked down a hall and entered another room. Here Stan was served a bowl of potato soup. It was watery thin, but it was hot. His jailer sat watching him as he ate. When he had finished, the man nodded and got to his feet. Stan followed him down the hall again and into a room furnished as an office. A fat German colonel sat at a desk. His bloated cheeks puffed out and he burst into a hearty laugh when he saw Stan. His fat stomach heaved as he laughed, and his bristling mustache made Stan think of a walrus he once had seen in a zoo.

Stan stood waiting. For the life of him he could see nothing so funny about his personal appearance. He looked the colonel over with a critical eye. The colonel ceased laughing and regarded Stan closely.

"Lieutenant Stan Wilson, Eighth Air Force, U.S.A.," he said softly. "But for my purposes a spy, caught creeping up on one of our outposts dressed as a German farmer."

Stan jumped in spite of himself. The colonel knew his name. That was bad. He said nothing, knowing the colonel would explain more in detail.

"You American swine are such fools, so easy for the German mastermind to handle. But you are the prize *dummer* of all. We gave you a chance to escape along with your friend Lieutenant O'Malley, and you had to get caught in spite of us." He leaned back and laughed loudly.

"Sim Jones was a spy?" Stan shot the question at the colonel.

"Sim Jones is no spy, but Herr Egbert Minter is a spy and a very clever one. He fooled you men into thinking he was Jones. You were trapped by a very clever actor, Lieutenant." The colonel patted his stomach and smiled broadly. "I have been given a complete file upon the case along with orders to put you out of the way."

"Why should you let us escape?" Stan asked.

"As you will not live to tell about it, I may as well enlighten you." The colonel fairly beamed. "When Herr Minter and the redheaded lieutenant reach England, as they will, Minter will send us information as to a big raid we are sure you are planning. After Lieutenant O'Malley and Herr Minter tell your High Command how near collapse Germany is, they will make the raid with everything they have to knock us out of the war." The colonel bent forward. "We were careful to stage many little scenes for your benefit. I am sorry only that this O'Malley person is to get through to tell how weakened Germany is within her own borders. You would have served much better."

Stan stared at the German and his teeth clamped shut hard. "A very clever set of tricks, Colonel,"

he said coldly. "But they won't get you any place. Minter won't be able to get a message out in time."

"We already have the radio equipment where he can use it. We have made a careful study of the habits of Lieutenant Jones. You see he was knocked a bit out of his head and talked a great deal about his home and about his career in the service while he was in the hospital." The colonel leaned back. "I, Colonel Glotz, had no small part in this and will earn an advancement. Heil Hitler!" He snapped the words out sharply.

"And you intend to shoot me?" Stan said.

"Perhaps, unless you can give us some information regarding this new fighter craft you were flying."

Stan's eyes narrowed. He was sure Colonel Glotz's orders did not call for shooting him on the spot. He would have a little time to plan an escape. His chances would be desperately slim, he knew that, but he had faced death many times before and had always cheated the final pay-off.

"Well?" Glotz asked.

"I don't know what I could tell you," Stan said, pretending to be debating with himself.

"We'll give you a few hours to think it over. I have some important messages to dictate." Glotz rang a bell and two guards appeared. They stepped up beside Stan and nodded toward the door.

Stan was marched out into the hall and down a few doors to a small room. He was shoved inside and the door was locked. There was a cot and a table in the room. A small light bulb dangled from a cord. Its feeble light was necessary because the room was an inside one without windows. Except for a barred transom over the door, there was no means of ventilation.

Stan sat down on the cot to think. He had to get away and warn the Eighth Air Force of the trap being baited for them. That matter was more important than saving his own neck.

CHAPTER X

SPY

Stan lay on the cot for several hours, looking up at the dangling light bulb. He had been able to think of no plan of escape that seemed likely to succeed. But after careful thought he was convinced Colonel Glotz had been merely showing off. Stan felt certain Glotz would have to wait for orders from his superiors before he did anything. Those orders, however, could come through very quickly.

His thoughts were disturbed by the rattling of the iron bar across the outside of his door. The door creaked open and a man in civilian clothes entered. Stan heard the shuffle of feet outside in the hall and knew armed guards were waiting. The civilian was a slender man with a big nose and a very small chin. He looked at Stan out of little eyes set close together.

"Sorry to disturb your rest, Lieutenant Wilson." The man bowed stiffly. "I am Domber." He said it as though Stan ought to know him once he had mentioned his name.

Stan nodded and remained seated on his cot. Domber rubbed his hands together and smiled.

"You will go with me," he said. "We will have a nice long talk."

Stan got to his feet. Domber stepped to the door. He frowned at the two armed guards waiting for them.

"The military have odd ways. They always have guards about."

"They are funny that way," Stan agreed dryly.

They walked down the long hall and entered a small office. Its one wide window looked out upon a tree-lined street. There were no bars on the window and one of its side wings stood open. Stan saw people walking up and down the street. An expanse of smooth turf lay between the window and the sidewalk. Stan turned back to Domber, who had seated himself at a desk.

The office had nothing military about it. There were no war maps on the wall. The only picture was one of Hitler, hung back of the desk. There was an adding machine, two sets of files, several large cabinets with steel doors, and a desk with a typewriter on it. Stan smiled at the little blonde seated before the typewriter. She returned his smile with a severe and steady look out of her gray eyes. No help there, Stan thought.

"Be seated," Domber said, pointing to a chair beside the desk. He fished out a box of cigars, flipped the lid open, and extended the box toward Stan. "Smoke?"

"No, thanks," Stan said.

Domber selected a cigar after turning several over. "Such poor cigars. I'll be glad when the war

is over and I can again import some of my favorite Tampa Perfectos." He snipped the end off the cigar with a gold clipper, then jabbed a full inch of the end into his mouth and rolled the cigar around as though tasting its flavor. "Now," he said, "we will get down to business."

Stan leaned back and waited.

"I went to considerable trouble to get this chance to talk with you. The colonel is a bloody old coot. All he thinks of is shooting people. I have other interests besides killing men. My hobby is planes." Domber bent forward.

Stan was instantly on the alert. He noticed the stenographer had placed a sheet of notes on a rack and was clicking away on her typewriter, but he did not think she was copying from her notes. He was sure she was going to record what he said.

"You have had a chance to work with many new ideas. You'll be with us until after the war, so I see no reason why we shouldn't have a chat about new wrinkles." He smiled and rolled his cigar.

"I understood I was to be shot as a spy," Stan said.

"The military is bent upon it, but I have much influence. I could have you designated a prisoner of war. Tomorrow I will see the Fuerher himself."

"What do you want to know?" Stan realized this was a chance to stay alive for a time. If he could interest Domber without giving away any secrets, he might be given a chance to escape.

"You were flying a P-51, a Mustang, the British call it."

"Yes."

"This ship has some very interesting equipment on it, some typically American improvements."

"Just what features do you mean?" Stan asked.

"I operate a plane factory. We have been experimenting with a supercharger. The one on the P-51 is something new. If you can recall some of the details...." Domber leaned forward.

"You haven't captured one intact yet?" Stan asked.

"No, and the possibility seems quite remote. You Yanks have been very clever in fixing it so that that particular piece of mechanism is always smashed when a ship lands."

"I'm not an instrument man. I just fly planes," Stan said. "But I have had general instructions on the new dual supercharger." Stan spoke slowly.

"You might, perhaps, be able to suggest repairs for one that is partly destroyed?" Domber asked eagerly.

"I have patched together some badly hashed ships," Stan answered.

Domber rubbed his hands together. "I think we shall have a very pleasant time working upon a P-51," he said.

"Don't get your hopes too high, I'm no expert," Stan said.

"When one is sure to be turned over to Colonel Glotz as a spy, one is apt to be quite successful as a mechanic, what?" Domber beamed.

"If I don't make good on this I'm to be shot?" Stan looked Domber squarely in the eye.

"I'm afraid so. It would be very painful to me, I can assure you. I do not like to see men shot. But we won't think of that. We'll have lunch and then we'll get at the job." He turned and spoke to his secretary in German, then shot a glance at Stan.

"He wants to see if I understand German," Stan thought. He did not show any interest and Domber smiled broadly.

"We will go out to lunch now," he said.

Outside the door the two guards fell in behind them. Stan smiled as he thought of the appearance they made. Domber was dressed in a natty suit. He wore spats and carried a small cane, which his secretary handed him as he walked out. There was a red feather in the bow on his snap brim felt hat. Stan was dressed in a wrinkled and soiled outfit that was streaked with mud.

They walked out of the building and entered a big car. The guards got in with the driver and the car pulled away. Stan noted looks of hate and fear on the faces of the Dutch people in the street as they watched the car slide past. He had a hunch Domber was known to these people; he also had a hunch the plane maker was hated and feared by them. They stopped outside a big house where four guards stood watch over the entrance. The guards saluted as Domber got out. He puffed up like a pouter pigeon and shouted:

"Heil Hitler!"

They walked up the steps and entered the house. A man met them in the vestibule. He took Domber's hat and cane and stared at Stan.

"See that Lieutenant Wilson is furnished a complete outfit of clothing. Show him to the east room." Domber spoke in English.

"Yes, Herr Domber," the man said and bowed.

"Run along with Herman," Domber said. "I'll be having a brandy in the library." He turned away at once.

Stan followed Herman up a wide stairway and into a large room. It was furnished in a luxurious manner. Herman bowed at the door.

"You will wish me to draw hot water for a bath?" he asked.

"Thank you, Herman, I will take a hot bath. See that there's plenty of soap." Stan grinned.

Herman drew water in the bathroom and laid out snowy towels. Coming out of the bathroom, he said:

"I will lay out clothing for you."

Stan lost no time in getting into the tub. He splashed and built up a mountain of suds, then wallowed in them. As he lay there he suddenly began to laugh. This was the oddest experience he had ever had. Yet there was something sinister about it. Domber had a fishy coldness about him that was chilling. Stan decided it was the way he looked out of his little eyes. There seemed to be a smoldering hate back of the light in those eyes.

Herman had laid out clothing, a business suit which was very close to Stan's size, fresh linen, a shirt, a tie and a pair of dress shoes. Herman was nowhere in sight.

Stan dressed slowly. The shoes fit well and so did the shirt. Herman was an expert man's man. He had sized Stan up correctly. As he knotted the tie, Stan walked to a wide window overlooking a garden. There were no bars on the window and the garden was deserted. No guards paced back and forth. Stan began to wonder if he was not supposed to escape again.

Walking to the door he opened it. The hallway was empty. Stan walked toward the back of the house and found a balcony with a flight of steps leading to the garden below. He wondered what would happen if he walked down those steps and into the garden. With a grin on his lips he did just that.

Stepping off the last step he strolled into the garden. No one challenged him, so he walked around the house. He was standing looking out into an alley lined with trees. Suddenly a man stepped out from behind a wall and bowed to Stan.

"Luncheon is ready," the man said in perfect English.

Stan noticed, as the wind whipped open the man's coat, that he was wearing a heavy shoulder holster. He smiled. The man reminded him of a Chicago gangster he once had seen captured.

"I was just going in," he said. Turning about he entered the house. Herman appeared at once and bowed. Stan followed him into Domber's library. A table had been set before an open fire. Domber was seated in an easy chair, puffing on a cigar.

"Have a pleasant stroll in the garden?" he asked.

"You certainly requisitioned a nice place for yourself," Stan remarked.

"Oh, I have owned this for years," Domber said. "This is my home."

That accounted for the hated looks the people on the street had given Domber as he passed. He was a Dutch Quisling, a traitor to his own country. Domber seemed to read Stan's thoughts.

"I always have been credited with having brains enough to take care of my business and my own comforts," he said dryly. Then he smiled. "But sit down. We will see what we have for luncheon."

The common people of Germany might be eating poorly and tightening their belts, but Herr Domber's table gave no hint of lack of supplies. There was real coffee, strong and black, fruit, fish, fresh vegetables and a roast squab for each diner. Stan put aside all unpleasant thoughts and ate heartily.

While they ate, Herr Domber kept up a steady conversation. He talked about fighter planes. Stan was surprised at the things Domber revealed in a casual way. He gave a very good description of the new secret rocket which was doing so much damage to the Forts and Libs, even telling Stan how it was handled. Once in a while he would ask a question. Each time Stan matched wits against the traitor to keep from telling him anything important.

After a while Stan was convinced Domber was so sure he would never live to repeat what he had heard that he felt no need to be careful about what he told the Yank.

"I have had many guests, Dutch, Norwegian, British and now an American." Domber beamed. "I have enjoyed each of them, and I am sure they never complained of my hospitality."

Back of the genial manner Stan felt the cold threat of death lurking in the way the traitor looked at him. Domber was very sure of himself and of his power. Stan resolved that he was going to be one guest who fooled the Dutch Quisling.

After dinner Domber showed Stan his collection of war trophies and his laboratory and workshop. The laboratory was far more elaborate than the workshop. Stan was fascinated by the plants and animals Domber kept there. Domber laughed softly.

"I experiment much," he said. Then he added, "I have done much with poison gas as well as with rare drugs."

"You plan to use poison gas?" Stan asked.

"If our plans work out well, yes," Domber said frankly. "If Minter's work is well done and we are able to smash a large part of the British and American air power, we will launch gas attacks upon the principal English cities and later make an invasion." He smiled slightly.

"You have the planes?" Stan asked.

"For one big blow. First we smash the air power, then we attack. We have endured much bombing to save air power for this." Domber had ceased smiling and for the first time his hate came to the surface. He shrugged his shoulders suddenly. "But we waste time. We will have a look at the P-51."

CHAPTER XI

MUSTANG

Herr Domber led the way from his shop and laboratory to the street entrance where a car was waiting. He scowled at the guards outside his door and shouted, "Heil Hitler!" Then he marched down the walk to the car. This time no uniformed guards went along. There was just the driver, Domber, and Stan.

Stan was beginning to get the idea that the Dutch Quisling disliked the military. But he was not fooled into thinking Domber did not have his own henchmen. The driver of the car was a powerful fellow with beetled brows and scowling face. As soon as they pulled away from the curb, another car slipped in behind them and never left them until they parked outside a walled enclosure.

They were getting out of the car when a German military machine roared up and stopped. Two officers got out and moved stiffly toward the spot where Stan and Domber stood.

"Heil Hitler," Domber said. Then he opened up with an angry flow of German.

The officers snapped back at him and a heated argument raged. Stan gathered the officers were angry because Domber had taken Stan out without a proper armed guard. Apparently Domber won the argument. The officers saluted and made off.

"Such fools. They fear you would escape," Domber explained. "I have told them you would not get a hundred yards before you would be killed. No one has ever escaped from the Bloodhound."

"Bloodhound?"

"That is a pet name my Dutch friends have given me." He smiled at Stan. "But come, we are being delayed."

A gate opened and a man in coveralls came up to meet them. Domber spoke to him and the man walked with them to a locked door in a second wall. Producing a key, he opened the door and let them through.

Stan was startled by what he saw. There was a sunken runway leading into an underground hangar. Domber beamed.

"Not a bomb ever falls here. Above our shops there is a church and a schoolhouse. We do much valuable research here and cannot afford to be disturbed."

Stan looked along the runway. It ended abruptly at a steel fence, but a roadway went on in a twisting course, making detection of the runway difficult.

"Very clever," Stan said.

"I was sure you'd appreciate it," Domber said. "Now we'll have a look at the P-51."

They entered the underground hangar by going down a shaft in an elevator. Stepping out of the elevator Stan saw a well-lighted and spacious hangar. Various planes stood along one high wall. There was a Fort, a Wellington, two Spitfires, a Lockheed Lightning, and at the far end in a wide shop space stood a new P-51. Her nose was pointed out toward the runway and she looked ready to glide out from underground and take off. Domber laughed.

"I'm sorry, but it can't be done," he said as though Stan had spoken his thoughts out loud.

"Can't blame me for thinking about it, can you?" Stan asked.

They walked over to the fighter. She had been patched up and looked airworthy enough.

"Mind if I go up?" Stan asked.

A dozen men working in the shop stood watching. "No, go ahead," Domber said.

Stan climbed up and into the cockpit. A glance showed him that there had been considerable instrument damage which the German mechanics had not been able to repair. He noticed at once that the engine was hooked up to a small portable gasoline tank. That meant she had no fuel in her except just enough to make test runs of the engine. It probably was a fire hazard measure, but it also was one reason why Domber was so willing to let Stan get into the cockpit.

The other reason Stan soon discovered. Looking out, he saw on each side of the opening to the runway, batteries of aircraft cannon. Those guns could lay a concentrated cross fire over the runway so deadly that any plane would be blown to bits in a minute.

Stan climbed down out of the cockpit. He faced Herr Domber. "Just what was it you wanted me to do?" He had to stall for time, more time.

"You will assemble and repair the supercharger on that plane. Every tool you need will be at hand, and if you need an assistant I will furnish you one who speaks English." Herr Domber was smiling as he spoke.

"That's a big order," Stan said.

"My experts could do this, but it might take several weeks and we do not have that much time. We have such a ship as this one. All we need is a supercharger to make it the best ship in the world. Naturally I am anxious and do not wish to lose any time."

"I'll need an English-speaking helper. I may have to have parts made and I do not run a lathe," Stan said.

Herr Domber called a man over to him. After listening for a few minutes the man left. He returned a few minutes later with a youngster not more than eighteen years of age.

"Swen, you will be Lieutenant Wilson's assistant. Help him in every way you can. You are under his orders," Herr Domber said.

"Heil Hitler," Swen said and saluted. He was a blond, curly-headed kid with a ready smile. Stan grinned at him and said:

"We'll get along."

"You may talk freely to Swen," Domber said. "He is a tested party man, but he does not like killing, so he is a mechanic. I have to watch him to keep the generals from stealing him and sending him off to Russia to fight." Domber laughed, but Stan saw fear come into the boy's eyes.

"Anyone else speak English in the shop?" he asked. "I might want another man."

"No others," Domber said. "Now we must get to work."

Stan was supplied with a locker and a pair of coveralls. He was taken to a special room in the shop. There he found parts from P-51's recently shot down. The smaller shop was completely equipped. Three other men worked at benches before a window. Stan was assigned to a vacant bench. Before him lay part of the new dual turbo-supercharger. Other parts were stacked on a table.

"Know anything about one of these gadgets?" Stan asked Swen.

"Gadget?" Swen repeated in a British accent.

"Yank word for machine," Stan explained.

"No, I have never seen one before," Swen replied.

Herr Domber stood around for a little while, then made off. Stan grinned at Swen. He had decided to work upon the kid. There might be a chance to do something. Swen, like most young Germans, was deadly afraid of being sent to the Russian front. It might be that he secretly hated the men who bossed him.

At the next bench a tall mechanic was working with a part from a Spitfire. Stan moved over to the edge of his bench.

"Hand me that wrench," he said to the tall German.

The German reached over and handed Stan the wrench. Suddenly his face became very red and he spoke angrily in German.

"Thanks, buddy," Stan said. "I'm glad you speak American."

The German shrugged his shoulders and went on working. Swen looked at Stan and said:

"I am your helper. I could have handed you that wrench."

"I just wanted to be sure Heinie, here, could understand everything we say. I noticed that he was just playing with that oil gauge. It's an old type that's been out of use for four years."

The tall German's face got redder. He growled something and moved away. Stan figured he was going to report he had been spotted.

"Now, Swen," Stan said, "we're going to be friends, you and I."

Swen looked scared. "Heil Hitler," he said. "I am not to be your friend."

"You won't get hurt," Stan said softly. "Just tell them everything I tell you when they question you tonight."

"They will kill you," Swen said in a low voice. "Herr Domber poisoned the other one. He will do the same to you."

"Tell me about it quickly. They won't be leaving us alone without a spotter very long," Stan said.

"I do not know how it was done. I heard the Gestapo men laughing about it. The British flier thought he was going to get away. He fixed up his plane and had gasoline enough for much testing. But after he had it running and they learned what they wanted to know about it, he just fell over dead."

"That is quicker than working it out by themselves. Not much, but a few days," Stan said grimly.

At that moment the tall German who had been working at the next bench came running up. He was out of breath when he halted before Stan.

"I am to be your helper." He turned upon Swen. "Get out into the shop."

"Sorry to lose you, Swen," Stan called after the boy. He turned to the new helper. "They sure sent you back on the run. Did you get a good skinning?"

The German scowled at Stan. "I am to take orders," he muttered.

Stan laughed. The softhearted Swen had been planted on him. They were supposed to get chummy while the tall mechanic listened and picked up anything of value which might be said.

"What am I supposed to call you?" Stan asked.

"Hans," the mechanic said shortly.

"Well, Hans, we'll have a try at assembling this thing," Stan said.

Stan worked on the supercharger all that afternoon and convinced himself that he could fit it together and make it work. Toward evening Herr Domber came back. He halted beside the bench and looked at the machinery there.

"You have had some success?"

"I don't know," Stan said innocently. "I'll have to try it out on the ship."

"Certainly," Domber agreed. "Of course. When will you wish to try it out?"

"Tomorrow afternoon," Stan said.

"If you worked tonight you could try it out in the morning?" Domber suggested with a leer.

"Yes, I guess so," Stan said.

"Fine. I know you won't mind working tonight."

"Of course not," Stan said and felt an itch to lay his fist against Herr Domber's receding chin.

"You will honor me by having dinner with me tonight?"

"Certainly," Stan said and laughed. He might as well live high while he could live.

As they went out to enter Domber's car, Stan asked, "Why do you go to all of this fuss? I can't understand you Germans. There was a lot of fuss in planning to let us escape. Now you are putting on a big show for me. You could get results without it."

"We have much humor," Domber said. "I have my own little jokes and enjoy them." He smiled at Stan.

Stan thought about the R.A.F. flier who had been poisoned after he revealed what Domber wanted to know. He decided Herr Domber was a bit of a maniac as well as an enemy and a traitor to Holland.

After an excellent dinner Stan was taken back to the job. Herr Domber was in high spirits. Hans was waiting at the bench. Stan saw at once that the mechanic had been trying to fit the machinery together. With a grin he fished several parts out of his coverall pocket and set to work.

As he worked he began to plan. If he was to be poisoned, it likely would be done shortly before the tryout. He would have to watch closely. He would drink nothing and he would eat nothing. And he would keep two vitally important parts hidden until he had to put them into place. He also would be very careful no one bumped into him and jabbed him with a hypodermic needle. The last method of poisoning did not seem to fit in with the character of Herr Domber. His method would be cunning and crafty, and it would be done with a lot of showmanship.

Nobody but Herr Domber, Stan decided, would have thought up such a crazy method of saving a few days time, and of making away with a prisoner of war. If he was called to face charges after the war, he could claim Stan Wilson had turned traitor to his country and disclosed secrets before meeting an accidental death.

Stan looked at the machine on the bench. He was taking chances with valuable secrets, but if he escaped he would be able to stop a mass slaughter of British and American planes and men, perhaps even a gas attack upon England. He decided it was worth the risk.

"You work very slow," Hans complained.

"You're here to take orders," Stan snapped.

Hans jumped and scowled at Stan. He was so used to being snapped at that he reacted without thought. Stan laughed.

"You jump like monkeys when they yell at you, don't you?" he said.

"Pig," Hans muttered under his breath.

Stan went to work again. At twelve o'clock he took off his coveralls and slipped several parts into his coat pocket.

"Tell the boss I'm ready to go to bed," he said.

Hans made off and while he was gone Stan did a few things to the supercharger. Hans came back quickly.

"Herr Domber will call for you," he said, then seated himself and lighted a cigarette.

Domber appeared a half-hour later, dressed in evening clothes. He was beaming.

"You have everything ready for a tryout in the morning?" he asked.

"Everything," Stan assured him.

"I must have a look at the machine," Domber said. He walked to the bench and spent a half-hour studying the supercharger. Finally he turned to Stan. "How much testing will be required to adjust it?"

"It can only be adjusted by running the motor," Stan said and did not smile. "I should say the plane could be ready for flight by afternoon."

"You will run it that long?"

"It may take even longer," Stan said. "This is a delicate bit of machinery and I am not too familiar with it. I have only had a general course in its construction."

"In that case we will have the tanks connected and filled with gasoline." Domber smiled broadly.

"That will save time, and I understand that's what you are interested in," Stan said.

"Time, yes, we have to work fast."

Stan grinned. He knew that Herman Goering's Air Ministry was wild with fear and grasping at every straw of help they could get for their fighter planes. They had to have something that would stop the Fortresses and Liberators, or their cities would be destroyed, and they had to have it quick.

"Haven't you ever thought that I might sabotage this job?" he asked.

"I think not," Domber said. "I am a student of the human mind. When I have studied a man I know just about what he will do. I know you do not wish to be turned over to the Gestapo and given the treatment they use to get information."

"No, I guess I'm not that much of a hero," Stan said.

CHAPTER XII

ZERO HOUR

As Stan worked on the supercharger he went over his plans carefully. With everything about ready to make tests, he was beginning to wonder if the story Swen had told him was not just the wild fancy of a scared kid. He even thought of the possibility that Swen had been planted to get him off on the wrong track. There had been so many crazy things happening that he could not afford to overlook any angle.

He had three mechanics helping him, with Hans giving his orders to the two who spoke no English. As he worked he began to wonder if he had not been neatly tricked. He was sure that at least one of the men hanging around watching him was a Luftwaffe pilot. No one interfered with his work or tried to tell him what to do. He was having as free a hand as though he had been

working in a shop of the Eighth Air Force. Some of the men scowled at him, but most of them just watched with interest and with something else. Stan guessed they were eagerly waiting for the trap to spring. Then they could have a big laugh on the dumb Yank.

The supercharger parts were about installed in the ship. Stan checked the gasoline supply. There was just enough to fly him out over the channel if he took off before he used too much. Once out over the channel he might be able to water-crash the P-51 near a British patrol or pick-up boat. The trouble was that the instant the engine began to work the trap would be sprung on him. He had to figure that one out fast.

Swen showed up and hung around watching along with the other mechanics. He grinned at Stan once and shook his head. Stan winked at him. Herr Domber showed up in a sports outfit. His white spats gleamed and his yellow tie shone. Domber was in a very genial mood.

"You are progressing?" he asked.

"I'm getting the thing together, but I don't know whether it will work," Stan said.

"We will have lunch at a café downtown today," Herr Domber said without the flicker of an eye. "I have a special café in mind where the sea food is excellent and the wine very choice."

"That will be fine," Stan said and grinned as he hoisted himself up into the ship.

He lay inside the fuselage and looked at the supercharger. There was one valve which he had not fitted. He was afraid that if he fitted that valve into place the Mustang would purr like a cat. He was now convinced that the Germans had had all of their trouble with the air mixture and the pressure intake. His instructions on the new machine had been very detailed on these points. They were the secrets of the new supercharger.

Stan plugged the valve opening with a wad of cotton waste and tucked the valve into his pocket. Of one thing he was sure, the Mustang's engine had to be hot if he expected to snap her out of that hangar. And in getting her hot he did not dare let her show signs of running smoothly. Climbing out of the fuselage, he called to Hans:

"We'll turn her up." He wiped sweat from his forehead. The air in the hangar was hot, kept that way to make engine starting easy.

Hans and his men wound up the Mustang. Stan climbed into the cockpit and got set. From where he sat he could see, through a plate he had removed from the panel, the adjustment valve he had seated with waste. He could reach it by bending over.

The Mustang's engine turned over and she sputtered once or twice but refused to start. The wad of waste was no good. He had to seat the valve. Looking out he shook his head to Hans. Then he noticed that Domber was talking to an artillery captain over by the gate. He was shaking his head and making violent gestures.

Stan watched him carefully. It might be that Domber was telling the gun captain not to blast the P-51 if it made a run. In that case Domber had plans even if Stan got the ship away. Domber came back to the P-51 and Stan looked the other way as he bent forward and seated the valve.

The tough part was that if he hit the mixture just right in seating that valve the engine would hit it off at once. Stan knew how those Allison's worked. Given a hot room they might flip right over and go off with a bang. He climbed out of the cockpit and made a few last checks on the outside.

A water boy came up and the men crowded around for drinks. Stan watched the water boy carefully. He was again thinking about the poison business. The water was in a pail and the men were dipping it out in a tin cup. That did not look dangerous and Stan was very thirsty. He turned his back and climbed into the cockpit again. He was down inside, working on a repaired cable. Close to his face was the hole where the shell had ripped through and severed the cable.

Suddenly Stan heard someone whispering. It was the voice of Herr Domber.

"Get set, fool, and when the boy offers him a drink you are to shake your head. In that way he will think he has escaped being poisoned. He is just stalling now. I want this ship tuned up. If you fail, it is the Russian front for you."

"Yes, sir. Heil Hitler," Swen's voice answered.

Stan grinned broadly. He finished with the cable. One thing was sure. The poison story had been a gag to make him think he had outwitted Domber. He climbed out of the cockpit and walked over to Hans.

"We'll hit her again," he said.

Turning back he noted that several of the mechanics had moved in close. A quick glance showed bulges under their coveralls which looked a lot like army pistols or automatics. The water boy moved toward Stan. Looking past the boy Stan saw Swen. Swen began shaking his head as Stan looked at the water pail. Stan pretended not to see him, though Swen was squarely in front of him.

Reaching down he took the tin cup, filled it, and drank deeply. He had a second drink, then tossed the cup to the boy. As he did so, he shot a side glance at Herr Domber and almost burst

out laughing. Domber's face was red and his mouth was screwed into a snarl. Suddenly Stan felt sorry for Swen. He nodded to Hans as he climbed up.

Looking down he saw the mechanics with their bulging coveralls crowding in close. Several of them had ripped their suits open and had their hands inside. Stan eased back against the shock pad. The left brake was the one to kick down hard. He had shoved the chock out from under the right wheel. He had a momentary feeling that the builders of the Mustang should have extended the armor plate further forward. The men on the ground would have a clean shot at him. They were well forward now and watching him like cats at a rat hole.

Hans kicked the engine over to prime her. Stan got set and eased on the switch. She turned over slowly, fired twice, idled, then fired again. Sweat broke out over Stan's forehead. Below him the faces of Domber and his men blurred. The engine kept on rumbling and sputtering. Stan relaxed as he pretended to be working on the gas adjustment.

He gave the valve a turn and the Allison smoothed considerably. Leaving it that way he looked down at Hans, a deep frown on his face. He shook his head and motioned to the mechanic. Hans did not know what he wanted, but he moved around to the side of the ship. Stan was sorry to have to use Hans as a shield but he knew, now, that a quarter turn more on the valve would set the Allison roaring. What he needed was a bit more heat on his temperature gauge, and he wanted to keep Hans in line.

Bending over he bellowed at Hans, making his words jumble together. Hans looked blank and shook his head. Stan scowled at him. Then he got a bright idea. He looked over at Domber and beckoned to him. Domber came over. He was shorter than Hans. Stan reached down and bellowed:

"Get up and I'll show you how to adjust this type of supercharger!"

He even gave Herr Domber a hand up on the step. Domber leaned into the cockpit. Stan pointed to the valve. His fingers closed over it and began to turn it. Then his right arm shot out. His fingers gripped Domber's yellow tie. The Dutch Quisling's eyes bulged and he pulled back.

In that instant the Allison surged into full, smooth power. Stan kicked down on one brake and snapped her around. Like a falcon launching out from a limb, the Mustang shot toward the opening ahead. Stan held Domber over the edge of the open hatch until the ship was out in the sunshine, then he gave the little Quisling a shove.

Hoiking the tail of the Mustang, he hopped her suddenly. It was a trick he had depended upon to save him from the guns. As she shot upward he saw flame and fire rip the runway. The blast was so close to his belly that it sheared away most of the landing gear. Stan banked and dropped back down toward the roofs of the city. As he laid over he saw the withering fire on the runway lift. Amid the ripped up slabs of cement he saw a man lying sprawled on his face. He was half covered by a slab of concrete.

"One for the Dutch patriots," Stan said grimly.

As he roared over the rooftops, Stan leaned back and laughed. He would have to fly low because the high-level dual supercharger was not working. All he had done was adjust the regular carburization system. He had not taken chances on his work on the high-altitude machinery.

There were no Nazi planes in the air. There had been no alert. Stan was sure there would be no attack until he reached Rotterdam. Using the tactics of the Rhubarb Raiders he flew low over the tile roofs and the windmills.

In a surprisingly short time, the Mustang broke out over Rotterdam and Stan straightened his course. His compass was out, the gyro-horizon had been removed and both clocks were stopped. The radio had been stripped out of the ship along with every other instrument not absolutely necessary to test flight. Domber had only wanted to learn about the supercharger. His egotism in believing everyone else was dull-witted compared to himself had saved Stan.

Over the estuary of the Rhine River Stan met his first flak. A startled battery opened up as he flipped over so low down he could see the buttons on the artillery men's uniforms. The firing was wild, but it roused gunners out on the Hook of Holland. There the Jerries did some closer shooting. But Stan was dusting the concrete emplacements and the gunners did not get their hearts into the job. Stan flipped up over blue water with a grin on his face.

Checking his gasoline supply, he judged he could get to the middle of the channel. He had no parachute and no life belt or Mae West suit to float him. The chill water of the channel would soon drag him down. He had to locate a patrol boat or a British ship of some other class. And he had to watch for Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulf fighters.

High above him he spotted three fighter craft. He saw them wheel and bank into the sun. They would be coming downstairs to have a look. Possibly they had been warned by radio to look for him. A minute later he spotted five more planes and these he was able to check. They were FW 190 fighters and they were coming up from the direction of Ostende on the Belgium coast. Then he saw two Me 109 Stingers slipping in from the other side. Stan kicked the Mustang wide open. No use trying to save gas by holding cruising speed. He had to get away from that coast.

The Mustang knifed ahead and Stan bent forward as the air-speed indicator rolled up to just

under four hundred miles per hour. There was no more boost and he longed for the dual supercharger. The FW's dropped in behind, unable to head him off, but the Me's came on like falcons trapping a homing pigeon. Stan felt a good deal like a pigeon. He was unarmed and he was carrying a vital message that had to get through. He dived down close to the water and roared ahead.

One Me dived in on him and zoomed over him. Stan felt lead spattering all over his ship and saw cannon shells hit the sea close below his wings. The second Me came in and Stan slipped a bit, kicking the top of a wave with his port wing.

The Jerry was coming down at a terrific rate. He did not think any sane flier would be zooming along on the crests of the waves. When Stan dipped, the Jerry missed him and shot past. Stan pulled up sharply just as a great cloud of water and smoke lifted above the sea. The Jerry had hit nose-on. Stan saw the tail of his ship and one square-tipped wing rise above the green water, then slip from sight.

In coming up Stan went over the third Me. It managed to flatten out but went skidding along the tops of the waves for a half mile before it got into the air again.

That gave Stan his chance to get away. He could outrun the Me's once he got them down on his level, where they could not use their diving speed. But the three fighter craft he had first spotted were coming down now. They were dangerous ships. All three of them were FW 190's, and diving on an enemy from above is a job the FW does best.

Stan settled down close to the channel again and kept racing on. The FW's were sloping in at a screaming pace. Stan felt their first lead as it hailed around him. He stayed in the fire a split second, then bounced up and over. He saw the three FW's far below him. They were coming around for another climb.

"Sorry, fellows, but I just can't wait," Stan muttered.

He nosed down again and used the slope to build up speed. Suddenly he glanced at his gasoline indicator. It was getting wobbly. Stan went up again to have a look around. Far ahead he spotted two black specks with smoke pluming up over them. That meant larger ships than patrol boats. They might be German light destroyers on patrol, but they were the only craft in sight. He had to make a try for them.

Sloping off again, he roared away toward the ships. Slowly their hulls became larger and Stan saw that they were destroyers, small, sleek, and fast. They were plowing along at top speed, which was not a good sign. German craft in those waters would be making knots because Allied planes kept a sharp watch over the channel.

Stan went in at top speed. He was still a long way from the two ships when his engine quit. It went out without any sputtering at all, and it refused to rev up a single blast.

Flying so low, Stan knew he would not stay up over any great distance. He felt the Mustang begin to settle. The ships were closer now, but he still had not identified them. That no longer mattered. If they were German he would just sink with the Mustang. Considerable haze and smoke enveloped the ships. They were putting about and swinging away from him so that the smoke kept them covered. Stan had a wild notion they thought he was trying to torpedo them and were taking evasive measures.

"Germans," he said between his gritted teeth.

Then the Mustang shot through the smoke, grazed the prow of one of the destroyers, and settled into the channel with a terrific splash. Stan heard anti-aircraft guns blasting away and saw flame and smoke belching from dozens of gun muzzles above him. "They aim to finish me off right," he thought wryly.

He promptly forgot his resolve to go down with the Mustang. Pawing the hatch cover open he heaved himself out of the cockpit and tumbled into the water. A big wave rolled over him and the suction from the sinking Mustang dragged him down. Savagely he battled his way to the surface. He was pawing and sputtering but able to swim strongly.

Looking up he saw that he was close beside the destroyer or her sister ship, he did not know which. Something white came sailing down toward him and he heard a voice shout to him:

"Blimey, old man! Grab the preserver!"

Then Stan saw that two other life preservers had been tossed to him. He swam to the nearest one and grabbed it. He was shaking from the cold water but he laughed. The destroyer was flying the ensign of His Majesty's Royal Navy.

A few minutes later a boat picked him up and he was rowed to the destroyer. Climbing aboard he was met by the commander. Stan saluted the officer.

"Lieutenant Stan Wilson, Eighth Air Force, reporting, sir," he said.

The commander looked at Stan's clothes, then smiled. "Where were you going with that Mustang, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I was headed for home, sir. You mistook me for a Jerry and started shooting."

"No, we knew what you were. We just bagged two Focke-Wulf fighters off your tail. But you can report in detail after we get you into some dry clothing."

Stan followed the commander to the officer's quarters. After climbing into a navy blanket and swallowing hot tea, Stan told the commander his story. He did not keep anything back. When he had finished, the commander said:

"We could radio in a warning, but I think High Command might appreciate it if we took no chances. We'll put in and rush you right to Eighth Air Force headquarters. That way the Germans won't be able to learn anything."

"The FW that got away will report I was blasted into the sea. Anyway, I have a personal score to settle with a Nazi who is passing himself off as a pal of mine."

"Better get in touch with the big boys first," the commander advised.

"I'll take care of both jobs," Stan promised.

CHAPTER XIII

SPY HUNT

The commander of the destroyer placed Stan in the hands of a British Intelligence Officer. Having had some experience with British methods of sending all reports through regulation channels before acting upon them, Stan merely requested that he be rushed to his headquarters at once.

"Certainly, old fellow," the officer said. "But that will be a bit awkward, you know. Everything is upset and everybody is very busy. There's a big show in the making. I'll do my best. Should be able to deliver you there by morning."

"Don't bother, if that is as fast as you can get me there," Stan said. "I'll find a way out to my outfit."

"No trouble at all, glad to help you. I'll get you a room and you can get a nice sleep. Bright and early I'll be around with a car." The officer made it clear he was in a big hurry to be off.

"Thanks a lot," Stan said. "I'll see you later."

The officer stared at him as Stan turned and barged out of the little office where the Navy had left him. News of a big air push made it necessary for him to get into action at once. He had to report his information in time to halt the operations, or catch Egbert Minter before he reported to Berlin. Getting a report to his own flight commander seemed the quickest way.

Without his Yank officer's uniform Stan was at a disadvantage. The destroyer commander had had his civilian suit cleaned and pressed for him and he was wearing it, having discarded the coveralls he had worn in the German shop. Standing on a street corner in the coast village, Stan realized that he was dressed as a German civilian. Getting a ride would not be so easy. Then he began to understand why the Intelligence Officer had wanted to hold him overnight. Intelligence had not been so sure the destroyer commander knew all about Stan.

Grinning broadly he hurried down the street. A few people stared at him and one man pointed him out to another. A bobby turned and stood watching him. Stan halted abruptly. The policeman was walking toward him. Suddenly Stan realized that he did not have a scrap of evidence on him to prove he was a Yank officer. The Germans had taken all identification away from him.

A man came up the street and halted the bobby. He showed the policeman something. The bobby looked at Stan, then turned back to his beat. The man sauntered on a few steps and paused to look into a shop window. At once Stan knew he was being trailed by British Intelligence. He had a hunch he would be picked up soon.

Entering a shop he smiled at a girl leaning on a counter. "May I use your telephone?" he asked.

"Over there." The girl pointed to a small booth.

Stan went into the little room. He got a connection and asked for Eighth Air Force headquarters after convincing the operator that he was a stranded flier. A voice at the other end of the line said in a very irritated manner:

"We are accepting nothing but accredited calls until tomorrow."

"This is vitally important. I must speak to General Gilmer. This is Lieutenant Stan Wilson speaking. I've just escaped from Germany. A British destroyer put me ashore."

"Where are you calling from?"

"Ramsgate."

"Get in touch with British Intelligence there. We can't put you through to the general."

"Then get me Colonel Holt."

"He is in conference. Now clear the wire."

"Don't hang up or I'll have your stripes!" Stan shouted.

"Yes, sir," the voice said quickly.

That meant the operator was a non-com which would make it a little easier.

"Get me Lieutenant Allison at Mess 187. Make it quick."

The operator did some plugging and after a bit came back with a report.

"Lieutenant Allison has shifted to fighter group. He is at 155, Interceptor Base."

"Get him!" Stan snapped.

The operator began plugging again and Stan waited. He saw the man shadowing him standing out at the counter drinking a cup of tea. After a long wait he heard Allison's voice.

"Hello there?"

"This is Stan. Hold it! Listen! I'm at Ramsgate and have to get to headquarters at once. Can't tell you how I got here, but I'm about to be grabbed by British Intelligence. I'm dressed like a German business man."

"I say, old man, this is topping." Stan heard him shout to O'Malley.

"Is Sim Jones there?"

"Yes, he was here. I don't see him, but I'm sure he's around. Want to talk to him?"

"No, but either you or O'Malley keep an eye on him. Don't let him get out of your sight. If he leaves the mess, follow him!"

"I say, what's up?" Allison was clearly startled.

"Do as I say, and get Colonel Holt. Tell him to pick me up here at once. Even if he has to come himself. I'm about to be grabbed by a plain-clothes man. But I'll be at British Intelligence here at Ramsgate."

The Intelligence man was in the door of the booth. "That will be enough talk," he said gruffly. "Any other messages you have I'll send for you." He reached over and hung up the phone before Stan could say another word.

"Listen, Officer. Take me back to the Intelligence Office," Stan said. "My commander will call for me there."

"You are acting very strangely, my man. Why didn't you make this call from the office? It could have been checked there." The officer laid a big hand on Stan's arm.

"I'll make one from there," Stan said. "I'll admit I should have put this one through from your office, but I did not know I was to be followed and I didn't stop to think how I would look in these clothes."

"I have orders to handle this myself in case you showed any suspicious actions. I think you have acted plenty suspicious. I'm taking you to the London office. We'll have to check this call you just made and get you identified."

"I can't waste all that time," Stan protested. "I have to get out to my outfit."

The officer smiled. "I think I've landed one of the boys we're after. We have had a tip that the Germans have planted a group of the smoothest men they have over here. So far we haven't been able to put a hand on a single man of them. But you fit the picture neatly."

"Why?" Stan asked.

"Well, you are an escaped pilot. That's the way they have been coming in. They are always able to slip through because they know all about the outfit they were supposed to have been with. They're even supposed to look exactly like the officers lost over Germany." The officer laughed. "The more I look at you, the more convinced I am that we've landed one of them at last. Come along."

Stan walked beside the officer. He felt like kicking himself for bungling. If the time were not so short everything could be straightened out. But he was sure the first waves of the giant air attack were about due to start, possibly before midnight. Allison had said Minter was not around. He and O'Malley might not be able to locate the spy.

"Here's my car," the secret-service man said.

Stan paused beside the sleek roadster. The officer opened the door. Stan stepped inside. The officer walked around the car. Stan leaned over the side.

"Aren't you going to do anything about this flat tire?" he asked.

"Another flat?" the officer said in disgust. "That's the third one this week. It's about time I had some new tires." He got out and started around the car.

Stan reached over and flipped on the switch. He slid under the wheel and stepped on the starter. The engine hit at once and Stan slammed the gears into mesh. The roadster leaped ahead, then stalled. Stan opened the choke and the car leaped again, its tires showering the agent with gravel.

"Stop or I'll fire!" the officer shouted.

Stan bent down and hit a near-by corner. He did not want to have a real blowout. He wanted to get as near headquarters as he could before the British police headed him off. The car careened around the corner and headed down a tree-lined street. Dusk was beginning to settle and Stan switched on the lights. He was disgusted to see that the lights were hooded for blackout driving.

Stan knew exactly how to get where he was going, but he avoided the main road and went careening down lanes and along narrow trails hemmed in by hedges. The car attracted little attention since it was an official vehicle and clearly marked.

Just when he figured he was going to make it in spite of the dim headlights and the fact that darkness had settled, he burst out of a lane into a village. He recognized the place at once. He was just two miles from his objective, but two military cars blocked the road ahead. Stan was sure they were waiting for him. He did not drive on to find out. Cutting the switch he slid out of the car and ducked over a hedge.

The car rolled on in the darkness while Stan sprinted along the hedge. He passed through a back yard two jumps ahead of a shaggy dog and headed up an alley. A few minutes later he was hurrying down the blacked-out street.

Reaching a tavern Stan saw two bicycles shoved into a rack beside the door. One of them was locked but the other was loose. Stan slipped it out and headed up the street again. He was mounting the cycle when he heard shouts down the street and men running. Dimmed car headlights gleamed. The officers were on his trail again. Stan ducked into a narrow path and pedaled away as hard as he could.

The officers chasing him drove along the road, which ran parallel to the lane. They had a spotlight on one of the cars which they kept moving in wide circles. Finally the light passed over Stan and the men began shouting for him to halt. The light came back and held on him.

Stan sent the bike into a cross path and was out of the beam and headed away from the road. He pedaled furiously. The men were out of the cars and running after him. At the first left-hand turn Stan headed back in the direction he wanted to go and kept pumping away.

The shouting behind him died down and he began to think he had evaded his pursuers. Suddenly the lane broke out into the main road. Stan headed down the road. He could see the looming bulk of a hangar against the sky and knew that he was nearing headquarters. Suddenly he heard a car behind him. Looking back he saw that one of the cars was close upon him. He kept on pedaling but the car rapidly gained on him. It was very close when he saw a gate ahead.

With five British officers on his heels, Stan ditched the bike and sprinted for the gate. Under shaded lights he saw two Yank soldiers. He reached them ten yards ahead of the Britishers, having outrun the secret-service men. The guards barred the way.

"Get a guard and take me to headquarters," Stan snapped.

"We turn all civilians over to the local police," one of the guards said. He grinned at Stan. "Looks like they were right on the job, too."

"They think I'm a spy, but I'm an Eighth Air Force officer and I have important information for Colonel Holt, my commander." Stan spoke sternly.

The British officers closed in. Their leader said:

"Come now. You led us a hot chase but you won't get away again."

"Colonel Holt will vouch for me," Stan said.

"What was the last password we used here?" the guard asked. "The one in use when you left."

Stan grinned and stepped forward. "Port wing," he said.

The two guards stared hard at him. "He has it," one of them said. The other turned to the British officials. "We'll take him to Colonel Holt. You can come along. If he's a phony you can have him."

"Now you're talking sense," Stan said.

The guard made a call and two soldiers appeared. One of the British officials went along, but it was clear they had begun to believe Stan. The guards took Stan straight to the administration building. Stan and the secret-service man were led to a small room off the operations room. Within five minutes Colonel Holt appeared.

"Wilson!" he almost shouted. "Where in heck did you come from?"

"I came in just one jump ahead of Scotland Yard," Stan answered and grinned at the Britisher.

"Guess I'll be running along. Sorry we took you for a Jerry," the man said.

"You did a fine job. Stick around. We may be able to grab one of the men you are looking for," Stan said.

"You got out of Germany?" Colonel Holt asked. "The Germans seem to be getting slack about prisoners lately. O'Malley and Jones got back a few days ago."

"O'Malley got back but not Jones. The Jones who got here is a spy. I'll give you the story briefly."

Stan outlined the whole scheme. When he had finished, Colonel Holt rushed him in to the officers meeting where the final touches were being made on plans for the big raid. Stan had an audience composed of generals and other high-ranking officials for the next fifteen minutes. Then phones began to buzz. The R.A.F. was notified to hold up. Stan soon found himself out of the meeting. He headed for his barracks. Officers had been sent to round up Egbert Minter, but Stan had a hunch he might be able to locate the phony Sim Jones before the officers found him.

Stan found Splinters Wright in the Nissen hut. Splinters leaped to his feet when Stan opened the door. He had a service automatic in his hand and the light of battle in his eyes.

"Oh, it's you," he said and seemed disappointed.

"Who were you expecting?" Stan asked.

"O'Malley left me here to grab Sim Jones when he comes in," Splinters explained. He grinned broadly. "You sure started a little war around this hut."

"Where's Allison and O'Malley?" Stan asked as he began getting out of his civilian clothes and into a uniform.

"They tore out of here like wild men. I'd hate to be Sim Jones if O'Malley locates him. We've all been wondering about that bird. He has acted half cracked since he got back."

"He isn't Sim Jones, he's Egbert Minter, a German spy," Stan explained. "And we have to grab him."

"O'Malley seemed to have a clue," Splinters said. "Bugs Monahan went with him and Allison."

"That Sim's locker?" Stan asked.

"Yes."

Stan walked over to the locker and opened it. Inside hung one of Sim Jones' uniforms and a few other things. Stan examined the uniform, then turned to the toilet kit. There was nothing there. He opened the first-aid kit. It contained sulfa pills, powder for dusting, and other medicines. Stan picked a roll of bandage out of the kit and looked at it intently. The bandage was packaged to keep it sterile. Suddenly Stan ripped open the package and unrolled a strip of the bandage. It came away freely because there were only a couple of yards of it. Under the bandage was a roll of adding machine tape. Stan whistled softly and Splinters crowded close to look.

The tape was covered with figures and fine, even German writing.

"Can you read Kraut?" Splinters asked.

"No," Stan said softly. "But our Intelligence Department can."

At that moment the door banged open. The boys turned and found themselves staring into the muzzle of a service revolver. Above the barrel glinted the eyes of Egbert Minter.

"Toss that gun on the floor," he snarled.

"Toss it," Stan said sharply as he saw Splinters' arm muscles begin to tighten. "This bird will shoot."

"You are right, Lieutenant Wilson. Now give me that roll of tape. It contains valuable data regarding the Eighth Air Force." He stepped closer and Stan passed over the roll.

"You'll never get out of camp with it," Stan said softly. "I have tipped the boys off to your little game."

"I will take it back to Germany," Minter said. "But before I go I will see that you do not make more trouble for us. You are a very capable man, Lieutenant Wilson."

"You flatter me," Stan said smoothly. "But how are you going to get back to Germany?"

"Don't try to stall for time. I have killed your pals, Allison and O'Malley, the idiotic Irishman. Now it is your turn. I shall break a container of Herr Domber's gas in this room before I lock you in."

"Is that the way you killed Allison and O'Malley?" Stan asked. A dangerous light had begun to flicker in his eyes.

"It is and I will go back to the hut where I left them. I have a radio there and will send a message. Two hours later I will be crossing the channel on a British patrol boat. You know we have

captured a few." Minter smiled. He could not help gloating over his victims.

"You Nazis have very nice habits," Stan remarked.

"Yes, we are efficient." Minter laughed. "This hut is made of corrugated iron, the floor is cement, the windows are steel with such small panes. You will die like rats!"

"Interesting, but I prefer to be shot!" As he spoke Stan dived in a lightning-like leap, straight at Minter. The Nazi's gun flamed and Stan felt a blow like the smashing of a big fist against his chest. The gun flamed again, its fire searing Stan's neck, then he had closed with the German and had forced his gun arm down. Splinters had dived in and hit the Nazi around the knees. They went down in a twisting, writhing mass with Stan's blood spattering over all three.

Splinters got the gun and brought its butt down on Minter's head. He slumped down and rolled free of Stan. Splinters stood up.

"You're hit bad," he said.

"I'm all right. Get some water and bring him around. We have to locate his hut and the radio. He must have others helping him." Stan steadied himself with an effort. He was beginning to feel sick to his stomach.

Splinters got water and doused the Nazi, while Stan tore open his shirt and began plugging an ugly wound in his shoulder. He had to sink down on a bunk to do it. But he refused to give in. He had to get to the death hut and rescue O'Malley and Allison. The medics might be able to save them.

Minter opened his eyes slowly. He groaned and pulled himself to a sitting posture.

"Take that container away from him," Stan ordered. Minter had pulled a square glass container from under his coat. It was attached there by a leather strap with a snap on it. Splinters grabbed the container and unsnapped it.

"No, you don't," he growled.

"We have to make him talk," Stan said thickly. His head was beginning to feel light and his tongue thick. The corrugated dome of the Nissen hut was wavering and swaying.

At that moment the door burst open. "Sure, an' I told you the rat would come back here!" That was O'Malley's bellow. "And there the spalpeen is!"

"I say, old man, are you hit bad?" Allison's voice came to Stan through the dizzy haze closing in around him.

"Just nicked," Stan muttered and grinned. By some twist Allison and O'Malley had escaped. He felt much better, so much better that he laughed, or thought he did.

Stan lay on his bunk with a medic giving him treatment before the ambulance boys packed him off. He opened his eyes and found the haze had gone. He could feel the morphine working and knew he would drift away again in a few seconds. O'Malley was looking down at him, his homely face twisted into a scowl. There were two suspicious-looking beads which were not sweat on each side of his nose. When Stan looked up at him, O'Malley grinned broadly. Beside him, Allison was smiling too.

"We'll have him fixed up as good as ever in no time," the doctor said.

"How did you keep from getting gassed?" Stan asked.

"Aisy," O'Malley answered. "The rat was so scared we'd rush him that he jest eased out through the door an' tossed a glass jug into the room. It was fixed to break aisy if it hit anything hard. Allison caught it as neat as iver he caught a Rugby football." O'Malley laughed.

"But the blighter had locked us in and that slowed us down some. Then two of his henchman came along to use the radio and when they unlocked the doors to air the gas out of the hut, we grabbed them." Allison looked at the doctor to see if it was all right to talk. The doctor nodded.

"Your phone call came in the nick o' time," O'Malley put in. "We located Sim and trailed him from the mess to his hideout. It was one of our own Nissen huts the boys had been using to store bedding in. The rats had moved the piles of bedding away from the back end and made a place there."

"Why wasn't their radio located?" Stan asked.

The doctor turned to Allison and Stan. "Better let the rest of the plot wait," he said.

Splinters and Bugs edged forward. "Be savin' a cot for you, Wilson," they said.

Stan grinned happily. The morphine had claimed him, and it brought a pleasant dream. He was again with his pals and another German plot had been upset.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A YANKEE FLIER OVER BERLIN ***

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